

Information Design: the Popular Communication experience

A contribution by Conrad Taylor to the conference on Information Design Histories at Coventry University, 10th December 2003.

We stand at a point in history where some tens of thousands of people around the world identify themselves as working in the field of Information Design. This gathering to consider our histories can be imagined as a vantage point from which to look back at the road we've travelled, and latterly travelled together. Each of us might look back across that landscape and ask, "By what road did we get here?"

I do not see a single grand highway behind us; I see a network of dusty tracks which coalesce into lanes, lanes which for a while run parallel to each other until they converge into roads, which merge into *this* road. I'm aware of other roads parallel to the one we're on – roads which seem to have the same general heading as ours. I can't make out whether in future the identity of our road will merge with others.

This paper is the story of some of the tributary lanes behind us, focussed through the experience of a network of people who for 25 years have been running short courses in communication skills, organised through two sister companies – Populär Kommunikation in Sweden, and Popular Communication in the United Kingdom.¹

DIY design – not an unusual story

I start with my own tale. I never made a formal study of art or design. After dropping out of university I worked for charities and human rights campaigns, for whom I designed posters, magazines, maps and leaflets – building on self-taught skills in calligraphy, illustration and photographic composition. I learned practical stuff: how to paste up camera-ready copy cleanly; how to specify type for photocomposition; how to use a repro camera, make litho plates and run an offset press. I also developed the more 'arty' skills – optical spacing of Letraset, balancing a double-page spread, producing a hierarchy of headings, structuring leaflets and posters to get the message across.

In the early eighties I was involved in the Law Centres Federation and other community organisations. This was the context in which I was first asked to *teach* people how to design publicity and publications. The courses were organised through the London Voluntary Service Council and my students were workers and volunteers in a variety of charities and non-governmental social work projects. In other words,

1. Briefly there was also Populær Kommunikasjon in Norway, but that has folded back into the Swedish operation.

the people I was teaching were in the same ‘DIY design’ situation I had been in ten years before, when I started working for the Europe–Third World Research Centre and Third World First...

The world is still full of DIY designers. Every company large or small, each branch of national and local government and every voluntary organisation is also a publisher of sorts. And many of those responsible for putting together user guides and newsletters, posters and leaflets, catalogues and Annual Reports, presentations and websites etc. *are in-house personnel who were not trained as designers*. These are people whom in the past I have referred to as the ‘design militia’.²

From Närtryckeriet to PopKomm

These DIY designers were also the people whose training needs inspired **Björn Karlsson** to start a training company – Populär Kommunikation – in Sweden. Björn was a lecturer in education, who in his youth had lived and studied in the USA. In the mid-seventies Björn quit his teaching job to run a magazine for the independent school sector in Sweden.

When Björn acquired his own printing equipment to reduce publishing costs, this turned into a side business, *Närtryckeriet* – the ‘neighbourhood printshop’ – serving small business customers in a suburb of Göteborg. These customers needed business forms, stationery, product catalogues, marketing flyers, newsletters and so on. It was the era of camera-ready copy and the diffusion-transfer instant litho plate. Some *Närtryckeriet* customers wanted the printshop studio to design the whole thing from scratch; others produced their own artwork and brought it in.

The customers’ DIY efforts were sometimes good, sometimes disastrous. Some of the problems were technical, such as photos glued directly onto the artwork, or dirty paste-up. There were also some lamentable designs, with illegible type choices, confusing layouts, badly structured business forms, weak headlines, and so on.

Björn Karlsson’s not the kind of guy to say “They should get a properly educated designer to do this kind of stuff!” He’s a great believer in DIY and in self-education and self-improvement. If there’s a better way to do something, Björn wants to discover it. And when he’s grasped the principles of how to do something better, he wants to teach that to other people. It’s an ethos at the foundation of the kind of teaching we both do.

To Björn it seemed a good idea that he should run two training courses in 1978, and market them to *Närtryckeriet* customers. One was a course on the elements of good layout and design, the other on how to prepare trouble-free artwork for print. These classes were a success, and a useful extra source of income, which encouraged Björn to plan the launch of a training company called *Populär Kommunikation* to take over the course-organising function.

2. “Training the design militia: in-service design education for the non-professional practitioner” – a paper for the InfoDesign 97 conference, 14 & 15 July 1997.

An intellectual basis for PopKom

At this point, I invite you to imagine that you are faced with the task of teaching a two-day class called 'Layout Basics' (or *Layout från början*) to twelve paying customers – employees of an assortment of companies and public bodies – who find themselves landed with responsibility for the employee magazine, the product catalogues or the data sheets.

What kind of expectations do these students have? What's implied by the way you organise the course? How can you help them?

- ◆ Firstly, by advertising the course in the first place, you are declaring that *good design can be taught and can be learned*. (The customers have likewise declared their belief in this by paying to attend!)
- ◆ To be more precise, you are implying that at least some worthwhile things about good design can be taught *in just two days*. (In other words, you're suggesting that a three-year course is not uniquely the way to learn some elements of good design.)
- ◆ That in turn implies that you can learn elements of good design by being told things, by being shown how to look at things, and by having things demonstrated to you in those couple of days.
- ◆ Many participants will tell you that they have come to the course to learn the 'rules of good design'. That puts pressure on you to come up with some rules (or principles, to give them a 'softer' name).
- ◆ One fast-track teaching methodology that suggests itself is to show them examples of good design and bad design and explain why one set of choices works and another doesn't.
- ◆ There is also the pressure to back up one's assertions with some kind of evidence.

These are the thoughts that must have occupied Björn's mind as he prepared those first layout courses, just as they troubled me as I was preparing my course *Design and layout for publicity and newsletters* for the London Voluntary Service Council.³

If you're in that situation you also have to ask yourself "What *is* good design, anyway? What is it for?" Both Björn and I concluded that, as far as our customers were concerned, design was there to help to communicate the message of the printed piece more effectively – whether that was to sell more ball bearings, alert people to health issues, help users to understand a piece of equipment, or inform and amuse the readers of a magazine. If the printed product looked pretty that would also be a benefit – but that was not to be considered the primary goal of design.

3. I started teaching through LVSC in about 1981, and also conducted some design workshops through the Law Centres Federation and Thameside Adult Education Institute.

A parallel with the concerns of Information Design

Thus far, it must seem that I'm not discussing the history of Information Design. All I want to assert is that the Popular Communication project, of "communicating about how to communicate", was bringing us onto a track parallel to that trod by those who were gathering people around the idea of Information Design in the late seventies, founding journals and running conferences. As **Ronald Easterby** and **Harm Zwaga** wrote in their introduction to the collection of papers from the 1978 Het Vennenbos conference,⁴

An important objective (and this is a longer term aim) was the codification of some coherent and substantive knowledge on the principles of display design and evaluation...

[Since] the ultimate destination of any information is a human receiver, there must surely be some general, psychologically based principles of display design which could be enunciated, together with some generalisable evaluative procedures.

Here too is expressed a hope that design could be evaluated on the basis of whether it helps to communicate a message, that its principles could be codified, and that these principles might be based on hard evidence. And in his foreword to this book, **W T Singleton** added a comment that also hints at an important part of Popular Communication's thinking:

Designers are inclined to work privately to design what the customer ought to want. Experimental psychologists have always been clear that it is their job to find out how the subject really behaves; how he ought to behave is a necessary starting point but it must be subservient to the results which indicate what really happened. This attitude has rubbed off on the good designer, who will now accept that the user is not necessarily a copy of himself and that there is much to be learned by evaluation, the formal check as to whether or not one did get it right.

The key contribution of Jan V. White

Björn's approach to studying how to teach design effectively has been an eclectic one. On the one hand, he is a notorious bookworm who buys each year hundreds of books on communication subjects. He also went back to America to participate as a student in the short how-to-design courses run by the Dynamic Graphics Educational Foundation,⁵ and on at least two occasions attended the conference in New York run by *Folio*, which is a magazine for people in the magazine business.

Jan V. White was a frequent featured speaker at the *Folio*: conferences. Björn attended his lectures and found in Jan's approach much of what he was looking for.

Jan was born in Czechoslovakia in 1928 but was brought as a child to England to avoid Nazi persecution. He trained in Britain as an architect,

4. *Information Design*, edited by Ron Easterby and Harm Zwaga, published by John Wiley and Sons in 1984. (Papers from the 1978 NATO Conference on Visual Presentation of Information, Het Vennenbos, Netherlands.)

5. DGEF is based in Peoria, Illinois. It is a sister company of Dynamic Graphics, which is a publisher of clip-art.

but after emigrating to the USA soon moved into a career in magazine design (initially designing architectural titles such as *Architectural Record*). He credits **Perry Prentice**, who first engaged him to work in a magazine art department, for insights into how the editorial and design staff at a publication should work together.

In 1974 Jan's book *Editing by Design* was published by R R Bowker and was shortly followed by a companion volume, *Designing for Magazines*. The Preface of the first book gives you a flavour of Jan's approach to publication design:

This is intended to be a useful book. A how-to book. A primer that gets down to the basic concepts of what a magazine is – and that shows how to turn those concepts to the advantage of the product. It deals with the interrelationship of two functions that are normally thought of as separate: editing and design. It attempts to show that these functions are not separate, but rather two facets of the same act: the thinking underlying both is identical, only the technology differs...

The trouble with many how-to books is that they give you examples of the what and lots of ways of how, but seldom enough of the why. As a result, you have a marvelously useful copybook, assuming that you can just swipe the examples. Unfortunately, the outward form of the examples is often grafted onto material that is unsympathetic to that form, and the result does not turn out as well as expected. WHY, you ask...

The reason why that original pattern had been done the way it was done was the ingredient missing from the recipe. What you need to know is the reason behind a design, as well as the characteristics that make it applicable to other situations. It is not enough to show a good solution without defining what makes it good – and what it is good for.⁶

Jan has gone on to write ten other books and about 250 magazine articles on visual design techniques and has given an estimated 1800 lectures to editors and designers in 27 countries.

Björn Karlsson invited Jan to be one of Populär Kommunikation's first teachers. When Björn joined forces with **Colin Ringrose** of Rotobord⁷ to found the British company Popular Communication Courses in 1984, Jan was engaged to be one of the initial course leaders for PCC as well.

Jan White's most recent engagement for Populär Kommunikation was in November 2003, during Populär Kommunikation's '25-year jubilee', when he lectured at a PK conference in Stockholm and handed out the prizes at the Swedish Publishing Prizes award ceremony.

6. *Editing by Design* has just been released in a new, updated edition (October 2003), published by Alworth Press. See <http://www.allworth.com/Catalog/GD294.htm>

7. Colin, a mechanical engineer by training, had taken over a company manufacturing drawing boards and selling materials for artwork preparation (Rotobord). Colin's interest in running training courses was fostered by organising speaking tours for **Walter Graham**, a printer from Omaha, Nebraska, who designed an innovative set of aids for quick and efficient paste-up and taught the techniques in a one-day hands-on workshop, enlivened by conjuring tricks!

Synergy between Jan's teaching and Information Design

Although I have not heard Jan describe himself as an information designer, there is a lot of similarity between what he teaches and some central principles of Information Design. I know that many people have been encouraged to adopt a more functionalist (and less dysfunctional!) approach to design by reading Jan's books or attending one of his show-and-tell lectures.⁸

- ◆ Jan insists that the role of the designer is not (in his words) 'mere prettification'. He insists that the designer's job is to support the editorial function of getting the words in a publication read.
- ◆ One of Jan's key messages is that the reader is naïve to the message or story that a publication contains, and must discover the contents 'from the outside in'. This insight is still a tremendous revelation to many editors, and acknowledges that (as W T Singleton pointed out) those who read publications are not clones of those who produce them, but have their own concerns we must engage with.
- ◆ Jan suggests that we would be foolish to assume that the reader is interested in our publications. (He goes so far as to suggest that we have to 'bamboozle' and 'lure' readers into engaging with what's on the page, which you may consider extreme!) By coupling this attitude with an understanding of what readers typically look at first, second and so on within a typical page or spread, Jan advises us how to use the resources of design to 'capture' and 'steer' reader attention (e.g. through use of large bold type for headings, white space, alignments, pictures and photos and their captions).

In the mid eighties, Jan was engaged to define the corporate publishing guidelines for Xerox, which steered the focus of his attention from his home ground of magazine design towards the demands of an organisation with a requirement for technical and document publishing. This informed the writing not only of *Xerox Publishing Standards* but also of *Graphic Design for the Electronic Age*. These later books carry a more systematic treatment of the visual language of type, space, rules and other layout elements which help bring structure to publications.

Towards a Popular Communication rulebook for design?

Influenced by Jan White but drawing on other sources, Björn Karlsson created the 'lesson plan' for our two-day Layout Basics course. When the British company was formed and I was invited aboard as a course leader by Colin and Björn, I made several visits to Sweden to sit in on the *Layout från början* course, then taught by Hans Wern for Populär Kommunikation, while Björn explained to me what was being taught at each stage of the course. I then implemented the same lesson plan in Britain for Popular Communication, though in the last 20 years I have departed considerably from it.

8. Jan's lectures and courses can involve the showing and discussing of several hundred slides showing publication covers, pages and spreads.

One of the key lessons we taught was called something like “Five things every layout has to achieve” and they can be seen as a sort of functionalist checklist. It’s not a formula I use these days, and this is a paraphrase from the deep crevices of memory:

Every layout should do the following:

- ◆ Catch the reader’s eye.
- ◆ Let the reader know what this communication is about – and do so in two to five seconds!
- ◆ Make it easy for the reader to follow the flow of the message.
- ◆ Keep the experience of reading the message ‘tasty’ (i.e. rewarding, entertaining, not boring).
- ◆ Always keep the type legible.

The idea was to give course participants a top-level checklist based on whether a design was putting barriers in the way of communication or making it easier – combined with a hint of Jan White’s scepticism about reader ‘fickleness’ that, if true of periodical publications, must be true in bucketloads of the marketing materials for which many Popular Communication course participants are responsible.

The influence of ‘when advertising tried harder’

An Information Design approach is often contrasted with the approach of advertising, partly because of a suspicion that advertising copywriters and designers are paid to tell lies, but also because advertising doesn’t argue its case in the same way. Indeed, a lot of advertising seems not to contain any information at all, simply keeping the ‘brand’ in the public eye through some gimmick or other.

But it hasn’t always been so, and the tracks trodden by some of the gurus of advertising could be claimed to run at times alongside our own.

For example, while preparing my lesson plans for Popular Communication design courses I found inspiration in the highly opinionated and colourful pronouncements of ‘the Pope of advertising’, David Ogilvy of Ogilvy and Mather – especially the illustrated book *Ogilvy on Advertising*.

Ogilvy was a demon for research – research into what he was being asked to sell, research into how readers would react to different ways of selling it in print. He was one of the first advertising practitioners to commission market research, to perform split-run tests on alternative ad designs, and to engage in the field of direct mail marketing which can, if conducted carefully, provide feedback about what seems to work and what seems not to.

Against this background, Ogilvy’s large generalisations and recommendations seem to be worth taking note of. For example, he found through a split-run test that a layout in which an image separated the headline from the text would get 10% less readership for the body copy than one in which the image was placed at the top of the page and the heading was immediately followed by the text. That seems worth knowing.

Information Design also implies a certain attitude to the reader, and Ogilvy seems at least to treat the reader as a rational being who is free to make choices and who should be addressed as such, even if we may regret the politically dubious way in which he expressed it:

The reader is not an idiot. She is your wife.

The 'rational advertising' tradition inside PCC

Now that Jan White no longer comes to teach in Britain, the longest-serving Popular Communication course leader apart from myself is **Alastair Crompton**, by background an advertising copywriter, magazine editor and features writer. In 1985 Alastair wrote and published the book *Do Your Own Advertising: the guide for everyone who runs a small business*. Since then he has also written a popular tutorial *The Craft of Copywriting* and a review of the work of 32 copywriters, *The Copy Book*.

In teaching Popular Communication's courses on copywriting and feature article writing, Alastair takes a functionalist approach similar to that of David Ogilvy, and in his approach to editing is influenced by the Harold Evans series of books on newspaper editing and design.

The influence of DTP and new media

Popular Communication got going in Britain in 1984–85, just at the dawning of desktop publishing. I first met the Macintosh while helping Colin Ringrose represent Popular Communication at the *Repro 85* expo in London.⁹ By 1986 PageMaker was running on the Macintosh Plus, Ventura Publisher ran under the GEM interface on the IBM PC, and my wife Sang-usa and I had bought our first Macintosh DTP equipment.

DTP unleashed a whole new wave of DIY design, adding substantially to the number of people who now needed to cope with typesetting and typography, page make-up and design. As the first person within the Popular Communication group to venture into this new field, it fell to me to explain the new technology and what you could and couldn't, should and shouldn't do with it. This also meant that I had increased contact with Populär Kommunikation in Sweden, and with our short-lived Norwegian company Populær Kommunikasjon, until more 'native' DTP talent was in place.

The mission of bringing advice to the novice desktop publisher was also adopted in those years by others better rooted inside the Information Design community. **John Miles** and **Alison Black** wrote important guides to DTP typesetting,¹⁰ and I shared a platform at a Monotype conference on electronic publishing with **Erik Spiekermann** (who at first had resisted desktop technology on quality grounds). This was also when I started to

9. The Macintosh and desktop publishing or 'Computer Assisted Typesetting' (CAT) were being promoted there by Gestetner, and I met there **Andrew James** who thereafter got me involved in a tentative and unfulfilled project (my fault) to write a guide to good design for desktop publishers. I was at the time too unsure of myself, but this association got me kick-started into DTP.

10. "Design for Desktop Publishers" and "Typefaces for Desktop Publishing: a user guide" respectively.

get involved in the BCS Electronic Publishing Specialist Group and the PageMaker User Group.

The combination of a bit-mapped computer display and reasonable quality on-screen type, which started as a surrogate typesetting technology, also found new applications in the hands of yet more DIY designers. Powerpoint presentations, whether projected or printed and bound into flip-books, have become an important tool in the City when investment management companies make bids to manage funds. Popular Communication has been called on a few times to advise about how these should be written and designed.

The latest wave has been the dramatic take-up of Web technology for the Internet and Intranets. Here too we have been kept busy in both Britain and Scandinavia supplying training, but to a degree less than one might expect. In large measure this may be because there are many technology training companies who see Web site design as part of their transferrable expertise.

An area of new media that Popular Communication addresses with less competition is the issue of how traditional writing and editing skills apply to the new situation. *Writing and Editing for Electronic Media*, taught by **Malcolm Davison** and **Diana Railton**, is perhaps our most popular course in Britain at present.

Web site design has raised the profile of usability (and usability testing) as no other publishing medium has done before. **Keith Errington** is one of our newer Popular Communication course leaders who has made this very much his subject, swinging PCC's path even more parallel to the concerns of Information Design.

Crossing tracks with Information Design

I shall close by enumerating a number of ways in which the two Popular Communication companies have crossed paths and made connections with the world of Information Design.

- ◆ Our courses in Forms Design were originally taught in the UK by the American forms designer **Marvin Jacobs**. **Erik Speikerman** also once taught this subject for us. The subject has not proved popular. The most recent PCC forms design course was an in-house event for a government department, delivered by myself.
- ◆ We looked outside of our core group of trainers to run a course on the design of charts and graphs. **Doig Simmonds** and **John Lang** have taught this for us, but we failed to raise enough interest in this to sustain it as a regular part of the curriculum.
- ◆ The person best known in the Information Design community who has also been a Popular Communication course leader is **Rob Waller**.
- ◆ In Sweden, Populär Kommunikation has links with the Swedish Verbovisual Academy, more literally the 'word and picture academy' (*Ord och Bild Akademin*). This institution or think-tank was set up by the encyclopædist, **Sven Lidman**, and now includes Björn Karlsson

on its board, though this audience will better recognise the name of **Rune Pettersen** of Mälardalen University. The aim of the Academy is to promote the better use of combined words and pictures to explain factual information.

- ◆ Sven Lidman himself has spoken at a number of the *Trialog* annual conferences organised by Populär Kommunikation.
- ◆ Popular Communication in Britain runs design competitions for publications and Web sites, with an emphasis on the role played by corporate and organisational in-house design talent. These have been sponsored by the Information Design Association, and latterly by InformationDesign.org which is responsible for managing the discussion list, InfoDesign-Café. **Jane Teather** has participated as a category judge and presenter at these awards nights for years. On one occasion, our guest speaker for the evening was **David Sless**.

Of all the Popular Communication course leaders, I am the one who has engaged most positively and identified most strongly with the Information Design ‘movement’ (if that’s the correct way to describe it). Being introduced to the Information Design community felt like a kind of homecoming – finding a network of people with similar concerns and viewpoints. As a ‘family member’, I’ve put a fair amount of effort into organising conferences, helping to run our Information Design Journal, and keeping our electronic avenues of communication going.

Closing remarks

I mentioned the idea of an Information Design ‘community’ and it feels real enough to me. But we shouldn’t let our tendency to coalesce into a group of self-identifying Information Designers cloud our awareness of the contribution of people who might be disregarded as ‘outsiders’ who haven’t contributed, simply because they don’t fit our template.

Jan White is a case in point – some people might be tempted to dismiss him as a showman, a simplifier, even a clown, but he has positively influenced how many people now think about design. Edward Tufte is another who doesn’t seem to ‘belong’ to the ID community, but whose impact in raising awareness of our issues has been enormous.

There are undoubtedly others whose angle on communication is not so ‘designerly’ nor visual, whose influence we should acknowledge in composing our histories of Information Design – including, I think, the whole Plain Language movement which has surely been one of our greatest allies politically.

16 November 2003
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