



Audrey Grace BENNETT is a tenured Associate Professor of graphic design at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and a past College Art Association Professional Development Fellow. Her interests include theory and research on images across media and disciplines, cross-cultural communication, user-centered and participatory design. Current research funding is through Rensselaer, the Society for Technical Communication, National Science Foundation and AIGA. Her monograph, *Engendering Interaction with Images*, appears this year (Intellect Books, 2012). She edited *Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design* (Princeton Architectural Press) and co-edited Icofrada's *Design Education Manifesto 2011*. She founded GLIDE, a biennial virtual conference on global interaction in design.

Audrey BENNETT

**GOOD DESIGN is GOOD SOCIAL CHANGE:
ENVISIONING AN AGE
OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN
COMMUNICATION DESIGN
EDUCATION**

ABSTRACT

Using typography as its exemplar with its lack of clear performance criteria, this article questions what is good design and how to measure a designer's accountability. Evaluation criteria are teased out from various perspectives: credibility, ease of use, stakeholder inclusion in the design process, respect for cultural dimensions and whether it adds to humanity and/or the environment. The article concludes with steps to social change.

*“We should evaluate design outcomes
on their positive or negative impact on
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their formal aspects...”*

WITH THE EXHUMATION OF SOCIAL-CONSCIOUSNESS (see *The First Things First Manifestos of 1964 and 2000*) and the steady rise of user research and interdisciplinary research collaborations in the discipline (*Frascara, 1997; Laurel, 2003; Bennett, 2006; Poggenpohl, 2009*) many communication designers may find themselves in dialogue (or sometimes heated debate) with lay people, professionals from other disciplines, or interdisciplinary students regarding what constitutes good design; and, this dialogue may become adversarial when the communication designer's formal values collide head-on with the functional values of others who are unfamiliar with, opposed to, or not persuaded by the discipline's old, steadfast rules for form. I had a recent opportunity to observe such a phenomenon when I was a spectator in a listserv discussion between interdisciplinary designers where the aforementioned design rules came under fire after their alleged misuse in the design of a university's webpage. The following is an excerpt from the beginning of the rather lengthy discussion:

CONTRIBUTOR 1 _____ [Someone] sent out a job announcement for [a university]. I've been advising another campus [of this university] on design, but I didn't realize [it also] had a design department so I thought I would check out their webpage... [B]elieve it or not [the university] teaches communication design, but you would never guess it from their website. [W]hy do graphics and communication designers love tiny, tiny type? Especially communication designers, who one would have thought would like their stuff to communicate. I have never

seen such small type on a website for the main message. There is one good side. Most graphical designers love to use gray letters on a gray background, with small font. At least here we have black on white. Moral: Never send anyone to study at [the university]. That design department doesn't get it.

CONTRIBUTOR 2 _____ I think you missed the gray flock of tiny flying birds meandering through the page? I think that more than makes up for the small font size...

CONTRIBUTOR 3 _____ It's easy to begin to criticize an effort like this based on issues [CONTRIBUTOR 1] raised re[garding] readability and legibility (which com[munication] design students are supposed to at least learn about early on in their studies), but then you can move on to discussing why it's probably a bad idea to construct a site like this one using Flash, which triggers critical dialogues that can lead to meaty discussions re[garding] actor network theory and how it could be very effectively used and has been used to frame criticism of an interactive construct such as this.

CONTRIBUTOR 4 _____ 'Why do graphics and communication designers love tiny, tiny type?' I know the answer to this one. It makes it easier to make the page look neat. My old typography tutor recommended as a get out of jail card with tricky layouts, to take the type down a size. It gives you more white space to play with, and white (or empty) space is the most important tool you have in creating a layout where there are clear distinctions between different information components. In some case, it can actually improve legibility, as clear space around a graphic object makes it easier to read. Of course, there are lower limits to legible type sizes, but these can be hard to define as hard and fast rules. Egregiously tiny type for styling purposes is of course, always wrong, but digital media puts a question against even that statement: Most web browsers, for example, have a 'zoom' function.

CONTRIBUTOR 5 _____ Yeah, CONTRIBUTOR 1, the type is slightly small. I'm nearly your age and had no trouble reading it plus I could—with the magical press of a button—enlarge things.

And despite my advanced age, I still have the cognitive facilities to realize that the site was aimed at someone slightly younger than I am. Seriously, this is the level of design criticism we get on this list? Gratuitous insults devoid of any questions about intent? Standards presumed but unspoken, letting people lost in the World Wide Web of 1997 whine because they don't make 'em like they used to?

CONTRIBUTOR 1 _____ Obviously I am capable of giving a detailed critique of the [university's] website. To find out what the [undergraduate] curriculum is, for example, one must look elsewhere or download a pdf. But when I find that a design professional violates even the most elementary rule (that type should be readable), I feel that they do deserve a public spanking. Making type tiny to increase white space is silly. [It is also] doomed to fail on a website where one has no control over how the browser will render it. The notion that it is OK to flout usability findings because...you can always enlarge the type, is also wrong...The fact that if the recipient does extra work they can overcome the flaws of poor design is not a very human-centered design approach: it is a very self-centered approach. Finally, the notion that it is OK to use tiny type because, after all, the advertisement is aimed at young folks is also silly and wrong: The goal is for everyone to read it so that some might recommend the position to other people. Good eyesight is not a given, no matter what the age. Many people have vision difficulties, starting at a very early age—even pre-teen age years. Decent designers understand the need to follow accessibility principles which take into account the large number of people in the world who have difficulties seeing, hearing, etc. This is also called universal design. Moreover, it is generally true that following good universal design principles not only helps those with disabilities, but helps everyone (*Norman, et al., 2011*).

Though CONTRIBUTOR 1 distinguishes between graphics and communication design, the ICOGRADA 2011 Design Education Manifesto (*Bennett and Vulpinari, 2011, 8*) uses the key phrases 'communication design' and 'graphic design' synonymously as will this article. The gist of CONTRIBUTOR 1's argument is that communication design can no longer sacrifice readability in order

to paint pretty pictures on the page. The ‘meandering birds on the university’s webpage’ as CONTRIBUTOR 2 notes may not in fact make up for the hard to read type and the hard to access information as CONTRIBUTOR 1 observes. CONTRIBUTOR 4 makes a valid point, though that the hierarchical organization of information elements on the page through variance in point size plays an important role in the overall visual organization and readability of a communication design layout. Still, CONTRIBUTOR 1 implies that communication designers should abandon the old, steadfast rules of white space and small type and focus more on designing for better readability. When CONTRIBUTOR 5 questions the authority of CONTRIBUTOR 1 and demands standards, CONTRIBUTOR 1 offers accessibility as the standard for good communication design.

None of the contributors to this debate are off target in their assessment of the university’s webpage. Other design experts agree that:

- 1 _____ VISUAL STYLE (*Dondis, 1973, 128*) or aesthetics (*Frascara, 1997, 11*) is important to communication design—particularly in regard to attracting the attention of users in order to make them linger to read information and extract meaning.
- 2 _____ READABILITY AND LEGIBILITY are essential to clear communication (*Bringinghurst, 1992, 17; Clair, 2005, 184; Craig, 2006, 63*).
- 3 _____ HIERARCHY AND SPATIAL ORGANIZATION (including the use of the white space) do indeed improve the readability of a communication design layout (*Lupton, 2004, 94; Williams, 2008, 172*).
- 4 _____ ACCESSIBILITY is indeed an important consideration to include in the design of an interface that will mediate communication with users with impairments (*Nielsen, 2000, 302; Tidwell, 2006, 288*).

However, to conclude that a communication design outcome is poorly designed based on the presence of small type seems too partial. In the previous excerpt from the listserv discussion, metrics

for what constitutes good design and an objective process of evaluation may have been useful to at least impartially assess the university's website and help the interlocutors find common ground; and, if so, then this raises interesting questions about the potential future of communication design education: How can we teach students to objectively evaluate a communication design outcome's performance and move beyond the subjective and shallow critiques: "I like it." and "I don't like it."? Do we primarily measure effectiveness at communicating as CONTRIBUTOR 1 implores? Or, do we evaluate it primarily for its aesthetic worth as CONTRIBUTOR 2 implies? Do we use theories as CONTRIBUTOR 3 suggests; or, do we factor in social (including environmental) impact? Are there collective metrics that can be gleaned from the discipline's literature; and, if so, do we weigh each of them equally for every outcome?

WHAT IS GOOD DESIGN?

Over half a century ago, curators at the Museum of Modern Art asked questions tangentially related to the previous questions when they curated the exhibition "Useful Objects in American Design under Ten Dollars." In this exhibition they presented objects in use circa 1940 that epitomized what they coined 'good design' (*Rand, 1993 12*). Years later, Thomas Watson Jr., the second president of IBM picked up the good design torch and carried it further. In a University of Pennsylvania lecture he proclaimed that good design is an essential ingredient of good business (*Green, 2011*). His mantra—good design is good business—begot successive mantras from other designers in the discipline: Paul Rand's 'good design is good will' (41) and subsequently Milton Glaser's 'good design is good citizenship' (*Heller, 2003, ix*). For Rand—a disciple of IBM's good design movement—good design is a corporate design outcome's intrinsic quality imbued with the creative inspiration of an individual with God-given talent (15). However, though business-centered and aligned with IBM's design goals, Rand's mantra differs from its precursor in its inclusion of human values—a consideration underscored in Glaser's focus on citizenship. Glaser's mantra implies that the designer plays an important role in effecting good design through high moral and ethical values married to an awareness and concern for social impact. Whereas the original

mantra—Watson’s mantra—empowers businesses and transcends social concerns, the latest one by Glaser, engenders the individual designer with power and agency to control and effect good design that is socially responsible—a theme still prevalent in contemporary communication design discourse. Consider the recent publication of the 2009 book titled *Do Good Design* by David Berman. The reason social responsibility is still a key phrase may be because the world is still in need of repair. Design is still both a source of remedies and, unfortunately, as Berman notes, a source for “the most destructive tools of deception” (2). For this reason, good design can no longer solely be based upon formal metrics. Knowledge of how to use white space effectively and a keen ability to apply that knowledge do not make an outcome good

FIG 1.

List of metrics for evaluating communication design outcomes

Does the communication design outcome establish credibility with its user?	
<div><div>1</div><div>The text uses supporting images effectively.</div></div> <div><div>2</div><div>There is a unified appearance of all images in composition.</div></div> <div><div>3</div><div>The information is visually organized and coherent (e.g., unified appearance and sequencing).</div></div> <div><div>4</div><div>Information is aligned and organized effectively according to an underlying grid.</div></div> <div><div>5</div><div>Aesthetic treatment of design layout stimulates and facilitates use cross-culturally.</div></div> <div><div>6</div><div>There are no decorative-only images or aesthetics.</div></div> <div><div>7</div><div>The design outcome exhibits a high level of creativity or innovation.</div></div> <div><div>8</div><div>Images are produced and presented professionally in high-resolution (print: 300 dpi color, 150 dpi greyscale; screen: 72 dpi).</div></div> <div><div>9</div><div>Only 1 to 2 fonts are used.</div></div> <div><div>10</div><div>Column widths are appropriate.</div></div> <div><div>11</div><div>Appropriate selection of font. Point size(s), kerning, tracking, leading support readability/legibility.</div></div> <div><div>12</div><div>Design outcome is accessible to targeted senses (e.g., legible, audible, etc).</div></div> <div><div>13</div><div>Information is sufficient in quantity and accurate.</div></div>	<div><div>When the designer authors the information, evaluate writing performance summatively with the metrics below. In the formative evaluation process, the student may consult with a copy-editor and proofreader to satisfy the following metrics:</div><div><div>1</div><div>Argument of authored text is thoughtful and expressed within a theoretical framework.</div></div><div><div>2</div><div>Authored text reflects great depth of knowledge (i.e., it includes high quality observations, analyses, description and reflection).</div></div><div><div>3</div><div>No errors in punctuation, spelling or grammar.</div></div><div><div>4</div><div>No errors in word usage, subject/verb agreement or sentence structure.</div></div><div><div>5</div><div>When appropriate, references to key literature (e.g., evidence-based research) are present and in correct format.</div></div><div><div>6</div><div>Authored text demonstrates logical sequencing of ideas through well-developed paragraphs; transitions are used to enhance organization.</div></div><div><div>7</div><div>Authored text is well written, concise, clear and stays on topic.</div></div></div>

design. In the specific case of the university's website, using white space to create hierarchy coupled with eye-catching motion graphics was not enough to attain goodness. Even mere consideration of human and environmental values alone does not equate to goodness. Certainly, as CONTRIBUTOR 1 notes, accessibility matters. However, CONTRIBUTOR 5 is also correct that more standards are present and need to be 'spoken' or disclosed in the evaluation of the website. The discipline of communication design has many tacit standards that if unearthed, compiled and integrated in the evaluation process may lead at least to more persuasive arguments with others outside the discipline about the value of form; and, at most when used pervasively they may inspire design outcomes that actually *solve* social problems.

Does the communication design outcome stimulate and facilitate ease of use in a public context?

- 1 The design outcome has a user-friendly interface that facilitates and stimulates use.
- 2 The proposed context of use is viable and accessible by the targeted user.
- 3 The design outcome incorporates appropriate materials for context of use.

Does the communication design outcome resonate with the culture(s) of users?

- 1 The design outcome uses culturally-appropriate aesthetics that respect and acknowledges the user's gender, age, impairment, literacies, etc.
- 2 The design outcome communicates in a way that resonates with the culture(s) of its users.
- 3 The design outcome displays a clear ethical sensibility that shows respect for the user, the designer and society at large.

Does the communication design outcome improve humanity and/or the environment?

- 1 The design outcome shows a potential to make a positive social impact (student design only).
- 2 The design outcome makes a positive social change with a measure that shows statistical significance (professional design only).
- 3 The design outcome uses eco-friendly materials (e.g., materials that are energy efficient).
- 4 The design outcome is sustainable.
- 5 The design outcome can be adapted for other uses or recycled, if it follows "cradle-to-cradle" (McDonough and Braunga, 2002) lifecycle rather than cradle-to-grave.



TOWARDS ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN

My recent work (*Bennett, 2011*) argues for a set of metrics, updated and reproduced in FIGURE 1, for evaluating student work and professional exemplars of communication design. The columns of text shows the list of metrics that I use to determine whether or not the communication design outcome meets five different overarching criteria for good design.

By providing students with these metrics at the beginning of the term or prior to the start of a project, they can use them to guide their design and creative decision-making processes. Thus, students use the metrics as a formative evaluation method in their own iterative design processes. However, when I use them at the end of the student's design process to evaluate their outcomes, they serve as a summative evaluation method that enables us to see which metrics they've mastered and which need improvement. When they receive this type of evaluation across several projects and even classes, performance patterns emerge that reveal strengths and weaknesses in their overall design skills and knowledge.

More importantly, however, the metrics serve as a guide to students for the kind of design work that yields a good design evaluation. As depicted in FIGURE 2, attaining good design is like climbing a steep set of steps; the closer their design outcome approaches social change the better its evaluation. While in school, students are expected to master a set of skills that will prepare them to enter professional practice after graduation. They are not required to change the world. They lack the time and resources to solve real world social problems. Thus, they are only evaluated on the observable potential of their design outcomes to effect social

FIG 2.

The steps to social change:
A re-grouping of criteria (with presumed metrics) from low to high with social change being the highest step to climb.

change. However, professional design outcomes, like the university's webpage, are held to a higher standard with the metrics in FIGURE 1: they are required to effect or to have effected positive social change. Good design should require good social change. We should evaluate design outcomes on their positive or negative impact on society instead of only their imagined potential to bring about social change or their formal aspects; and, if it we do this collectively on a global scale then we might transition from the present age of social consciousness into a future age of accountability and benefit from the fruits of our labor through a synthesis of our social consciousness and research-driven design advocacy.

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