

## Graphic Design for the Real World?

### Visual communication's potential in design activism and design for social change

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#### ABSTRACT

**This article examines graphic design's role within design activism. It outlines design activism in general and its relation to commercial design culture in a consumerist economy. Thereafter it discusses persuasive tendencies in graphic design and questions if its current contribution to design activism is limited to its predominant narrow role of persuading for "the good cause."**

**To illustrate the hypothesis that such a persuasive approach lacks activist potential and thus social impact, cases that represent traditional graphic-design activism are compared to alternative approaches with an informative rather than persuasive character. The latter cases exemplify how information design can challenge the status quo and range from conventional leaflets to interactive tools and data visualizations. The discussion explores how these cases work as a non-commercial service to its audience, rather than solely solving communicative problems for commissioning clients. It is argued that in this way visual communication can intervene into problems on a functional level, similarly to artifacts from design disciplines such as architecture and industrial or product design.**

Keywords: design activism, information design, ethical economy, design culture, persuasive communication

#### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, design activism and critical design mainly originate within the design categories where the end product is a 3-dimensional artefact. As demonstrated by the cases illustrating "good design" in Victor Papanek's seminal book *Design for the Real World* (1997), most are from industrial design, product design and architecture.

This holds for the activist design movements arising in the 1970's as well as for recent design activism. In general, Papanek's overall requirements for design that is "on the side of the social good" (p. 55) do not exclude graphic design. His foremost demand is that designers should be advocates for users (p. 146) rather than work to accumulate prestige or wealth for themselves or others.

Further he claims that the designer has to understand and anticipate the design's consequences for politics, health, income and biosphere (pp. 6-24). Also he proposes designing for groups with special (e.g. handicapped, elderly, or pregnant people (p. 63)) or real needs (e.g. food, shelter, clothing (p. 56)). These requirements are not exclusively accomplishable by industrial design or architecture. Moreover, there are examples of socially conscious graphic design movements like the First Things First Manifesto, written by Ken Garland in 1964 and signed by 21 visual communicators, and again its renewed version in 2000 published by AdBusters and signed by 33 visual communicators. Still, visual communication tends to play a less prominent role within design activism and the literature discussing it. Mostly it is perceived as graphic design for socially responsible clients, or as communicator of activist artifacts from other disciplines.

#### DESIGN CULTURE, DESIGN ACTIVISM AND NEOLIBERALISM.

The main reason why Papanek proposes these changes in design practice is because he heavily criticizes design's alliance with neoliberal economy throughout *Design for the Real World*.

This goes along with Hugues Boekraad, who states in his book about the graphic designer Pierre Bernard and his work for the public domain that the dominating perception of design in the media is that of a market-related phenomenon, a way to meet the

needs and desire of the consumer. Hence it works as an instrument to accelerate production and consumption of goods and services (2008, p. 47).

Design activists challenge this role of design as a marketing tool, because it favors the economic gain of a few over the interests of others (e.g. communitarian, civic, social, environmental) and thus acts socially divisive and environmentally destructive, as Nigel Whiteley lays out in his book *Design for Society* (1993, pp. 44, 81).

Yet, according to design researcher Tatu Marttila, design is capable of changing these harmful consumption patterns into sustainable ones, as it has a normative position between domains of society (2011, p. 1).

Basing his notion of design culture on actor-network theory and science and technology studies, Guy Julier (a design researcher with a background in design history) discusses this interdependence between design culture, neoliberalism and design activism (Julier, 2013b). He finds that corporations came to utilize design's ability to ensure differentiation in a saturated marketplace and unlock future value. That's why he interprets the increase in design activity and the emergence of commercial design culture in the last three decades as "one of the fruits of neoliberalism" (p. 220). Julier further finds that design activism is not independent from design culture or neoliberalism. Since activism may appropriate techniques of commercial design, there is traffic between these practices. Also, both surges in design activism can be interpreted as a consequence of the crises of neoliberalism. Still, he views contemporary design activism as part of a broad movement including social design, community design, participatory design and critical design (2015, pp. 215–227).

In this broader sense, activist design might be located in the emergence of what sociologist Adam Arvidsson (2008) calls the ethical economy. According to Arvidsson, the motivation to participate in this ethical economy is not to obtain financial gain, but rather to have an impact on society and the possibility to express and realize one's own values. Arvidsson (2008) calls this non-monetary motivation or extra enthusiasm "ethical surplus", a concept he adopts from Maurizio Lazzarato (p. 333). This ethical surplus might be monetized by capitalist enterprises in the form of unpaid labor or consumers engaging with a brand beyond the exchange of money and goods (Arvidsson, p. 334f). In activist design, the designer's ethical surplus, in the form of labor and

expertise, is used to create a designerly intervention. The aim of this aesthetic intervention is to disrupt existing power structures by questioning the ways of being in the world, as design researcher Thomas Markussen (2013, p. 39), puts it.

In Julier's opinion said intervention has to work in a "utilitarian and a politicizing sense" and intervene functionally into the issues it addresses. This excludes "activities and artifacts, such as writing manifestos, designing political posters, whose sole purpose is changing attitudes" (2013b, p. 219). These are currently still graphic design's prevalent contributions to design activism.

According to designer and researcher Jorge Frascara, the aim of visual communication is to change attitude and thus behavior in its audience (2006, p. 31) and not about the production of functional artifacts that are able to physically address a given problem. Therefore graphic design's artifacts might be excluded from Julier's notion of activist design by definition. Yet, according to Alistair Fuad-Luke (2009), author of *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*, 27% of common actions in design activism are information and communication. Based on this notion, we will in the following apply a broader definition of design activism, and adapt the following definition put forward by Thomas Markussen (2013, p. 38):

Design activism generally is defined as representing design's central role in (1) promoting social change, (2) raising awareness about values and beliefs (e.g., in relation to climate change, sustainability, etc.), or (3) questioning the constraints that mass production and consumerism place on people's everyday life.

Jorge Frascara (2006, p. 28) finds that by organizing visual communication in society and by being concerned with the efficiency of communication, graphic design has a social impact—and therefore a social responsibility. This view is further supported by the influential Dutch graphic designer, Jan van Toorn (1994, p. 102f), who noted that most graphic designers view their work as serving a public interest. At the same time, van Toorn criticized that most cases have a commercial client as a sender. Thus the bigger part of the visual communication we encounter today mediates messages and produces cultural symbols that represent the ideology of capitalist corporations and serve the self-interest of commissioning clients. In this way graphic design legitimizes itself within the current established

social order of neoliberal consumerism and hence it is no exception to the relations of Design Culture and Activism described by Julier.

### VISUAL COMMUNICATION ACTIVISM AS COMMERCIAL CAMPAIGNS

Jorge Frascara (2006, p. 27) has stated that the main reason for the existence of any piece of graphic design is that "Someone has something to communicate to someone else." In general, there seems to exist a self-conception as a persuasive practice within visual communication: For Instance, in her contribution to Audrey Bennet's comprehensive collection of papers on design studies, Ann Tyler (2006) describes the communicative process as the designer's attempt to "persuade the audience to adopt a belief demonstrated or suggested through the two-dimensional object" (p. 36). In the same book, Jorge Frascara (2006, p. 29) proposes that quality in graphic design should be measured by how it affects the audience. This goes along with the three functions attributed to persuasive communication by Katherine Miller: shaping, reinforcing and changing attitudes and behaviors (2005, p. 125). She bases this assertion on G.R. Miller's definition of persuasive communication as "any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others" (p. 125). She actually refers to theories describing reception and processing of messages that are specifically designed to change or reinforce behaviors or attitudes, as theories of persuasion (p. 124). Amongst these theories are the so called "dual processing models" like e.g. the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) proposed by Shelley Chaiken (Miller, 2005, p. 133) or the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) developed by social psychologists, Richard Petty and John Cacioppo (Miller, 2005, p. 129). Both models surmise two different routes of persuasion. One that is systematic (HSM) or central (ELM), where the message contents are elaborated according to the strengths of the argument; another that is heuristic (HSM) or peripheral (ELM), where the receiver relies on cues unrelated to the logical qualities of the message, but on factors like attractiveness of the message environment like, e.g., testimonials, slogans, or design (Miller, 2005, pp. 129–133.)

In the introduction to the publication *Theory and Research in Graphic Design*, editor Audrey Bennett (2006, p. 16) points out that, as graphic designers typically do not have editorial control over their work, they are, traditionally, more involved in producing the aesthetics than in producing actual content. This might be related to the point Paul

Messaris makes in the introduction to his book *Visual Persuasion* (1997). He states that the persuasive use of images cannot include explicit arguments because images lack propositional syntax. Images cannot make explicit causal claims, draw analogies or express other kinds of logical connections between ideas, which are an integral part of argumentation (p. xviii). In this way the interpretation of the designer's visual argument is a construction of the reader. According to Messaris (1997), this is an advantage over explicit argumentation as the readers are more likely to accept arguments they co-constructed according to their own view (p. xvii). Therefore it can be argued that in most cases the job of the visual communication designer is to persuade the reader of the commissioning client's message by providing peripheral cues and visual arguments that make the message content more attractive and adoptable.

It follows that if visual communication is persuasion on behalf of a client, it just acts as a means of social change if that is the clients' intention.

The case of the "Death to the Death Penalty" Campaign by TBWA Paris for Amnesty International (Figure 1) illustrates this premise.



Figure 1. The campaign "Death to the Death Penalty" by TBWA for Amnesty International. The aim was to convince the reader that the death penalty should be abolished.

© TBWA Paris (2010)

The campaign was directed at the public in order to pressure decision makers. Its goal was to raise awareness and impose the belief that capital punishment should be abolished. It consists of an





Figure 2: Following the visual language of ads from Absolut Vodka, the spoof-ads from AdBusters play with the message by visualizing the downsides of consuming alcohol. The final -e was added to the brand name to avoid legal complications.

© AdBusters (2011)

animated spot and print advertisements depicting different methods of execution as melting wax figures.

Campaigns such as this one are frequently pro-bono work and take up only a small part of an agency's activities. "Good cause" campaigns are often identical to commercial campaigns in their creation, the approach to the audience, the employed media and the visual language. Pro-bono clients, striving to achieve altruistic goals, are thus represented in the same manner as the agencies' commercial clients that are pursuing their companies' financial interests. The aspect that typically sets this work apart from an ad for a corporation like McDonalds is that the client's interest lies within influencing the audience in a way that is generally perceived as socially valuable since it is promoting human rights (in this case the right to life) and not aiming to economically enrich the commissioner.

Interestingly, the Death to the Death Penalty campaign was perceived as a success not due to any changes in policies it achieved but almost exclusively on the merit of winning "more than two dozen advertising industry awards including a D&AD Yellow Pencil in the Animation category in 2011" (D&AD, 2015). It is not unusual that advertising agencies use pro-bono clients to do "creative" campaigns specifically designed to win awards. These campaigns

are rarely, if ever, displayed outside the agency or the award shows. By doing such projects, the agencies increase their own creative value in the form of awards, while simultaneously demonstrating Corporate Social Responsibility. Therefore, it can be argued that the ethical surplus invested by the agency was mainly directed to increase the value of their own brand rather than intervening in the issue at hand. Still, the campaign aims to address the need of the client to communicate his or her message. It is striking that the attempt to persuade the audience to accept this message is largely relying on the peripheral route of message processing, as the ad does not present any explicit arguments why the death penalty should be abolished.

The communication intent is the intent of the client, whereas the designer does not play a critical role. As mentioned above, this is not unusual. As authorship stimulates research activity and thus critical, reflective practice, Bennett (2006, p. 16) argues that this may be one explanation why—compared to other design disciplines—reflective discourse and activist practice in graphic design is only a more recent phenomenon.

The spoof-ads from the non-profit organization AdBusters "subvertising" the brand Absolut Vodka (Figure 2) serve as an example of prominent graphic design activism, where the designer takes an

authoring role and thus the communication solely follows his intent. In this case the designer produced the factual arguments as well as the heuristic cues, which aim to persuade the reader.

The ads adopt the visual language of the iconic Absolut print ads and combine them with opposing messages proclaiming the risks of alcohol consumption.

In contrast to TBWA, AdBusters is a non-profit organization. The ethical surplus is primarily directed to articulate and share personal values and beliefs in order to create networks and respect. In that way the organization is part of the ethical economy described by Arvidsson (2008). Nevertheless, AdBusters use the same visual language and approach to the audience as normally seen in commercial work.

According to Julier (2013a, p. 219) the subvertising of AdBusters addresses the individual consumer and thus is “reacting to given circumstances rather than proposing a materially different public world.” He distinguishes design activism from design culture as a practice that is not reactive, but more self-consciously and more knowingly responsive (2013a, p. 219). Therefore the Absolut case, just as the Amnesty case might be allocated closer to design culture on the continuum from design culture to design activism, even though the designer exerts his or her editorial role in a critical manner. As Jan van Toorn points out: “Symbolic productions represent the social position and mentality of the elites that create and disseminate them” (1994, p. 103). Therefore it can be argued that activist visual communications that defines itself in terms of the symbolism of the ruling order, it is bound to stay reactive in a visual dialogue that is predetermined and shaped by commercial communications. Therefore design activism that stays within the practice of neoliberal design culture deprives itself of its potential to disrupt predominant corporate structures.

As demonstrated by the previous examples, communication design—whether activist or commercial—traditionally serves the interest of its commissioning client. Both cases aim to create social impact mainly by means of persuasion.

To create artifacts that work in a way that Julier considers activist, or that care for human needs in a Victor Papanek (1997, pp. 215–247) sense, visual

communication would have to use its problem solving abilities to functionally address the issues of the reader.

## **VISUAL COMMUNICATION ACTIVISM AS INFORMATION**

Visual communications could intervene in the reader’s problem on a functional level if this problem is a lack of information. By communicating and organizing information in a visual way, it tends to the need of obtaining the right information at the right place and time in a way that is optimally intelligible. Thus it can empower the readers to solve their own problems. Ann Thorpe, amongst others, acknowledges visualizing information as a valid method of design activism (Thorpe, 2012, p. 138).

The Public Access Design Project established by the so-called Center for Urban Pedagogy (2015)—another non-profit organization that “uses design and art to improve civic engagement”—exemplifies how conventional graphic design can be used in an activist way that is informational rather than solely persuasive. On its webpage, the Center for Urban Pedagogy describes its work as “design to make complex urban issues accessible to the New Yorkers most affected by them” (2015). The solutions provided by the Public Access Design projects are visual tools that disseminate information directly to the people who need it. Visual communication is used to make the information more comprehensible and overcome language barriers. Often projects realized by the CUP include interactive workshop tools, so the advocates can include the affected community in the planning process. This goes along with Papanek’s picture of the designer as a design-planner in an interdisciplinary team that includes the users (1997, p. 84).

Take for instance the “I got arrested! Now What?!” (Figure 3) leaflet from the Making Policy Public campaign, which breaks down “the juvenile justice system comic-style.” As in all Making Policy Public projects, the work is a collaboration of different advocates and designers, brought together by the Center of Urban Pedagogy—in this case the Center for Court Innovation, the Youth Justice Board, and graphic novelist Danica Novgorodoff. The leaflet explains the system step-by-step by introducing the different decision-makers through the story of the character Chris who got arrested (Center of Urban Pedagogy, 2015). Thus, the project aims to empower the receiver to best advocate one’s own case and to prevent avoidable penalties and entering a system that is hard to get out of.



Figure 3. The leaflet “I got arrested! Now What?!” pictures the character Chris and the different options he has when moving through the system.

© Center of Urban Pedagogy



In this project the designer’s role is to organize and visualize information about a complex process supported by using aesthetics that appeal to the receiver. The peripheral cues attempt to persuade the readers to engage with the content in a way that is ultimately supposed to lead to a behavioral change.

This coincides with Ann Tyler’s proposition (2006, p. 36), that artifacts which seek to educate the audience can be interpreted as an attempt to persuade it to accept information or data.

Nevertheless, the “I got arrested! Now what?!” leaflet sets itself apart from the previous examples in a crucial way: the information opens up a



different way of interacting with the surroundings. It enables the readers to solve their own problems and thus is a service to them. In this way, it actually intervenes into the problem it addresses. Therefore it qualifies as design for human need as Papanek proposes and as activist in Julier's sense. This is something that design activism, which purely acts in a persuasive manner, is not able to do. Designer Florian Pfeffer (2014, p. 73) even doubts that persuasive communication has any significant impact due to the passive role of the receiver. He argues that rather than displaying one's own agenda and trying to convince others of it, new design strategies should empower people to become their own advocates.

A similar principle of empowerment applies to the case of the iSee project "Paths of Least Surveillance" (Figure 4) by the Institute of Applied Autonomy (IAA). It demonstrates how wayfinding combined with an interactive tool can be used in an activist way.

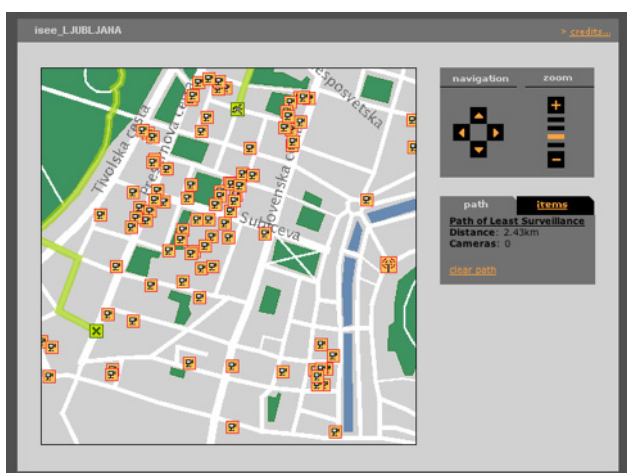
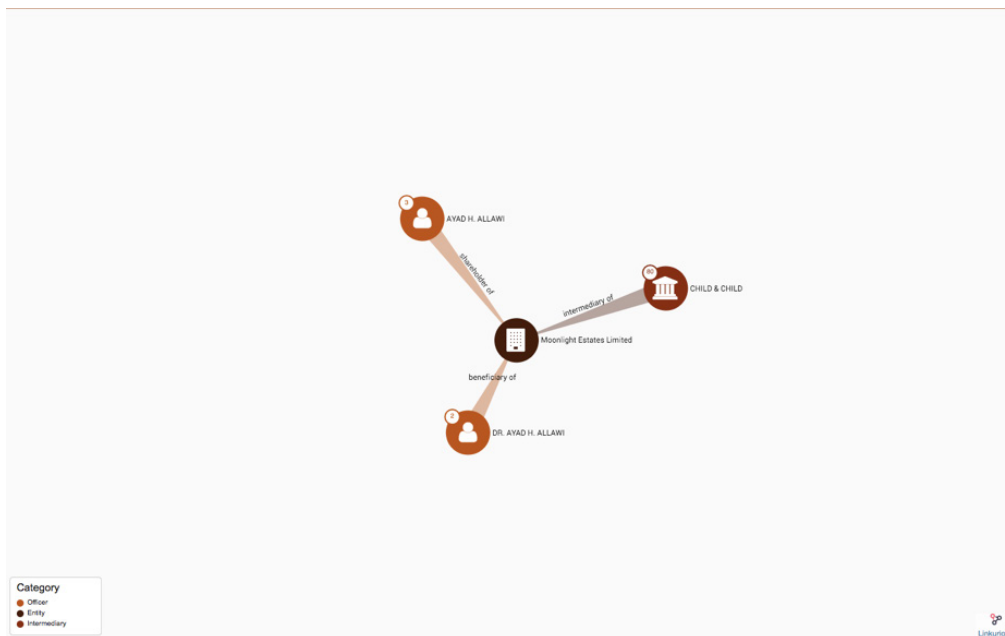


Figure 4. The web-based application that shows the possible routes to take to avoid being caught by CCTV cameras in the urban landscape. Version 1 and 3.

© Institute of Applied Autonomy (2001–2003)

This web-based application allows the user to find routes while avoiding closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance cameras in urban environments, thus enabling the public to track and avoid CCTV cameras (Markussen, 2013, p. 46). One goal of the project is to raise critical awareness about the increase in surveillance in cities without public debate or transparency. Interestingly, the IAA views itself as a technological research and development organization rather than a design-collective. This is also reflected in the aesthetics of the application. It looks like a rough visualization of the data rather than serving as peripheral cues to enhance the attractiveness of the content. There is also an interactive "problem-solving-tool": the user has the opportunity to create his or her own "paths of least surveillance." In this way, the iSee project provides a service to the users to act against and change these existing systems of power (Markussen, 2013, p. 47). Even though it is apparent that the IAA opposes CCTV tracking and that using this tool might convince the user to adopt this attitude, it could also be used to achieve the opposite effect. If the user wishes to be seen by cameras (e.g. for safety reasons), she or he could use the map to create a path of maximum surveillance. This exemplifies that activist design, which does not solely rely on persuasion puts the user in a much more empowered and self-determined role.

Another case of data visualization that creates "spaces of contest," as Markussen puts it (2013, p. 43), is the visual search tool that was used to investigate the so-called Panama Papers in 2016. To search through the massive amount of data extracted from the data leak, the International Investigative Journalist Consortium (ICIJ) used a search engine and a visual tool. This tool was an interface provided by Linkurious, a company that specializes in creating software to visualize graph data. The interface was supposed to help non tech-savvy investigators search the data in an interactive way (Heymann, 2016) as it visualizes complex networks and uncovers connections, which otherwise are hard to discover. Also, it enabled collaborative research as the visualizations could be easily shared. The users can look for specific people, companies or jurisdictions. Then related addresses, shareholders and beneficiaries are visualized as a network of nodes (Figure 5). By clicking on the nodes, further connections are revealed. The user herself is able to construct the visualization he or she needs (Figure 6). As long as the investigations were secret, the journalists were the exclusive users.

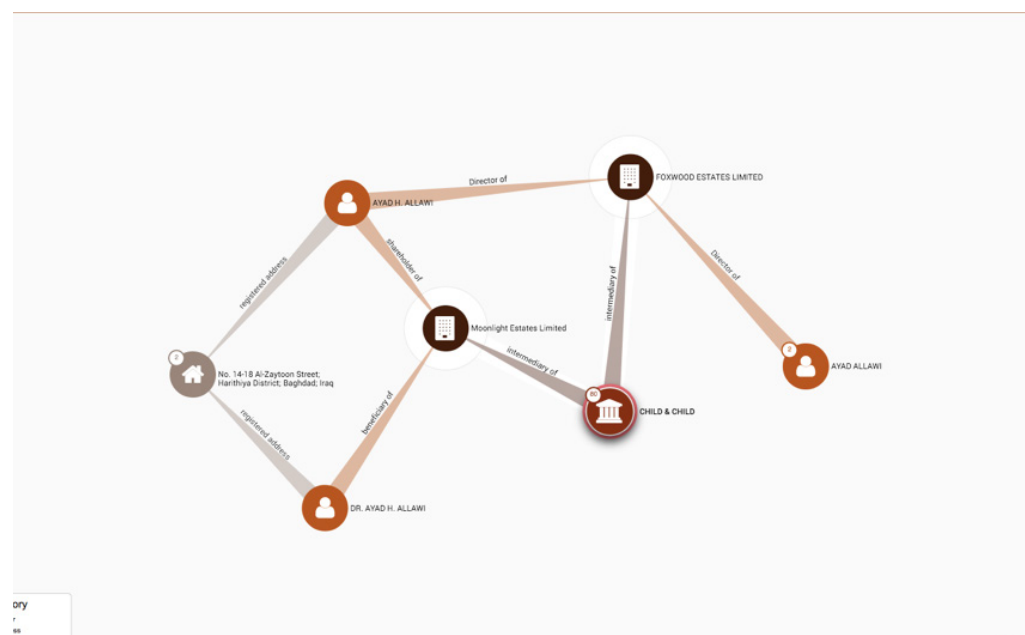


*Figure 5.* If the user has searched for the corporation Moonlight Estates Limited, he or she will see that it has one stakeholder, one beneficiary and one intermediary.

© International Investigative Journalist Consortium (2012–2016).

*Figure 6.* By clicking on the single nodes, the user can explore further connections. This graphic shows that the beneficiary and stakeholder of Moonlight Estates Limited are registered at the same address. Moreover an intermediary of Moonlight Estates is also intermediary in another company, to which one of its shareholders is connected.

© International Investigative Journalist Consortium (2010–2016)



In this context, the tool did not communicate a message that was designed by a source to influence the users, it was used to create content. It can be argued that ever since the tool was made accessible to the public in May 2016, it has served to persuade the public of the cause of the ICIJ.

Just as the earlier discussed non-profit organizations engaging in activism, the ICIJ are part of the value-logic of the ethical economy. The invested ethical surplus is directed towards creating ethical capital and it's recognition. As Arvidsson (2008) states, ethical capital makes it possible to initiate and to organize productive processes (p. 333). As an example, one of the reasons the ICIJ was

approached with the Panama Papers by the original investigators from *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, was because the brand ICIJ already had accumulated networks and respect from similar cases like the *LuxLeaks* or *SwissLeaks* (Heymann, 2016). Although the ICIJ's goal is not financial enrichment, it attempts to convert some of this ethical capital into monetary value in the form of donations (The Center of Public Integrity, 2015). Unsuccessfully so, because even though the revelation of the Panama Papers had considerable social impact and the ICIJ's work generated massive media attention, the expenses of the investigation caused a financial setback for the ICIJ. The organization could not extend temporary contracts of some of its project staff and



had to vacate its office (Redl, 2016). Interestingly, the people behind the Linkurious interface had no intention to produce activist graphic design artifacts. The software that visualizes the data is part of everyday commodity culture. Everyone who needs help visualizing and connecting data can purchase it from Linkurious. Its application within the context of the Panama Papers is an activist act, but mainly as a means to facilitate the original investigation. Nevertheless the visual aspect was crucial to enable the investigation and to communicate it to the public.

Also it meets Markussen's previously mentioned definition of design activism. It is a disruptive aesthetic practice that evokes the effects of revelation, contest and dissensus, all effects that Markussen attributes to design activism (2013, p. 42f). Additionally it works in a utilitarian and politicizing sense, fulfilling Julier's requirements for activist design. As demonstrated above this is something not every piece of graphic design activism is able to.

## CONCLUSION

This article focuses on a possible activist utilization of graphic design. The reviewed cases range from campaigns that aim to be activist but in their practice are closer to commercial design culture, to projects that are not executed by graphic designers or originally have no activist intention, but are visual interventions that can be interpreted as activist graphic design. The former has come to represent visual communications' main contribution to activism in the form of persuasion for social change. We argue that these approaches are mere imitations of corporate campaigns that lack disruptive potential to evoke significant social impact.

To extend its scope and effectiveness within design activism, it has been proposed that visual communication could refocus on its qualities as an informative practice that empowers the users to solve their own problems and open new possibilities of interacting with their surroundings. How this can be achieved is demonstrated by the latter three cases. Still, these isolated cases serve as illustrations of possibilities and do not exhaust by far the potentials of graphic design in activist practice or a kind of ethical economy. Also because of the rapidly changing nature of media and its design, more research has to be done in this area especially in relation to interactive media design and participatory methods within visual communications.

Either way it is crucial that visual designers are aware that apart from communicating a clients' message or voicing their own agenda, they can create design that is a service to the reader. Which is one of the foremost proposals of Papanek in *Design for the Real World*.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

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