Institution: University of Reading

Unit of Assessment: 34B Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory - Typography

Title of case study: Designing information for everyday reading

1. Summary of the impact

Research carried out by the University of Reading's Department of Typography & Graphic Communication into the design of information for everyday reading has contributed to public services and policy making by:
– improving government communications and
– changing the use of design by non-specialists, particularly in government departments.

The Department's expertise has been used in areas where communication is challenging (prisons and UK Jobcentres), benefiting disadvantaged user groups. The Department of Typography's input to the communications of GOV.UK and HMRC has benefited the UK public in contexts where poor design decisions can prove costly to both individuals and government departments.

In addition, the Department's research-based exhibitions have spread public understanding of information design, attracting specialists and non-specialists and receiving significant coverage in the professional, national and international press.

2. Underpinning research

The Department of Typography & Graphic Communication has a strong track record of research into the design of everyday documents, dating back to the 1980s and evidenced throughout the REF period. This research brings together historical, theoretical and practical approaches.

Key researchers for the research and impact captured in this case study were:

Alison Black (Professor; 2011-present)
Christopher Burke (Research Fellow; 2007-present)
M Esbester (Research Fellow 2008-11)
Paul Stiff (Professor; 1980-2011)
Rob Waller (Professor; 2008-11)

Stiff's (2002) paper 'Why do designers need to understand reading?' developed the umbrella term 'design for reading', describing the necessary processes of analysing document content, making appropriate design decisions and carrying out testing to support the needs of real, rather than ideal, imagined readers. Stiff's analysis sought an understanding of reading that is more useful to designers than accounts that are often derived from psychology, which largely ignore navigational and selection tasks or non-textual elements such as diagrams and maps. Design for reading is positioned as solving practical communication problems, a key component of which, in the broad scope of document design, is to know why documents fail their readers and to prevent such failures from occurring.

Stiff (2005) mapped a history of this problem-solving approach to design through the 20th century and, stemming from this analysis, carried out further historical investigation in his AHRC-funded project (£387,000, with Esbester) 'Designing information for everyday life, 1815-1914', which included specific investigations of timetables and forms (Esbester, 2009, 2011). This research focus on the history of information design was extended by the Department's AHRC-funded project 'Isotype revisited' (£380,000) based on its unique archive of the pictorially-based public information design undertaken by the Isotype team (led by Otto and Marie Neurath) from the 1920s to the early 1970s. Significant publications from this project include Burke's (2009) analysis of Isotype's pictorial communication of social statistics.

The Department's success in building the profile of research in design for everyday reading provided a foundation for the University-backed initiative to establish the Simplification Centre (2008-11), a multidisciplinary team of researchers in design, linguistics and psychology, with the brief of developing

research in precisely those areas of public communication where documents often fail. In his 2008 paper 'Simplification: what is gained and what is lost', Waller set out an explanation of what 'simplification' entails. He demonstrated that naïve interpretations of simplification risk depriving readers of information they need, or placing additional load on them by not dealing with the complexity of the underlying information. This failure to deal with complexity can be critical for people dealing with, for example, financial and legal documents. Waller set out a classification of the type of techniques (reduction, amplification, stratification and personalisation) that should be of use in preparing complex information for everyday reading. This approach was applied in the consulting work carried out by the Simplification Centre.

In mid 2011 the Simplification Centre changed name to Centre for Information Design Research (CIDR), from which, Black and Stanbridge's (2012) diary study of document recipients' responses to the public and corporate communications they received provided insight into the particular aspects of everyday documents that people respond to explicitly. Although documents may succeed or fail in ways that users are not able to articulate, this research highlighted how their language and design are interpreted in the context of people's understanding of the sender organisation. The research has provided a framework for recent guideline development carried out by the Centre for Information Design Research.

3. References to the research

- 2002 Stiff, P. 'Why do designers need to understand reading?' *Proceedings of Ist International Conference in Communication Design*, Thessaloniki. Copy of printed paper available upon request.

- 2005, Stiff, P. Some documents for a history of information design. *Information Design Journal*, 13/3, 216–228, doi: 10.1075/idjdd.13.3.06sti. Published in peer-reviewed journal.

- 2008* Waller R.H.W. 'Simplification: what is gained and what is lost'. In T. Porathe (Ed.). *Applications of Information Design 2008*: Selected papers from the international conference at Malardalen University in Eskilstuna, Sweden 25-28 June 2008, pp 219-230. Eskilstuna: Malardalen University Press. ISBN: 978-91-86135-31-7. Copy of printed paper available upon request.

- 2009 Burke, C. (2009) 'Isotype: representing social facts pictorially'. *Information Design Journal*, 17/3. 211-223. ISSN 0142-5471 doi: 10.1075/idj.17.3.06bur. Published in peer-reviewed journal.

- 2009 Esbester, M. 'Designing time: the design and use of nineteenth-century transport timetables,' *Journal of Design History*, 22/2, 91–113, doi: 10.1093/jdh/epp011. Published in peer-reviewed journal.

- 2011 Esbester, M. 'Taxing design? Design and readers in British tax forms before 1914', *Design Issues*, 27/3, 84–97 doi:10.1162/DESI_a_00093. Published in peer-reviewed journal.

- 2012 Black, A. and Stanbridge, K.L. 'Documents as critical incidents in organization to consumer communication.' *Visible Language*, 46/3, 246–281. Photocopy of printed paper available upon request. (Peer reviewed and included in REF2)

4. Details of the impact

Improving government communications with service users
The reputation of the Department of Typography's research in public information design led to direct approaches by UK Government departments for assistance with communication to improve their services.

• *2010-11 Supporting equality in prisons: Race Equality Advisory Group (REAG), part of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS)*
Two projects were commissioned from Simplification Centre by REAG to improve equality and transparency in treatment of prisoners. (Both projects were collaborations with professional design consultancy, Text Matters, who implemented our research-based methods.)

1) Translation of a paper-based documentation process to an online, interactive tool kit (the NOMS Equality Impact Assessment Tool, NEAT) that facilitates incident recording, management and tracking for Britain's 90,000 prisoners. Our problem-solving approach to forms design ensured usability of the interface and transparency of the reports produced by the tool. NEAT was listed as a 'Key Achievement' in the *NOMS Equalities Annual Report for 2009–10* and was implemented nationally via *NOMS Ensuring Equality Instruction, 14 April 2011*.

2) Stemming from the success of NEAT, the research team worked with NOMS REAG to create a shared checklist, ReCoDe (Request, Context, Decision), for prisoners and officers to follow when prisoners make requests. The checklist describes a sequence for dialogue to promote equitable handling of requests across all prisoners. Pictorial communication tools (influenced by our research expertise in Isotype) were prepared to explain the process for both officers and prisoners. ReCoDE was first implemented at Aylesbury and Cookham Wood prisons, with a positive response. The Governor of Cookham Wood attributed a significant drop in the use of force in her prison to the checklist and HM Inspector of Prisons (2011) identified it as an example of good practice. ReCoDe was subsequently taken up by Elmley Prison. The tool was evaluated independently by London School of Economics' Mannheim Centre for Criminology, who reported very positive outcomes where the tool had been implemented enthusiastically by prison management.

• *2012–13 Changing people's approach to job search: Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team (BIT)*
BIT, which was piloting behavioural interventions to increase the effectiveness of job seekers' search for work, asked for guidance to develop a shared record form, or 'commitment pack', for job seekers and their Jobcentre Plus advisors. CIDR designed a structured documentation pack which supported job seeking by clarifying for the job seeker and advisor the tasks that the job seeker had made a commitment to carrying out during the interval between appointments, and when or how he or she was going to do them. CIDR introduced user scenarios to help explain the process to the job seeker and used design to make the pack look attractive and less institutional than other, typical Jobcentre documentation. The pack was piloted at 12 Jobcentres in Essex (covering 20,000 job seekers) from February 2013. The success of the pack during the REF period led to the decision to extend the use of a commitment pack nationally (announced by the Minister for Employment in August 2013).

• *2012–13 Research-based guidelines for Government digital communications*
— Stemming from our successful input to the job seeker's pack, CIDR was asked by BIT to prepare research-evidenced 'Top Tips for Letter Writing' for the Cabinet Office. Described by the client as 'very helpful', the project led to a commission for a research rationale for Government Digital Service (GDS) content guidelines (see below).
— CIDR prepared a research-based rationale and critique for GDS' existing content guidelines that are applied to all Government online documents and can be accessed by any web user. This input led to revisions in the guidelines. At GDS' request, the team prepared a blog post for them on the use of research to inform practice (http://digital.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/2013/06/11/empowering-everyday-readers/). The post was viewed over 900 times from publication (11 June) to 31 July.

• *2010–13 CPD training in information design for HMRC*
HMRC asked the Simplification Centre to develop a training course in information design for non-designers, to raise awareness and equip participants with skills to commission design effectively. The course (ongoing) has attracted 21 students from HMRC and additional participants from insurance companies AXA and Aegon. Gavin Jefferies, Head of Customer Information at HMRC, commented that participants 'found it helpful in providing a framework to identify design improvements and also the theoretical/ research-based evidence to defend their recommendations'.

Communicating the principles and practice of public information design
Alongside direct collaboration with government departments, the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication has used its funded research projects as a foundation for the following exhibitions explaining the significance and methods of 'design for everyday reading' to civil society.

• *2010 St Bride Library (London): 'Designing Information for Everyday Life'*
Based on 'Designing information before designers' and attracting, particularly, a professional audience (following a positive review in *Eye Magazine*), visitors' written comments included 'The designing exhibit brought the Victorians to life in ways I have never experienced before…' and 'An eye-opener and inspiration for modern information designers grappling with these problems…in a digital environment'.

• 2010–11 *Victoria and Albert Museum (London) 'Isotype: international picture language'*
Based on the project 'Isotype revisited', the Austrian Cultural Forum London collaborated on the private view of this collection, which was attended by the Austrian Ambassador (Isotype was initially developed in Vienna in the 1920s) . The exhibition was previewed in *Eye Magazine* and reported in the *Independent*, *International Herald Tribune* and *New York Times* and in interviews with Austrian radio station, ORF (May 2011). Exhibition footfall (based on uptake of the exhibition prospectus) was a minimum of 4,000. The website for 'Isotype revisited' (http://isotyperevisited.org/) receives an average of 5,000 visits per month.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

National Offender Management Service
- NEAT
  http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/publications/noms/2011/NOMS_equalities_annual_report_2009-10.pdf (pp 3, 29)
- ReCoDE http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/publications/inspectorate-reports/hmipris/prison-and-yoi-inspections/cookham-wood/cookham-wood-2011.pdf (pp 11, 22, 26, 31, 41, 60)
- Governor, Cookham Wood Young Offenders Institution* - corroboration that data indicates ReCoDE led to a reduction in the use of force.

Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team
- Policy Advisor* - design of the Jobseeker Pack for trial in Essex Jobcentres.

Government Digital Services
- Head of Content Design* - can corroborate work to prepare research-based principles/guidelines for writing for the web.

HMRC
- Specialist Infrastructure Manager, HMRC Digital Service, Operations* - corroboration indicating the impact of the course on his work as a manager in HMRC Digital Services.

Victoria and Albert Museum
- Senior Archivist* - collaborated with the Typography Department in setting up The Victoria and Albert Museum's hosting of the Isotype Revisited exhibition

(*) Contact details provided separately