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FIELDS

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INFORMATION DESIGN

FROM TOOL CRAFT TO META MEANING

DAVID CRAIB

A new form of design professional has emerged; one whose focus is to convey information meaningfully and accurately. It may seem obvious that the critical information clients wish to convey should be valued by the designers tasked to convey it, and that the information should be designed to be comprehensible to the end users of their designs. Due to the misconception that design is an aesthetic task—a misconception held by much of the design community—some designers have chosen to reaffirm their vows; to convey the information entrusted to them by their clients, to the best of their ability. These Information Designers are found within several design disciplines, most commonly within graphic design, technical writing and web design.

WHAT IS INFORMATION DESIGN?

Definition of Information

The Oxford Dictionaries (2012), online resource includes the following as a definition of “information”.

Facts provided or learned about something or someone.

Definition of Design

The Free Dictionary (2012) includes the following within the list of definitions of the word “design”.

To formulate a plan for; devise

To plan out in systematic way, usually in graphic form

Using these definitions we may view Information Design as the act of devising a plan “in systematic way” to communicate “facts provided or learned about something or someone”.

A more thorough definition comes from The Society of Technical Communicators (STC, 2005).

The Information Design Special Interest Group of STC addresses application of design principles to translating complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into valuable, meaningful information.

The practice of information design requires an interdisciplinary approach combining skills in areas including graphic design, writing and editing, instructional design, human performance technology, and human factors.

HISTORY OF THE TERM, INFORMATION DESIGN

The following is a brief historical perspective of the term, Information Design, as it surfaced within 5 design disciplines.

In Graphic Design

Graphic Designers design the appearance of visual presentations of information.

The term “information design” was coined by Pentagram Design in the 1970s. Although the term is relatively new, the “genres”, so to say, of information design are a lot older, even if they weren’t always thought of belonging to the same discipline (Koponen, 2011).

Information Design’s first coinage as a term, by Pentagram Design, a large multi-national design firm based in London, England, was through the perspective of graphic design, yet the discipline of information design is much older, 100s if not 1000s of years older than the first coinage of the term.

In Technical Writing

Technical Writers design the content structures of documents. During the 1970s, the discipline of technical communication was becoming focused on content design of educational and instructional materials (Redish, 2000). In the late 70s a project was funded by the National Institute of Education (U.S.A.) exploring how to develop documents that communicated more effectively than the norm. This

project was termed the Document Design Project, yet its use of the word ‘design’ primarily meant document content, organization and writing rather than visual design (Redish, 2000).

In Statistics

Statisticians design and format data presentations.

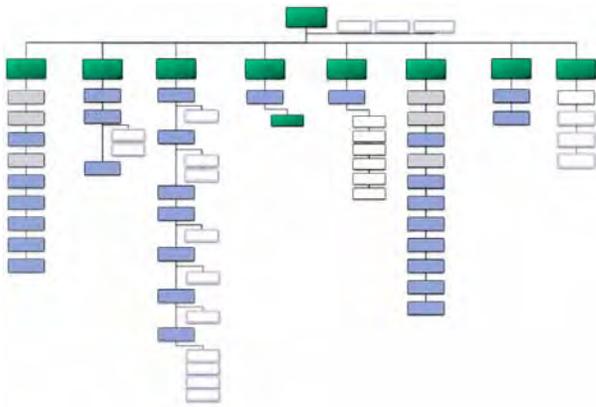
In the mid 70s, Edward Tufte began his research into statistical representations of data, publishing his book, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (1983) (Tufte, 2000). In the introduction he described his book to be about “how to communicate information through the simultaneous presentation of words, numbers and pictures.” Tufte is one of the first to extensively describe the challenge and discipline of conveying information, publishing 3 more books on the subject, between 1983 and 2006.

In Architecture

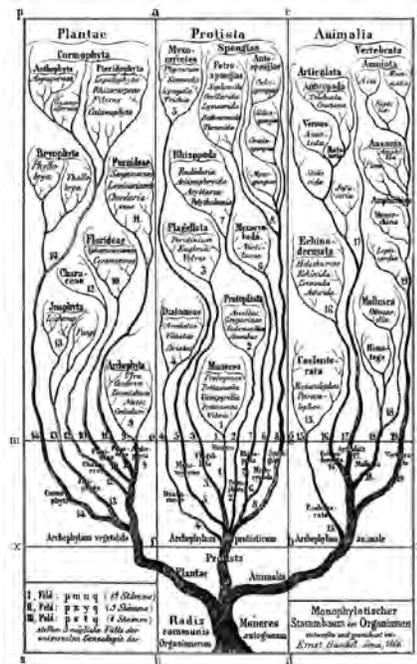
Richard Saul Wurman, chairman of the 1976 national convention of the American Institute of Architects, named their convention, *The Architecture of Information* (Wurman, 1996). Twenty years later (1996), he compiled the book, *Information Architects*, a multidisciplinary collection of 20 designers’ works focusing on conveying complex information (Wurman, 1996). It featured architecture, communication design, exhibit design, statistical design, illustration, wayfinding and web design. Soon after this, designers of websites adopted the term Information Architecture to describe the design process of website structures. (1)

In Web Design

Peter Morville and Louis Rosenfeld published *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* in 1998. This book looked at the complexities of designing large scale sites, and approaches the topic of organizing vast amounts of information in methodological ways (Morville & Rosenfeld, 2006).



^ Figure 1: Website structure (Craib, 2012)



> Figure 2: Haeckel's Tree of Life, one of the first genealogies of life (1866)

Within the book, the authors often referred to the structure of websites (Figure 1) as architectures, or taxonomies (Morville & Rosenfeld, 2006). Derived from the ancient Greek words for “arrangement method” taxonomies are groups of biological units (taxa), describing biological hierarchies. Visually, these may bear resemblance to the hierarchies designed by web designers (Figure 2).

Within these five disciplines of graphic design, technical writing, architecture, statistics and web design, we see a growing, synchronous perception that information needed to be conveyed with consideration and expertise. This movement became evident in the mid 1970s, and began to be popularized through the 1980s and 1990s, preceding the World Wide Web.

THE INFORMATION CONTINUUM

One of the issues confronted by Technical Writers in defining information design, is that they feel it has 2 meanings. First, it is the complete process of developing a document or group of documents. Secondly, information design is the way the information is presented on the page or screen (Redish, 2000). To the technical communicators, the magnitude of the design task affects their definition of information design.

This occurs in other disciplines as well. Graphic Designers work with page elements and with complete information systems, Web Designers design buttons to navigate, and navigation systems. Information Design exists on a continuum, where the design of single elements play a role within larger components, which play a role in complete systems.

META MEANING, INFORMATION DESIGN'S ULTIMATE GOAL

Through a review of various approaches to Information Design, it becomes apparent

that there are two simultaneous goals that skillful Information Designers aspire to achieve.

First, through a disciplined and sensitive view of their communications challenge, they use tools (such as typography) to build systematically planned out, ordered sequences of text, images and other graphic elements. This goal is to increase the conveyance of meaning through the use of systems and craft.

The following are the components of this Information Design task:

- 1) the Information Design approach to tool craft (typography, syntax, etc.),
- 2) the Information Design approach to content (order of information, meaning of images, veracity of data, etc.),
- 3) the Informational Design approach to correlation (how information is juxtaposed to achieve higher meaning),
- 4) the Information Design approach to overall structure (tailoring to target audiences, ethnographic considerations, the overall value to all users of the information, etc.).

CONCLUSION

Although the term, Information Design was coined in the 1970s, the practice of information design is much older.

Information Design is practiced within many disciplines. Its paradigm chooses function over form, defining function as the effective and successful conveyance of meaningful information to its intended recipients.

Information designers work at various scales (Redish, 2000), from small scales such as the design of a website navigation button, a letterform, or a corporate logo, to a complete online environment, a complete set of type families, or a complete visual branding system.

Information designers have two key goals. The first is to use their tool craft to increase the effectiveness of information transfer. The second is to correlate information in new ways to effect new understanding and create new insights within complex sequences of information.

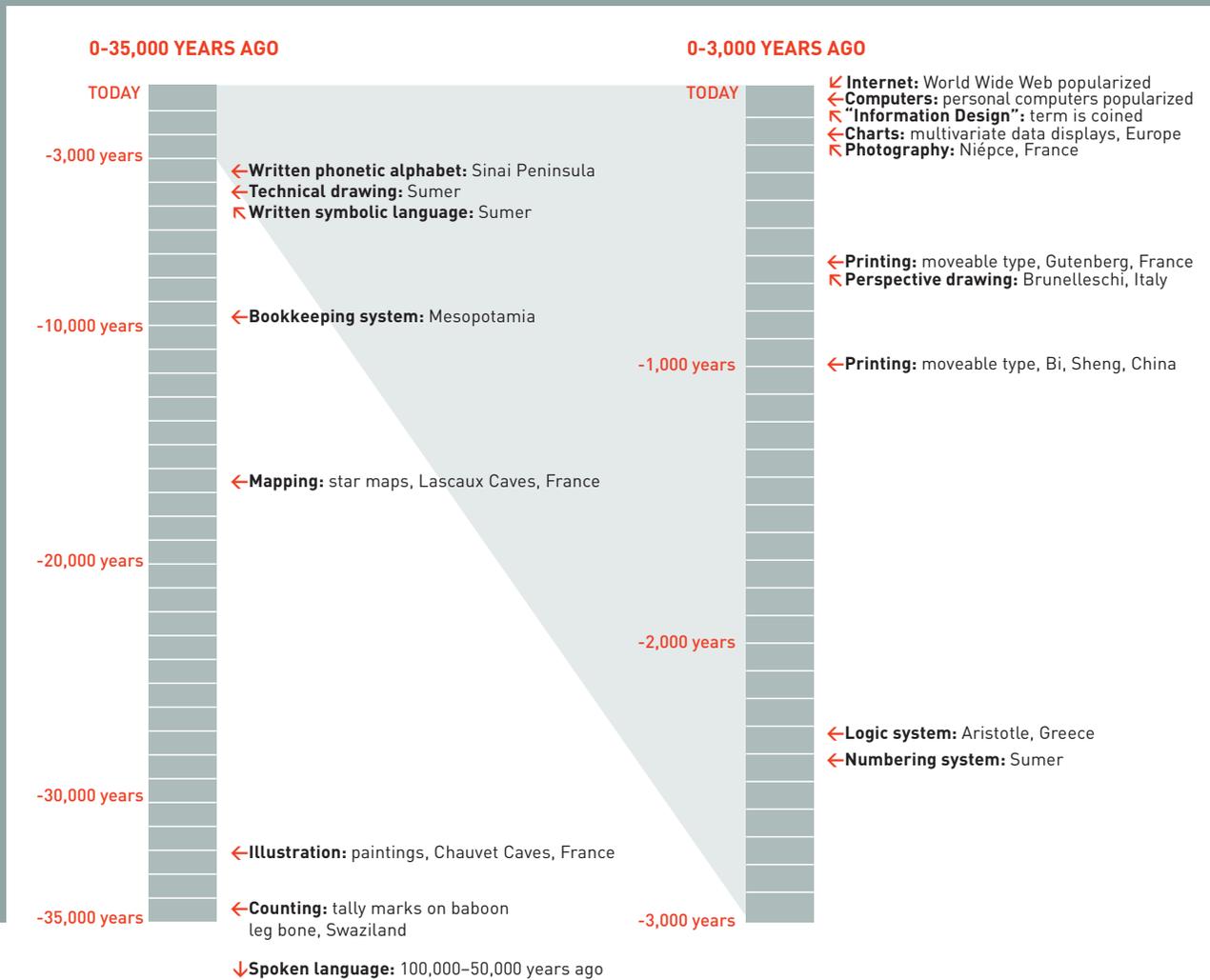
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THE DESIGN OF INFORMATION: A TIMELINE

DAVID CRAIB

Humanity's desire to communicate complex ideas has spawned many inventions which now form the basic tool-kit that Information Designers use. The following diagram charts approximate dates of some of these inventions.



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... is exploring the new scenarios and professions of design through their interdisciplinary theoretical foundations and methodological practices;

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... is mapping the landscape of the creative professions, their profiles and work;

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'Concept' is dedicated to the theoretical backgrounds and to critical reflection;

'Context' presents the contemporary scenarios among designers, investigating the processes and their work;

'Object' analyzes the new complex products emerging from the activity of design, the advanced forms of experimentation and the strategies of production.

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