

# Conceptual Versus Technological Inspiration: Reflections on Designing in the Age of Democratised Information

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**Abstract** – Democratisation of information makes the traditional methods of creating art and visual mediums yesterday look conventional today and are likely to be classified obsolete tomorrow. The creative fraternity faces mounting scepticism over the impact of computer-generated imagery and software use to design and produce art since 1970s. Examining some effects of information democratisation on designers would be explored in this paper, with qualitative research as critical inquiry discussing the processes and means whereby challenges to design and designers. The changed aesthetics of conceptual and visual forms through the application of technology will be reviewed, to delineate the challenges designers face in their systems of knowledge and values. Reflecting on the shift to technological-based production of design and the use of new media for creative research, this paper asks: Is conventional graphic and conceptual art redundancy a foregone? To advance debate, this paper proposes another perspective; that creative professionals are essentially producing inspirational output for the development of conceptual design through adaptation to democratised information - so long as they desire for continuous learning to improve design thinking and solve problems intuitively.

**Keywords**—democratisation, technology, design, conceptual art

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will first of all be discussing the impact of information democratisation and summarises how digital age technology affects creative professionals' quality of work. Secondly, the argument will be built on the positive uses of democratised information in its offer of content choice, flexibility and inspiration for creative professionals to expand creativity. Various perspectives will be framed to consider whether the reliability of digital information jeopardises conceptual and visual forms of cultural interpretations, producing an attitude which will be termed in this paper as 'dispassionate performance', where the motivation to enhance design creativity is affected. The purpose of this paper is to firstly review select literature to seek insights from creative and technological perspectives which proposes and opposes utilisation of technology in art and design; following that, to overview technology infusion into design thinking and creative processes and ask whether this has in fact not created the problem of dispassionate performance. The solution proposed is the improvement of design thinking at institutional level through continuous learning and exploration of new perspectives.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To graphic artists and visual communicators, the Internet now stands as a digital library, a great source of inspiration and reference. Billions of images, artworks, photographs, videos, music and etc. are being produced and shared all over the Internet every day, cultural data and art styles can be found instantly, easily, spontaneously and organically. Educational game developer Marc Prensky's [1] millennial

study on the digital native (Figure 1) segment shows that the "Internet generation" are suffused with a digital environment from which they process information, replicate data, and are able to demand – and select – information that is easier to access, cheaper, and unprecedented in speed and efficiency. Having limitless quantities of previous and current information to reference from, open source content creation and potential for collaboration by online users, it is also important to understand the challenges faced by Gen-Y and Gen-Z, the so-called digital natives [1], in choosing reliable and credible references and having skills to distinguish them from poor ones, as this problem eventually results in the degradation of quality in design outputs.



Figure 1 Common Features of a Digital Native [15]

## EFFECTS OF INFORMATION

The adoption of technology as part of the development of “material culture” [2: 438] means design must join hands with other sectors of industries, if progress means seeing the larger social impact of their work. For one, the digital revolution has produced an up-swelling of interest in technology and design research [3: 3]. Unsurprisingly, historians attempting to understand the democratisation of information, knowledge creation and consumption, note the resulting shift of social and political power bases. Led by social media and digital networks, the Internet and digital web environment which have benefited the process of collaborative research, has also disrupted mass media and publishing interests, a shift that Tom Standage [4: 4], digital editor at The Economist notes, may directly be responsible for promoting “trivial and coarse public discourse”. An alternative way by which technology can be couched in advantageous terms in post-industrial society is when it is thought of as a necessary part of a system that creates solutions: design processes when undergird by the principles of functional creativity such as usability, simplicity, clarity, accessibility and meaning, births innovation. Through technology, design’s ultimate goal must advocate for improvement and sustainable solutions to be integrated into people’s work and lives [5: 188-206].

Jorge Frascara [6: 20-22] defines graphic design as “organised, properly-implemented systems of visual communication that aligns social impact to a set of expected behavioural change in the audience or community”, and that it is this form of responsible communication that contextual design work and projects should aim for. Along with objective communication of information, an attempt to discuss technological evolution in design practice naturally means questioning the impact on creators (developers and designers) and users (consumers), as both are key stakeholders. The balance and synthesis of visual or aesthetic sophistication and rational thinking skills become the essence of the oeuvre and contribution by graphic design practitioners [6: 26]. Furthermore, rhetorical approaches are an increasingly acceptable marketing and consumer research concept, designed to organise persuasive communication. Visual rhetoric in graphic design such as advertisements and commercials are analysed for their complex (and often ambiguous) characteristics such as the use of metaphor, figurative speech and imagery (Figure 2). Some researchers also explore visual rhetoric in its broad use for affecting behavioural change and consumer sense-making [7].

According to marketing educators Garber, Hyatt & Boya [8] good design should characteristically display or provide benefits that ‘separates’ the class of audience or consumers. Attributions of product quality, utility and function is not to be inferior in the differentiation of a brand, but design, as a visual persuasion form, should aspire to provide a particular appeal that helps broader segments of consumers appreciate, share ideas, and ultimately “co-produce” intrinsic value in the design and production process [8], as can be seen in customisation of technological products. This qualitative approach calls for the active participation of designers in

observational and ethnographic consumer research in order to understand, determine and articulate the roles they are to effectively play in the design process, which are at once discursive, economic, social, political and cultural in nature [9].

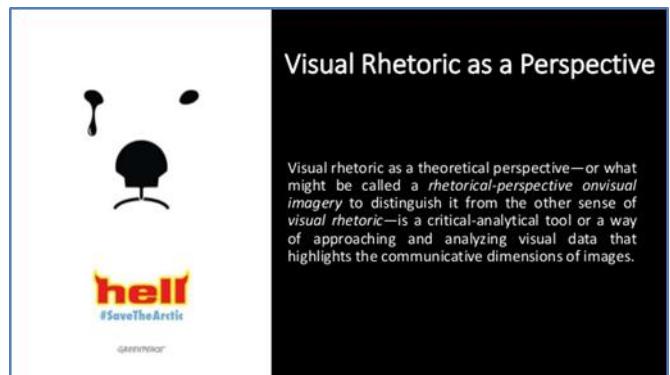


Figure 2 Theory of Visual Rhetoric [16]

## DEMOCRATISATION ON DESIGNERS

The availability of technologies can affect design production. Brands, for instance, go beyond stimulating traditional consumption and commercial value in the marketplace today. In their newly-acquired role in modern consumer society, brands are seen to contribute to community well-being. This triggers the process of designing and symbolically constructing meaning that align with target consumers’ identities, increasing competition and indirectly promoting innovation [3: 6]. To meet consumer demands, product development using the latest technologies becomes a game of one-upmanship among brand owners, as companies strive to develop, design and improve their brands to engage and satisfy target markets, to represent an image of excellence and to create a virtuous spiral of continuous innovation [5: 23]. However, the prohibitive advantages of informational technologies have also been the subject of case studies about the comparative value and impact of “information processing and technology’s role in redefining aesthetic awareness” [2: 438; 10]. Tracing conceptual art as a site of conflicts of perspectives in the 20th-century, art historian Edward Shanken [2] argues that the reasons to find continuity and commonalities were often displaced in favour of waging wars – traditionalists maintained that art starts and ends with ‘software’ (expression), while experimentalists held that the ‘hardware’ (technology and physical materials) would redefine cultural currency for the present and future era [2: 436].

A voice for latter-day designers and artists, Steven Heller [11] believes true design literacy is a function of learning and understanding design language, cultural views, historical legacies, impressions and opinions; in other words, in improving common knowledge. However, Heller points out that digitally-produced works for mass media audiences tends to focus on producing ephemeral, one-dimensional and superficial cultural caricatures [11: 90]. Still, Heller’s description of the problem at hand is a good framework from which to critique the social transformation aspects of design communication (Figure 3).

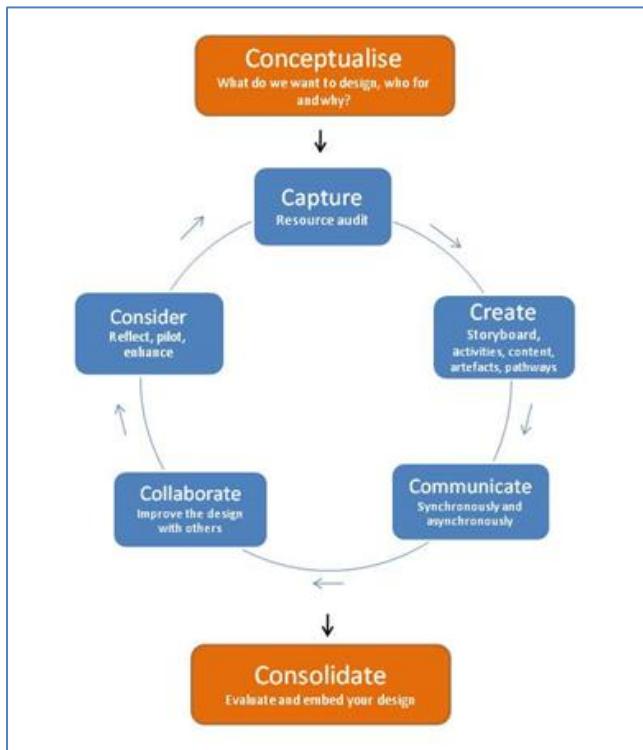


Figure 3 Design Process Matched to the 7Cs above [17]

Current marketing research point towards visual design's inadvertent role in persuasion, since, having greater access to media and news, consumers have become increasingly knowledgeable about marketing intentions and product claims [3]; and the association of commodity brands and brand image with specific target markets forms the social communication contexts of product advertising and branding today [12]. Conversely, where once perceived as pedestrian, literature shows the shift in perception of advertising as an élite form of modern art that directly and positively increases living standards and choices [12: 16]. At the same juncture, media culture theorists argue that many contemporary designers effectively use their expertise in tactical visual and rhetoric representation to influence social attitudes, inspire noble values and economic aspiration, while creating strong impressions that mediate the current of promotional culture [3; 7; 12; 13].

### III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

In the course of critical reflection, it was decided that this paper would primarily be concerned with explicating the possible positive and disadvantageous consequences of information democratisation in the production of design. Current theoretical underpinnings and literature in the cross-disciplinary fields of culture and media studies, marketing and design education were reviewed to attract further discussion on the notion that technological applications have improved design output. Qualitatively, the method of research is to present a series of critical questions to stimulate further discussion and provide points for reflective learning among design educators and practitioners.

Critical inquiry will be sought through questions about how examining some effects of information democratisation on designers. The research questions are also intended to

provide contextual reference for the organising discussion of conceptual versus technological inspiration. The significance research addressed the following questions:

- *How has creative design and design changed in the age of information democratisation?*
- *Would the availability of technologies affect design outcomes and performance objectives, and weaken creative output in the long run?*
- *What can designers do to broaden their cultural knowledge that enables them to distinguish between conceptual thinking and technological-based design methods and skills?*

Today, it is very important to seek for the balance between the challenges to design and designers facing a world full of contradictions, in which the structures to which we are used have changed in a vertiginous way. The mindful used of metaphor in the age of democratised information approach can be a nurturing way to the information makes the traditional methods of creating art and visual mediums yesterday look conventional today and are likely to be classified obsolete tomorrow. Above questions are analysed considering the changed aesthetics of conceptual and visual forms through the application of technology will be reviewed, to delineate the challenges designers face in their systems of knowledge and values.

### IV. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Aesthetic and visual making skills in the domain of artists, graphic designers, typographers, illustrators and art directors face an increasing threat, whose approaches are regarded as less adaptable, less relevant and presumably less entertaining if they refuse to adapt to technological-based design research and thinking skills.

There is no lack in academic courses teaching specialist design education; what seems obvious is the growing evidence that among contemporary design and art communities, the greater focus is placed on fleeting "dictates of the marketplace", and many therefore cannot claim total mastery of design literacy [11: xi]. This "creativity hijack" creates what is here termed as dispassionate performance, where – in opposition to the pursuit of passion for improving their knowledge, methods and skills – the pragmatic needs of working for clients are so predominant that the outcomes are not properly synthesised with the more organic systems of values and cultural affiliations which theoretical knowledge provides. As an integral foundation for understanding and criticising others' experiences, contemporary designers should not forget or ignore an essential step in their advancement, which is to seek continuous learning and self-motivated action that enhances design thinking skills in the intuitive, emotional, rational and social realms of message construction [6: 26-29].

This leads to twofold assumptions regarding democratised information. First, standards of design practice are to be effectively measured and compared to locate the impact of design to audiences and users. Second, consumer and user experiences must be documented, analysed and understood in order to acquire primary information that shapes

appropriate systems of values communication and to apply principles of persuasion in different cultural climates. At the intersection of these two assumptions is where advocacy of democratised information and technological literacy should focus. Institutions of creative design teaching and learning are to play a key role in instructing, storing, enabling, experimenting, sharing, coordinating, discussing and memorialising aspects of design practices past and present, in order that they could 'stand on the shoulder of giants', so to speak; confident in the deep mastery of design philosophies, methodologies and skills, and through acknowledging and learning from mistakes of industry predecessors. Design thinkers today, citing great breakthroughs of the last two centuries, have crossed into newer fields like disruptive innovation in designing and developing experiential technology (Figure 4) that is necessary for businesses to stay competitive and change-ready [14]. Measuring of efficiency in design processes today need to take into account sustainable practices and parameters [5: 162]. As such, it behoves designers to speak the language of business and to encourage collaborative economic opportunities in order to "rethink priorities and strategies" for outcomes and solutions that are durable, functional, culturally-appropriate and satisfying for all stakeholders [5: 383-388].



Figure 4 Technologies That Can Enhance Your Event [18]

## V. CONCLUSION

The present trend of collecting a broad range of inspiration from technological sources continues to be viewed with askance by traditional design practice, in the interest of developing professionalism and the perpetuity of ideas.

With more fields studies showing quality of design work affected by the availability (or lack) of access to, and reliability of, democratised information in cultural production, modern designers' abilities to construct communication links between concepts, contexts and audiences and improve conceptualisation is an area of contention, as degradation of quality in design thinking is both its cause and consequence. Design thinking today challenges practitioners' learning capacities, requiring more than solutions in the process of answering client briefs and marketplace needs to produce evidence of emotional, cultural and social engagement. In so doing, the issue of dispassionate performance can be addressed, a deeper evaluation of democratised information is deemed possible, and a more culturally-inclusive, innovative culture of design practice could be promoted for the growth of the industry and its stakeholders.

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