

Information design and systematic thinking

Gerlinde Schuller interviewed by Bianca Sun

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Bianca Sun: When was your attention drawn to information design?

Gerlinde Schuller: During my graphic design studies I discovered the book 'Envisioning information' by Edward Tufte. Although the book is analytic and theoretical, I became fascinated by designing complex information. I wanted to learn how to make complexity comprehensible. But it was a great deal of 'do-it-yourself' learning, as there weren't any courses on information design at my academy at that time.

What's the process of making information design?

Information design is the design of complex data. 'Data' can be everything. My main objective is to derive additional knowledge by organising, combining, condensing, filtering and translating complex data into an 'information' visualization. For me, taking the right steps 'from data to information to knowledge' is the challenge.

Information design seems to have a lot of other names, the classification is also very different. What is the scope of information design?

Information design is an umbrella term for 'designing complex information'. Infographics, information architecture, signage, maps, diagrams, just to name a few, are different information design applications. In my office the design approach for all these applications remains the same. In all cases we do the research ourselves and translate it into a systematic design in order to make complex issues comprehensible. I also find that information design does not depend on certain media.

How do you get information? Is it difficult?

When we design for a client, we get the data from them. But we always have to check it carefully, as good information design requires correct and complete databases. For self-initiated projects, I prefer to build up my own databases, if possible.

For my book 'Designing universal knowledge' (Lars Müller Publishers, 2009) it took me two years to collect a 'material database' consisting of own images, press material, essays, interviews, talks etc. Therefore I travelled to France, the United States, Germany and Austria to interview designers, visit libraries, archives and museums. Although we have Internet, email and telephone, I find it impossible to make a book from my desk. At the end I only used 1/4 of the database for the final version of the book. It's always important for me to have control over the data I have to design. Besides, I also find it essential to have a broad, interdisciplinary and international view on the topics I am working on.

What is the hardest part behind practising information design?

The challenge within information design is creating a 'universal image' that is comprehensible for everyone. That's idealistic and not realistic for a lot of commissioned projects because you often deal with a certain target group. But if you think of airport signage, map navigation systems or patient information leaflets, the 'universal' aspect is important. You try to broaden the target group as much as possible, trying to make it understandable for every age and culture. But it's very difficult to create a 'universal image'.

How do you tell your story effectively?

Storytelling is often part of our infographics projects. Within these projects I act as a 'visual journalist'. I complete a journalistic investigation before I start designing. But unlike a traditional journalist I deliver an image story at the end of my research – a combination of image and words, with the focus on the image. The smallest application I work on is a single infographic, the largest is a book of my own, like 'Designing universal knowledge' that I wrote, edited and designed myself.

Would you share some thoughts on running a business in information design?

Running a studio which only does information design is much easier nowadays, as the term is more established than 10 years ago. Information visualizations on the Web have grown quite popular lately, so potential clients know what you're doing.

What do you think the future of information design will look like?

New computer technologies, the Internet, the smart phone and free databases have a great impact on the collection of data and therefore on information visualizations.

Today, information technologies offer quick and prompt collecting of data and high memory capacities. We are used to checking share prices, web statistics and the weather forecast in real time on our Apple Apps. Data has to be generated within seconds to an information design that an average person can understand. Therefore not only fast technology is necessary but also a simple interface, efficient navigation and understandable information graphics.

The trends within the discipline are fast and automatically generated information visualizations, like Google Analytics or interactive infographics such as the excellent election maps by the New York Times after Obama's victory in the US.

What are some important issues that you would like to share with young and developing information designers?

An information designer should be talented in systematic thinking and needs a combination of analytical, editorial and graphic abilities. In my opinion, information design should be at once inspiring, enlightening, entertaining, informative and functional.

If you want to specialize in information graphics for the media you should be interested in designing and writing. You should have an eye for details and some stamina when it comes to checking sources, facts and databases.

In commercial projects, parts of management have their own ideas, how do you convince them to accept your idea?

I always try to find out if the client is open to advice and new ideas before I accept a commission. But most of my clients realise that information design is a specialization that involves a multi- and interdisciplinary approach to communication, combining skills from graphic design, web design, 3D design, psychology, cognitive science, information theory and cultural studies. I guess they know that we are the experts to do this, so convincing them is never that hard.