From Formalism
to Social Significance
in Communication Design
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Introduction

At the heart of design is the goal of communication, and instilling a belief in the audience about the past, present, or future.[1] Historically, graphic and advertising design, fields within communication design, have oriented around clients and deliverables, and have maintained a focus on translating written or spoken messages into visual communication. Designers of visual communications—graphic design and the related areas of advertising: brand and identities, Web sites, and posters and photomontages—have largely relied on the designer's intuition and training to create appropriate visual messages.

However, communication designers have begun to encounter a more difficult task in negotiating the client's vision and the viewer's response to the designed message. This is partly due to the fact that viewers of advertising messages differ from those of past decades. Consumers today are exceedingly diverse in age, income, and ability, and have a wider variety of expectations, influences, and education. Additionally, they have much more exposure to the constant stream of visual stimuli that today's media offer, and more diverse experiences responding to a world of designed messages. For these reasons, relying solely on the designer's intuition no longer may be the most effective approach for creating communications that resonate with a particular audience. Instead, designers must create empathy with the audiences for which they are designing.

While product designers traditionally have made greater use of data about the people who their products are designed for, communication designers more often have relied on inference and personal insight when designing communicative artifacts. The result is that these artifacts may fail to inspire the audience they were designed for, or more critically, fail to change behavior in the way that was intended. Recently, the inclusion of user-centered, interdisciplinary methodologies in communication design processes has helped to find appropriate ways to reach today's viewers. User-centered methods allow communication designers to create the opportunity for a shared dialogue with their viewers, and more important, to create the opportunity for behavioral and social

1   Richard Buchanan, "Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument and Demonstration in Design Practice" in *Design Discourse: History Theory Criticism*, Victor Margolin, ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 92.
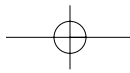
change. When designer and viewer are actively involved in a shared dialogue, both become active participants in the creation and interpretation of the visual message. As a result, the designer is empowered, shifting from a decorator of messages to an agent who has influence on the social implications of delivering a visual dialogue.

This paper explores how communication designers are incorporating research methods in their design processes to create empathy with their viewers. We present two case studies of how design firms have employed methods for understanding users throughout the activity of communication design. Finally, the implications for situating research methodologies within the field of communication design and society are discussed.

A Rhetorical View of Communication Design

A designed message communicates by effectively ordering and representing the common visual languages of society. Therefore, it possesses great potential for affecting viewers. In its most powerful form, communication design can inspire the viewers to change behavior by generating knowledge, taking action, or creating an experience.

Ann Tyler has studied how the communicated message mediates the relationship between designer and viewer.[2] This relationship can be viewed a number of ways. In one view, designers create messages that act as formal expressions, presented in isolation from the audience they were designed for. A second view is one where designers create iconic or symbolic messages, requiring decoding and interpretation from the viewer. A third and closely related view is where designers create iconic or symbolic messages that are decoded by an audience sharing specific and similar beliefs. A fourth view characterizes designers as those who create arguments that persuade an audience by referencing key values and connecting with social attitudes. This is a rhetorical view of communication design.[3]

The rhetorical view of communication design allows designers and viewers to actively co-construct meaning through the visual message. New interactions between designer, viewer, and message result. The common visual language is the medium through which ambiguities are reduced and differences are assessed. The agents taking part in the dialogue can establish common meanings and build bridges to shared values. Effective rhetorical communication allows individuals to relate to each other, provides a vehicle for expression, freedom, and the discovery of truth, and ultimately, creates the possibility for social agreement within a pluralistic society.[4] However, if designers attempt to persuade audiences through visual messages, without properly understanding who they are designing for, inappropriate outcomes can result.

For example, the advertising messages related to specific audiences within HIV-positive and AIDS communities provide an

2   Tyler characterized four perspectives on the relationship of the audience to the communication process in order to set forth a new agenda for design inquiry. See Ann Tyler, "Shaping Belief: The Role of Audience in Visual Communication" in *The Idea of Design, A Design Issues Reader*, Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 105.

3   Ibid., 106.

4   Richard McKeon, "Communication, Truth, and Society" in *Freedom and History and Other Essays: An Introduction to the Thought of Richard McKeon*, Z.K. McKeon. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 96.
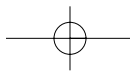
interesting social and cultural case study of the ability of designed communications to affect the behavior of the public at large in appropriate and inappropriate ways. The onset of HIV and AIDS in the US in the mid-1980s generated numerous advertising messages related to the disease. In 1987, the American government educated the American public about the severity of this illness with a frightening message—"anyone could get AIDS." [5] While this was a key event for raising public consciousness about the disease, the campaign communicated that anyone was at risk and, as a result, prevention advocates were unable to secure government funds to educate the two highest risk groups, gay men and intravenous drug users. Misdirecting the advertising message resulted in an undesirable societal impact—the inability to get government funding to treat the individuals who needed it most.

In 1997, the FDA began to allow drug companies to market directly to consumers, and the resulting messages changed from pessimistic to optimistic ones, depicting miraculous cures for HIV and AIDS. Once again, the misconceptions that resulted from these advertisements made the disease harder to fight. Research showed that gay men who saw advertisements for HIV drugs were less likely to practice safe sex, because advertising messages led them to believe that a quick cure was easy to come by.[6]

More recently, however, advertisements for HIV drugs have become more realistic, possibly as a result of a better understanding of the audience that will view them. Subjects in the campaigns are depicted more realistically, reviewing their options for treatment. Viewers are implored to assess their personal values related to being a safe partner and planning for a healthy future. Today's messages, targeted appropriately to the audiences who need to hear them, persuade viewers to assess what is healthy preventative and interventive behavior. The HIV and AIDS campaigns are evidence for showing that understanding viewers will help people to take action based on increased knowledge. The images serve as data for social and cultural inquiry, because they are concrete pieces of visual information that represent abstract concepts in everyday social life.

A New View of User-Centered Research for Communication Design

Designers can no longer only be concerned about the interaction of word and image; they also must be concerned about the interaction between the audience, the content of the communication, and the outcomes of the design. In order to create dialogues that effectively persuade the viewer to adopt a new belief or change behavior, the communication designer can no longer rely solely on intuition.

Designers have to devise methods for creating empathy with the viewer who will play a part in constructing meaning from the message. This may mean gathering data directly from the audience who the message is designed for. However, the actual execution of

5   Blair's article in the *New York Times* "Ideas and Trends" column from August, 2001 chronicled the short history of advertising related to HIV and AIDS awareness and treatment. See Jayson Blair, "Healthy Skepticism and the Marketing of AIDS" in the *New York Times* (August 5, 2001): 14.

6   Ibid., 14.
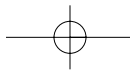
7   Roth originally addressed the evolving
    field of design research in an essay
    published in the proceedings of the "No
    Guru—No Method?" conference in
    Helsinki in 1997. See Susan Roth, "The
    State of Design Research," in *Design
    Issues* XV:2 (Summer 1999): 18.

8   Frascara and Strickler have both been
    concerned with inclusion of social issues
    as a concern for graphic designers. In
    Jorge Frascara, "Graphic Design: Fine Art
    or Social Science?" in *The Idea of
    Design, A Design Issues Reader* Victor
    Margolin and Richard Buchanan, eds.
    (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 47, the
    reader is given an overview of the past
    and future concerns of the graphic
    designer.

9   In Zoe Strickler, "Elicitation Methods in
    Experimental Design Research" in *Design
    Issues* XV:2 (Summer 1999): 27, provides
    a working model for design research
    related to communication design.

10 Roth, 18.

11 My thoughts on this issue have been
    greatly influenced by informal conversa-
    tions with Richard Buchanan as both an
    advisor and colleague, as well as the
    PhD-Design discussion distribution list
    (PhD-design@jiscmail.ac.uk). For an addi-
    tional overview, see Nigel Cross, "Design
    Research: A Disciplined Conversation" in
    Design Issues XV:2 (Summer 1999): 5.

12 Alastair S. Macdonald and Cherie S.
    Lebbon, "The Methods Lab: Developing a
    Usable Compendium of User Research
    Methods." ICED 01, The International
    Conference on Engineering Design,
    Glasgow, August 21–23, 2001.

13 The Presence Project was a revolutionary
    design research project funded by the EU
    and contributed to by both industrial and
    academic partners. See *Presence: New
    Media for Older People* Kay Hofmeester
    and Esther de Charon de Saint Germain,
    eds., (Amsterdam: Netherlands Design
    Institute, 1999). A website, www.pres-
    enceweb.org, also was developed as a
    resource to the community (not currently
    available).

14 MacDonald and Lebbon, 3.

user-centered research related to communication design in profes-
sional practice can be extremely limited. This is because the research
may be drawn from archetypal marketing data, may be related to
a small part of a specific project, or may be conducted within a
rapid time frame.[7] Once the work is finished, it is rare that findings
remain accessible to designers. The research may be lost, archived,
or rarely circulated outside of the client-designer relationship.

A few communication designers have made a call within the
community for a systematic understanding of the impact of visual
messages on the behavioral and social aspects of a community of
viewers.[8,9] Zoe Strickler, through her research on advertising cam-
paigns on driving behavior in Canada, has identified a need for a
knowledge base about viewers and how they might interact with
visual communications.[10] The practice, processes, and methods for
conducting user research in communication design are in their
infancy, and there are a myriad of ways to talk about conducting
research and applying subsequent findings.[11]

Within the Helen Hamlyn Research Center at the Royal
College of Art in London, researchers have been involved with
"i~design," a project that is attempting to create a compendium of
user research methods in design. The goal of i~design is to deter-
mine what value user research brings to the design process, and to
build and structure a usable source of user research methods, illus-
trated through case studies. The ultimate goal is to support the
design of artifacts that meet the needs of the greatest number of
users. The i~design project builds on earlier work done for the
Methods Lab, a project that was part of the Presence research
program, one of thirteen EU-funded projects under the European
Network for Intelligent Information Interfaces.[12] The format and
content for the Methods Lab initially was developed during the
Presence project, where, through a series of working groups (called
tea parties), methods were discussed, refined, and evaluated.[13]

However, a major problem with design methodology is
accessibility.[14] Practicing professional designers may have difficulty
in rapidly translating and using the methods listed in the Methods
Lab, particularly across the cultural boundaries of the design disci-
plines. A need still exists to group, organize, and make data-gather-
ing methods usable and readily accessible to communication des-
igners. One approach, adopted by i~design, is to track and log case
studies of how research about the audience can be conducted to
identify the beliefs and behaviors of those who will interpret the
visual messages. The case studies are demonstrable examples of
choice and application of research methods. By creating empathy
with viewers, designers are freely empowered to become active
agents in the communication of the message.

How have communication design firms directly involved the
audience in the research, design, and making of the communicated
message? Both Wire Design, a small firm in the United Kingdom,
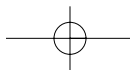
and BIG, a brand integration group within the worldwide advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather, have realized the vision of asking viewers to examine their own beliefs and, where needed, to make a change in their behavior. The outcomes of the work of these forward-thinking firms have enabled both designers and viewers to create new beliefs and to engage in new experiences as a result of designed communications.

Wire Design: Design With a Point

In 2000, Damilola Taylor, an eight-year-old resident of Peckham, South London, was stabbed to death near his home. The nature of his death and the repercussions that followed led to community debate about youth safety and the knife-carrying culture in Britain's inner cities.

The Southwark Council and the Metropolitan Police were faced with the problem of how to communicate and resolve issues related to the untimely death of a young boy. The local community in Peckham needed communications on two levels: community assurance about safety, and dialogue with youth about the issues related to carrying knives. To do so, the Council turned to Wire Design, a ten-person design firm founded in 1997.

The Company and the Vision

Located in Northeast London, Wire Design had a history of work with clients including Nokia, the Barbican, and the New York City-based firm Digital Vision. Wire Design Director John Corcoran felt that, since the client list had grown over the past five years, and the staff worked furiously to meet client deadlines, the firm was forced to focus exceedingly on the decoration of messages.

However, upon being commissioned to develop a new corporate identity for the Lewisham Council, a government organization of ten thousand employees, the firm began to witness a change in the way that they worked with clients. There was a marked difference in the way that the Council asked for Wire's input in the communication problems that they wanted to address. Wire had the freedom and ability to both design the content as well as the visual language of the dialogue, and it was liberating.

Inspired by the success of the work with the Lewisham Council, Metropolitan Police and the Southwark Council approached Wire Design to create communications for a knife safety campaign. Based on his learning experience with Lewisham, Corcoran frankly told the Southwark clients that the firm could not begin to generate solutions to the problem at hand until they could gain a better understanding of the audience they were designing for—youth and knife carriers. Wire recognized the need to reframe the problem in terms of values, rather than the client's objectives. Based on their work with the Lewisham Council, Corcoran knew that the appropriate images, language, and style would be unattainable
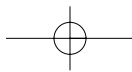
without a thorough understanding of what would resonate with the audience.

To move ahead from their basic assumptions, Wire Design began their research with the South London police. They reviewed statistical data on knife attacks, and listened to the assumptions and beliefs of local police officers about what the communications campaign should do. For example, police had perceived a change in the age and reasons for young teenagers carrying knives in the street. Since the death of Taylor, children as young as age nine were carrying knives out of fear. Police felt strongly about delivering a positive message, as well as reinforcing the strength of the community, without delivering threats to youth or making promises to those concerned about safety. The message would be delivered in public spaces and primary schools, and serve as a discussion point with parents, grandparents, and teachers. The message could neither glamorize or dramatize knife carrying.

Wire Design worked with Lebbon, a researcher at the Helen Hamlyn Research Center to create an effective research strategy for developing empathy with the various constituencies of the audience. Corcoran felt that it would be critical to choose the most appropriate visual language for understanding a teenager's perspective and beginning a dialogue.

Corcoran and Lebbon made two visits to a Southwark school. The goal of the first visit was to get a sense of what visual languages and messages might be most appropriate for an audience of 13- and 14-year-olds. Wire developed a fictional band, "Trainer"

Figure 1.
Middle school students evaluated CD covers for a fictional band called "Trainer."
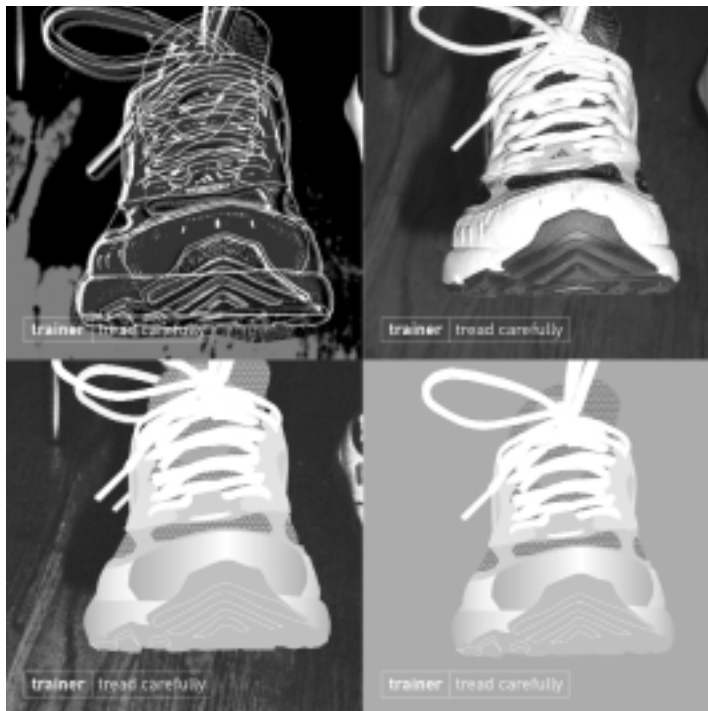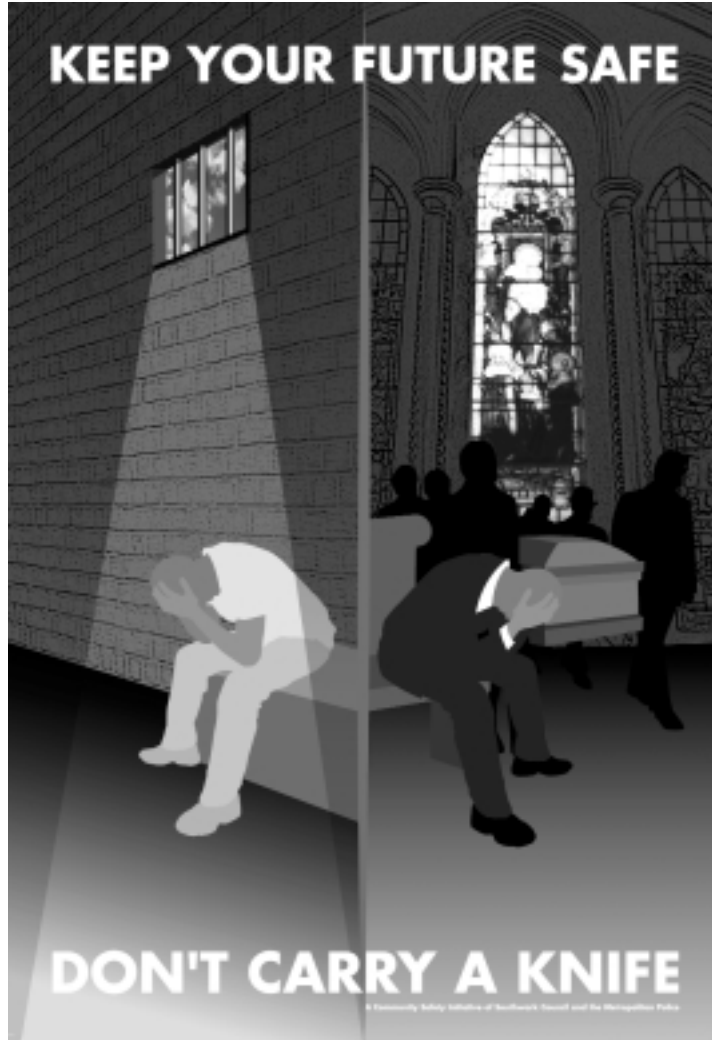
Figure 2.
Wire Design's final poster for the Southwark knife campaign.

and created twelve CD covers in a variety of visual styles (fig. 1). Students were asked to associate each example with a particular age group. The second visit took the form of a group interview with the goal of understanding the students' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and language related to knife carrying and safety. Additionally, students evaluated image boards in the light of conversations that they had (fig. 2).

The Dialogue
The final poster employs a combination of photographic and illustrative techniques, chosen as a direct result of what Corcoran and Lebbon learned from their studies with the teens. The result is a poster which is driven by visual impact: the image of an older teen, representing aspiration to a certain kind of life, situated in a church environment representing fear of failure in front of family and friends. The imagery, deliberately chosen to create a contrast of hope
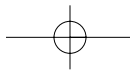
and despair, is augmented with the text "Keep your future safe. Don't carry a knife." The choice of the word "safe" alludes to safety in the form of freedom from harm and a safe as a treasure of life. It was a word chosen directly from the vocabulary that emerged from talking with the teens, that represented the qualities of being good, cool, and under control.

Situating the Message in the Community
Based on the success of the youth poster, Wire Design was asked by the Southwark Council to create a modified version of the poster for use in the community at large. To support this audience, Wire modified the copy on the poster, placing more emphasis on the word "safe," and enlarging the type to make the poster accessible to an older population. The Metropolitan Police logo was added for more credibility and reassurance.

Corcoran and Lebbon conducted subjective tests of the second poster to understand the effectiveness of the message, learning that elders between the ages of 60 and 75 responded positively to the message. Both the youth and the community posters, designed with specific needs of each audience in mind, instilled a sense of safety and positive change within the community.

Oglivy and Mather: Tipping the Culture
In 1999, the U.S. Government realized the need for assistance in conceiving of and producing public service announcements. The government wanted to gain critical mass for the national anti-drug campaign aimed at teens and young adults. Instead of typical television advertisements aired during undesirable slots on early morning television, the government would have to compete for and purchase prime media time. To do so, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) turned to Ogilvy and Mather and its Brand Integration Group.

The Company and the Vision
Ogilvy and Mather has led hundreds of successful campaigns since its inception in 1948. However, in 1999, the agency made a major strategic change by restructuring its Brand Integration Group (BIG), a group within the agency that specializes in revitalizing and repositioning brands and integrating them with the mass media.[15] BIG had been in existence since 1997. In 1999, Brian Collins was selected to bring a new vision to BIG.

Collins surrounded himself with a staff that is well practiced in creating dialogues in disciplines other than design: theater, book publishing, and even biology. In this way, BIG can be sure that its constituents do not overly rely on the often-tried and relied-upon codes of advertising.

Based on work done for American Express and Motorola, BIG was hired to brand the national anti-drug campaign. ONDCP

15 Steven Heller, "The B.I.G. Idea," reprinted from *Print Magazine* (November/December 2000).
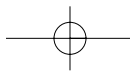
had never had a branded campaign before. Instead, the Partnership for a Drug Free America had simply served as the body that organized agencies who would donate services to the cause. BIG was charged with creating a brand vision around which multiple themes could be executed, but remain consistent.

In order to understand the visual language and dialogue that would be most effective for teens, BIG pored through vast amounts of research from ONDCP. Collins was able to develop and assert a hypothesis: teens could be steered away from drugs and drinking by allowing themselves to connect to larger and more positive forces in life. By engaging in activities such as dancing, biking, working with a family business, sports, and school events, each teen could foster a unique relationship with the universe.

To test and verify the hypothesis, BIG talked to teens, using focus groups and insight groups as the primary methods to learn the beliefs and attitudes of teens. Collins felt very strongly that the ONDCP message needed to foster a conversation without being pedantic, parental, or overbearing. Collins and his group also re-searched mythology and stories about achieving the grail in order to recall the difficult and painful process of finding a personal path in the world. If the invitation to take part in a dialogue was appropriately extended, teens would be interested in participating in the dialogue rather than feeling as though they were being told to do something.

The Dialogue

The mythology stories, along with the time spent researching teens, served as a direct catalyst for the BIG team. Charles Hall, a senior writer at BIG, emerged with the question, "What's your anti-drug?" (fig. 3). This phrase, which is represented with a handwritten script and graphic structure that invites completion, served to motivate appropriate dialogues on several levels. First, it motivated those responsible for engaging in communication: teens, who could identify with and communicate about what made them feel positive and unique; and parents, to engage in dialogue with teens about drug addiction and positive behaviors. Second, the phrase motivated those responsible for making the communication: other ONDCP agencies would be able to extend and co-construct the brand by creating new and evolving artifacts.

As the campaign unfolded, opportunities to gain empathy for the recipients of the message continued. For example, teens were invited to a web site, www.whatsyourantidrug.com, to talk about what their personal connection to the universe was (fig. 4). Each message that was left by a visitor was developed into an excerpt using images, music, and voiceovers. Some were done by BIG and some by other agencies. Some were chosen and further developed into television commercials.

Figure 3

. A final poster from the "What's Your Anti-Drug?" campaign. The visual design of the tag line invites the viewer to fill in his/her own response to the question. Additional copy in handwritten script motivates dialogues on several levels.

Situating the Message in the Community

The resulting artifacts from the campaign—placed in theaters, schools, and public arenas including the Web and television—called upon viewers to think, act, feel, and engage with the dialogue at hand. Collins has followed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the changes in the community as a result of the campaign. ONDCP reported that the awareness of the anti-drug campaign was at a historical high point. Collins recalled the story of one of the BIG group, while attending a movie, witnessed a conversation that took place between a parent and a teen as a result of seeing the poster displayed in the theater. Collins himself received a letter from a parent thanking him for opening an honest and effective dialogue with society. These facts and recollections are pieces of evidence that design has the power to do what Collins describes as "tipping the culture"—creating understanding, new points of view, and new entries into experience.

Conclusion

Wire Design and BIG's stories make clear the benefit of situating design research methodologies within the field of communication design. In both cases, designers were empowered to create a common ground for dialogue, community-building, and behavioral change.

Figure 4.

www.whatsyourantidrug.com, a website inviting shared dialogue among teens.

16 In this series of essays, Carey contrasts the differences between communication as transmission and communication as ritual, arguing that the ritual view is less explored because the concept is weak in American social thought. For more information, see James Carey, *Culture As Communication: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

Effective rhetorical communications such as these have great implications for society. They are vehicles for expression, social agreement, and social change. They allow communication to move beyond a process of faster and better information transfer. Instead, communication evolves as a ritual process where sharing, participation, and community-building work towards maintaining society, and representing and promoting shared beliefs.[16] These implications set forth an exciting new charter for design research.