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Editorial

Exploring problems of information design: The ties that bind us

If you were looking in on the field from afar, you might conclude that research on information design is fraught by a lack of coherence. You might mumble to yourself: this field is all over the map.

You would be right in that what researchers choose to study is literally and figuratively all over the map. Indeed, the topics we explore cover a wide territory. To illustrate the terrain of our intellectual landscape, this issue of *IDJ* features studies on the following diverse topics:

– Analyzing publications on user-interface design and user-experience design to trace their growth
– Designing typography to improve distance reading for people with low vision
– Uncovering students' needs for wayfinding maps on campus
– Designing specialized information for budding experts in industrial and product design

This range of topics could be interpreted as no more than a scattering of disconnected topics. While the topics are all over the map, you'd be wrong to assume that nothing binds them together.

For example, three of the four articles address the needs of people who use information designs in different environments. These authors draw on a variety of empirical methods to explore people's needs. Their collective goal is to design for people using the right information, at the right level, in the right platform, at the right time.

In this issue's review of *Design for People,* Thomas Bohm raises a provocative question. When we say that we "design for people," what do we mean? When we ask questions about whether a design works, what are we trying to find out? How do we know if a design is effective? Designers have always strived to make designs that are good. But as Bohm asks: when a design is good, for whom is it good? And good for what?

So, what are the ties that bind exploring problems of information design?

1. Commitment to evaluating what works

One tie that binds the information design community is our taking seriously the hard questions about what works. We don't just design, we are committed to assessing the quality of what we design. Since *IDJ*'s very first issue in 1979, we've seen a proliferation of research on understanding the needs of audiences to improve the communications people engage with every day — whether at home, at work, at school, in airports, or even in hospitals.

Our commitment to evaluating what we do is moving the field beyond expert opinion about what works. It's

not that we ignore the well-trained eyes of experts. After all, many seasoned professionals have immersed themselves in the creation of hundreds of information designs. Research suggests that deep experience in a domain allows one to develop sophisticated pattern knowledge about their field's problems and solutions (Schriver, 2012). Put differently, their educated hunches are more than mere intuition. In fact, some of us have been working on consolidating some of those patterns and their typical solutions (Waller et al., 2025, June 5).

Yet even the best experts often fail to see what audiences see (De Jong & Lentz, 1996). Our commitment to evaluating what works means that we expand our vision beyond ourselves and direct our attention to the eyes of audiences. Many of us now test not only for usability, but also to learn about people's emotions, preferences, and satisfaction with information designs. Whenever possible, we go straight to our audiences and rely on their human judgements about whether visual or verbal content works.

2. Use of multiple research methods

A second tie that binds us is that we are methodologically opportunistic. We seize the best methods for the situation, often opting for multiple methods to take a closer look into why something works. Our willingness to mix research methods — both quantitative and qualitative — has been a particular strength. When we explore a complex issue by integrating methods appropriate to the questions it raises, we stand a better chance of learning *what* works. Importantly, we also come closer to knowing *why* something works — *for whom* and *under what circumstances.* Our rejection of the egocentric view that what is clear to an expert is clear to an audience has allowed us to move beyond self-absorbed designs that may please our ego but fail our audience.

3. Concern with ethics and social justice

A third tie that binds us is our sense of ethics. We have opted — by choice — not to use our talents just to sell things or make them pretty. We do not aspire to generate the world's best eye candy. Instead, we are driven by a dogged commitment to ethical practices and social responsibility. We care about people's functional needs for accessing and using information. From redesigning nutrition labels to ballots for voting, we are unabashedly egalitarian, believing that everyone has a right to take informed action.

We believe that plain language and clarity — especially in communications from governments — is a civil right (Schriver, 2017). We care about social justice, leveraging design to address societal inequalities and promote fairness. We recognize that the designs we create are not neutral artifacts, but information tools laden with values. The visual and verbal stories we tell aim to enable people who use our designs to feel heard and to be seen.

We encourage collaborative practices such as co-design, with an eye toward building information designs that people can not only use but trust. Our commitment to iterative human-centred design aligns with our sense of ethics and user advocacy.

4. Curiosity about people as they engage with language — writing, visual design, typography

A fourth tie that binds us is perhaps our strongest. As a field, we care deeply about the audiences for our work — whether we call them stakeholders, visitors, customers, readers, or users. We place human needs at the center of information design activity. Our genuine curiosity about people as they engage with all types of language — words, images, numbers, or typography — distinguishes us.

Instead of a techno-centric approach or one that privileges the perspective of organizations, we stress a people-first strategy. We want to know about people's cognitions and emotions, their situations, and cultural contexts. Our orientation toward learning what people want has led to the design of people-friendly communications around the world.

5. Seeing these ties in practice

Taken together, these ties act as a kind of intellectual and social superglue — binding the field as it is now and scaffolding our future. Upon reading this issue, you may be struck not only by the different topics each article explores, but also by how each article uniquely reveals some of these ties. You'll notice that when authors review the literature, they focus on persistent questions about what works. You'll see a range of research methods, both familiar and not-so-familiar. You may glean researchers' sense of ethics through whose interests they focus on. You'll detect researchers' curiosity as they study how people engage with information designs and evaluate what works.

5.1 Analyzing publications about user-interface design and user-experience design to trace their growth

In "User interface, usability, and user experience" Mustafa and her colleagues used a novel research method — bibliographic analysis — to track the evolution of UI and UX papers over a 30-year period. They offer insights into trends in publications, patterns of collaboration, and the impact of research funding on the productivity of researchers in different countries. They found, perhaps not surprisingly, that researchers from richer countries tended to get more funding and publish more, which boosted their profile and productivity in relation to their peers across the globe.

Even though some researchers had a home advantage, some star researchers from poorer countries managed to capture wide audiences for their work, demonstrating that individual initiative can make a substantial difference. The authors visually map the data, allowing readers to acquire a richer and more concrete image of their interesting findings.

5.2 Designing typography to improve distance reading for people with low vision

In "Enhancing distance reading for low vision: A reading acuity experiment on letter width," Afonso and his colleagues studied how typography influences distance reading for people with various vision challenges. In a series of carefully designed experiments, the researchers investigated the impact of letter width, weight, and spacing on the legibility of typography for wayfinding signage in hospitals. They looked at how varying these typographic characteristics influenced how quickly people in different groups could recognize letters. The researchers asked four groups to participate: those with (1) blurry vision, (2) central vision loss, (3) peripheral vision loss, and (4) no vision loss (the control group). Interestingly, all groups benefited by making the letterforms a bit wider (about 140%) — even people with no vision loss.

Still, they found that individual differences mattered a lot. Not everyone could recognize letterforms using the same typographic settings. Those with central vision loss and peripheral vision loss needed a type setting different than those with blurry vision or no vision loss. People with blurry vision benefited from letter boldness more than those in the other groups. Overall, this study reminds us of how important it is to consider people's individual differences as they read wayfinding signage. By making letter recognition easier, readers could process the content more efficiently, improving their

accuracy and fluency. This work has important practical implications. Designing wayfinding signage with their improved specifications can give people more agency as they negotiate the complex layouts typical of hospitals.

5.3 Uncovering students' needs for wayfinding maps on campus

In "Exploring the impact of map visualization features to improve campus wayfinding through user-centered design methods," Yang and his colleagues took an iterative approach to learning what students needed as they negotiated the location of buildings and their entrances at Leeds University. They found that some students using Google maps became confused about the precise locations of buildings, especially when the buildings changed elevation or had undocumented throughways connecting them.

To provide students with better information, they compared two redesigned paper-based maps: one prototype that included additional visual content — such as images of buildings, elevation information, accessible passages, tunnels, stairs, and entrances — and one that did not (the control group). The researchers employed a variety of research methods — including think-aloud protocols, questionnaires, direct observation, and a Strava tracking app (which tracks a person's time walking, standing, cycling, etc.). Perhaps not surprisingly, the researchers found that their redesigned map with added visual information that signposted the built environment substantially improved students' wayfinding.

5.4 Designing specialized information for budding experts in industrial and product design

In "From Physical Material Samples to Design-Relevant Tags: Using Research Through Design (RTD) to Generate Prioritized Information Specifications," Akin and Pedgley offer a fascinating account of iterative design for a rather unique information product. They designed what they call "material information tags." Something akin to food nutrition labels, these tags are for choosing not the most nutritious food, but rather, for choosing among alternative physical materials to design new products.

The researchers organized their design process to benefit a group of budding experts — their undergraduate students in industrial and product design from the UK and Turkey. They supported students' growth as designers by helping them to better understand the properties and affordances of a given material they might use. In this case, the tags were about the unique properties of plastics, metals, aluminum, earthenware, or ceramics. For example, a tag for a plastic like polystyrene — used to make a variety of everyday products — might include helpful information about its technical properties, ways it can be shaped, its best uses, and its negative environmental impacts.

According to the authors, the information they tag, while available in databases and libraries, is scattered. This lack of already compiled quick-reference data forces designers to carry out cumbersome searches to learn about the pros and cons of a given material they might use. The tags provide just-in-time information that can guide rapid decision-making during product design and development.

After several iterations of the tags, the researchers learned a lot about five criteria essential for their effective design. The tags needed to be informative, understandable, relevant, attractive, and inspirational; that is, they should give designers ideas about options. Students collaborated with their teacher-researchers throughout the process. Co-design made students active participants in reimagining what worked. This study reminds us that good information design is not only important for end users of products, but also for the experts who design them.

In summary, you will notice that throughout this issue of *IDJ*, the authors demonstrate that clarity and legibility of information design should never be an afterthought. Indeed, clarity is central to our mission, reinforcing the ties that bind us.

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