
Interaction Design in the Corporate World : Creating Tame, Captive Designers

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Abstract

This paper looks at the role of interaction designers within a profit-oriented society through the works of designer Victor Papanek and physicist Jeff Schmidt. It covers changes in student attitudes since Papanek was writing, a time of radical student activism; the conflict between the priorities of business and the goal of design; and how our professional training programmes set us up to serve corporate interests rather than people's real needs.

Keywords

Design, professionalism, student activism, conformity, responsibility, ethics, corporate interests

Introduction

Nearly all of us are so victimized by the propaganda of the profit system that we are no longer able to think straight. [7, p. 333]

Victor Papanek was a socially responsible, radical designer. He despised gimmicky, showy designs and derided advertising design, “probably the phoniest field in existence today”, for “persuading people to buy things they don’t need, with money they don’t have, in order to impress others who don’t care” [7, p. ix]. He saw the designer as someone with enormous responsibility, someone able to contribute to real social change.

Design for the Real World [7] is still relevant today primarily because of Papanek’s concern with big picture issues. While many of the “idiocies” of design contribute to a whole host of new idiocies as interaction designers. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to look at specific cases of good or bad design but rather to focus on a few aspects of the social environment affecting interaction design students today: the “market-oriented, profit-directed system” in which we live, and the role of schools and corporations in creating the “tame, captive designers” Papanek rails against in his book.

From Activism to Conformity

Papanek was writing and working during the 60s and 70s. This was a time of radical student activism and questioning of social structures. In 1969 Papanek

took part in a design conference organised by the Scandinavian Student Design Organisation where students asked him to create a flowchart highlighting the moral and social responsibility of the designer and the dominant structures that pose a challenge to truly responsible design. The student movement of the 60s and 70s, according to Professor Sharon Beder, changed the way many people viewed the world and “brought a new emphasis on equity and critical thought”. These changes trickled into schools, stimulating lively debates and transforming traditional teaching methods. [2, p. 131]

But the new critical attitude amongst students wasn't welcomed by all. When businesses realised their new recruits were not going to toe the line as before, they decided to respond: “teachers were accused of being left-wing and „espousing an anti-business, or anti-industry stance” and in 1986, two years after the second edition of Papanek's *Design for the Real World* went to print, the US Department of Education published *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*. The booklet “championed a return to the traditional paradigm as demanded by business groups.” [2, p. 134]

Corporations, fearful of another backlash, have gone to great lengths to change their image. Corporate social responsibility, a voluntary effort by corporations to appear responsible, has emerged to convince not only consumers but also designers working for them that they do actually care about real world problems shift focus away from problems that might be more deserving of our attention.

Serving Corporate Needs

Amidst so much mass hysteria over ever newer models of portable devices (the iPhone, iPad, Nexus One), multi-touch tables, wearables, augmented reality, etc. it seems we've lost sight of people's real needs. That's not to say these developments are completely inconsequential, but how many of us consider who we really help by devoting so much of our time and energy toward these efforts? For Papanek, the designer's “social and moral judgement must be brought into play long before he begins to design, since he has to make a judgement, an a priori judgement at that, as to whether the products he is asked to design or redesign merit his attention at all. In other words, will his design be on the

side of the social good or not.”

So what can interaction design students take away from Papanek's experience, what can we do to become more socially and morally responsible designers? One starting point would be to consider why some of the technologies we've familiarised ourselves with are being pursued at all. In *Everyware: The dawning age of ubiquitous computing* [3], Adam Greenfield provides an answer:

“The logic of success in late capitalism is, of course, continuous growth. The trouble is that the major entertainment conglomerates and consumer electronics manufacturers have hit something of a wall these last few years... Putting with maximum bluntness an aspect of the ubiquitous computing scenario that is rarely attended to as closely as it ought to be: somebody has to make and sell all of the sensors and tags and chipsets and routers that together make up the *everyware* milieu, as well as the clothing, devices, and other artifacts incorporating them... So if businesses from Samsung to Intel to Philips to Sony have any say in the matter, they'll do whatever they can to facilitate the advent of truly ubiquitous computing, including funding think tanks, skunk works, academic journals, and conferences devoted to it, and otherwise heavily subsidizing basic research in the field.

If businesses are the main driving force behind these developments, it's clear that their main concern is not going to be people's real needs. The lawyer Joel Bakan explains: “The corporation's legally defined mandate is to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, its own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others.” [1]

Despite this, a recent report looking at corporate influence on science and technology found that businesses “have expanded the number and range of partnerships with universities” and “academic departments are increasingly orientating themselves to commercial needs rather than to broader public interest or curiosity-driven goals.” [6]

Design Professionals: Exercising Ideological Discipline and Assignable Curiosity

In a chapter discussing the responsibility of the designer, Papanek highlights the problem with design by using a triangle to represent the design problem (see Figure 1).

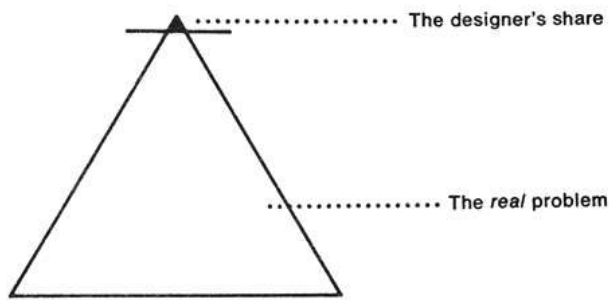


Figure 1: Diagram showing the designer's lack of engagement with real problems

Papanek writes “Industry and its captive designers have not addressed themselves to the huge bottom area of our diagrammatic triangle... Where has our spirit of students, like us, training to become professional designers so they could work with industry and solve real problems. So where is it all going wrong? Perhaps the answer lies in professional training itself.

If you look at descriptions of design programmes on university websites you will likely find a statement where the school says their training will set students up for “professional” work, or their courses will involve tutoring by “professional” designers. But what does it mean to be a professional? Why do we go through professional training and what’s the special ingredient in our study programmes that transforms us into professionals ready to enter industry? This is a question that the physicist Jeff Schmidt has looked at in some detail in his excellent book *Disciplined Minds* [8]. Schmidt argues that instead of teaching us to solve real problems, the professional training we go through actually teaches us to “do [our] assigned work without questioning its goals” [8, p. 2].

According to Schmidt, the difference between professional and nonprofessional work comes down to what you are asked to do on the job. If you can write a how-to manual for your job then it’s nonprofessional work. But in some jobs that’s not possible: “Here a manual would not be able to say much more than „create’: Write a news story; draft a policy; design a product”, these are the jobs that require professionals. But unlike nonprofessionals who can be told exactly what to do in the job, professionals need to understand and internalise the interests of their employers. So the role of professional training is primarily to instill a certain ideology: to create “ideologically disciplined” professionals who won’t seriously challenge the status

quo. Schmidt explains:

Work is an inherently political activity, but professionals and nonprofessionals advance their employers’ interests in different ways. Professionals sell to their employers more than their ordinary labor power, their ability to carry out instructions. They also sell their ideological labor power, their ability to extend those instructions to new situations. It is this sale that distinguishes them from nonprofessionals, who sell only their ordinary labor power. Those in charge can trust professionals to make

Professionals ... are required to be creative in their work—but within strict political limits. Their creativity must serve their employers’ interests, which often are not the same as their own interests, the interests of clients or customers or the public interest...

Just as professionals engage in playpen creativity, innovating within the safe confines of an assigned ideology, so too they engage in playpen critical thinking... Professionals generally avoid the risk inherent in real critical thinking and cannot properly be called critical thinkers. They are simply ideologically disciplined thinkers. Real critical thinking means uncovering and questioning social, political and moral assumptions; applying and refining a personally developed worldview; and calling for action that advances a personally created agenda. An approach that backs away from any of these three components lacks the critical spirit.

But to engage in real critical thinking and continue to keep apace with the study programme is not easy. Those students who spend their time thinking about the wider issues surrounding their work end up at a disadvantage “not only because their attention [is] divided, but also because their beliefs about big-picture issues such as justice and social impact [cause] them to stop, think and question”. In the competitive atmosphere of university or the workplace, there is no time to consider such issues and those who focus narrowly on their assigned tasks end up at an advantage over those who don’t. Over time, a student’s natural curiosity develops into what Schmidt calls “assignable curiosity”: the ability to direct all effort to problems and tasks assigned by others.

If we emerge from our design training as ideologically disciplined thinkers, happy to work only on problems businesses find profitable, we shouldn't be surprised to find that the bottom area of Papanek's triangle continues to remain neglected.

The Future

Interaction design is still a fairly young field and as students we can still influence how it develops. But the consequences of going with the flow are apparent in other fields. Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick have written about the business forces which advanced certain technologies at the expense of others in the emergence of Web 2.0 [4]:

...because Web 2.0 is funded by Capitalism 2006, Usenet is mostly forgotten. While everybody uses Digg and Flickr, and YouTube is worth a billion dollars, PeerCast, an innovative peer-to-peer live video streaming network that has been in existence for several years longer than YouTube, is virtually unknown...

Nicholas Knouf, a PhD student at Cornell University, sums up Papanek's position: in contrast to many who feel today's design problems can be solved by staying within the capitalist framework, Papanek was "critiquing the very nature of capitalism itself" [5]. Knouf writes:

With market pressures, relationships with totalitarian regimes, and a legally-bound slave relationship to shareholders, how can we expect corporations to be able to use design as part of the process of social emancipation? And what would be the alternatives? This act of thinking an alternative requires a process of reflection that would focus on ... the designer's role within existing structures of power...

To aid this process of reflection, in addition to reading Papanek's *Design for the Real World* [7], design students who'd like to better understand professional training and learn how to survive with their values intact could learn a lot from reading Jeff Schmidt's *Disciplined Minds* [8].

The aim of this paper has been to highlight the conflict between corporate aims and real world needs in the hope that we can begin to challenge the corporate propaganda around us. We cannot rely on our professional training programmes to do this for us or to encourage us to act. Despite our study of lateral thinking and problem solving techniques, we appear unable or unwilling to see the elephant in the room. If we did, perhaps we'd start to use some of our methods and design tricks to fundamentally transform these dominant selfish institutions rather than collaborating with them as we do today. And then perhaps we'd find our work becoming meaningful again.

To end this paper, I think Papanek's rallying call bears repeating today: "Design, if it is to be ecologically responsible and socially responsive, must be revolutionary and radical in the truest sense." [7, p. 346]

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