FROM VISUAL JOURNALISM TO INFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

OUR RESEARCH ON SOCIO DESIGN ARTEFACTS IN THE INFORMATION FIELD

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TRANSFORMATION DESIGN
INFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES
SOCIAL DESIGN
SOCIO DESIGN

This paper introduces the design-research work in the field of information design developed by the author, as a member of the Trans-form research cluster at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. The Trans-form group focuses on the interdisciplinary research studies and practices that combine design and the social sciences to promote the concept of sustainability across diverse fields, such as economics, politics, and finally information, with the goal of achieving an inclusive and aware society. Specifically, the way information is produced, consumed, and processed today, online and offline, offers an important space to design interventions and make an impact on society: an aspect to which this paper contributes, presenting the research done by the author in collaboration with sociologists, anthropologists, and journalists over the past five years at the Trans-form cluster. The following essay introduces the theoretical framework of socio-design within which the Trans-form cluster operates, and then focuses on socio-design in the information field. It subsequently moves on to the research conducted by Trans-form on information socio-artefacts, introducing three of the most significant case studies, which challenged a broader audience with engaging informative experiences aimed at raising awareness to foster possible behavioural change. Finally, the conclusion highlights the research findings over five years and points to new possibilities to design and impact society through socio-design research.

INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces the design-research work in the field of information design developed by the author, as a member of the Trans-form research cluster at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano[1] . The Trans-form group focuses on the interdisciplinary research studies and practices that combine design and the social sciences to promote the concept of sustainability across diverse fields, such as economics, politics, and finally information, with the goal of achieving an inclusive and aware society. Specifically, the way information is produced, consumed, and processed today, online and offline, offers an important space to design interventions and make an impact on society: an aspect to which this paper contributes, presenting the research done by the author in collaboration with sociologists, anthropologists, and journalists over the past five years at the Trans-form cluster.

The following essay introduces the theoretical framework of socio-design within which the Trans-form cluster operates, and then focuses on *socio-design* in the information field. It subsequently moves on to the research conducted by Transform on information socio-artefacts, introducing three of the most significant case studies, which challenged a broader audience with engaging *informative experiences* aimed at raising awareness to foster possible behavioural change. Finally, the conclusion highlights the research findings over five years and points to new possibilities to design and impact society through socio-design research.

POLITICAL DESIGN, A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In his book *Adversarial Design*, the designer and researcher Carl di Salvo (2012) sheds light on the differences between the concepts of "Political design" and "Design for democracy": while the latter refers to "improving the mechanisms of governance and increasing participation in processes of gov-

ernance" (p. 3), the former refers more precisely to those design-forms that embed a socio-political attitude within them, which often serves a function of contestation. In his work, Di Salvo introduces those "artefacts and systems [that] are adversarial because they represent and enact the political conditions of contemporary society and function as contestational objects that challenge and offer alternatives to dominant practices and agendas." (2012). More than a specific medium, or genre, adversarial objects share a political attitude that allows citizens, participants, readers or users to participate in political expression. The socio-political nature of certain objects resonates strongly in the social sciences, as in the work of sociologist Bruno Latour to whom Di Salvo refers in his book.

Together with the artist/curator Peter Weibel, Bruno Latour framed the concept of object-oriented democracy in 2005 in the exhibition "Making things public" held at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, which asked the question: "What would an object-oriented democracy look like?" (Latour, 2005). The exhibition answers this question by collecting and showing the ways in which artists, designers, social and natural scientists reflect upon and drive reflections on social and political issues through the design of objects, artefacts.

By explicitly defining the object-oriented nature of politics, Latour highlights the role of tangible and intangible artefacts in allowing "matters of concern" to emerge, i.e. issues, or *things*, like "res" in "res publica", that people discuss and about which they express their concerns, thus contributing to the political –in the wider sense of the word– debate.

Latour, indeed, identifies "matters of fact" and "matters of concern" as the conditions that animate the political and social debate. He writes that our society is built upon continuous negotiations of concerns to establish a *factual* dimension, which is not everlasting; it is on the contrary always subject to re-negotiations that may be prompted by societal, technological or political change. Current democracy results in a tension between the diverse matters of concern, and the diverse positions around them, with the purpose of achiev-

ing a factual condition, a debate often mediated by artefacts.

What Latour then proposes is a shift from politics considered as the primary field for the human exchange of ideas, discourses, and opinions, to a field in which artefacts have the same relevance as ideas and discourses. A field in which artefacts operate as mediators and not as intermediaries (Weibel & Latour, 2005; Mattozzi, 2017).Latour's shift explicitly opens the field of politics to design and legitimizes the work of designers as key to politics and specifically to democracy. This framework resonates in the work of Di Salvo, who reflects upon it from a design perspective. Artefacts such as digital platforms, physical products and tools convey a concern, open a debate, drive reflections, criticize or support the aggregation of people who share the same concern. Artefacts act socially and politically, though they are not officially endowed with a political role, giving voice to a concerned public, and offering an opportunity to take action. Regardless of the chosen medium, these artefacts are mainly characterized by the way they contribute to an issue, by rearticulating the relations in which they take part and by the way they afford a degree of contestation. Within this framework, an apparent new space for design emerges, a space that welcomes contributions, reflections and practices from designers and social scientists.

The theoretical framework in which *Trans-form* operates also draws inspiration from the practical and theoretical work of a series of socially engaged designers and scientists of the past, such as Viktor Papanek (1972), who called for a more sustainable, ethical role of objects at a time when design was largely focused on consumerism and the production of mass products. The *social turn* invoked by Papanek was influenced by left-green-oriented political positions, more akin to the values of social and environmental sustainability, which represented the first call for a radical shift.

Our research approach furthermore built upon the considerations of Lucius Burckhardt on the social impact of design, which led him to coin the term *socio-design*. In his work *Design is invisible*, Burckhardt focused on the social dynamics and

the relations that are triggered when a newly designed intervention or object is introduced into a social context (Burckhardt, 1980). This may originate a series of spontaneous consequences, which are not designed and should be taken into account during the design process. Burckhardt invokes a more conscious form of design, which moves beyond Papanek's paradigm, where objects act as real *social devices* rather than merely embodying social and environmental values.

Though *Trans-form* researchers are more interested in exploring and devising how artefacts contribute to shaping and articulating issues, and not just communicating them, as Otto Neurath was, his experience and that of his team is very relevant for our research. The Austrian philosopher, sociologist and economist designed ISOTYPE, a visual language aimed at informing a broader audience and shaping a more informed and educated society after World War I. He worked with an interdisciplinary group consisting of designers, scientists and experts, with whom he replaced the basic shapes of abstract data visualization (such as bars, lines and circles), with graphic icons that symbolize the topic represented by the visualization, and connect the audience to it (Neurath, & Kinross, 2009). The aim was to raise the cultural conditions of a wider audience that survived WWI, lived in a condition of extreme poverty and needed basic education. Neurath's experience is very relevant to our research because it demonstrates the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to improve the cultural level of a community using visual methods. In support of this, consideration should also be given to the role of the Transformer, which Neurath kept for himself within the working group, and which could mediate the visual and verbal language of the designed artefacts in order to communicate effectively to the target-community.

Given the theoretical framework described above, it now becomes clear how the social role of objects represents an interesting field to which design research may actively contribute, as the Trans-form cluster at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano has been doing for the past several years. Our

approach to information is characterized by an intense collaboration between practitioners, design researchers and social scientists, which allows us to explore the field through a very specific interdisciplinary approach. The long-term goal of our research is to define a series of methodologies to impact society by means of *socio-design artefacts*, with the aim of achieving transformation, and finally to evaluate their impact.

SOCIO-DESIGN ARTEFACTS TODAY:
A FOCUS ON THE INFORMATION FIELD

The way information is produced, consumed, and processed online and offline today represents an important space for the design of interventions that can impact society.

With the advent of web 2.0 technologies, people who have Internet access have become potential content producers (Deuze, 2001): they are now able to generate and spread content to a broader audience online, with a potentially substantial impact on society through the social networks, for better or for worse. Social movements, such as Occupy, produced and disseminated powerful online narratives that were able to impact and inspire new actions and people. The Arab Spring activist, or the protester at the Turkish Gezi Park riot, were supported by a technological dimension that facilitated their organization in launching collective actions, as well as documenting and publicly denouncing the abuses and injustices they suffered to the international media and the courts (Howard et al., 2011; Khondker, 2011).

At the same time, these objects may have a negative influence and impact on society and democracy, as widely demonstrated by recent phenomena such as online fake-news and the rise of populism, of nationalist movements and parties, strongly supported by online propaganda spread on a massive scale through the social networks.

Given the instrumental nature of technology, in particular of the online social networks, the responsibility that comes

with using and making sense of them becomes evident. The way people produce, retrieve and process information and news is crucial to building their opinions and perceptions. Human factors are, indeed, another essential pillar that should be taken into account during the information process.

Human and technological factors are responsible for the current information ecosystem in which readers and citizens are immersed: a context in which factual information is often overwhelmed by a multitude of narratives that are often more appealing, partial and biased, or sometimes completely misinformed. The readers will be responsible for negotiating their way among the diverse concerned narratives, to build their own position in the debate (Bamberg, 2014). Otherwise, looking at the average behaviour of online readers, they will tend to polarize around the most comfortable narrative, the one that supports and confirms their own position, whether it is reliable or not (Zollo et al., 2017).

What emerges is the importance shared by a scrupulous design process in the development of socio-design interventions within interdisciplinary projects aimed at shaping a more self-aware and inclusive society. Practices and research studies that focus on restoring a more informed debate, on challenging dominant narratives, and on supporting minorities and activists. A framework to which we actively contribute at Trans-form, through the design of socio-design artefacts that connect the social sciences and design, such as the ones we present in this paper. Indeed, the following section introduces our design research on socio-design artefacts by presenting three socio-design case studies that deal with online and offline information.

Relying mainly on visual means, the case studies presented here supported and enabled people to connect with complex and controversial issues, to foster greater awareness: if it is true that we are what we eat, we are also what we read (Johnson, 2015).

THE SOCIO-OBJECTS DESIGN AT UNIBZ

In 2014 we started a design exploration with our students on the potential offered by information visualization, especially on topics as complex as social issues. From the very beginning, we understood the limits of a mono-disciplinary approach aimed at depicting the complexity embedded in societal issues. We couldn't get far if we had only our design background to rely on. For this reason, we started a collaboration with journalists and social scientists, to portray as many facets as possible of complex social phenomena, to provide multiple entry points on socially controversial issues for a broader audience. The goal is to contrast the over-simplification often carried out by much mainstream media, by providing engaging counter-narratives that enable readers to understand how complex social things are, even when they are represented as simple, on- and offline.

On these bases, we started research on *visual journalism* aiming to extend the existing practice of data-journalism through a visual approach with a strong focus on design. We can date the origin of *data journalism* to the year 1973, thanks to the work of Philip Meyer (2002). His approach combined journalism with statistics, leading to what was known as *computer-assisted reporting* (Powers, 2012), and later to *data journalism*, which relies on the same approach, but makes use of big data and digital tools. Data journalism was an important step in the evolution of journalism, since it impacted not only the methods but the education of journalists as well, who now require statistical, data-science, and data visualization skills.

As designer practitioners and design researchers, we contributed to the practice of data journalism with our skills in information visualization, user experience, interface design and information architecture, giving shape to a more visual information-rich experience which we called visual journalism. It is not a new concept: it originated in the 1970s to describe journalism practices that rely on visual means such as photography or video, and later even comic art and illustra-

tion. At Trans-form, we reshaped the concept, introducing a strong focus on design and a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach, in which the role of the designer is inspired by Neurath's transformer, who can mediate between the diverse roles in the team, and with the target audience as well, through a user-centred approach aimed at adapting the visual and verbal languages to affect the target-community. In light of this framework, we designed several digital artefacts of which the *People's Republic of Bolzano (PRB)* represents the most significant case.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BOLZANO: A DIGITAL SOCIO-DESIGN ARTEFACT

PRB was published online in 2015 with the primary aim of contrasting and debunking the clichés surrounding the local Chinese community of Bozen-Bolzano, often depicted as invaders, and the existence of a Chinatown in the city. The project started with the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data about the local Chinese community of Bozen-Bolzano, which led the team to discover significant facts.

For example more than 200 news articles were published in the previous three years by *Alto Adige*, the most widely-read local newspaper: the majority of the headlines relied on a sensationalistic and often ambiguous language that supported and confirmed the biased perception largely shared by the local citizenship.

Moreover, the quantitative data revealed that Chinese people made up just 0.6% of the city's population, and that only 1.3% of companies were Chinese-run (Moretti et al., 2017). An interdisciplinary team consisting of a journalist, a designer, an anthropologist, a photographer and a computer scientist, made it possible to publish a design inquiry (Di Salvo, 2012), conceived as a visual journalism project that offered a counter-narrative and a different depiction of the local Chinese community, supported by data and facts.

Restaurants 餐馆

11,8%

**Out of 261 local restaurants, only 32 are
Chinese, i.e. 11.8% of the total.**

Even in terms of restaurants, the figures are far from out of the
ordinary and nothing like an invasion: out of 261 local restaurants,
just 32 are Chinese, i.e. 11.5%. Compared with other far larger
communities, the Chinese run retail businesses meaning they are
more visible than, for example, the Romanian and Albanian citizens
that work on worksites or farms.

Fig. 1 Local vs Chinese-run
restaurants data visualisation
from People's Republic of
Bolzano website.

While the quantitative data tells us that there is no invasion
in the city, the video interview made by the anthropologist
revealed what data can't express: how deeply Chinese people
are integrated into the social fabric, what they think about
Italy, what their expectations/wants/desires and needs are.

The project positively challenged the public perception of
local Chinese people, pushing even the *Alto Adige* to retract its
narrative. Moreover, the project served as a knowledge base
to support concerned users in their digital debate, giving rise
to an unexpected change in the trend of responses on the
Facebook page of the *Alto-Adige* newspaper (Felle et al, 2015).

For once, the comments about the project under the
article on *Alto Adige*'s Facebook page were mainly posi-
tive, supporting a more inclusive vision of local society.

Fig. 2
Detail from the TedMed
17 Participatory Data
Physicalization at Milan's
Politecnico.

KNOW AND BE LIVE: A PARTICIPATORY PHYSICAL
SOCIO-DESIGN ARTEFACT

In order to inform a local audience about a largely-avoided topic such as cancer, a research study was commissioned by KnowAndBe.Live[2] , a startup working in the field of cancer prevention awareness, with the aim of fostering a bottom-up information request from a local audience.

The research team included a designer, a sociologist and experts on the topic of cancer-prevention, who worked together relying on a collaborative design approach, with the goal of delineating possible strategies to encourage the search for and retrieval of information on a delicate and largely-avoided topic such as cancer.

The project combined *participatory data physicalization (PDP)*, an information-design approach where the geometry
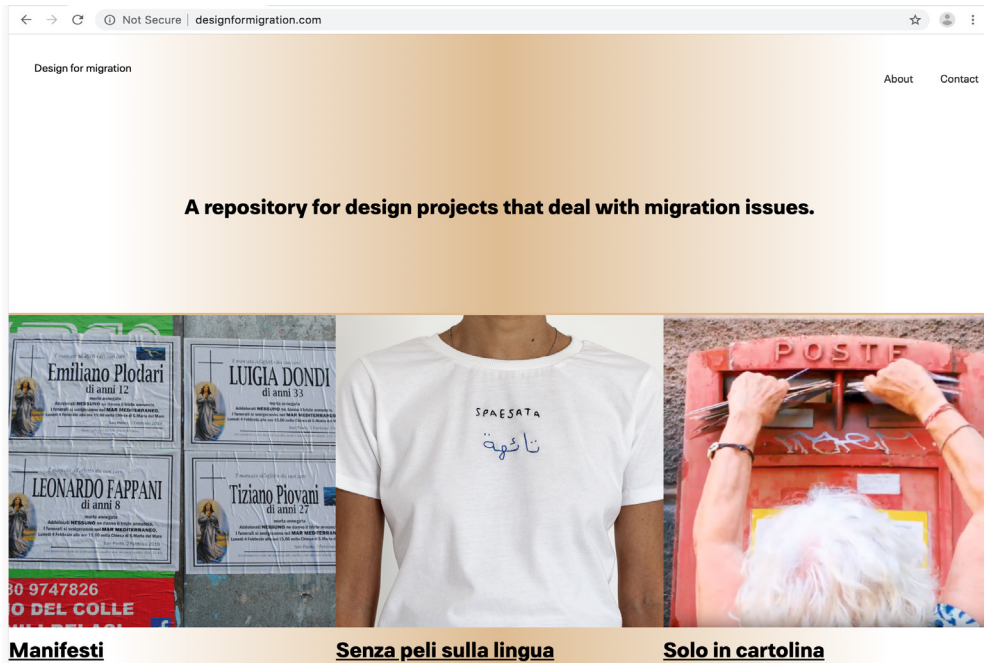
Fig. 3
Design for migration
homepage

or material properties of physical artefacts encode data, with a *you-draw-it* approach³ . This term refers to a series of data journalism projects published by the New York Times, which challenged readers in a guessing game regarding specific data connected to the topic. The act of guessing, indeed, facilitates the assimilation of knowledge by arousing curiosity about the right answer (Golman, & Loewenstein, 2015). Combining these two approaches we designed an experience that involved the local audience of the TedMed 2017 in Milan in confronting the topic of cancer; the experience triggered a bottom-up demand for information which was answered by offering participants a well-designed information booklet.

DESIGN FOR MIGRATION: A META SOCIO-DESIGN ARTEFACT

The last case study focuses on the digital platform Design for migration (DFM), an online repository that collects the

most interesting design experiences concerning the Migration phenomenon in Europe, the so-called migrant crisis.

In presenting a wide variety of design artefacts, the platform reveals an innovative approach to promoting a different way to practice design and to deal with social issues. The platform aims to achieve three specific goals:

1. To give these projects (new) visibility, since many of them are very important but little-known, not only by the design public but by the social and political audience as well.

2. To connect designers who share the same concerns on the European territory, with the purpose of building a design network that can facilitate new collaborations, and foster and promote a shared and more inclusive vision of our societies.

3. Inspire and support a broader design, social, municipal, institutional and political audience with new practices and methods which contribute to dismantling the invisible walls that run through our societies, separating us and them.

Thanks to the periodical publication of projects, together with a series of public talks and publications, these goals are slowly being achieved. New collaborations have started among the designers involved, some of the published projects received new attention, funds, and requests for collaboration from municipalities, associations, and young designers who wish to contribute.

DISCUSSION

· The design approach:
While the three projects differ in terms of medium and purpose, they share a similar design approach which originates in the intense collaboration between designer and social scientist, relying on user-centred and co-design approaches. Indeed, the PRB design process started with a series of interviews and observations in the public space aimed at collecting the most widespread concerns and stereotypes about the Chinese culture and its biased perception, col-

lected by the anthropologist member of the design team. Based on this data, the team co-designed a visual and inter-active project that could debunk the most diffused clichés through data and facts. A similar approach was delivered in PDP, where the most widespread misperceptions about cancer and cancer-prevention practices were collected by the design team together with experts and partners, both members of the design team. Next, these beliefs were analysed and used to design an experience aimed at challenging the participants' knowledge. Slightly different is the DFM project, a project by a single author, which therefore lacks the co-design approach, even if it started from a series of considerations, observations and interviews with designers concerned about the migration issue, around which the project is mainly designed.

·   The aim:
Moreover, there is a socio-design component embedded in the projects, because they aim to counter-inform an audience on specific issues, and contrast dominant narratives. They enable readers and users to understand the complexity embedded in societal issues, empowering them in the process of negotiation among the diverse narratives, in order to build their own position within the debate (Bamberg, 2014). Indeed, all the projects presented here provide agonistic information: PRB offers a different portrayal of the local Chinese community of Bolzano to foster a less biased perception; PDP first exposes participants to their knowledge-gap and then fills it; and finally, DFM brings to light different narrations on migration which highlight the positivity of a design-oriented approach.

·   The impact:
Concerning the impact of these projects, the evaluation of PRB revealed that it activated and served as a knowledge-base to foster participation online. Unexpectedly, the majority of comments and likes began to support a positive posi-

tion towards the Chinese inhabitants of Bolzano, contrasting the biased narration spread by the local media. PRB engaged a series of users to take part in the digital debate on Alto Adige's Facebook page, supporting them to argue positively in favour of the Chinese community in Bolzano. Differently, the PDP project activated the participants: they asked for accurate information about the data on cancer-prevention, once exposed to their knowledge-gap by the interactive installation. The experience we designed triggered a bottom-up quest for information leading to a more aware lifestyle. Differently, DFM achieved some of the goals it set: within a year of its publication, the first collaborations between the different designers published on the website have started. Moreover, as their interviews revealed, the website brought them renewed attention, and many were contacted by the media and especially by institutions. Finally, a series of young designers contacted the platform to confirm their willingness to collaborate on projects concerned with migration.

CONCLUSIONS

The research we undertook five years ago with the Trans-form cluster at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano explored diverse methods and practices in the field of information at the intersection of design and the social sciences. They rely on the design of artefacts that can inform a broader audience with serious and accurate information, by providing immersive and engaging digital and physical experiences aimed at supporting the opening of a debate, at leading reflections, providing multiple entry points on complex topics, and contrasting misinformation through the design of counter-narratives. This design attitude may be likened to the socio-design framework conceived by Papanek (1980), and currently referenced in diverse forms by the work of Latour (2015) and Di Salvo (2012).

Relying on this framework, this paper looks back upon

five years of design practice and research in the field of information socio-design. We started within the framework of Visual Journalism (PRB), with the aim of extending and empowering traditional practices of information production with new methodologies and design practices.

We then moved forward to the design of informative-experiences: highly immersive and engaging design artefacts that aim to have people experience what the information is conveying. Information and experience are usually distinct: while information is indirect, because it is always referred by somebody or something, experience is direct, we engage in it first-hand. By the term *informative-experiences* we refer to those artefacts that shorten the distance between them.

Relying on this frame, our research then moved toward more hybrid practices such as participatory data physicalization (PDP), and toward the exploration of innovative ways to inform and provide better information retainment, aiming to activate users with the purpose of fostering behavioural change. Finally, in order to scope new practices and foster networks among European researchers and practitioners, we began to research socio-design practices and research studies on issues of migration, published on a public digital platform which serves as a knowledge base for further studies and research (DFM).

What emerges from the project discussion, is the ample potential offered by the hybrid framework of socio-design, which spans design and the social sciences, informing the practice with more reflexive and exploratory methods that enable a deeper understanding of user and audience needs, as well as a more complex design process generated by the collaborative efforts between interdisciplinary team members. Finally, it appears that a socio-design approach transcends the traditional design disciplines such as product, graphic or interaction design, toward a more issue-based design where the specific medium depends on the issue and the goals that need to be achieved. To conclude, socio-design represents not only an interesting space for design but most

importantly a new space in which design and the social sciences may engage and interact.

NOTES

1 https://www.unibz.it/en/faculties/design-art/research/transform/

2 https://www.knowandbe.live/

3 https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/15/us/politics/you-draw-obama-legacy.html

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