

Can Graphic Design really save your life?

Graphic design has been used for thousands of years to illustrate danger in a way that is quick and easy to digest. Ever since man could use tools to mark surfaces, we have been keeping account of things such as predators, foods and foliage that could potentially kill you if eaten or eaten by. Undeniably these images would have greatly impacted the way that primitive people consumed information. In this essay I shall be exploring how graphic design could save your life and how it has saved the lives of others, how graphics can be as informative as written instructions, as well as ways that graphics can and have been misused and the morality that comes with being a graphic designer and handling misinformation as well as the damage that can be done from abusing graphic design.

When considering the earliest signs of informative graphic design, we can look closely towards cave paintings that have been traced back to about 36,000 BC (Galvan, n.d.). These early demonstrations of infographics were then used to guide neolithic people in how they should live their lives, which foods were good/bad and which predators were likely to kill you when you were to hunt. These were displayed as very simple images of 'stick' type people demonstrating actions that were used to guide others in a time when language didn't exist, most likely saving the lives of many people who did not necessarily know any better than the information displayed in these caves. When thinking of an example of similar usage of graphics in current times I mainly look towards things such as hospital signage and road safety signs. These examples are very similar in the way that they use very simple imagery that can be broken down mentally quickly by the user of the graphic if need be. For example, when on the road, the information on these signs can be digested incredibly quickly whilst travelling at high speeds. The designer Margaret Calvert originally designed the modern international road signage that we are all well accustomed to today. When she designed the signage her goal was to design images that could be digested by a driver almost immediately (Dyrlaga, 2023) these signs have undeniably saved countless lives since they were first implemented.

Graphics have also had large usage in business and transport when used to create fire evacuation and exit strategy plans. These plans have been created by the designer to the strict specification of the building or vehicle of which it is made for to highlight the safest ways to evacuate. These plans must be carefully accessed by an on-site survey and exit strategies must be well planned out prior to the design stage. These are alike to the examples of hospital and road signs which also help the user of the graphic to digest the information quickly in an emergency such as a fire or plane crash. These pieces of graphics can be highly effective in keeping people safe if they are kept up to date and are available to reference at any given time and could provide you with lifesaving advice in a dire situation. On the opposite hand if these graphics are not well thought out and regularly updated, they could do more harm than good and potentially lead to further confusion to the user, this is why most businesses will re-access their strategies after a certain amount of time. When creating these graphics many things need to be considered such as, fire exits, fire doors, fire hazards and dead ends, this can make the design process of these strategies hard due to how specific each design needs to be and the time it may take to visualise all the relevant safety ideas. In more recent years it has also become more commonplace for companies to create their own informative videos condensing what were previously more complex graphical guides into easy to digest video content, these videos are often shown during travel on planes and trains to inform customers of any necessary safety advice.

Another example that I would provide of health and safety driven designs would be the Australian design for cigarette packaging that began rolling out in Australia in 2012. As described by the WHO (World Health Organization) "packaging, or standardized packaging, comprises "measures to restrict or prohibit the use of

logos, colours, brand images or promotional information on packaging other than brand names and product names displayed in a standard colour and font style" (www.who.int, n.d.). In simpler terms the new laws on trading tobacco strictly state no logos, branding or any messages promoting smoking to be shown on any tobacco product in any country that has adopted this ruleset. The intention behind this rule is to stop the appeal of flashy cigarette branding (potentially to children) making cigarettes less appealing to the eye. The boxes also use a colour tone that has been found to be the 'ugliest' through vast research, this tones name is Pantone 448C (Daven Mathies, 2016). To many people this is a controversial piece of graphic design since instead of creating graphics that 'put people off smoking' the governments of each rule adopting country could just stop the sale entirely. This isn't to say that it doesn't potentially stop young people from smoking as the design is made to be as deterring as possible but it likely won't stop the existing smokers that have had the habit for a very long time. Although it has been controversial findings have gone to show that the implementation of plain cigarette packaging the likelihood of young people becoming future smokers has declined slowly since (Opazo Breton et al., 2021)

In 2012 a street artist named Stephen Doe created a piece of extremely considerate art at the height of the Ebola outbreak which spread to five different countries and killed roughly 2,300 people in Africa. When Doe was creating his mural he became aware that a large amount of people in Africa struggle to read and write. When considering how he could communicate his message of the Ebola symptoms he instead chose to visualise the symptoms of Ebola through images of actions and feelings so that it was clear to anyone who came across it regardless of their ability how they would feel if they had contracted the deadly Ebola Virus. I think this is a perfect example of graphic design that is extremely well thought out and highly considered to the people in a community that he wanted to protect, this is a highly inspiring piece to me and undoubtedly made a lot of people a lot safer and potentially saved a lot of people's lives. This mural further went on to be used in informative flyers, posters, and other forms of print media so the message could be shared far and wide to people who will benefit from it. (Gorvett, n.d.)

Yet again in 2012 graphic design had been used again to raise awareness for another lifechanging illness that many suffer from internationally, Breast Cancer. The Swedish Cancer Society's "Square Boobs" Viral Advert caused a fair amount of controversy when the advert was banned from Facebook due to the 2D image representing a pair of breasts was deemed to go against Facebooks policy on nudity. In turn the Swedish Cancer Society quickly corrected the image to a pair of squares that quite blatantly still represented breasts. Facebook accepted the correction and in turn allowed the advert to be put back onto its site (Gorvett, n.d.) Debatably this controversy caused the advert to gain many more eyes through the news and coverage that it was receiving due to the Facebook controversy and ultimately proved that controversy doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing and can ultimately end up having a positive result. This is why it is important push the limits of controversy as this can oftentimes create ground-breaking and thought-provoking work.

The topic of COVID 19 would be something that most people have likely seen plenty of graphic design made for over the last 4 years. This is a section of design that has had plenty of good and bad, many graphics did do their job of informing the public of good safety measures during COVID, whilst many did a good job of confusing many people. The best individual graphic example I can provide being the graphic displaying all the good handwashing and protective measures we can all take to be preventative; this graphic did its job of being simple and informative in a time when people were rightly worried. This signage made it absolutely clear what was required of us when going back into public spaces. My second individual example of poor COVID graphic design would have been the podium displays that were continually changing during the speeches from Boris Johnson and Chris Witty.

These signs added nothing but confusion to the public who rejected the signs and oftentimes made 'memes' highlighting just how confusing these messages were to the British public and honestly didn't make a lot of sense to begin with. As well as unclear messages, graphic designs were made to promote schemes that were not so well thought through and may have done more harm than good, a perfect example being the 'Eat out to help out' scheme that ran during the earlier half of the COVID pandemic. New 2023 research finds that the eat out to help out campaign caused a potential rise in COVID infection rates from anywhere between 8% and 19% (Department of Economics, The University of Warwick, 2020). This is obviously not entirely at the fault of the designer, but the promotion of these schemes did do major harm to the public which cannot be ignored. The friendly promotion of a dangerous scheme did its part to draw the public out of their homes, to feel safe in an unsafe environment and ultimately harmed many people. This example goes to show that graphics whilst having incredibly good and often lifesaving benefits can be used as a tool for spreading awfully damaging misinformation regarding public health and safety.

When the Nazis gained power in Germany in 1933, the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was created to spread hateful messages toward the British, Jews, Blacks and Gypsies amongst other minorities (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2023). Posters as well as film were created by the ministry to spread the hateful messages of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party to stir hate within his own country, messages of racial hatred and genocide were often displayed as cartoonish type graphics that humoured the downfall of anyone who opposed the Nazis. These graphics displayed Jewish people as grotesque cartoonish type displays often displaying messages of hatred alongside. The designs created were shown to adults and children in Germany and the damage done by the Nazis to the Jewish population is still yet to be fully undone and the messages of Adolf Hitler are still being used to fuel racist hate groups today. Personally, I think this example given is one of the most dangerous examples of graphic design being used to spread hatred to the masses. This tactic has been used by countless other hate groups and regimes throughout history and continuously goes to show that graphic design can enrich culture whilst also having the potential to serve incredibly destructive purposes. Unfortunately in this circumstance due to the ruthlessness of the Nazis it's incredibly likely that designers didn't have a choice in pushing out mass false propaganda about the Jewish people but when possible, it is important for graphic designers to be responsible when considering the jobs they pick and the information that is being presented to them is honest, or else there is the potential to create messages through graphic design that can be shared far and wide to purvey negative messages so it's careful to be considerate when deciding whether you agree with the message that you as a designer are actively participating in spreading.

To sum up my thoughts, I highly agree that graphic design can be lifesaving in a range of different applications whether it may be international road signage created by Margaret Calver that are still used today that have undeniably changed the way people use roads and have made them far safer because of their implementation. As well as Stephen Doe's work creating the Ebola mural which without it many people live without the ability to read would have potentially been lost if it wasn't for this graphic design. There are many positive implementations of graphic design especially in the medical industry. Whilst saying this there is also undeniable bad that can be communicated through graphic design and has been over the course of history, whether they may just accidentally confuse such as some of the examples of design over the COVID pandemic or the more serious sides of negative graphic design such as the Antisemitic propaganda displayed in Germany throughout the second World War which undoubtedly hurt the image of the Jewish population for many years following after. So my ultimate conclusion in summary would be that designers whilst at times should push the limits of design to create ideas that

haven't been found yet we also need to be heavily considerate to not create imagery that can hurt and damage society and we should be more proud in our careers than to sell out our personal morals for financial gain when there are so many more ways to positively impact society, culture and community through the talents of a graphic designer.

Reference Sheet

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