

# Models of the mass media as conceptual frameworks for design

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**Nathan Crilly and P John Clarkson, University of Cambridge**

*Although many design scholars have described 'products as media' and 'design as communication' these notions are rarely explored within the context of communication theory. This paper argues for products to be considered not just as communicative artefacts but as examples of the mass media. In doing so, an argument is presented for gaining familiarity with a range of different models of communication. The accompanying presentation explores these models and considers their potential application to design.*

## ***Introduction***

Many design scholars have described 'design as communication' and 'products as media'.<sup>1</sup> These descriptions either appear in the words that comprise the authors' argument (e.g. Vihma, 1995: 37-38; Muller, 2001: 299; Warell, 2001: 48; Karjalainen, 2004: 21) or in the diagrams that represent the authors' conception of the subject (e.g. Krippendorff & Butter, 1984: 5-6; Monö, 1997: 43-45; Crilly *et al.*, 2004: 550; Crilly, 2005: 23-25). This communicative perspective on design is often seen as suggesting that products be considered as 'texts' that are 'written' by designers and 'read' by consumers. The meanings assigned to these texts may include technical attributes such as the functionality of the product and its mode-of-use in addition to more subjective qualities such as elegance and coherence.

Although products are often described as a medium of communication between designers and consumers, this notion is rarely explored in detail. Instead, the concept of communication is used to provide a perspective on design that allows other issues to be addressed (often issues of consumer interpretation). By drawing an analogy between design and communication that is never fully explored, the conceptual foundations of much design thinking have escaped critical scrutiny. In particular, the following questions remain unanswered:

1. If design is an act of communication then what kind of communication is it? (Is it interpersonal communication, mediated communication or mass communication?)

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the field of industrial design, where the notion of 'design as communication' is particularly prevalent. However, such concepts have been discussed across a wide variety of design disciplines including: architecture (Colomina, 1994), software (de Souza, 2005), fashion (Barnard, 1996), graphic design (Meggs, 1992) and typography (Swann, 1991).

2. Which models of communication might be most valuable for representing 'design as communication' or 'products as media'?
3. What has been the critical response to these communication models and how do these criticisms relate to design theory.

This working paper briefly addresses the first of these questions. The accompanying presentation (and future publications) will address all three.

## ***Products as mass media***

If design is a process in which the designer attempts to affect the consumer, then it can be tempting to consider design as a form of *interpersonal communication*. However, the process of face-to-face human exchange is characterised by the provision of immediate feedback that allows for message modification (Fish, 1989: 43). Therefore, the analogy of direct human conversation is inappropriate for design because there is seldom the opportunity for reciprocal dialogues between the designer (or design team) and each consumer. Put simply, the product is out of the designer's control once it reaches the end customer and negotiated clarifications of 'product meaning' are often impossible.

Instead, design is more usefully viewed as a process of *mediated communication*, a process that involves the exchange of messages that are encoded in some medium (see Fiske, 1990: 18). Any intentions that the designer has for how a product should be interpreted are translated into a product form that is presented to the consumer. Once in the marketplace, any reactions on the consumer's part are not immediately available to the designer unless they are also translated into some other communicative media (e.g. sales reports, guarantee returns, market research materials). Even then, this process is not truly 'conversational'; as a feedback channel it is delayed, weak and often neglected.

Because designed products are often intended to satisfy or stimulate the demands of large consumer groups, design may best be considered not as a process of one-to-one mediated communication but as a form of *mass media* (like newspapers, television and radio). When considering industrial design, the example of newspapers is particularly relevant because in both instances, the output is mass-produced and then physically distributed to various outlets for a paying public to consume (see DeFleur, 2002). In particular, the mass media analogy is useful where the role of high-volume manufacturing ensures that many identical products reach large and diverse audiences (Fusco, 1967: 61).

If products are considered to be examples of mass media then it may be instructive to exploit models of mass media as a conceptual foundation for design. Such models include those proposed by Schramm (1961: 6) who emphasises the potential discrepancies between different parties' experiences, and Westley and MacLean (1966: 83) who focus on the relationships between all the stakeholders in a communicative event. However, despite the relevance of these models to design theory, most design scholars have either developed their own generic models of communication or adopted early communication models that were not intended to specifically represent the mass media.

## ***Conclusions***

Given that there are a range of established communication models from which to select, with a little work, it is possible for design researchers to select the model that best satisfies the conceptual demands of their approach. In return for such investment, researchers directly benefit in two ways. Firstly, they may minimise the extent to which the chosen model must be adapted; and secondly, they may maximise the insight that the chosen model yields. Less directly, through their exposure to the variety of ways in which communication has been conceptualised and represented they might also be encouraged to recognise the mutability of their chosen model. This could take the form of making substantial revisions to a single model or combining elements from different models so that the resulting framework more accurately reflects their conception of the domain. Whichever approach is taken, this paper has argued that the models of the mass media provide a fruitful place to start.

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