



Contemporary Branding Discourse

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I am just a Designer not a Politician.



*“Designers are
treated as
mercenaries by
politicians”*

When it comes to the ethics, design and money it all becomes very complicated for designers. If you have the money you can hire the best public relations, design and branding agencies to communicate your ideology and propaganda, in the words of a public relations director^[1] *“Designers are treated as mercenaries by politicians”*.

This essay will analyse, through using examples, how propaganda is promoted through visual and textual statements that are outcomes of a clients objectives from a commercial and state information provider. It will also consider the moral and ethical consequences for a designer through the use of examples, from both democratic and authoritarian regimes.

The Libyan Question

Recently representatives of the current Libyan government controlled by Colonel Gaddafi approached a public relations and branding agency based in London who specialise in Islamic and Arabic affairs. They offered a substantial amount of funds to fight their propaganda here in the United Kingdom and Europe, due to the overwhelming international pressure and condemnation against the regime for the acts carried out against their own people. The regime wanted the agency to communicate their propaganda and contest the negative manner, in which western media organisations have covered the conflict so far.



*“For everyday that
he is in power
people will die”*

Morality and Consequences

Now here lies the problem, does this agency take up this work for the vast sums of money offered and be professional about the work they offer? Or does the agency reject the work on the grounds business ethics and morality, so being unprofessional to a potential client.

As designers, copywriters and other visual communicators, we are faced with these morale and ethical decisions every day in our work. We have to decide what type of projects to take on. Sometimes we take work that we do not agree with but do it anyway and other times not. It comes down to what we feel about the subject matter or product and if we want to invest ourselves into it. Should we just accept all work that comes to us and be professional about it? Or do we say no to projects we deem morally wrong?



This has been a highlighted in many texts over the years and has become a very big talking point within the design and communication industry. In the article by Jennie Winhall for the UK Design Council (2011), *"Is design political?"* She stated^[4],

"My policy colleagues say they went into politics because they wanted to challenge the status quo and make things better for ordinary people. That's certainly why I went into design. So maybe design is more political than you think."

As designers we are just as responsible as the people in political office. Design is political because it has consequences. The power of designers is that we can design things to have different consequences. Working on a campaign for Colonel Gaddafi has serious consequences, as the former Libyan UN ambassador Ali Suleiman Aujali

said (February 2011), *"For everyday that he is in power people will die"*.

Helping any dictator, or world power that has a proven record on serious human rights abuses, is just wrong. Nothing good can come out of lining our personal and company bank accounts with blood money. The history of propaganda has shown us what working for such dictators can do to our world.

Top Image:

A young woman protesting in Libya against Colonel Gaddafi, Hoping for peaceful change in the early days of the conflict, 22 February 2011.

Opposite Top Left Image:

The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. A non-violent movement led mainly by students and intellectuals in Beijing, the protests occurred in the year that was to see the collapse of a many communist governments in eastern Europe.

Propaganda

Throughout history, propaganda has played a massive role in shaping our beliefs and philosophy. We all have a view on how we think this world should be, but these views are not wholly our own, they have been shaped in our minds, by the ideology and propaganda of others without us even knowing it. In his famous novel 1984 George Orwell created a world where truth is what the state decides it is and anybody who challenges the party line is swiftly and brutally dealt with by the thought police.

Values and beliefs are shaped by factors that influence us, from a young age. The ideologies of others, affect human psychology on a subconscious level, our decision making processes, i.e. consumer behaviour, who or what organisations or groups we associate with, and also who a person votes for in a ballot, are all effected by the powerful cognitive outcomes that result from being exposed to the spectrum of messages found in visual/audio/digital communication. As Dr Joseph Goebbels said in a speech in December 1933,

“The essence of propaganda consists in winning people over to an idea so sincerely, so vitally, that in the end they succumb to it utterly and can never escape from it.”

This mind control has been used in changing public perceptions to great extent. The Bush and Blair governments were able to sell the war in Iraq on false premises, Their use of the mass media and public relations advisers/ designers helped get their message across better than the opposition. In May 2005, US President George W. Bush said,

“See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda.”

“The essence of propaganda consists in winning people over to an idea so sincerely, so vitally, that in the end they succumb to it utterly and can never escape from it.”

When you look at Nazi Germany the whole country fell into the Nazi ideology, because their designers did such an effective job in ten years, that the whole country believed in their doctrine of national empowerment and hate. When we look at the posters, brochures, video clips of their propaganda, we wonder how one could not be taken in by these ideas. As the Nazi ideology was played continuously to the populations minds, from a very young age, the Hitler youth were shown posters and negative images of Jews as bad people and all other non-Aryans are to be looked down upon.

Opposite Image:

Der ewige Jude (The Eternal or Wandering Jew) Mjöltnir [Hans Schweitzer], poster for the film Der ewige Jude, directed by Fritz Hippler, 1940. As part of its heightened wartime attack on Jews, the Ministry of Propaganda turned to motion pictures as a medium for antisemitic messages.

DER EWIGE JUDE



EIN DOKUMENTARFILM ÜBER DAS
WELTJUDENTUM

Gestaltung: Fritz Hippler * Musik: Franz R. Friedl
Herstellung u. Vertrieb: Deutsche Filmherstellungs- u. Verwertungs-GmbH.

Nazi Rising



Looking at posters from this period (1932-1943), we see how the Nazi's changed the image of Hitler in less than a decade, to make him the absolute ruler of all Germany. Propaganda for the masses had to be simple, and appeal to the emotions. To maintain its simplicity, it had to put over just a few main points, which then had to be repeated many times. Once in power the Nazis took control of the means of communication by establishing the Reichministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda) in 1933, under Dr Joseph Goebbels.

By the late 1930s, the increasingly fanatical tone of Nazi propaganda reflected the growing radicalisation of the regime's anti-Semitic policies. The Jewish stereotypes shown in such propaganda served to reinforce anxieties about modern developments in political and economic life, without bothering to question the reality of the Jewish role in its contribution to German society.



In November 1937 '*The Eternal Jew*' exhibition opened in Munich, and ran until 31 January 1938, claiming to show the 'typical outward features' of Jews and to demonstrate their allegedly Middle Eastern and Asiatic characteristics. The exhibition also attempted to '*expose*' a worldwide '*Jewish-Bolshevik*' conspiracy.

The striking poster for the exhibition contrasted Jewish individualism and '*self-seeking*' with the Nazi ideal of a '*people's community*'. It did this by revealing an '*eastern*' Jew - wearing a kaftan, and holding gold coins in one hand and a whip in the other. Under his arm is a map of the world, with the imprint of the hammer and sickle.

The exhibition attracted 412,300 visitors, over 5,000 per day^[2]. The Secret Police

Communist China and Russia

The CCP (Chinese Communist Party) sought inspiration from the Soviet Union for the development of its visual propaganda. Mao and other leaders were convinced that Socialist Realism, as it had been practised in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, was the best tool to develop new forms of art. It provided a realistic view of life, represented in the rosy colours of optimism, although largely seen through an urban lens.

Socialist Realism focussed on industrial plants, blast furnaces, power stations, construction sites and people at work. These Posters worked on creating image of joint corporation between the two communist powers, showing how their ideology works and the success it is bringing to both peoples. Even if the reality was that both countries were oppressing any political dissent by force and not telling their people what the reality of their situation was.



reports claimed that it helped to promote a sharp rise in anti-Semitic feelings, and in many cases violence against the Jewish community^[2].

When we look at some other countries that use the media to promote and control the public like Communist China and Russia, they all apply similar methods. Well-polished ideas of what their national identity and social values. Most of these ideas are very well crafted by designers and marketing specialists.

Opposite Top Left Image:

A 1932 election poster. In the last days of the 1932 election campaign, amidst a sea of coloured election posters, the Nazis confidently produced a strikingly effective black-and-white election poster.

Opposite Bottom Left Image:

'The seed of peace, not dragon's teeth' cartoon of Hitler, from the magazine Kladderadatsch, 1936.

Top Left Image:

The poster for the 'Eternal Jews' exhibition, 1937



Above Image:

Long live the friendship between the peoples and the armies of China and the Soviet Union, 1950s

In modern times the use of the web, radio, television and print have never been more intergrated, we have slick campiagns for the most mundane products selling us a lifestyle choice, to a politcal party we should vote for in the next general election. They apply the exact same strategy, by which a customer/ voter is influenced.



Failing Democracy

During the U.S presidential election of 2000, design and politics hit the news big time when it was revealed that Florida's badly designed butterfly ballot could have cost Al Gore the U.S. presidency. It is perhaps the most widely known example of the political impact of design. In the book *Do Good Design* by David Berman (January 2009) says;

"The poor design of this ballot is therefore likely responsible for the failure of the United States to sign the Kyoto Accord on climate change, the 2003 invasion of Iraq in search of weapons of mass destruction, and a long list of controversial White House decisions during the eight years that followed."

After this election, responsible governments around the world looked at how to make sure their voting systems work well and are easy to understand. This is a good example of information designers, using their talents to improve a system that was not working well. Political design does not just stop at the ballot box; candidates spend vast sums of money on advertising. The advertising Campaigns are over-simplified and intentionally

deceptive. Advertising Age Columnist Bob Garfield says, *"Political advertising is a stain on our democracy. It's the artful assembling of nominal facts into hideous, outrageous lies."* Designers apply clever strategies to the briefs given to them by the clients to get the best impression of the candidate, most of the times stretching the truth and manipulating facts.

"Political advertising is a stain on our democracy. It's the artful assembling of nominal facts into hideous, outrageous lies."

LABOUR STILL ISN'T WORKING.



Saatchi and Saatchi and Democracy

The famous “*Labour isn’t working*” advert produced by Saatchi and Saatchi, run in August 1978, together with some hard hitting party political communication helped the Conservative Party to be re-elected in 1983. The implications of “*Thatcherism*” on UK society during the late 1970’s and 1980’s did have a negative downward trajectory on societal aspirations, especially amongst the working class and students.

Thatcherism was loosely defined in the 1979 Conservative election campaign as freedom, choice, opportunity, and prosperity. Yet to the detriment of many UK coal miners and UK manufacturing plants, as well as trade unions, Thatcherism spelt long periods of unemployment, economic uncertainty and an unemployed working class youth striving to find a career with prospects^[3].

Above Top Image:
Saatchi and Saatchi campaign
“Labour isn’t working” on behalf of the Conservative
Party before the 1979 UK general election.

Opposite Above Image:
The Palm Beach ballot paper was designed
by Theresa LePore.

Ogilvy and Puerto Rico

Communication can be used to better improve a country’s economy. Legendary ad agency Ogilvy and Mather produced some successful ad campaigns for the Puerto Rico tourism board during the 1950s and 1960s. The campaigns helped in changing Puerto Rican socio economic position in a positive manner, through communicating the scenic beauty of the Puerto Rico’s beaches and tropical settings to American tourists and their disposable incomes. As David Ogilvy stated^[6];

“I did not feel ‘evil’ when I wrote advertisements for Puerto Rico. They helped attract industry and tourists to a country which had been living on the edge of starvation for 400 years.”

*“Advertising is only
evil when it advertises
evil things.”*

Conclusion

Designers created propaganda posters for their clients, strategies for the Nazi party and designed systems for voting, like they would for any other commercial project.

No responsibility was taken for these images and messages created. We designers seem to think that we can distance ourselves from the clients and projects we take on and that it is not really our concern, and we just have to do what we are told. If that is the case we are no more than mercenaries for hire, instead of carrying guns we use our computers and pencils.

Everything we do has consequences, and we have to accept that. By us working for unscrupulous dictators and regimes that pay us huge sums of money to carefully craft their ideology and propaganda, we are no better than the soldiers shooting and persecuting their own people.

We have to apply morality and business ethics to our work and the clients we work for. All companies should have a set of ethical and morale codes in place to deal with clients that want work that is clearly not good for their country and people. Design is very much political, because it has consequences, and sometimes serious ones at that, like the rise of corrupt regimes like the Nazis and Communists. The power of designers is that we can design things to have different consequences. When asked, many designers say that their job is to do what the client wants. But as Rick Poyner points out in First Things First 2000 manifesto^[5] initiated by Adbusters, this is an abnegation of responsibility.

“The decision to concentrate one’s efforts as a designer on corporate projects, or advertising, or any other kind of design, is a political choice.” If you fulfil the brief, you choose to agree.

Colonel Gaddafi is no better than most of the dictators in history. He is one of the longest serving world leaders, just behind Fidel Castro. But he seems to have survived all sorts of attempts to topple him over the years. Is this just luck or is there more to it? He has used western media agencies to promote his image better in the west and in Libya itself.

Individual freedom and individual choice designers have in choosing which project to undertake. Some designers may be money centric, and only interested in the financial gain their work can achieve for them, regardless of the cost their work could have on human suffering. Account Managers who maybe under pressure to hit targets and win new accounts, no matter if it means undertaking an account of an unethical organisation/person/ government, may place pressure on creative designers/copywriters to go against their own personal ethics and morals in order to seek repeat long term large financial gains, regardless of its effect on innocent people.

To conclude Some copywriters and designers have a set of rules by which they conduct their work. Some have a policy not to promote tobacco, pornography or guns, highlighting that their work and creative communication will always seek to better the world, by sticking to an ethical or moral high ground. It is therefore important to strike a balance between designers (and the agency’s) own monetary needs and rewards needed to sustain their own personal standard of living, as well as the non monetary rewards that can come from contributing to a worthy cause (account) and dismissing an unethical account.

Group Discourse Blog

<http://magbigroup1a.wordpress.com/2011/04/11/i-am-just-a-designer-not-a-politician>

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Unitas Communications is a specialist Public Relations, Public Affairs, Research and Digital Communications agency, specialising in the interface between the Islamic and Western worlds.

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By Jennie Winhall

Jennie Winhall is Senior Design Strategist for RED. RED is a 'do tank' within the UK Design Council that develops innovative thinking and practice on social and economic problems through design.

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