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Voice by Design: Experiments in Redistributing Media

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Submitted to the faculty of the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Master of Fine Arts in Design Visual Communications.

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I would like to thank my advisors, my reader, my professors, my wife, my family, and my friends for the collective experience to incite social change.
Growing up in the 1980s I was obsessed with Robin Hood. A VHS tape of the Disney movie resided permanently in my family’s VCR and I watched it every morning before I went to school. I consumed every Robin Hood book, television show, poster, comic book and sticker I could find. I spent hours designing bows and shooting arrows so that I could follow in his footsteps.

In the stories of Robin Hood, he is depicted as an active agent of change, a decentralizing power who redistributed wealth from rich to poor. The logic behind his crime sprees made perfect sense to me when I was young. Growing up around Washington DC, I saw examples of the kinds of class barriers that Robin Hood worked to dissolve. I was appalled, at the age of six, upon seeing poverty-stricken people who lived without shelter. I could not fathom how anyone, how society, could let such things happen.

To deal with these inequalities I found comfort in the existence of a Robin Hood.

I was first compelled to become politically active in 2003. The United States, with a handful of supporting nations, went to war with Iraq. A few images of that war were broadcast through Al Jazeera, the Arabic news service and television channel. The images censored by American media, had shown children mutilated by the bombings, Al Jazeera’s website and mirrored sites were repeatedly shut down, but still made it to my computer screen. These images struck a deep chord in me.

In the initial phases of the United States war on Iraq, anti-war Americans coalesced. But, although premature, when President Bush declared, “Mission Accomplished,” it effectively stalled the anti-war movement. In Richmond alone, anti-war protests regressed from marches of 7,000 to mere rallies of 200 in less than one year.” Local activists told me that they were disheartened by non-existent or biased documentation of their actions. While many in the anti-war movement were deflated, this time period was a personal turning point in my role as an activist.


2 This data was gathered while I helped organize both the 2003 march and 2004 rally.
In the current economic and political reality, if a citizen is compelled to promote an idea or viewpoint to the American public, his or her options are limited. Possible options include national advertising campaigns, newspaper ads and billboards. These venues, however, are prohibitively expensive for the majority of the American population.

Economics effectively regulates free speech of these kinds by insuring that there are not affordable legal venues for effective expression. Only a large organization or a wealthy individual has access to these promotional options. It does not only affect the poor, but the upper and middle classes as well.

New media offer new, affordable alternatives. The Internet is arguably an effective force in democratizing media. It is true that the Internet—and the blogosphere and YouTube—can be effective tools and that these venues are readily accessible to millions of Americans, but it is equally true that the credibility of such media is undercut by the flow of flimsy, unsubstantiated content on the internet. The American public has a preconceived notion about what is objective and authoritative based on the venue that displays the content. Venues such as online newspapers and journals have a tactile version of their publication and credible authors to validate them. But, a blog is not the venue for the effective communication I seek.

For this particular project, I focus on tactile media. Tactile media offers many immediate advantages as an effective activist medium: viewers connect more readily to an idea if it is part of our physical reality; We react immediately to messages that confront us physically; Also, a physical tangible composition exhibits the author’s commitment (in materiality and physical labor) and adds the sense of authenticity that a message conveys. Tactile media escapes the many connotations that come with the flimsy, mass produced media of corporate America. Tactile media is real. Tactile media is also immediate because it can be made fast and inexpensively. No complex skills are required. Materials are readily available. Access to wheat paste, markers and spray paint are not hard to come by or complicated to use.

In addition to our connections with physical objects, images can be effective since the public does not require the image creator, whether designer or non-designer, to have an expertise on the subject they are commenting on. These image creators transcend issues of their occupation, by participating in something without any distinct boundaries. Citizens don’t have to be photographers or designer to be effective communicators with images.

As a designer, I feel it is imperative that I introduce accessible means for people to self-represent using affordable experimental and guerilla promotional methods.

Like Robin Hood, I am attempting to decentralize power, but through giving people the power to change their built environment rather than letting it change them.

Late one night (Oct. 2007) I had a dream. I dreamt of Richmond citizens manipulating the content of a local newspaper—a wiki-newspaper that expressed the needs of the people. The idea excited me and I immediately woke up my wife to tell her my dream. We discussed possible ways such an idea could be realized. Our first idea was to create mock content for a local publication by paying for advertising space. However, we didn’t have enough money to pay for ads and we were too over extended to find sponsors. We discussed several more ideas in the coming days and came up with the concept of a poster campaign to display short statements by Richmonder’s of their dreams and aspirations for the city.
To collect content for this new campaign, we sent out photographers to collect images and statements—citizens were asked to complete the statement, “I dream of a Richmond . . .” Designers then combined text and images to create individual documents of the participants, using a poster template I designed.

The completed documents were intended to be primarily wheat-pasted posters outdoors. The majority of the posters were intended to be wheat-pasted on Broad Street because of the diversity of traffic there. We wanted the posters to reflect a broad range of opinions and we wanted those opinions to be displayed to a broad range of viewers. For our purposes, Broad Street seemed to be the most effective local venue for “I Dream of a Richmond.”

I wasn’t so delusional that I thought the project would completely decentralize media power. There were many decisions made by both photographers and myself that inhibited a pure self-representation of the participants. I designed the template, choosing the type and what photos of the participant would be used. The photographers retained power by choosing how to frame and what to reveal in their photographs. These choices, of course, affected how an observer perceived the posters. Admittedly, this was not “pure” self-representation, but it remained a tool for opinions to be disseminated to a broad public.

To gather content we started with a “Call for Entries” poster. The poster showed an image of a neglected building, functioning as a metaphor for need and potential. In addition to the posters we sent out campaign information to local publications and e-mail lists.

A Wheat paste is a wheat derived adhesive used for wallpaper and outdoor advertising.

I was surprised by how enthusiastic people responded to our campaign. Most of the people I documented thanked me for doing the project. I was equally surprised by how much some of the participants censored themselves for fear of not stating the correct response. We were consistently asked, “What should I say?” or “What do you want me to talk about?”

At first, we received very little response from local photographers. So I took some photos of vendors from a local farmers market to help people understand the project and get them engaged. Shortly after these first few posters were exhibited on my wife’s gallery’s website, Gallery5.org, we were approached by a couple of professional photographers. The project gathered momentum.

Posters of The Byrd House Farmer’s Market vendors.

“A CALL FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS” poster

“Call for Entries” poster

“Mugsy Lunsford, age 48
I DREAM OF A RICHMOND without bigotry.”

Mark Van Atter, age 50
“I DREAM OF A RICHMOND with more small vehicles and bicycles.”

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Before the January kick-off, we were approached by local organizers of Richmond’s New Year Celebration. Those organizers displayed the “I dream of a Richmond...” images on large screens scattered throughout a commercial district during the celebration. An estimated 18,000 people viewed the campaign on these screens. We also asked local businesses to exhibit posters in their windows and wheat-pasted some of the posters on neglected buildings. Because of these display venues we received a lot of local press by: V Magazine (Dec 2007), InRich.com’s MashUp (Nov 2007, Jan 2008) and RVA Magazine (Dec 2007).

5 V Magazine is a free local women’s monthly publication.
6 MashUp is an online, youth centered, version of a local paper.
7 RVA Magazine is a free local arts and culture monthly publication.
I DREAM OF A RICHMOND where racism ceases to exist through integration of street art, parades and history.”

Lily Lambrutta, age 26

“I DREAM OF A RICHMOND where roaches and rats are replaced with a more pleasant infestation. Like ducks, or baby elephants or something.”

A. Biro, age 24

“I DREAM OF A RICHMOND where the local government doesn’t perpetually build obstacles to the growth and health of small businesses.”

Pat

Selection of campaign posters

First application of wheat-pasted posters.
I DREAM OF A RICHMOND that has more vegetarians and has less trash.

Kieryn, age 11

“Kieryn, age 11”

I DREAM OF A RICHMOND in which I live rad and die hard.

Elijah Von Lramon, age 18

When I saw the posters next to each other I began to see some interesting relationships. The posters, juxtaposed with one another, helped define what a participant’s background was. Two images best exemplified this. A child’s (age 11) statement was “I dream of a Richmond that has more vegetarians and has less trash.”

A young adult’s (age 18) statement was “I dream of a Richmond in which I live rad and die hard.” The 11 year old, coming from a different background, is stating something more community focused than the 18 year old. The posters powerfully exhibit what is most important to each of them them respectively.
For the inaugural exhibition of “I dream of a Richmond . . .” at Gallery5 in January 2008, posters were hung on the walls and displayed on a screen.

As the campaign grew, various non-profits also began to participate. Organizations ranging from art education to queer radicals presented information about how people could help the organization attain its goals. The purpose of having the non-profits participate was to present some ways of fulfilling one’s aspirations for the city.
Though I am thrilled with the initial response and the enthusiasm of participants, organizations and local press, I believe the project must continue to evolve before it has the actual effect of directly empowering people. At least one shift toward individual empowerment has already occurred. More individuals are taking the initiative to take their own photos of their friends and family, which means there is less of a barrier between photographer and participant. This is very encouraging. While the project has already been met with great success it holds more potential to directly affect Richmond.
There Once Was A Rebellion
There Once Was A Rebellion — initially a series of tutorials — started as an independent study in Fall 2006. It focused on developing tutorials about guerilla media techniques to empower the economically or socially marginalized. The goal for those tutorials was to make them as accessible as possible. This meant dealing with both language and economic barriers.

My first attempt to develop a tutorial used photography as a medium. I hoped that by photographing actual processes; people who had trouble reading English could understand the tutorials. However, people who saw the first versions had trouble making out what the materials were. They expressed that the photography was “too abstract” or “too artistic.” So I tried a different method to explain the media techniques.

I decided to use iconic imagery to explain the techniques. At first this process was difficult, but eventually I developed a repertoire of icons and illustrations. The illustration methods used labels such as simplified images of the materials being used, clocks to define time elapsed, arrows as indicators of movement, meters to discern how full a container was. I used these icons among other symbols to help the reader along. I ended up developing three tutorials for the study and would revisit the project later as a sub-problem for my thesis.
When I revisited the project, I found that it was imperative for some of the tutorials to use a dense amount of text. When using materials that most people are not familiar with, it was difficult to explain what the materials were, what they did and where one could find them. For example, someone who has no idea what photo emulsion is or what emulsion does can’t discern an iconic image of an emulsion container, scoop coater or other screen-printing tools. Unfortunately, this meant I had to use verbal information thus making the universality of iconographic tutorials a secondary goal.

Before you begin, here is some extra information about printing using screens. Also see the burning a screen tutorial before you begin.

**Supplies:**
- Burner (or stove and match)
- Screen printing ink
- Printed positive
- Specialized ink remover
- New fabric
- Acetate
- Stencilex
- Mat board
- Masking tape
- Registration stops

**Clean up**
- Before printing, make sure the screen is clean. After removing any emulsion with a piece of flat board and returning to the developer, rinse the emulsion on the screen with water to remove the ink. If the ink is difficult to remove, simply use a damp cloth.
- To remove any ink left on the screen's material, apply the emulsion remover on the screen with a clean rag. Then remove the ink with a soft cloth and water. If the screen has a mold or a miter, slit the screen for a minute and let it dry first. It's necessary to remove it's mold.
- To remove the screen, simply immerse it in a bath of water. For some screens, use a piece of soap and brush on a cloth. After completely cleaning the screen, rinse with water and let it dry.

** textbox ACETATE METHOD OF REGISTRATION**
- A registration stops, especially when experimenting a second batch of an already printed area, is the following.
  1. Place the screen in a desk with a Flat Bar. Allow the frame to take a moment while the stencil lines up with the paper. Secure the screen in position, being careful not to damage the image on the acetate.

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Now that I had some tutorials, I needed to develop a visual identity to promote the tutorials. I wanted to combine the identity with some research I had been doing about radicals during the 1970s in Iran. I was interviewing several leftists involved with the 79 revolution and learned about a metaphor used by Bizhan Jazani, the head of an Iranian guerilla group. Before Jazani was a guerilla, he was involved in advertising and came up with a metaphor that functioned as a snapshot of the revolutionary experience. The metaphor was an image of an armed deer in the process of hunting a hunter. This image is very powerful because it abstractly illustrates the power dynamics of despot vs. people. After being exposed to the metaphor I became obsessed with Iranian deer. I illustrated deer as logos, as revolutionaries, as street artists, in info graphics, as themselves etc. The images led to the identity system of There Once Was A Rebellion.
Diagram using deer to explain council-communism.

Diagram using deer to explain Marxist-Leninism.
I illustrated a few deer as street artists to become visuals for the website. The intro page of the site had an illustration of a deer drawing a mustache on a poster of a hunter. It was intended to be an iconic image of empowerment through subversion. The website itself was conceived to give people free access to the tutorials.

A friend of mine helped me develop a content management system (CMS) for the site. By using a CMS I could much easily manage any information on the site or the aesthetic allowing potential to evolve. Data was stored in a way that was readily available to the web-developer as information was added.

8 Chris Seamon, a professional web developer, helped me develop There Once Was A Rebellion’s CMS.
I developed a logo using a burning blade of wheat as the image with the option of it being coupled with a deer head. The idea was rebirth, using a method of farming as metaphor. It also had implications of guerilla media techniques because of a method using a wheat-derived paste. This paste is not only used for guerilla media, but is probably one of the most pervasive media used for guerilla propaganda.

The deer illustrations were also used to promote exhibitions. The exhibitions involved multiple components: artwork as inspiration, free literature on various topics (texts exhibiting: interviews with political theorists, essays by theorists, zines on do-it-yourself community spaces, etc.) and workshops on various printing techniques.

For the first exhibition (my colleague Kenneth Yates and I were involved in), we boarded up Gallery5’s windows to wheat paste works. The exhibition also included various signage we re-appropriated to make social statements. The exhibition attendance numbered nearly one thousand viewers. Although the opening was a success the workshops proved to be more complicated and received unsatisfactory attendance.
Since the exhibition was in March, during VCU’s Spring Break (as well as daylight savings time complicating scheduling), we didn’t foresee either of these time conflicts to be an issue. However, our lithography workshop had over fifteen people sign up, yet only four (very appreciative) people attended. So for the next year we paid special attention to any potential conflicting dates and encouraged prepayment.
The second exhibition did not display works in an unusual way, but included a collaborative installation by six of us. The purpose of the installation was to invoke feelings of empowerment to participants. The final installation was a “city” in which the audience had control of various components. The components included billboards, building placement, sound and video.

We built billboards to scale with surfaces painted using chalkboard paint. The paint enabled people to draw or write on the billboards using chalk we provided. The response to this component was very interesting because people moved from the billboards to the tops of buildings to the buildings themselves. Participants responded to each other by adding text or censoring text. We were all very satisfied with the result.

The buildings’ arrangement of the buildings was subject to change via wheels on the bottoms of them. The buildings themselves were created using already existing pedestals we wrapped with collaged images of local buildings. People were very apprehensive to move the buildings even though only two of the buildings were static. One of the two static buildings was used as a podium, introducing a sound component.
Although the workshops were better attended, I was still not completely satisfied with how many people we reached and how diverse our audience was. Therefore, as a future application, I have decided to create a mobile teaching unit. The unit will include materials necessary for teaching a specific technique. Each unit will have some sort of music similar to an ice cream truck to entice interest. Then, when approached, the teacher would reveal what the unit was and teach the technique to help participants create their own message and voice. By being mobile it allows us to be proactive in encouraging people to directly self-represent themselves and, in turn, give them a taste of empowerment.

On the top of one building lie a microphone and a suggestion box. However, the suggestion box housed a paper shredder, destroying all suggestions. The hope of this component was to encourage more proactive statements. Most people actually did not act on this. They either were unaware that their statement was being shredded or laughed and walked down to interact with the buildings some more.

It is difficult for me to find any component of the installation as a failure. We simply supplied people with various ways to interact with the exhibit in hopes that they would do more as they became familiar with the hyperreal city.
There Once Was A Rebellion is far from where I want it’s development to be. The organization will continue as various manifestations such as mobile teaching units, do-it-yourself dissent kits, direct actions, etc. It is also imperative for us to test many of the methods we present as well as constantly question their relevance as society evolves. The continuation of this project is important in truly assessing its impact for future models of decentralization media control.

Designers are in a good place to be at the forefront of decentralizing media power. First of all we are an integral part in how media is presented and organized. We also tend to remain anonymous when implementing these projects for clients. We provide a service to others rather than fulfilling our own needs, which is an important mindset for creating non-authoritative social discourse. Our anonymity allows for us to be anyone and for anyone to continue our projects. There is no leader, just ideas.

This is the same mindset of many non-leaders such as Subcomandante Marcos, a Zapatista spokesperson.

“Marcos the quintessential antileader, insists that his black mask is a mirror, so that Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.”

By adopting this philosophical mind set we will produce an environment allowing ideas that would not normally be circulated vocal representation. Like Robin Hood, we must decentralize the power of the few into the hands of the many. This is imperative for our social evolution. We will evolve by receiving varying perspectives on different topics keeping us from being culturally homogenous or intellectually incestuous.

My goal, then is to continue to develop and implement new campaigns that build upon the experiences and resources gained from “I Dream of a Richmond . . .” and There Once Was A Rebellion. I also hope to encourage other designers to do so as well.