

# Design as Symbolic Violence. Design for Social Justice.

**Keywords:** symbolic violence; social justice; politics; communication

## 1. Catalyst Information

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## 2. Context of Conversation Topic

Design embeds ideas in communication and artefacts in subtle and psychologically powerful ways. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term 'symbolic violence' to describe how powerful ideologies, priorities, values and even sensibilities are constructed and reproduced through cultural institutions, processes and practices. Through symbolic violence, individuals learn to consider unjust conditions as natural and even come to value customs and ideas that are oppressive. Symbolic violence normalises structural violence and enables real violence to take place, often preceding it and later justifying it. Feminist, class, race and indigenous scholars and activists describe how oppressions (how patriarchy, racism, colonialism, etc.) exist



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within institutions and structures, and also within cultural practices that embed ideologies into everyday life. The theory of symbolic violence sheds light on how design can function to naturalise oppressions and then obfuscate power relations around this process. Through symbolic violence, design can function as an enabler for the exploitation of certain groups of people and the environment they (and ultimately 'we') depend on to live. Design functions as symbolic violence when it is involved with the creation and reproduction of ideas, practices, tools and processes that result in structural and other types of violence (including ecocide). Breaking symbolic violence involves discovering how it works and building capacities to challenge and transform dysfunctional ideologies, structures and institutions. This conversation will give participants an opportunity to discuss, critique and/or develop the theory of design as symbolic violence as a basis for the development of design strategies for social justice.

### **3. Organizing research questions**

1. How do designers participate in symbolic violence?
2. How can designers reveal and undo symbolic violence?

### **4. Set-up of your session**

#### *4.1 Rough outline:*

We plan to run a two hours session with up to 40 participants. We will start with three short presentations by the catalysts followed by six parallel discussion groups, each focusing on one aspect of symbolic violence. Participants will have space to introduce themselves and their concerns, which will be the basis for the discussion sessions.

#### *4.2 Detailed outline:*

Six groups of chairs and tables will be set up for a group of 40 people (maximum). A facilitator will welcome everyone and introduce the topic, schedule, goals and suggested ground rules for the session. She will check to see if the group has additions or modifications to these rules. She will then ask for everyone to agree to these rules and for their help co-facilitating the session. She will introduce the timekeeper and explain that time limits will be strictly applied. In these ways we will attempt to keep to schedule and accomplish the goals within a two-hour period.

The theory of symbolic violence will be introduced (5 minutes). Then each of the three catalysts will have 7 minutes to present a short slideshow with examples of design as symbolic violence as well as an example of design that reveals or undoes symbolic violence. Following these presentations we will facilitate a session where everyone in the room briefly introduces themselves. Depending on the number of participants, people will have between 30s and 1 minute to speak. A timekeeper will

ring a bell when the time is up. This will be a moment to learn about the interests in the room.

Following these introductions, we will invite people to suggest types of symbolic violence. If other topics have emerged, new themes can also be added at this stage. The six most popular ideas will be established by the facilitator (using a facilitator method to decide democratically). The six themes will be hosted at the six different tables. The person who suggested each theme will lead the discussion. A volunteer note-taker and/or image-maker will document the conversation. Other participants can choose their favourite tables to contribute to the conversation and/or move between conversations. This process will last half an hour. The workshop will end with each group summarising their conversation to the group as a whole. This process will last 20 minutes. The final ten minutes will be a chance to reflect on the process and share ideas of how to build capacities for research and action for design and social justice.

#### **4.3 Roles:**

Joanna Boehnert, catalyst and main facilitator

Bianca Elzenbaumer, catalyst, co-facilitator, Twitterer and time-keeping coordinator

Noel Douglas, catalyst, co-facilitator, Twitter coordinator and time-keeper

### **5. Type of space and equipment required**

We will need a room with moveable seats for 40 people and six large tables. We will need a projector and a screen (ideally two) to display presentations as well as the Twitter feed. Ideally people will sign up for the workshop. It will not be appropriate for people to join the workshop after it has started since everyone participating needs to agree to the facilitation ground rules.

### **6. Dissemination strategy**

Before the event, each catalyst will write a 350-500 word text that will be shared online with their slideshows. We will be live tweeting the event with our own unique hashtag (#SymbolicViolence) and the #DRS2016 hashtag. We will have a Twitter stream of instantaneous tweets with our hashtag projected on a wall. With this live tweeting, non-local people can follow the workshop from home. They will be invited to tweet content (that will be viewable on the tweet stream Twitter wall). When possible, the Twitter coordinator will alert the facilitator to relevant tweets from beyond the workshop space. The twitter stream will serve as a means of documenting the event and we will use it to put together a Storify thread. We will also make a voice recording of the session that will be posted online. At the end of the session, we will ask participants to compose a 140-character statement (which can be tweeted). During the workshop, we will invite participants to contribute with writings, drawings and photos of their notes. We collect all of these outputs on the Storify online.

## 7. References

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About the Catalysts:

**Dr. Joanna Boehnert** ([@ecocene](#) + [@ecolabs](#)) works on the politics of design, technology, the environment and society. Her work investigates how visuals, data and text work together to communicate controversial and complex information. She has recently finished writing a book titled [Design/Ecology/Politics](#).

**Dr. Bianca Elzenbaumer** ([@bravenewalps](#)) works on design projects that engage people in rethinking social, political and environmental issues by combining design research methods with radical pedagogy, conflict mediation techniques and DIY making.

**Noel Douglas** ([@signsofrevolt](#) + [@occupydesign](#)) is an artist and designer who works across a range of media. His main interests are in the aesthetics, politics and the creative use of graphics and art in social movements.