Design as Common Good / Framing Design through Pluralism and Social Values

Swiss Design Network
Symposium 2021
Conference Proceedings

Edited by
Massimo Botta
Sabine Junginger

University of Applied Sciences and Arts
of Southern Switzerland
SUPSI

Lucerne University of
Applied Sciences and Arts
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Design as Common Good / Framing Design through Pluralism and Social Values

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Conference Proceedings
Swiss Design Network Symposium 2021
25-26 March 2021, held online

Organized by
University of Applied Sciences and Arts
of Southern Switzerland, SUPSI
Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, HSLU

Conference Proceedings Design
Claudia Tambella

Proceedings Compiled by
Vanessa De Luca

Editors
Massimo Botta, Sabine Junginger

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Conference Proceedings
Design as Common Good
Framing Design through Pluralism and Social Values
ISBN 978-88-7595-108-5

Published by
SUPSI, HSLU, swissdesignnetwork

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The Design of Social Independent Magazines. Multiple Translations for a New Design Sensitivity

Elena Caratti[a*],
Giovanni Baule[b]

We are living in an epoch in which critical reflection on the meaning of the human condition is impelling. Equally urgent is the creation of artefacts and experiences that can heighten awareness concerning collective challenges within everyday contexts and processes of social and economic life (Julier 2019, p.336).

As the research commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council about Social Design Futures declared:

Society currently faces extensive large-scale complex challenges, which social design is suited to addressing. The challenges of climate change, migration, ageing populations, chronic disease, wealth disparities, and pressures on public sector finances, require smarter and more agile responses to how problems and opportunities are identified and framed, and how new solutions are generated, explored, prototyped, resourced and realised. (Armstrong et al. 2014, p.20)

In this paper we would like to assert that the sector of independent editorial design for the social can positively contribute to information sharing, reinforcing knowledge and debate, reframing issues, building a memory of good practices, and supporting the importance of social design in different contexts, both civic and academic.

More specifically, the paper intends to:

- Reveal the characteristics and potentialities of social independent magazines as cultural attractors and cultural activators.
- Describe how they can be conceived and interpreted.
- Reflect on the design process through multiple translation practices (beyond the interlinguistic translation).
- Consider the ethical dimension of translation and its implications on education through three projects developed at the Design School of Politecnico di Milano, MA Course in Communication Design.

We will refer to ongoing research regarding the relationship between design and translation, focusing our attention on the process of editorial translation. For this purpose, we will consider a series of contributions from the fields of social design and independent magazine design and, in particular, from theories in text, medium, and translation studies.

1 Social Independent Magazines

The design of social independent magazines is a compelling and growing field of research and design experimentation both at the professional and academic levels.

We are referring to a specific area within the complex reality of social publishing, which is thematically focused on cultural and social issues (concerning human rights, education, environmental, welfare, health, migration, and so on) where research, content writing, and multiple translation processes converge.

As testified by the Report on Social Publishing 2010 (Battiston et al. 2010, 44), social magazines can be understood one of three ways: 1) as simple “house organs" of non-profit organizations; 2) as thematic magazines that are on the market even if they originate from third sector organisations; or 3) as magazines promoted by commercial companies or cooperatives that deal with social issues.

In this paper, we will take into consideration an additional category inside the social magazine publishing ecosystem, which is characterised by the adjective “independent.”

Independent and small publishers are like rare plants that pop up among the larger growth but add something different: they feed the soil, bring colour or scent into the world. (Hawthorne 2014, p.135)

Hawthorne’s assertion brings us back to the fact that the realisation of social independent magazines is motivated (to a greater or lesser extent) by social and cultural values rather than financial gain (Murray 2021, p.103). Indeed we are not alluding to the mass mainstream magazine market, but to a more sophisticated typology of editorial artefacts that are experimental and open to innovation in terms of content, writing style, format, layout, and iconographic or typographic apparatus.

Independent social magazines can have a monthly or bimonthly edition (see for example the Italian magazine *Gli Asini*, https://glasinirivista.org), a long-term periodicity (see for example the biannual

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It's Freezing in LA, www.itsfreezinginla.co.uk), or even have a limited edition (see for example the six numbers of *Migrant Journal*, migrantjournal.com).

Their distribution is counter to traditional magazines; for example, independent social magazines can be distributed offline or online, by bookstores or by specialised magazine shops (see for example Mag Culture Shop in London and its platform magculture.com).

The independent magazine houses involve writers, researchers, editors, or curators in strict collaboration with communication designers. Their activity is in some cases comparable with the "research and development" area of a company (or an agency or an organisation) as a whole (Galligan 2007, p.40). Their main purpose is to create "innovation" in terms of content (with talented authors), multimodal translation (visual, auditory, etc.), and multimedia divulgation.

Content is structured according to different organisational principles that can contribute to our understanding of reality; some magazines even orient sections within the same publication differently in order to respond to different principles. Categories of content include convergent/divergent, focussed/flexible, linear/lateral, serialist/holist, and propositional/appositional, all of which can be significant for the index definition, but can also replicate how the reader approaches the ideas. As Nigel Cross affirms, such natural dichotomies may reflect the underlying dual structure of the human brain and its apparent dual modes of information processing (Cross 2007, pp.40–41).

According to traditional research approaches, however, content can simultaneously be treated in relation to a single discipline or to integrated disciplines from an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary point of view (Pohl et al. 2019, p.64).

2 Further Interpretations: Independent Social Magazines as Text, Medium as Device

We can consider other analytical perspectives to better comprehend the features of an independent social magazine and the related translation processes that allow it to generate culture, change behaviours, and interact with other textual forms or other media.

In the field of semiotics, the "text" is an overall configuration of meaning which, by resorting to some expressive support, guarantees the generation, circulation, and interpretation of social and cultural meanings (Marrone 2010, 18); to consider a magazine in terms of "text" means to perceive it not only in terms of a physical support, but also as an "abstract model of investigation" (Marrone 2010, p.VI), or a sort of "metacognitive apparatus" (Dallari 2012, p.19).

According to these premises, an independent social magazine is interpretable as a "polyalphabetic and polymorphic text," and as a communicative artifact, unitarily and organically conceived, which is characterised by a plurality of codes and expressive modalities (verbal, visual, sonorous, tactile, etc.).

We can thus deconstruct the text according to: the *iconic code* that refers to the use of images (iconic illustrations, photos, representations or symbols, etc.) to describe or represent actions, situations, and contexts; the *verbal code* and its relationship with the iconic code; the *graphic code*, or the compositional elements of the pages (the format, the layout, the orientation); the *typographic code* that refers to the choice of paper, the form, and the application of other materials on the magazine's pages including the binding, the care, and the quality of the print process; the *reading method code* that is connected to the content fruition procedures (sequential or punctual); and finally the *relationship code*, which is related to the expedients and methods in building a dialogue with readers (Dallari 2012, p.49).

The simultaneous coexistence and mutual interdependence of these multiple codes enables us to recognise the transformative potentialities of the artefact both in the analogue and digital environments.

The principle of "intertextuality" constitutes an additional factor of innovation. Each independent social magazine (as a text) is located within a series of exchanges and interactions with other texts: a single text contains other texts, refer to other texts, was born from other texts, and produces other texts. As Roland Barthes asserts, a text is not understood as a closed cultural product but as a production in progress that is associated to other texts, other codes, and society (Barthes 1991, p.184).

This relationship with what is external transforms the independent social magazine, thus amplifying its own concept, its content, and its cultural meaning.

Alongside the intertextuality principle, we also have to recognise the principle of "intermediality" that represents a further expansion of intertextuality and its presupposition simultaneously since it is interested in the relationships established between different media as devices (Zecca 2013, p.38).

According to Federico Zecca, it is also necessary to shift attention to the entire medial dimension (Zecca 2013, p.19). From this perspective, an independent social magazine can be redefined in terms of a "medium," which has to be understood:

not only as a transmission channel, nor only as an expressive language; but as a 'cultural device' tout court which, in accordance with its internal characteristics (linguistic, technological, experiential) and its economic-social function, regulates the production and circulation of texts, actively affecting, at various levels, also on the form and 'existence' of their relationships. (Zecca 2013, p.143)

To summarise, the concepts of "text," and "medium" as "cultural device" affects our way of perceiving independent social magazines as entities that are strictly connected to language and its codes, but also as artefacts with specific material and technological conditions that can influence and orient new forms of social experience. These interpretative categories bring us closer to the process of "translation" in all its forms.

3 Multiple Translation Processes

Translation is not historically and geographically understood according to a common meaning; each tradition has made and makes use of specific cultural paradigms that are often very different from one another (Bettini 2012, p.X). This field of study still remains multifaceted and intertwined with other disciplinary fields (linguistics, sociology, history, psychology, literary studies, philosophy, etc.), and can be defined as "translatology" (from the French *traductologie*), science or translation theory, the poetics of translating, or in term of *Translation Studies* (Jervolino 2001, p.10).

The range of ways in which translation practice can be conceived and articulated within the editorial ecosystem can be connected to the concept of "total translation," originally expressed by Peeter Torop in 1995 and successively amplified and codified by Bruno Osimo (2020, pp.256–258).

According to these studies, we can conceive translation as a cultural and semiotic process, (deep and total), that entails the transfer between a starting system (prototext) and an arrival system (metatext).

It is important to note that the different translation methods identified by Torop are immensely applicable within the design process of magazines. As Baule asserts:

The editorial field is one of the spheres in which the translation paradigm for communication artifacts would seem to find a natural home. The editorial field—understood as a content processing and artifact design system identifiable also as the *content industry*—has been configured right from the start and, as a whole, as a highly complex translation system subject to structured interweaving of diverse scales and a range of translation passages. (Baule 2017, pp.41–42)

If we transfer the translation categories identified by Torop to the process of magazine design we can identify:

- *Mental translation*: The conceptualisation process of the editorial product. The concept itself is a sort of mental representation that shapes, processes, preserves, and transfers knowledge. It has specific cultural characteristics and can be of various types and different complexity; its borders are indefinite and mobile (Arduini 2020, p.23).
- *Metatextual translation*: According to Torop, it consists of the translation of a text in the form of any metacommunicative tool (Torop 2010, p.11). We refer here to all texts that are external to the main text; they accompany the text by highlighting aspects of it in order to facilitate its decoding. This is typical when we use notational tools (the flatplan, for example) for content planning, or when we design the cover of the magazine or the teaser as a promotional video.
- *Intralinguistic translation*: The processes of reformulation of the content that we can find, for example, in the index of the magazine.
- *Interlinguistic translation*: The traditional interpretation of translation in terms of content transfer in other languages.
- *Intersemiotic translation*: The translation that is expressed as content transfer between different semiotic systems such as the process of de-verbalisation (from the verbal to the visual) or vice versa from visual to verbal (according to the ekphrasis), from the mental to the visual during the writing process and typographic transcription, or from the verbal to the sound.
- *Intertextual or intermedial translation*: The translation as an expansion of the content within other texts or media; in other words, the contents are the result of a process of reinterpretation of previous content, the contents are amplified or cited in new texts, or the content migrates between/among different media.
- *Cultural translation*: Translation as cultural mediation and transfer; when an independent magazine transfers or synthesises verbally and/or visually the distinctive features of a culture (its characteristics, values, signs, or memories).

These multiple categories exemplify the plurality of possible translation paths; in some cases, they are more adjacent to the starting system (prototext), and nearer to the arrival system (metatext) in others.

According to Torop, some categories are more akin to a process of analysis. In these terms, they are finalised to the comprehension of the properties and characteristics of the prototext, while others are closer to a synthesis process that is finalised to the re-creation (recoding and/or transposition) of the properties and characteristics of the metatext (Zecca 2013, pp.170–171).

4 The Implications of Translation Processes in the Editorial Design Education

According to Paul Ricoeur (2001, pp.51–74), translation is both a hermeneutic practice and an ethical act. It can be understood as the former because it can be finalised to comprehension, as explained by Domenico Jervolino:

> [Translation] requires a methodological moment, it does not limit itself to vindicating the indisputably creative character of language and interpretation, it does not only want to understand, but also to explain. In this sense, the encounter with a practical and reflective science of translation, purified from the temptation of a totalizing rationalism and a more or less explicit positivism, becomes necessary and fruitful. (Jervolino 2001, pp.15–16)

Translation is an ethical act because it requires not only an intellectual, theoretical, and practical work, but also expresses an ethical problem (Ricoeur 2001, 67). This implies that translation must be considered "in relation to multiple factors," or to simply "something else," such as the source text, the differences between languages, the "native" texts produced in the target language, the people who translate, the machines that translate, the users of the translations, the situations in which the translations are produced, the culture of arrival, and so on (Palumbo 2010, p.151).

Such considerations are at the core of our MA course, which is aimed at the realisations of social independent magazines in analogue and digital fields.

The name of our studio course, "Magazzino Sociale," was born from the association between the adjective "social," with the English term "magazine" (the French "magasine" or the Italian "magazzino"), which derives from the Arabic "makhzan," a space used for the conservation and storage of different types of goods. This metaphorical allusion allows us to conceive our object of investigation and design in terms of an "independent container of diversified social contents" (on education, welfare, the environment, rights, and health), where translation paradigm, design practice, and ethical mediation converge.

This is the context in which the translation paradigm is inserted, which is a happy way to go beyond the text and the fascination of textuality, without abandoning language. In the translation work one's own and the stranger, the self and the other, the other that we find within us and that is not reduced to the otherness of the other man. In the translation, a concept of plural humanity is at work and yet one, not reducible to a single thing in terms of a unified science, an absolute knowledge or a single language, but which can be united on the model of hospitality and coexistence, of cohabitation in a world made habitable by a practice of conviviality. (Jervolino 2001, p.34)

The following research questions reflect the path taken by the students within the course:

- What are the components of an independent social magazine?
- How can we analyse and interpret it?
- How can we design it, according to the idea of disseminating content and sensitising readers to social issues?
- What are the conceptual assumptions of the independent social magazine?
- What is its identity?
- What are the recurring themes?
- What are the areas of reference?
- Who are the authors of the articles, and who are the readers?
- How can these kinds of visual artefacts incentivise the sense of otherness, hospitality, pluralism, and diversity?

In this paper we report a synthesis of three projects designed by students of the Master's course in Communication Design, with Professors Elena Caratti and Sergio Menichelli, with the tutors Giulia Piccoli Trapletti and Francesco Scagliarini (academic years 2018/19 and 2019/20).

These experimentations were designed in all their components and details for reinterpreting the environmental issue in analogue and digital fields according to translatability principles.

We recognised three primary approaches: the first, (Altamarea), was thematically convergent and pragmatic, the second, (Wireframe), focused on a specific interpretation of environmental issue with a critical approach, and the third, (Superfluo), was more playful and divergent.

4.1 "Altamarea. Zero metri sul livello del mare" [Altamarea. Zero Meters above Sea Level]

Altamarea is an independent social magazine born out of the desire to explore the social unease resulting from one of many consequences of climate change: the raising sea level in major cities around the world. It is a semi-annual magazine that includes six numbers about the cities of Venice, Rotterdam, New Orleans, Shanghai, Miami, and Bangkok.

The goal is to sensitise readers through scientific content and a series of verbal and visual reportages that summarises and artistically repurposes the life experiences of the inhabitants of those cities. In addition to the magazine, a series of promotional artefacts (posters, gadgets, and the teaser) have been designed in accord with the principle of intertextuality. In this article, we report the main characteristics of the first issue on Altamarea, which is about the city of Venice.

Fig. 1: *Altamarea first issue, cover, academic year 2019/20, deesigned by Nicola Belfiore, Antonino Bellomi, Milena De Carla, Lara Marino, Vittoria Pinato, and Mattia Zanardi.*

Fig. 2: *Altamarea first issue, the flatplan, academic year 2019/20, designed by Nicola Belfiore, Antonino Bellomi, Milena De Carla, Lara Marino, Vittoria Pinato, and Mattia Zanardi.*

Fig. 3: *Altamarea first issue example of internal article, academic year 2019/20, designed by Nicola Belfiore, Antonino Bellomi, Milena De Carla, Lara Marino, Vittoria Pinato, and Mattia Zanardi.*

Fig. 4: *Altamarea first issue, poster and boot cover, academic year 2019/20, designed by Nicola Belfiore, Antonino Bellomi, Milena De Carla, Lara Marino, Vittoria Pinato, and Mattia Zanardi.*

4.2 Wireframe: Juggle the Overload

Today we are inebriated by the digital medium, without being able to fully evaluate the consequences of such intoxication. This blindness and simultaneous numbness represent the crisis of our day. (Byung-Chul 2015, 31).

The concept of this magazine stems from the problem of the digital content overload that affects every aspect of human life and often creates discomfort if not actual disorders (known as Information Fatigue Syndrome, or IFS). As Han Byung-Chul claims, at a certain point, the information is no longer informative but deformative; communication is no longer communicative, but merely cumulative (Byung-Chul, 2015, p.735). The narrative model of the hero's journey constituted the reference for the structuring and organisation of the content. We can identify in the index four different phases which correspond to different types of content: articles, infographics, and expert interventions for the first phase; scientific articles and interactive contents for the second phase; interviews and virtuous cases reported for the third phase; and articles aimed at reflecting and overcoming the problem for the fourth phase. The key concepts of the articles are highlighted in colour, and texts are enriched by interesting and sophisticated iconographic apparatuses, including photos, illustrations, and infographics.

The interactive section allows the reader to access content in audio format.

Fig. 5 a-b: *Wireframe front cover of first issue (a) and covers of subsequent issues (b), academic year 2019/20, designed by Elena Buttolo, Caterina Cedone, Francesca Fincato, Marta Monti, and Federico Pozzi.*

Fig. 6: *Wireframe index of first issue, academic year 2019/20, designed by Elena Buttolo, Caterina Cedone, Francesca Fincato, Marta Monti, and Federico Pozzi.*

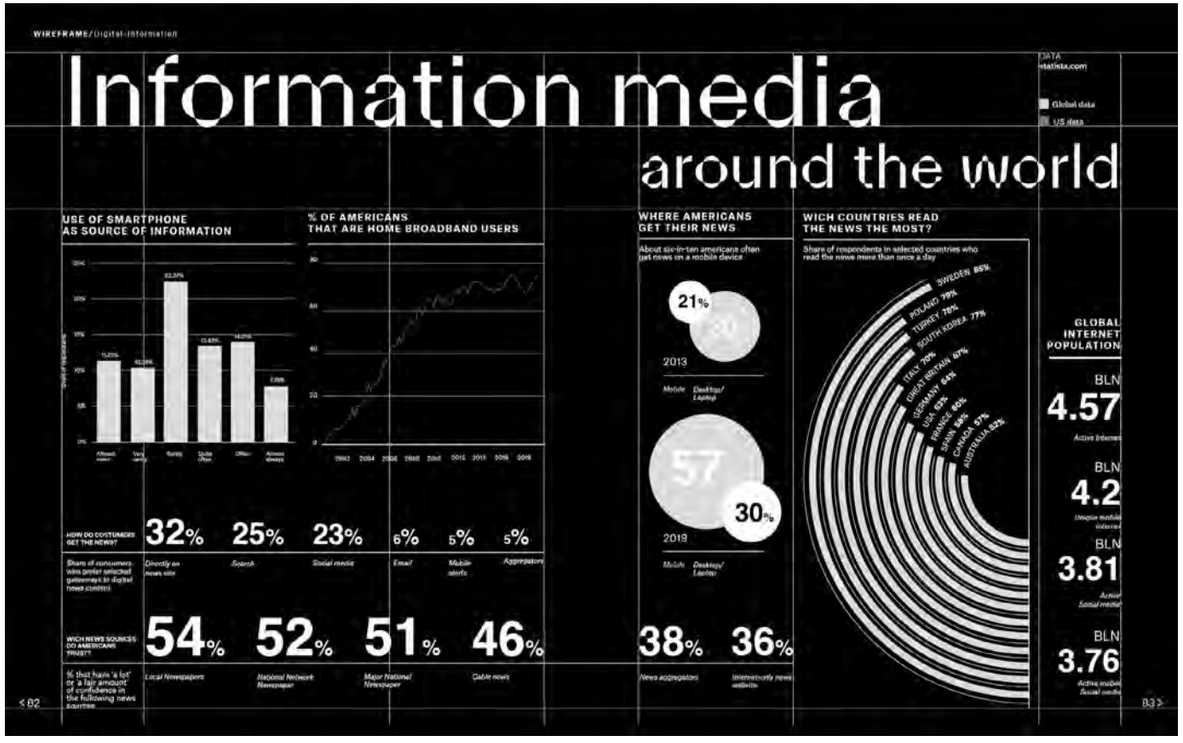

Fig. 7 a-b: *Wireframe internal pages of first issue, academic year 2019/20, designed by Elena Buttolo, Caterina Cedone, Francesca Fincato, Marta Monti, and Federico Pozzi.*

4.3 “Superfluo.
Con sottotitolo ambientalista”
[Superfluous.
With Environmental Subtitle]

Superfluo magazine confronts the environmental issue in an original and playful manner.

Its concept was developed in consideration of the two connotations of the adjective “superfluous”: it is most commonly a synonym for “unnecessary,” but the word is also related to the combination between the term “super” and “fluo,” which is the abbreviation of “fluorescent,” an adjective that stands for something that is colourful and bright.

The multi-coloured cover and the silver treatment of the written text are emblematic of this dual meaning. The monothematic semi-annual independent magazine publishes content that debates the current environmental situation through the contraposition of oppositional interpretations of a central topic. The first issue is about food and the following issues are about cosmetics, fashion, and sports respectively.

The magazine presents two content indexes and two editorials in order to highlight the “sense of being-in-between,” a plural vision of the same topic.

Ironic and playful rhetoric constitute the fil rouge of the entire project, supported by rich, provocative, and original iconographical and typographical research.

The intertextual and intermedia translation provides a promotional campaign and the design of an app that highlights the world of environmental operators through the same aesthetic as the overall magazine, implementing bright colours to make a strong visual impact on the readers.

Fig. 8: *The cover of Superfluo magazine, first issue, academic year 2018/19, designed by Gabriele Della Pepa, Federico GuglielmettiFrancesca Granzotto, Paola Rondi, Elena Stefani, and Giulia Valentinuzzi.*

Fig. 9: *Superfluo magazine, internal pages, academic year 2018/19, designed by Gabriele Della Pepa, Federico Guglielmetti Francesca Granzotto, Paola Rondi, Elena Stefani, and Giulia Valentinuzzi.*

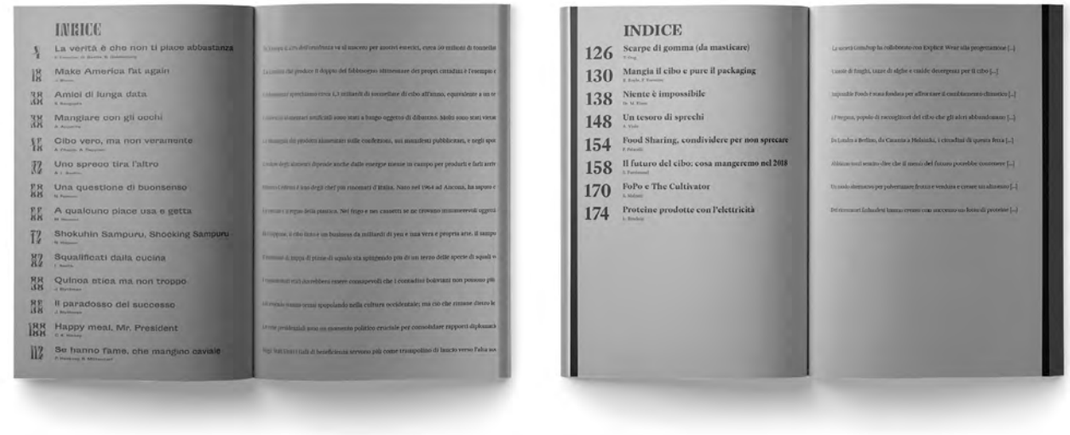

Fig. 10: *Superfluo magazine, first issue, two indexes, academic year 2018/19, designed by Gabriele Della Pepa, Federico Guglielmetti, Francesca Granzotto, Paola Rondi, Elena Stefani, and Giulia Valentinuzzi.*

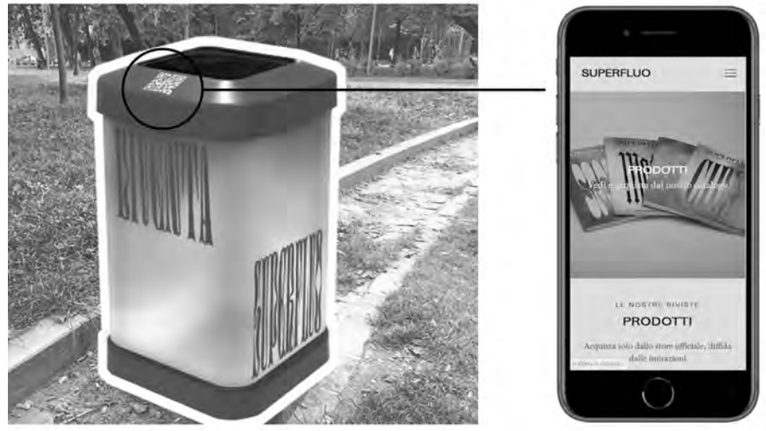

Fig. 11: *Superfluo magazine app and campaign around the city, academic year 2018/19, designed by Gabriele Della Pepa, Federico Guglielmetti, Francesca Granzotto, Paola Rondi, Elena Stefani, and Giulia Valentinuzzi.*

Fig. 12: *Superfluo images from the visual campaign around the city, academic year 2018/19, designed by Gabriele Della Pepa, Federico Guglielmetti, Francesca Granzotto, Paola Rondi, Elena Stefani, and Giulia Valentinuzzi.*

5 Final Considerations

In this paper, we have discussed the publishing field of independent social magazines as a territory of experimentation that is constantly evolving in terms of content, iconographical apparatuses, formats, and the possibilities of interaction with the final readers.

Despite many difficulties, new independent social magazine projects, both in traditional paper dimensions and in new digital formats, have established themselvesinto the broad field of magazine design, opening debate on pressing issues concerning health, human rights, environment, education, and welfare, and inviting the readers to make significant change.

We theoretically defined these artefacts in terms of text and medium as dispositive to comprehend their complexities and articulations and underline their potentialities in the dissemination of social content beyond mainstream publishing.

The application of the translation paradigm to the design of independent social magazines allows us to recognise: the potentialities of language (verbal, visual, etc.) that undergo continuous change since language is an active force; the interpretative aspect of translation which consists of a "situated act" (temporally, geographically, socially, and ideologically); the risk of producing misinformation, (i.e., the risk of betraying the original intentions of the source text), but at the same time facilitating the opportunity to create new significations beyond stereotypes or schemas; new ways to interact with or include the readers; and new possibilities of producing hybrid texts and cultural exchange.

The translation paradigm in all its declensions is also useful in the education of a communication designer, aiding in one's understanding of the processes through which social issues can be shared, transformed, diversified, metabolised, conserved, recycled, or even falsified. Therefore, the process of translation can be understood as "ethical-practical mediation work" (Ricoeur 2001, p.67) that consists of a continuous negotiation process that embraces new meanings and values of hospitality, alterity, pluralism, and diversity.

In conclusion, three coexisting dimensions can be identified in an independent social magazine: *epistemic*, because it concerns research, knowledge and the interpretation of the most pressing social issues; *cultural*, because culture can contribute to capture, orient, determine, intercept, shape, control and ensure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, and speeches of living beings (Agamben 2006, p.14); and *experiential*, because it is strictly connected to the perceptive, semantic, and pragmatic features of the design practice and to the various methods of interaction with the final readers.

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ISBN 978-88-7595-108-5