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Leslie MacNeil is an MFA candidate in the University of Washington's Visual Communication Design Program, with an expected graduation

in June of 2009. Prior to joining the program at the University of Washington, Leslie worked as Marketing Director and Designer at

a civil engineering firm in Seattle, Washington. Leslie received her

BFA in graphic design at Iowa State University. Her interests include information design and cross-disciplinary work that integrates social sciences with the field of design.

Design Ethnography: Strategy for Visual Communications**Abstract:**

Public health communications play a critical role in preventing disease and improving the overall well being of societies across the globe. Effective visual communication design for public health programs requires in-depth knowledge and understanding of the target audience (i.e. specific individuals that may benefit from better health behaviors). Without insight into the culture, preferences, and norms of a targeted population, designers have little chance of developing a compelling argument for changing the existing (and often deeply embedded) attitudes and behaviors of a society.

Ethnography is a powerful research technique that can help designers better understand their audience. Ethnography is a research approach derived from anthropology that is based on observing individuals in their natural settings, allowing researchers to detect subtle actions and nuances that might otherwise go unnoticed. Interpretation and analysis of this type of data can produce insights about the hidden needs and beliefs of an audience; insights that can be used to develop valid strategies for visual communication design.

While ethnography has been developed and used extensively in both industrial and interaction design it has, unfortunately, made less advancement in the field of visual communication. Many graphic designers rely on audience research techniques such as focus groups or interviews where individuals are required to report and assess their own behavior. While still useful, this form of audience research can suffer from the distortions and oversights that occur in any self-analysis.

This presentation examines the application of ethnographic research in the field of visual communication design, and explores how ethnographic insights can strengthen strategies for public health programs. The presentation uses interviews from designers and ethnographers to provide recommendations for collaboration efforts between designers and ethnographers. Case studies are presented, including a volunteer designer for Voluntary Service Overseas who used ethnography to develop messaging for HIV/AIDS communication programs in Koraput, India.

Key words:

Design Collaboration, Design Process, Design for Public Health, Design Research, Design Strategy, Ethnography, Experience Collage, Visual Communication Design

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