Governing Identities: Neoliberalism and Communication Design in 1990s Victoria, Australia

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ABSTRACT In 1990s Victoria, Australia, communication design played a complex role in neoliberal government policy and local identity. In keeping with neoliberal principles, the purpose of local government in Victoria was radically reframed, from a partner in Australian democracy to the service-oriented business arm of state government. A swift and significant change in the visual representation of Victorian local governments coincided with and influenced this process. Communication designers were hired en masse to design logos to replace the seals and coats of arms traditionally used to represent Australian local governments. An extensive survey of Victorian emblems before and after local government reform reveals trends in the form and content of post-reform logos that this paper argues aided the state government’s neoliberal reframing of the role of government. Government logos, and communication design generally,
play an important, and as yet seldom explored role in mediating governmental power.

KEYWORDS: communication design, governmentality, government emblems, logos, neoliberalism

In January 1995, Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett referred to his government’s program of neoliberal reform by saying, “We have spun the culture on a sixpence” (Davie 1995, 1). With this statement, the leader of the state of Victoria, Australia captured the motivation behind this sweeping reform program: to swiftly and dramatically change the relationship between government and the Victorian public (6). The reforms were true to neoliberal priorities of ostensibly reducing government spending, industry regulation, and employment conditions in the pursuit of free markets and free trade (Costar and Economou 1999, x; Harvey 2007, 2). To achieve these ends, Victoria’s historically strong workers’ rights were significantly weakened; state government health, education, and social services budgets were drastically cut; and the Victorian local government system was restructured (Economou 2006, 364; Kiss 1999, 110; Mowbray 2000, 217; Wiseman 2012, 132). Within the first three years of the Kennett government over 300 schools were closed, and the operating budgets of public hospitals were reduced by up to 14 percent. Approximately 20 percent of public employees’ positions were cut, including 8,000 teachers, 37,000 other public employees, and 35,000 employees of state-owned businesses (Evans, Han and Madison 2006, 14; O’Neill 1999, 82; White 1999, 136–7). The restructuring was aimed at reframing local governments as business ventures, and their citizens as customers. Amalgamations of local governments, new management structures, and new state legislation limited and heavily regulated local government’s areas of activity (Alford and O’Neill 1994, 121; Gramberg and Teicher 2000, 489).

Overall, these neoliberal local government reforms were similar to those made by other state governments in Australia at the time, and also similar to neoliberal government reforms made in many other countries, including Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Marshall, Witherby, and Dollery 1999, 34; Mowbray 2000, 221). What was unprecedented in Victoria’s case was the intricate and sophisticated communication design that accompanied the legislative reforms. Due to his years of running an advertising agency, KNF Advertising, prior to being elected, Premier Kennett had a professional understanding of the importance of perception management, and the role communication design could play in affecting it. Additionally, the reforms occurred during a period in which “designers were becoming professional, or trying to become professional, [and] the Australian Graphic Design Association … was really coming to the fore” (Cozzolino 2008). Established by prominent designers from Victoria in 1988, the Australian Graphic Design Association (1995) (AGDA) had a charter to “improve the business of graphic design in Australia.”
Considerable effort and expertise went into altering public perception of the state government and its reform agenda, paid for with state funds, and using a significant amount of the alleged savings the Kennett government was making by cutting essential government services (Editor 2001, 1; Worthington and Dollery 2002, 501). Early perception management efforts through communication design focused on giving the appearance of an economic crisis in Victoria, with an assurance that the Kennett government would solve that crisis (Lavelle 2000, 129). Within months of being elected, the Liberal government ran advertisements on television and in newspapers, attacking the previous government’s economic credentials and suggesting it was responsible for the alleged crisis (Carney 1993, 2; Shamsullah 1999, 4). Printed promotional items styled as annual reports, and detailing the Kennett government’s achievements, were sent to every residential address in the state (Magazanik 1998, 5). Billboards featuring Premier Jeff Kennett’s head appeared outside the international airport in Melbourne intermittently throughout his term in office (Dennis 1999, 3; Money 2010, 5; Skulley 1994, 5). These communication strategies were highly unusual in Australian politics, where self-promotion on such a grand scale is rare for politicians both historically and today.

The state commissioned a new logo, a blue inverted triangle containing the Southern Cross, the nationally revered star formation, and topped with the Saint Edward’s Crown (Puttock 1988, 74). This was essentially a re-designed version of the Victorian state badge, with the re-design adding the more commercially associated styling of a logo (Figure 1). The new state logo was accompanied by the tagline, “Victoria on the Move” and a AUS$2 million corporate identity campaign, which saw the logo and tagline placed conspicuously on government documents, letterhead, and property, as well as on unusual promotional items such as socks and boxer shorts (Costa 1999, 8; Green 1994, 1; Magazanik 1998, 5). State-issued license plates were changed to the corporate identity’s color palette and, unprecedentedly, incorporated the new state logo and tagline (Figure 2). While these extensive perception management efforts were commented on in the press and Parliament, the new license plates sparked public outrage and the most negative commentary of any of the new communication strategies. Changes to the license plates were viewed as more acceptably partisan than other, less ubiquitous areas of the Kennett government’s perception management efforts (see Dunlevy and Mangan 1993, 2; Editor 1993, 18; Green 1994, 1).

The Victorian state government’s use of communication design for public perception management was not limited to state neoliberal reforms. It affected local government reform, too. The most visible effort was the adoption of logos and accompanying corporate identities by all of the new, post-reform local government bodies, known as councils. Between 1994 and 1996, 200 Victorian councils were restructured to form seventy-seven new councils, and all of these entities commissioned new emblems in the form of logos. Controversially, many of these new logos were commissioned through a process in
which designers were asked to present their creative ideas for free. Although requests for designers to present unpaid pitches were not uncommon in Victoria at the time, the practice was frowned upon. The requests for free pitches from councils proved to be problematic early in the amalgamation process, so much so that by the end of 1994, the Victorian Chapter of AGDA issued a statement condemning the practice and suggesting councils take a more ethical and professional approach for commissioning logos (Bevers 1994, 3). More troubling than the process of commissioning the logos was the content of the logos themselves. The majority of these new logos did not contain references to Australian culture or history that were common in Victorian local government emblems used prior to the neoliberal reforms. Most of the post-reform emblems contained abstract shapes referencing letterforms, or depicting stylized nature elements, such as water, hills, and the sun (Hepworth 2012, 365). These new local government emblems followed the period trend of highly abstracted symbolism evident in local corporate logo design, such as the redesigns of the

Figure 1

The Victorian state logo 1993–1999 (left, Figure 1a) closely resembles the Victorian state badge (right, Figure 1b).

Figure 2

Victorian license plate featuring “on the move” tagline and Victorian state logo, courtesy of Dennis Schatz.
Commonwealth Bank and Melbourne Water logos within the preceding decade. Such generic symbols could be used to represent any locality in any country, and in some cases, perhaps even any corporation.

The swift and extensive change in the visual representation of local government in Victoria was unique in the history of visual representation of Australian governments. Its speed, symbolic shift, and integration into a broader perception management program were all unprecedented. This was a classic commercial crisis management strategy applied to local governance. The widespread adoption of logos and corporate identities by local governments was a crucial component in the Kennett government’s efforts to gain widespread public acceptance of local government reform and, in turn, change popular understanding of the role of government. In contrast to the controversy sparked by changing the design of Victorian license plates, comment on the new local government logos is notable only for its absence. An extensive search of major and local community newspapers, parliamentary records, trade publications, and AGDA archives reveal barely any mention of the new local government logos. This could be interpreted as an indication of the success of the visual change. As design historian Michael Large (1989, 34) writes, “the role of corporate symbolism in times of change is to establish the perceptual background for decisions and behavior patterns, rather than being a direct causal agent.” The rapid, mass adoption of logos by Victorian councils amounted to a change in the visual “background” to the public debate on local government reform, both literally and figuratively. The new local government logos appeared on buildings, government communications (including websites, business cards, letters, media releases, bills, and awards), public signage, uniforms, and other government property. Both the media coverage and people’s everyday experiences with their local governments repeated exposure to the new logos, affecting popular perception of local government. This visual shift was one of many elements that contributed to changing public attitudes about local government reform, and ultimately, to public acceptance of the new local government structure and the altered relationship between the citizenry and the government it engendered.

The use of such sensorially based persuasion to influence attitudes and behaviors has been well documented in organizational studies (Engels-Schwarzpaul 2001, 3; Gagliardi 1992, 67, 2009, 44; van Riel and Balmer 1997, 343). Neoliberal governments, in particular, have gained attention for using communication design as a persuasive tool to commercialize and monetize as much of public life as possible (Rose 1996, 53; 2008, 164). In a typically masterful and remote piece of perception management, Victorian councils were not legally required to rebrand themselves by the Victorian state government. Instead, their field of responsibilities was so substantially reduced, and so heavily steered toward commercial contract management that presenting themselves in the visual language of commerce – logos and corporate identities – appeared to be the only viable option. In turn, the adoption of logos by Victorian councils assisted the state government in its
Communication Design Artifacts as Technologies of Government

The political functioning of communication design artifacts is highly contextual; form and content strategies used in 1990s Victoria, Australia have entirely different meanings and political consequences when used in different geographical, cultural, and temporal contexts. For example, simplification and abstraction have been key communication design strategies for designing logos and other symbols for almost a century. Since their rise in popularity, these strategies have been used in the service of a broad range of political activities and ideologies in different times and places (Bakker 2015, 115–16). During the interwar years in Austria, philosopher Otto Neurath developed ISOTYPE, a system of implementing simple icons, or pictograms, to represent data graphically. A highly idealistic project, he considered pictograms to be a key visual strategy in the successful establishment of a socialist utopia (Hartmann 2008, 279). In 1944 in the United States, pictograms were used for an almost opposite political ideal, by a student of Neurath’s, Rudolf Modley, when he designed a pictographic guide to help US soldiers understand the Second World War before and during deployment (see Modley 1944).

In a more recent example, design historian Javier Gimeno Martínez (2006, 55) describes how in newly democratic, 1980s Spain, abstracted local government logos were widely seen as a sign of democratic renewal. In stark contrast to this democratically inspired use of abstraction, design historian D.J. Huppatz describes the transition from descriptive symbols to intentionally neutral logos and corporate identities in 1980s Hong Kong banking. He argues that in this context, abstraction was used to obfuscate the banks’ historical associations with colonialism and communism, and align them with corporatization (Huppatz 2005, 368). In the local government emblems in 1990s Victoria, abstraction is used in the service of a neoliberal reform agenda that arguably changed the civic climate for the worse. The contrast between the various uses of simplicity and abstraction described above and the example of the post-reform emblems demonstrates that specific communication design strategies, and visually similar logos and other symbols, can be associated with very different power dynamics and social climates.

More generally, the relationship between communication design artifacts and neoliberalism has been documented across various disciplines (Harvey 2007, 39; Larner 2000, 12; Rose 2008, 36–7). Several scholars have studied the common phenomena of governments using communication design artifacts and strategies to gain public approval of neoliberal public policies and institutions. Anthropologist Juris Milestone (2007, 191) has described the overwhelming absence of meaning, or “nothingness,” communicated by certain communication design
artifacts within neoliberal governance systems as an intentional governance strategy to shape public attitudes in favor of neoliberal ideals. Historian Gavin Benke (2014, 72) details the uniquely neoliberal properties of the visual communication of international finance corporations. He describes how corporations attempt to promote acceptance of neoliberal values through abstract, non-representative corporate visual communication. Cultural historian Maud Lavin (2001, 93) identifies a contrasting approach to the use of communication design artifacts to foster public acceptance of neoliberal public policy. In the United States of the late 1980s, corporations specializing in consumer products adopted highly nostalgic and historicist symbolism in their advertising and corporate identities in an effort to soothe unfavorable public response to the Bush government’s continuation of the aggressive neoliberal public policies initiated by the former Reagan administration.

Although the political functioning of communication design artifacts has been observed by prominent historians, social theorists, and sociologists, the means through which communication design artifacts hold power have not yet been studied closely. Despite the descriptions in the academic literature of how communication design artifacts contribute to the neoliberal persuasion of publics, the mechanics of this process have not been investigated either. Drawing on the work of philosopher Michel Foucault, social theorist Nikolas Rose, and sociologists Judy Motion and Shirley Leitch, I argue that communication design artifacts have a limited and culturally and temporally bound capacity to hold power associations, including political ideologies such as neoliberalism. From this perspective, communication design artifacts are conceived of as mediating a specific kind of power Foucault called “government,” not to be confused with the political institutions of the same name. Foucault (1982, 790) writes that government “designated[s] the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed …. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.” Government differs from other kinds of power, like discipline and sovereignty, in that it is an inherently dispersed and subtle form of power, one that is associated with satisfactory arrangements of people in relation to their surroundings, including objects, communications, and physical spaces (Foucault 1978, 211). Exercise of governmental power relies on tactics that manipulate knowledge on an individual level, effectively shaping each person’s attitudes, skills, and habits.

It is worth comparing this concept of the tactics of government with design researcher Jorge Frascara et al.’s (1997) definition of communication design practice as “affecting the knowledge, the attitudes and the behavior of people.” According to Frascara, the communication design profession’s purpose is an inherently governmental one, due to its purpose of affecting individuals’ knowledge and behaviors. Communication design artifacts and strategies can therefore be seen a specific subset of tactics, or technologies of government, as Foucault (1977, 26) sometimes called them. For example, Motion and Leitch (2002, 50) have framed corporate identity as a technology of government.
They counter common understandings of corporate identity programs by emphasizing the governmental and highly contextual nature of communication through corporate identities. As technologies of government, corporate identities create meaning by shaping corporate interactions with surrounding societal discourses. “Discourse,” as they use it, refers to sociocultural influences and practices that shape our common understanding of reality through constructing and representing meaning. Foucault’s own definition of discourse refers more specifically to knowledge and communication. He defines discourse as “the difference between what one could say correctly at one period ... and what is actually said” (Foucault 1968, 63).

Motion and Leitch’s (2002) reasoning that corporate identity is a technology of government can also be applied to communication design artifacts more broadly. Like corporate identities, all communication design artifacts are both governmental and highly contextual. When successful, they depend on unconscious influence on emotional states to change attitudes and beliefs, and the effectiveness of this influence depends on their ability to resonate with broader societal discourses. Each of us handles or sees hundreds, if not thousands, of communication design artifacts daily. Mostly, we interact with them thoughtlessly or as a matter of routine, and yet each artifact has some small governmental effect. For communication design artifacts to be persuasive, their design must resonate with the other discourses with which we are familiar.

For this persuasive functioning and connection to societal discourses to be possible, communication design artifacts must be able to retain governmental power, at least temporarily. The means through which they retain power is conceptualized here as “embodied discourses,” or discourses temporarily contained within communication design artifacts (Hepworth forthcoming). These embodied discourses originate in, and become embodied through, professional communication design discourses, insofar as they are constituted by communication design knowledge, professional methods, and production factors. Communication design knowledge is comprised of communication design education, professional organizations, and informal professional news and communication networks. Professional methods and production factors include the studio environment, computer hardware and software, printing machinery, paper, ink, and coding languages used to produce communication design artifacts. The process of embodiment allows communication design artifacts to participate in discursive exchanges first with their creators (communication designers) and production technologies, and then with their users, environments, and cultural associations across their life cycles.

As the context in which they are viewed and used changes, so too does the nature of the discourses temporarily embodied within communication design artifacts. Rose (1996, 42) has described an anatomy of technologies of government that helps deconstruct how communication design artifacts can temporarily hold power. He argues that technologies consist of three kinds of attributes: forces, techniques,
and devices. Forces are the most expansive of these attributes and refer to broad trends; techniques are second tier attributes, operating within the constraints of forces; and devices are the most specific, referring to small individual details. I have adapted Rose’s anatomy of technologies in order to create a schema of the discursive functioning of communication design artifacts.

Within communication design artifacts, two internal technologies of government can be identified: the technology of form, and the technology of content. These technologies work concurrently, but communicate through different means. Forces within communication design artifacts include the languages they contain, the means by which they were produced, and the types of meaning exhibited (associative, metaphoric, descriptive, etc.). Techniques within communication design artifacts include composition, stylistic treatment, typefaces, and phrases. Devices in this context include individual symbols, colors, shapes, and words. By classifying individual components of communication design artifacts in this discursive framework, it is possible to begin to understand how even the smallest attributes of communication design artifacts resonate with broader societal discourses. Each small detail of communication design artifacts contributes to a cumulative embodied discourse, which in turn both influences and is influenced by the broader discursive landscape.

Communication design artifacts participate in discursive societal exchanges throughout their life cycles, although the discourses they temporarily embody necessarily change over time. The social meaning of the various form and content attributes of communication design artifacts – colors, composition, language, images, production effects, shape, and typography – is continually shifting across time, culture, and place. While the individual communication design artifact maintains more or less the same qualities, ravages of time notwithstanding, the governmental effects of those qualities change due to the relentlessly shifting social construction of meaning.

Assembling and Exploring the Emblem Archive

In order to study the significance of communication design generally, and local government logos specifically, to the rise of neoliberalism in Victoria, Australia, I set out to create a comprehensive archive of emblems used by pre- and post-reform Victorian local governments. The term “emblem” is commonly used to refer to a wide range of government symbolism. However, it is used in this study to refer specifically to symbols Victorian local governments used as their main form of official visual representation. For example, it refers to the main symbol used on buildings, other government property, publications, and official documents. Some local governments were found to use multiple symbols at the same time, and the less commonly used ones were not included in the archive. Emblems were collected from a wide range of sources, including: local newspaper archives; local government documents and buildings; local graphic designers’ archives; and state
government documents. The resulting emblem archive contains emblems from 124 pre-reform councils and seventy-four post-reform councils, amounting to a total of 198 unique local governments emblems from Victoria, Australia.

I treated the emblems as primary historical sources. Different from most design artifacts stored in archives, the emblems are accompanied by very few details regarding provenance. In late twentieth-century Victoria, local government emblems were lucrative, but not illustrious design commissions. Design studios, individual designers, local newspapers, the trade press, and the councils themselves rarely publicized design work for councils. Interviews with certain graphic designers who were involved in the council identity work provided some information about authorship, though other designers involved in the process completely refused to discuss their participation. After an exhaustive search of local newspapers, trade press, American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) archives, and in-depth interviews with designers, I was able to retrieve authorship details for only twenty-one, or just over 10 percent, of the 198 emblems in the archive. Though I learned little about their provenance, they were nevertheless commissioned, used, and had some governmental influence for the populations who saw them regularly. Each emblem thus contains rich visual and textual information about the governmental conditions that existed at the time of their use.

Of the emblems in the archive, thirty-two are coats of arms, seventy-two are seals, and ninety-four are logos (see Figure 3). Each of these emblem types has a different history and cultural as well as ideological associations that affect how the governments who use them are perceived. Coats of arms are complex symbols created according to the strictures of a symbolic system called heraldry, or its informal equivalent, known as paraheraldry (Neubecker and Brooke-Little 1977, 263). This system emphasizes descriptive depiction of symbols in complex, regimented compositions that adhere to strict use of color conventions (Low 1971, xxvi). Used from the twelfth century onwards, coats of arms were originally issued by European monarchs and there is a long tradition of civic or local government heraldry. Consequently, coats of arms have long served as visual reminders of governmental authority and legitimacy in Europe, and in countries that were once European colonies (Hicks 2010, 89; Puttock 1988, 98). Strictly speaking, coats of arms can only be issued by royal warrant. When a monarch grants a coat of arms, it signals governmental approval, and has done so for 800 years. But there is no Australian law regulating the use of coats of arms, and so both official and unofficial coats of arms have been used regularly by different levels of government (Low 1971, xv). Even when unofficial coats of arms are used, the strong associations with governmental authority remain.

Seals are round emblems reminiscent of the imprint of the stamps used to determine authenticity and authority in medieval Europe. Modeled after the “great seals” granted by British monarchs to their colonies, seals were the emblem type most frequently used by local governments in Victoria prior to neoliberal governmental reform. While
Victorian local government seals mimic the round shape of medieval seals, seals of various shapes have a long history of both commercial and governmental use, dating back to ancient times (Will 1979, 334). Irrespective of whether it has been used to represent commercial or governmental authority, “the seal effectively symbolises the sum total of forces which stand behind it” (Rudofsky 1952, 40). Victorian local government seals vary greatly in their level of symbolic complexity, with the most complex incorporating multiple coats of arms, and the simplest containing relatively few words and images. They frequently incorporate symbolism from state, federal, and British coats of arms, emphasizing allegiance with higher levels of government and invoking their greater power and legitimacy at a local level.

Logos are by far the simplest symbols of the three types of emblems used by Victorian local governments, and the only emblem form originally created to promote commercial activity (Poulin 2012, 68). Since their exclusively commercial origins in the early twentieth century, logos have come to be used for a wide variety of both commercial and non-commercial purposes, and yet logos still retain the associations of their commercial origins and dominant usage. They are also the only emblem type that depends on eliciting an emotional response from viewers for their effectiveness (Dilanchian 2015, 102). In addition, they have far greater reach than other emblem types in the archive, due to being accompanied by, or integrated within, corporate identities.

Corporate identity is an integrated corporate communications, management, and marketing strategy for shaping employee and customer attitudes about an organization, as well as encouraging them to
act in ways the organization perceives as favorable. A key component of corporate identity is the “corporate identity system,” an elaborate set of rules about how to visually present an organization in all communications, including how and where to use its logo (van Riel and Balmer 1997, 340). Traditionally presented in large binders known as “corporate identity manuals,” these systems contain exhaustive descriptions of how the logo should be used on various property and in different contexts, and also about how communication near the logo should be visually presented (Martínez 2006, 53). These rules include details such as which color backgrounds the logo can and cannot appear against; which typefaces can be used in the same communications that the logo appears; and the subjects and styles of photography that can be used in publications. The reach of corporate identities depends on how well their corporate identity systems are implemented by the organizations’ employees. In the post-reform local governments in Victoria, the execution of corporate identity systems varied greatly; some councils demonstrated exemplary implementation, while others experienced limited corporate identity implementation. For example, Melbourne City Council, the local government that encompasses the downtown and central business district areas of Victoria’s capital city, had the most elaborate corporate identity implementation, while some smaller, suburban councils, such as Port Phillip City Council, had far smaller scale corporate identity implementations (Taffe 2008). While the councils’ corporate identities are outside the remit of this study, the fact of their varying effectiveness (dependent on breadth and consistency of implementation) in amplifying the persuasiveness of logos significantly differentiates emblems from seals and coats of arms.

After the 198 emblems were collected, 787 individual attributes were identified in the archive through a visual reading process akin to the close reading of textual historical sources. This process depended on my understanding of communication design techniques and trends (local, national, and global), as well as knowledge of corporate, mythological, and local symbolism (Hepworth 2013, 1). The visual reading process was a form of content analysis, adjusted to account for the unique visual properties of designed emblems that established content analysis methods do not readily accommodate (Rose 2016, 85). Each of the 787 documented attributes were organized in a faceted classification system. Though such a classification model is rarely used in design history, it is common in information architecture, library services, and website search optimization (Frické 2010, 44). Faceted classification is a uniquely flexible classification system that adjusts according to the nature of the data it contains (Tunkelang 2009, 7). I used it instead of taxonomic or tree structure classification systems more common in the communication design literature, in order to allow for multiple classification hierarchies.

Emblem attributes were collected in three main groupings: emblem type, emblem content, and emblem form. The term “emblem type” referred to the kind of graphic convention the emblem most readily resembles: coats of arms, seal, or logo. “Content” referred to
the symbolic meaning of words and images contained within each emblem, and “form” referred to the typography, compositional qualities, color combinations, and rendering style used on individual content attributes within each emblem. Collecting and studying the emblem archive in this way made it possible to identify discourses embodied within them, and communicated throughout their use, from approximately 1842 to 2000. While the emblem archive covers a broad swathe of governmental representation, this paper focuses on the period of representational rupture demonstrated by the pre- and post-reform emblems. Examining the contrasts between the visual representation in the pre- and post-reform emblems, and in-depth exploration of the discourses embodied within the post-reform emblems, highlighted communication design’s role in local government visual representation during and immediately after neoliberal reform. What follows is an investigation of how logos contributed to the neoliberal rupture in Victorian local government’s visual representation, and the role this rupture played in changing the relationship between government and the public in Victoria. While analysis of all emblems in the archive contributed to this investigation, only a small portion of the emblems are cited in the following section, because they exemplify the major trends discussed.

Identity in Transition: Abstraction in the Service of Neoliberalism

The logos used to represent post-reform Victorian local governments furthered the Kennett government’s neoliberal agenda through an embodied discourse of neutral ambiguity. This embodied discourse was communicated in related, but slightly different ways through the emblems’ type, content, and form. Most striking was the mass adoption of logos as the dominant emblem form. In the 1990s, when the Victorian local government reforms took place, Australian governments at federal, state, and local levels rarely used logos. The emblem archive contained twenty logos used by pre-reform councils, and thirty-two coats of arms, with the remaining seventy-two emblems used prior to local government reform taking the form of seals. This mix of emblem types in use by Victorian local governments prior to local government reform created a complex mix of symbolism that, as a whole, emphasized the authority, legitimacy, and permanence of local government. The shift from this mix of emblem forms to all councils being visually represented by logos within four years of local government reform was seldom commented upon at the time, but nevertheless had a significant and lasting effect on the political landscape.

The widespread adoption of logos by Victorian local governments had an immediate, practical effect as well as a larger ideological purpose. Short term, adopting logos helped post-reform councils overcome popular disapproval of local government reform. Local government exists in each Australian state by virtue of an Act of state parliament, since local government is a partner in the Australian Federation and is not mentioned in the Australian Constitution (see Table 1). Therefore,
local governments in Australia are effectively smaller administrative units of state government, responsible for the distribution of services in accordance with state government policy, and wholly dependent on the state governments for their terms of operation (Galligan 2003, 235–6; Lowell 2005, 2; Soul and Dollery 2000, 44). Despite the consequent logistical ease of local government reform in Australia, several attempts by previous Victorian governments had failed, due to popular outcry. Local government autonomy, while not a legislative fact, is widely held to be sacrosanct in Australia (Dollery and Grant 2011, 4). It took the combined public persuasion and legislative approach of the Kennett government for local government reform to be publicly accepted in Victoria. The Kennett government’s sophisticated use of public persuasion and legislative tactics was greatly influenced by Kennett’s unique expertise in the arts of verbal and visual rhetoric. Early in his career, Kennett trained as an in-house graphic artist at Myer, a high-end Australian department store. Before completing this training, he enlisted in the army, rising through the ranks by using imaginative techniques of motivation and intimidation on his fellow cadets. He later founded and ran KNF Advertising, which operated for two decades before he was elected as Premier (Steketee 1992, 2). By the time Kennett became Premier he was expert at public perception management both in person and from afar. In person, he was forceful, charismatic, and bullying. From afar he relied on sophisticated rhetorical governance strategies calculated for their effect on public perception.

The long-term, ideological purpose of using logos as the primary emblem form for all post-reform councils was to reinforce the state government’s message of government as business. Post-reform, Victorian local government logos helped shift the perception of government generally, and local government specifically, from inviolable civic institution to service-oriented business, and to reframe citizens as customers. When used en masse by governments, the form of the logo severs ties to traditional symbols of government legitimacy, instead invoking a commercial legitimacy through the visual language of corporations (Large 1991, 31). By tying commercial associations to the previously sacrosanct, strictly non-commercial realm of government visual representation, the logos changed the sphere of public life with which local government was associated (Kopytoff 1986, 73).

Logos are commonly adopted by governments in times of upheaval and reform, partly to reduce controversy through their banality. Where there is so little content, there is very little to criticize or to react against (Large 1989, 4; 1991, 32). When logos are first used by governments in any particular locality, their content becomes secondary. This is because the commercial associations of the logo as an emblem type have such a persuasive and jarring effect, relative to 140 years of non-commercial government visual representation. Where the coat of arms meticulously identifies multiple aspects of its bearer’s nature and provenance, the logo intentionally presents a metaphorical white wall that reveals little about its owner.
Despite their somewhat obfuscating form, careful study and interpretation of logos can reveal the mechanisms through which they communicate their message of government as business. The embodied discourse of neutral ambiguity is present in the post-reform logo content, not by what is depicted, but rather by what is omitted. The overarching message collectively conveyed by the content of the pre-reform symbols was that Victorian local government was permanent, indispensable, and inseparable from Australia’s British colonial ties and Australian nationalism. In general, these pre-reform emblems contain a lot of representative symbols and descriptive text. In contrast, the post-reform logos contain far fewer references to history, values, or place in either symbols or words. Instead, they present an ambiguous façade of corporate neutrality through abstracted, ahistorical symbols, and comparatively few words.

Examples of the post-reform embodied discourse of neutral ambiguity can be found in the shifting depictions of local flora and fauna in the emblem content. While both pre- and post-reform emblems contain visual representations of local plants and animals, the majority of the pre-reform emblems contain multiple references within each emblem, and each depiction is typically rendered with a high level of detail, sometimes akin to a botanical illustration (see Figure 4). Collectively, these depictions associate local government with national identity through repeated use of Australian national symbols such as the wattle flower and the kangaroo. Renderings of local plants and animals link the councils with a sense of place. The highly detailed depictions of these symbols give the sense that the pre-reform councils are firmly and proudly rooted in place. In contrast, most post-reform local government logos use vague symbolic representations of generic landscapes. For example, fifty-six of the post-reform logos contain references to generic, unidentifiable landscape scenes, as compared with only four of the pre-reform local government emblems. These abstracted landscape scenes commonly feature water, hills, or the sun as the primary visual symbol. Highly abstracted hills are the main visual depiction in both the Colac Otway Shire Council logo (designer unknown) and the Baw Baw Shire Council logo designed by Simone Taffe (Figure 5). Sometimes the abstracted flora and fauna depictions are combined with council initials; hills and birds are the most commonly depicted “symbols as initials.” The limited authorship information available suggests some of this “symbols as initials” repetition was due to preferences of particular
designers, as in the case of the Monash City Council logo and the Banyule City Council logo, both designed by Tony Coombes (Figure 6). The collective effect of these abstracted references to place in the post-reform logos, particularly as a sudden replacement of emblems containing rich visual references to local wildlife and landscapes, is a sense that these logos are placeless, distanced from local sources of identity and pride.

The embodied discourse of neutral ambiguity is also furthered by textual content, including frequent misnaming in post-reform council logos. All pre-reform emblems contain the correct names of the council they represent, while more than half of the post-reform logos misname the council that they represent. In some logos, only part of the council name is included in the logo and all reference to government is omitted. In these instances, the logo doesn’t have any symbolic, textual, or formal references that suggest it is associated with a government. For example, Cardinia Shire Council’s logo, shown in Figure 3, is appropriate for representing any number of commercial endeavors. Other logos continue the embodied discourse of ambiguity by containing names that are slightly different than the legal name of the council. For example, the legal names of the two councils represented by the emblems in Figure 7 are Casey City Council and Kingston City Council respectively, neither of which is depicted correctly in their emblems. During local government reform, all new councils were given consistent names that reflected their status as regional or metropolitan government areas (see Table 2). The logos in Figure 7 contain a common type of misnaming, which references the old, pre-reform naming conventions of councils. The frequent, intentionally incorrect naming in post-reform emblems is likely a symbolic rejection of the constant, state-driven coercion local government was experiencing with the implementation of neoliberal reforms.

Some of the pre- and post-reform emblems contain extra wording beyond the name of the council they represent. The pre-reform emblems contain a variety of extra descriptive text, including mottoes, founding years, and textual references to local citizens. Some of the mottoes and textual references include references to community unity, such as the City of Brunswick’s motto, “Unity is Strength.” Community unity is also conveyed in the pre-reform emblems by the words “mayor, councillors and citizens/ratepayers” of the council, as in the City of Moorabbin seal in Figure 3. By invoking enfranchisement and representation, this wording places value on collective action and democratic principles within local government, giving an impression of citizens and elected officials working together as one community. In total, there are twenty-nine references to community unity in the pre-reform local government emblems, and only one reference to community unity in the post-reform logos. While some of the post-reform logos also contain extra text apart from their names, it is much rarer than in pre-reform logos. When extra text is used in the post-reform logos it is exclusively in the form of logo taglines made up of neutral, nondescript
phrases like “naturally progressive” in the Colac Otway Shire Council logo in Figure 5.

The form of the words and images within the emblems also presented drastically different messages before and after local government reform. The vast majority of the pre-reform emblems feature highly structured, consistently balanced, even regimented compositions consistent with classic values of order, balance, and rationality. In contrast, the post-reform logos predominantly use postmodern typography, composition, and symbol-rendering, all of which reinforce the embodied discourse of neutral ambiguity within the post-reform emblem content. Postmodern style is part of a deconstructivist tradition in graphic design, in which the contradictions between discrete objects create meaning (Lupton and Miller 1996, 8). Postmodern deconstruction typically features ad hoc compositions of contrasting objects, typefaces, and colors that...
present a striking difference from what has gone before and foster an ahistorical sense of presentness within artifacts (Economou 2003, 17). Juxtaposition and deconstruction, common in the post-reform emblems, are typical of postmodern visual styling (Jameson 1988, 244; Poynor 2003, 71). In the post-reform logos, juxtaposition involves strong contrast within typography and images. Typographical contrast is the strongest juxtaposition within the post-reform local government logos, with post-reform logos frequently containing mixes of lower case and upper case lettering, or title case and upper case words, as well as combining type weights and styles: serif and san serif, narrow and regular, italic and bold. In several emblems this combination of typeface contrasts is increased by the use of more than one color in the text. Strong postmodern typographic contrast was in use in other graphic design in Victoria during the same period, as can be seen in the design of multiple AGDA documents from the period (Australian Graphic Design Association 1996a, 1996b). However, such use of postmodern typography was not without local criticism (McDowell 1993, 15).

Juxtaposition in image content within the post-reform emblems includes contrast between shapes and depictive quality. Highly geometrical shapes are frequently contrasted with organic, non-geometric shapes. At the same time, highly abstract shapes are contrasted
occasionally with more descriptively rendered elements, most frequently identifiable as birds and leaves. These compositional qualities constitute a transition away from rational, ordered representation of government and toward fragmentation and abstraction. The post-reform logos generate meaning primarily from their composition and from the juxtaposition of symbols and typefaces. Symbols are of lesser importance than the style in which they are portrayed. They exude a presentness and a historicism that reinforces the embodied discourse of ambiguous neutrality. Postmodern style, including juxtaposition in typography and images, is evident in the emblems in Figure 7. The Casey City Council logo designed by Amanda Roach, and the Kingston City Council logo designed by Meg Robertson and John Magart, both use seemingly unrelated shapes in three of the same colors (orange, blue, and green), and arranged in such a way that the negative space between them creates meaning in the form of the first initial of the council’s name. Certain color combinations, typeface combinations, and visual devices (such as use of negative space to form initials) are frequently repeated throughout the post-reform logos. This presents a sense of sameness.

In comparing the pre-reform and post-reform emblems, there is a shift from literal to abstract depiction, from reason to emotion, and from conscious to subconscious interpretation. Elaborate ornamentation is replaced with sharp, simple vector lines, and symmetrical composition is replaced by postmodern juxtaposition. The frequency of consciously identifiable symbols and phrases in these emblems is reduced such that symbols depicting local industries, flora, and fauna are far less
common in the post-reform emblems. For example, the local industries of farming, fishing, logging, mining, and viticulture are collectively depicted 159 times in the pre-reform emblems, and only twelve times in the post-reform logos. Similarly, the pre-reform emblems contain twenty-one depictions of local fauna, most of which are identifiable as specific species, whereas the post-reform emblems contain only ten references to fauna, nine of which are highly abstracted depictions of birds. In the post-reform logos, the communicative burden is placed on emblem form attributes – color, shape, composition, and typography. These are elements that most people interpret subconsciously. Such simplifications and abstractions have a long history in communication design, and are most strongly identified with modernist ideology and visual style. In the context of local government logos in 1990s Victoria however, certain modernist visual strategies are incorporated into otherwise postmodern compositions, exemplifying a phenomenon identified by political theorist Frederick Jameson. Modernist visual qualities are repeated as a pastiche – the emblems benefit from their compositional advantages – while they are at the same time uprooted from their past contexts. This pastiche furthers the embodied discourse of neutrality, or as Jameson (1991, 17) writes, it presents “a blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.”

**Conclusion**

Local government logos played a complex role in the Kennett government’s multifaceted strategy to gain widespread public approval for neoliberal reforms in 1990s Victoria. The public’s understanding of their relationship to, and the role of government in Victoria was altered through a sophisticated combination of neoliberal public policy, public relations, and communication design. The most notable example of the role of communication design was the change in local government emblems after local government reform. The post-reform local government logos functioned as a governing, perceptual background to the sweeping neoliberal changes in 1990s Victoria. By designing these logos, local communication designers participated in manufacturing public acceptance of local government reform and, more broadly, the reframing of local governments as service providers, and citizens as customers. With their embodied discourse of neutral ambiguity, these logos have an air of corporate transience; this is the key to their symbolic success as promoters of the neoliberal ideal of commercializing as much of life as possible. The embodied discourses within pre-reform emblems – Australian nationalism, British Empire, and enduring legitimacy – reinforced surrounding societal discourses by reflecting back to Victorian society the things it valued most: its heritage and its self-identity. Noticeably, the post-reform emblems do not reflect back on Victorian society any of its values, or history. Intentionally faceless, the post-reform emblems present the public with a local variation on the international commercial symbolism of trademarks, and effectually
changes the continuous narrative between government and citizenry from one of mutual affirmation to a non-affirming, transactional arrangement.

The role of new Victorian local government logos in changing public perception of neoliberal reform is just one example of how communication design artifacts are used in the service of political and ideological ends. Such uses of communication design by governments and political parties are commonplace, and they have widespread ramifications for public life. When communication design artifacts are used in the service of those in power, they invariably change the public narrative about commonly held values and cherished public institutions. This process can be used to weaken collective experiences of democratic principles. In the case of post-reform Victorian local government, logos eroded the value of local government itself by contributing to a shift in its value as a service-based business enterprise. But communication design artifacts can also be used to strengthen collective experience of democratic principles. While not inherently good or bad in its functioning and effect, communication design is nevertheless a powerful governance tool. Our interactions with communication design artifacts shape the possible field of public thought and structure the possible field of public action. By investigating the symbolic form and content of Victorian government emblems before and after neoliberal local government reform, this paper has revealed the communication strategies at work within the emblems, and how those strategies changed after neoliberal public policy became the norm in Victoria. In turn, this examination shines a light on the governance role of communication design artifacts in support of neoliberal public policy.

The communication design artifacts used by governments, and their effects on public discourse, deserve closer attention than they have so far received in the academy. As with other governance tools, communication design can be used to the detriment of democratic institutions, and the best guard against such uses is to publicize them. When communication design is understood as a governance tool, its hold over us can be somewhat mitigated. The effectiveness of communication design as a governance tool for persuading publics depends in part upon its capacity to go relatively unnoticed. The vast majority of communication design artifacts fall into the category of ephemera, disposable artifacts with a temporary purpose, and these artifacts are seldom treated as serious subjects for academic study. The common understanding that the bulk of communication design artifacts appear to have little to no lasting value actually aids their effectiveness as tools of governance. By publicly and explicitly examining communication design artifacts and their relationships of power, and by dissecting the processes through which they collectively exert influence, we can improve popular understanding of how communication design governs, and therefore be better prepared to identify uses that work against the common public good.
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References


