OPUS▶

Journal of Society Research

RESEARCH ARTICLE

First Things First Manifestos: Social Responsibility in Graphic Design

Güliz Boyraz[1]

[1] Research Assistant, Hacettepe University, Ankara/Turkey
ORCID: 0000-0002-7129-3176
E-Mail:
gulizboyraz@gmail.com

Corresponding Author:
Güliz Boyraz

Abstract

The concept of social responsibility has become both an individual and a corporate phenomenon. In this context, all individuals and organizations are expected to carry out their activities within the framework of social responsibility. At this point, the social responsibility of the designer is even more important due to its mission of informing and directing society, as the designer raises awareness and convinces the society while presenting the product s/he has designed. However, in the situation that came with industrialization and then capitalism, the designer started to go out of his main duty and lost the awareness that this profession should be carried out ethically. One of the main reasons for this was that the rapid development in the advertising sector through a transformation towards a consumer society brought about focusing on the number of works rather than their quality. The First Things First Manifesto, which is against this kind of works and sees the works made according to the wishes of the consumer society as worthless and a waste of time, has attracted a lot of attention since its first publication and has been discussed by many field researchers and designers. Over time, the First Things First manifesto has been renewed against the changing problems with the development of technology and social changes and its 2020 version was published in order to draw attention to the effects of the climate crisis today. In this article, First Thing First Manifestos which draws attention to the main task of the designer in terms of social responsibility are examined, and the changing responsibility of the designer against current problems of the society is discussed in line with these manifestos.

Key Words: *Social Responsibility, First Things First, Graphic Design, Corporate Social Responsibility.*

Öz

Sosyal sorumluluk kavramı hem bireysel hem de kurumsal bir olgu haline gelmiştir. Bu bağlamda tüm bireylerin ve kuruluşların sosyal sorumluluk çerçevesinde faaliyetlerini sürdürmesi beklenmektedir. Bu noktada tasarımcının sosyal sorumluluğu toplumu bilgilendirme ve yönlendirme misyonu sebebiyle daha da önem taşımaktadır çünkü tasarımcı toplumu bilinçlendirir, ikna eder ve tasarladığı ürünü topluma sunar. Sanayileşme ve ardından kapitalizm ile birlikte gelinen durumda tasarımcı asıl görevinin dışına çıkmaya başlamış ve mesleğinin etik bir şekilde yürütülmesi gerektiği farkındalığını kaybetmiştir. Bunun temel nedenlerinden biri tüketim toplumuna doğru yaşanan dönüşümde reklam sektöründeki hızlı gelişimin çalışmaların kalitesinden ziyade sayısına odaklanmayı beraberinde getirmesi olmuştur. Bu çalışmalara karşı olan ve tüketim toplumunun isteklerine göre yapılan çalışmaları değersiz ve zaman kaybı olarak gören First Things First Manifestosu ilk yayınlandığı zamandan itibaren çok ilgi görmüş ve birçok alan araştırmacıları ve tasarımcılar tarafından tartışılmıştır. Zamanla First Things First manifestosu teknolojinin gelişimi ve toplumsal değişimlerle birlikte değişen sorunlara karşı yenilenmiş ve günümüzde iklim krizinin yol açtığı etkilere dikkat çekmek amacıyla 2020 versiyonunu yayınlamıştır. Bu makalede sosyal sorumluluk açısından tasarımcının asıl görevinin ne olduğuna dikkat çeken First Thing First Manifestoları incelenmiş, bu manifestolar doğrultusunda güncel toplumsal sorunlara karşı tasarımcının değişen sorumlulukları ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sosyal Sorumluluk, First Things First Manifestosu, Grafik Tasarım, Kurumsal Sosyal Sorumluluk.*

Introduction

"Social responsibility" is defined as "the obligations of an institution to protect and develop the environment in which it operates, the obligation that an individual, manager or organization has to fulfill towards the society" (TDK, 2020). Activities that focus on social responsibility are those which make the personal sector, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations work collectively, direct them to behave as a whole for a particular reason whose tremendous consequences are shared by the society (Saran, Coşkun, Zorel, & Aksoy, 2011, p.373). In this context, people and organizations that take social responsibility into account must act ethically and responsively to social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues. It can be said that social responsibility is both an individual and an institutional requirement as the individual's acceptance of social benefit as a priority in his lifestyle and principles reveal the individual aspect of social responsibility.

As the term social responsibility has become much more important and common nowadays, companies aiming to innovate in their social responsibility efforts are increasingly integrating corporate social responsibility issues into their business practices and aligning their company vision and values with the corporate social responsibility agenda. This has revealed the need for more professional design for social responsibility works and made it necessary to work with graphic designers as design should now create dialogue channels between the company, and customer/consumer, adapted to the communication needs of different target audiences, rather than just promoting a brand or helping businesses talk to their target audience. Graphic design should be integrated into the process as it is a visual communication tool that promotes a product or service, conveys a message, and has the power of persuasion. With this persuasive power, graphic design can make a

person, a group or a society discourage, change, or accept ideas. As a result, there have been many people who have argued that the designer's job is not just to advertise or promote a product, but that s/he is responsible for his work, and they have published their thoughts as a manifesto. The "First Things First" Manifesto, written by Ken Garland in England in 1964 and later renewed with the same name, is one of them. The first manifesto was a positive transition in the graphic design industry to the quest to create new meaning, but it also sparked a lot of controversies, leading to a wholesale rejection of the manifesto for being idealistic. The Manifesto was revised under the leadership of Rick Poynor in 1999 and Cole Peter in 2014, and was finally rewritten in 2020 by Marc O'Brien, Namita Dharia and Ben Gaydos to draw attention to the climate crisis and is a call for social responsibility signed by many designer artists and students.

The first manifesto (see Image 1) was printed in 400 copies in January 1964. It was a response to the society devoted to consuming in England in the 1960s and called for a return to the humanistic side of the design (The First Things First Manifesto, 2020). The manifesto was signed by 22 graphic designers and supported by about 400 graphic designers and artists. Among the signatories of the manifesto were famous graphic designers and typographers such as Ian McLaren, Caroline Rawlence, Anthony Froshaug, Edward Wright, Ken Briggs, John Garner, Robert Chapman, as well as students, educators, young designers, and photographers (Benuğur, 2014, p.210). The 1964 manifesto, which supports the idea that the only duty of designers is not to make designs that will provide financial gain, but that they should support the welfare of the society and that they can be the people who lead the society in this direction, requires designers to think over their responsibilities in their work and question their ethical perception, make human-centered designs and stay away from designs that will lose their effect in a short time.

Image 1. First Things First Manifesto (Source: http://www.kengarland.co.uk/KG-published-writing/first-things-first/)

The 1964 Manifesto has expressed the basic problems such as what the role of the graphic designer is, how it should be, the designer's point of view on more important issues that society needs, and the necessity of ethical evaluation of their profession. The purpose of the manifesto was to draw attention to the more useful and more important aspects of communication and to decide what their priorities are, rather than the abolition of commercial advertising altogether. For Poynor (2002), the critical distinction highlighted by the manifesto is the difference between design for communication (giving people essential information) and design for persuasion (making people believe in buying something). In the view of supporters of the manifesto, much designer talent and effort were expended in advertising several junk goods, from mineral water to weight-loss diets, while "more useful and more enduring" things such as street signs, books, periodicals, catalogues, manuals, educational tools were left aside. The manifesto, which draws attention to the issues that graphic designers should direct the society and use their potential more efficiently and more beneficially, continued to be discussed with great interest during and after its period. Manifestos on the subject in the following periods

brought to the agenda that the graphic designer can be more beneficial for the society, that he can do permanent, and mass-raising works beyond the limits set for him, and it has been developed in the direction of raising conscious designers by including the subject of responsibility in the training of the next generation designers.

In 1998, Adbusters magazine republished Garland's original manifesto. In the manifesto, Adbusters represented the points he emphasized in a way that would respond to current problems (Prusynski, 2008, p.10). In early 1999, First Things First 1999 emerged, with Hungarian designer Tibor Kalman proposing a revision (López-Lago, 2014). The First Things First 1999 manifesto, which is an updated version of the manifesto published in 1964, argues that the design energy is not enough to support an aimless consumption and explain the increasingly complex modern world (Poynor, 2002).

The 1999 Manifesto was signed by 33 designers and published simultaneously in Adbusters, Emigre, AIGA Graphic Design Magazine, Eye Magazine, Blueprint, and Items. Later, it was published in many other magazines and books which maximized its impact. This text, once again, made designers rethink what their professional

priorities were and what the future of their profession would be if they continued to follow this path (López-Lago, 2014). In each variation of the Manifesto, the position of the designer as a professional is clarified simply; however, both versions emphasize to think over the designer's position and moral responsibility while using the abilities, knowledge, and experience especially in visual communication (Poon, 2016, p.2). So, the new version of the manifesto can be considered as an update required by the developments in visual communication tools and increasing needs and opportunities in the field.

In the First Things First 1999 manifesto, visual communication designers were reminded that they should prioritize more useful, permanent, and important issues such as social, cultural, and environmental problems instead of the wishes and expectations of the consumer society and use their visual communication tools and expertise for these purposes. In addition, the reordering of priorities for more beneficial, sustainable, and democratic forms of communication in environmental, social, and cultural challenges was advocated, and the necessity of producing persuasive power by transforming it into thought for public benefit was highlighted. With this aspect, the manifesto reminded that designers, as professionals, should think not only as consumers but also as citizens.

In the fiftieth year of the first manifesto published in 1964, the manifesto, which aims to reflect the impact of the internet on communication and design, was updated and republished with the title of "First Things First 2014" by designer Cole Peters and co-written and edited by Chris Armstrong, Aral Balkan, Jon Gold, Laura Kalbag, André Mooij and Anna Sobolewska (First Things First 2014, 2014). The manifesto draws attention to the worldwide negative impact of the development and progress of technology and, accordingly, the industry.

Cole Peters stated that it is a natural duty to deal with ethical issues as designers, stating that most of the work is for large-scale consumption, which means that when designers ignore their moral compass, they have the potential to negatively affect large numbers of people (Ball, 2014). Thinking that designers today have more specific

(and less talked about, but equally important) concerns to address, most of which caused by the prevalence of technology today, and that this was not really addressed in any of the previous manifestos, Peters said that the manifesto was updated with contemporary concerns (Peters, 2014) just like the previous one.

Cole Peters expanded on the content of the manifesto, suggesting that graphic designers should focus on solving real problems in other important areas such as education, medicine, safety, communication, and social responsibility that benefit society, rather than spend too much time on superficial commercial work. Besides, he stated that every designer whose work has the power to influence people collectively has a duty to produce works that respect people and benefit society (Ball, 2014), which puts an important responsibility on the shoulders of the designer.

The inclusion of the influence of the "world wide web" in the manifesto and the expansion of the audience appealing to the manifesto can be considered as two important updates of the manifesto. Arguing that the renewal of the manifesto should be sensitive to the realities of the increasingly complex and interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of design, Peters, therefore stated that it should represent everyone who uses technology and creativity in a professional pursuit, not only designers but also developers, programmers, and other creative technologists (ico-D, 2014).

The designers, creative technologists and interdisciplinary communicators who signed the manifesto point to the negative effects of the development and expansion of technology and industry on a global scale in the last 15 years and draw attention to the fact that the manifesto has gained more importance. They stated that they were also responsible for this situation professionally as they spent their professional potential by exploiting destructive unimportant emotions, reinforcing commercial fraud, and producing narrowly appealing designs for the sale of customer data. They emphasize that the skills should be used in areas such as human rights, civil liberties, and humanitarian aid (Benuğur, 2014, p.210). In his 2014 manifesto, Peters advocated the

production of meaningful and useful work by moving away from profitable business models and putting companies in front of individuals with a new style. The developing technology and considering the issues related to privacy, security, and freedom of expression and their relationship with the design industry brought up the necessity of reevaluating the activist role of designers.

It is possible to say that the public interest and human-oriented works of the designers are indirectly related to the content of the First Things First manifestos. In this context, manifestos have played an effective role in the creation of works that will produce solutions to social problems. The First Things First manifesto, which reminds us that designers can make humane and conscious designs for society instead of only designs for sale, was rewritten and edited after 1964, and the signature of many contemporary designers under each manifesto is a sign of how important it is and that it will not lose its importance for a long time. The re-emergence of the First Things First manifesto in 2020 is the most important proof of this. The First Things First manifesto has been rewritten in 2020, the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, taking into account the emergency that has arisen due to the effects of the climate crisis, which is taking place in front of the whole world in a much more devastating way than in the past. The manifesto was updated by Marc O'Brien, Namita Dharia, and Ben Gaydos with support from Sarah Harrison, Julia Yezbick, Karen Stein Shanley, Rachel Cellinese, and Rich Binell. Cast Iron, a brand studio with an emphasis on eco-design, created the identity and website of the new manifesto with the help of web developer Cody Whitby (The Brand Identity, 2021).
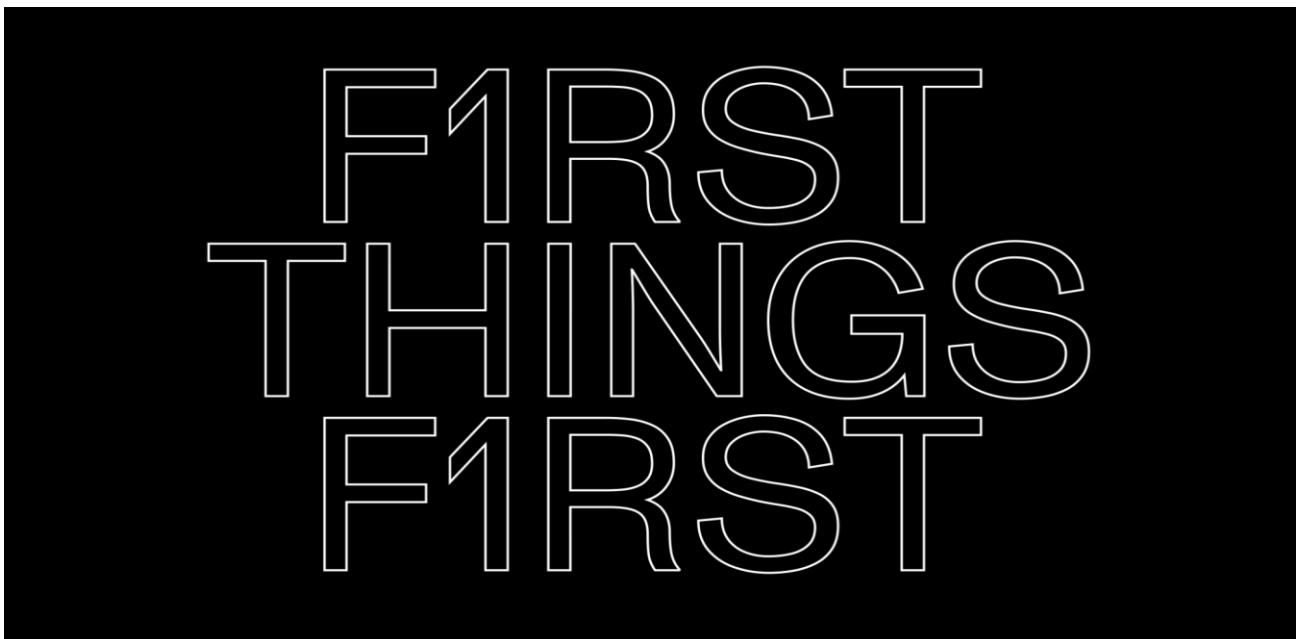

Image 2. First Things First 2020 Manifesto (Source: https://www.firstthingsfirst2020.org/)

Preserving the narrative language and vision of the original manifesto, First Things First 2020 was written with a sense of urgency brought on by the climate crisis, in line with the expectation that this decade is crucial to bring people together around the climate movement based on social and environmental justice. So, similar to the previous updates and revisions, the latest version of the manifesto included contemporary issues and concerns and tried to provide a perspective for the designers in terms of their responsibilities against society.

Conclusion

This article summarized the contents of the First Things First manifestos in order to provide a vision of social responsibility to graphics designers and other professionals in the field of communication design. First Things First manifestos focused on

the broader implications of graphic design dominated by commercial design. The common purpose of these manifestos is that the designers do not only work for profit; they emphasize how important it is for them to use their talents in solving social, cultural, and environmental problems and to increase the sensitivity of the designs for the benefit of society while judging himself morally. While aiming that the products or services are for the needs of all people rather than just the needs of the individual, it is argued that the designers should use their time and services in education, cultural and social areas as a key point and that they should use their talents in this direction for more social gain. To reach its aim, it brought together groups of design professionals to express their concerns about the direction of society and raised the question of whether designers could act together to improve social conditions. The first manifesto resonated with the design community, and the issues it raised are still vital today. While the First Things First manifesto is still important, revisions have been made to support the content and purpose of the manifesto, and new manifestos have been signed under the leadership of many design associations and designers. In this respect, it can be said that this manifesto has a modern and renewable ideology. So, the field of graphic design should become more society-oriented, morally, and ethically responsible and it should start from professional education.

References

Ball, N. (2014, February 28). Design for life. Retrieved August 11, 2021, from Eye Magazine: *https://www.eyemagazine.com/blog/post/design-for-life*

Benuğur, Ş. (2014). Grafik tasarım eğitiminde görme engelliler için sosyal sorumluluk tasarımı. *Eğitim Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi, 4*(2), 205-226.

First Things First 2014. (2014). Retrieved September 14, 2021, from First Things First 2014: *https://firstthingsfirst2014.net/*

ico-D. (2014, Mart 12). First things first manifesto celebrates 50 years. (Retrieved August 13, 2021, from *https://www.ico-d.org/connect/index/post/1933.php*)

López-Lago, S. (2014, September 19). Escuela de organización industrial. El manifiesto first things first. (Retrieved September 16, 2021, from *https://www.eoi.es/blogs/craftdesigners/2014/09/19/el-manifiesto-first-things-first/*)

Peters, C. (2014). First Things First 2014. (Retrieved August 11, 2021, from *https://dpya.org/wiki/images/e/e2/First_Things_First_2014.pdf*)

Peters, C. (2014, March 4). Updating the first things first manifesto for 2014. (A. Montgomery, Interviewer)

Poon, S. (2016). Visual communication and design's role drives branding innovation and social responsibility. *Journal of Visual Art and Design, 8*(1), 1-15.

Poynor, R. (2002). İlk önce öncelikler. Retrieved June 10, 2021, from Grafik Tasarımcılar Meslek Kuruluşu: *http://gmk.org.tr/uploads/news/file-14466674451023275305.pdf*

Prusynski, M. (2008). Tasarımda etik. In, *No Tasarım Sosyal Tasarım Seçkisi: 2* (M. E. Uslu, Çev., s. 4-15). İstanbul, Yordam Kitap.

Saran, M., Coşkun, G., Zorel, F. İ., & Aksoy, Z. (2011). Üniversitelerde sosyal sorumluluk bilincinin geliştirilmesi: Ege Üniversitesi topluma hizmet uygulamaları dersi üzerine bir araştırma. *Journal of Yasar University, 6*(22), 3732-3747.

TDK. (2020, Şubat, 05). *https://sozluk.gov.tr/*. Retrieved June 10, 2021, from Türk Dil Kurumu Sözlükleri: *https://sozluk.gov.tr/*

The Brand Identity. (2021, Haziran 5). Retrieved from The Brand Identity: *https://the-brandidentity.com/feed/join-fight-global-climate-crisis-signing-updated-first-things-first-manifesto/*

The First Things First Manifesto. (2020, Haziran 15). Retrieved from Design Is History: *http://www.designishistory.com/1960/first-things-first/*