

Graphic Design for the Public: Communication, Access, and Civic Experience

In recent years, Service Design has emerged as a strategic approach within the public sector, contributing to the adoption of human-centred and participatory methodologies to address increasing complexity. Through innovation labs, governmental units, and specialised consultancies, it has supported processes such as policy-making, organisational transformation, citizen engagement, and digitalisation.

However, the growing relevance of service design should not obscure a fundamental condition: long before these approaches gained visibility, and still today, most interactions between citizens and public institutions are mediated through graphic and visual communication. From transport systems and wayfinding infrastructures to tax forms, digital interfaces, electoral information, and public health communication, the everyday experience of the public sector is largely constructed through **communication design**.

In this sense, visual design artifacts can be understood as a critical interface between institutions and citizens, where effectiveness depends on the capacity to organise, clarify, and deliver information but also to raise awareness in ways that support real actions—such as navigating systems, accessing services, completing administrative processes, or understanding and responding to public communication flows across visual and audiovisual media. Even when services are conceived as intangible, they are not invisible. Their access, comprehension, usability and aesthetic qualities rely on visual and multimedia structures, informational hierarchies, and communication devices—including time-based and audiovisual formats—that enable citizens to engage with institutional processes and to navigate increasingly interconnected public services.

Public institutions and national and supranational organizations have a responsibility to reduce barriers to participation in civic and social life. This includes ensuring that tools such as forms, platforms, publications, signage systems and multimodal experiences are accessible, understandable, usable and effective by diverse populations. These design operations are crucial in areas such as elections, emergency communication, healthcare, migration, transportation, and economic reporting, contexts in which clarity, reliability, and trust are essential.

Despite its centrality, this form of design is often unglamorous, silent, and largely unnoticed. It is frequently perceived as neutral, default, or merely functional, expected to work, and therefore rarely questioned. Yet it profoundly conditions everyday life and plays a decisive role in shaping the relationship between citizens and public institutions and organizations. Precisely because it often operates anonymously, without recognition or visibility, it requires a high degree of care, responsibility, and quality. Public communication design must meet demanding standards of clarity, accuracy, and usability, not for aesthetic recognition, but for its direct impact on citizens' lives.

At the same time, contemporary public institutions are increasingly confronted with complex, dynamic, and often contested scenarios. As highlighted by Burns et al. (2006), many systems have historically been designed for a complicated rather than a complex world.

Today, however, the proliferation of information, the acceleration of digital infrastructures, and the instability of political and social environments challenge the capacity of traditional communication models to effectively mediate between institutions and citizens. Citizens rarely experience public institutions as isolated organisations; rather, they encounter the State as a network of interconnected organisations, services, and platforms. In this context, the role of communication design extends beyond representation, requiring processes of research, iteration, and multidisciplinary collaboration to ensure that information systems effectively support real-world use and help citizens understand how to move across institutional boundaries in pursuit of their goals.

Accepting the challenge raised by issue 42, *Design under attack*, which called for a renewed ethical, political, and operational reflection on the role of communication design in a context of crisis and instability, this issue proposes to shift the focus toward the public domain in a national and supranational environment. If design can operate as a form of resistance, critical communication, and social agency, then public communication design can be understood as a form of silent yet fundamental resistance: a practice committed to the common good, to clarity, to accessibility, and to the functioning of democratic systems across static, dynamic and interactive experiences.

In a context marked by political polarization, misinformation, and increasing distrust toward institutions, the role of graphic design in the public sector becomes particularly significant. It is not only a matter of aesthetic refinement or superficial “beautification” (as suggested by President Trump’s America by Design statement), but of sustaining the credibility, transparency, and operational capacity of the state. As Richard Saul Wurman famously stated, “public information should be made public”: information that concerns collective life must be accessible, understandable, usable, and free.

This issue invites contributors to critically explore the role of graphic design, visual communication, and information design within the public sector. The aim is to investigate how design practices can support, question, and transform the ways in which public institutions communicate, operate, and engage with citizens.

Thematic Areas

This issue welcomes contributions that address, but are not limited to, the following thematic clusters:

Graphic Design and the Public Interface:

How does graphic and information design shape the everyday experience of public services? In what ways do visual systems operate as interfaces that mediate citizens’ understanding, navigation, and use of interconnected public infrastructures, services, and institutions, both physical and digital?

Access, Participation, and Civic Inclusion:

What role does visual communication play in enabling, or limiting, civic participation and social agency? How can public design ensure clarity, accessibility, and inclusivity across diverse populations with different capabilities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds, particularly in critical contexts such as healthcare, mobility, or democratic processes?

Designing for Complexity and Digital Transformation:

How can information design address complexity, ambiguity, and scale in contemporary public systems? What are the implications of digitalisation for graphic interfaces, visual languages, and user experience, and how can design support effective real-world use?

Evaluation, Performance, and Evidence:

How can the impact and usability of public communication design be assessed? What methods and frameworks can support the evaluation of graphic interfaces, addressing the current lack of shared metrics and systematic studies?

Identity, Coherence, and Public Visibility:

How can public communication balance coherence and recognizability with diversity and plurality? What is the role of standards and design systems in ensuring visibility, trust, and continuity across fragmented institutional landscapes?

Design, Governance, and Institutional Practice:

What role does graphic design play in co-creation, decision-making, and public innovation? How do organisational and political structures enable or constrain design action, and how can quality, professionalisation, and scalability be sustained?

Ethics, Politics, and the Role of Design:

How can public communication design operate as an ethical and political practice? How does it contribute to trust and institutional legitimacy, and what are the implications of multiple—or fragmented—voices for clarity and public trust?

Multimodality, Engagement, and Public Communication:

How does multimodal communication – across visual, textual, and audiovisual formats – enhance the effectiveness of public communication? In what ways can the integration of multiple modes address heterogeneous audiences while supporting comprehension, attention, and emotional engagement in public contexts?

Bibliographic References

Authors are encouraged to consider the following references as starting points for their proposals:

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Types of Contributions

Contributions published in Progetto Grafico are divided into four sections:

- **Research** – Scientific essays on the theme of the call (25.000–30.000 characters, including spaces), to be placed in one of the following categories:
 - Experiment*: applied research and design innovations.
 - Mapping*: case studies and critical analyses of design experiences.
 - Narrate*: historical research on relevant phenomena, figures, or artifacts.
- **Visualize** – Scientific communication artifacts (infographics, maps, experimental visualizations, videos, interactive representations).
- **Discover** – Critical book reviews (max. 7.000 characters).
- **Wander** – Scientific essays off-topic but of particular academic interest (25.000–30.000 characters, including spaces).

Each section has a specific editorial purpose and follows defined formatting guidelines. For full details on the types of contributions, please refer to the document “INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS”.

Deadlines and Submission

Opening of the call: September 14, 2026

Deadline for submitting titles of books to be reviewed: September 27, 2026

Deadline for submitting contributions through the journal’s website: November 1, 2026

Notification of acceptance / revision requests: November 30, 2026

Deadline for final version: December 15, 2026

Publication of the issue: January 2027

For the **iconographic apparatus**, each author may provide approx. 10 images free of rights accompanied by complete captions with any necessary credits.

Submissions must be uploaded through the journal’s editorial platform at pgjournal.aiap.it.

Editorial guidelines for preparing texts and images are outlined in the “INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS” document, attached.

