

Sustainable Innovation 2023

Accelerating Sustainability in the Creative Economy and Creative Industries

24th International Conference

Online Conference: 20th – 26th March 2023

Business School for the Creative Industries

University for the Creative Arts

Epsom, Surrey, UK

Sustainable Design: Escape from Mount Stupid?

Professor D Mann, University of Buckingham, UK

How will the EC's Sustainable Product Initiative and other environmental policies impact on the Creative Economy and Creative Industries? Comparisons with previous analogous initiatives would tend to suggest that the most likely outcomes will be somewhere close to the polar opposite of the ones intended. In exploring why this is paradoxical prediction represents the most likely reality, the first half of the paper takes the reader on an explanatory journey starting with the Laws Of Human Stupidity, passing through the Dunning-Kruger Effect (aka Mount Stupid) and ending with Zero-Sum Bias. In summary, the SPI, like most government-lead initiatives, tend to deliver Orwellian results because we think we understand what the problems we're working on are, but in reality don't. Which again sounds paradoxical given that we all know 'the problem' is Climate Change. There's the Dunning-Kruger Effect in action – the unjustified confidence we have in making decisions based on insufficient information. This is not so much about challenging the existence of Climate Change (literally everyone on the planet is now experiencing an effect) as what we actually need to do to slow or prevent our climate from heating further. Here's where Zero-Sum Bias comes into play: the mistaken belief that the solution of one problem comes only through compromising on another. It is very easy, in other words, to produce low or no-carbon solutions if we accept that the resulting products and services will perform worse and/or cost more. Passionate early-adopters might accept these kinds of trade-off, but the vast majority of the population cannot or will not. And so the only meaningful way of making progress comes when designers examine the trade-offs *between* different conflicting design parameters and successfully deliver both/and instead of the usual either/or solutions.

Contradiction solving thus becomes one of six proposed solution strategies outlined in the second half of the paper: we are all currently, Climate Change-wise, sat on the top of Mount Stupid right now, and if we are to successfully descend the mountain and move towards genuine climate-wisdom and start delivering actionable, scalable, repeatable and net-benefit-delivering climate change solutions, a systemic approach is necessary. Such a system, the paper demonstrates, requires as a minimum:

- 1) The aforementioned contradiction-finding and contradiction-solving design skillset,
- 2) The recognition of the need for a joined-up, interdisciplinary approach to eco-system change – one that takes us away from the current testosterone-and-ego dominated corporate hierarchies towards interdependent, self-organising value networks,
- 3) Means of measuring what's important rather than merely easy,
- 4) A critical mass of designers equipped with an innovation – as opposed to 'operational excellence' and 'continuous improvement' – mindset. (At the moment, according to our research, only around 1% of the design population possesses the needed skills and attitudes, and almost none of them are working in the sustainability domains)
- 5) A recognition that 'innovation' is only innovation when it has delivered tangible benefits (as opposed to the usual definition that innovation is about the creation of novel solutions – creating novel solutions, world experience tells us, is easy; turning

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those solutions into value is absolutely not), and that what the world needs are repeatable, systemic innovation processes.

6) Meaningful models of the world that allow us to simulate the effects of candidate new solutions before we inadvertently – as today – commit enormous resources to designs that we believe to be ‘solutions’ that, when we join all the dots, too-late realise merely shift the planet from one set of problems to another.

A final section of the paper proposes an outline ‘how to get there from here’ roadmap to help navigate ourselves safely off Mount Stupid, hopefully for the last time.

