type positive: the rise of helvetica

by

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The subject in question is everywhere, simultaneously orderly and ostentatious in its ubiquity. It is in real life and fake worlds, in fiction and nonfiction, movies and television. It appears in books and on websites. It's on the streets and in our houses, unassuming while also overpowering. A casual observer might not notice it, but point it out and its omnipresence becomes instantly obvious. It is the focus of love and affection, along with derision and, occasionally, hate. (This last emotion is, perhaps, too much, given the subject, but that's the strength of response it provokes.)

It, however, is not a person, place, or thing. It is not even a tangible object. It is a typeface. Specifically, our topic is the sans serif wonder Helvetica. (Serifs are the tails on the end of letters.) The famous font came out of Europe just before the 1960s and found its way into the hearts and heads of the world's best designers. It became the symbol of modernity, of corporations, of progress, of capitalism, and all the elements – both good and bad – that came along with those aspects of life in the late 20th century. Helvetica gained legions of followers, which prompted a backlash, which, in turn, was met with renewed fervour in support of the serious, almost clinical typeface.

Today, the debate surrounding Helvetica rages on design blogs, in books, and on forums around the world. The only consensus about it is that there is none. A popular 2007 documentary timed for the 50th anniversary – yes, a documentary about a font (and a good one at that) – brought these arguments to the wider world, as has the public's increased interest in design culture.

The growing importance of websites, which look cleaner and clearer with sans serif fonts, altered the way we see and relate to Helvetica. Something that previously showed up almost solely in small quantities is suddenly appearing in large blocks of text. Despite the passionate, intelligent, well-argued thoughts of the anti-Helvetica army, the font becomes ever more popular. It is, simultaneously, a deadly serious sign of branding and a cheeky corporate joke (think: the American Apparel logo). The letters bring with them certain connotations of certain subsets of people; Helvetica moved beyond simply a font and into the realm of metaphor and symbolism. The trick is to parse out what the audience believes and why it does so. If used correctly, Helvetica is a perfect typeface for the post-modern world. But that's only the beginning of the problems.

We can't grasp the present or the future without first understanding the past. For a typeface that defined modern America, Helvetica is rather old. It dates to 1957 when Eduard Hoffman, head of Münchenstein, Switzerland's Haas Type Foundry, tasked Max Miedinger with creating a new, clean font that would convey letters and words without the pomp and circumstance of many popular typefaces at the time. Hoffman wanted something with less clutter, something that would stand out on signage. Miedinger delivered, using a 1896 font, Akzidenz-Grotesk, as a basis for what would become his most famous work. Neue Haas Grotesk, his resulting sans serif masterpiece, was elegant and effective. Soon after, the Haas parent company, Linotype, changed the name as it prepared to debut its creation in the US. Helvetia, Latin for 'Switzerland,' was the initial choice, but that became Helvetica, which means Swiss. The stage for the invasion of America was set.

In the early 1960s, the US was prepared for Helvetica to arrive. "The beauty of Helvetica is that it's a really neutral font," Thomas Dolle, a designer and lecturer at New York City's Pratt Institute, says. "That works really well in a lot of situations." The country, gaining economic power and cultural clout, had a rapidly developing conception of companies, corporations and commercial practices. Branding grew increasingly important. (See: Draper, Don.)

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Helvetica offered a perfect mechanism for conveying whatever information the ad men wanted. Among others, designer Massimo Vignelli championed the font at the famed Unimark studio, using it for the American Airlines logo, the New York Subway system, and many other brands. Jeep, JC Penny, and General Motors, to name just a few more, tied their corporate identities to a font. Helvetica became the face of the American capitalism as it took over the country and the wider world.

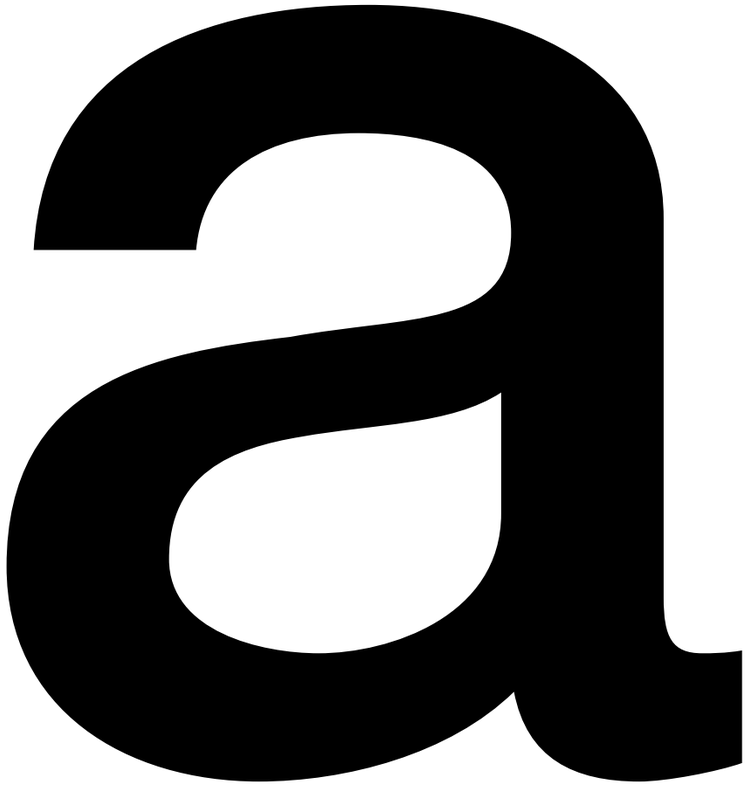
As Helvetica spread, one font became many. The parent company expanded its offerings to capitalise on the popularity. (Capitalism at work!) Helvetica begat Helvetica Compressed, Helvetica Textbook, Helvetica Inserat, Helvetica Narrow, Helvetica Condensed, Helvetica World, and beyond. Linotype updated the original version in 1983. The font, you see, was not static in the 60s and 70s. It changed slightly due to inconsistencies in printing and other factors. The result, Neue Helvetica, attempted to return the typeface to its initial design while simultaneously preparing it for the digital age.

The success of the update and the new fonts depends upon whom you ask, but nothing could stop the momentum of Helvetica. The Linotype website currently offers three dozen versions of the font for $29 each. "[Helvetica] covers a large range of fonts. Some of them aren't very good and some of them aren't quite what you think when you hear the name Helvetica," Dolle says. "Not all Helveticas are created equal."

Equal or not, the Helvetica family continues to be immensely popular. Which brings us to the present.

There is a reason Helvetica rose to such a rarefied space in the typeface world: the font does some things exceptionally well. It conveys information in a no-frills manner, which is essential for some types of communication. "When it's used correctly, like in a lot of European rail systems, it still retains that timeless quality," Stephanie Murg, an art and design writer, says. By limiting distractions – the serifs, the frills, the fun – all that remains is the meaning of the words. In a situation where meaning trumps aesthetic concerns (getting around the New York subway system, for example), there is no better typeface than Helvetica.

Because of its simplicity, Helvetica also allows other features of the design to work upon it. The typeface changes with its surroundings. In the right hands, that's an excellent quality and one that increases options infinitely. "If you look at Target and American Apparel's logos, both are black, they look the same. But you think of those two brands separately. What Helvetica is doing for them is acting like an empty canvas," Julia Vakser Zeltser, co-founder of Hyperakt, says. "It's getting dressed up and sponges up all the character of the brand. In that respect, it's



very clean and elegant and very sterile. It could assume anything it wants to."

Miedinger designed the typeface to be flexible. Ironically, however, because of Helvetica's success, it brings connotations and baggage in today's world. The font is no longer meaningless. Far from it, in fact.

Perhaps the best way for a non-designer to understand Helvetica's place in contemporary society is through metaphor. Spend any time reading design blogs and you'll find plenty. It's the Swiss army knife of fonts or the all-purpose woodshop tool. Helvetica is a pair of well-loved, well-worn pants, the ones you wear out from overuse.

"It's the khakis. It's the Levi's jeans. It's the font that always works, but it's not always the best choice. A pair of jeans can be simple and great, but there are certain situations where you wouldn't wear a pair of jeans. Or you'd wear a pair of jeans and you'd dress it up with other things. Same with Helvetica. Maybe you want to use Helvetica, but there are certain things you want to do to it to make it more special," Dolle says.

More than anything, though, Helvetica is the little black dress (LBD): "It's kind of like a cute LBD in your closest that's always hanging. It's ready to look classy and good," Vakser Zeltser says. Helvetica: ever trustworthy, ever simple. Slip it on and go out. The action requires little thought and less effort. And that's exactly the problem. Too often, it's the default font, the typeface used without thinking.

"You have to be sure that there's a good reason to use it, because it's loaded. You have to be conscious of it," Agnieszka Gasparska, founder of Kiss Me I'm Polish, says.

Bruno Maag, founder of the font foundry Dalton Maag and one of Helvetica's most vocal critics, goes a step further: "It's a little bit of the Comic

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San syndrome. It is a lazy choice for a designer. People indiscriminately use it without looking at it, without knowing the history behind it, and without understanding the alternatives."

The Little Black Dress of typefaces is vital to have in a designer's arsenal, but there's so much more. "The truth is I never wear my black dress. It's there. It's available. It will look okay, but it's not exciting any more," Vakser Zeltser. "There are some many other similar black dress typefaces in that family that are a little different. They are a black dress with one red button."

In recent years, Gotham gained traction as the LBD with just the right amount of flair. The font, originally designed by the famed typography team of Hoefler and Frere-Jones for *GQ*, is Helvetica for the computer age. It uses the vertical geography of New York for inspiration, mixing in a little forward-thinking Americana.

Gotham is, according to its creators, "hard-working typeface for the ages." Gasparska describes it as "an amazingly beautiful typeface that's slightly sunnier and warmer, and removes some of the holes that Helvetica leaves."

It's also everywhere. Coca-Cola, Barack Obama's 2008 presidential

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campaign, Nike+ and Tom Ford are just a few of the major brands attempting to bend Gotham to their own purposes. The backlash to the 'new Helvetica' is bubbling up, with designer after designer claiming it's progressively becoming overused and over-employed. Maag, the type of person who spends five minutes articulately deconstructing the look of the letter 'a' over the phone, says he prefers Paladin.

And yet, Gotham continues to gain steam. That's the way it is with fonts, a self-perpetuating cycle. The general public grows comfortable with a typeface, so risk-adverse brands – which, let's face it, includes nearly every company – choose to stick with the tried and true. Designers, after all, are beholden to their clients. They can try to steer account executives away from Gotham, Helvetica, or another font, but the ultimate decision comes from the firm supplying the cash for the project.

And, of course, there's the danger of going too far in the other direction, of using a font in place of Helvetica for the sake of avoiding using Helvetica. That's no good, either.

"Arial is a [red haired] stepchild of Helvetica. There are a lot of fonts that sort of look like Helvetica, but they are the cheap imitation versions. If you're going to use a font, you might as well use Helvetica," Dolle says.

The most famous 50-year-old font isn't going anywhere, but two factors are changing the way the world uses and reacts to Helvetica. The first one is the growing awareness of design, specifically typefaces, in the general culture. Every time you type a document in Microsoft Word or an email to a friend, you make a decision about the font. Even the absence of a choice, the decision to use the default pre-programmed font, says something. We are more aware of typefaces than ever before. "Fonts have become a new universal vocabulary," Murg says. She's right. Just think, you're reading a feature about a typeface in a general interest magazine. Would you have thought that possible 10 years ago? Or what about the success of Gary Hustwit's documentary *Helvetica*? The result is a public typeface aware.

The second factor in the changing uses of Helvetica is the rise of the digital age. Previously, the font's place in society involved mostly signage and logos, but sans serif typefaces are superior on screens, especially small ones like the ones on a smartphone. (Fun fact: Apple switched from Helvetica to Helvetica Neue with the iPhone 4.) Serifs can look cluttered when you are scrolling. As a result, website designers increasingly use Helvetica for large blocks of text. "The typeface works very well in motion. When you are scrolling on your iPad, it looks much better than something more ornate. When you get more involved, things don't work as well. The motion element works in favour of sans serif fonts, including Helvetica," Murg says. Some of Gotham's recent prominence is no doubt linked to the rise of sans serif fonts on the Internet.

There will always be a place for Helvetica. It's too good, too clean and too perfect for too many situations. It's not the be all, end all typeface, but that was never the intention when a man from Switzerland sat down to

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design something that would compete with Akzidenz-Grotesk. Miedinger succeeded beyond his wildest imagination, creating a typeface that would come to help define the good, the bad and the ugly of the modern era. For better or worse, Helvetica is – and will remain – everywhere. "There's a particular minimalist aesthetic that the typeface evokes. As long as that is around, we're going to need Helvetica," Gasparska says.

But Helvetica is not for every situation. There needs to be a thought process. Halfway through writing this story, I decided to switch away from the world's most famous font. I tried Gotham, but it didn't feel right so I took Maag's advice and went with Paladin. While it was better for a while, it eventually felt too airy. I wanted something denser, a font that encouraged me to focus and type quickly. The decision was obvious. I returned to Helvetica. We have choices. It's important to think about going beyond the default option. But that's not to say Helvetica is always wrong. Sometimes it's the best pick. But only after we understand why. ■

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