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Useful Reading? Designing Information for London's Victorian Cab Passengers

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Abstract

Considered in an historical context, the design of information for everyday use can tell us much about the experience of reading for action. This article focuses on the extraordinary range of information designed for London's cab passengers in the nineteenth century, focusing on fare books, lists,

posters and maps. The article assesses how the largely anonymous designers of these documents—publishers, mapmakers and printers—sought to address the perceived needs and abilities of their intended readers, and explores how actual readers responded, focusing, in turn, on two groups: regular cab users (invariably assumed to be upper- or upper-middle-class men) and strangers to London, whether foreigners or otherwise. The paper demonstrates how accounts of reading experience link design and use and bring into focus the effectiveness, or otherwise, of the former. Even in the context of this very specific case study, the article's analysis of readers' responses to information design suggests varieties of historical everyday experience that have yet to be considered by historians, but, like other forms of reading, warrant our close attention.

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