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Are Graphic Designers Killing Newspapers?

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The end of the twentieth century is rife with predictions of the demise of newspapers. The futurist Alvin Toffler called the newspaper business "the last of the smokestack industries." U.S. newspapers have lost 20 percent of their readers since the 1970s, the number of newspapers in the U.S. has declined 10 percent since 1955, and in the same period the number of U.S. cities with separately owned newspapers has fallen from 94 to 33. Based on these statistics, The Economist called newspapers "decrepit, dated and destined to die."

Computerized information sources appear to present the latest threat to newspapers. Jonathan Katz, in the pages of Wired magazine, called newspapers "the biggest and saddest losers in the information revolution."

And Michael Crichton, writing later in the same venue, predicted that within a decade, newspapers and other mass media as we know them, will "vanish without a trace." In response to a question about computers and the future of print journalism, Gene Roberts of the New York Times said, "I think the only thing print journalism really has to fear is its on owners and managers."

Here is how Roger Fidler, formerly with Knight-Ridder, envisioned the computer news: As a download-able, digitized stream displayed on a flat panel, the computerized news would be clean; it would produce no waste. It could be selective, catering to any reader's particular interests. It could also provide more information, limited only by the memory of the machine or the time it takes to download more. It would be faster to absorb, especially for those who use search engines to scan, and faster to distribute, over wires that skip the laborious manufacturing of a paper product. News sent out and downloaded immediately would be fresher, more current than day-old print.

The response of newspapers to this electronic threat can be witnessed in an example from Asia: The New Paper of Singapore. Newspapers are adopting electronic layout techniques, which are flexible and somewhat compatible with other electronic devices. They are segmenting their markets, to produce zoned editions that narrowly target reader interests and advertiser markets. They are maintaining information, including everything from sports scores to school homework assignments, in databases accessible by telephone. Some newspapers such as this one are printing information in bar-codes, so that the reader who, let's say, likes a television review can run a hand-held scanner over the accompanying bar code, which programs the VCR to record the show. Newspapers are also encoding their advertising as information, providing access to restaurant menus and movie listings through home computer modems.

Another response of newspaper executives is to develop a separate non-paper product, the electronic newspaper. Ads appearing in the New York Times hawk an on-line version of the combined information that has appeared in the Times and in its competitor the Wall Street Journal. Electronic newspapers open the possibility that publishers may someday abandon paper entirely, saving themselves and their customers money and reaping all the benefits of the digital age. This strategy is considered farsighted and visionary response to the decline in readers and rise in electronic competitors.

The Logic of Redesign

The concept behind all these strategic moves by newspapers is this: That the business of newspapers is information. Journalists aren't in the newspaper business, they're in the information business, and unless they recognize this central fact, they will lead newspapers into ruin. The commonly cited analogy used to explain and justify the information concept is the railroad. At their height, American railroads inspired a whole generation to admiration. The romance of the rails spurred collectors, miniaturists, and hobbyists, as well as movie-makers and youngsters, and also motivated the grown-ups who entered railroading as a career. As this romance took center stage, the argument goes, the railroad industry forgot it was really in the transportation business. It did not respond to the changes in technology that allowed the automobile and airplane to compete for passenger traffic, and the trucking industry and air shipping to compete for freight. Little by little, railroad executives yielded ground to these alternatives in the United States. To do otherwise would have required that they give up what was essential about railroading - the physical form of rails and trains, from engine to caboose - and get on with the business of transport, whatever its form. As a consequence, railroads faced becoming little more than museum pieces from a quaint and bygone era.

This concept, and the analogy that sustains it, are completely wrongheaded. Passion is important - absolutely central to the survival of print journalism. In fact, without the passion of the rails, that very useful form of transport, ideally suited to the economies of scale needed in global markets, might have been lost. In journalism, the passion to inform the public, and the public's passion to know, gave newspapers their form. Each aspect of the newspaper - its format and binding, inked typography and pictures, physical arrangement of items in space - grew out of that passion. Rather than offering a big-hearted argument to save newspapers, the information concept and its accompanying analogy function as a tool or lever to move the culture away from newspapers.

To undo a pattern of cultural practice that has taken centuries to create requires a very clever tool. This one is called synecdoche, the use of a part to stand for the whole. Referring to newspapers as information names the whole by only one of its parts, an important one, but still only part. What gets excluded? Why, it's the form of information that's left out. The best way to attack something so deeply ingrained is to go around it, to ignore and sidestep it. By this small device, it is possible to completely change how we look at newspapers. Unlike a paper, about which journalists are the experts, information is the province of other professionals. News-as-information opens the paper to marketers, programmers, and graphic designers.

The history of dying American newspapers is strewn with designers. When major newspapers get into trouble, they bring in design consultants.

In 1966, when one of the grandest New York newspapers, The Herald-Tribune, was ailing, designers came in as saviors. But the design change was so great, it scared away readers (and may have startled investors). So instead of saviors, the designers performed a role much closer to that of morticians. A similar ritual occurred when the Chicago Daily News ran aground in 1978. As the U.S. newspaper industry has fallen on hard times since the 1970s, the pattern of redesign has become widespread. This may be pure coincidence, but I think not. Newspaper executives are aware of the loss of readers and the competition for advertisers, as well as the high cost of newsprint, and they have entered into a series of efforts to restructure news to reposition their papers in the market.

Most of these efforts involve a repackaging of news as information. Editors have created info-capsules that break news into bite-sized bits of information. Self-promotional sky-boxes, which run high on the front page, are the most widely used format for teasers, which apply the techniques and vocabulary of advertising to lure readers into the information. A more basic way of treating news as information is by supplying readers with detailed indexes, which have recently expanded from the small list of major sections and heavily trafficked items (like the television listings) to more detailed lists, highlighting top articles or indexing advertisers. The goal, in design parlance, is to provide more "entrances" into the information content, so that readers are more likely to link up. One of the greatest uses of space for this purpose is the so-called "chimneys" of news briefs, which usually run in the left column of each section front and summarize the major articles appearing inside.

Besides these editorial changes, there have been design changes specifically planned to make information attractive (and here you can see just how the logic works). News is by definition racy, exciting, and sometimes salacious. Information is dry, undifferentiated matter. It requires dolling up. One of the most important means of making information seem more appetizing is to paint it with color, but there are others, such as using particular design styles, illustration or typographic treatments, and the like. Information can't stand alone; it requires fancy packaging and added ingredients (which take up space). In effect, instead of having the newspaper present news as journalists understand it, this new concept of news as "information" requires the services of window dressers and cake decorators, in a word: artists.

The Values of Artists

If artists are to be in charge of information, it might be worth the trouble to examine what it is that artists admire. What passions do they pursue? What excites them? Artists are not an undifferentiated lot.

They come in specific varieties: typographers, illustrators, infographic artists, and page designers as well as photographers and so forth.

Typographers who specialize in text design, that is the body copy or textual matter, are great admirers of the book. John Baskerville's eighteenth century setting of the Latin Virgil is a good example of what drives typographers. They like textual matter to be set at a reasonable size, on wide columns that approach the grace of a classical book page.

They are greatly interested in legibility, which allows the letterforms and words to be clearly perceived. They search for type that is elegant but unobtrusive, able to convey the content without drawing attention to itself. When left to design newspaper text, these typographers will introduce something like the award-winning pages of The Washington Times: goodly size, wishy columns, handsome initials. Each column of type comes close to achieving the legibility of a book page.

Typographic designers who work in advertising and display are of a different breed. Many of them are influenced by the modernist side of type design. Jan Tschichold's 1927 design of a poster for the play "Kiki" illustrates this movement. It uses asymmetrical balance for the letterforms on the generous pools of white space, with broad bars or ribbons in black and red as counter-weight. These effects motivate the typographic designer, along with some of the classical qualities already mentioned. When newspapers are handled by typographic designers, they are likely to produce something like the fashion pages from the daily Novedades in Mexico City.

The section head imitates Tschichold's use of generous sized display type, in which the form of the letters act as an illustration of the concept, set off by heavy ruled line or bar in contrasting color.

When asked what they most seek to emulate, illustrators, like typographers, never say "newspapers." What illustrators admire is the

nineteenth-century poster. Lithographs by the master Henri Toulouse-Lautrec demonstrate the large scale, strong composition, and areas of expressive color that characterize the heyday of the art poster. Cut loose on a newspaper page, any illustrator worth the salt would have a hard time complaining about the illustrations that appear in El Nuevo Día, published in Puerto Rico. The large scale of a typical illustration on its pages occupies more than half the broadsheet page. The use of color and line provide a quality of whimsy and style that illustrators value.

The designers of charts and diagrams, so-called "infographics," also hold large-scale work in high regard (this is a pattern throughout the visual arts), but they also want encyclopedic information. Perhaps the most admired example of the design of information has been championed by Edward Tufte, who publishes his own edition of a data-map designed by Minard in 1861 to show the fate of Napoleon's army. In that map, the width of lines shows the size of the army at any location along its route to Russia and back. A temperature scale below ties the shrinking army to the chilling temperatures. Little wonder that infographic designers, who can pore for hours over Popular Mechanics-style charts, will produce work like the much-admired early example in the Allentown (Pa.) Morning Call, showing the process of hurricane formation. Once again these graphics occupy roughly half the page, but the area is rich with factual details about the formation of a hurricane. This is great stuff by any standard, well beyond what newspapers ran in previous eras.

About my esteemed colleagues, the photographers, I am not an expert, so I will say little except that even the most committed photojournalists among them do admire the expansive displays of the old Life magazine and secretly dream of having their work displayed alone on a gallery wall.

My own career began as a page designer, and so I can say more about my fellow layout artists. As a group, especially in my generation, we were great admirers of abstract art. After all, a layout is really a tasteful arrangement of rectangles. A composition by Mondrian could very well be a newspaper page, with the strong bar of red standing for the nameplate, above the various blocks of gray type and rectangular photographs and ribbon-like headlines. Viewing Mondrian as a news layout is not so great a stretch, once you look at the pages of the Washington Times. The Mondrian echoes not only in the nameplate

but also in the red bar setting it off from the day's content. The play of vertical type against horizontal photographs has much of the aesthetic appeal of fine abstract art. The grid that organizes everything on the pages is what gets layout artists excited.

In another well-known page, from the day the leader of the Shining Path guerilla movement got arrested, *El Comercio*, the leading newspaper of Perú, showed how underlying grids work to create unity. By a happy coincidence, the verticals and horizontals in the main photograph of the terrorist behind bars repeat the vertical columns and dividers and horizontal bars and spaces underlying the entire front page. The influence of Mondrian again turns up in the ribbons of color around the nameplate.

Consequences

All of this design is beautiful to look at. But when we give free reign to the ideals of these many kinds of artists, what happens to the news? What happens to the newspaper? Much of my book, *Seeing the Newspaper*, explores the consequences. As pictures get larger, other things must go, either off the front page or out of the newspaper. As display type gets larger, each word in a headline costs a premium. And some of the additions to the newspaper are of questionable value. Some detailed and highly decorated information graphics are indecipherable. Adding promotional sky-boxes and other items often duplicates information. And bad color abounds.

A newspaper is like real estate. Some places like the front page are exclusive neighborhoods, highly desirable and exacting a premium. Yet in the last century -as measured in my study with the historian John Nerone- everything on the front page got bigger. That meant fewer things would fit. The number of items -pictures, headlines, text blocks, and ads- went from almost 50 to fewer than 10. The number of stories went from almost 25 to fewer than 6, and the number of words -a gross indicator of how much will fit in a given size of type- went from 12,000 to 4400.

In the United States, editors are now faced with attracting readers from many different groups in society. The makeup of cities is changing, becoming more diverse. The growing numbers of ethnic groups, racial and cultural minorities, and immigrants, as well as women and young adults, turn away if their own interests go unreported in the news columns or get buried inside. What binds readers to newspapers is seeing themselves, their families and friends, in the pages. In my research with Ellen Wartella, an expert on youth and media, young adults reported that having their own name or picture in the paper was a significant spur that turned them into readers. But the changes in newspaper design -the larger pictures, graphics and headlines, and the generous text type- all work to squeeze out these new readers. Young people, as well as women and many minorities, very rarely make the front pages and only occasionally appear inside. Their news gets shunted into special interest ghettos, if it appears at all (see "Extra!"). By pushing for and winning larger text type (to make it more legible), larger, more elegant headlines, bigger, more dominant photographs, and grander information graphics, artists have thus created a structural barrier to diversity in the newspaper.

Yet redesigns continue to become more common in the United States. When artists start saying a newspaper looks dated or needs a face-lift, they reveal a fundamental misconception about newspapers. Unlike other consumer products, newspapers are out-of-date the day they're published. With preservatives, even bread has a longer shelf-life. Yet most redesigns are motivated by an urge to make the visible form of news appeal to the current fashion taste.

The idea that design can increase a product's attractiveness emerged in the 1930s. Marketers were faced with consumers who were so buffeted by depression economics in the United States that they stopped making purchases. In an effort to pry open their pocketbooks, marketers hatched the notion of style obsolescence. By adding distinctive styling features, a manufacturer adds a new sort of value to a product. The old product might still have the same intrinsic usefulness, but when a new, restyled model comes out, the old product looks passé. It has become obsolete because of its surface appearance. In their groundbreaking work in that era, Egmont Arens and Ray Sheldon proposed restyling as "a new technique for prosperity." Consumers (women were a special target) would become dissatisfied with their old models and open up their handbags and spend! It was a strategy for the moment, applying an idea from clothing fashion merchandising to durable goods. It spread quickly beyond automobiles to less durable items such as newspapers.

When applied to newspapers, style obsolescence has an unintended effect. It scares consumers away. That is why redesigns since the 1930s have so often foreshadowed the death of newspapers. The first redesigns applied streamlining to the typography of headlines, following pioneer designer John Allen. The asymmetrical streamline is best known from the Art Deco styling of the Hoover vacuum by Henry Dreyfus, the Electrolux vacuum of Norman Bel Geddes, and the Tide and Chlorox packaging by Donald Deskey (see "Packaging"). In a close reading of newspapers of the 1930s, the historian John Nerone and I found that radical redesign was a characteristic of newspapers that failed. Restyling does not build consumer desire for the newest model because the news itself changes every day, often so radically that the entire face of the newspaper seems

to change. In newspapers, design itself functions differently, providing a constant that binds the reader to a routine purchase. It provides an anchor, a reliable and familiar face, which remains the same despite the constantly changing expressions of news.

A wonderful example of design and obsolescence comes from York, Pennsylvania. In the early 1980s, two newspapers were being published independently, the afternoon Dispatch and the morning Daily Record. The Daily Record looked like this: It had an updated nameplate in a modern Roman type, large flush-left headlines, a dominant photo, and horizontal layout with legible type, an index, and promotional sky-boxes. Each of the section heads was unified in design, using a then-popular bold Helvetica.

Advertising was cleared from entire pages, or was neatly grouped into rectangles on pages where it appeared.

The competitor Dispatch looked completely different. Its old fashioned nameplate included an engraved device with the look of something from the nineteenth century. Headlines were small, in condensed capitals, each line step-indented in a form common in the Edwardian era. Photos were absent or small, and the layout was vertical. The logos and signatures were all a jumble of styles, using contrasting type. Advertising was piled in pyramids at the bottom of pages. Despite all these old fashioned effects, this newspaper wasn't something from history. It was published day after day to compete with the Daily Record I just described. And the gray Dispatch was the dominant newspaper in the market. In 1984 an editor from The Daily Record attended a conference where he complained that his paper was doing all the right things with design and photography - had hired designer Rob Covey to produce do its design in 1979 - but was unable to win any of the loyal readers away from the old-fashioned Dispatch. The Daily Record tried again in 1988, hiring The New York Times designer Lou Silverstein.

But then, in 1989, the Dispatch also redesigned, about the time that its circulation began to fall behind, and it signed a joint operating agreement with the Daily Record. The Record soon surpassed the Dispatch in circulation, 42,000 to 39,000. By 1994, the two newspapers had again been redesigned so that one was almost indistinguishable from the other. They both had dominant photos on the front pages, as well as a column of briefs and an index on the left. The Dispatch added promotional sky boxes and a weather icon. Only the nameplates contained a vestige of the original designs. The two newspapers melded into a single entity for the new, jointly published York Sunday News. The Dispatch was rumored to be in trouble and facing a possible sale or closure. This example suggests that at the very least, something gets lost when newspapers engage in periodic redesigns to update their image.

Resilient Paper

Newspapers, as paper products, have great resilience when journalists, instead of artists, hold the reins. That is to say that journalists are much more likely to carry on the romance of paper, treating news as news and not as its pale sister, information. As physical objects, newspapers function - and will survive in America - on several levels, none of which can be easily reproduced in electronic form.

First, the newspaper is a object infused with a certain value in the society. Its symbolism in popular culture gets reinforced constantly in novels, films, and television programs. People who carry newspapers are identified as being in the know. They are viewed as politically engaged.

They are intellectuals. This value of the newspaper as a symbol or icon is something like a commercial franchise, which confers worth because of its familiar associations. Newspaper executives in the next century will either waste or benefit from the paper-news franchise.

Second, as an object, the newspaper imposes a daily ritual. It serves its readers in a democracy by providing a discipline for citizenship. The newspaper landing on the front porch or appearing in its box each day allows citizens to distribute their duties from day to day.

Instead of a huge task, such as getting informed about candidates before an election, citizens can use the newspaper to spread things out, taking on information in small doses. A daily newspaper manages to contain the entire world. Instead of the vast array of events and personalities, readers find a selection of highlights that make the huge world manageable. The routine of newspapers also provides an important service by periodizing the marketplace. The grocery ads come out on Thursday in the United States, and so shoppers can plan their purchases during the week with time to clip the coupons and get to the store without facing daily (or hourly) price

changes. Contrast this to the condition of airline ticket prices, which fluctuate minute by minute on the computer system, driving consumers into a fury.

Third, newspapers supply a sort of social adhesive, tying people together. A common newspaper provides topics for water-cooler talk at work. The physical object gets carried around, clipped, filed, pinned up, and shared. When we take the time to clip a story and send it to a friend, we are putting them first, and the object helps us think of others' interests. The pages have all sorts of stories jostling with each other, so that readers also have the opportunity to confront and connect to others, many of whom they might ignore if allowed to simply search electronically for stories that already interest them. The paper news makes readers more cultured by putting them in touch with other cultures. Some of these advantages may be recreated electronically, but only by imitating paper.

Finally, newspapers are documents of the sort that electronic files can never be. On paper, the news fixes individual and collective memory. Pictures and stories become portable, clipable, and fileable. We share and remember our past as individuals, families, and societies on a backdrop of newsprint. The paper form supplies more than bits and bites of information because clippings are significant objects. Having your name mentioned or your photo printed in the paper means something. Who cares if you're on the Internet? The paper not only documents reality and gives form to common memory, it confers status. In the study I already mentioned with Ellen Wartella, we found that young adults yearn to become daily readers, and that those who do acquire the newspaper habit consider themselves better informed. Newspapers are grown up and important.

The electronic newspaper just can't do all these things. The newspaper form adds to these benefits the many ways in which it is reused:

At my house, we use it as a wrapper for the fish my sons catch, as gift wrap for birthday presents, as a fly-swatter, as glass cleaner for window washing, as an umbrella, as padding for our china when we were packing. It is recycled as insulation and blown into the walls of our house, we burn it as kindling in the fireplace, and we spread it out as a drop cloth for painting and other messy work. It also has had uses in my children's art, in papier maché, collages, and transfer prints from clay. Some people go so far as to turn it into furniture and blankets. These creations may be trivial or bizarre, but they demonstrate that the newspaper occupies people's minds and imaginations. That suggests its value and importance in the culture. It is a franchise that electronic forms have yet to reproduce.

The next century may see the extinction of paper news, but only if journalists abandon it first.

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