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Newspaper Design

By

Peter Ong

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Newspaper design

D-E-S-I-G-N. Suddenly, it seems, the word has become part of newsman's jargon. Where once we used "make-up" or "layout" to describe the process of putting words together with images on a page, we now use "design." It is as hip as designer jeans. So today there is an in-house designer rather than a plain, old layout sub or make-up artist.

Until a few yers ago, universities that teach journalism did not even have design in their curricula. But now it is a major part of journalism courses.

The entire concept of newsrooms around the world appears to have changed in the last 15 years, thanks to the American experience. And if you flip through the first few pages of those glossy magazines, you will notice that they too, have fallen victim to the design craze.

Or is it a craze, a passing fancy? The answer to this question must be NO. The design craze has been necessitated by a host of factors, chief among which is the growing sophistication of readers who demand better-written stories that are well illustrated, either with better pictures or better graphics.

Perhaps the visual impact of television and popular magazines has given them higher expectations. The wonderful thing with TV and radio is that the daily news diet is available round-the-clock and is fresh.

Then too, there is the change in society. With more and more two-income families, people are finding that there is little time left to read the papers. Worse still, if the papers are poorly-organised and packaged.

In addition, there is the generation of children weaned on computer joysticks and TV who are now grown-ups. They have forsaken the time-consuming habit of reading the papers and opted for the weekly magazines like Time and Newsweek and Sunday papers.

As a result, papers began to lose circulation and revenue from advertising, forcing publishers and editors to think of ways to combat the impact of the broadcast media.

The American experience.
For decades, American papers were not designed but laid out in a hodgepodge of conflicting styles both typographically and graphically. While the design revolution affected every consumer product from cars to magazines to the jeans you wear, newspapers clung on to their staid, archaic forms. Ironically, newspapers were and still are the major purveyors of information.

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Designs -- or whatever they called it then -- tended to hinder rather than aid the papers' main aim: to communicate.

As Philip Ritzenberg, design editor of the now-defunct New York News, wrote in 1971 in Print: "Virtually the entire industry clings to archaic graphic forms. While newspaper journalism continues to change and grow, the average newspaper itself still resembles a bulletin board hung with shreds of information, disorder passing for spontaneity, stridency passing for immediacy."

In the 1960s, editors began to see the light when circulation and revenue kept plunging. It finally dawned on them that they were not communicating as well as or better than television, which had undergone rapid changes for the better.

The first salvo of the "battle royale" was fired by the New York Herald Tribune, whose fortunes were quickly dwindling. Hoping for an economic miracle, the editors brought on a young designer in Peter Palazzo.

"When I came in, they were in such bad shape they said 'What the hell; what have we got to lose?' There was absolutely nothing at stake."

When the Tribune was relaunched towards the end of 1963, its circulation shot up dramatically. But the journalism jungle that was New York even then swallowed the Tribune wholesale.

However, it was a significant milestone in the history of American newspapers. Throughout the country, papers began to hire designers/design firms to give them the transformation they sorely needed.

Once again, the face of American newspapers began to change. And so did the newsrooms where proponents of design became part of the fixtures.

During the 1970s, papers started the rush to redesign. Some editors and publishers of failing newspapers thought redesign would give them a new lease of life. But it did not save the Chicago Daily News, as it did not the New York Herald Tribune almost a decade before.

With interest in design reaching feverish pitch, a group of 12 designers saw the need for a forum. And so in 1978, the Society of Newspaper Design was born. Today, its membership has grown to more than 1,200 members, some of whom are from the remotest parts f the world.

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By 1980, American papers were beginning to look different. But mostly good-looking.

There are about 1,700 dailies and a large number of other newspapers, big and small, in America. Each of them has undergone at least one redesign. As of today, many have had two and some three.

Perhaps the next most significant achievement in newspaper design was the introduction in July 1984 of what is known as the Standard Advertising Unit. This was a coup staged by the American Newspaper Publishers' Association who realised that advertisers were having great difficulties with the odd shapes and sizes of papers.

For example, national advertisers wanting to put out ads in major cities would have to create separate artwork for each of the different papers. This was because newspapers across the country used different column widths.

Some were six columns, others were seven, eight or nine or 10. Then there was the difference in size between various papers (and not just the difference between tabloids and broadsheets). Even among the broadsheets, some were larger than others.

The publishers agreed to standardise column widths and paper size. From July 1984, broadsheets used a six-column grid while the tabloids used a five-column one.

Not only that, publishers gave editors the mandate: Go out and package the papers better.

The design revolution got into full swing. Newspapers began shedding off their "grey matter" for colourful, well-designed pages. Anything that could be told in pictures and graphics were told that way.

Even the oldest newspapers in the US, The Hartford Courant, departed from its grey-is-best edict to become one of the country's better-designed papers. The New York Times and Wall Street Journal thought differently. Their news sections would remain at their greyest best but when it came to the feature pages, the editors let designers rule.

American papers are today leading the way in design. In virtually every newspaper, designers have taken over the features, sports and business pages and are now fighting for a foothold in the news sections.

In some papers, they have succeeded in doing so. For example, a designer in a Seattle, Washington, newspaper draws up the Page 1 daily. The Times-Union of Rochester, New York, has a similar set-up.

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While each paper may operate differently, it seems that most of them have at least one person in charge of the graphics and art section. That person is usually the Graphics Editor or Art Editor or perhaps and Assistant Managing Editor (Graphics). He oversees all the design aspects of the paper so as to ensure a consistency even an untrained eye will notice immediately. The consistency is also assured by the use of design manuals.

Some design trends

Quite apart from consistency, American papers have shown that modular is best. The idea is that news should be organised in neat, rectangular boxes not unlike filing cabinets where contents are organised into folders. Running stories up and down a page in dog-leg fashion is no longer considered good design.

Newspapers worldwide seem to have accepted the modular concept. Research, too, has shown the wisdom of neatness that seems guaranteed by going modular.

American papers have also struck the death knell of screaming headlines from broadsheets (and even some tabloids) that still characterise the English newspapers. Research shows that people read the papers at no more than an arm's length away. And because the eye can take in only a few words at a time, huge headlines defeat the purpose for which they were created. Besides, designers say, there is no need to shout out the news; if it is such a good story, it will be read anyhow.

There is also much to learn in the width of stories. Research in the US and West Germany have shown that the optimum is in the range of 12 to 15 picas. Anything less would give the "windshield wiper" effect. If you have ever tried following the movements of a windshield wiper, you will know what I mean. It is the same with narrow column widths.

However, design goes deeper than the visual and clean, good looks. It is the successful marriage of visual elements such as typography, photography, colour, illustrations, information graphics and white space with good editing, taste and judgment. Done successfully, it attracts the reader and then gives him the information faster and easier.

While American papers have undergone such a revolution in design, newspapers elsewhere seem to have lagged behind excruciatingly. This is painfully evident in Asia.

Perhaps it is time for editors in the region to think seriously about design. After all, we are in the business of communicating and packaging helps us do that more effectively.

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Besides, with newspaper technology progressing at such a quick pace, there is the danger of becoming dinosaurs at our own game.

The need for redesign

One of the first questions editors would ask is this: Why should they think about redesign when readers are still buying their products with no serious complaints.

But just stop and think: The news we print is fresh every day. Why should they be packaged in an old-fashioned and uninspired way? The same cannot be said, however, of a large number of consumer products where packaging is reviewed ever so often.

This is not to say that newspapers should be changed every day. No. A redesign is to make the paper more contemporary or at least do its job better. On the other hand, there is no need for a redesign purely for the sake of a redesign.

A redesign does not mean a complete overhaul. Caution should be the buzzword, especially if the paper is an established one. Almost always, there are some good things in the existing paper; these should be retained.
Otherwise, readers might suffer an identity crisis. They may not recognise their old and trusted friend, even if you have a new, flawless look.

There are a host of good reasons why papers should give some thought to a redesign, chief of which must be the business side of the operation. For example, there was a regional paper in Madrid which suffered an enormous drop in circulation and a fully-discredited image.

It was fighting a losing battle with the leading competitor when the editors decided to give it a new look and image. The paper was relaunched with changes to the way it presented the news:`Instead of the competitor's formula of long and detailed stories, it had short, lively and extraordinary reports. Soon after, the paper got back on its feet.

A redesign is a good time to do all these things: The circulation department could present new and innovative ways to reach out to the readers; the advertising department could launch a new marketing strategy and the production department could install new equipment.

But the editorial department has the biggest job: Give the paper a new journalistic concept. This could be in the form of a typographic facelift, use of bigger and better pictures or a reconfiguration of the paper with various sections. Also, it could be the presentation of the

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news: Is the length just right or is it too long? What about the language used? Should there be new features or columns? etc.

First things first

Before editors jump into making a decision on a redesign, there are 1,001 things to plan. The most important is to develop a design philosophy.

What kind of paper should it be: Upmarket? Downmarket? Conservative? Liberal? Aggressive? Sober? Fun? Lively? Serious? If one of these has been decided, the paper must make sure all editorial matters reflect that stand.

The editor should then set up a committee made up of all section heads plus a designer. The designer is the key person and he should be an outsider working with an in-house expert who can take over when the consultant completes his task.

Section editors should start thinking about their plans for the various sections, with the editor acting as goalkeeper.

While this is being done, market research must be carried out. There is the need to understand the readers and the market by studying the demographics and the psychographics.

How does the reader view the paper? What would he like to see improved or scrapped? What kind of new features would he like? What about the language used: Is it too difficult, obtuse, complex, simplistic or what? Are pictures good enough? What does he think of the comic strips?

Where does the paper stand in the competition? Which segment of the market does the paper want? Is there a new, untapped market?

These may all sound like unnecessary details a journalist shouldn't even bother himself with, but then that's what a redesign is all about. The research will help decide which way the paper should go. Of course, editors should give weight to their own gut feeling and the instincts of other experienced journalists.

Almost always, these are reliable barometers. For example, USA Today went ahead with its editors' instincts of producing a paper with short stories, plenty of graphics, unusual leads, etc. instead of taking up the final recommendation of researchers to produce a paper that is just the opposite. As they say, the rest is history. USA Today is now a profitable paper after several years of languishing in the red.

Once the research results are in, say, at the end of three to six months, it is time for the designer to get down to the real work. He

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has to produce a series of prototypes for discussion. These should be printed on newsprint as though they were the real paper because what you see on art paper is quite different from what you see on newsprint.

There should be no restrictions on the number of prototypes. Produce them until you are satisfied with the final product.

Some thoughts on redesign

There are no hard and fast rules for design. But these tips should help any paper with a redesign in mind:

* Design is like packaging a consumer product you see in the supermarket. Let's say you are attracted to a box of biscuits on a shelf in the supermarket. You move towards it, pick it up, study the package and then decide whether to buy or not. It is the same with papers. People look at Page 1, see what's inside and then decide if the paper is worth his 50 cents. The Page 1 seduces and grabs the readers' attention.

* Organise and structure the paper so that everything flows smoothly from Page 1 to the last. Organisation, separation, segregation, isolation and direction are words you want to give a lot of thought to.

* Give readers plenty of assistance with signposts, signals, proper indexing, digests and blurbs. The paper should be as reader-friendly as possible.

* Design should always be as simple as possible. There is no need for pyrotechnics; artistic twists and turns are for the pop magazines.

* Never rush into a redesign. It may take one or two years, but the patience always pays off.

* Be different. Exploit what is unique about your paper.

* Be wary of trends. Magazine-style designs that use a mixture of type in confusing fashion are just passing fancies. Stay in touch with the times, by all means, but be judicious.

* Journalism must still rule over art. There is nothing to gain from attracting readers with the looks if the content is poor. Readers will soon wise up to the fact that the paper has nothing to offer.

* Use colour by all means, but study it carefully first before going for the palette. Is colour synonymous with quality? Is it the wave of the future? Is colour better than black-and-white?

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There is a tendency to use colour for the sake of colour, but the following highlights of a survey of readers' reaction to colour carried out by the US Newspaper Advertising Bureau should prove helpful:

1. Colour is definitely eye-catching, but there is the danger of being misused, which results in dissipation.
2. Colour seems to make the paper up-to-date and progressive.
3. Colour quality matters a great deal.
4. Colour gives a sense of depth, action and emotion. It also simplifies reading and understanding by organising and separating materials on a page.
5. Colour affects perception of advertising.
6. Finally, it boosts readership.

The nitty gritty
Let us now see the various aspects of the newspaper a designer would usually scrutinise:

The masthead
This is the paper's trademark. In a majority of cases, publishers tend to stick to the traditional view that the masthead is sacrosanct. But there are enough examples in the US of mastheads being changed or updated to reflect changing times that it warrants another look.

Personally, I do not think the masthead is a sacred cow. In fact, nothing is untouchable. If you think the existing masthead is simple, clear and speaks with an air of authority, stick with it.

But if you are thinking of changing it, be very judicious in the choice of the typeface. The nameplate should indicate the paper's contents. For example, we are a serious paper, a regional paper, a colourful paper, a lively paper, a conservative, a liberal, a progressive and so on.

Layout principle
This is hardly an issue here. Most papers have accepted that modular is best because it helps organises the page and makes reading easier. But the counter argument is that modular may make a paper look dull.

There are some editors who feel pressured into editing stories to fit nice holes/rectangles. They say stories never fall into neat blocks, but of course stories must fit whatever holes there are in whatever layout concepts.

The grid and page architecture
One of the keys in good design is consistency. Designers can ensure this by introducing the grid system which is not unlike the graph paper used by students and architects.

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Creating one that is accurate down to the last millimetre is crucial. The grid ensures that every line of text is lined up in straight lines across a page or facing pages and throughout the paper. Research shows that readers react favourably if space between headlines, text, columns, etc, are consistent.

The grid system also gives structure, neatness to a page and cuts down sloppiness in the production process.

Formatting

Effective formatting can help the journalist and the readers in many departments such as the stocks and shares pages, sports results, racing results and so on.

USA Today, for example, is a highly-formatted paper. Its Page 1 is almost always the same day in and day out; the weather page follows strict rules; the editorial page is standardised and so on.

There are, of course, pros and cons to formatting. For one thing, it helps readers locate things more quickly and easily. It also reduce workload and ease production. But the disadvantages are that the paper may look dull, never exciting, stable and inflexible to changing news and readers' needs.

There is another kind of formatting to cater to the two categories of readers: the devout reader who reads extensively or almost everything you give him and the scanner who flips through the paper in a few minutes, picking up morsels of news items, headlines, captions and pictures.

Even the most devout readers will appreciate guides, signals, quotes, charts, maps, subheads, summaries, highlights, boxes, etc. As for the scanner, he will appreciate these even more.

Type styles

It is amazing how few papers understand typography. The amount of type used in a paper is staggering. For example, The Straits Times in Singapore prints more than 160,000,000 words a year, or enough to fill up a full-length novel every day.

The same can probably be said of some of the bigger newspapers in Asia. Yet more than 90 per cent of newspapers in the region are living proofs of what typography is not. There is poor inter-lettering space, exaggerated leading, poor legibility and just bad choice of type.

Graphics/illustrations

These have become almost standard fare in many American and the major English newspapers. On any given day, USA Today carries more than 30 graphics, many of them computer-generated.

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Yet information graphics and illustrations are a rarity in many Asian countries. The time has come for graphic artists, illustrators and designers and graphic journalists to become part of the newsroom. And the sooner the better.

But graphics should not just be adornments. They should complement a story or provide enough information to stand alone as a piece of journalism.

Production

It is important, too, for the designer to study the production process and capabilities. Are facilities enough? Are people trained enough to cope with new methods and processes? What sort of training should be developed as quickly as possible?

These are vital questions that will make or break the redesign process. It is futile to conceptualise the best design for the paper if the production cannot cope. It is like doing well in the hurdle race only to stumble at the last one.

Finally...

Lastly, there is the element of surprise. It is a key design principle. There should be a surprise element in every page if possible to detain the reader. This can be achieved through the dramatic use of colour, pictures, different typefaces, a change of pace and so on.

Now that we have dealt with the broad outlines of a redesign, the next most important question an editor must face is this: Should the redesign be thrust upon the reader suddenly or should he be given the various parts in doses.

In other words, revolution or evolution?

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The electronic newspaper

Just imagine this: A reporter leaves the office for an assignment with a photographer. All she has in her hands is a tiny tape recorder. No notebook. No pen or pencil.

The photographer, too, is seen with a strange-looking camera. Instead of the usual film, the camera has a computer-like disk.

At the end of the assignment, they return to the office. The reporter plugs her tape recorder into a computer system and the story appears on the screen in front of her. There is no typing to be done. Any corrections she wants is made through a voice-activated computer. When she is satisfied with her story, she transmits it to her editorat the click of a button.

In the photo department, the photographer slips the disk into a computer. He scans through the pictures he has shot, selects the best and then transmits it to the editor.

The editor calls up the story and photograph on a video display terminal, crops and sizes the picture the way he wants it and merges it with the story which he has edited.

Story and picture are sent to the sub-editors and designers who then lay out the various pages on a video display terminal. Once the page is completely filled, he sends the page off to the production room where a plate is made directly from the computer. The page is ready for printing any minute now.

Does this sound like fantasy? Or perhaps science fiction?

No, not at all. In fact, newspaper technology has reached such a stage as to make some parts of this imaginary scene a reality. And the day won't be very far away for everything to become a possibility.

Already, Nikon and Sony are working on prototypes of such a camera system, using computer disks instead of films. It is said that the first such cameras will be ready for consumers in a couple of years.

Until about five years ago, the electronic newspaper was an impossible dream, but now more and more papers are talking of outputting full pages containing text, graphics, illustrations and photographs directly onto the printing plate.

For the present, however, it is possible for any newspaper to publish full newspaper pages on negatives which are used to make the plate. One of the leading computer technology firms, Scitex of America, already has such a system.

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At the American Newspaper Publishers Association 1987 show in Las Vegas, such pagination systems were on show.

But what is pagination?

To understand the concept, let us take a look at how pages are readied the traditional way. Stories from reporters and photographs are sent to sub-editors who then fits them into a page.

The stories are subbed and then typeset on bromides which are then pasted up on sheets of paper. This is sent to the camera for a negative to be made. The negative is used to make the printing plate.

In pagination, all the processes up to the plate stage are done on a video display terminal, most likely by the sub-editor.

Pagination has been around for several years now. At the heart of the pagination system is a video display terminal that allows editors to access a data base, interact with it and create or shape or design a page with text and graphics or photographs.

Other essential equipment in the system would include an advertising make-up system, classified system and a graphics system. The last should have a scanner to take pictures and graphics and translate them into computer files.

At the moment, each of these systems is made by different vendors. There is not one single vendor who is capable of making a complete system on its own.

Pagination is being experimented in the New York Times. As far as I can ascertain, there is one paper, the Daily Record in Morristown, New Jersey, that makes most of its printing plates directly from an electronic page system. But the number of other newspapers keen on pagination in three to five years can be counted on the fingers of one hand

The fact is that pagination is still a few years down the road. At the recent Las Vegas show, for example, there was no significant progress in this area.

According to a magazine on publishing systems, the trend is now for vendors who were once regarded as specialists in certain computer applications to be complete, full system vendors.

That means there is less chance for pagination that integrates various systems from various vendors.

The computer-to-plate system does away with typesetting, paste-up, and camera. Instead, these are done by pagination editors, computers and a laser platemaker.

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Pagination editors at the Daily Record edit the stories, crop and size pictures, crop and place advertisements and adjust space in a page. Once ready, the page is sent to the platemaker. The process is said to take about 20 minutes or so.

Naturally, there is a lot of savings on manpower, time and costs through pagination. There is no need for paste-up, PMTs of photos and graphics, camera equipment, and negatives.

This will be the biggest factor that will swing newspapers into the technological era.