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Sixth Annual AMIC Conference
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Roger Black

Heading for the cliff

As we move toward the millennium, the news media are proliferating. Now your screen-saver and your pager give you the headlines. Soon, news will be coming in on your toaster oven and the weather, on your thermostat.

Giant news providers like Reuters make more money feeding news to corporate desktops and web sites than to their newspaper customers. Branded news channels, like CNN, spray out headlines to airport lounges and hotel rooms around the world. Ten percent of the Americans who don't read newspapers, according to one study, skip them because “the news just comes to me.”

Commodity news—with unbranded, freeze-dried headlines and soundbites—is sold like pork belly futures everywhere. There is no way that newspapers can win in this market, except as suppliers. There is no sustainable competitive advantage. Publishers of course already know this, but not all journalists have figured it out.

The Internet, which can be simply defined as the conduit of all digitized information, will displace newspapers in the delivery of commodity news. Why wait for the printed version? The Internet instantaneous. Eventually the wire feeds will bypass the middlemen—both newspapers and television networks—and go directly to the reader or viewer.

Electronic media, tightly-focussed Net sites and TV channels will make further inroads on print in the area of special-interest features, the syndicated columns and service articles that now fill North
American newspapers. Generic tabloid sensational news and celebrity coverage are already going electronic. The question is, how will print compete?

**Readership is fragmenting**

The habit of reading newspapers varies from country, and it may be that parts of Asia will resist the competition for a while longer (just as it took nearly 20 years for European publishers to feel the threat of commercial television). But there is another factor that must be dealt with: the increasingly pluralist, cosmopolitan nature of the audience. Every big city is more and more diverse, polyglot and multi-cultural.

There is no typical reader anymore. Patterns of family life are changing. There is a growing ethnic mix; the American melting pot, for one, is not melting fast enough.

Moreover, the pattern of daily life is changing. Many households cannot be described as “married with children.” Everyone is working more; both husband and wife have jobs; no one has any free time; and there is more competition for leisure.

Big newspapers must appeal to a wider range of people, and it will be harder and harder to cover a multitude of social niches.

**Media conditioning**

Compounding all this, we are seeing greater generation gaps. The baby boom, the first generation to grow up with television is beginning to look behind them at kids who grew up with video games. There is a universal expectation for media to be visual, interactive and entertaining. The younger generation is bathed in media as never before. Take a look at Saturday morning TV in America. Images move like strobe lights in an effort to hold the audience that is used to absorbing multi-media. The commercials are so frenetic that adults can barely watch them without getting sick.

The global commercial global culture—Nike, Pepsi, Calvin Klein and Microsoft—are adding a cosmopolitan gloss to children as never before. Teenagers in Kuala Lumpur dress the same today as their counterparts in San Francisco, Paris and even Moscow.

**Aspiring readership**

With the boom in Asia and the United States, we see that readers are expecting something better than what they have. In the same way
that main-line consumer goods hint at upscale design, readers react favorably to a little more elegance in their papers. No one wants to be grouped as part of the masses. While culture varies, there is a general yearning among consumers for better products, but products with a traditional quality.

Survival tactics

To survive in this changing environment, newspapers must adopt new technologies, succeed in the Internet business themselves, and develop “a sustainable competitive advantage.”

And, guess what?—they already have it: reading. People still like to read. They’re reading more than ever. They like newspapers, the way they like shoes with laces, because they work. Television will never deliver the same one-to-one connection offered by writing and reading. Print is still the best way to deliver text. The cost of producing electronic media make it inefficient for the kind of niche focus that modern society demands.

The successful newspapers, like police departments, have gone back to their roots: the beats. When good reporter-writers know a community, and report on it regularly, the people in the community start noticing that “this newspaper gets it right.” Once trust is established, readers look to newspapers to find out what is going on. Newspapers with original reporting are still in demand. Often this means local.

The enhanced newspaper is completely connected to the Net, so readers are brought into the loop.

National and world news are still important, particularly in the national dailies, but they are approached new ways. The writing has personality, depth, spin. Stories tell you what the news means to you—and what may happen next.

The advantage of newspapers is story-telling. Newspaper writing can connect the writer and the reader intimately, without all the production noise of television and the Net. This is the emotional edge of print.

Design and style

Since people expect visual entertainment, newspapers must be visual. Since they don’t have enough time, the layout should be utterly browsable.
A great newspaper by definition is full of surprises. Some stories run for pages; some long stories are all pictures. You never know what you will find when you turn the page.

Newspapers should not all look alike. But there are two successful forms we can identify:

Saville Row: The traditional paper (eg., The Wall Street Journal, The Baltimore Sun) has an early-20th-century feel, but is fast-paced, and "lumpy" in content. There is a definite feeling of upscale quality. These newspapers have found that the layered news presentation technique of The New York World in 1927 still works. There is still a belief in objective journalism, but every story has a by-line.

Couture design: The radical paper (eg., Liberation, Svenska Dagbladet) has an intense, local personality, with exquisite detailing and a rich variety of ways to present the news. The style is modern. The entertainment value comes from the writing, and the opposition of strongly-argued opinions, as well as a visual feast.

Both styles share reader friendly characteristics:

- Multiple points of entry to each story
- Elegant typography
- Awareness that readers are as sophisticated as journalists
- Emphasis on visual content rather than decoration
- Strong individual identity
- Design drawn from local culture

Putting out such a newspaper takes a very fluid and alert organization. Designers, photographers and graphic artists must work more closely with reporters and editors. And for the first time in the Anglo-Saxon press, there is cooperation between the newsroom and the advertising department to fix editorial and marketing strategies that are compatible.

It will take enormous work to make newspapers survive in the next century, but there are already signs of a new design and editorial energy in the daily press. There are plenty of dangers ahead, but there's never been a more exciting time in the newspaper business.
Biographical note

Roger Black is the president of Roger Black, Incorporated, a leading publication design firm. He is a partner in several affiliated studios devoted to media design and strategy, including Interactive Bureau, LLC, and The Font Bureau, Inc., with offices in the United States, Mexico, Spain, Italy, France and Germany.

This week the first edition of the redesigned Svenska Dagbladet was published in Stockholm. Later this year Tages Anzeiger (Zürich) and The Straits Times (Singapore) will appear with new designs created by Mr. Black and his colleagues.


For a portfolio of Internet design, see http://www.iab.com.

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Heading for the Cliff: 21 June 1997
THE HUMAN FACTOR IN MULTIMEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Allen Yeung
Azizi Meor Ngah
Andreas Becker
Volker Illert
TOPIC: Human Factor in the Multimedia Environment

- Current state of people competencies in the communication industry: capabilities and limitations
- Human resource strategies in a multimedia environment and the role of education/training.

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