

RAGGED Right

DESIGN, TYPOGRAPHY & JOURNALISM



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THE COLLECTION

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CRITICISM



WRITE, EDIT, DESIGN ... RANT

RAGGEDRIGHT made just nine appearances between 1992 and 1996. The original purpose of the tabloid when I sold the idea to my bosses at Thomson Newspapers, for whom I was head of design in North America, was to bring editing and design skills to editorial staffs at the company's 100-plus newspapers. But the format rapidly expanded into a hard-hitting, often scathingly critical commentary on modern newspaper publishing, with readers on all five continents. For that, I salute all the contributors – writers, illustrators and photographers and Thomson Newspapers, who paid the bills.

Along the way, *RaggedRight* won awards for its design and typography from the New York Type Directors Club, the Society of Newspaper Design and the Advertising and Design Club of Canada, while its international reach was helped by simultaneous publication as an insert into South Africa's leading media magazine, *Rhodes Journalism Review*.

This small book is the first in a series of collections of the best work that appeared in *RaggedRight*. Future volumes will cover a series of interviews with prominent designers, outspoken essays on the media and at least one more devoted to diverse writings on the practice and failings of journalists and journalism.

The collection begins with my favorite piece of all, a marvellous rant by Chicago theatre director Billy Birmingham, reproduced from Chicago alternative weekly *The Reader*. The article caused quite a stir in the Thomson corporate office, which was not accustomed to seeing the word *fuck* printed in any of their papers, and certainly not one published for staff. Ah, the joys – and perils – of publishing ...

Tony Sutton
Editor

RANTING IS THE BEST REVENGE

When his play was savaged by a Chicago critic, theatre director **Billy Bermingham** refused to turn the other cheek ... he just slammed his critic in the next edition of the paper



ISSUE FIVE / 1994

Adam Langer, theatre critic for *The Reader*, Chicago's alternative newspaper, triggered a ferocious response when he wrote a scathing review of *Fat Men In Skirts*, a comedy staged at the city's Torso Theater. Director Billy Bermingham's response was an awe-inspiring eight-page, single-spaced diatribe to the editor that clearly expressed a serious lack of confidence in the professional abilities of Mr. Langer and his newspaper.

Langer says he never read the entire letter because "after the first few paragraphs, I got the drift of what he was saying. The tone of the letter did match the tone of the play, though. It's not a happy-neighbor play," he added.

Fat Men In Skirts told the story of a man, his mother and other airplane crash survivors trapped on a desert island. Described by Bermingham as a 'satire' and 'black comedy,' the play included graphic descriptions of cannibalism, complete with blood on the theatre stage.

"The editors were cautious, then amused, then decided the letter was funny, so decided to run it," said Langer, who was probably relieved when they decided to ignore the suggestions offered by Mr. Bermingham in the letter's final paragraph.

Here, for your enjoyment, is an edited version of what we hope will become a contemporary masterpiece of a new literary genre – creative ranting ...

Since Adam Langer has deemed himself an appropriate agent to throw open my mailbox for "complaints, insults and petitions" in that pathetic diatribe you allowed him to pass off as a review of *Fat Men In Skirts*, I'll consider it an open letter and respond now: DID YOU PEOPLE ACTUALLY PAY THAT IDIOT FOR WRITING THAT PIECE OF SHIT?

"My first instinct is to lead Mr. Langer by his snotty little nose to a dictionary and make him LOOK UP THE WORD"

First Mr. Langer complains that the play "insults the intelligence of its audience." Well, Adam, I think all of us – audiences past, present and future – all of us peons, minions and other cerebral sharecroppers would just like to say THANK YOU, THANK YOU, LORD GOD KING LITERARY DEITY LANGER for taking the time to step down from your CLOUDBORNE THRONE OF KNOWLEDGE and TELL us by what standards we should be insulted. Don't you even realize that YOU insult EVERYONE's intelligence by simply making that statement? Fool!

Next Mr. Langer says the show "borders on pornography." My first instinct is to lead Mr. Langer by his snotty little nose to a dictionary

and make him LOOK UP THE WORD.

But on second thought, I feel it might be more constructive (in a therapeutic and learning kind of way) if he were simply to RENT AN X-RATED VIDEO and then compare the contents to what he saw on stage. I'm sure the stark difference will strike Mr. Langer in a LIGHTNING BOLT OF REV-ELATION at least HALFWAY through the tape.



DAVID ANDERSON

Mr. Langer then proceeds to call the Torso Theater a fire-trap. Now, correct me if I'm wrong here, but I don't believe Mr. Langer MOONLIGHTS as a BUILDING INSPECTOR for the City of Chicago (although it is a profession he should consider entering full time; it's really the only justifiable excuse for him ever setting foot in a theatre again). Torso is inspected regularly, is up to code and is completely SAFE, asshole.

After these futile attempts to keep everyone possible away from our theatre, Mr. Langer actually talks about the play. He first comments that it is "unbelievably long." I think most people would agree that an hour and a half running time divided by a 10-minute intermission is about standard time for an evening in the theatre.

Perhaps Mr. Langer's talents would be better served if he were to critique productions that weren't so TAXING, like, say, PUPPET SHOWS at the STATE FAIR. No matter how many times his lithium-deprived attention-span is assaulted by machines and moo-moos, he'll still be able to follow the plot – something he obviously wasn't capable of doing with FAT MEN IN SKIRTS. I won't even BEGIN to explain the symbolism and subtext of the play to Mr. Langer (for fear of triggering a MASSIVE BRAIN HEMORRHAGE when that much-neglected organ of his is SHOCKED into USE).

Hypocrisy, on the other hand, is a concept that Mr. Langer is quite familiar with. He accuses the playwright of

resorting to "infantile name-calling" and then, in perfect form, only a paragraph later, calls one of the actors a "pipsqueak" (an actor who, incidentally, could KICK his SOFT, SQUISHY, FAT ASS).

Your paper does a great injustice to ALL by printing Langer's juvenile, auto-fellating rubbish: to the entire theatrical community, to your readership and, in the ultimate irony, to YOUR VERY OWN NEWSPAPER, by CATAPULTING your CREDIBILITY as a theatre-criticizing medium like a FLAMING BALL OF SHIT, SCREAMING, SOARING RIGHT OUT OF THE FUCKING WINDOW.

Any publication with an iota of integrity or PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS would not only FIRE LANGER out of SHEER EMBARRASSMENT but would also CUT OFF HIS HEAD, AFFIX IT TO A PIKE AND PROMINENTLY DISPLAY THE SOGGY MELON OUTSIDE its FRONT DOOR AS AN APOLOGY TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY FOR SUCH A FLAGRANT DISREGARD FOR THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM!!!

Billy Bermingham
Producing Director
Torso Theater
Chicago

"Your paper does a great injustice to ALL by printing Langer's juvenile, auto-fellating rubbish"

Perhaps there's the germ of a plot for Mr. Bermingham's next satire lurking in here. – Editor

IS THAT YOU, BWANA EDITOR?

Editing newspapers in Africa can be a humbling experience, as can be seen in these reminiscences from **Donald Trelford**, former editor of *The Observer* in London



ISSUE FOUR / 1993

My first editorship was of the *Nyasaland Times*, now *The Times of Malawi*, when I was 25. I spent a good deal of my time in the mid-60s moving around this part of Africa in pursuit of stories on UDI in Rhodesia, the resulting civil war and sanction busting.

So it's 29 years since I first sat in an editor's chair – more than half my lifetime. I mention this, not because it entitles me to claim that I've learned very much in that time about the press or its proper role in the world, but because I realize now, looking back, that I learned all I really needed to know in my first few days in the hot seat all those years ago.

I'd been sent out to Africa by Roy Thomson. I only met him once. He peered at me close up through his thick pebble glasses, shook me by the hand and said, "You make a dollar for me, boy, and I'll make a dollar for you."

My brief in Malawi was a simple one: to keep the paper alive, which meant making it acceptable to the country's leader, then and now a somewhat peppery individual called Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. I found all hell breaking loose, with the country engaged in civil war – Banda versus a group of rebel ministers led by a man called Chipembere.

Journalistic integrity required that we should report the civil war fairly, but this wasn't easy because Banda had passed a law making it a criminal offense, punishable by five years in jail, to publish "any story likely to undermine public confidence in the government." So I made my first principled decision as editor. I decided to back the side that was going to win! I gave my vote to Dr. Banda, reporting his speeches with big headlines

and big pictures. But I also felt an obligation to report the rebel speeches and sent reporters into a remote tribal area hundreds of miles from the capital. I had their story translated from the local dialect, edited it right down and published it very briefly and (as I thought) inconspicuously under Banda's speech.

When this was done and the paper came out, I was surprised to see that it was selling like hot cakes on every street corner. The Africans were bending over the front page, ignoring Banda's big picture and headlines and reading the little item about Chipembere – and thereby giving me my first important lesson about journalism: News is what governments don't want people to read.

The episode didn't end there. I soon learned my second lesson in journalism – about the political pressures on an editor. The phone suddenly rang in my office. I was to report without delay to Dr. Banda. He was livid, waving his arms about, threatening me with expulsion, and he sent me away with this stark warning ringing in my ears, "Keep out of my politics, white man!"

When I got back to my office, still shaken from this encounter, the phone rang again. The conversation went like this: "Is that you, Bwana Editor? Chipembere here. I didn't like the coverage of my speech today."

"I gave you more coverage than was good for me, Mr Chipembere."

Silence on his part, then: "Well, Bwana editor, I would expect the powers-that-be to bring pressure to bear on you. But you mustn't think they're the only people who can bring pressure to bear."

I'm sure
Lord Thomson
wouldn't
like anything
to happen
to his
precious
printing
machinery"



MIKE CUSTODE

Silence on my part, then (rather nervously): “What do you mean, Mr Chipembere?”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t want me to organize a boycott of your newspaper among the Africans. And I’m sure Lord Thomson wouldn’t like anything to happen to his precious printing machinery.”

Silence on my part, then (hesitantly): “I’m sure you’re above that sort of thing, Mr Chipembere.”

Long silence on his part, then (rather firmly, I thought): “I wouldn’t count on that, Bwana Editor.”

After that sort of experience, you’ll appreciate that the occasional run-in with the law is mere child’s play in comparison, though I’ve appeared as an editor before virtually all Britain’s courts – from a magistrates’ court to the Old Bailey to the House of Lords and the European Court.

Not all my memories of that period in Africa are so menacing. I once went on a circulation tour, using a small plane, to the remote parts of the country and visited a border town called Karonga. I particularly wanted to visit it because we seemed to be selling a remarkable number of newspapers there. So many in fact, that the local agent, an African, had qualified several times for the bicycle I was offering as a reward for enterprise.

“Every editor has to get used to the idea that his paper will wrap tomorrow’s fish and chips but not before it has even been read”

I found this wizard salesman in his small hut by the lake, and he told me his secret. The retail price of his paper was threepence. As an agent, he got it wholesale for twopence, then separated the sheets of paper and sold each double page spread for a penny to the local fishermen, who used them to wrap up their fish. It was the only source of paper in the area. With any bits left over, he cut out the pictures, especially pictures of Dr. Banda, and sold them to the villagers as decorations for their huts. He was making a fortune – and not one copy of the paper, as far as I could see, was being read!

Now, every editor has to get used to the idea that his paper will wrap tomorrow’s fish and chips – but not today’s, and not before the paper has even been read. What could I do about this appalling situation? I decided to do nothing and flew out of Karonga the next day, leaving the agent with his secret monopoly. After all, he was happy, his customers were happy, and I was happy to be selling so many papers. One of the things this humbling experience taught me was that people sometimes buy newspapers for reasons that editors never think of, so we shouldn’t take ourselves too seriously.

Donald Treford resigned as editor of The Observer when it was taken over by The Guardian in 1992..



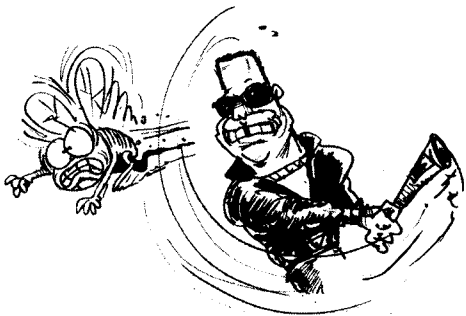
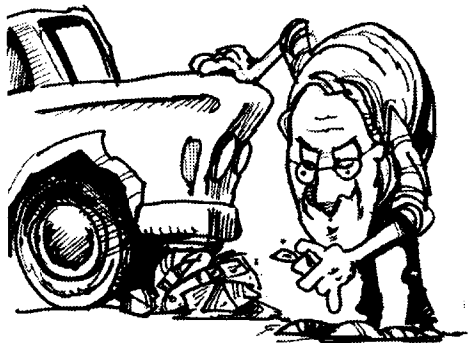
NINE THINGS TO DO WITH A MORNING PAPER



ISSUE NINE / 1996

IN their efforts to remain competitive with other media, many newspapers in North America are switching from afternoon to morning delivery. When *The Daily Courier* at Kelowna, B.C., made the switch it ran a page of cartoons by Greg Perry that showed readers 34 uses for a morning paper. When asked why there were 34 images on the page (as opposed to 50, 40 or even one for every morning of the month), we were informed that there were more, but some didn't make the cut for reasons too obvious to explain further. Here are nine that were suitable for publication in a family newspaper.





HOW TO USE DESIGN TO EDIT NEWSPAPERS

To some journalists, design is little more than cake decorating ... to make pretty ... to make pleasing to the eye. That's eyewash, says **Jan V. White**. In fact, it's the opposite of what it should be: Design – functional design – is a tool to clarify whatever is being covered

ISSUE ONE / 1992

Too often design is thought of as a cosmetic that is needed after the “real” work has been done: the piece written, edited, finished. Only then it is handed over to the art department for treatment. (Those art people aren't really editors. They are artists, for heaven's sake ... to them, out there on Cloud 9, graphic presentation means cutting our valuable copy in order to make their damn pictures bigger. Or using a weird typeface for the headline.)

Unfortunately, most reporters, writers and editors – the word people – labor under this misapprehension. Tradition, bad guidance and mis-education have propelled them into that boxed view that splits the team of communicators into two hostile camps: the word people and the visual people.

Neither likes or even quite trusts the other, and they work at cross-purposes – in the happy event that they don't actually undercut each other.

In any case, all of them do a lot of under-the-bench muttering about each other.

How to use design for editing?

Start welding the two factions into one team whose individual members understand how vital their shared efforts are to the product's acceptance by the public.

Clearly, design is only one of the tools of the information trade. Good presentation is analogous to good writing. Sure,



a lousily written piece may hide its information in clumsy wording, just as a crummy-looking newspaper may conceal nuggets in confusing visual arrangements.

The stuff may be there, but will the readers want to dig it out? Probably not.

That's where we have to understand our audience, whichever demographic group or social class or educational level our product may be catering to. They share one thing: their reluctance to get involved and read.

Why? Because the disastrous reality of this much-vaunted information age is overkill.

All of us are buried under an avalanche of so-called information rolling down at us from all sides, all day: movies, TV, videos, books, newspapers, magazines, corporate literature, junk mail, technical documentation.

All vie for our attention, and they are test-marketed and beta-tested and scientifically fashioned to creep up on us from behind and penetrate our subconscious from below (and make us buy).

What do all these information packets demand from us first? Our attention, our concentration, study and, worst of all, our time – the most precious, finite thing we have. No wonder we all build protective fences around ourselves.

We are afraid of getting involved, UNLESS there's obviously something there that affects us in some way. (And that



word “obviously” is the design-orientated word! We’ll come back to that.)

WHAT’S-IN-IT-FOR-ME IS THE FIRST CRUCIAL FACTOR. As potential readers, we may be predisposed toward a point of view and

therefore feel good when we find out that the President agrees with us ... or we are scared of cancer and are happy to find out that a cure has been found ... or a new magic diet will help us lose 10 pounds overnight. So, the first technique to penetrate the reader’s protective fence is to edit and

DESIGN

design to reveal the what's-in-it-for-me factor.

You can even do it with hard news, which is supposed to be straight. It may be tricky to angle or interpret the hard news, but you certainly can and must do it with everything else, just as magazines do. If they didn't, they'd fail. If we don't, we'll fail, because in our features we are producing magazine-type material in a slightly bigger format. (TV is swiping the news-disseminating function newspapers used to have. Newspapers are swiping the feature-report function general-interest magazines used to have. Magazines are serving narrow special-interest markets ... and much of their news function and analysis function is passing to newsletters.)

On a more obvious level, the what's-in-it-for-me aspect is, of course, taken care of with shop-window presentation – running teaser boxes about what's inside a section on the front page. But the service-to-the-recipient attitude (perceived by the recipient as what's-in-it-for-me) should form the handling of everything we do. We must couple exposing the what's-in-it-for-me factor with the second crucial factor.

SPEED IS THE SECOND CRUCIAL FACTOR. Few in our culture allow themselves the luxury of time. The normal attention span has been reduced to those 11 minutes between commercials on TV. We have been trained to live by sound bites. So we must couple the what's-in-it-for-me factor with speed so readers will get it fast. They'll be happier than if you make them dig it out for themselves from a mass of background.

Most stories should be edited down to be shorter, more concise chunks, the shortest of which will probably get the highest readership score.

OBVIOUSNESS IS THE THIRD CRUCIAL FACTOR. A news item must be easy to enter, and it must be easily understood. Information turned into visual form can be grasped faster than verbal descriptions of statistics. That's why infographics are flowing everywhere – in print from *Time* magazine to *USA Today*, visual presentations in computer-generated charts and graphs for overheads. And now in video training.

- This is where better cropping of pictures comes in – homing in on the thrust of the story that the image is being used to translate.

- This is where color comes in: not as superficial deco-

ration but as a tool to organize, highlight, emphasize. Functional color.

- This is where headline typography comes in: The size, boldness and positioning of heads helps in interpreting the relative importance of each story on the page.

- This is also where modular page arrangement comes in, where stories in vertical or horizontal shapes, with big or little pictures, are displayed on the page for immediate recognition of what belongs with what and how long each item is.

Now let's recognize a fact about our audience that our verbal friends hate to admit.

They always glibly talk about “our readers.” Readers aren't really readers. At least they don't start out as such. First they are lookers. People scan, hop and skip around, pecking here and there, searching for goodies until something catches their attention. Seldom do they begin reading at the start of an article. They enter where they damn well feel like entering. Watch how you read yourself. You are typical ... that's why we must build in as many welcoming doorways as we can. Because, once fascinated, lookers will indeed start to read.

“People scan,
hop and skip
around, pecking
here and there,
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catches their
attention”

SALESMANSHIP IS THE FOURTH FACTOR. It is also the function of design to catch and then seduce viewers into becoming readers. That's visual salesmanship, and, like it or not, in our competition for the potential reader's attention, we must use it or die.

EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT – THE FIFTH INESCAPABLE FACTOR. It's a branch of salesmanship and of reporting. And of visual presentation. But our uninvolved lookers are humans, with curiosities, angers, sympathies – the whole range of human emotions, and we must use them. Play on them.

We know that they react faster and more actively to visual stimuli than to intellectual ones. That means photos: They are fast and easy to take in and can be emotionally involving if they are good. Hence, more space for pics, more budget for photographers. It sells papers.

GUIDANCE FOR THE READER IS THE SIXTH FACTOR. Directing the searcher's eye to the important stuff. What is important? Defining that is a function of editing. Achieving the goal of displaying the material to the casual viewer is a function of

DESIGN

typography, layout and design. The two work hand-in-glove to make it easy for viewers to orient themselves and find what they're looking for.

- Premeditated organization is the key.
- Standardized signs are needed to announce the elements.
- Repetitive elements ought always to be in the same place. Does that mean formatting? Yes – but only those things that make sense to format.

We work on two levels: the product level, where signs demand uniformity to orient the user, and on the journalistic level, where individual stories demand variety and freedom. Balancing the two is quite an act. Freedom is vital for non-repetitive elements. You have to be choosy – and responsible – about what to emphasize. Typography is the vital representation of tone of voice. If everything screams, all you hear is loud, conflicting noise, and nobody listens. Okay, turn the metaphor into visual terms. Messy disorganized typography and page arrangement is like static on the radio. Or call it visual pollution. Call it anything, so long as you don't do it.

PERSONALITY – THE SEVENTH FACTOR. In this ruthlessly competitive world, it is vital that each product create its own character, both in terms of its substantive matter – what it thinks and how it says it, what its service is and in terms of its appearance. That appearance is vital to success.

Knowing who you are is no less useful to the advertisers. It is the visual context in which your information is carried. It manifests itself by adherence to style that must be protected by strict discipline. It is especially tricky for we designers to know when and where to depart from style, because we want to have fun and show off how clever we are, but every departure dilutes the precious recognition. So you only depart from it when there is overwhelming reason to do so. Every departure costs.

MONEY – THE EIGHTH FACTOR. As a marketing tool, better design is succeeding in getting accepted by the financial people who ultimately control everything we do. Design isn't seen as a waste of money anymore. They know that a better-looking vehicle gets better attention from its readership and thus pulls more ads.

Good design has proved to be good for business. Hence,

more redesigns, more color, more infographics, perhaps even more freedom for designers. No, not more freedom. We don't need that. We need more clout.

So, in this time of positive change, what must we do to get more clout? We must sell the efficacy of design. Never ever sell a design on the basis of aesthetics – that you “like” it. That is an advantage to us, but not to our partners, who are afraid of such fine judgments.

That implies taste. And it is safer to say no than to say yes to anything unfamiliar or new. By hanging the decision on “liking,” you give them the weapon NOT to like it – and there's no argument about that. You abdicate the decision. You have no recourse. No, we must be seen as responsible journalists who develop design as an integral element of editing.

That means we must develop our ability to explain, justify and rationalize what we want to do in words and concepts that they feel comfortable with.

We must make them see that our goals are no different from theirs, our standards are the same as theirs. We must learn to speak their language.

Only that way will we become accepted as intellectual equals and contributors to the common good. Because we visual people must join our verbal co-workers to hone our product to make it totally acceptable to our investors – the buyers.

They spend money for which they expect a certain service. We had better deliver on our promise, and they had better perceive that they are getting their money's worth.

Design guides them to notice these vital qualities of clarity, value and speed. Those are the criteria on which good newspaper design should be judged. It has little to do with pure aesthetics. They are a given – they are the foundation on which we build. It's like correct spelling and good grammar for the writers.

No, design has everything to do with journalism and functional expression of substance. That's on the high level. On a lower level, it is really industrial design: styling a product that is right for its audience in its market niche.

That's quite a job.

Internationally acclaimed as a lecturer and consulting art director, Jan V. White is also the author of many books on publication design.

“If
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THE PERILS OF PAGINATION

Pagination wasn't the quick and easy revolution we all hoped for, says **Tony Sutton**. The growing pains are not yet over for many newspapers



ISSUE NINE / 1996

Way back in the good old days of hot-metal typesetting, the production of newspaper pages presented few problems for journalists. They didn't do it. Their task was to write the stuff, inspiration and creativity finely-tuned by a few swigs from the ever-present bottle in the bottom drawer.

Dropped onto the editors' desk, the neatly-typed copy would rapidly degenerate into barely-intelligible scrawl before being transferred, together with a roughly-scratched layout, along a pneumatic tube into the bowels of the building. There, a gang of sweaty, ham-fisted artisans would miraculously turn it into a newspaper. And that, more or less, was that – give or take an expletive or two along the way.

Then things changed. Newspaper production lurched forward a gear or two, sharply propelled by the cold-type revolution of the '60s.

An era ended. The gangs of two-fingered typesetters along with their thuggish leather-aproned compositor-cum-psychopath pals were either replaced by, or transformed into, Men-in-White-Shirts-and-Ties. The equipment changed just as dramatically. The noble Linotypes – solid, mechanical contraptions that responded to a well-wielded hammer or a splash of carelessly-sprayed oil, – were sent to the great dinosaur graveyard and replaced with a succession of increasingly delicate and expensive contraptions. Unfailingly, these needed the attention of an out-of-town technician whenever the worst possible deadline loomed.

Changes to the workplace were just as dramatic. Along

with the introduction of members of the other sex (whose only previous appearance had been as decoration to hide the ink-stains on the walls), the production department began to look suspiciously like an office: carpets on the floor, mugs of steaming coffee on neat, white-topped desks and the gentle breeze of political correctness floating through the air.

Out with the old, in with the new? Almost, but not quite. Union contracts meant that many of the hairy-fisted Lino-type operators remained on the job, laughingly described as retrained, brandishing vicious scalpels in their daily war with a new breed of artsy-fartsy design types, who made their lives increasingly difficult by expecting them to strip – “neatly, please” – little pieces of type onto lay-out boards.

The equipment? The kindest thing you could say about the Justowriters, Compugraphics, Phototypositors and their brethren was that the technology was intermediate – a bridge between the bad old ways and the brave new world that we knew was just around the corner.

Did it work? Well, sort of.

An international magazine at which I was London production editor decided to save cash (how many times have you heard that hoary old chestnut?) and loosen the pressure of deadlines by making pages in our Fleet Street offices instead of sending them to typesetters based several hundred miles out of town in the West Country.

“No sweat,” declared a sharp-suited salesman, tongue loosened by several large glasses of wine, as he passed a

“Whenever I traveled to the big dailies for which I consulted, it became apparent that technology had hit a brick wall”



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

quotation for a couple of filmsetters across a lunch table, adding the fatal rider that we'd "need to buy a back-up system ... to be used *when* the main one goes down." He got the hangover, but not the deal.

Then there was the new Sunday newspaper that installed a batch of brand-new digital imagesetters that overheated on their first deadline trial and had to be replaced by less-sophisticated hardware.

Roadkill on the road to hell ...

And so the revolution evolved over another decade, through a progression of increasingly refined and more expensive solutions to the age-old (and previously quite simple) dilemma of getting ink onto paper as quickly, efficiently and – did I already mention this? – as cheaply as possible.

Finally, God gave us the Mac and desktop publishing programs. And all production journalists on the planet rejoiced, knowing full well that the future had finally arrived. Little

did they know that, for the mainstream press at least, the future was still a murky, elusive, shadow.

First, the good news: Pagination technology worked.

I sat in my home studio in South Africa in 1987 and, like journalist colleagues around the world, produced magazine pages direct to film (aided and abetted by a service bureau with a large, costly Hell drum scanner).

The bad news? It didn't work for newspapers!

Whenever I traveled to the big dailies for which I consulted, it became apparent that technology had hit a brick wall – Atex front-ends, lots of sticky bits of paper in the middle and gangs of Exacto-wielding heavies protecting their hard-won backshop territory ("Try to change this page and I'll cut off your fingers!").

As I packed my bags at the beginning of the '90s and headed for the cold wastes of Toronto to redesign *The Globe and Mail*, I told myself things would be different. I knew the

TRANSFORMATION

Globe's printing press was a neanderthal scrapheap from the age of hot metal, but the newspaper was a pioneer in satellite technology and pagination. Right?

Well, half right.

The satellite worked like a dream, but the Harris pagination system, linked to the ubiquitous Atex front-end, was slow, cumbersome, complicated and prone to crash at the sniff of a deadline. I spent five months designing new pages on a Mac, then watched in head-scratching bewilderment as my redesign accomplice and *Globe* assistant managing editor Earle Gill transferred everything line-by-agonizing-line into the Harris. (Earle must have doing something right; he's now the *Globe's* executive editor.)

The *Globe* project was followed by a host of others at smaller dailies across North America. The story was unchanged: Designing pages on a Mac was hassle-free. Trying to get similar-looking effects on production systems that spanned several levels of technology, each linked by the electronic version of chewing gum and sticky tape, was not.

Pagination was a bad joke.

Catch 22 took on a whole new significance as I watched an Ohio editor try to put a vertical rule between two columns of type on the screen of his terminal. In full-size mode, he could see the rule – but couldn't move it. In small-page mode, he could move the rule but could hardly see it. At least the publisher was happy: "We're saving cash because we've got rid of the backshop ..."

That attitude contributed significantly to the problem, as I discovered while chatting idly to a vendor's rep elsewhere in Middle America. "Yes, our machines are crap," was the gist of his argument, "but only because customers won't pay for anything better. Editorial quality is just an incidental, all the publishers care about is an improved bottom line. They want cheap; we give 'em cheap!"

Unchecked, the rot continued.

I will not forget the newspaper that I almost put out of commission by installing Adobe Type Manager into the Quark terminal at which I was attempting to make typographical adjustments. Pandemonium followed several minutes later when the whole pagination system crashed. ATM, it seemed, clashed with the code in the translation tables.

Then there was the large metro making millions of dollars profit each year that had a pagination system so com-

plex and unnerving that some technologically challenged editors cowered in terror when asked to use it.

And I recall one newspaper that moved to a new "palace," giving its journalists spacious work areas, sparkling-clean desks and new carpets. It replaced the tired and shagged-out printing press with a big blue Goss that filled the basement. Clunky Crossfield pagination terminals were replaced by PCs running QuarkXPress.

Perfect? Nearly, but not quite. Someone on another continent was struggling to write translation tables for a front-end system that did not have – and never would have – the capability to connect with Quark. It was business as usual for more than a year.

Enough, already. You've heard the stories. It's time to move on. There's another revolution in the air. And, as the daily print media reacts to threats from a new generation of Internet-centered technology, the bean counters are finally

seeing the light. Cutting corners, they have discovered, may not be the best way of saving cash, and you won't get a better editorial product by providing your editors with inadequate tools with which to work. So, many newspapers are starting to enjoy the fruits of the Quark revolution: Front-end systems (almost) seamlessly integrated with Mac-based pagination terminals that are fast, simple and fun to operate.

That's the upside. Unfortunately, the cost-cutting mentality still reigns at too many locations throughout the industry. QuarkXPress is so easy to use, say those men in dark blue suits, that they can get rid of the backshop crew and load all the production

work onto the hard-working editors: "Just think of all that lovely money we can save!"

It's ironic that the ultimate price these managers paid for effective pagination was to turn editors into production staff. They didn't get rid of the Linotype operators, they got rid of the editors.

The result? Bad-looking but well-edited newspapers have been transformed into good-looking but vacuous rags.

But, by God, they're saving money!

“Unfortunately,
the
cost-cutting
mentality
still reigns
at too many
locations
throughout
the industry”

Tony Sutton is president of News Design Associates, a newspaper design and editorial consultancy based in Georgetown, Ontario, Canada. He is the author of Creative Newspaper Design and Creative Magazine and Newsletter design.

HUMOUR

HOLD THE FRONT PAGE

The spirit of Hildy Johnson is alive
and well and living in Florida,
says **David Grimes**



ISSUE ONE / 1992

A former newspaper reporter of my acquaintance recently won more than \$35,000 on the television show *Jeopardy!* She identified a lot of tough questions over the course of three days and was even able to identify a Czech opera composer by the name of Bedrich Smetana.

It's a sad day for journalism when a former newspaper reporter can go on national TV and correctly identify someone with a name like Bedrich Smetana. In defence, all I can say is that the woman's newspaper career was relatively brief and that she now works for an artsy magazine that has been known to publish entire articles about opera and ballet and who knows what else. She insists, rather too often, I think, that she is very happy.

I have a tough time imagining Hildy Johnson going on *Jeopardy!* or any other show that requires knowledge of Czechoslovakian opera, Reformation poetry or Russian ballet. Hildy, the star of the famous 1931 newspaper movie, *The Front Page*, slept in a suit and poured his breakfast from a bottle he kept in his desk drawer. He used two fingers to type his stories on an old Underwood and would yell, "Stop the presses!" when he had an especially sensational scoop. As



far as game shows went, Hildy probably would have been over his head on *Wheel of Fortune*, but he might have done OK on *Family Feud*.

You don't see too many Hildy Johnsons around newsrooms these days. The good old Underwoods have been replaced by glowing computer terminals, and if you look in a reporter's desk drawer, you're more likely to find an asepticly-packaged box of organic soybean drink than a bottle of rot-gut whiskey.

In Hildy's day, the newsroom was a chaotic place of jangling telephones, screaming editors, clacking typewriters and chattering wire machines.

Today's newsroom is carpeted, air conditioned and decorated in restful shades of mauve and beige. At deadline, there is an electricity in the air similar to what you might find in the reference room of the public library.

Modern newspaper editors almost never go berserk and hurl their ashtrays through the office window. One reason for this is that editors don't have time to pitch fits because they're too busy going to meetings. If an editor feels the urge to yell at someone, he or she is encouraged to attend a meeting until the feeling goes away.

In Hildy's day, reporters competed for the privilege of covering an execution and often succeeded in winning the condemned man a last-minute reprieve. Today, reporters compete for the privilege of writing a 12-part series on agricultural run-off. In Hildy's day, reporters liked to relax on the floor of the neighborhood saloon. Today, reporters like

to relax by competing in triathlons and discussing the merits of various brands of imported mineral water. Today's reporters almost always have a college education, and many have travelled abroad and learned foreign languages.

Hildy started out in the business as a paper boy and is only partly fluent in English and doesn't know any-

thing of the world beyond his newspaper's circulation area. On the plus side, Hildy does not have to attend benefits seminars, and he is not subjected to annual performance reviews.

Newspapers are probably better now than they were in Hildy Johnson's day, but I'm sure they aren't as much fun.

David Grimes is a writer with the Sarasota Herald Reporter in Florida.

WHY YOUR PAPERS SUCK!

Nick Olivari, a young Toronto journalist, looks at his daily papers and wonders when they will begin to cater to his new generation of readers



ISSUE EIGHT / 1995

I'm a Generation Xer, one of few, perhaps, who fondly remembers the days when home seemed to be filled with family members reading newspapers. I decided that I wanted to be a journalist almost as soon as I could understand the allure of ink on newsprint. Now my enthusiasm is waning. Things are different, times are changing. But newspapers aren't.

Today, in fact, the whole idea of having a newspaper delivered to my doorstep seems quaint and old-fashioned. And unnecessary. I don't have to wait 12 hours for the headlines – I get news almost instantaneously from the AP wire on CompuServe, I read features on the Internet and find just about everything else I need on CNN.

I'm fortunate that my journalistic lifestyle supports my habit – but there's an awful realization that if newspapers are losing their meaning to the people who produce them, whatever will happen when ordinary readers catch on? Well, in case you haven't noticed, the revolution has started. I can't even be sure when it happened, but I know that in the age of MTV and rapid-fire youth culture with their what's-hot-and-what's-not feel to everything, newspapers have rapidly become perceived by my generation as dull and irrelevant.

The commercial press is still writing for my grandfather and the products look as dull as the content – sedate and out-of-date. This may appease stodgy boards of newspaper

directors but does nothing for my youthful cohorts or me.

When we can get our news and entertainment – with heavy emphasis on the latter – in four minutes of video and high-velocity graphics, why on earth would we GenXers want to read a newspaper, anyway?

The answer may surprise you.

Yes, we do read newspapers. But not yours. Not the dull broadsheets. Not even the racier, down-market tabloids. Why would we? Strip away the veneer and scratch the social and political surfaces beneath, and they're the same anyway.

You'll find us spending our reading time with our noses intently stuck in the smaller, brighter and less self-conscious pages of the alternative press. When we're not immersed in cyberspace, that is.

My neighbors, young, vibrant and alive, avidly devour their weekly copies of Toronto's alternative news and entertainment voices – *eye* and *Now* – not just because they're free, but because we can relate to them. They have a meaning.

Their front pages look more like the clothes combinations we'd like to wear to work, and, although the content is still heavy

on the news of our times such as ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, famines in Africa and big brother increasing our taxes to pay for new police uniforms, the articles are written by young people for young people.

No one pulls any punches, and if investigations get rough or the language gets a bit earthy, or someone actually has an unpopular opinion, so be it. And, if there's a flood of hate

“The commercial press is still writing for my grandfather and the products look as dull as the content – sedate and out of date”



ANDREW PEYCHA

mail the next week, it's regarded as applause because it proves that people are reading the paper. In contrast, up at the boring end of the spectrum, mainstream newsrooms are full of middle-class hacks-with-spouses-in-a-good-job-and-live-in-nannies-and-almost-paid-mortgages-and-holiday-cottages-and-two-children-at-college, who've lost touch with what it is to be or feel young – or free.

Can you imagine how difficult it is for reporters from these papers to gain the trust of someone wearing ripped jeans and with a stud through their nose, especially when their papers insist on a formal dress code.? If you can see the

futility in that scenario, just imagine the problems when newspapers expect meaningful insights into the local chapter of the Hell's Angels while expecting reporters to dress in the manner of what the Angels might mockingly term "A Citizen."

Another joke to we GenXers is that if you want to be employed in the newspaper market you will need at least one university degree – more if there are 100 applicants for every job. But don't editors know that the vast majority of people for whom we write possess only a secondary education? With a university degree and a middle-class background,

CRITICISM

how can a writer's understanding of events ever reflect that of someone who sees the world through a truck window or from behind a dry cleaning press – no matter how sympathetic the writer is personally, politically or socially.

Likewise it's hard for someone facing several bouts of enforced idleness in their life – a reality for most youth today – to connect with a story on unemployment written by a journalist who's clearly never been through the agony and indignity of the dole line.

It's equally galling to read middle-aged hacks ranting about how young, unmarried mothers should stop relying on the government for paltry handouts, especially when those same hacks studiously ignore the slurping sounds of big business lurching greedily at their much-larger public troughs.

You could argue that a good journalist should always remain detached from reporting and stick to the facts. But there are a great many issues common to anyone between the ages of 18 and 30 that someone of an earlier generation will never understand or even perceive as a newsworthy point.

Deciding what copy is relevant to an adult under 30, and who should write it, will only ever be half the solution because, like any other product, it's the packaging that makes the sale.

While policymakers debate the limits of good taste and worry how graphic pictures should be, my generation and the two that followed have already been profoundly affected. No one I know blinked through Quentin Tarantino's movie *Reservoir Dogs*, which was drenched in blood, blood and more blood. It shocked our elders, but not us.

So what? We see blood at the movies, on TV, in videos and in professional sports. It's going to take a particularly shocking photograph to offend us. In this era of multi-media, only the unborn can be spared.

More pertinent is the subject of photographic choice and presentation in newspapers. Too often pictures are chosen for their appeal to the Mahogany Rows of the world without thought to their children.

Photos of the geriatric Rolling Stones, for example, are a front-page staple wherever they tour, but while the dinosaurs of rock are still big news in the daily papers, teenagers cruising the local band scene couldn't give a toss about the concert Daddy attended last night.

They have their own tastes, which are either ignored for being too vulgar, or they're dumped into a pathetic pull-out youth section planned by someone – obviously with children of his or her own – who's theoretically in touch with what's happening. And then they wonder why young people won't read it!

Face it, with the aid of cable and satellite TV, today's teens have become more discerning consumers of good photography than their parents ever were. Rock videos and pop-culture publicity stills are a borderline art form and what every teen will later use as a benchmark for an interesting picture.

And the images do not look like those that every newspaper photographer knows will make his stereotypically middle-aged WASP news editor happy.

Nor are the graphics and color use in today's papers relevant to kids who have already been dosed with several thousand hours of garishly colored video-arcade games by the time they reach puberty.

When *USA Today* was launched it seemed the television generation breathed a collective sigh of relief over a paper that looked and read like a TV screen. But TV's old hat. Didn't you know? Today's children attend computer courses from age five, design a web page at 12, and – unlike their parents – find it easier to read from a computer screen than an unwieldy newspaper.

Anyone who spends time on the Internet will tell you that reading text from multi-colored backgrounds with individual words highlighted in bright blue and shocking lime green

soon becomes second nature and makes the conventional newspaper look archaic.

And while traditionalists will argue that blue headlines or key words emphasized in color within standard black text won't work, one international direct-marketing firm exploring the sales potential of the web has already designed its current brochure like an Internet home page.

Yes, it does work. But the big question remains, how will newspapers prevent the continued fall in readership and particularly attract young readers back to the fold? Perhaps they can't do it. I'm not sure they have the will.

“It’s galling to read middle-aged hacks ranting about how young, unwed mothers should stop relying on the government for handouts”

Nick Olivari was a Toronto-based freelance writer when he wrote this story. He now has a full-time job in New York City with Reuters press agency.

CARTOONS

DRAWING THE LINE AT McTOONS

Fearing advocacy groups, U.S. newspapers have softened the satirical edges of their editorial pages. Resistance continues, however, in Canada, says **Brian Gable**



ISSUE SIX / 1994

The gang down the hall at the Ford Dealers' convention is having a heck of a good time. Boisterous chat around the swimming pool, laughter in the halls of this genteel hotel on New Orleans' Bourbon Street.

In our convention rooms in the self-same Royal Sonesta Hotel, there is gloom. We are attending the annual meeting of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, and time and again, in workshops and in private conversation, the talk is of a profession under siege. It seems selling cars is a lot more fun than creating socially meaningful satire. A primary concern for all the cartoonists, American and Canadian, is that satire is currently perceived to be a weapon of elitist repression rather than a method of social criticism.

In a society busily fragmenting into advocacy groups, it's not surprising that the "Mr. Citizen" whom cartoonists once spoke for has vanished. The very idea that a single image could today represent all society seems quaint, not to mention implicitly offensive. But the danger is that, in attempting to avoid giving offence, satirists may be reduced to speaking for no one.

Many cartoonists and newspapers have chosen to avoid interest-group confrontation by softening the satirical edge on their editorial pages. The results are mild-mannered gags



rendered in a homogenized style known in the trade as "McToon." Those cartoonists who haven't muted their message are finding themselves caught up in vicious community disputes. Dennis Renault of *The Sacramento Bee* was a case in point, when an anti-racism cartoon he drew was itself interpreted as a racist statement

One of the more interesting seminars dealing with the McToon phenomenon is a "cliche-a-thon" conducted by Joel Pett of Lexington, Kentucky, and fellow cartoonist Jack Ohlman of Portland, Oregon. The two clipped 12 months' worth of stale cartoon metaphors from the editorial pages of U.S. newspapers. They gleefully show the results to a cringing audience: platoons of Energizer bunnies, political Pinnochios, time running out of hour glasses. The show rolls ruthlessly on while the cutting commentary shows no mercy.

The satirists are satirized, and behind these closed doors much of the pleasure comes from the shared understanding that this is how it's supposed to work. You laugh at what deserves to be laughed at and then strive to make it better.

Twenty-five Canadian cartoonists are participating in the meeting. The Americans tend to regard them with the usual mixture of curiosity and indifference. "How come there's so many Canadians here this year?" an Orlando cartoonist asks his friends at the opening ceremony. "Must be that NAFTA thing."

An exhibition of contemporary cartoons hangs in one of the adjoining convention rooms. About 30 Canadian cartoons are grouped together on a single wall, providing a perfect opportunity for comparison with their 200 American counterparts. There are evident differences. Most noticeably, the Canadian work seems to encompass more stylistic variation. Chalk it up to greater regional isolation or more independent press voices. The burgeoning "McToon" phenomenon is not as pervasive in the Canadian drawings.

How is it that Canada, a nation usually associated with politeness and conformity, should continue to produce artists with independent visual and satirical styles? At the same time, how is it that America, whose very essence is wrapped up in the sanctity of the individual, should be wrestling with McToons and the retreat of powerful satire? Culham Rogers, a North Carolina cartoonist and sage, reflects briefly on this conundrum and offers his theory: "Americans want to be individuals; it's just that we all want to be the same individual."

Brian Gable is the editorial cartoonist at The Globe and Mail in Toronto.

THE NETWORKS HAVE LANDED

Ben Macintyre reports from New York on the morning
after America's prime-time invasion of Somalia



ISSUE THREE / 1993

The invasion of Somalia is under way. Marching into Mogadishu, bawling orders, knocking things down, frightening the locals and buying up people, goods and services, they have finally arrived: the American television networks.

The sociologist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that “television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of our living rooms,” and the arc lights and anchor-man have played a pivotal role in every major conflict since. But Operation Restore Hope is quite different. Television is not part of the process, it is the entire process: The decision to send troops to Somalia was born out of the emotive footage of starving people and armed bandits, and the grand humanitarian gesture thus launched will be played out for and in front of the cameras.

“C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la guerre,” whatever the Pentagon may try to suggest. Operation Restore Hope is in part a public-relations exercise, co-ordinated between the government, the military and the networks. A full 24 hours before the first troops came ashore in Mogadishu, officials had announced the precise location and timing of the landing – dawn in Somalia, evening prime time in America. The Pentagon had stated that there was no danger of mines, but still three teams of U.S. Navy Seals in camouflage make-up “stormed” onto the beach to clear the way. The Somali “enemy” had long since vanished, and in military terms the dramatic landing was unnecessary, as

television it was riveting and as military PR it was a disaster.

The 100 or so waiting cameramen, photographers and journalists quickly surrounded the soldiers, to their discomfort. It is hard to look brave and battle-ready when you arrive to discover that hundreds of civilians have been wandering around the “combat zone” for days.

“Welcome to Somalia,” said a friendly journalist.

“Hands up,” came the furious reply.

The Pentagon immediately tried to insist that the blinding camera lights be switched off, so that the Seals could wear their night-vision goggles to see the Somali warlords who weren’t there. Later, grumpy Marines tried to get their own back by forcing about 60 journalists to lie face down on the dock at Mogadishu port, but the damage had already been done. The U.S. Defense Department, however, made little effort to disguise the fact that the dawn landing had been set up in much the same way as a sporting event.

The television commentators yesterday were plunged into a semantic muddle: Many found the habits of Desert Storm hard to break and called the exercise an invasion, others opted for the more neutral “landing.” None called it what it was, a piece of charity show-business that only America could have produced.

Whatever the Pentagon’s protestations, the operation is effectively under the control of American television. Perhaps one day military manoeuvres will be handed over completely to the electronic media: “Sorry, Stormin’ Norman, honey,

“The Defense Department made little effort to disguise the fact that the landing had been set up in much the same way as a sporting event”



PETER BROOKES

can you invade again? The sound level wasn't right."

A former foreign editor of this newspaper, Ralph Deakin, once remarked that "nothing is news until it has appeared in *The Times*." In America nothing is news now until the TV anchormen are there on the scene, philosophizing in flak-jackets.

Before the anchormen arrived in Mogadishu, Americans showed a marked lack of interest in Somalia, a story plugged away at by the worthier newspapers but largely ignored elsewhere; that has now changed, for in America there is nothing either good or bad, but television makes it so.

The relationship between America's newscasters and the viewing public is bizarre and unique. Part oracles, part ambassadors, such luminaries as ABC's Ted Koppel, NBC's Tom Brokaw and CBS's Dan Rather do not report the news, they are the news. Well before the marines went in, the *New York Times* ran a headline announcing: "Now, from Somalia, Three Star Newscasters."

With obvious delight, those newscasters found themselves in the strange position of reporting on themselves as news. "The most difficulty the Marines had to face all day," said Ted Koppel, host of ABC's *Nightline*, "is having to face the cameras and the lights." this inelegant remark was not an apology, more a boast.

Indeed, the celebrity of American newscasters has reached the stage where they come close to eclipsing the story itself. The personal appeal by a television newscaster is a powerful tool, as Michael Buerk of the BBC proved with his first, moving reports out of famine-struck Ethiopia.

But in America, such "I-smelled-the-cordite" reporting is a stock-in-trade, every report is a personal one, and it is almost impossible to find the news behind the chummy talking heads.

The evolution of America's television war-reporters from journalists into stars probably started in Vietnam and has reached its ultimate expression in Somalia. That is partly the

OPINION

fault of the networks themselves, a result of the never-ending television ratings war that elevates personality over substance. But it is also a function of the way the U.S. government has chosen to portray Operation Restore Hope.

Of all the areas of the world rent by civil war and famine, America chose to help Somalia for two reasons: The situation is far less dangerous than, say, a Sudan, Mozambique or Bosnia, and it makes better television. The outgoing Bush administration needed to make a gesture, for the starving people of Somalia certainly, but also to restore hope in America and the Republican Party.

As one media critic said yesterday: “The bottom line is that the heart of every 10-year-old in the country has to beat a little faster when they see the Seals storming ashore.” And for that, the cameras are vital.

But the landing in Mogadishu was rendered farcical because the seams showed too clearly, the cameras were too visible, the scene too obviously staged and the danger virtually non-existent. The soldiers who came ashore were intended to represent America at its most resourceful, daring and generous.

They ended up looking silly because the other half of the equation – the people charged with relaying that image to America and the world – got in the way.

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney was angry yesterday that the soldiers had, he said, been exposed to danger by the lights of the cameras, but what had really been exposed was the convenient and unspoken pact established between the American government and the media.

What is now taking place in Somalia is not a war, it is not even, primarily, a peace-keeping operation, but something far more mundane and important: a logistical exercise in moving huge quantities of food.

By trying to pretend otherwise, the American government has exposed a creditable, life-saving enterprise to ridicule and shot itself in the foot. After the embarrassment of yesterday’s dawn landing, a Pentagon spokes-

man observed, “We probably should have inserted the public affairs officer first.” He was not joking.

This story first appeared in The Times of London

“The bottom line is that the heart of every 10-year-old in the country has to beat a little faster when they see the Seals storming ashore”



“We Make Good Things Better”



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BEST OF TIMES, WORST OF TIMES

Earle Gill tells how Canada's National Newspaper battled to get a readable text face (and lost)



ISSUE FIVE / 1994

A couple of years ago, two of our usually alert readers noticed that *The Globe and Mail* had changed its body type — the stuff you're reading now — from one typeface to another.

It's highly probable that more readers noticed but couldn't be bothered to let us know they had uncovered our little secret (and who can blame them). Well, we did it again. Last November, the *Globe* reversed itself and went back to the typeface it introduced with its redesign in June 1990. That typeface is Times New Roman. In 1990, it replaced a face called Imperial that had been used for decades before the redesign. At this point, *Globe* readers may have been tempted to shake their heads and speculate about the collective sanity of those in charge of such things. Rest assured, there is a rational explanation.

First, go back to Imperial, the typeface that was ditched in 1990. In the process that culminated in the redesign, it became obvious that Imperial didn't work with the headline style that was being adopted. It was too heavy and printed too black. Headlines are the only element on a page that should be black because their job is to catch the reader's eye. Imperial was offering too much competition.

So the job of telling our stories fell to Times New Roman, a face originally designed for *The Times* of London in 1932. It is less robust but more elegant than Imperial. It also provided the heightened contrast between text and headline

that the redesign called for.

Unfortunately, when the new-look *Globe* went into full production, it became obvious that the 30-year-old presses, which produce the paper for most Ontario readers, weren't capable of producing the fine lines that make Times so distinctive. (By contrast, the more modern presses that print the paper in other parts of the country had no problem with it.) Since producing two sets of pages for the two types of press was out of the question, it was decided in January 1992 to change the typeface once again, this time to one called Calisto, which is very much like Times, but whose line weight is more uniform. Calisto was a compromise, but it worked well — for a time.

Since then, however, the *Globe's* production department was able to improve the quality of the presses through the installation of new equipment. The improvement was so good that Calisto started to look too heavy. It made sense to go back to Times, so we did.

Then, in February, editor-in-chief William Thorsell, fresh from a tour of the European colonies, allowed that the *Globe's* typeface didn't compare well against some of the papers he and *Globe* president Bill Greenhalgh had just seen. They admired the look of *The Financial Times* of London. A major component of the FT's look is the typeface chosen for its body type — Clarion, whose advantage over Times is that it has a bigger x-height, which means that 8-point Clarion is just as legible as 10-point Times and takes less space.

So we decided to run some tests on one of our best-read pages — Facts & Arguments, which appears five days a week on the back of the front section. We tried different permutations of Clarion on the page, varying the point size, leading and tracking (and while we were at it we tinkered with Times as well).

We asked people in the newsroom how they liked it. As usual, some loved it; others hated it. And our readers got in on the act too. They took advantage of our national 800 number to put in their two cents' worth. The best one said, "I don't know what you're doing with that page . . . but I want you to stop." And stop we finally did.

We decided that we wouldn't want to put our readers through too many shocks this year. We already know that we'll likely be changing faces later this year when we go full-color offset. So we'll wait until then.

When he wrote this, Earle Gill is executive editor of The Globe and Mail in Toronto. He is now the paper's newsroom business manager.

“I don't
know what
you are doing
with that page,
but I want
you to stop.’
And stop we
finally did”

IT'S EVERY EDITOR'S WORST NIGHTMARE

And it'll take over the world if we don't stamp it out now,
says **Don Gibb**



ISSUE FIVE / 1994

At this very moment, there's a reporter in some newsroom somewhere in the world cranking out another PWN story. It could be a reporter at *The South China Morning Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Toronto Star*. Or it could be CNN international celeb-talker Larry King.

PWN is the king of all journalism clichés these days. It has appeared as a lead, a quote or simply a line in more than 170 newspaper and television stories I've called up on a computer network search. Find: Parent's / Worst / Nightmare.

Usually, PWN describes a tragedy in which a child has been killed or hurt.

My first encounter with a parent's-worst-nightmare lead suggested someone's PWN was their son purposely setting fire to their house.

Got trouble with that one. If I had a list of 20 parent's worst nightmares, it would not make it. Same goes for Beavis and Butt-head, the Rolling Stones and shopping malls. They've all cropped up as a PWN.

Sample some of the bad dreams:

"Good evening from New York. The story of Polly Klass' abduction and murder is a parent's worst nightmare ..." – Larry King Live on CNN.

The tragic case rated at least three other worst-nightmare leads on American TV and in newspapers.

"The first few times a toddler bites Mommy or Daddy on the finger, they may think it's kind of cute. But if it becomes a daily occurrence, or the child bites a schoolmate, it can be ... (you guessed it) ... a parent's worst nightmare." – *Montreal Gazette*.

"Wait and See by (children's author) Robert Munsch:

turns a little girl's blow-out-the-birthday-candles wish into every p... w.... n..." – *Ottawa Citizen*.

And on and on and on. From the tragic and serious to the ridiculous, a PWN stands for anything.

Often, the references deal with death, crime, dreadful accidents or deadly disease: Murder, rape, abduction, missing kids, cancer, meningitis, traffic accidents.

But they know no bounds. Take a look:

"The Good Son ... is a deviously titled, ultimately unpleasant thriller that stars Macaulay Caulkin as every parent's worst nightmare." – *San Francisco Chronicle*.

"With its assortment of furry bra tops, black leather lace-up bustiers and rosaries (for wearing, not praying), the Electric Chair (store) could well be a p... w... n..." – *Los Angeles Times*.

"It's only in the past 10 years or so that the (Rolling) Stones stopped being a (you-know-what)." – *Toronto Star*.

What is this fascination with the nightmare lead?

As one who has written his share of cliché leads, let me suggest it has a lot to do with the excruciating agony of writing that first sentence. So much pressure to get just the right introduction. Make it light, tight and bright; make it clear, concise and straightforward; make it interesting; keep it short.

No question, PWN has a nice ring to it. Catchy. It's got rhythm and it's handy – right there in the back of your mind. 'Don't know where I first heard it, but I think I'll try it.'

You and a million other reporters.

I recall reading a piece on writing tips that said a catchy

"I recall reading a piece on writing tips that said a catchy phrase can work on the right story"



phrase can work on the right story – for the first reporter to use it (remember where’s the beef, here come the judge, mother-of-all etc., etc., etc.). It might even be fresh enough for the next two or three reporters and their stories.

But by then, it has run its course. It’s stale, trite and trivial.

PWN has had an abnormally long run. My list contains more than 50 varieties – more nightmares than I could possibly think up on my own.

And as if the simple every-parent’s-worst-nightmare weren’t good enough, we have the hybrids:

“It’s the worst nightmare of parents whose children ski” (a racer slamming into another skier). – *Calgary Herald*.

“A year ago, San Diegan Pam Murrell experienced every working parent’s worst nightmare.” – *San Diego Union-Tribune*.

“Shooting a person is every cop’s worst nightmare.” – CFTO-TV, Toronto.

“It was a PWN, but this story has a happy ending (teenager got lost on way home to her new house)” – *Calgary Herald*.

Just a thought: Did the reporter already have the standard PWN lead in the system, then figure tacking on a happy ending to a nightmare was a nice twist?

“Our child throws himself down in the middle of a shopping mall and begins to wail. Almost every parent’s worst nightmare.” – *Ottawa Citizen*.

Shopping malls, grunge, babies switched at birth, an

extra five-day school holiday, religious cults, autism, heroin snorting ...

PWN certainly tops a long list of classic clichés, which include:

– People responded with mixed reactions today to

...

– Rain failed to dampen the spirits

– Imagine you’re on a tropical island. Imagine ... (it keeps on going, just like that battery commercial).

– This quiet, working-class suburb with its tree-lined streets is in shock today after the brutal murder ...

– And: What do such and such have in common?

– Something is done thanks to ...

– Something is said: That’s what so and so thinks...

For the good of journalism and to show compassion for our readers, let’s stamp them out. But, please, begin with **IT’S A PARENT’S WORST NIGHTMARE**.

Retire the Nightmare on Copy Desk Street ...please.

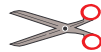
Don Gibb teaches reporting at Ryerson Polytechnic’s School of Journalism in Toronto. He is the author of two books: How to Write the Perfect Lead and How to Get the Most from Your Interviews.

P.S. It’s Don. I’m back again! It’s everywhere. I just picked up a book, *The Nanny Murder Trial*, by Don Davis. On the back cover in boldface: It was every parent’s worst nightmare.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh ...

READ THIS!

Enticing headlines and informative cutlines are two of the most basic ingredients in the creation of a readable newspaper. So, why do we ignore them so often? asks **Martin Gibson**



ISSUE ONE / 1992

NEWSPAPER people have the right idea, of course. That is, they know people ought to spend an hour getting news from our product. Readers ought to go beyond headlines. They ought to read cutlines carefully. They ought to go through the lead to the meat of the story. Trouble is: They don't.

Indeed, an interesting new piece of research indicates that headlines, cutlines and leads too often form barriers to readers.

Readers don't cross those barriers; they turn to the TV or some other diversion.

Publisher John Ginn, writing in the *Harte-Hanks Editorial Focus*, tells about research done at his newspaper, the *Anderson Independent-Mail* of South Carolina. We need to listen.

His researchers, using groups of people brought in to discuss problems at length, found headlines, cutlines and leads to be the main sources of complaint. The top gripe about headlines: Being misled. "Just give me the information in the headline and don't play games with me," one reader said.

This led Grinn, and thus the *Independent-Mail*, to rethink their position on clever teaser headlines for features and their position on big one-column headlines. We ought not to abandon cleverness, but we must not strive for it at the expense of our ability to give the reader full information.

A busy reader must have an idea of the subject before going into a story. Otherwise, he or she is likely to consider that story one of many that will go unread. And all readers are busy readers.

Headline problems go beyond blind heads on features.

Some readers look at almost nothing but headlines, and they want to get news from them. You and I want to read the whole newspaper. Readers don't have time. Really. Some can be satisfied by a check of the headlines.

Ginn says he was at first offended by that view. "What right does a reader have to ignore all of our stories and just read the headlines?" he asked.

Then he realized that the reader has "a right to do as he pleases" once he gets the paper. (For an eye-opener, Ginn suggests reading one copy of your own newspaper that way – going through and reading nothing but headlines to see whether you get a full picture of the news.)

One final thought on headlines: *Independent-Mail* readers wanted all important parts of the story cited in the head. They did not like finding good material buried. Perhaps that means the old-timers were right when they added decks, kickers, underlines and other ways to run more information in big type.

Years of research show that readers look at photos before anything else on a newspaper page. Then they read the cutlines. Or try to. If we give them only snippets – a name with no ID, for instance – we irritate them.

A partial quote with the name does little more for readers, because they have to check the full story before the quote makes sense. I can support the use of a single line of type on a photo that accompanies a story. But that line must carry enough useful information to make the reader understand the picture.

I was really happy to see that the research supports my view on the time element in cutlines. Readers were puzzled by a present-tense sentence that had a date. To wit: *Bobby Unser smashes into the wall Friday.*

“Years of research show that readers look at photos before anything else on a newspaper page. Then they read the cutlines. Or try to”



Drop the time element from that sentence; it belongs in the second or third sentence.

Cutlines and leads get bad marks for wordiness. Ginn narrowed the problem. He went past the number of words to the number of ideas. Readers could follow fairly long sentences that contained only one basic idea. Extra clauses that brought in tangential ideas left readers floundering.

The Independent-Mail found one other big problem – inaccuracy. Readers said they put down the newspaper when they run into something they know is wrong. Not only do they put it down, but they don't pick it back up. Not only do they not pick it back up, but they let their subscriptions lapse, too. And now we are getting close to home. We're talking money. We're talking livelihood.

We're talking about the influence a newspaper can have. Or not have. Every newspaper – weekly, small daily, metro

monster – should have an error-elimination program. First you identify errors. Then you go after them.

John Ginn suggests you have this point of view as you examine copy. "I know there are some errors here; I wonder how many I can find and eliminate."

WRITING HEADLINES: THE KEY WORD

I do not have to sell you on the importance of headlines. You have moved along in your career far enough to have learned that lesson. So I offer one guideline to help you write headlines: Find the key word in the story and use it in the headline.

Every story has a key word – synonyms count – that must be in the headline. For example, a headline said this: *Inmate accused of murder*. Prison murder happens so often, I regret to say, that it isn't startling news. But the key word would

EDITING

would have made this more interesting. The inmate was accused of killing the warden. That word, warden, lifted this out of the ordinary into an unusual story. The headline should tell us so.

You must start by finding the key word. Then you must try to be as specific as you can. Take this one: *Accident kills 4 at construction site*. We readers have no way to know precisely what happened. Perhaps a trench collapsed. A building fell on the workers. Paint blew up. They were gassed. Or burned. We don't know. Actually, this appeared on a story about four men who died when a crane's cable broke and fell 165 feet. So we say: *4 workers fall 165 feet to death*. Or you can skip the height and say: *Cable snaps; fall kills 4 workers*.

After that, you have nothing to do but find strong verbs and telling adjectives that fit. Headline writers must cultivate the habit of using strong verbs, lively verbs, illuminating verbs.

I do not mean words like *blast*, *flay* and *hit*, the standbys of headlines. I simply mean you want a precise verb that conveys an image of a specific action. You need a list for future reference? None exists. Make your own this way:

- 1. Attack the next edition of your newspaper with a grease pencil.
- 2. Write in a stronger verb for every headline, even the good ones, in the first 12 pages. Do not worry about the length of your verb; you can struggle with fitting it into the headline some other time.
- 3. Do the same thing every day for a week, with your own newspaper or some other.
- 4. After a week, skip the grease pencil and do the exercise only in your mind.
- 5. After another week, use verbs that fit in the holes left by the verbs you changed. Alternatively, you can adjust the wording in the rest of your practice headline to allow room for your new, muscular verbs.

You wonder whether grown people would do this sort of thing? Yes. Name a baseball hitting star. He probably makes a million dollars a year. He also takes batting practice.

Yes, he gets \$1-million dollars a year, and he's a superior batter already, but he still practices. He gets to bat three to six times every game, but he practices anyway. Why wouldn't a journalist practice?

Why wouldn't a journalist be willing to do something for self improvement?

You have no deadline when you wield the grease pencil.

You can take your time and hit only the pitches that come right over the plate.

If you don't like the word you choose at first, you get to choose another. Eventually, you get a home-run word. And the more you try this practice, the more likely you are to produce a prize headline at deadline time.

PADDING IS FATAL

While you have the grease pencil out, perhaps you can use it to circle all the useless words you find in headlines. Elimination of padding will give you more room to be specific. Example of padding: *President Bush going home to Texas for Thanksgiving holidays*. I fudged on that one to give you plenty of sinners. You need only one word to identify the person involved; either *President* or *Bush* will handle it.

No matter who we have as president, the name alone adequately identifies the person. Then we have *home to Texas*. If we want to emphasize the home angle, we can drop *to Texas*. Otherwise, we can refer to all of that as just *Texas*. (We have a major problem here, in that Bush grew up in Maine. However, he called Texas home in his political campaigns.) Then we have *Thanksgiving holidays*.

This story would run just before the trip, no doubt, so we could use either of the words; we would not need both. All readers would know which holidays we meant. If we just used the word *Thanksgiving*, readers would know we had holidays in mind.

The point: You receive a specified amount of space in which to fit information of great value to readers. You cannot waste any of that room.

You have to tell as much as you can as specifically as you can. You have to fashion a lively string of words that will accurately tell people about something of interest to them in the story your headline covers.

And you don't think you ought to practice?

This article is extracted from Martin Gibson's book, The Writer's Friend, published by Iowa State University Press. Mr Gibson, regents professor of communication at the University of Texas at Austin until his death in 1993, | was also the author of Editing in the Electronic Era, which is also available from Iowa State University Press, 2121 S. State Ave., Ames, Iowa 50010

“Name a
baseball
hitting star.
He probably
makes a
million dollars
a year. He also
takes batting
practice”

WRITING WORTH READING ABOUT JOURNALISM & JOURNALISTS



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This collection of articles from the pages of *RaggedRight* is edited and designed by Tony Sutton, who was editor and publisher of the tabloid from its start in 1992 until it ceased publishing four years later. *RaggedRight* won many awards for its design and typography, but its readers were always attracted by its eclectic variety of articles, from stories on how to improve writing, editing and design skills to fiery criticism of the way journalism has been debased in the past 20 years, helped along by a heathy dollop of humor.

Tony Sutton has been a journalist and consultant for many years, beginning in Britain, where he worked on weekly, provincial and national daily newspapers and magazines. He moved to South Africa in 1975 to become executive editor of the internationally respected *Drum* magazine and consultant to the emerging Black alternative press. Moving to Canada in 1990, he redesigned Canada's national Newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, later becoming North American corporate design consultant with Thomson Newspapers. He is now president of News Design Associates, an international editorial and design consultancy based in Georgetown, Ontario, Canada.



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