

**THE  
BRAIN DEATH  
SYNDROME  
(AND HOW TO BEAT IT)**

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# The Brain Death Syndrome

*(and how to beat it)*

**W**e are strange creatures. Obsessed by declining circulation, newspaper people have slavishly copied every content and design fad that has come along since USA Today burst onto the streets with its graphic snapshots, truncated stories, fine color and funny-looking vending boxes. In a valiant attempt to hang onto our rapidly declining band of readers and entice younger ones, we have abandoned news for features, substituted gossip and lifestyle for exposés, and sent teams of bemused and bewildered reporters to sit idly in shopping malls waiting for ‘news’ to happen.

Yes, we try really hard to be smart, our eyes glued to the horizon, forever seeking trendy new ways to make our product more relevant to an increasingly bored and alienated readership. But, in this frantic race for innovation and change, many editors ignore the often-appalling way they sling their newspapers together. Indeed, much of what they

print each day must make their baffled readers scratch their heads in bewilderment and wonder just who is in charge of the newsroom — the editor or the office cleaner. What do I mean? Well, here are 10 blunders editors at newspapers of all sizes make every day. How many are you guilty of?

### **1. MEANINGLESS HEADS AND VACUOUS PULLQUOTES**

Headlines are signposts to the text of the newspaper. They attract readers and persuade them to take a closer look at the gray stuff underneath. Subheads and pull-quotes add information and draw them into stories they would probably overlook. But what happens when we write unintelligible headlines, with appalling subheads and dull quotes? Nothing! Busy readers skim pages looking for interesting things to read. If the headline information is badly written waffle, they'll skip right over them and the stories beneath and, ultimately, will stop buying the newspaper because it's too dull. The remedy? Scan your newspaper the way the reader does. If the heads mean nothing to you, they'll mean even less to anyone else. Fix them!

### **2. PAGE ONE PROMOS FOR BORING STORIES**

Perhaps the most inane teaser I have ever seen at the top of a newspaper front page said, "Breakfast — See Page 6." But there have been many others that are almost as senseless. Bad promos are counter-productive; they don't tempt readers inside. Instead, they'll persuade them *not* to turn the pages. Run sky-boxes if you can produce scintillating teasers and add eye-catching art without effort. But, if you're continually begging your editors every day for "*anything to fill those god-forsaken holes at the top of the front page,*" there's a simple way to end the anguish. Scrap them. Today!

### **3. PROMINENT DISPLAY OF STORIES OUR OWN STAFF DOESN'T READ**

Tight deadlines, overworked page editors and a computer full of wire stories can tempt the most dedicated editor to fill pages without reading the copy. Can't happen in your office? That's what a Canadian managing editor thought until he asked an editor about two long, boring stories on a late inside page. It turned out the hard-pressed editor who did the layout looked for stories to fit

the holes on the page and dropped them in without bothering to read past the second paragraph. This leads to two more interesting questions we should be asking: How many journalists don't read their own newspaper? Why not?

#### **4. BRIEFS THAT AREN'T**

Columns of short items are the editorial version of the Venus flytrap. They draw readers into areas where they don't necessarily want to go. But they won't work if they're not brief. The longest brief I have seen was seven inches long. And that aint a brief, not even in the Wall Street Journal. The ideal length? About two inches. Anything more needs to be edited, or run elsewhere as a story.

#### **5. NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL PAGES IN HOMETOWN NEWSPAPERS**

Something is wrong when the editorial page of the newspaper for a vibrant community is jammed with long gray wedges of syndicated waffle, an editorial that could be marketed as a sure-fire cure for insomnia, and half a column of Today In History. If you think that national affairs are more important than local issues, and syndicated copy is more valuable than local letters, you're very, very wrong.

#### **6. PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED LIFESTYLE SECTIONS**

If every lifestyle story seems to be a moan, groan or affliction, it may be a result of the it's-too-boring-for-the-news-section-so-we'll-dump-it-in-the-feature-pages mentality. It's also what happens when the ad manager thinks he can sell ads on the back of National Ingrown Toenail Week. But mainly it's the mark of the editor who can't say no. Every self-help group gets a feature, whether it's worthy or not. The solution: Lighten up. Cover a broad selection of stories that will appeal to every one of your readers. And don't forget to add humor to that mix — if a story makes you smile, it should do the same to your readers.

#### **7. CHARTS AND GRAPHICS THAT ARE UNNECESSARY OR INCOMPREHENSIBLE**

Macintosh computers are valuable additions to newsrooms. But don't fall into the trap of producing graphics for every story that contains a set of figures. Why waste 25 inches of valuable front page space on a gaudy lump of art if you

can describe the information quickly and easily in 25 words? And, if you do decide to use a graphic, don't make it so complicated that understanding it demands the mental capacity of a nuclear physicist.

## **8. APPALLING USE OF COLOR**

One of the things USA Today taught us is that superb quality color printing is achievable on newsprint if there is a commitment to excellence. If editors blame photographers for poor color and photographers blame the printer and the printer blames the editor, we'll just go round in circles and get nowhere. Whose responsibility is it? Commitment starts at the top — in the publisher's office — and works down. There's no excuse. We're all responsible!

## **9. DESIGN ELEMENTS THAT MAKE THE PAGE IMPOSSIBLE TO READ**

One of the most memorable pages I saw recently was a section front from a major North American newspaper. The head was good, the art superb, the page appealing. But the important stuff — the text — was unreadable because the designer had obliterated it with a garish background tint. The next day the editor apologized and the story was reprinted without the offending color screen. Don't let art obscure content. Readers buy a newspaper to read, not to admire the skill of the designer. A clean, easy-to-navigate page is more effective than one that defies logic or makes unnatural demands of the reader's vision. If you're not sure about the effects of a certain process, don't use it.

## **10. MEANINGLESS PAGE HEADERS**

I saw a newspaper the other week that had a huge label at the top of Page 2, saying . . . Page 2. Next to it was a large page number, saying . . . A2. Now this may be a small point, but I wonder how many readers read this every day and think that the people who produce the newspaper are not very bright. Page headers are fine if they inform readers what the content of the page is, but overstating the obvious is probably a crime. If not, it should be.



# Ten More Design Myths Debunked

**T**he editor of a newspaper I recently redesigned passed me a letter from a reader, who was clearly not amused with the fruits of my labors. After suggesting several times that the editor ought not to have trusted the redesign to ‘an amateur,’ the critic proceeded to catalogue my many failings. Among a wide-ranging litany of errors, I was admonished for placing the front page lead story in the top left corner of the page when, she claimed, everyone with half a brain knows that the main story should always be on the right hand side of the page. And that set me thinking about how we allow ludicrous laws, ancient axioms and proprietorial diktats to get in the way of clear and effective communication. Here are a few of them:

## **1. LEAD STORIES SHOULD ALWAYS BE ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE PAGE**

This ‘law’ dates back to those good old days when newspapers were the

best show in town and huge banner heads were splayed right across the top of the front page. Journalists in the United States believed that the best place to run the story was on the right hand side of the page, directly beneath the last letters of the headline because, they said, that was where the reader's eye went after reading the head. However, on the other side of the Big Pond, their European colleagues disagreed, arguing that the reader's eye automatically returns to the left after reading each line of type, including huge headlines. So they opted for the left hand lead. Who was right? Who cares? We don't design our newspapers like that any more. Modular layout removes the confusion caused by banks of clashing, screaming headlines. That means we can put the main headline wherever it fits best. Forget the past, do what is best for the story. Just make sure the heads are well-written.

## **2. WHITE SPACE IS BETTER THAN RULES BETWEEN STORIES**

Another hoary blast from the past, this time from the more recent days of the cold-type revolution of the '60s which attempted to clean up some of the more blatant excesses of their hot metal predecessors (and to counter the inability of paste-up staff to lay rules on layout boards in anything resembling a straight line). Current logic agrees that a pica or more of white space is still essential between columns of type and, increasingly, newspapers are helping readers navigate their pages by using vertical column rules and horizontal cut-off rules to separate unrelated stories. And new technology means those rules will — thankfully — be straight.

## **3. TOMBSTONE HEADS CONFUSE THE READER**

Only if each head is set very tight in the same size and typestyle. But no one ever got confused by the placement of a four-line, single column 24pt headline in light type adjacent to one in 72pt Sledgehammer Gothic. Bumping heads are only confusing if they are handled badly. Any problems can easily be eliminated by introducing white space to separate the heads, contrasting bold and light typefaces or using wide, horizontal heads next to multi-line singles. Any further doubts will be resolved by inserting column rules between the stories

## **4. PICTURES OF WRITERS SHOULD ALWAYS ACCOMPANY COLUMNS**

Not necessarily. In fact, there is a good argument for *not* printing pictures of national columnists at all. Why? The pictures are usually so old that you'd prob-

ably not recognize the writers if you were married to them. And a strong case could easily be made for throwing away the pictures of Abby, Royko, Erma and their syndicated buddies and carrying photographs of local columnists, whom you're likely to meet — and recognize — in the street.

### **5. ALL LOCALLY-PRODUCED STORIES AND PHOTOGRAPHS SHOULD GET A CREDIT**

Why? Editors would encourage better journalism if they only gave bylines for the best elements on each page. At one of my old newspapers in the U.K., for example, the only photographs to get a credit line were the big ones at the center of each page and the only stories with bylines were the main ones. Bylines should be a reward for good work, not the divine right for mediocrity.

### **6. ALL PHOTOGRAPHS, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN FULL COLOR, MUST BE SURROUNDED BY A BLACK RULE TO 'HOLD THE EDGE OF THE IMAGE'**

Another relic from the days when presses were so bad that we couldn't print color in register. Modern presses are usually accurate enough that they are unnecessary, especially those thick black rules that make every picture look like an obituary. Thin keyline rules may be justified if they are added to pictures on pages assembled on a pagination system, but I can't think of one reason why we should expect paste-up people to place them around veloxes.

### **7. CUT-OUTS OR MORTICES SHOULD NOT BE USED ON PHOTOGRAPHS BECAUSE THEY DESTROY THE INTEGRITY OF THE IMAGE**

Maybe not on news pages, but feature pages should be fair game for creative cropping and editing of visual images. And cut-out photographs can add definition, movement and impact to some — but not all — photographs. If it works for the staid New York Times, it'll work for a lively small-town daily. But think twice before you start butchering perfectly good images. In fact, think carefully before you do *anything* out of the ordinary.

### **7. SKYBOXES ARE SPACE-WASTERS AND OUGHT NOT TO BE USED ON SMALL NEWSPAPERS**

Not always. Some small papers produce excellent skyboxes; some big newspapers do awful ones. The sensible approach is to use them if you've got something worth billing and ignore them if you haven't.

**8. FRONT PAGE STORIES SHOULD ALWAYS END ON THE SAME PAGE BECAUSE READERS DON'T FOLLOW JUMPS**

Beware of absolutes. A rigid no-jump policy doesn't always work, especially if it leads to gray, boring pages or if good stories have to be brutalized to fit small spaces. Discerning readers won't follow boring stories, but they will follow a single jump, especially if it is a compelling read and easy to find. Perhaps the best policy is to discourage jumps on all but the most important stories and then make sure the jumps are controlled, by allowing a limited amount of space inside. Let the nature of the news determine its treatment.

**9. CUTLINES SET WIDER THAN TWO COLUMNS ARE EASIER TO READ IF THEY ARE BROKEN INTO TWO OR MORE LEGS**

Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't. There is no reason to assume that a reader cannot negotiate a snappy, 45-pica, one-line cutline in 12pt. But six lines of gabble crammed into the same measure with no leading would be a daunting task for the most dedicated customer. As a rule of thumb, the optimum size for cutlines is:

1-column .....	4 lines
2-columns .....	3 lines
3 columns .....	3 lines
4 columns .....	2 lines
5 columns .....	1 line

I've got no complaint if you insist on running type in narrower legs, but please make sure that the number of lines in each leg is even. Nothing looks worse than when three lines on one side are faced by two on the other, especially if the last line is very short.

**10. YOU SHOULDN'T GIVE AWAY THE STORY IN THE HEADLINE**

Get real! Why should customers have to wade through 15 inches of gray stuff to understand what you're trying to say in the three lines of 48pt at the top of the page. Good headlines, with well-crafted subsidiary information, lead the reader naturally into well-written stories. Bad heads don't! If you want to see examples of good headline writing, read the National Enquirer. Your readers certainly do!



# Five Silly Things That Editors Do

**Y**ou know how it is. The sun's shining. A gentle breeze is blowing. There's a picnic basket. The partner of your dreams is beside you. Soft music's playing. All's well with the world. Then you wake up! It's raining like there's no tomorrow. Your brain aches. The dog wants a walk and a wee, but not in that order. And you have to drag your bones into the office where you know the editor is going to moan and whine until you write another three pages of drivel to justify the miserable pittance she pays you. "And something original please; you wrote about supermarket tabloids four issues ago!" Yes, it's Deadline Day. Again. But you're journalists. You know how I feel. Welcome to my rant, this time about five of the silly things newspaper people do, starting with:

## **1. REDESIGN DUMMIES THAT DON'T LOOK ANY DIFFERENT FROM THE ORIGINAL PAGES**

I've got one in front of me right now. The editor has done his best. The

pages have been remade and printed so the new ones face the originals and can be compared. There's a sheath of notes explaining the new typography, the restyling of the nameplate, new sigs and myriad other small details. So, what's the problem? Well, I can't tell which of the pages are new and which are the originals. Nor could anyone else I showed the redesign to.

Now, I'm not suggesting that the editor should have gone overboard, throwing out every recognizable characteristic of the paper in an effort to be on the cutting edge of style. But it seems obvious to me that change has to be noticeable if it is to be effective, even at a small town monopoly daily.

And when I say noticeable I don't mean garish. You don't need to turn the nameplate sideways or splash colored ink all over the page or go in for visual gymnastics on the lifestyle front to create significant change.

What you should do, however, is to look at the content of each page, the flow of the ads, the length of the stories, the pacing of the sections and the overall feel of the paper. And ask yourself what's wrong with it and discover ways of correcting deficiencies. Think before you act. A change of typefaces does not constitute a redesign; your newspaper and its readers deserve more.

Redefine, then redesign. Experiment with type, structure and style. Blue sky ideas. Incorporate those that work, reject those that don't. Don't be content simply to make your newspaper different — make it better.

## **2. STORIES THAT I CAN'T UNDERSTAND; HEADLINES THAT ARE GIBBERISH**

In my job, I have the fortune (sometimes good, often not) to be asked to review, critique and offer suggestions for improving the appearance and content of newspapers of all shapes, sizes and circulations. I have the advantage in that I approach the product as a new reader — and, as we all know, they are ones most newspapers want. The greatest problem I find is stories that are so complicated that they become meaningless (and I differ from the average reader in that I *force* myself to read the stories from beginning to end — often several times).

Short stories are not a problem, except when they omit important facts. But long 'important' stories are an entirely different species, especially when they involve meetings of more than two elected representatives, most of whom seem to speak a different language from ordinary folk. So what do our reporters do when faced with these problems? Do they ask for clarification of the gubernato-

rial gibberish? Do they paraphrase the convoluted claptrap into a language we can all understand? Not on your life, they don't. They run the waffle in the first paragraph and hope it all makes sense.

Then it goes to the city editor, who glances at it and hastily passes it on to the page editor, who hasn't got time to figure out what it all means. Anyway, he's got another problem — the headline. How can he describe something he doesn't understand? Simple: Put part of the offending garbage between quotation marks and hope no one says anything. Then we scratch our heads and wonder why it's so hard to attract new readers.

### **3. GRAPHICS THAT ARE MEANINGLESS**

I've got a special place at the top of my hit list for newspapers editors who are still obsessed by the need to clamber aboard the graphics bandwagon that began with USA Today a generation ago. Especially guilty are those who genuinely believe that the act of plonking a computer on an editor's desk will instantly transform him or her into a magician who can pull electronic rabbits out of the box 10 minutes before each day's deadline. That only happens in fairytales. Good graphic artists are hard to find; that's why major newspapers pay them so much. Artists need lots of information and time to do the job properly. And much of what they do won't get into the newspaper because of editing decisions made as news changes during the course of the day. If you've got the resources, the skills, the energy, the space and the quality of print to do consistently good graphics that add valuable information to the stories they accompany, do them. But, if you use them because they're oh-so-trendy and such a cute way of filling that ugly gray space at the foot of page one, you should think again.

### **4. PHOTOGRAPHS THAT ARE MANIPULATED TO FIT SPACES LEFT ON PAGE LAYOUTS**

I was in the sports department of a large newspaper recently and had an interesting conversation with an editor who was determined to place a picture that demanded a deep, shallow crop into a square hole. We conferred over the Mac as the color technician tried to make the picture fit. No, no, no, no, no. You can't do it, I said. Why not? he responded. *Why not ...!!!??*

Because it's lazy and it's inconsiderate and it's thoughtless and it's shoddy

journalism. That's why. Good, well-cropped and carefully-sized photographs are worth their weight in words. They are a doorway into the page. Readers see them and respond by looking at the heads and stories that surround them. Then they read. So, put the main pictures on the page first, then assemble the other elements around them. Make them fit their natural shape, don't mutilate them into a pre-ordained shape because you can't be bothered to change a layout.

If we can't be bothered to do our job properly, how can we expect the reader to care?

## **5. STALE NEWS THAT EVERYONE WHO CARED SAW ON TV 12 HOURS EARLIER**

Newspapers are about news. Fresh news. If readers know about it, it's not news. If they saw the event you're heralding on the front page move across their TV screen last night, it's not news. If the A section of your newspaper is full of stories off the national and international wires, it's incomplete.

News is what affects the lives of your readers. It makes them laugh. It makes them cry. It makes them talk. It makes them respond. And it makes them look forward to the newspaper. It makes them continue their subscriptions.

Define your own notion of what constitutes news and put the plan into action. Make it work. Don't complain about lack of resources, staff or effort. Do something about it. Look after your readers if you want to retain them.

Well, that's about it. The moral of my rant should be clear: Many of the current ills of newspapers, including declining circulations and disinterested readers are caused by people who just can't find the time or the energy or the enthusiasm to do their job as well as they ought to.

It's not too late to change.

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