

THE ERGONOMICS OF READING

By Sarah Rink

The last ten to fifteen years have presented one of the most challenging periods for the printing industry. In less than 10 years, the way people consume news has changed faster and more radically than ever in the history of news. The influence of the internet, and the spread of new gadgets such as palmtops, multifunctional mobile phones and ever-shrinking laptops, has drawn a large question mark on the future of the printed daily. Clearly, the TV and the radio still play an important role in the way that people absorb information. However, newspapers are no longer the sole providers of *written* news, and increasingly face stronger, faster and more modern competitors under the big umbrella of the Internet.

Realising the impact of these changes, media company experts started to tackle the question of how they might be able to fight what they called “the enemy” – the Internet. The top issue in media meetings and conferences has been to analyse whether the newspaper, in its current form, still has a chance in the voracious new media market, or whether it is doomed to lose its shine and die away. The importance of this issue for the newspaper industry cannot be underestimated: recently, Alan Mutter, a media entrepreneur, estimated that North American newspapers have lost 42% of their value in the past 3 years, mainly due to the success of online publications.

Among the strategies outlined by media companies in their struggle to survive, the most remarkable change has probably been the change in newspaper size. In the United Kingdom, as in many other countries, a newspaper’s dimensions used to be an unmistakable symbol of its editorial line: broadsheet papers were the vehicle of the reference media with serious, intellectual journalism. At the other end of the line, the tabloids were small, down-market publications highlighting gossip, sports, crime and sensational news.

Then, in 2003, to the surprise of many, the left-leaning English reference newspaper *The Independent* decided to create a ‘tabloid’ version. It shrunk the contents that were before spread onto its broadsheet pages and fit them into a smaller tabloid-like size, called the ‘compact size’. The term ‘compact’ was used instead of ‘tabloid’ to differentiate these new reference products from the down-market ones.

The response from the public was simply immense. The success of this new format was so great that within two years, virtually all the British national papers were publishing in compact form, or

were circulating with editions in two different sizes. The change in the newspaper market brought in by *The Independent* was known as ‘the compact revolution’ and it spread all over the world, through Europe, Asia and South America.

Why was it that a company decided to undertake such a risky venture? Why would it challenge a paradigm established more than 100 years ago? Many editors who took part in the ‘compact revolution’ said that the compacts were more ‘user-friendly’. It seems now pretty obvious that the tabloid format was more user-friendly: it was a format for London, a city where 3 million people squeeze into Tube carriages every day. Anyone who’s ever tried to read a newspaper inside a London Underground train knows that it is often impossible to move one’s arms at all, let alone spread pages spanning half a metre. However, the question still remains: why did the media industry suddenly start caring about the ergonomics of reading? Are readers becoming more demanding? Or was it just a daring strategy born in a marketing department brainstorm session?

While this question is still to be answered, a major consequence of the strategy is that every professional in this industry – from newspaper editors to the designers and printing plants – are suddenly concerned about the ‘usability’ of their papers. Media groups in Central America disposed of perfectly functional printing machines and replaced them with new ones, solely because they wanted to print full colour, tabloid size papers. All the projects created by editorial design companies such as *Cases i Associats* and *Garvia Media* sang the same song: if it is good for the reader, it is good for us. Newspapers should be warm and friendly.

But what does it mean to be ‘more warm and friendly’? What do design projects for newspapers circulating across disparate cultures and environments have in common? Across the world, newspapers are now not only compact, but they are also full colour, so that they immediately create an impact on the reader. They also have a clear structure, so that the reader can search for information in a more rational, logical way than was the case in old-style broadsheet newspapers. Their layout is now more accessible for the human mind. And, finally, the information is displayed in a more bite-sized way, so as to be more easily absorbed by the readers.

What is really striking is that this description of ‘compact revolution’ editorial design could perfectly fit a description of a well-designed website. And if we look at newspapers through a more critical lens, one can see that instead of creating a new identity, newspapers are actually copying websites’ structures and outlooks. It is difficult to judge how good – or bad – this kind of news is.

The positive aspect of this outcome is that editorial designers and media companies get more and more conscious about the ergonomics of reading, the importance of creating better and more natural mappings for their products, and, above all, providing readers with a more pleasurable experience. An organized layout of information makes things less stressful for the reader and helps them absorb and retain information, turning the effort of reading into an enjoyable practice. Thus it seems quite logical to make readers feel good if one wants to sell more newspapers.

On the other hand, I wonder if the 'compact revolution' has also decreased the reader's tolerance for longer, denser, and more analytical articles. Does

'more usable' also mean 'more superficial'? By forcing all news into bite-sized compartments, are designers limiting the depth of analysis, and therefore diminishing the critical abilities of readers around the world? If so, I would consider it an inappropriate application of the concepts of ergonomics and usability by editorial design professionals. This possibility should be reviewed if we want to prevent future readers from having very comfortable, but very shrivelled, minds.

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