

Why News Design Matters

Why is journalism in the situation it is, surrounded by a climate of pessimism, lost prestige, and mistrust? While the answers may lie beyond the scope of this book, still, the soul-searching that has been done arrives at the realization that a fair amount of responsibility lies with us, the journalists. We are where we are because we journalists have allowed it, actively participated in creating a crisis that envelops the printed word.

The goal of this book is not to cast more doubt or blame; however, at this moment in the evolution of news design it is vitally important to have an honest discussion if we wish to further the state of journalism. As designers, we must sincerely explore the attitudes, criteria, and tools that can offer journalism great opportunities. As seen in these pages, it is storytelling that will always remain at the root, with visual journalism becoming an essential factor in the reinvention of newspapers. This tool is not magic in itself. But for newspapers to continue to thrive, design can critically enrich and better prepare them for the future. It is unrealistic to think of a good newspaper today without also thinking of a strong, consistent, and appealing visual approach.

Though still a recurring theme in books, articles, and conferences, the death of print newspapers has not yet come. Despite its decline, print continues to be an indispensable point of reference in terms of quality. Apart from a few exceptions, none of the so-called “legacy” newspapers are seriously considering closing down their print edition—not yet at least. Doing so would mean less visibility, less credibility, and a significant loss in revenue. Several media publishers, having believed they were all-powerful, quickly discovered the abyss they leapt into upon entering the digital world without the safety net of a print edition.

In 2013, French journalists Laurent Beccaria and Patrick de St-Exupéry published a manifesto on journalism in the twenty-first century (*Manifeste XXI. Un autre journalisme*

est possible). The first paragraph of this powerful document reads as follows:

“And what if they were wrong? And what if digital conversion was a lethal trap for the printed press? And what if print media publishers around the world blundered by investing all they had in apps, websites, and multimedia news-rooms? And what if the ethereal numbers of page views and the extraordinary confluence of press mastheads transformed into “media brands” was a scam? [...] In our opinion, the press, having folded in the face of the technological bluff with its exponential growth rates and its gleaming glass city, has entangled itself in a continuing cycle of absurd decisions.”

On very few occasions have I read a more unflinchingly self-critical declaration or one that our profession more urgently needed to hear. The principal conclusions of the essay by Beccaria and de St-Exupéry, publishers of France’s quarterly magazine *XXI* and, as of January 2018, the weekly *Ebdo*, are equally provocative: 1.) the digital world is not responsible for the current crisis; 2.) in print or on screen, journalism must bravely undertake a profound journalistic revolution from the ground up; and 3.) it is possible to imagine a post-internet news media, one without advertising, independent, and conceived of for the benefit of readers.

This book is an homage to print newspapers but one that seeks to be realistic instead of overly romantic when it comes to print. The press has made countless contributions over the decades to quality journalism and, by extension, to a mature dialogue as a steward of democratic societies. Today, more than ever before, when the profession of journalism and the entire industry are weathering difficulties and threats to their credibility, it is important to pay tribute to newspapers. It is essential to defend them in the face of passing fads and misguided whims. And it is also necessary to raise a voice and remember that journalism can and should be published in various formats because each one contributes to the whole.

In light of all this, I firmly believe that print newspapers have a future in the digital age and will continue to play a key role within news production.

The future is (also) the past

Journalistic design is not a trivial subject. It is true that the news is not created by visual journalists and that design alone cannot justify or sustain a newspaper, but it is also true that visual journalism is essential for the correct presentation of the news and can enhance the impact and comprehension of a story. And today, this is what matters more than ever.

Before the world went digital, a few pioneers understood this: the first newspaper to be truly designed was the *New York World*. Purchased by Joseph Pulitzer in 1883 when it was in financial trouble, it grew to become the newspaper with the largest circulation in the United States over the next few years. Aside from its ferocious battle with Hearst’s *New York Journal* toward the end of the nineteenth century, the *World* promoted investigative journalism, added women to the news staff, created weekend supplements, and launched the first-ever supplement printed in color. It also published the first crossword puzzle and legendary comic strip *The Yellow Kid*. Above all, it developed an impressive visual language that gives this newspaper a notable place in the history of journalistic design. All visual journalists and any student of journalism or design should be required to study the pages of its Sunday edition as a source of inspiration.

The *World* pioneered many of the approaches and formulas today considered leading forms of storytelling. Rarely has there been a newspaper with better integration of text and image. The WED concept (Writing, Editing, Designing) espoused by Mario García, among the most famous news designers in history, was in fact invented by the *World* 120 years ago.

1. Purchased by Joseph Pulitzer in 1883, the *New York World* is one of the high points in the history of visual journalism, particularly its Sunday edition, which perfectly combined text, illustration, and dazzling infographics. The *World* “invented”, among other things, the in-color weekend supplement and investigative journalism. It was also the first newspaper to publish a crossword puzzle.

2. In 1963 Peter Palazzo redesigned the *New York Herald Tribune*,

the first-ever instance of modular design being used on a newspaper.

3. The first issue of *USA Today* went on sale on September 15, 1982. Published by Gannett, it was considered to be the first truly national newspaper in the United States. Richard Curtis was the creator of the graphic project and head of design at the newspaper for nearly three decades. Among other innovations introduced by *USA Today* was the full-color, page-width weather map.



1.



2.



3.

But prior to the 1960s and 1970s, the term “journalistic design” was not known, and the figure of the art director had not yet emerged. Peter Palazzo, Massimo Vignelli, and Lou Silverstein are fundamental to this history. In 1963, Palazzo realized the revolutionary redesign of the moribund *New York Herald Tribune*. He installed a modular system and a grid with wider columns that were more legible than those habitually used by newspapers of the time. He reduced the typography to a single font, Caslon, and introduced for the first time a summary, or index, of that issue’s content on the front page. Last but not least, he dared to introduce compositional criteria to newspapers, similar to that of magazines.

Vignelli, for his part, had never worked for a newspaper, but in 1971 he broke all the molds when he devised the layout for the *Herald*. His proposal for the weekly *New York paper* made a push for horizontality, something radical in that era: all the pages of the publication, which used a two-section tabloid format, were organized in a functional system of horizontal structure that ensured rapid production. In place of the traditional eight columns, it only had six. Its grid was divided into 17 vertical modules, with all headline elements vertically fitted to one of these modules, giving the pages an almost mathematical continuity.

The design used only one font: Times New Roman. “To design a newspaper means to organize the information in such a way that it will facilitate the makeup of the issue [...] and in the end, to convey the information to the reader in the clearest way possible,” Vignelli himself explained in the book *Vignelli: From A to Z*.

Steven Hessler, writer, designer, and director of the New York School of Visual Arts, wrote: “All that unused white space, precisionist modular layout and limited use of typefaces and point sizes [...] the *Herald* was so beautiful that I could cry.” In that same year, Frank Ariss created a redesign for the *Star Tribune* of Minneapolis that is legendary for its reticular

system and for the original use of Helvetica as the headline font. Both Vignelli and Ariss influenced entire schools of design with their work.

Lou Silverstein is considered the first art director in modern journalism. Unlike Palazzo and Vignelli, he did work for a news outlet, the *New York Times*, making his contributions from inside the newspaper. Silverstein created new forms of visualization for the legendary Op-Ed page, paving the way for infographics to become what it is today. In 1976, he established the new content structure of the *Times*. “It was a rethinking of the paper that was as important to its future then as the internet is today, and one that influenced newspaper

design nationwide,” wrote the *New York Times* of Silverstein’s legacy in his 2011 obituary. Silverstein demonstrated how far a designer could go within a news organization, as well as the profound influence that design can have on every level.

From the “boom” to design as an organizational change agent

In 1978, the Society for News Design (SND) was founded in the United States. Journalistic design was introduced to universities as a discipline, and the first computers arrived in