

THE GREAT AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

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Last week for the first time, my son joined me when I read the Sunday newspaper. He donned his petitioning look — half smile, half squint — and said, “Can I have the, uh, comics?” I’m territorial when it comes to my newspaper, but that section, well, it’s just a wrapper for the ads and color supplements. So I handed it over, and he said thanks and spread himself out on the rug. A typical Sunday paper takes me an hour, turning pages from front to back at the dining room table, but when I was finished, he was still poring over the funny papers. Things like “Mary Worth” don’t really interest my nine-year-old boy, and so, I wondered, what was he doing? What makes him want to use a newspaper so badly that he will wade through comic strips that must be to him incomprehensible?

My own fascination with the newspaper began early. I remember my father, seated in the big armchair, hidden except for his legs and fingertips behind the *Salt Lake Tribune*. My mother read, as I do now, at the table. As a child, I can remember wanting to read the newspaper, too. I began at about my son’s age with the comics, first reading “Nancy” and then adding “Beetle Bailey” and others. When I could read them all, I began skipping the ones I didn’t care for. Then I would look at the rest of the newspaper, moving from cartoon to cartoon — they had these sprinkled around then — and I sometimes discovered amazing little fillers. On the front page I found “Today’s Chuckle,” and on the local news page something called “Sam the Sad Cynic Says,” in a column by someone named Dan Valentine. Before long I was reading the whole column. News stories began to catch my eye, and then I was hooked.

Reading the newspaper seemed like a grown-up thing to do. When I started reading the business news, sometime in college, it felt like a rite of passage. Getting through the page was work, but I thought I was old enough, so I stuck with it. Now I browse those pages, too. I don’t know if the way I use the newspaper can be called reading. What once seemed a significant task now seems inconsequential. I hardly pay attention, skimming over the headlines, reading less and less as I get older, or skipping directly to the item or two that I read by habit.

Yet I can’t get along without a newspaper. Sometimes in disgust I cancel my local paper, only to subscribe again. My father did this, too, switching to the *Deseret News* and back again. Living in a two-newspaper town, he could have his tantrums without missing a single day’s news. While living in the New Hampshire countryside, I would travel ten miles every Sunday through snow, freezing rain, or mud, to pick up the *Boston Globe* at the village store — the same trip I would grumble about taking for a gallon of milk. But a newspaper is more than food. It is a ritual, little understood, that I am handing down to my sons. It is a part of my cultural heritage as well as a convenience, a tool for daily living. Even as I read it less I depend on it more, and that makes me curious about the newspaper as an object.

What is to prevent a daily newspaper from being made the greatest organ of social life?

— James Gordon Bennett, Sr.

Watching my son explore the newspaper made me see it with new eyes, and I didn't like what I saw. Newspapers have changed since I began reading them. Someone has been tinkering. Now, instead of all those real-life events, serendipitous cartoons, clipped opinions, and odd facts, we seem to get fewer and fewer items, all of the less-disposable type: literary-style news analysis, fine art illustrations, arcane criticism, and popular-mechanics charts. In my lifetime, *The New York Times* has slowly metamorphosed from a newspaper of record to a newsmagazine of polite opinion. The elites in my middle American town read it to learn what issues and problems are fashionable. Smaller newspapers follow suit. My local newspaper is not a newspaper of record but of conservative fashion, political as well as social.

The newspaper was once a grubbier, lower, more attractive form. As a product of the machine age, it reached its apex in this century. Picasso, in his collages of 1912–13, identified the role of the newspaper in modern iconography: he cut it up, using news stories as a background for ordinary life, represented by the cafe table, wine, and music. He thus identified its pervasive role as the typographic texture of this century. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol's black-and-white paintings of newspaper pages and, in the 1980s, Barbara Kruger's works imitating tabloid typefaces have brought the trend to its contemporary apotheosis.

By continuing its present course, the newspaper could become like the foundry type in which our first newspapers were set: a quaint antique, symbolizing a bygone era. In its place, some journalists predict it will metamorphose into another form: The paper won't yellow, the ink won't rub off, and the first edition probably won't be so cheap. But before we destroy the popular form, perhaps we should try to find out why the newspaper has changed, how its design affects readers, and what consequences it has on our society.

Journalism consists in buying white paper at two cents a pound and selling it at ten cents a pound.

— Charles A. Dana

The American newspaper is fascinating in its functions. Before it ends up in the trash, it gets wrapped around rubbish, used to line bird cages or wash windows, rolled up for a weapon against flies, or spread overhead as an umbrella. Children rip it up to make papier-mâché, put it under clay putty and paint boxes, fold it into airplanes and paper hats. It's a gift wrap, padding for parcels, a drop cloth, tinder, and a wrapper for hot peanuts at the game. Some people even roll logs and make dresses and lamps from it. There is something appealing about the pattern and the texture, and also something symbolic.

Newspapering expresses American values — the entrepreneurial zeal of the reporter, interviewing people, being places first. It is objectivity and object, American idealism made material. It is an invention by a culture of inventors, a gadget, a gimcrack, a gizmo, an all-purpose object not unlike the American city — congested, exciting, funny, and just a bit garish. A newspaper is the American persona played up big — a braggart, a schemer, a behind-the-scenes do-gooder, a power broker, a dynamo, a know-it-all. News travels fast, and a newspaper is an artifact of deadlines, hustle, clang and crash, rolls of paper flying through the presses, headlines twice the size of the events shouted rapidfire from the street corner. The newspaper is American overabundance embodied — an embarrassment of facts, more than anyone could ever digest, a

luxury of stories to be mined and picked over, bargain-basement style. It expresses the American love for the compendium, the almanac, the Whitmanesque listing.

The newspaper is an essentially democratic form. Just about everybody can afford one. Because it crosses the barriers of race, money, and status, it is the tributary of universal suffrage. It informs the self-governing citizenry. “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government,” said Jefferson, “I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” The newspaper is the fourth estate, a vital check on government, a watchdog for the republic. On the pages of the newspaper are distilled the misery and misfortune, comedy and catastrophe of national life. Reading news is a civic duty taught in American schools. Citizens assert more proprietary interest in their local newspaper than they do in any mere business. We call it “our newspaper,” and we chastise it for any lapse in completeness or accuracy because it is the tangible record of our community life. But it records more than that. The local newspaper chronicles important events from the lives of acquaintances, neighbors, friends — lives like our own. Personal experience day by day is played against a backdrop of news. We remember our own lives by the texture of the news of the day. And once in a while our own lives become news.

My family has appeared in the newspaper spotlight only a few times. Once was when my sister fell from our apartment window. She was only two or three years old, trying to reach a doll propped on the sill. She fell two-and-a-half stories to the sidewalk below and survived only because she landed on the doll. That was a news story. I know about it — this was before I was born — because the family has two relics of the event: one is my sister’s bent little finger, which was the only thing broken in the fall; the other is a newspaper clipping (“Doll Breaks Drop”). In some envelope or bureau or trunk, American families save the clippings about our births and weddings and blue ribbons won. A relative once showed me the front-page story about my mom. She was identified as a mother of six. The reporter had tried to reconstruct the last moments of her life, before she fell from Ensign Peak near Salt Lake City (“Fall Injury Fatal”). The paper was yellowed and worn. It felt strangely thick and brittle. I held it only for a moment before folding it back into its place between the pages of a book. These scraps of newsprint bearing the traces of our lives are somehow beyond price.

No printed medium has as much room for ordinary people as a newspaper does. Books are for the renowned, magazines for the celebrity. As a child I was taught to respect books, not to write in them, fold them, or tear them, but to handle them with care, to use a bookmark, a book bag, and to make a brown paper cover. My family treasured any magazines that came into the house. Copies of *National Geographic* were displayed on the coffee table, arrayed in the shape of a fan. A far cry from the stately book or chic magazine, the newspaper is jerry-rigged, a Rube Goldberg form — big, fat, and dirty, like old American industry. The ink comes off on your fingers and clothes. The paper smells of dust and makes you sneeze. Inelegant and ephemeral, the newspaper is least among forms. But it bears examination because it has entered the American mythology, an image enshrined by what Roland Barthes called the process of signification.

I love the weight of American Sunday newspapers. Pulling them up off the floor is good for the figure.
— Noel Coward

Americans pay scant attention to the visible form of things. Such considerations are thought to be mere window dressing for the substance that lies in words and actions. Aesthetic concerns, devoid of practical value, are relegated to kindergarten, where art is a form of play. In school,

Americans study words, and our visual knowledge remains as we acquired it in childhood. Visually uneducated, we find it difficult to appraise the form rather than the content of the news. If we could again see a newspaper as a child does before learning to read, we would be aware of it as an *object*. Instead of events and ideas, the page would be the sum of its musty smell and taste, the crackling sounds it makes, and its significant link to our parents. Somewhere in our earliest memories, we retain this sensual and emotional tie to the newspaper form.

The visual appearance of the page — the blacks and whites in different textures and shades of gray, forming a multitude of shapes in many sizes — still resonates with meaning, even if it is inarticulate. When we see a horizontal shape, even as a small child, we can make sense of it by drawing on our experience with flat things in the environment. The horizon, building foundations, and our own position in sleep seem tranquil. Anything vertical we can associate with standing erect and with the precarious images of cliffs and skyscrapers.

In a newspaper, short lines of type get stacked into vertical shapes. The same text in long lines will make a low horizontal shape. Research suggests that horizontal blocks of text seem comfortable; vertical columns create a hostile environment for reading. But at either extreme, the lines will cause discomfort: too short, and you're jumping constantly from word to word and struggling with hyphenations; too long, and you get lost going from one line down to the next.

All the graphic attributes of the text and headlines — how large the type is, the amount of space between the lines — can be varied to extremes or kept neutral. Headlines with bold, condensed, italic type made entirely of capital letters seem active; headlines with lighter weights and lowercase letters seem more calm. Laying out a newspaper page involves dozens of decisions about size and shape not only of text but of pictures and other elements. Each decision pushes the image toward the calm or energetic extremes, or nearer the neutral ground.

Any newspaper we read conveys its personality through the accumulation of these visual cues. We assume that it is the writing that makes the difference, but that is only partly true. When we see the same wire story laid out differently in, say, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Post*, we draw different conclusions about the quality, clarity, and authority of the writing. No matter how strenuously we may deny it, the form of the news matters. It elicits meanings from our personal experience. It gives substance to a ritual of daily living and weaves our individual lives into the fabric of American culture.

Behold the whole huge earth sent to me hebdomadally in a brown-paper wrapper!

— James Russell Lowell

The form of the newspaper developed slowly, beginning late in the eighteenth century, as American journalists adapted the newspaper from its European antecedents. The process was an accretion, like the building of a coral reef. By the 1930s, enough structural remains of the attitudes, values, and beliefs of publishers and journalists accumulated that the newspaper became the embodiment of an American myth, its contours clearly defined. The form was a naive expression of the culture: its philosophy democratic and idealistic, its personality busy, crowded, and complicated. It was a seat-of-the-pants product of people and machinery driven to the limits to put out all the news first, however crude the form. Strong, a little pushy or brazen, it embodied perfectly the urgent and combative quality of the news. This American mythology is stored in cultural memory as an image, and it probably bears more resemblance to the *Daily Planet* than to any real newspaper.

If you were to invent a form that expressed the whole brash hubbub of daily news, you would probably recreate the mythological American newspaper, and it would probably look something like this: The text typography would be as small as possible — pushing right to the limits of intelligibility (and beyond what some could read without a magnifying glass). You would make the columns narrow, say four or five words wide (about one alphabet). Text columns would be very vertical, as vertical as you could get them. For headlines, you would choose typography that again pushes the reader to the limits, would make them bold, condensed, all capital letters — all the things that emphasize the vertical aspects of the letterform. You would use a typeface that is crude and dense, one that would withstand the pounding of thousands of impressions of metal on paper. You would use italic type. Legibility research shows that all these things present difficulties for the reader; but then, so does news. Instead of arranging the elements neatly in boxes, you would scatter them and build up irregular shapes, so that stories, especially major ones, would have a jagged silhouette. You wouldn't leave any space but would crowd everything in, and you would develop a complex system that would create layering, so that at any distance, new items would become apparent. You would cram in as many tiny items as you could. Of course you would use pictures that were equally active: people at war, riots, or at the very least, felons being led from court. You would play them as large as the dense packing of the page would permit, but never so large that they did not seem detailed, and you would squeeze in mug shots to exaggerate the difference of scale.

I am not talking here about any single styling detail that newspaper editors like to debate — whether to use ruled lines between the columns or a specific typeface like Bodoni. The newspaper has taken a thousand individual styles within the larger parameters of this mythological form. What is significant is not the particulars of dress but the overall pattern, which reveals our assumptions about the role of the newspaper in culture and its use by common people.

A headline is not an act of journalism, it is an act of marketing.

— Harold Evans

Reporters and editors nowadays believe that their stories get read — much as a book gets read, only quicker. For that purpose, a busy, crowded, complicated newspaper will not do. What is needed, it is felt, is clarity and simplicity, so that the ideas can flow unhindered by the setting. Besides informing the reader, editors will admit other purposes — to entertain, warn, persuade, enlighten, and so on. These uses are no different from those of a book, and are best served by the clear, simple appearance of a book page. When editors hire researchers to study the best typography, they convey these purposes. And researchers bring their own set of assumptions. Typographic research has traditionally focused on the problems of legibility (whether letterforms can be easily identified) and readability (whether words can be comfortably understood). The researcher typically measures the speed of reading and the comprehension — two activities enhanced by a neutral typographic form, such as that found in books.

Designers and artists contribute yet another set of assumptions about newspaper design, most of them based on aesthetics. They want the newspaper page to achieve a modicum of unity, balance, contrast, rhythm, and proportion. This vocabulary of form, attributed to classical philosophy, suggests a marketing strategy: make the page pleasing to the eye, and thus entice the reader to sample the editorial product. Artists tend to admire the painting as a form, designers the book. In art school, the newspaper doesn't rate.

Now these assumptions of writers, artists, and researchers would never get you to the mythological newspaper form I just described. The typography of the text, if you tested it on any group, would not score well on any of the measures of legibility. The researcher would say, make the columns wider, make the type larger, use a face that is less crude so that the form of each letter is more legible. The researcher could prove that type in all capital letters is harder to read, bold type is harder to read. Indented, italic, and centered headlines would not test nearly as well as any of the less tortured forms. The researcher would say, get rid of the boldface, make the headline “down style” (lowercase except for the initial capital letter), in roman, of a reasonable size, and don’t make it either so horribly long or short. Keep it in the neutral zone.

The graphic artist would hate *everything* about the typography and would strongly support the researcher — but would add a few more suggestions. She would dislike the irregular shapes and would want those jagged forms removed. She would want all the little items, spread haphazardly on the page, to be grouped together and given a home. Order and logic would require that. There’s just too much going on here, she would say, and besides, with this new, larger type on wider, more horizontal columns, you’ve got to get rid of all this junk, clean it out. Then it will look accessible, inviting. So the designer, along with the researcher, pushes, and the poor editor, like any naive artist, yields. After all, the editor thinks, reporters want their stories longer and photographers want their pictures bigger. And, anyhow, these complicated pages are hard to lay out!

What these assumptions of writers, artists, and researchers have done, bit by bit, is dismantle the newspaper from its native, expressive, mythological form. Publishers first began to hire typography and marketing experts in the 1930s and graphic designers in the 1960s. By the 1970s, the newspaper began to resemble something else entirely. It looked like a book, or a magazine, or a poster — anything but a newspaper. By 1980, Mario García, a leading newspaper consultant, admired the Midland, Texas, newspaper for being “clean, easy-to-read,” for its “large photos, and an almost totally horizontal format for its front page. The nameplate . . . has been surrounded with white space. . . Few stories are played up on page one, but they are packaged to provide comfortable reading. The headlines show little size variation. . . This type of front page is easy to design and easy to look at.”

News expands to fill the time and space allotted to its coverage.
— William Safire

The content of the newspaper changed as well. Stories were longer, and there were fewer of them. Where once a reporter wrote at least half a dozen stories in a day, now he wrote one or part of one. Instead of three stories written on three different fires in the city, an editor would run only the biggest or combine the information from all three into one story built around a similarity, a unifying element, or theme. One of the fires might be described as an example, representing all the fires of that sort, or the story might focus on any of a number of fire-related issues or trends. Somewhere along the line, editors, perceiving a need to differentiate a newspaper from a television set, hit upon the length of the story as print journalism’s principal distinction. Stories, they discovered, could be made longer by spinning out the facts into a web of interpretations, historic as well as topical. And that is what journalists did.

The new long journalism removed a critical, structural support from the traditional, mythological newspaper. Individual lives, in long journalism, came to be treated as examples of larger problems, and the newspaper became distanced from the individual citizen. But news that is

less particular is more frustrating than cathartic. Fires end, but issues are never resolved. In the long journalism, the house across town didn't burn, instead society confronted a chronic wiring problem in its aging stock of housing.

This shift from reporting single events to creating news roundups and analyses has contributed to the widespread perception of the last thirty years that we have more problems and that they have become more intractable. It has also fed the public sense that editors report only bad news. Although it is not so much the negative events as it is the negative *meanings* that readers find oppressive, their objections have spurred on the effort to make the news at least *look* better. But cleaning up the form has only exacerbated the problem. Alternative tabloids designed in the 1970s commonly had a single story on page 1. Even the supermarket tabloids did not remain immune. The *National Enquirer* and the *Star* redesigned their front pages, and weird stories about aliens and deformed babies began to appear in neat little boxes reproduced in crisp color, an utter contradiction of form and content. Readers are not fooled by these beautification projects; their response in focus group research has been to say that the world is not so neat and pretty.

In the 1980s some newspapers, influenced by *USA Today*, put more charts and graphs on the page, adopted color, and so on. These changes made newspapers resemble television. Editors revile *USA Today* because it joined the competition. Even its vending machines look like TV sets. Not only its form but also its contents break with the newspaper of mythology. Despite the brevity, its reporting places even greater distance between individuals and the news by subsuming them into the mass, where they participate in trends that begin with the phrase, "We're becoming more . . ."

Something significant has happened to newspapers, and it has principally to do with the scale of things. The page itself has gotten smaller as the price of newsprint has gone up, and because of the assumptions of editors and designers, the things on the page have gotten larger and fewer. You could probably fit the contents of two or three contemporary front pages onto one front page of the *Daily Planet*.

The size of things in a newspaper expresses the fundamental definition of what is news. How "big" a story is, whether it gets on the front page or into the newspaper at all, have come to depend on its level of abstraction, on the secondary meaning that a reporter or editor can assign it. This journalism flies in the face of the broadly accepted sense of the term. To characterize any writing as journalistic places it within a tradition, bounded by the "direct presentation of facts or description of events without an attempt at interpretation," to quote Merriam-Webster. Covering events in the lives of common people, once the heart of reporting, has become a drudgery to be avoided in the new long journalism. A typical undergraduate journalism assignment is to analyze the meaning of an event, to do what professors call "making sense" of the news. The typical cub reporter wants to be a columnist — to write opinion and commentary, which is believed, rightly or wrongly, to provide the ultimate freedom from reporting ordinary news events. Reporters interview other reporters, asking for news analysis, or they all go on radio or TV to present their differing points of view. With so much going on in the world, journalists argue, readers need packaged explanations. The facts alone lack meaning. All of these changes are to the good, if newspaper editors and designers are right in their assumptions about how we use the newspaper. Are they right? I don't think so.

Newspapers serve as chimneys to carry off noxious vapors and smoke.

— Thomas Jefferson

What is the function of a newspaper? Do people read it the way they read a book or a magazine? I doubt that any well-conceived study would show that we do. The newspaper in culture has little to do with reading and nothing to do with beauty. It is not meant to be read or admired at all but to be confronted, like the enemy. We attack it and tear it apart, write on it, and cut it up, doing socially acceptable vandalism without guilt. No other medium allows that freedom.

My father was a devoted newspaper reader. When he came home from the meat market, tired and short-tempered, he looked for the paper. If it arrived late, he paced around the house, went out to look in the bushes again, and muttered and swore until the paper landed with a whop on the front step. Then he would settle into his chair and roll back the rubber band before snapping the paper flat, just so. I never saw my father read a book, but he read the paper, silently for the most part. He never exclaimed at it or said, "Listen to this," as my mother sometimes did. But he read it every day. And we children would tiptoe around or go outside and wait.

I don't know what my father did when he was reading, but I don't think his purpose was to find information, to be entertained, to become a better citizen, or to pass the time. I believe he used the newspaper in another way. For twenty minutes perhaps, he glanced at stories about an Israeli military action in the Suez, a racial incident in the South, or one of Stevenson's attacks on Eisenhower, the part-time president. He might even have read a few paragraphs about traffic or hunting accidents, bad weather in Idaho, or the boy and girl gang fights on Salt Lake's west side. His own life, by comparison, must have seemed easy, or at least the news put his problems into perspective. Looking at the newspaper, he knew just how bad it could get. The tightly packed troubles on those pages acted as a catharsis. After reading, he would roll the paper up and whack the ottoman with it, feigning anger. And then he would smile.

"People don't actually read newspapers," wrote Marshall McLuhan. "They get into them every morning like a hot bath." Research indicates that ordinary people do not read newspapers. They look at them. They scan the headlines, read a few lines here, a paragraph there. The story they read in its entirety is the exception. They come away with *NUN DIES IN FIRE; CHILDREN SAVED* and little more. Most of the news we don't need to know about. Reading a news story is like coming upon upon an accident: we don't want to see it but can't stop ourselves from looking. A glance is enough. We don't want beautiful news pages. We want to marvel, yes, but also to resist. In one sense, the newspaper exerts social control by showing that crime never pays, by exposing corruption and greed. Ordinary readers can come away feeling justified and maybe a touch self-righteous, our prejudices and pretensions affirmed. Reading the newspaper can also assert individual freedom to pick and choose, ignoring what doesn't appeal to us. The newspaper is then an artifact of our birthright of freedom. Finally, the newspaper provides a means of self-control. In a society of unbridled expectations, a daily dose of news can make our burden seem lighter. It is a damper to our discontent.

It is typical of Americans to take our purgative in private and to view the act pragmatically and egotistically. We use the news like a mouthwash, the newspaper like an appliance. The value we put on the form cannot be measured in Pulitzers or design awards but in how assiduously we rip the thing apart, on how many uses we invent for it, and on how many items we clip and mail or keep taped to the fridge so long they crumble. Anyone who has packed up to move has found pages from an old newspaper lining the bottom of the trunk or dresser drawer. The discovery is poignant. We pause to remember and to wish it were more durable before we throw it away. A

newspaper is a symbol of memory. It is ubiquitous in literature and film, where it prods characters to both recollection and action. We treat our life lightly each day it arrives, we say we want it to instruct and improve us, but we are inattentive and we use it up for other things. Memories we want to preserve and cherish, but they are made of newsprint.