

The tabloid format is easier to handle than broadsheet and cheaper to produce. Why, then, has it proved so unpopular?

THINK SMALL

N

O adult human being, no matter how sober or how fit, can comfortably read a broadsheet newspaper while standing up.

Try it for yourself. In no time at all, your spread-eagled arms will ache from shoulder-blade to shoulder-blade and your eyes will water from concentrating on small print held rather too far off.

Sitting down while reading helps the elbows a little, but the pages billow about and you have to pump your arms up and down as your nose tracks its way from top left to distant bottom right.

The only easy way to read a broadsheet newspaper is to cheat by folding it in half. Which raises the obvious question: why aren't all newspapers

printed in this convenient, folded-in-half format?

The answer is that newspapers are printed in bloated sizes because they have been printed in bloated sizes for hundreds of years.

This wasn't always the case; the very earliest newspapers were sensibly designed in a compact format which a messenger could fit in a saddlebag. But in no time at all, the editors, like editors ever since, decided they had so much to say they needed bigger pages.

The trend ended with British press baron Lord Northcliffe, who published the first popular contemporary newspaper, the Daily Mail. Northcliffe sold his paper more cheaply than his rivals by saving himself a fortune on newsprint. All he did was chop three inches off the length of the standard

broadsheet page.

This principle was to catch on. Later popular newspapers adopted an even smaller half-sheet format. A 32-page Daily Mirror, for example, used half the newsprint of a 32-page Daily Mail, and cost the readers a lot less too.

But it was this very cheapness that ruined the tabloid's reputation. The format became associated with the bottom-end of the newspaper market, with sleaze, blaring headlines and lower-class vulgarity.

In class-obsessed Britain, no newspaper of dignity would adopt such a format. Indeed, the heavyweights flaunted their bulkiness, charging customers extra for the privilege of reading in civilised discomfort.

Out here in soberly provincial South Africa, all newspapers, white or black,

In our third design forum, **IRWIN MANOIM**, whose designs have included the Sunday Express, Business Day and The Weekly Mail, discusses size, shape and prejudice



WEEKLY MAIL INTERVIEW

MANDELA SPEAKS

In his first press interview, the ANC leader talks about the need for flexibility

Interviewed by **GAVIN EVANS and SHAUN JOHNSON**

NELSON MANDELA said yesterday that he was warning the blacks were fundamentalist in their demands for a new constitution. He said that the ANC was not prepared to compromise on the principle of majority rule. He said that the ANC was not prepared to compromise on the principle of majority rule. He said that the ANC was not prepared to compromise on the principle of majority rule.



I HAD A DREAM ... AND SO DID 150 000 OTHERS **Thandiswa Mkhawana on Page 11**

Only an urgent all-party conference can bring peace

There IS a way to end the violence

THERE IS a way to get national negotiations back on track: an urgent conference of all major political parties to hammer out a joint strategy on the violence wrecking South African townships.



the suspension of police officers involved in massacres in the townships... could form discussion points at a serious debate about how the crisis is to be overcome. Despite the modification of the ultimatum this week by ANC deputy president Nelson Mandela, who resumed the organisation's "flexibility" on the issue, many analysts agree that, all else having failed, a fresh approach is urgently required to deal with the conflict.

DESPITE THE CRITICS, THE ANC'S OPEN LETTER WAS RIGHT **Page 4**

affected the same genteel stuffiness and a "gutter press" never really emerged. But there was a hierarchy of page formats nonetheless. "Real" newspapers were broadsheet; tabloid was reserved for advertising free-sheets, small-town rags and parish newsletters. For over a century, the South African newspaper world has been dominated by broadsheets. Generally, only the poorer newspapers, like the Diamond Fields Advertiser or the Evening Post, have been tabloid. Of course there are some exceptions, invariably at the "popular" end of the market. During the late fifties and sixties, the tabloid Sunday Express of Joel Mervis and Johnny Johnson nosed up close to the Sunday Times, thanks to a mixture of populism, schlock and

moral outrage at the decadence of the young. There was also Jim Bailey's Golden City Post, much less famous than its stablemate Drum, which is a pity, because it was the only really good South African attempt at a racy, working-class tabloid. Strident and cheeky, it specialised in such mind-improving fare as "COP RAPED DOLL OF THREE IN GRAVEYARD". Modelled on the Daily Mirror, it was particularly well designed for its time; indeed, it was the only South African newspaper of the fifties and early sixties to show any understanding of contemporary design principles. The hour of the tabloid may yet come, and it is rising costs that may speed it along. In Britain, for example,

costs have forced all the middle-brow newspapers and several leading provincial titles to adopt the smaller format. In South Africa, the Argus company's "think-tank", Newspaper Market Research, announced last year that research indicated most South African readers prefer the tabloid format. You will note that the Argus company's editors remain unmoved. The two fastest-growing newspapers of the moment, the Sowetan and the Citizen, are both tabloids. Both were circulation and advertising laggards for years, and have made breakthroughs only quite recently. In both cases, the new readerships are largely black, the one section of the market with no pent-up ancient prejudices against the small format.

Big shout
 Say one thing, and say it loud. The Weekly Mail's unusual readership mix ranges from white professionals to township workers. The front page has to strive for a balance between a brashness that will stand out on newsstands and an elegance that denotes seriousness.



One of the most interesting European tabloids is the Parisian daily Liberation, which uses an often cheeky, magazine-style on its front pages.



The Christian Science Monitor is elegant and restrained ... but then, it does not have to compete for customers on cluttered newsagent shelves.



Vrye Weekblad usually goes for a big picture display, but in this ably-handled variation, the headline typography does the talking.



Going colourful

Acclaimed Fleet Street designer Leslie Sellers spent a decade on the Sunday Times and influenced a generation, including myself. Sellers' South African work remained within the Fleet Street popular tradition, but he took advantage of the then-new technologies of photo-litho and colour to explore areas then unavailable in Britain.

Tabloid design offers different opportunities to broadsheet design ... and a host of different problems too.

A tabloid is at an immediate disadvantage when laid out on a pavement or a café shelf along with its broadsheet competitors. True, a folded broadsheet and a tabloid take up the same amount of pavement real-estate, but the horizontal shape of the folded broadsheet allows for more flexible headline positioning and bolder picture sizing.

This is why tabloids have traditionally fought back against the broadsheets by compensating for their undersized formats with oversized headlines, particularly in heavy, black condensed faces which potential customers can read at twenty paces.

South Africa shares with some European countries a tabloid size based on the metric A3 format. It's a little too long and narrow, not nearly as elegant as the smaller and squarer British and American tabloid.

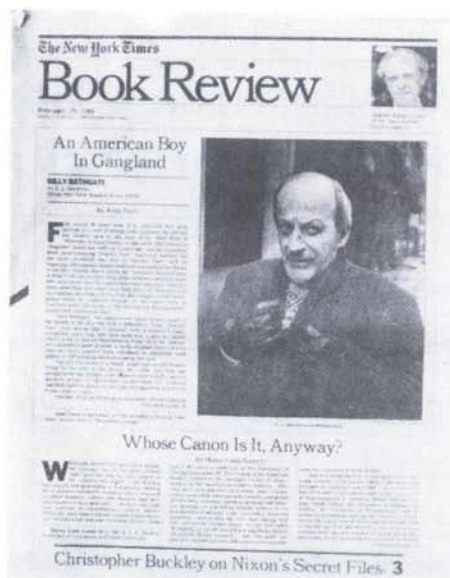
But the smaller format has on occasion surfaced here. When Caxtons landed the printing contract for the international edition of the London Daily Express earlier this year, they had to order special paper in the British format. Since then, Vrye Weekblad, printed on the same Caxtons press, has adopted the British format, with attractive results.

But there's a hidden trap to the smaller format, painfully learnt by the late Sunday Express. In its final incarnation, the paper was printed on an eccentric second-hand South American press which offered only the smaller US format. The format was a delight to work with, but there was one snag: standard full page advertising material would not fit. And no advertising agency would remake material for the convenience of a single newspaper.

Advertising shapes are the biggest obstacle to good tabloid design in this country. Take a look at major tabloids abroad, like the pace-setting New York Newsday, and you'll notice that advertisements are firmly cordoned-off in neat modular boxes, usually either full or half pages. The resulting rectangular editorial holes make for attractive pages which benefit both readers and advertisers.

Not so here. Most advertisements are designed to look good in magazines or broadsheets, which is where most of the adspend goes. A favourite shape, for example, is A4, which neatly fills full pages in magazines and quarter pages in broadsheets. In tabloids, however, the A4 is a menace. It leaves the merest sliver of editorial space around the top and sides, useless for picture display and awkward even for headlines.

The Argus company appears to have a firm rule that no front page may venture forth without



The feature section of the redesigned Sunday Express of 1984 was first to use the smaller tabloid size ... at the cost of its advertising revenue.

The main section of the New York Times is as grey as ever, but the feature supplements, like this tabloid, are models of understated elegance.

Bold black-and-white picture from a Weekly Mail supplement. Market pressure finally pushed the paper towards colour just a few months ago.

its solus cigarette advert. This is fine on broadsheets, which have the top of the page to stretch out, but disastrous on tabloids.

The Sowetan's designers, for example, were for years expected to squeeze their front page leads into a narrow gully between the masthead and the ever-present advertisement. Not surprisingly, they rarely succeeded. Recently this advertisement has been reduced a little, and the front pages have noticeably improved as a result.

Perhaps the trickiest task in tabloid design is creating an "upmarket" front page, because it is not easy to be serious ... and also to be seen. Some of the best "serious" layout can be found in publications like the Christian Science Monitor and the tabloid inside sections of the New York Times, which convey a quiet, thoughtful elegance.

But the designers of these sections enjoy one freedom which the rest of us don't have: they aren't required to compete for attention on crowded South African café counters.

This has been one of the dilemmas of

designing The Weekly Mail. The audience is serious, but the competition is loud and brash. Modest front-page display would fade into the merest whisper alongside the artillery of the Sunday Times.

The short-lived British tabloid, the Sunday Correspondent, faced the same problem. It was Fleet Street's first "serious" tabloid, and its elegant inside pages more than demonstrated how well the tabloid size can handle long features. But in the front, the newspaper had to compete on news-stands ... so it used thumping sans typefaces and shouted like everyone else.

For The Weekly Mail, the problem has an added twist. The people who subscribe (mainly white and middle-class) would probably prefer a quiet paper like the Christian Science Monitor. But the floating population of casual buyers (mainly black) are attracted by bold display.

So The Weekly Mail must adopt a schizoid personality; quiet on its inside pages, with light headline faces, and brash in front. We use many of the same sledgehammer techniques that the Mirror perfected years ago, but with

one important difference: where the Mirror used bold, fat sans serif types, we use the more elegant serif types, mainly Times and Palatino.

When The Weekly Mail has a big story, we clear the front page and go for broke, hammering a single message. On more ordinary weeks, we adopt a poster front page, a series of capsule summaries of the goods on offer inside. This allows for plenty of headlines, and avoids one of the tabloid format's most serious shortcomings: multiple turns. The Citizen, for example, will often display five stories on page one, and turn all of them.

The Citizen is perhaps a good place to finish. Editor Johnny Johnson is the only leading editor who has always sworn by the tabloid format. The Citizen is a splendid example of anti-design, with headlines doglegging all over and crashing into one another. A modern designer would clean the paper up into tidy, modular blocks, logical, cool and elegant.

But the paper would lose its olde-world charm, its intriguing nooks and crannies full of human-interest oddities. It's a bit like Grandma's flat, full of knick-knacks and ill-matched Edwardian furniture, but so much more interesting than the studied elegance of those interior-designed rooms we see in glossy magazines.



A 1934 edition of the tabloid Sunday Express shows a simple boldness unusual for the time