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Editors tend to be lunch people first, political pundit people second, corporate suit people third, words people fourth, and visual people last. Their interest in design, graphics, photography, and what these might accomplish, ranks just ahead of their interest in the Pets of the Month page.

But there is guilt. Editors know better. Every editor who has stayed half awake during a conference on the Future of Newspapers has been made aware, dimly or otherwise, that visual journalism is THE IN THING.

The experts have spoken: If old-fashioned print is to be rescued from the invasion of the dreadful bloggers, design and graphics are at the frontline.

The challenge, then, is not persuading editors and journalists that design matters. They know it matters. Just like they know that avarice and adultery are sins. The challenge is persuading them that design is about more than a quick coat of paint.

I've devised various exercises that attempt to meet that challenge. They've been stress-tested in classroom or boardroom confrontations with post-adolescent journalism students, greying editors and their lesser editorial minions, and even with such mortal enemies as newspaper managers and marketing flunkies. And I believe that over the years, I have seen sparks of light amid the darkness.

I start off by being wilfully obscure. I present a newspaper page in some foreign language, ideally with a non-Latin alphabet – my favourites have been Chinese and Cyrillic – and I say: "I'm not going to tell you what this paper is called or where it's from or what language it's written in, but I want you to tell me: what's it about?"

Silence.

I ask a set of questions. Is this a high-brow, middlebrow, or browless newspaper? Does it seem to be aimed at banking nabobs, or stay-at-home mothers, or beery sports dudes, or nightclubbing youths? Does this newspaper sell on street corners, or on news agent shelves, or is it sold

Speaking design language

mainly by subscription? Is it meant to be read on the bus or train, or in the back seat of a limousine? Does it have lots of readers? Is it careful, or does it take chances? If you could read it, would you believe it?

More pages follow. What surprises the audience is that, despite the unintelligibility of the texts, they are able to form a great many assumptions about the pages, their news values and audiences, and to do so with some confidence.

Then I show a second set of foreign front pages. These have various nasty tricks to them.

There's a front page of a Russian communist party daily, for example. When was it published, I ask. Fifty, 70 years ago, people agree, during the depths of the Stalin era. A fair answer, given the bleak, Cold War appearance of the page, but actually, it was published just a few months ago.

Then there's a sparkly Portuguese page that looks as if it might be the Christmas joy issue. But it's actually reporting a massacre outside the town. Bad design sends out misleading signals.

The lesson, then, is that design is a language in itself, working behind the scenes to tell a story. People have already

formed opinions about a newspaper, based on visual cues alone, before they begin to read.

Design can signal the quality, the tone and the market segment of a newspaper, which would explain that daily marvel of the apartheid era: how whites didn't notice black newspapers and blacks didn't notice white papers.

Next I present a range of newspapers from around the world, all published on the same day, and leading on the same story. Not too many stories make the lead in newspapers all over the world. Only natural disasters on a terrifying scale, or blood-curdling terror attacks, or the infidelities of Hollywood residents.

We make comparisons: see how the same photograph has been used in different papers, at different sizes, cropped in different ways. See how different headlines change the meaning of the same photo. See how colour changes the emotional impact: black and red make the page look angry; blue quiets it down.

I hand the students a bundle of the day's local papers and say: "If you were a newspaper editor, what would your front page look like today?" I give each student a different, rather narrow, imaginary target audience: investors, students, pensioners, teachers, farmers and the like.

They cut and paste the newspapers to concoct their own. Some find this brief return to childhood immense fun. Others, who can effortlessly manipulate cellphones under the desk with a single thumb, show remarkable sloppiness when confronted with a pair of scissors (did they learn nothing at nursery school?).

The exercise demonstrates how design is about news values and how news values are about the cultural values of the audience. Already at this stage, it's possible to tell which students will be the stars.

I would like to be able to end here on a cheery note, by saying that all this effort has paid off and newspaper design in South Africa has greatly improved. So I will: newspaper design in South Africa has greatly improved. Reporting, sub-editing and proof-reading have all gone gently to hell, but design is right up there.

Maybe my lessons should take the credit for this. Or maybe the reason is that the more South African newspaper executives contemplate their sinking circulation and revenue graphs, the more anxious they get, and the more anxious they get, the more willing they are to seize on the option of last resort: let's redesign the paper! (Some of us make a living from this. I would make a lot more if I had a foreign accent.)

South African newspapers are, design-wise, way better than they were 20 years ago. Those who don't believe me are welcome to pop into a newspaper archive (if they can find one) and ponder how bad our papers once looked.

Photographs were undersized, badly cropped... ink smudges. Today, pictures are used far more boldly, and with greater sensitivity to the photographer's intentions.

Info-graphics, unknown in this country not long ago, are becoming more common. We still don't quite get them right, but the effort is being made. And at a great many newspapers, the tabloids in particular, a handful of designers of real flair have mastered the art of taking a news story, actually reading it... and projecting it with real punch.

Of course there might be some more mundane reasons for the resurgence of design. Like: it's a lot easier to lay out good pages when there are no longer too many of those damn adverts getting in the way.

The long, slow death of the printed newspaper might be a good thing after all.

