

DESIGNER'S FORUM: Behind the recent merging

MORPHING

ADVERTISING agencies are fond of a computer animation trick which involves taking two different images — one fat woman and one thin, say — and collapsing the two into each other, so that the fat woman's flab melts away ... and a desirable nymph emerges.

This technique goes by the expressive but inelegant name of morphing. I mention it because I recently had to do some morphing myself. I had to take two rather different newspapers and morph them into one. And that was the easy part of the brief.

The hard part was that there were also two clients based half a planet apart, with agendas that did not always coincide. And there were two sets of readers, not all of whom wanted to be morphed. But to begin at the beginning.

By IRWIN MANOIM
Co-editor of the
Weekly Mail
and Guardian

In 1992, the *Weekly Mail* reached an arrangement with *The Guardian* in



London to jointly publish *The Guardian Weekly* in South Africa. Readers would pay only for the *Weekly Mail*, but folded inside they would discover *The Guardian Weekly*, theirs for free.

At the time, it was hailed as a masterstroke. The *Weekly Mail*, born as a newspaper of protest and still struggling to find a comfortable post-PW Botha identity, was given a major boost: an international section which, for sheer breadth, intelligence and literary style had no local rival. On most levels, the experiment worked as well as we hoped. The *Weekly Mail* gained new credibility which in turn brought new readers (sales went up a third) and new advertisers (revenues doubled). The new readers were generally slightly older and a good deal wealthier, which pleased the agency media

Accommodating our wordy new joint masthead was not easy. Here are just two of the many rejects.

directors. But there were some problems, and they turned out to be expensive. Advertisers were more willing than before to go into the *Weekly Mail*, but they did not want to go into *The Guardian Weekly*. To them, *The Guardian Weekly* was an insert. Reader traffic in inserts was traditionally lower, therefore they did not place adverts in inserts.

An independent survey was commissioned to check out how many *Weekly Mail* readers turned to *The Guardian Weekly*. It showed that 97 percent spent as much as four hours reading it. The survey fell on deaf ears; the ad agencies would not budge.

The result was the newspaper equivalent of skewed growth. Advertising ballooned in the *Weekly Mail*, forcing the paging to increase. *The Guardian Weekly's* local advertising



Anti-design: A typical picture-less spread from the old Guardian Weekly, above, remade for an early dummy, below. This style was thrown out after the Pentagram redesign.

of the Weekly Mail and Guardian

THE MAIL

The brief was to take two newspapers and make them into one. That turned out to be the easy part...

The Guardian Weekly

The Washington Post & Times

Sarajevo given grim ultimatum

The British Foreign Office has given Sarajevo a grim ultimatum: to accept a UN ceasefire by 11.59pm on Tuesday or face a no-fly zone over Bosnia. The ultimatum was issued by the British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hogg, in a statement to the House of Commons.

Somali mission turns to blood and tears

UN officials have said that the Somali mission has turned into a mission of blood and tears. The UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, said that the mission had become a "mission of blood and tears" because of the violence in Somalia.

UN official files to Iraq

The UN Secretary-General has said that the UN will file a report on Iraq's actions in Kuwait. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Missory of the Sudan rivers

The Sudanese government has said that it will file a report on the Missory of the Sudan rivers. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Justice in question

The British government has said that it will file a report on the justice in question. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Countess re-weds

The Countess of Arundell has re-wedded. She has married a man named John Arundell.

Trouble at St. Andrew

The St. Andrew's School has had a trouble. The school has had a fire.

Don't cry for Sir Andrew

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Don't cry for Sir Andrew. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Arts, books 20-29

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Arts, books 20-29. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

IN THIS ISSUE

The British government has said that it will file a report on the IN THIS ISSUE. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

The Guardian 15

2/INTERNATIONAL

Sarajevo given grim ultimatum

No power to jump either — unless Serb attacks can re-open arms factory. Ed Vulliamy reports from Bosnia

UN rejects call to end combat

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has rejected a call to end combat in Somalia. He said that the UN would continue to support the mission in Somalia.

Wishful conclusions in Tokyo

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Wishful conclusions in Tokyo. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Georgia very much on their minds

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Georgia very much on their minds. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Cabinet paralysed by the future

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Cabinet paralysed by the future. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Between the sushi and the spaghetti

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Between the sushi and the spaghetti. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Muted victory for Clinton

The British government has said that it will file a report on the Muted victory for Clinton. The report will be filed with the Security Council.

Clinton wins but must find new allies

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rarely crept above 10 percent. The conventional newspaper approach is to shrink back a section until the advertising pays its way. But *The Guardian Weekly's* size was fixed by its British advertising content and could not be varied from 32 pages.

There were other problems too: **The Guardian Weekly** carried very few colour pages, but those there were fell in the wrong places — wrong, that is, in the opinion of our printers, because they caused colour imposition problems for the rest of the run. As a result, *The Guardian Weekly* often had to be printed separately, which drove up expenses.

The Guardian Weekly goes off stone at noon on Tuesday. *The Weekly*

Comment

A system out of control

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The Guardian Weekly front page becomes an inside page. The Pentagram front at left, and a Weekly Mail dummy which mixes Guardian and Washington Post stories on one page. The Guardian Weekly editors did not like the centered headline and blurb in the anchor story on the dummy — Pentagram rules demand that headlines and blurbs always cover the first leg. Back to the drawing board...



LEFT: A typical columns page. The redesigned version is on the far left.

RIGHT: The old front page, above, and the new. The idea was to change as little as possible, so that readers still recognised the product. But headlines have been sized down.



Mail is delivered to homes on Friday. The world does not stand still between Tuesday and Friday, with the result that we often delivered old news to readers. Readers are reasonably tolerant of old news when a paper arrives in the post, but when it is hand-delivered along with the morning's Business Day, it is expected to be up-to-date. Don't *The Guardian Weekly* editors know that Windsor Castle burned down, asked one amazed phone-caller. They do, I assured her, it'll just take them another week to get round to it.

● *The Guardian Weekly*, like most British tabloids, uses a smaller paper size than the local A3-based format. Each week we had to enlarge, pad and stretch its pages to fit an A3. Or to phrase it another way, each week we wasted an inch-wide margin around each page which added to our paper and freight costs without adding to editorial.

By late last year, it had become clear that a change was needed if costs were not to rocket way out of control. And although it took a while before anyone was willing to acknowledge it, it was clear that the only economic way forward was brute force: integrate the papers so that there was no insert, so that paging size could be determined by advertising volume, so that there was no paper waste and so that the entire paper could be printed in a single run.

At that point, the people who juggle with budgets passed the problem along to editorial: take two newspapers and make them into one. It sounded easy enough, but it proved a lot harder than morphing a fat woman into a thin one. These were some of the problems we faced:

● **ENTER PENTAGRAM.** *The Guardian Weekly's* long-serving editor John Perkin had an olde-world scorn for such latter-day affectations as design. Articles were rarely grouped thematically and were allowed to sprawl over hundreds of column centimetres

with nary a picture in sight. His erudite audience of Commonwealth intellectuals were rather fond of this austere indifference to sweeteners, but it was not a paper that easily grabbed the eye of potential new converts. Indeed, one of our motives for integration was to modernise the international section by grouping articles thematically and making better use of *The Guardian* daily's excellent photographic service. The redesign plans were well under way when, shortly before the switch, Perkin suddenly retired (wearied, I suspect by the prospect of his life's work falling to the barbarians) to be replaced by a younger man with altogether different views, Patrick Ensor.

Ensor immediately commissioned the renowned British design house Pentagram to redesign the weekly and bring it in line with the modern appearance of its daily sibling. The Pentagram redesign of *The Guardian Weekly* had two notable features: an iron set of style rules, intended perhaps to force contemporary typography upon an office which preferred the old ways; and a rather decorative quality, with lots of rules, boxed pages, drop letters and tramlines. On *The Guardian Weekly's* standard format of shiny white airmail paper, the design had an attractive magazine look. But translated to our off-grey South African newsprint, it looked mannered.

The Pentagram design was to be the source of fierce debate between ourselves and Manchester. *The Guardian Weekly* editors insisted that we be as true as possible to its spirit; I believed that many elements of it were inappropriate to the *Weekly Mail* context.

These debates raged back and forth until the very week of the launch, when a compromise was struck. But they were a useful reminder that real-life design is part typography and part-diplomacy, the art of find-

ing a mid-point between the dreams of the designer and the caution of the clients.

● **PLAYING IT DISCREET.** *Weekly Mail* readers may be liberal in their politics, but they share with newspaper readers everywhere a deep conservatism when it comes to typography. One of the most important functions of newspaper design is to provide a mental comfort zone: subliminal navigation signals which make a publication intelligible to readers. Taking two newspapers and yoking them into one means destroying all the familiar landmarks, leaving readers marooned in new, uncharted territory. Clearly, they were not going to appreciate this. Since the changes to the basic structure were so radical, the changes to typography had to be minimised, so that individual pages at least looked familiar, even if they were no longer in the same place.

● **SEPARATE BUT EQUAL.** One approach to integrating two newspapers was to treat all sources as equal and to place articles on merit, according to theme, in much the same way that every other local newspaper uses its international sources. But *The Guardian*



A weekly paper that goes off stone on Thursday can't really compete on back page sport, so we flag our entertainment section instead, revamped in the version at left.

Weekly editors feared they would lose control over their own product unless some separation was maintained. A second approach was to treat the two sections distinctly, and disturb the existing structure as little as possible. This may have been the easiest approach for both editors and readers, but it did not solve the insert problem. The approach eventually adopted was, like all international treaties, a compromise. The paper was organised by theme, but *Guardian* and *Weekly Mail* pages were separated. This allowed the editors on each end to keep an eye on their own pages.

● **QUIETLY SERIOUS.** How does one unify pages, yet keep them separate? The answer was to keep the basic elements like text typography the same, and use different display dress. We wanted to signal seriousness and quiet elegance, keeping most headline sizes below 42pt and in simple shapes. Since the Pentagram redesign of *The Guardian Weekly* stressed variants of Helvetica, the choice for a *Guardian* display face was made up for me. For the *Weekly Mail* I chose Bookman, a quiet, light face which has strength even in modest headline sizes.

● **LIGHTENING UP.** Previous redesigns of the *Weekly Mail* had been based on the principle of providing maximum word count in the minimum space, resulting in an often intimidating greyness. This time round I aimed to lighten up the text. I chose Bookman again, and for the same reasons: it works well against the Helvetica headlines and its wide, open letter forms have the virtue of appearing much larger than they are, even in small sizes.

● **MASS PRODUCTION.** Since I'm seldom involved in day-to-day layout myself any more, the design needed to be intelligible to

other people. The *Weekly Mail* subs room is under pressures rarely found in local newspapers. A handful of sub-editors not only sub, but also design and make up every page on their screens (and proof-read and correct them) right up to final art-work. Only adverts which arrive from outside are stripped in. The subs need to complete 80 pages in three-and-a-half days, or one completed page every 25 minutes. The design therefore needed to be simple and quickly reproduced from templates.

For these reasons, I scrapped various time consuming elements of the Pentagram design such as the rules between every column. I also used a single version of Helvetica rather than Pentagram's half a dozen different weights, a change which speeded laser printing by more than half.

● **THE FINAL NIGHT.** Of course, as with all plans that have been made and remade over periods of months, everything fell to pieces in the week of the launch.

The new computers and software we'd ordered to allow us to produce 32 extra

pages failed to arrive. And to make it all even more complicated, a family illness put me in quarantine for the critical week, barred by doctors from coming into the office. The launch day loomed and the final design was still unfinished.

The sub-editors rallied magnificently, spending the next few weeks playing musical chairs between the few available terminals, and trying to second-guess a design locked inside my absent head.

AND reader reaction? It was of the normal kind. Readers invariably hate redesigns for the first fortnight, come to grudgingly accept them for the next month, and thereafter can't remember when things were ever different.

Face-to-face feedback was generally positive, particularly from the ad agencies. Which is just as well, because the letters, ranged from the mildly complaining to the apoplectic: "I shall never buy your rag again," was the way several ended. I comforted myself with the old saying that people only write in to a newspaper when they're in a rage; those who're happy or just indifferent don't bother.

We did make some changes in response to reader feedback, in particular from warring spouses who complained that they were no longer able to divide up the paper. We offered an "invisible insert": the foreign section was grouped around the centre of the paper so that those who insisted on reading it separately could pull it out intact. Presumably this met with approval; a week later, the complaining letters died down.

I knew we'd finally made it when we received an irate letter about our sexist use of language. I recognised the handwriting. It was from someone who a month earlier had sworn never to buy our paper again. ●

How it's put together

THE *Guardian Weekly* is a digest of international news from three sources, *The Guardian* daily, *The Washington Post* and *Le Monde*. It is produced in a tiny office in Manchester and flashed around the world, courtesy of the international phone system.

Raw copy from the three source publications is first picked up by phone from electronic mail boxes, and then processed on personal computers. Completed *Guardian Weekly* pages, including photographs and advertisements, are sent by modem to sites around the world. An

average newspaper requires about an hour a day to transmit.

Our sub-editors then remake pages to match our format. They are allowed considerable leeway to make changes, in consultation with *The Guardian Weekly's* editors. They also receive a regular electronic "dump" of the entire text of each day's *Guardian* daily.

Using the phone to transmit pages is considerably faster than the air freight used by the *International Express* and *Weekly Telegraph*, which explains why *Guardian Weekly* news is as much as a week ahead.