SYDOSTPRESS

Redefining the whole process

DESIGN TRAINING PAVES THE WAY FOR MAJOR CHANGE AT 3 PAPERS

By Ole Munk

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The visual quality of a newspaper depends upon the skills of those working with the paper on a daily basis, rather than upon whatever guidelines lie behind the design. No matter how good a consultant and how splendid a design job he or she may have done, if the staff does not catch the idea – and/or if their resources do not match the ambitions of the design concept – the result is bound to fail.

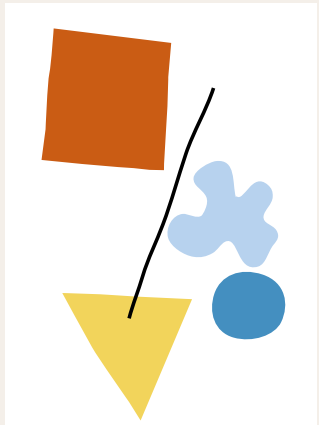
On the other hand, it is my contention that a resourceful art department may take any old combination of typefaces and graphic devices and produce high-quality newspaper design out of it.

The fact that few Scandinavian papers have art departments (instead, copy editors are expected to take care of layout and editing at the same time) makes it even more important to ensure that the level of complexity in a design concept corresponds to the actual manpower available for doing page layout.

Moreover, as the design of a newspaper is never (and should never be) static but constantly evolving, with new editorial ideas and demands calling for constant design innovation, a paper needs to possess not only resources for practising daily design but for developing it as well. If not, the paper will depend heavily on the consultant who did the original design; quite a comfortable position for the consultant from a financial point of view, maybe, but not a very healthy one for the newspaper.

In my early years as a newspaper design consultant (actually not so long ago, hardly more than five or six years) more than once I had the frustrating experience of seeing a newspaper rapidly lose the visual quality it had just gained through an otherwise successful redesign process, due to the aforementioned reasons.

I began looking for ways to avoid situations like this and it came as a very pleasant surprise when in May 1999, I was asked by the Sydostpress newspaper corporation of southern Sweden to arrange a design education for selected members of their staff. The aim was to solve problems exactly like the ones mentioned above. Sydostpress wanted to anchor the future design development of their three papers within the organization.



Marylin Monroe
Leonardo da Vinci
Lisa Ekdahl
Olof Palme
JOHN WAYNE
Karen Blixen
Björn Borg
ADOLF HITLER

The first round of the design education contained theory and exercises about basic graphic design. The word "newspaper" was hardly mentioned at all. Typography was, of course, an important part of the syllabus.

The design education took place in the Media Center of Blekinge Läns Tidning.

Two people from each paper (Blekinge Läns Tidning, Smålandsposten, and Barometern/Oskarshamns-Tidningen) were picked out and interviewed by me in order to let knowledge about their design skills (all six were editors with a background in journalism) and expectations for the education influence the syllabus.

One thing which became clear was that several of the "students" already had a good sense of shape but relied completely on their intuition in design matters; they had no system of terminology to help them prefer one possible design solution to another.

The first lap of the design education ran in January 2000 in the Media Center of Blekinge Läns Tidning in Karlskrona. For a start, we dealt entirely with graphic design basics: typography, composition, colour, visual perception, rhythm, etc.

During the first three days of the education, the word "newspaper" was hardly mentioned at all. Instead, I tried to direct the attention of my "students" to the design decisions they were already making all the time, in every part of their life. As a rule, they made the "right" decisions, too; they just didn't know why. Design theory was, of course, a central part of the education.

Going tabloid

In 1994, Blekinge Läns Tidning had changed from broadsheet to tabloid and circulation had kept going up ever since; quite remarkable on a market moving mainly in the opposite direction. Surveys indicated that readers in both Växjö and

A Barometern broadsheet front page from before the redesign, left. And a tabloid front page from afterward.

SMÅLANDSPOSTEN

ONSDAG 11 oktober 2000

Lungläkare saknas

Avtal och finansiering inte löst

Satsar på fler vuxna i skolan

Konsult granskar ekonomin

Teatern – en gränslös mötesplats

Stora framgångar för småföretagen

Biskopen vädjar för flyktingar

Taif-ledare som inte kan hockey

Årets skörd av äpplen förlorad

SMÅLANDSPOSTEN

onsdag

Romantiskt hus i Ryd

Sexdrycken döps om

Inga miljöböter från Lessebo

Australien nästa beachvolley

Hanna – han är trött på all damreklam

Bara sju vill bli polisrektor

Endast två av de sökande har erfarenhet från polisvärlden

HD-frälsta reser till Calle i Moheda

Torpsbruk fräschas upp

Pendlarpar ses på perrongen

A Smålandsposten front page after the redesign to tabloid.

A Smålandsposten broadsheet, left, front page before the redesign.

Kalmar would prefer a smaller paper, too, and from a corporate point of view the advantages of having one format for all three papers seemed pretty obvious. During the year 2000 the decisions were made. Smålandsposten should go tabloid March 1, 2001; Barometern was to follow eight weeks later.

Logically, both papers appointed their design "students" to head the tabloid projects. At Smålandsposten, sub-editor Anders Tapola and executive editor Gun-Britt Iderheim became project managers; at Barometern, former sports editor Dennis Andersson and sub-editor Mikael Larsson Ek got the responsibility.

I was asked to help the processes along as a consultant. But before that, we were to go through a couple of more laps of the educational process together. During 2000, a total of ten days were spent in the BLT Media Center, moving gradually from general graphic design to a more newspaper-oriented syllabus and emphasizing the crucial relationship between writing, editing, and design—between form and function.

The fourth lap of the education, running in late August, contained (among other things) a revision in which the "students" were to sum up what they had learned. These were their conclusions:

- You cannot discuss form isolated from content, and vice versa; the two are inseparately connected.

Aesthetics are about more than just beauty. Creating unity and consistency.

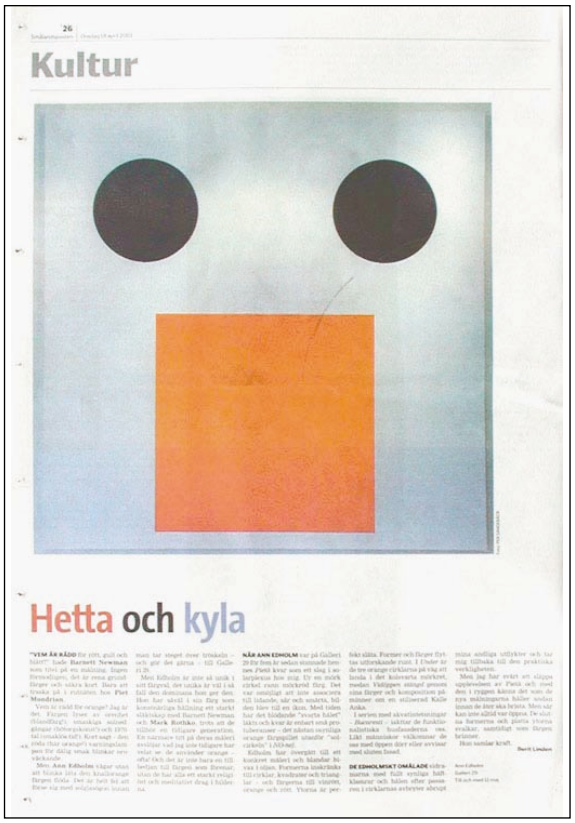
- The importance of details—and of cutting away details.
- Respect towards, and knowledge about, typography.
- Colour theory; combining colours with both harmony and contrast.
- Rhythm.
- Grids and modules.
- International variations over the newspaper theme (successful and less successful).
- Relations between different components of a newspaper; show-

SMÅLANDSPOSTEN

onsdag

Terrordåd chockar världen

Smålandspostenls front page after the WTC attack.



Kultur

Hetta och kyla

The Culture pages of Smålandsposten are renowned throughout Sweden for both contents and presentation.

ing function through form.

- Flexibility; how to break rules without ruining the concept.
- To know why you are doing as you do.
- Theoretical knowledge about design; how to motivate your choices.
- Courage.
- The importance of entry points—and how to handle them.
- The maestro concept.
- It takes time to change a newspaper!

The design process

Design work on the Smålands posten tabloid began in October 2000. One month later, Barometern started a similar process. For six months, traffic was heavy between Växjö, Kalmar, and EspergRrde—both physically, as we were frequently seeing each other, and in cyberspace. E-mail gave us the opportunity to practise "virtual teamwork" to an extent when we sometimes forgot we were not sitting at the same desk.

The fact that we knew each other through the education made cooperation easy, even when we disagreed. We spoke the same language. Also, the project managers' newly developed skills facilitated their promotion of new design ideas to colleagues. Decisions and motivations were not based on fashion or personal taste as much as on actual knowledge and explicitated editorial intentions.

On March 1, 2001, Smålandsposten became a tabloid newspaper. April 24, Barometern followed.

The three Sydostpress tabloids do not look the same. Neither did they when they were all broadsheets; nor should they, since they have significant editorial differences and operate on markets quite unlike each other, first of all in terms of competition.

Nevertheless, there are similarities between the new tabloids, some of which can be traced back to the design education which the project managers had in common. The sys-

KALMAR

Bergman tvingas lämna sin post

Lagbrott bakom prisad reklamkampanj

"Det här får inte förekomma i framtiden"

Uppgifter går isär om grannbråk

Kyrkofullmäktige för Dörby–Hossmo kyrkliga samfällighet

Destination Kalmar begärde inte in anbud

Tre dagar återstår

Träffsäkerhet av vikt

M vill ha program för privatisering

Kalla handen för kulturskola

Välbesökt träff

Populärt lopp för många barn

Sporthall kan bli upprustad

Barometern

Skolkällaren

Forum

Barometern: The tabloid format ensures at least one page for each local bureau, sometimes two or more. In the broadsheet format, the presentation of local material seemed quite confused.

tematization of entry points is one example.

Good news: The readers seem to appreciate the format change. In spite of the fact that the tabloid launch was not accompanied by special campaigns, circulation has gone up (Smålandsposten +700, Barometern +1,000).

More good news: Layout appears to be easier with the new format, according to editors. As a rule, the papers are laid out in spreads rather than single pages, and many stories are visually planned at early stages.

Then what about identity? Have Barometern and Smålandsposten lost their soul, given the fact that virtually everything changed with the redesign?

Apparently not. "The tabloid clearly appears more modern and more alert. Still, readers feel familiar with it and are content and confident with the new Smålandsposten," said editor-in-chief Ulf Johansson.

And the design education?

It is to be continued, now more in the form of a workshop. Next lap is November 19-20 when the tabloids are to be reviewed and revision shall commence. As might be expected in a fluctuant industry, a couple of replacements have been necessary in our group; nevertheless, we believe our goal is within reach. Soon, the design future of the Sydostpress papers will no longer be dependant on outside assistance.

The full story of the Sydostpress project, a PDF slide show illustrating the process can be downloaded at www.ribmunk.dk

Barometern

Barometern

Ole Munk was asked to redesign all three logotypes for the tabloid format. Changing Barometern's nameplate was a delicate task since this logotype characterizes a strong brand with a significant history.

Oskarshamns-Tidningen

Oskarshamns-Tidningen

The logotype of Oskarshamns-Tidningen (an edition of Barometern) was modernized rather than redesigned.

SMÅLANDSPOSTEN

SMÅLANDSPOSTEN

Smålandsposten 's new logotype is plain like the local people (and the old logo) but owns a slight awkwardness which makes it special. The inspiration came from an old advertisement.