

Analysis

Professional Analysis

The Boston Marathon winds its way each year through the tight, compact streets of its namesake. The course goes by many homes, and people will sit on their front porches while runners pass. Dan Zedek, who often watches the marathons with his children, says it's a time when everyone comes together. That meant that the bombs that went off in April at the marathon's finish line struck a personal chord for many in the city, he says.

As an assistant managing editor at the Boston Globe, Zedek says he, and the team of designers he oversees, wanted to capture how the incident affected the city. "We set ourselves fairly ambitious goals of ... storytelling," he says. "And one of them was to try and recreate what happened on those two or three blocks."

With that idea in mind, one of the Globe's data visualization journalists created an interactive map that visitors to the Globe's website could click on to show where they were during the bombing. There was also an option for them to select if it was OK for the Globe to contact them. Around a thousand people filled out the map, Zedek says, and about 350 agreed to be contacted. That led to an in-depth story of what it was like to be near the finish line that day. There was also a package in print offering analysis into the bombing, along with day-to-day coverage online and in print of the bombing and its aftermath.

This one example shows that for the Globe, digital storytelling and design are a high priority. This is also reflected in the platform for this

journalism. BostonGlobe.com is a subscriber-driven news website meant to mirror the reading experience of the organization's print edition. It does this largely through the way the website is designed. This approach is something of an anomaly in the newspaper industry. Just take a look at any news organization's website. There's a good chance it will have a different design from the print edition. Some websites even have a separate name or a distinct identity.

A more consistent branding between online and print has advantages. When two products are similar, and branded in a similar way, consumers see the new product as a better fit with the existing brand. So, in this case, having an online product that's consistent with the print edition makes it easier for readers to draw a connection between the two. More importantly, though, the consistency seen at the Globe results from designers being more involved with the paper's digital platforms. That leads to better digital design, which can influence readers. Previous research shows that a high-quality website, from an aesthetic perspective, can give people a more favorable view of a product. The involvement of designers in the Globe's digital editions sets it apart from some newsrooms, but appears to be changing as designers at some larger papers are starting to become more involved with their respective organization's digital products. As with the Globe, these efforts have paid journalistic and financial dividends.

These were some of the findings from four case studies of large, metro news organizations. This researcher interviewed design directors as part

of a graduate research project at the Missouri School of Journalism. These in-depth interviews included conversations with:

- Michael Whitley, Assistant Managing Editor, The Los Angeles Times
- Paul Nelson, Presentation Director, The Virginian-Pilot
- Andres Quesada, Creative Director, Gannett Digital (works extensively with USA Today)
- Dan Zedek, Assistant Managing Editor, The Boston Globe

These four organizations were selected because all have earned acclaim for their print design, and each one offers a slightly different insight into digital design at large news organizations. The Los Angeles Times website has the same identity (name and logo) as the print edition, but its website is fairly traditional in its design. The Virginian-Pilot, on the other hand, has a website with a different name and identity from the print edition. USA Today has a web presence heavily influenced by the tablet. And the Boston Globe, as noted earlier, uses a new website to emulate the experience of its print product. Large organizations were selected because a paper's circulation size, according to other research, is the best predictor of the quality of its design since these larger papers have more resources they can devote to design.

A unified Los Angeles Times brand.

Michael Whitley says that one of the most important aspects of the Los Angeles Times' page one design is a consistent approach. Readers, he thinks, expect a quick-to-digest product. This means that the front page often looks similar from day to day, with more time devoted to the design of the paper's inside pages.

That same consistency exists online. There, a top story takes up two columns, with an ad to the right. Below this are a collection of links to other stories. Some of these links feature a photo and extended summary, while others are shorter, breaking news items.

This templated design rarely changes, except in cases of large news stories, when the right-side ad disappears to make room for the top story. Whitley says he thinks readers expect that same consistency on the home page as they do in the print edition, and they might know what the lead story is already about. That's why links are prominent to other stories, he says.

There's also a consistency in how each product is branded. The Los Angeles Times' Blackletter nameplate is the same across all platforms, and all of these products use a similar modular and minimalistic design. Although this is the case, Whitley and the designers he oversees are not intimately involved in the design of each product. For instance, the Times has an iPad app that was created in-house, but Whitley didn't play a role in its development.

Whitley is actively involved with an upcoming redesign of the Los Angeles Times' website, however. He says it will be responsive to a user's device and more 'dynamic' than the Globe's responsive website. He says that means something that offers more in the way of graphics and video. He also hopes that the responsive website — not the app he had little to do with — becomes the main source of Los Angeles Times news for tablet readers.

Two brands of Pilot.

The Virginian-Pilot's website was one of the earliest journalism websites, according to Paul Nelson, presentation director. At that time, it was seen as something that should be separated from the newsroom operation, since it was disruptive technology. "And the business idea at the time about disruptive technology was if you take that technology, in this case the website, and give that to the newsroom, the newsroom, because its traditional and somewhat hidebound, is going to drag it down and not let it fulfill its potential," he says.

This meant that designers in the newsroom, including Nelson, had little to do with the website's design or branding. The Pilot's designers, of course, are much more involved with the paper's award-winning print design, which usually includes dramatic front page presentations of the day's news. "We try to illustrate the lead story and make the lead story look like the lead story," he says. "We don't like to say, 'oh well, this is a one-and-a-half column lead story, and here is a four-and-a-half feature centerpiece that we're using to buffer the size of whatever the lead is'."

Nelson thinks that approach is too similar to newspaper design of the 1980s. For the most part, he says, the newsroom supports the Pilot's more unorthodox design approach. Editors consciously try to help find visuals for Pilot designers, and design is often a focus of short-term and long-term story planning meetings.

But that discussion seems to begin and end with a story's print presentation. Digital presentation of a story isn't ignored in these meetings, but it

does seem to be relegated to rather simple ideas, such as whether a story will have a slideshow. This is likely because of the lack of involvement the Pilot's designers have in the look and feel of the website. This could begin to change soon, though. There are no plans to redesign the website, but Nelson did say that the Pilot is creating an iPad app that his designers are involved with. The idea is that this app will be almost like an evening edition of the Pilot, with a design that mirrors the print edition. Part of the app will be RSS-based and templated, with the other part of the app being actively designed daily. It's currently in the testing phase, Nelson says. "We want it to look slick, we want it to look like a magazine," he says. "People tend to read longer-form stories (on the tablet), so we want to be able to make it easy and inviting for them to just be sitting in their chair in the living room, flipping through the stories."

Nelson and his design staff also recently did some light redesign work on the websites that cover specific communities within the Pilot's coverage area. These include websites, or channels as Nelson calls them, for communities such as Norfolk and Virginia Beach. After these sites were redesigned, Nelson says advertising opportunities on them quickly sold out for the year. They've also been able to sell some advertising for the new app.

That gets at a larger issue the Pilot's designers face when deciding which project to focus on. In order to justify a redesign of its existing, main website, for instance, Nelson says it would have to actually bring in more revenue for the organization. Programming time is too valuable to use on a project that won't see a return, he says.

Constant Reevaluation at USA Today.

USA Today's recent digital overhaul also illustrates how designers being involved with a organization's digital product can have advantages for a newsroom. The paper is the largest client for Gannett's digital design team. Creative Director Andres Quesada has worked closely with USA Today on that redesign process and continues to work closely with the news organization.

The newly redesigned website and print edition are branded consistently and share some design characteristics, such as the distinct colored labels for different sections, the circle logo and typography that is unique to the organization. Although these few similarities exist, the two products were developed and designed separately, and Quesada wasn't involved at all with the print design.

But Quesada still worked closely with USA Today on the project. He says he met early and often with the organization's executives about the goals for the site, and he worked with Fantasy Interactive, the agency selected to help with the website redesign. Going into the project, Quesada says he thought the site was stale and didn't really stand out from any other news site that had stood the test of time. "One of the major goals was just a way to tell stories visually, and I think that's why we saw the design happen the way it did," he says.

The new website design, Quesada says, takes a lot of cues from tablet design. Square images are used throughout, with one large image and a reverse-type headline occupying the main story hole. Next to this is a slightly thinner, but equally tall breaking news bar of several links. Down the page, a grid of nine or so stories are featured from the paper's various sections.

One of the biggest challenges in the redesign, which Quesada admits is still a problem, is how the site packages stories. He said the new content management system made it easier for editors to tell a larger story on the home page by arranging the top story and the first few secondary stories to complement each other. But, Quesada says a problem occurs if, later in the day, a new top story or secondary story emerges that pushes part of this larger story package further down on the home page. He says just because a more important piece of news comes along doesn't mean the larger story package should be broken up. Currently, he and his designers are working to come up with a way to address this.

This example, of how stories are packaged and how Gannett Digital is reevaluating this, illustrates a larger development philosophy his team of designers use in their work. It is a philosophy of constant iteration, where a product is reevaluated immediately after it is launched. With this mindset, nothing is really ever complete, according to Quesada. Designers' and developers' ideas are used, alongside market research, to inform future changes to a Gannett Digital product. "And those learnings help us grow the product effectively and more quickly," he says. "The chief aspects of product are that you are building constantly, you're constantly adapting, you're constantly building that thing because the marketplace constantly changes, their usage constantly shifts. As a result, you need to make sure you're accommodating them effectively, or you're going to end up sitting in the wrong place with regards to what you're putting into, and how you're instructing your designs or your applications."

Here again, the marketplace is what's driving the close communication and involvement Quesada has with USA Today's digital design.

Two different kinds of Boston Globe readers.

The Boston Globe found, after researching the online audience for Boston.com, found a couple of distinct patterns that visitors followed on the site. In many cases, visitors to site wouldn't stay for very long and were mainly scanning headlines.

Another, smaller group of visitors were spending more time on a specific page of the site that listed all of the stories in that day's print edition.

"They were clearly reading, looking for depth," Zedek says of these visitors. "And, you know, what we realized is that we really have two audiences within the site. One of which was so heavily engaged, we thought we could actually get them to pay for it, which actually turned out to be the case."

With that business motivation in mind, the organization developed BostonGlobe.com, a subscription model site mentioned earlier. So far, it's been successful, Zedek says, and the paper's circulation is higher now than it has been in 10 years — a change largely driven by digital subscriptions. Sunday print subscriptions, which can be bundled with digital access, have also risen dramatically.

Of all the newsrooms studied, the Globe is by far the most integrated when it comes to newsroom designers working with all of the paper's digital platforms. Not only does this lead to its products having a similar look and consistent brand, but it also leads to more thoughtful digital storytelling. At the

Globe, a story's online component isn't the last thing designers think about — digital elements of a story instead are an integral part of the organization's journalism.

These case studies show that editorial designers don't always work with or influence the design of a news organization's website. In all of the papers studied here, though, designers, to varying degrees, are becoming more involved with the design of digital news products. This greater integration, at three of the four newsrooms studied, has paid financial dividends. The Pilot, for instance, did some light redesign work on a suite of community news sites and quickly sold out advertising opportunities on them for the year. And at the Globe, circulation has increased following the launch of its new, premium site. Finally, USA Today has seen an increase in traffic to its site since was relaunched.

More importantly, having editorial designers work with digital platforms can lead more sophisticated and in-depth digital storytelling. Instead of the online component being an afterthought for a narrative, it can be considered by designers as a storytelling opportunity from the start. This can lead to such features as the Globe's interactive map of the Boston Bombing, which let online visitors leave comments about where they were when the tragedy unfolded. On a more general level, USA Today's redesign offers readers of the online edition a visual experience, optimized for the tablet, instead of a static website that doesn't reflect the current reality of how people consume news.

As time goes on, digital news products will only become more important, even if they haven't yet supplanted an organization's print edition. Design is one way to strengthen this emergent, and soon to be dominant, platform. If newsrooms are willing to make it a priority, strong digital design offers financial and journalistic rewards.