

ANALYSIS

HOW EDITORS VIEW THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DESIGN STUDIOS

A survey distributed to nightly news editors at Gannett dailies shows they see studio designers as outsiders, but have noticed an improvement in the visual quality of their publications

Editors at Gannett publications are pleased with the visual quality of their newspapers since the company began designing pages at regional studios. But that's only part of the equation when assessing the effectiveness of Gannett's design studios. Those same editors expressed concern about designers' understanding of local news. If a designer works and lives in Des Moines, for example, can he or she truly design the best presentation of news for readers in Monroe, Louisiana?

In a survey distributed online to nightly news editors and copy editors at Gannett newspapers, participants were asked about how design quality, communication effectiveness and representation of local communities has changed since the introduction of regional design hubs in 2011. The survey was emailed to 210 editors across all of Gannett's 82 daily newspapers and received a return rate of 31%. On the survey, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of

certain qualities based on a Likert scale of 1 to 7. In addition, there was a space for editors to leave comments they wished to make.

Three research questions were tested in this study:

Do editors at Gannett daily newspapers rate the design quality of their daily print edition as being higher or lower since the introduction of regional design studios? How effective are the communication practices between editors and designers now compared to when pages were designed in-house? Do those editors think design studios are accurately portraying the communities of the newspapers they produce, considering factors such as the accuracy of headline wording, photo selection and story placement or hierarchy?

The intent of the study was to measure what kind of impact regional design studios are having on the newspaper industry. To help gain insight into that effect, the focus of the research was narrowed to look solely at Gannett newspapers because the researcher interned at a Gannett design studio. There are a handful of newspaper companies currently using design studios to produce their publications, but Gannett was the first business to implement this new type of resource on a large scale. The Society for News Design brought up [some of the problems that naturally came up](#) during Gannett's preparation to outsource page designing duties to its regional studios. In interviewing Gannett's vice president, Kate Marymont, SND asked about the

individuality of newspapers and the [possible effectiveness of communication](#) between newsrooms and designers.

Another issue that this study wanted to analyze was how the delocalization of production of newspapers' print product might affect the strength of the local coverage. More specifically, the researcher wondered if designers in Gannett's regional hubs might not use photographs and headlines the same way a local designer would because they might have little knowledge of the community for which they'd be helping create a newspaper. On top of that, this research thought it important to obtain editors' opinions of the studios' effectiveness. Similar research surrounding news design [has tended to focus on a designer's perspective](#). This study sought to understand how editors inside Gannett's local newsrooms interpret changes they've witnessed with the implementation of design studios.

Design quality

When considering how much they personally value the overall design quality of their newspapers, editors rated themselves extremely favorably – a 6.46 average was the highest rating on the survey by a substantial margin. On the other hand, those same people rated how much their coworkers value design quite a bit lower (5.62).

(Figure A.)

SURVEY QUESTION TOPIC	AVERAGE RATING
How much you value design quality	6.46
How much your peers value design quality	5.62
Change in design quality	5.08
Change in overall look of newspaper	5.5

When assessing how the actual design or visual quality of their newspaper has changed since regional studios began being utilized, Gannett editors responded favorably. A 5.08 rating means that, on average, editors think designers have improved the design quality of Gannett newspapers. Along the same line, editors rated the change in the overall look of their newspaper as having improved as well (5.46). It would be one matter for a news designer or design editor to look at a Gannett publication before and after the use of regional studios and determine whether there has been a noticeable improvement in visual quality. It is a different matter altogether for nightly news editors and copy editors to rate an improvement in design quality. In the comments section, one participant noted that some newsroom employees have been designers in the past, but they “have been told in so many words that they have no say in how the presentation will be.” It is true that a portion of Gannett editors have worked as page

designers before. The company is not taking advantage of the strengths and skills of its employees if it ignores those editors' concerns. However, the sites do maintain a lot of creative control over their papers, and editors are empowered to make judgment calls on whether a designer's layout can work. According to Nathan Groepper, former creative director at the Des Moines studio, the amount of control varied from newsroom to newsroom.

Groepper was heavily involved in the process of getting Gannett's studio up and running in Des Moines. He said the studio always communicated to the sites that newsrooms should have final say on their newspaper's look and presentation, but that they should take advantage of designers' skills:

"In Des Moines, we always preach 'it's your paper,' which means the site should know what's best for their readers and have final say. The studio encourages frequent and constant collaboration between the designers and newsrooms. The smart sites take advantage of the studio's expertise in visual presentation and give designers the time and freedom to do good work. But some sites wanted tighter control and the studio allows for that, too."

At Des Moines, there really is regular communication between the studio supervisors and the newsrooms, which they refer to as "sites." The studio director, creative director and the team leaders at the Des Moines Design Studio speak with the newsrooms regularly, so there is an open line of communication. When newsroom employees notice wording, spelling or style mistakes, the studio designers hear about it. Even while designing on a nightly basis, the communication systems at Gannett encourage newsroom editors to voice concerns to the designers. That back-and-forth process happens every day with every newspaper. Perhaps the failure the survey commenter refers to is a failure on an individual level; a failure of one-on-one communication between designer and editor.

Communication practices at Gannett

Another important aspect of this research was judging the effectiveness of Gannett's communication practices. Several issues were discussed as hurdles for the company: Advanced planning for pages; regular discussion before nightly news designing; the influence newsroom editors would cede or maintain on design matters; the frequency of nightly communication. The range of topics was narrowed slightly for the purpose of a shorter questionnaire. However, the final question on the survey asked for other comments. Going back to the same commenter as before, part of the response particularly pertained

to the topic of communication practices. Here is a slightly longer excerpt:

“Communication is poor, and people in the newsrooms who have been designers and have strong backgrounds in design have been told in so many words that they have no say in how the presentation will be. The studio we deal with is tone deaf to the newsroom and does not perceive it as anything other than a faceless client than an opportunity to work together on a product.”

The survey was anonymous, so it’s not clear which design studio this editor collaborates with. Maybe the perception of studios seeing newsrooms as faceless clients occurs because the two workplaces set out to achieve different goals. The Gannett design studios — which do not have websites — list [their mission statement](#) on the studios’ Facebook page:

“To produce bold and innovative newspaper and magazine design, and improve visual story telling throughout our properties.”

The Des Moines Register, which shares a building with the Des Moines Design Studio, lists [a mission statement of its own online](#) in an archived page from Nov. 2005:

“The Register strives to report the news objectively and to present our opinions clearly and vigorously. We are dedicated to progress and to Iowa.”

Those two Gannett properties coexist and thrive within the same building, but have two totally different missions. But those missions are not mutually exclusive. Just because the Register “strives to report the news objectively” does not mean they don’t care about newspaper design — and vice versa.

(Figure B.)

SURVEY QUESTION TOPIC	AVERAGE RATING
Importance of discussion b/w editor and designer	5.46
How much influence editors have on design	5.08
How much influence editors should have on design	5.92
Gannett’s encouragement of discussions b/w editor and designer	4.67
Quality of communication at Gannett	3.92
Effectiveness of Lync in daily discussions	4.58

One question on the survey asked participants how much Gannett encourages a conversation on design. While the response was generally favorable (4.67), it was not as high of a rating as other averages on communication topics. Editors were also asked how important they think it is to discuss a news story or package with designers before it is put together. On average, participants responded that it is important to have that discussion (5.46). However, there was also a clear disparity between how much influence editors feel they do have on design (5.08) versus how much influence they should have (5.92). If there's any evidence of the communication failure the previously mentioned commenter talks about, this could be the strongest indicator. Based on their responses, you can see a pattern of how newsroom employees might feel out of the loop on the presentation of their newspaper.

Finally with communication practices, subjects were asked to rate the effectiveness of Microsoft Lync as a day-to-day messaging program, as well as the overarching quality of communication at Gannett. Editors rated both factors as being close to average, in their minds. The overall communication quality's 3.92 rating is just below average on a scale of 1 to 7. The effectiveness of instant messaging communication using Microsoft Lync was slightly higher at 4.58. It's hard to determine whether some editors rated Lync's effectiveness

negatively based on technical problems or because instant messaging, in general, makes it hard to communicate properly with each other.

One thing studio supervisors at Des Moines talk about is how important phone conversations are between designers and editors. Often, misunderstandings occur when someone “reads into” the tone of a message of email. But messages inherently have no tone — the hurt feelings happen only because a designer or editor “reads into” it. That’s why Des Moines studio supervisors stress phone communication because it can eliminate those issues. However, it is ultimately up to the designer and editor he or she works with to talk on the phone before a nightly shift. It is not required of anyone, and many employees would rather just use Lync.

That being said, Groepper said Gannett outlined the three levels of best communication practices between designers and editors when the company was planning its regional studios. Lync would be used “for the daily back-and-forth on any questions or things that needed to be changed on the page.” Phone or Skype calls would be used for planning and urgent issues. Emailing would be needed “only for things like budgets or long lists of corrections.” Three years after Gannett opened the Des Moines studio, those practices are still encouraged.

Representation of newspapers' local communities

This study's third central question revolved around whether designers in regional studios could represent a newspaper's community well enough despite having little or no knowledge of that community. In a few questions, editors were asked to judge how the quality of some design aspects has or has not changed since the introduction of regional studios. Interestingly, respondents have not found much of any change in these qualities over the past four years. Their ratings for headline wording, photo selection/placement and layout organization all hover around average.

One participant noted in the comments section that editors write the headlines, and designers have control only over the size and positioning of those headlines. This is certainly true in many cases. However, many designers at the Des Moines Design Studio offer suggestions for headlines, and sometimes even write their own – mostly for centerpieces or features pages. In addition, there are often situations where a designer wishes a headline to fit into a larger or smaller space, and then he or she can work with the newsroom editor to adjust the wording.

(Figure C.)

SURVEY QUESTION TOPIC	AVERAGE RATING
Designers' understanding of local news	3.08
Editors' trust in designers ability to represent community accurately	3.92
Confidence in how effectively pages are designed for local community	4.38
Change in quality of headline wording	3.67
Change in quality of photo selection/placement	4.5
Change in quality of organization of news packages	4.42

When asked if they think designers understand the importance of particular news for a newspaper's community, editors rated the designers' knowledge poorly – the 3.08 average was the lowest of any question asked. Two other questions about how much trust and confidence editors have in designers' knowledge of their communities showed similar results. The fact that those particular ratings were amongst the lowest on the survey could be cause for concern. For designers, a common obstacle is learning about what is important to a specific newsroom site's readership. For example, a sports designer must learn which professional sports teams the readership are most interested in, as well as which local colleges are important to them. That knowledge is pivotal in knowing which stories should be higher on the page, what wire stories to use from The Associated Press, and so on. Most, if not all, designers face that feeling out process in learning about the newspaper's community.

From the editors' standpoint, their responses indicate designers need to spend more time focusing on these things. One problem for designers is that many of them work on multiple newspapers at once on a given night, and some are also designing advance work for more than one publication. Also, when design work is done in advance, it is possible for a news designer to illustrate a story in a manner which newsroom employees feel misconstrues a situation or issue. When close communication does not take place, designers and editors can form significantly different viewpoints on how best to visually represent a story. And forming a bond of trust with editors is one of a design studio employee's most important tasks. The low survey results show not all designers are accomplishing that goal.

Groepper said the receptiveness to forming that bond of trust also varied from site to site. He noted that some newsrooms were enthusiastic about collaborating with the Des Moines studio while others were resistant to the change. To Groepper, the quality of relationships was dependent on the personalities of designers and editors. Part of his and other Gannett supervisors' jobs was pairing designers with editors who got along with each other. The type personalities involved was a key aspect in cultivating newsroom-studio relations. Even still, the variation in sites' receptiveness to what the studios try to do plays a huge role in the studios' effectiveness.

Groepper says the sites generally trust designers to meet deadlines, “But they don’t completely trust the studio when it comes to news judgment and how that relates to presentation.”

Conclusions

It’s not easy to draw definitive conclusions from a short survey on this topic. Future research should perhaps consider interviewing as a method to gain more in-depth insight into editors’ views of design studios’ effects. The purpose of a survey was to make the findings generalizable to a larger group of newspaper editors, but being able to read editors’ explanations or personal experiences would add to our understanding of the current situation. With design studios having been a part of the newspaper industry for less than four years, we’re still learning about their impact on daily newspapers. It would also be enlightening for future research to ask some more questions. What kind of ownership do Gannett newsroom employees feel toward the paper they work for? Do editors, copy editors, reporters and photographers feel less in tune with their workplace now that regional studios hold much of the production power? Employees who feel less ownership or lesser involvement are probably less personally invested in the success or profit of their newspaper.

Another point of interest for future research would be to find out how Gannett dailies’ visual quality stacked up against other newspaper

competition prior to the implementation of studios. This could be done through interviewing or content analysis, and would provide a more solid base for understanding how design studios have or have not changed the company's position within the industry in terms of visual quality. A study on Gannett's current culture comes at an interesting time of tumult as well. With the company's "restructuring" and "repositioning," more newsroom staffs are being slimmed down, and more positions are opening up within the regional studios. Future research on design studios must keep track of a free-flowing situation within the newspaper industry.

In terms of measuring success, this study's findings reveal varying results. On one hand, news editors rated a change in design and overall visual quality positively. With respect to a change in design quality since the introduction of regional studios, editors rated that change an average of 5.08 on a scale of 1 to 7. They rated the change in overall visual quality a 5.50. On the other hand, designers not being present in local newsrooms do seem to create a problem. Overall communication at Gannett was rated below average at 3.92, while Lync was viewed a little more positively at an average rating of 4.58. More notable is how highly newspaper editors rated the importance of a conversation about the design and layout of pages. A 5.46 rating indicates that newsroom employees think collaboration and discussion

is important, and their other responses about involvement in the design of their paper reflects that.

Equally concerning is the potential for a lack of trust and understanding to exist between editors and designers while working together. Kate Marymont noted in 2011 that [it would be important for those two kinds of workers to establish trust](#). This study's results suggest that editors think that trust may be lacking. Perhaps Gannett should provide some kind of training at the studios on how to effectively communicate with co-workers in newsrooms. If a huge part of designers' and editors' jobs is to establish trust and good partnerships with each other, why does the company not do more formal advising on how to approach that type of relationship? Another good idea might be to — before a designer's first shift working on a certain publication — have the designer meet either face to face or over the phone with that newsroom's editors. A short session where co-workers can get to know each other's backgrounds and goals could help set employees on the right track.

Something else Marymont stated in her discussion with SND is that newsroom editors have the ability to view pages' design throughout the process each night. That is true, and editors voice their concerns to studio designers when they notice an issue, whether that concern is about positioning, style or anything else. That's why

Gannett relies so heavily on Lync, because instant messaging facilitates that conversation between designers and editors.

Lastly, the effectiveness of communication techniques at Gannett's design studios, according to newsroom editors, is average. The drawbacks are clear: impersonal relationships, potential misunderstandings, and inconvenient or inconsistent modes of contacting people. That being said, editors responded favorably to the importance of discussing and working closely with studio employees on designing pages. While those news and copy editors expressed a desire to be even more involved, they do maintain a fair amount of influence on the creation of their pages. Impersonal interactions are unavoidable when cooperatively working with someone many miles away. However, positive and frequent communication between editors and designers might be essential in producing a newspaper that adheres to both visual and journalistic standards.