



# HAVE YOU SEEN THE NEWS?

*An Interview with Tony Sutton  
By Jason Walsh*

**DigitalArts**



**Tony Sutton** is president of News Design Associates, Inc. – <http://www.newsdesign.net> – an international publishing consultancy based in Georgetown, 20 km from Toronto in Canada. He is a former editor of the South African magazine, *Drum*, and of *Design*, the magazine of the US-based Society for News Design. He is also editor and publisher of the internet magazine *ColdType* – <http://www.coldtype.net>  
He may be contacted at [tonysutton@newsdesign.net](mailto:tonysutton@newsdesign.net)

**Jason Walsh** is a former designer turned journalist who writes about design, culture, politics and technology and has contributed to a wide range of newspapers and magazines in the UK, the United States and Ireland. He studied fine art at the University of Ulster and currently divides his time between Dublin and Belfast.

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**H**ow often do you think of the design of a newspaper? Not very often, I would guess. In truth, you probably shouldn't: A newspaper should be an example of invisible design, something that's a lot harder to do than it sounds.

Of course, in the last couple of years newspaper design has been far from invisible. First the *Independent* came out of the washing machine a little shorter and a lot fatter, quickly followed by a newly-tabloid *Times* – something Rupert Murdoch later admitted he'd wanted to do for years.

Both re-formatting exercises brought about major redesigns, particularly in the case of the *Independent* which has received plaudits for its single-issue front-pages, though it appears to this journalist at least in danger of becoming a liberal *Daily Mail*. *The Times* responded by having its features section, *Times2*, redesigned by none other than Neville Brody. Has newspaper design suddenly become sexy?

Next came the *Guardian* and *Observer* moving to Berliner-size (at almost exactly the same time, incidentally, that the *Irish News* moved from Berliner to tabloid), the *Guardian* earning its in-house design team a Designer of the Year nomination.

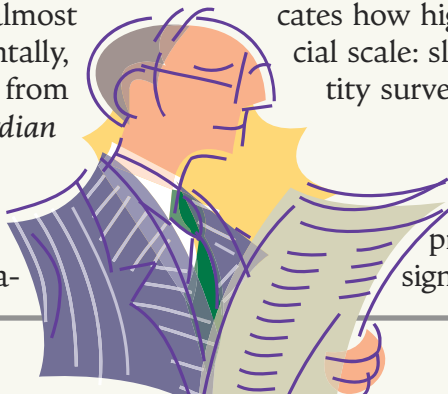
**Tony Sutton**, head of Cana-

dian-based newspaper consultancy **News Design Associates** and former editor of *Design*, the magazine of the Society for News Design, should know what's going on. Lincolnshire-born, Sutton has designed newspapers and magazines across the globe including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and South Africa and is an expert in the field. He answered a few questions on the subject of news design.

**Jason Walsh:** *How important is newspaper design:*

- To publishers and readers of newspapers?
- And to our broader culture?

**Tony Sutton:** When I tell people – usually during inane conversations over rubber chicken on long, dull, airplane flights – that I'm a newspaper designer, 99% of them assume I design the ads. When I put them right, most are politely incredulous; but amazed that anyone would pay people to slap their daily paper together. This indicates how highly we rate on life's social scale: slightly lower than quantity surveyors. It's also safe to assume that the same proportion of readers is just as unaware of the process of newspaper design. But that's okay, so long



## HAVE YOU SEEN THE NEWS?

as we subscribe to the relatively sensible view that the look of a newspaper should be subservient to the other stuff – the words, the pictures and, yes, even the advertising.

After all, our customers buy papers to read, not to admire. They're subconsciously aware of newspaper design, in pretty much the same way as they're aware of the design of crisp packets. But I don't think it plays a major part in helping them make their decision on which daily paper to buy – I've been involved in enough failed launches to know how entrenched readers are in their daily buying habits.

Most publishers are aware of the importance of design, if only because they've spent much of the last 20 years being told that design is the panacea for plunging circulations. The fact that sales have continued to fall suggests that they haven't always had their eyes on reality: Newspapers cease to be relevant for many reasons – design included – each of which has to be tackled if declines are to be reversed.

Culturally, newspapers also have a problem, in that they're so much yesterday's product. They don't appeal to younger people: who are more technologically proficient than their parents, and they, in turn, are less inclined to read the daily rag than their parents. I think the average age of daily paper readers in America is edging 50 – youthful grandparents! So, no matter how trendy your design or how cool your colour palette, it's increasingly hard to compete with iPods, blogs and texting, no matter how many times you try to convince yourself of the supremacy of the printed word.

Perhaps we should pause

for a moment while the newspaper designers reading this go out and slash their wrists...

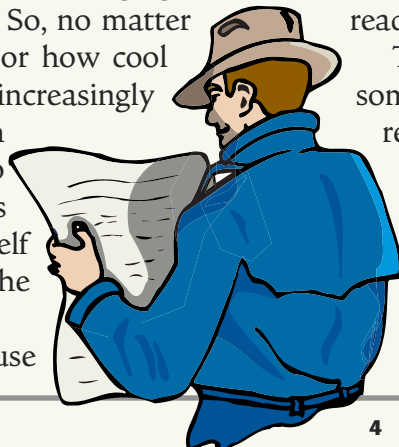
**Walsh:** What makes good newspaper design?

**Sutton:** A combination of elements: A clear sense of identity and organisation, good typography, overall styling and strong content all help to create a newspaper's personality and generate 'reader acceptance.' But design can't do it by itself – producing the world's best looking newspaper is pointless if people don't buy it.

That's one of the most obvious lessons from the US-based Society for News Design's annual contest for the world's best designed newspaper, where a fair number of papers honoured with being the best designed have gone belly up soon after. *The European* (remember?) was one, while Edinburgh's *Scotsman* was top-rated by SND at the same time as its circulation was collapsing.

Closer to home, free copies of the Canadian *National Post* have been dropped in the drive of every home in the street in which my daughter lives for the past two weeks. Eight hours later, most of them are still lying in the dirt. The *National Post* wins dozens of design awards, but the publisher has trouble giving it away, because readers don't like its content.

The moral? Designers – and some editors – tend to forget that readers don't carefully snip their wonderful works of art out of the paper and hang them on their walls – designers do that, readers throw them into the rubbish bin within minutes of opening them (or, in the case



## H A V E Y O U S E E N T H E N E W S ?

of Canada's *National Post*, not opening them). The purpose of design is to attract readers' eyeballs to the paper, help them get through the pages, help their understanding of the stories and make them linger a little bit longer than they really want to. If the content is good, that's great – but if it's crap, it's just a wasted effort.

What makes good newspaper design? Good content, that's what!

**Walsh:** Is designing a regional weekly significantly different from designing a daily national?

**Sutton:** The staff resources at weekly papers are much smaller than on dailies, and the skill levels are usually, but not always, lower (mainly because undertrained and usually underpaid reporters have to do everything). The content and reader expectations are also entirely different: In a daily paper, for example, you'll choose a few eye-catching pictures and make them as big as possible, but if you did that in a weekly it'd piss off readers who expect to see lots of smaller pictures of local people doing things that don't always appear captivating. And readers of local papers are much more critical of change than those on national papers because the local paper is theirs in a way that the *Daily Bum* never will be. Bugger up small, seemingly unimportant, things and they'll burn the bloody building down.

**Walsh:** How does newspaper design differ from magazine design?

**Sutton:** Chalk and cheese. Newspapers are about speed – fast production for fast

reading; magazines are leisurely beasts, both in production and reading. Newspapers are the ultimate throwaway item – skim through it in 10 minutes, absorb as much of interest as possible, then heave it into the bin and scrub the ink off your hands. The design's there to help you absorb as much as you can as quickly as possible. Magazines are a luxury – people buy them to read for pleasure, the stories are (usually) longer and more thorough, they find the time to read them. Editing and designing magazines is more exacting and much more leisurely – until deadline looms when, certainly the ones I've worked at, the offices transform into madhouses.

**Walsh:** Is the fact that the final work is performed by journalists a major consideration in newspaper design?

**Sutton:** Yes, few subs are trained designers (and designers tend not to be journalists, as we can see almost every time we pick up an American paper). But I think deadlines are a greater consideration. The most important element in planning a redesign of a newspaper is speed – it's no use designing a wonderful looking paper if it takes vast amounts of time getting the pages produced. At the same time, you have to produce design formats that are easy to implement by journalists who are not only un-

trained in design but often have to work with pagination systems that are hard to use.

We tend to forget that a generation ago we got rid of the hairy-fisted artisans who actually put the paper together and passed their work on to



## H A V E Y O U S E E N T H E N E W S ?

the journalists. Then we reduced the number of journalists . . .

**Walsh:** How do you feel about the rush to shrink to tabloid?

**Sutton:** Generally, it's a good idea, but there can be problems, especially in transforming big broadsheets into smaller packages. When a section goes over 100 pages it becomes unwieldy and that makes it off-putting for readers. Some papers do it right: Glasgow's *Sunday Herald* did a great job with their recent conversion, stitching their sections so they fall out of the main body as tabloid-sized magazines.

We should also remember that going tabloid's not really new; the trend wasn't started by the *Independent*. The *Daily Mail* led the way years ago, followed by the *Express* and virtually every provincial daily and evening newspaper in Britain. The main lesson – usually forgotten – from those transformations is that circulation soared for a time then, at most papers, the decline continued.

And it's good to see weeklies finally making the move to tabloid – they're so much easier to lay out and readers almost always prefer the smaller format.

**Walsh:** Is the Internet changing how newspapers are laid-out?

**Sutton:** Yes, but mainly on a superficial level with the use of internet-style design icons, links to the net and so on. The Internet is an entirely different product and newspapers should understand that. They fell into the trap – 20 years ago – of trying to be

like TV (hence *USA Today's* TV-shaped sales boxes); I wish they'd stop trying to be what they aren't and concentrate on doing a better job at what they are... newspapers. But they've now started to latch on to the fact that the Internet might just be the future and that might make the changes of the past 30 years seem like small stuff. Just imagine: A newspaper without paper and ink...

**Walsh:** How did you become a publication design specialist?

**Sutton:** Purely by chance. Until I left school, I'd planned to be a soccer star, but I wasn't good enough, so I joined my local paper, the *Horncastle News* in Lincolnshire, where I discovered I had a talent for laying out pages. After that, it was down to curiosity, asking the right questions and being ambitious. And being a journalist has always seemed more fun than working for a living...

**Walsh:** Do you think journalists and the publishing industry respect publication designers?

**Sutton:** If they care about words, yes. If they just want to draw pretty pictures, no.

**Walsh:** You're British, you live in Canada and you work internationally, yet you haven't done much work in the UK. Why is this?

**Sutton:** Good question, but not totally right. I did quite a lot of work in Glasgow a few years ago, consulting for the launch of the *Sunday Herald* and redesigns at the *Evening*



## H A V E Y O U S E E N T H E N E W S ?

*Times* and the *Herald*. And, of course, I've worked with a number of papers in Northern Ireland including the *Ulster Herald* and *Daily Ireland*. I did my stint on British newspapers early in my career at the *Shields Gazette* in South Shields, *Sunday Sun* at Newcastle upon Tyne and the *Scottish Daily Express* in Glasgow. But I haven't lived in England for 30 years, so my journalistic links with the country are not that strong, although I spend a fair amount of time there and still think British newspapers – some of them, anyway – are the best in the world.

I also find that consulting work tends to be a bit cyclical: a few years ago, most of my work was in the USA; now I have few clients there, most are in Africa, Australia and New Zealand and Europe. To be fair, I'd rather travel to new places than revisit old haunts, despite the efforts of various airlines to make that travel as miserable as possible.

**Walsh:** How would you say the design of British newspapers differs from North American newspapers?

**Sutton:** In a word (or three): Volume of Advertising. US newspapers are stuffed with the bloody things. And they still haven't grasped the fact that readers are NOT interested in seeing wide-open front pages containing nothing but art, a headline and three inches of text about a story no one cares about. After that the punters really don't want to turn the pages and wade through acres of dull text running round ugly ads trying to extract a few

nuggets of useful information. The complacency is a result of publishing monopolies that maximise corporate profits at the expense of journalism. Competition, as every Brit newspaper person understands, makes design – and content – stronger. Well, most of the time it does.

**Walsh:** And continental European newspapers?

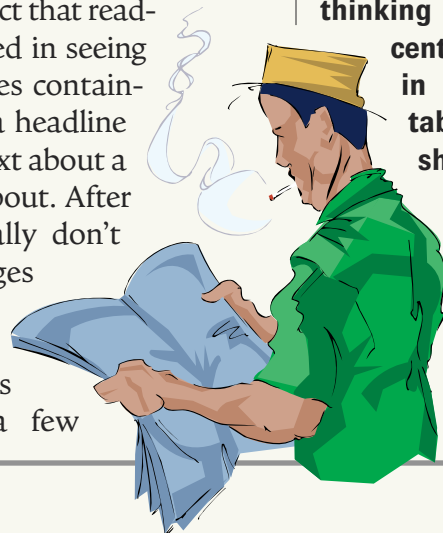
**Sutton:** I can't read them so can't really comment, but they look good – some of them.

**Walsh:** What is your favourite newspaper design?

**Sutton:** I don't really have one. Design is not what I look for in a newspaper; I buy them to read, not to admire. But I do like the new look of the *Guardian*, although when the first issue came out I thought it was crap – I was in Ireland at the time and the Irish edition was printed very badly without full colour on every page – and *G2*, my favourite part of the paper, was an abomination

**Walsh:** In general, is newspaper design better or worse now than in the past? I'm thinking in particular of the turn of the century festival of colour illustrations in American newspapers, British tabloids and how the British broadsheets of today compare to themselves ten, twenty and fifty years ago?

**Sutton:** Yes, I'd say it is better, in the way that most things are better – mainly as a result of changes in technology. In 50



## H A V E Y O U S E E N T H E N E W S ?

years people will look at the work we do now and laugh at how old fashioned it looks.

**Walsh:** What is, in your opinion, your own best work?

**Sutton:** My favourite work, not necessarily the best, is the stuff I've done for myself – *ColdType*, in print and on its website, [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net). It's tremendous therapy editing and designing your own publications without having to second guess the desires of a client.

With commercial work, I'm proud of the Glasgow Sunday Herald, which just gets better and better, and the Toronto Globe and Mail, which I redesigned in 1990. The design really WAS revolutionary at the time – we turned it, as one pundit said,

from the worst-looking paper in North America into the best. Other high points include the recently-deceased Daily Ireland, which I admired for its commitment to a united Ireland, and *Africawoman*, a tabloid for a woman's collective in Nairobi, Kenya, which is engaged in a continent-wide battle to improve the basic quality of life.

**Walsh:** What do you think of the re-designed *Guardian* and *Observer*, both in terms of format and design?

**Sutton:** Both are excellent, and have, in fact, long been the papers I buy when I'm in Britain. I think the *Guardian* is the better designed, if only because it handles spot colour much better – the *Observer's* colour is a little too kaleidoscopic for my liking.

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