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## Typography in Publication Design

### Dressing up a Dog's Dinner

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#### Visual: 1

Friend's pardon me if I have made some of you a little uneasy with this rather blasé title of my presentation, the audience of an intellectually elite institution like this one may have pondered a bit at the network architecture that links typography to one's pet's dinner. But that exactly was my idea, to create a bit of mystery around this morning's topic, but rest be assured I will try not to divert too much from design and typography.

I wish to tell to this marvelous audience the story of Outlook magazine that started in 1995 and since have had a momentous run for the past 17 years.

Mid-90s in India was a rapidly changing time in most spheres of life. The opening of the economy brought in much needed capital and business energy in most industries. The consumption patterns and the quantum we consumed were changing at a speed that was never seen before. When we talk today of Indian economy is being transformed from an elephant to an Asiatic tiger, then the mid-90s was when this tiger was a cub and at its energetic best.

The end of license-quota Raj brought about by the NarsimhaRao- Manmohan Singh duo in 1992 triggered an unprecedented inertia in private ventures. It was not just the stock markets that saw the red flag furlled at it, the domestic consumption markets too, cramped so far by Soviet-style state-controlled economy, unleashed itself on a choice-starved middle class.

The local kirana-stores began to sell products those carried a stamp of a brand and were packaged smartly. The days of buying things by weight and carrying it in crummy paper bags were beginning to be a thing of the past.

The new-found choice the Indian consumer was experiencing on the store-shelves naturally led to the need for these competing products to be advertised. This meant a boon for the cash-strapped print-publishing industry. A welcome source of revenue, generated by product advertising was beginning to emerge. Which also meant, a venture to start up an independent news publication, banking purely on advertising revenue, was looking a certain possibility.

It is interesting to remember here that print journalism in India was at its robust best just after the end of imposition of emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1977. Gagging of the free press had resulted a lot of steam to be let out. A plethora of news magazines and newspapers appeared on the scene in late 70s. All the big editors you find today were the front rank artillery of the glorious 80s of print journalism. But barring just a few most of these publications shut shop as soon as they had opened. This happened because most of these publications, though some of them were of high quality, were not run like a profit centre, as in a journal that could financially sustain itself through self-generated revenue. So the minute a journal published something that conflicted with the interests of its patrons, monetary ties were snapped resulting in closure of the publication.

The booming of the stock markets in the 90s, the explosion of FMCGs, the advent of new kinds of automobiles on the Indian road, the Indian middle-class' appetite for white goods, all this and more brought in advertising revenue that would give the much needed oxygen supply to the gasping independent news journalism ventures. The possibility of bringing out a news publication that was free of government aid - which usually would come in the form of government advertisement, or a financial support that eventually would get snapped off the minute the self interest of the patron came in conflict, seemed real.

Outlook was born at a time when the financial climate in India was ripe. But we had a few other things going for us too.

For starters, we chose *India Today*, the market leaders in the news magazine category at the time, would be our principal competitor. The benefits of this were two-fold. Firstly, our opponent's enormous circulation figures shook us out of our initial inertia, and spurred us to try and match them. Secondly, *IT* then was a fortnightly, and by the time it appeared on the stands much of its currency was lost. The long gap between two issues robbed it of the surprise element so vital to a news magazine, and gave its contents a boring predictability. Moreover, *India Today* in '95 looked visually tired, with its cluttered look,

inelegant typography, toss-away visuals and lack of attention to detail. It was designed more or less by default, not by professional designers but by layout artists, who rigidly followed an already tight template. A BBC correspondent at the time, leafing through a copy of the magazine, remarked to me that *IT's* Macintosh seemed to have gone amok! The other newsmagazines—*Sunday*, *Frontline* and *The Week*—were feeble challengers to *IT's* muscle.

To keep myself within the goal posts of this lecture's topic, I'll spare you, this lovely attentive audience, the journalistic journey of Outlook and instead narrate Outlook's 'look' story, in which I had a small part to play. How we evolved a visual narrative for story telling.

Design is the frame that holds a magazine together; it's the subtle yet vital component that distinguishes one magazine from the other. Without design, a magazine is merely a *mélange* of disparate elements; with it, it is a disciplined entity.

We wanted a design that would be simple but expressive in spirit. I am speaking about design here, which is within the limited confines of news journalism. When I refer to design the context here is visual journalism. The job on my hand was to create a design structure for the magazine that addressed to three different groups. The User, the consumer, and the advertiser.

## **Visual: 2**

For the benefit of those in the audience who are not familiar with the workings of a news publication let me quickly explain how a design room functions within the editorial scheme of things. A design room normally is headed by the art or the design director, who is assisted by fellow designers, illustrators, cartoonists, info-graphists etc etc. The design section is conjoined at hips with the photography section. The two departments weave the visual story together.

In a standard visual structure, few elements are kept as variables while others are constants, the design or the layout, a full-page of a newspaper or a multi-page story for a magazine, as the case maybe, is passed on to an entity known as the copydesk. Copydesk is the interface between the editorial and the readers. At the copydesk editors fit the textual part of the story that includes things like headline, captions etc.

This was my first target group, the user of the design - the copydesk. The design my team and myself was creating for the magazine had to be easy to use for the copy desk, it had to be quickly adaptable to constantly changing scenarios of news environment. We believed if the first group - the user of the design found the design comfortable to work with and prided itself in engaging with it in a creative way, the remaining two groups, the consumer as in the readers and the advertiser, from who our pay checks came could be roped into our conspiracy.

The design mantra we gave ourselves was: Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication. Simplicity of the design should be linked to making the magazine easy to read. The main thing about editorial design is that it should make things intuitively obvious. We employed minimalism but we avoided minimalism to make the magazine look cold. In the design room we were passionate and super serious about design but at the same time the designs we created had a sense of play.

When we started out, we had the privilege of not being weighed down by the greatness of our back-issues. This allowed us a fair degree of leeway and an openness in dealing with the visual aspect of the magazine. *Outlook's* visual personality, we decided, will be elegant and minimalist, with authoritative typography, sophisticated visuals and judicious use of colour; and lively pacing that would make the editorial material flow seamlessly from one story to the next. We would try to keep a surprise element for the reader, but not in a way that would make him wonder about the mental health of our Macintosh!

Conventionally news magazines those days, be it Indian or foreign, used a thick red band on the top of the page. The objective was to encase the page, giving a sort of a contour to the content. The top thick band also lent a sense of urgency to the display. In most cases a news magazine page would be boxed by rules of varying thickness.

We did away with this convention and instead used a thick blue rule at the bottom of the page. Though we went ahead with a conventional three-column format, we decided not to have any rules between the columns or a box around the page.

### **Visual: 3**

Editorially Outlook had a dream inaugural issue. The cover story we carried, was the result of an opinion poll, conducted in the Kashmir valley, which claimed – 77 percent of Kashmiri's wanting Azadi from the Indian state.

The Outlook inaugural issue acted like a red rag furred at the extreme Hindu right political party, the ShivSena. ShivSenasupremoMrBalThackery sent hundreds of his goons to ransack our editorial office and thrash us up. Without having to spend a single rupee in advertising our new magazine, MrThackery's actions ensured, us becoming a household name in India. We were the messengers who were shot at. Our readers were extremely sympathetic and supportive to us right from the very first issue.

Both on the cover as well as the opening spread of the cover story we used a bold, in your face design. We used condensed Helvetica font for our headlines that gave an urgent look to our pages. Conventionally serif fonts were used but we decided we would use serif headlines only for our features stories.

#### **Visual: 4**

Another crowning glory of our inaugural issue was the excerpts form the then prime minister's NarsimhaRao's yet to be published novel. That the PM was writing a novel was being talked about in hushed tones in the corridors of power, but nobody imagined till we published the excerpts, on how raunchy and scandalous the novel was. Outlook became the toast for the season. We were written about, due to this story, all over the international press.

The legendary cartoonist, MrAjitNinan, drew a brilliant sketch of NarsimhaRao that helped us design a lavish spread for the story.

When we started out in 1995, it was not so easy to buy or source fonts as we have today. The choice was limited. Online purchase, which is a norm today, was not possible. One had to depend on the local vendors for fonts. We chose, after much deliberation, Stone Print to be our font for the body copy.

Stone Print had a good x-site and its serifs were well formed that helped in reading big masses of text. Though the font was elegant, personally I felt, Stone Print to be a bit-tooold-fashioned for a brand new magazine, which editorially wanted to be irreverent, right from the word go. But I had a few choices then. Luckily, our design went down well among our peers.

Seven years later, that is, seven eventful years in the short life of a newsmagazine, we had already chronicled three general elections, two cricket world cups, one war and two

nuclear blasts, a hijack-hostage drama and a plenty much more. We had begun to feel the need to redesign the magazine.

The primary objective of a redesign a magazine or a newspaper is to reorganize its contents that has, due to several modifications and innovations, caused by the need to adjust as per the content of the day, has lost its unique visual personality. Easier put, every edition has a slightly different ask than its previous edition in its design demands. Along the course every cook adds its own spice to the broth, so after a point you realize, your colour palette is very different from what you had started out, the font library begins to look like a letteraset, and the style box contains many un-connected design elements, in other words, a big mess.

Redesign is a splendid opportunity in putting the house back in order. It also brings in an element of renewed energy among 'the user of the design' - the copydesk. Redesign also helps the editorial to bring in fresh ideas and discard the ones those are not working.

But redesign is a subtle art; it is like producing good wine. It must be handled with care and above all, patience, so that the comfort level of the reader is undisturbed.

In the summer of 2002, I had met the art director of The Guardian newspaper in London. Guardian was and is, a visual delight. I regard the Guardian typography to be the most elegant in the business. I was looking for a new font for Outlook redesign. The Guardian art director suggested me a type foundry in London, called The Fontworks. Fontworks showed me their bouquet of fonts and I found them impressive. They had worked upon, both serif and sans serif rather well.

#### **Visual: 5**

We chose News14 to be our body copy font for the redesign. We replaced our news story headline font from condensed Helvetica to a more stylish Gill Sans. We changed the design of all our regular pages, barring the masthead; we almost changed everything in the design. And one fine week, confident as a brat, we launched the redesigned Outlook to our readers.

The reaction was disastrous. The readers hated the new look. A few readers on our letters page demanded my sacking. My nervous editor asked me to tweak the design a bit. The best option for me at that point was to go back to basics.

## Visual: 6

I employed the thick red-band-on-top, tried and tested, formula.

And it worked.

But the choice of typography was correct. It gave Outlook a nice, contemporary, new-look. News14 was an elegant font indeed. The combination of Gill Sans and Bliss as a news headline fonts and Walburn as feature headline font complimented, News 14 very well.

Outlook in yet another design avatar:

## Visual: 7, 8, 9

In the constantly changing paradigm of news journalism the need to reinvent is constant too. Though print publication in India, unlike our western counterparts, is a sunrise industry here, yet the space for a weekly magazine is ever shrinking. Added to that is the variety of choices the reader has today.

In 1995, when Outlook began, there were just a handful magazines on the stand compared to hundreds the reader can choose today.

The reader, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is longer just a king, he his kinky too.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer considers loyalty to be a canine virtue.  
An intelligent person is the one, who is discerning too.

Outlook faces a stiff competition every week at the stands. It is like walking on the conveyor belt facing the wrong side. We try to reinvent all the time.

Sometimes we fail. But that doesn't deter us in our will to take the reader by surprise.

We think the element of surprise is the, elixir for survival, in our business.

Sometimes we do get a bit of a jolt, when the elixir turns a bit poisonous, that gives us indigestion.

The visuals you saw just now on the display, is Outlook in its latest avatar.

We changed our fonts and design yet again. Once bitten but never to be shy for another bite.

### Visual: 10

In 2006, we replaced News 14 with Mercury, Bliss with Retina, Gill Sans with Gotham and Walburn with Didot.

During my many visits at the Society of News Design conferences, I came across the works of the incredibly-gifted type designers – Hoefler&Ferrer Jones. Seeing the works of Hoefler&Ferrer Jones I had shifted my loyalties from the Fontworks.

Afterall, I am the consumer here and have a right to be kinky.

The reactions to the redesigned Outlook were disastrous as before!

The reader rejected us outright yet again.

Hate mails, and the demand for my head, were asserted without any signs of sympathy.

In the glorious tradition of Outlook, most of the letter those hurled abuses at the design, were printed with relish in our letters page.

But this time around our skin had developed a few more layers and got thicker. We refused to change.

My logic was – a design that replaces an older design, will always be difficult to accept initially. The resistance is caused due to the familiarity with the way things were. A change requires re-adjusting and we are all creatures of habit and acquaintance.

It is like changing your toothbrush.

When you change your toothbrush it always feels a little strange in your mouth. You long for the older one.

Yet you carry on with the new toothbrush because the older one had to be discarded.



And before you know you have adapted yourself to the change.

The present design we have employed works very well with our editorial needs. It is flexible to long format journalism, that is when we do stories those go on it 16 to 18 pages.

A case in point being Arundhati Roy's essays - they are read worldwide, giving Outlook a global footprint. Roy's essays evoke extreme viewpoints in our letter page, giving the magazine a vibrant, argumentative flavour.

#### **Visual: 10a**

An important milestone in Outlook's typographic journey was introducing the new symbol for the Rupee. I take immense pride for being able to adapt the Rupee symbol in the fonts we use in Outlook, that is Mercury, Retina and Gotham. On behalf of the entire Outlook team, I extend our gratitude to IIT-Powai, Prof G V Shreekumar and his team to have so brilliantly adapted the Rupee symbol for Outlook. Many many thanks guys.

The Outlook design story will not be complete if I don't speak about our covers. Right from the beginning we were well aware that the cover of the magazine would be a critical factor in determining whether the reader would ultimately buy *Outlook* from the stands. A good design is one that is designed end-to-end, the design elements closely tailored to the product and vice-versa.

We identified four key areas to address this issue:

**Identity:** the cover has a vital role to play in establishing a magazine's brand identity.

Type, colour, image style and number of cover lines—all conspire to personify the brand.

**Image:** the main image and the masthead are the first things the reader sees when surveying a newsstand. So, week after week, it is essential to get right the overall composition of the cover, and choose the right image that captures the essence of the cover story.

**Impact:** to grab the attention of a potential *Outlook* reader, we must get them through the front door, and make covers that would make readers curious about what's inside.

**Information:** great cover lines are like poetry, tightly written, and with the ability to move the reader.

**Visual: 11-28**

In one of our anniversary issues we invited noted photographer, Dayanita Singh to choose our best covers. Here are Dayanita Singh Outlook Best with her comments.

Despite trying to follow these guidelines faithfully, we have got it wrong on a few occasions. In an environment where information travels so incredibly fast, how does one find an arresting visual that the reader has not already seen on TV or the morning newspaper or the internet? Some news events, like 9/11, generate only one news image, which the *Outlook* reader would have seen a thousand times before we could reach the stands. For an event like that, we displayed the most iconic image of the news on the cover and relied on our reader's faith in us that *Outlook* will offer something new that he has not already seen or read before.

**Visual: 29**

Here I pause to clear the mystery behind the title of my lecture: Dressing up a Dogs Dinner. Let me clarify that the term Dressing Up is not meant to be negative.

Dressing Up doesn't mean that we manufacture a story nor do we sensational a story.

Dressing Up merely means packaging a story in a manner that it makes the story appear inviting to the reader.

The nature and constraint of a weekly format is as such that, by the time we get to the news and publish it, the story that remains for us, is quite like a leftover from the table, that has already been dined upon by a variety of news hounds: 24x7 TV, daily newspaper, the internet etc.

By the time Outlook reaches the news stands, my reader has got all the news.

Some of the news that dominated the week may just be pouring out of his ears.

This is where the dressing up is so very necessary.

Dressing up is done not just visually but also by how the story is written.

The spin that is given to a news development, in a way, that triggers enquiry, in the readers mind.

Many important stories keep developing during the course of the week.

In such a scenario, the manner in which the story is tackled, so that we don't get overtaken by the events, ... and so on and so forth.

The visual narrative of the magazine plays a key role in the dressing up process. It also gives a pace and a rhythm to the magazine.

If we were to personify visual narrative the best personification will be that of a DJ in a club. All that a DJ does is he plays music that already exists ... and possibly played by the same audience he is playing for.

But the DJ's skill lies in how he puts what is available to him, in a way, that binds his audience together.

The art director is like that DJ.  
He sets the pace of the journal.

A lot depends on how the visual hierarchy is established.

We, in Outlook, over the years have found our own style of visual journalism and have devised a few thumb rules, though they are not carved in stone. For instance, while designing the cover, for a news event that would allow us to choose from many images, almost as a rule; we choose the image which is not quite mainstream, even if that particular image is only obliquely linked to the cover story.

But the reader, as we found out, can be unforgiving if we err too much on the side of adventurousness.

### **Visual: 30**

The reader response to *Outlook* cover of November 12, 2001 (*Clueless in Afghanistan*) taught us a valuable lesson about the reader's sensitivity. The lesson we learnt from this error of judgment was: wounded babies make for an oppressive visual and hence are a complete no-no for a cover.

## Visual: 31

There isn't a single dull moment in the design room of a newsweekly, and I have never regretted my decision to be an editorial designer.

When receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Society of News Design, the venerable Louis Silverstein, known as the grandfather of news design, narrated why he chose visual journalism as a career.

He said, "Of the many odd jobs I did as a teenager, one of them was as a milk delivery boy. One morning when I knocked at a door to deliver milk, a beautiful young blonde wearing a diaphanous negligee opened the door.

On finding me there, her face fell in disappointment.

'I thought it was the newspaper boy,' she said.

That was the day I decided to make a career in newspapers."

It's true, there's something irresistibly sexy about the business of news!