

Re-designing news challenges journos, publishers



By Herman Manson: @marklives

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All The News That's Fit to Print, to quote the most famous newspaper motto of all time, has of course become less about reams and reams of words stuffed onto cheap paper and more about words and images strategically placed to tell a story in a way that is accessible to readers. Visual journalists like Charles Apple play an increasingly important role as the news industry attempts to increase engagement, with consumers used to sound bites and quick synopses of news as it happens. Their work and strategic importance is already apparent locally in the recent redesigns of South African newspapers *Rapport* and *City Press*.



Charles Apple, visual journalist and instructor.

Apple believes newspapers have re-engaged with visual journalism in the face of declining circulations (specifically in developed economies), viewing it as another way of attracting new readers. There are some tricks you can teach old dogs yet! Already, he cautions, visual journalism is being turned on its head by the rise of mobile devices.

South African papers, which Apple suggests lags international publications visually by quite a substantial margin, have a lot to learn but could potentially embrace international best practice, should there be the editorial and management will to do so.

[Apple](#), who spent [three months in South Africa](#) last year to facilitate training of visual editors at a number of Media24 titles, is an award-winning visual journalist with over 20 years of experience behind him. He is an industry columnist for the [Society for News Design](#) quarterly magazine, *Design*. Apple also [blogs](#) about visual journalism on [VisualEditors.com](#).

Bizcommunity.com: Visual journalism seems to continue gaining in importance even as word counts seem to keep falling. Is this news' way of keeping up with the shorter attention span of readers used to TV snippets and sound bites and information overload?

Charles Apple: I think it's an attempt to do that, yes. But it's also a way the media is trying to meet readers' expectations.

Readers want to see a nice, big display on page one after a big [FIFA] [World Cup win](#) or a political election. Readers expect a publication that's slick in both tone and appearance. To give your readers otherwise is simply not meeting their needs and expectations.

The trick, however, is to give readers wonderfully-designed front pages, but do it in a way that focuses on the content - on telling the story. It's easy to slap a photo on the front and run it big. But you have to set a tone with it; to capture the mood of the story with the picture, the headline and anything else you use out front. To do it any other way is just empty calories.

Visual journalism isn't new. The only thing that's new is the interest newspapers are taking in it as a way to attract and delight readers.

Biz: How is the web impacting on visual journalism both in terms of how it is being presented online and in how it has changed print news design?

Apple: Over the past few years, we've seen a lot of interactive maps and diagrams here in the US - information pops up as you click here or there; numbers change as you fiddle with them or as you move a timeline slider to or fro. These pieces are wonderful storytelling devices. Those of us still in print can only drool over the power these tools wield.

The best of this work, by the way, is done by the *New York Times* and the Fort Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel*. Lately, I'm not seeing quite as much impressive multimedia work - mostly because US newspapers have cut back drastically on their staffing.

The other way the web has affected print is with a brain drain. Some of the biggest names in visual journalism have left print for the multimedia side - and you can hardly blame them, especially with all the crushing layoffs newspapers in the US have experienced.

Biz: I know visual journalism now integrates multimedia and interactivity online. Do you think this will be turned on its head once again as mobile data usage gains on the web?

Apple: It'll definitely be turned on its head - in fact, it's happening right now. Experts are telling us that the worldwide transition of users from laptops to smartphones and tablets will happen even faster than the transition did from desktops to laptops. A lot of the multimedia stuff we see today simply won't fit on a smartphone screen.

Also, more importantly: many - perhaps a majority - of multimedia graphics are built with software called Adobe Flash. Apple's new iPhones and iPads can't read Flash, so readers are getting a little blue box with a question mark in it instead of their graphic. Much money is being spent - and many teeth are being gnashed - around the world to search for a software platform that will be smartphone-compatible and Apple-friendly.

Something that's been big for US newspapers, over the past few years: video. Papers here have spent millions, converting their photo departments into video studios; their photographers into videographers. All that has crashed this year - big time - when publishers, watching the number of clicks and page views, finally admitted hardly anyone out there is watching this stuff.

Biz: Do most journalists and editors recognise the importance of news design or is that still "for the production side to worry about?"

Apple: I think most newsroom employees "get it" now, at least here in the US.

Sure, design can be left to the end of the process and treated as if it were a production function. But then the quality suffers greatly. And, as quality diminishes, so does readership, eventually. I think by making the cuts and trims they've made to their staffing, US papers have worsened the declining readership numbers.

Biz: *You've been involved with visual journalism here in SA through consulting for Media24. What struck you when you first looked at SA newspapers?*

Apple: The first thing that struck me was: I've been here before. Figuratively, I mean.

For the most part, SA newspapers are about where US papers were, in terms of visual journalism, in the late 1980s. You have the technology and the desire to do cool visual work. But your editors and designers are lacking some of the fundamental skills needed to do great work.

To a great extent, SA papers have an unsophisticated use of typography, for example. Ditto for white space - for a number of reasons, leaving blank area around a picture or a graphic can be an important design technique. But often, when I see white space on a SA newspaper page, it's somewhat random and therefore ineffective as a tool to move the reader's eye around the page.

All too often, graphics in SA newspapers simply repeat information from the story beside them. Perhaps it would help if editors and designers thought of graphics as sidebars, rather than decorative elements.

I hasten to add: this was true for the Media24 operations and I worked hard with the folks there to remedy this.

Biz: *Did any other SA newspapers impress you visually?*

Apple: Honestly? No - not visually. A few papers ran larger photos than others, and I liked that at times.

Not to shill for Media24 or anything, but I think consultant [Peter Ong](#) did a wonderful job with his redesign of *Rapport* last year. By the time I left (in early December) that paper was really humming along, visually, with interesting graphics, better use of photography and wonderful typography. I've seen pictures online of the new *City Press* -- it looks really good, too, but I'll reserve judgment until I hold and read a copy.

The folks who impressed me the most at Media24 were the sports and business departments. Sports used their visual resources particularly well, I think. And that Sunday *Sake24* is a model of what I think modern business journalism can look like.

Biz: *The Newseum is quite an extraordinary resource but not many South African newspapers are participating at the moment. Do you feel it's a missed opportunity that we're not submitting to the Newseum at a time when we have so much world attention focused upon us?*

Apple: The [Newseum](#) is a non-profit organisation that was seeded with Gannett money, if I'm not mistaken. It actually has a museum building in Washington, D.C., but most newspaper designers interface with it via its [online collection of front pages](#) from the US and beyond.

Basically, it's where news designers - indeed, anyone in the world interested in news presentation - can go to check out what papers are doing around the globe.

And yes, it just boggles my mind that SA newspapers aren't posting their pages there every day. It doesn't cost a cent. And, once you set it up, it requires hardly any effort at all.

For SA papers to not post their pages at the Newseum during the [2010 FIFA] World Cup is like U2 going on tour without its bass player. You have this wonderful opportunity to impress fellow journalists and show them what you can do. And, I might add, to link back to your organisation's web page. The only SA papers that post their pages at the Newseum are *Business Day* and *The Times*. And both appear to have stopped posting regularly during the cup.

Biz: *The best designed newspapers in the world according to Charles Apple? Why?*

Apple: I have a tendency to only answer this question with papers I've held in my hands and actually flipped through. Which means my answer is biased against papers not published in the US

Nevertheless, in no particular order...

- The *Virginian-Pilot* of Norfolk, Virginia (where, yes, I spent nearly five years as graphics director). They're insanely creative in the way they present stories on their section fronts. And - until the paper tightened up a year or so ago when its owner put it on the market - it had some of the best-thought-out internal arrangement of any paper I've ever seen.
- The *New York Times*. I don't care much for its A1 presentation. But once you open up the paper, you find a huge array of visual expertise: incredible photography, innovative graphics, and wonderfully clever presentations.
- *Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* of Frankfurt, Germany. This paper I find visually stunning - it sure knows how to fill a page. This is kind of an easy choice, however: it has been named one of the "World's Best-Designed Newspapers" by the Society for News Design three of the last four years.
- The *Gulf News*, Dubai. I've never seen a *Gulf News*, nor do I care much for the front pages I see. However, a large number of graphics and pages by the *Gulf News* have trickled to me, via email and even in an international contest I judged earlier this year. It seems to be these guys are doing incredible stuff. I'd like to see more.

- Find Charles Apple online at www.visualeditors.com/apple/, his World Cup posts at www.visualeditors.com/apple/category/world-cup/ and follow him on Twitter at [@charlesapple](https://twitter.com/charlesapple). • Submit your newspaper front pages to the Newseum (see how at [About/FAQ](#)) and/or email them to Apple in pdf format at chuckapple@cox.net [especially your 2010 FIFA World Cup coverage, all you South African and African newspapers out there - managing ed].

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