THE PUBLIC EDITOR; What Belongs on the Front Page of The New York Times

By JACK ROSENTHAL
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THE Good Gray Times: it surely was that. Black and white for certain; read all over, maybe. For decades, the front page of The Times each day packed 12 articles into eight narrow columns of type, relieved only by occasional photographs and maps. Page 1 in 1900 had nearly 10,000 words of text; in the 1950's, about 4,500.

How times -- and the face of The Times -- have changed. Page 1 today typically contains six articles, with about 2,200 words of text, arrayed in an artful vertical and horizontal mix, with three or four color illustrations and a box promoting five or six articles inside.

Page 1 has also steadily changed in another substantial way: content. The Times has long prided itself on its coverage of geopolitics, whether foreign turmoil, Washington infighting or city politics. But in recent years, front-page subject matter has expanded widely, reflecting rising interest in topics like finance, family, technology, medicine and space. The front page likewise reflects the paper's interest in livelier writing. Radio and television have turned spoken, informal English into Americans' dominant language and The Times, famously scrupulous about keeping language proper, has become equally concerned with making it accessible.

The Times has done less well in adapting to other concerns of readers. They ask why, for instance, does a paper that made much of Whitewater, a real estate deal that occurred before Bill Clinton's presidency, now fail to give Page 1 prominence to the financial improprieties at Halliburton under Dick Cheney? Why does The Times put so many articles about Abu Ghraib on Page 1? Why a feature on young Japanese-Americans rather than real news about the failings of federal gun control?

Such questions often reflect the asker's politics, geography or age. In any case, it is reckless to second-guess the choice of one article over another for Page 1 without at least knowing at what hour a particular article developed and how it compared in importance with other news of that day.

Dan Okrent's appointment as the first public editor offers a way for readers with such concerns to make themselves heard. He has appraised Page 1 news judgments before and I'd be surprised if he does not do so again. An appraisal is also in order of the Page 1 process, including its shortcomings. Two notable ones are navigation and explanation.

The very comprehensiveness of The Times's coverage often makes readers -- and some editors -- long for a compass to direct them across acres of newsprint. And in this all-news-all-the-time environment, when many readers already know what happened before they pick up the paper,

their need is for help in understanding it.

What Page 1 Does

The Times's front page performs several traditional functions. At a glance it gives readers a summary of the most important events of the day, in obvious order of importance, in comparison with other days. On big news days, the editors are always ready to break out big headlines (MEN WALK ON MOON; U.S. ATTACKED). On a routine day, the lead story will appear on the far right under a single-column headline. That tells the reader this is the strongest article the editors have to offer today, and they see no reason to hype it with a bigger headline. These are judgments that hundreds of editors and news directors around the country receive in nightly reports of The Times's "frontings."

On big news days, the choices are pretty obvious. It's slow days that test the depth of The Times and other quality media. All-news channels and stations are not known for exhaustive reporting of old governmental wrongs or new social rites. The Times's front page last Monday, a slow day, included exclusive articles of both kinds, one reporting that the F.B.I. has been questioning political demonstrators, and one registering a turn in teenage fashion from punk to preppy.

Page 1, like The Times, reflects the interests of a readership that is better educated, more curious and more dispersed. Women, for example, were once catered to -- patronized, one might say today -- inside The Times with the Four F's, a daily page titled food, fashion, family and furnishings. Now, topics like diet, divorce and retail rivalries regularly win front-page attention.

Who Decides What Goes Where

Promptly at noon and again at 4:30, about 18 editors gather around a long oval table to hear what each of the major departments recommends for Page 1 the next morning. The executive editor and managing editors encourage discussion. When there's not much going on, every editor remembers the unspoken first law of journalism: big news or no news, you gotta run something.

Especially on slow days, heads of the various departments at The Times look for the opportunity to present original reports. These may disclose a new aspect of a continuing story, like the federal investigation into who leaked the name of Valerie Plame of the C.I.A. to a Washington columnist. Or they may present new reporting like The Times's July series, "Death on the Tracks," on scores of preventable deaths at railroad crossings. Or editors may consider what they call "the mix" and put on Page 1 a story of only passing consequence but of interest to a diversifying audience. An example that irritated older readers is the recent report that the cool look for younger men is to wear their shirttails out of their pants.

When there's a major occurrence, The Times, like other papers, will assign multiple reporters to multiple facets. Last Sunday's coverage of Hurricane Charley included five articles occupying half the front page and two full inside pages. In instances like this, a decent regard for readers with limited time or interest suggests giving them navigation help, a brief summary of those articles, for instance, starting on Page 1. The Times created such a feature on a bigger scale for A Nation Challenged, its special section after 9/11. That daily summary became an art form all its own.

What's Behind the News

Starting half a century ago, The Times began publishing news analyses to give reporters a way to supply expertise or context when the facts alone tell only part of the story. These are known internally as Q-heads, after their typographic designation. From the start, Times editors have taken pains to see that these articles do not express opinion; that's the province of the editorial and Op-Ed pages.

Sometimes simple juxtaposition of facts tells more of the story. Consider, for instance, this excerpt from Todd Purdum's Aug. 4 news analysis on the most recent terror alert: "'We don't do politics in the Department of Homeland Security,' Secretary Tom Ridge said on Tuesday in dismissing any suggestion that his latest threat warning had a political motive. But on Sunday, Mr. Ridge, a former Republican congressman and governor of Pennsylvania, did do some politics all the same, when he declared that the intelligence behind his alert was 'the result of the president's leadership in the war against terror.'"

Some readers express impatience with anything other than traditional news. Yet readers who know the news before morning constitute a large and growing fraction of the readership. The Times calculates that one of every six readers also consults The Times on the Web, and there is an unknown but surely substantial overlap with broadcast news programs. The new all-news environment thus generates the need for explanation. The same imagination that creates room on Page 1 for crystal-clear graphics could do so for more written background, context and insight.

To advocate more explanation may be just glib. When a reporter is writing on deadline soon after an event, there may not yet be anything more thoughtful to contribute. In any case there's no time to ask or ponder, no matter what some experts may instantly declaim on cable news. The Times in fact now encourages writers to interpolate more analysis into their primary reporting rather than ask readers to consult a separate article. The Iraq dispatches from John Burns, The Times's nonpareil foreign correspondent, illustrate that skill. But for readers disinclined to read an article repeating what they already know, a separate explanatory article may offer just the added value they thirst for.

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More Page 1 news analysis is, in any event, only one answer. Another is to call front-page attention to explanatory material inside the paper. There may also be new ways to present analysis and explanation, escaping from formats devised for the clanking Linotype machines that disappeared from The Times's fourth floor 25 years ago.

One way or another, simply presenting the news, no matter how accurately or attractively, leaves many readers unsatisfied. When so many of them have already been exposed to the bare bones of the news, what The Times can best offer them, starting on Page 1, is more meat to chew on.

Inside Page 1

Editors use many terms to describe features of the front page. Some are captivatingly obscure in origin, like "paddle-wheel," the name for a particular front-page banner headline. It arose from its use in 1959 over an article about a satellite that opened four solar panels once in orbit. Here is a glossary of some more frequently used terms.

A-head. The one-column headline used on the most important articles at the top of Page 1. Recently redesigned but still quiet.

Floater. A free-standing photograph and caption, which can refer to an article inside.

More-on. A brief item referring to a related article inside.

Q-head. Evaluation and analysis of a news event; distinct from opinion.

Reader ad. The agate-type item, always labeled "ADVT," that sometimes appears at the bottom of a column. Minimum cost, $1,230 for two lines.

Reefer. A summary sentence or two that refers readers to an article inside.