

Seeing Red: Cardinals Opening Day and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

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When interpreting messages conveyed by the media, it is important for the audience to understand who the message is coming from and what the motivation is for sending the message (Silverblatt, 2008). The communications model consists of the communicator, the message, the channel and the audience (Silverblatt, 2008). However, in mass communications it is the *medium* (or channel) that determines the communicator, content and audience (Silverblatt, 2008). In the case of print media, a newspaper is a good source of information on "complex issues" because it can provide the intricate details that another medium cannot (e.g. television) (Silverblatt, 2008, p. 22).

The selection and placement of stories within the first section of the paper communicates the importance of such information. That is why it can be disappointing to pick up a newspaper to see news stories covered on the front page that simply do not belong there. This leads me to analyze the editing decisions made by the publishers of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Included in this analysis are editing decisions ("the selection and arrangement of information") and the relative position of stories ("where [an] object appears on the [...] page") published in the first section of the newspaper (Silverblatt, 2008, p. 165, 178).

Editing decisions communicate to the audience how significant a story is, with the most important information appearing first and less relevant information buried further into the newspaper. Likewise, the relative position of photographs that accompany news stories helps attract the attention of the audience. Color photos are usually printed on the front page of each section with black and white photos on each subsequent page. If a photo is placed at the top or in the center of the page, it leads the audience to believe that this picture and its story are of

utmost importance. In contrast, a picture and story placed at the bottom of the page or further into the paper is not as significant and does not necessarily grab the attention of the reader.

With regard to editing and relative position, the first thing one will notice when looking at the front page of the March 31, 2008 edition of the aforementioned newspaper is a picture of several St. Louis Cardinals baseball players. Each is wearing a red uniform jacket and red baseball cap. To the left of the photograph reads "Opening Day 2008" printed with special, eye-catching graphics; just below this appears the headline "READY OR NOT..." in all-capital, large, boldface type and a color picture of the article's writer (Miklasz, 2008). The title line of the newspaper was moved halfway down the page, just above the fold, so the picture and headline could literally be placed at the very top of the page. This tells the readers of the *Post-Dispatch* that this is the most important story of the day, even more important than identifying the publication in which it is printed. This is one of only four stories that made the first page.

Along with the main headline, the following banners are displayed on the opening page of the newspaper:

- "A river-taming tempest" – an article about recent flooding in Pacific (Leiser, 2008);
- "Al-Sadr orders militiamen off streets of Iraq" – a piece on the ongoing violence in Iraq (Gamel/Associate Press, 2008);
- "Student aid form can be brick wall" – a story about low-income families filing the FAFSA, or Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Giegerich, 2008).

Because of its placement at the top of the page, the feature on the Red Birds opening day is more important than a story about the flooding that has been occurring in Pacific, Missouri and an Associated Press piece about the war in Iraq. The last article to make the opening page is one

regarding the application process for college students requesting federal aid, buried at the bottom of the page.

A color photograph of the mayor of Pacific, Missouri, a Pacific resident and a volunteer worker is placed below the headline for Ken Leiser's article. In it, Mayor Herbert Adams is in the center standing in a doorway of resident Deborah Mueller's flood-damaged home. Ms. Mueller is on the left while volunteer Karen Coffey is on the right, both in a separate room from the mayor. Each of the women is seen from a side view while the mayor's face is clear; however, his body is turned to the right of the photo as if he is talking to someone that cannot be seen in the picture (he is facing and looking left). Because he is in the background of the photo, he appears to be higher than the women even though they are all on the same level. This communicates that the mayor is of more importance than the two women.

To the left of the page is a column of teaser headlines containing short summaries of various stories that appear deeper into the paper. The various headlines read:

- "Safety Laws Superseded"
- "2-Wheel Tribute"
- "Iran Bomb?"
- "Four to Go" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2008, p. A1).

At the very bottom of the column is the *Post-Dispatch Weatherbird* wearing a red baseball jersey and a red hat with a cardinal fluttering next to him. Above the illustration are the words "Red alert" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2008, A1). Along the bottom of the page, headlines read "Weather-Wise" and "Go! St. Louis Marathon" which directs the reader to a story on page H1 regarding the upcoming St. Louis Marathon and to a web page on the same story (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2008, p. A1).

As the reader turns to the second and third pages, the stories consist of Associated Press articles:

- "Dith Pran 1942-2008 | Journalist survived, coined term 'killing fields'" (positioned on the top left of page A2)
- "Consumers losing the right to sue" (top right of page A2)
- "Women want Clinton to stay in race" (top right of page A3)

A black and white photograph taken in 1980 of Pran with Rosalyn Carter accompanies the story on Pran's life and recent death. The bottom of the page carries an ad that takes up a quarter of the page. Above this ad in the center of the page under the heading "People" appears a picture of rapper Tone-LoC with a brief story on his upcoming concerts in the Detroit area, among other celebrity blurbs.

The next page features the story on Hillary Clinton's bid for the White House, accompanied by a color photograph of Senator Clinton and some female supporters. In the picture, Clinton appears on the right with a smile that appears elated but somewhat silly. Her right arm is raised as she points her forefinger up to something the reader cannot see. Behind her, to the left, are four women smiling and clapping. These women appear much smaller, and therefore much less important, than Senator Clinton. Next to this photo, under the heading "Digest," there are several brief stories that seem to be of significance yet they are buried on the third page and are hardly given a mention. The first is a piece on the failed trial of the cholesterol drug Vytarin, which was found not to decrease heart disease even though it reduces several risk factors of the disease (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2008, p. A3 "Drug trial's results"). A story such as this seems pretty important to a great deal of Americans, including St. Louisans, so one should wonder why such information was not placed on the front page. Yet below the

section where the story appears is an advertisement that takes up one-fourth of the entire page with two smaller ads that together cover approximately one-sixth of the page.

On pages A4 and A5, half of one page is the continuation of the first-page article on recent floods in the area and the debate about area levees (Leiser, 2008). Below this is a furniture store ad that covers the remaining half of the page. Over half of page A5 is filled with advertisements but the headline in the top right corner reads "CIA chief says he thinks Iran is pursuing nuclear bomb" (Miller, 2008). To the left of this piece is another Associated Press story covering the elections in Zimbabwe and a *Washington Post* article referring to Israel's removal of road blocks in the West Bank. All of these stories seem of greater importance than the Cardinals home opener yet they are submerged deep into the front section. It does not get any better as the pages are turned.

The next page is shrouded by more ads with three-quarters of the page devoted to sponsors. The Bernie Miklasz cover-story is concluded and the Olympic torch's arrival in Beijing is noted in another AP narrative on page A6, with no room left for news chronicles. Page A7 wraps up the last two front-page headlines on the top half of the page, while the lower half is covered by various paid advertisements. Turning to the last page of this section, the reader sees the entire back cover devoted to an ad for Wachovia Securities.

The editors of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* must catch the eye of the reader and lead them into each section of the newspaper. The main goal is to get the reader to see the ads that appear throughout each section. This also means that perhaps there is a hidden agenda, one that is not made clear to the average reader. However, if one becomes educated on media literacy – or simply pays close attention to where stories and pictures are placed within the publication – he

or she will have the tools necessary to understand exactly what the media communicator is trying to say to the audience. More than likely, it is not a message one would expect to hear.

## Resources

- Gamel, K. (2008, March 31). Al-Sadr orders militiamen off streets of Iraq [The Associated Press]. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 130(90), pp. A1, A7.
- Giegerich, S. (2008, March 31). Student aid form can be brick wall. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 130(90), pp. A1, A7.
- Leiser, K. (2008, March 31). A river-taming tempest. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 130(90), pp. A1, A4.
- Miklasz, B. (2008, March 31). Ready or not.... *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 130(90), pp. A1, A6.
- Miller, G. (2008). CIA chief says he thinks Iran is pursuing nuclear bomb [*Los Angeles Times*]. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 130(90), p. A5.
- Silverblatt, A. (2008). *Media literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. (2008, March 31). Metro Edition, (130)90. Davenport, IA: Lee Enterprises, Inc.