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What does the *New York Times* redesign say about its self-image?

By Christopher Hawthorne

Among the *New York Times'* many longstanding quirks is the third person, bone-dry style the paper uses to write about itself. That tone, detached and a bit solemn, hardly wavers whether the paper is announcing a promotion or dissecting an in-house scandal.

Last month's unveiling of changes to the paper's design was no different. "In place of a miscellany of headline typefaces that have accumulated in its columns over the last century," an Oct. 21 story reported, "the newspaper is settling on a single family, Cheltenham, in roman and italic version and various light and bold weights."

"Settling on a single family": Along with adding a poetic touch to what might easily have been a boring press release of a story, that phrase neatly sums up what is, in essence, an affirmation from the *Times* of typographical monogamy. The paper has decided to stop playing around with a half-dozen different typefaces for its headlines and shack up with just one, a serif font called Cheltenham. (Serif typefaces are those with extra bits on the ends of most letters—the little lines that stick out from the tops of h's and d's and add a degree of formality. Sans-serif fonts, which are smoother and less stuffy and have been popular among graphic designers over the last five years or so, lack those strokes.)

Design writers and *Times* addicts had no practical need for the announcement on page A8: Most of us noticed the new style as soon as we unfolded the paper the morning it went into effect. All of a sudden—thanks to the work of Matthew Carter, a British-born typeface guru hired by the *Times*—the front-page headlines appeared somehow airier and less substantial. In a small but important way, the *Times* looked a lot more like every other newspaper in America.

Symbolically, the most important site of the shift is in the upper right-hand corner of the front page—the spot the paper reserves for the story it deems the day's most important. The lead story is usually topped by a triple-deck, single-column headline, which in the old setup employed two typefaces: Latin Extra Condensed at the top and then two decks of the sans-serif News Gothic below. In the new design, all three decks are in Cheltenham, in its Bold Extra Condensed, Bold Condensed, and Medium varieties.

This switch was easy to forget about in a couple of days. Much more noticeable, and tougher to get accustomed to, is the *Times*' decision to do away with Bookman, a serif typeface that it had used for many of its single-deck headlines stretching above stories three and four columns wide. Especially when standing alone and used in italics—*And the New York Times Loves To Put Headlines in Italics*—its replacement, Cheltenham, seems too carefree and lightweight to introduce a story about sniper victims or dead American soldiers.

This might seem like an overestimation of the symbolic weight that typefaces should have to carry, but I certainly wasn't alone in having it. "I think the old Bookman/Century/Cheltenham/News Gothic/Latin Extra Condensed combination had more character and felt both more 'newsy' and more 'New York,'" one designer wrote in a post to a typography Web site, adding that the Bookman headlines struck him, as they had me, as "a little too pretty and too harmless." A letter to the editor that appeared in the *Times* two days after the switch was harsher, calling the new Cheltenham regime "the typeface equivalent of New Coke."

We shouldn't be too surprised. People develop strong relationships with the design of objects they see or use every day, and changes—even minor ones—can be jolting. And the work Carter has done for the *Times* is certainly more substantial than the logo redesign he just finished for another New York institution, the Museum of Modern

Art. (Those changes were so subtle as to be essentially unrecognizable and became the subject of some restrained chiding from the *Times* itself, in a recent Sunday "Arts & Leisure" piece.)

In the larger scheme of things, of course, the *Times*' redesign is minimal. It doesn't come close to altering the fundamental character of the paper or even the experience of flipping through it. By comparison, last year's design changes at the *Wall Street Journal*, the only paper in the country that had matched the *Times* in combination of large circulation, reputation, and aesthetic conservatism, look almost radical (and remarkably successful: They've made the *Journal*'s fusty front page look accessible and contemporary).

In the end, the most intriguing way to think about the design changes is in terms of what the *Times* believes they say about the paper in 2003. The entire institution is in the middle of a rather painful and very public self-analysis. That's not just because of the Jayson Blair-Rick Bragg-Howell Raines affair, which new Executive Editor Bill Keller called "a shock to our system—to its morale and reputation," but also because, more generally, its leaders are wondering what will become of the most powerful name in newsprint once newsprint gives way to fully digitized information. In ways large and small, the identity of the paper has been in flux for the last several years.

In the words of the paper's Design Director Tom Bodkin, the goal of the new design was to mete out change—but not too much. "We wanted to appear traditional but less old-fashioned," he was quoted as saying in the Oct. 21 article. That's a precise choice of words, to say the least: The space between traditional and old-fashioned may be a narrow one, but it's exactly where the *Times* has always felt most comfortable.

Bodkin's quote suggests that the paper took the changes seriously, and it leads naturally to speculation about the debate that must have gone on inside the *Times* building about the new design. Consider a section later in the same article that took pains to note that the "new styles were chosen from numerous options commissioned by Joseph Lelyveld, executive editor, before his retirement in 2001. Final approval was given by the current executive editor, Bill Keller."

One name is conspicuously absent from those sentences—Howell Raines, who held the executive editor post in between the two men. It makes sense that Lelyveld and Keller, both of whom are known for an even-keeled style, might not have favored design changes that looked too racy; monogamy, typographical or otherwise, would seem to suit them just fine. But what about Raines, the editor who oversaw the rise and fall of Jayson Blair and Rick Bragg, who put Britney and Botox on the front page and seemed to thrive on upheaval? Somehow it's harder to imagine him agreeing to all Cheltenham, all the time.Christopher Hawthorne writes about architecture and design for the *New York Times*, *Metropolis* magazine, and other publications.