

# What is a graphics editor?

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My responsibilities at the *Tribune* are for all graphics that appear in the editorial pages. The question that often arises is, what's a graphic? The way we define it is charts, maps, combinations... anything that is not what is described as pure illustration. In other words, if it has editorial matter — there are words with it — then it falls under the province of the graphic editor.

When we look at graphics for the *Tribune* — and we do draw a lot of line work, charts and maps — we are looking to see whether we can help the story as well as illustrate it.

For example, if a story is about soybean farming, and the cost the farmer has to bear to plant his soybeans, what we try to do is to make sure that the graphic is right on the money. Obviously, it's important for us to read the story, talk to the reporter, see what kind of material there is, and make sure that the information on the chart is correctly related to the story.

Sometimes though, there is no set of figures that you can gather for a particular story. At this point, we try to go to something we call "sidebar" graphics.

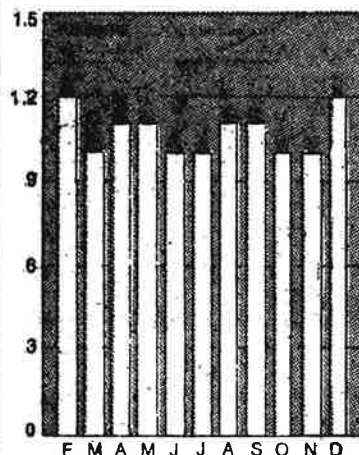
A sidebar graphic is exactly what it sounds like. It's a sidebar to a story. That is a self-contained graphic unit. If the story is about one farmer who has planted soybeans, we think that it could be interesting, depending on the story, just to talk about the increased number of acres harvested, to put it in a chart. And use that as a little bit of visual information that the story wasn't going to give.

In other words, we can take the story and package it to the reader one step further by putting in this kind of sidebar. You need someone who can make that kind of editorial decision, so the responsibility has got to fall on someone who both understands the artistic needs and also has the editorial background, because what you're doing essentially is fulfilling an editing function.

Let me mention a couple more points as to whether we go to news meetings and

## Consumer prices

Per cent change from previous period;  
seasonally adjusted



### Consumer price index

1967 equals 100; unadjusted

December 1977	December 1978	December 1979
186.1	202.9	229.9

Source: U.S. Department of Labor,  
Bureau of Labor Statistics

things like that. We are supposed to wander around. It is not, supposedly, a sedentary job. We visit with the section editors to find out what they've got coming for various projects. There are two news meetings a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, and there is generally someone there from the graphics staff. We also attend the planning session to plan for our Sunday paper, special projects and things like that.

We're considered part of the news desk in terms of planning and in terms of relationships with other editors. The graphics editor reports to the assistant

managing editor, operations go to the news editor. That way, the news desk is plugged into what we do because they're the ones that are going to get the graphics into the paper.

We've got to read the paper to see what's missing. To see whether there's even space for a graphic. We have to make the decision whether we're going to illustrate that kind of story and how so. It sounds very formal, but it's a little more casual than that because we've been doing it for a number of years. There's no need to hit them over the head.

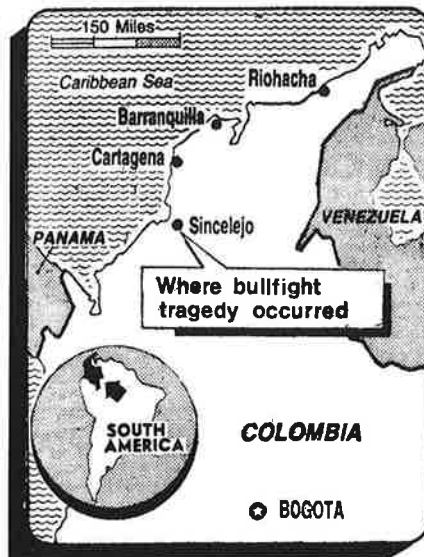
That's why it's important that a graphics editor can relate to word people, because I understand the needs of a section editor who has problems trimming a story 20 inches to get it in. On the other hand I also understand the needs of the artist who says he can't do this map in two columns by three inches. Or, this won't work as a horizontal, it should be a vertical.

We have to be able to make the decision at that point whether we're going to go horizontal or vertical. That's where the graphics editor makes the decisions. The idea is to have someone there to make sure the schedule are all kept and that it flows in smoothly. That's part of the job, but the other part is someone in there thinking graphics, and how they can help the reader. Any kind of graphics, even if it's just a picture and some tabular material. Something that's gonna catch the eye of the reader and that's going to make the story a little easier for the reader to understand.

Of course, there's always one other function of the graphics editor that's not as pleasant, and that's knowing when to kill. Because there's nothing worse than a graphic that doesn't work.

Given the cost of newsprint, it's almost a crime to put in a two column by six inch graphic that takes 12 column inches of space but could be said best in one paragraph within the story. We're not looking to illustrate the newspaper with

**'(Design) starts with more aggressive ideas about editing. We don't sit back so much, waiting for whatever happens to come across our desks.'**



graphics. We're looking to inform and enlighten the reader.

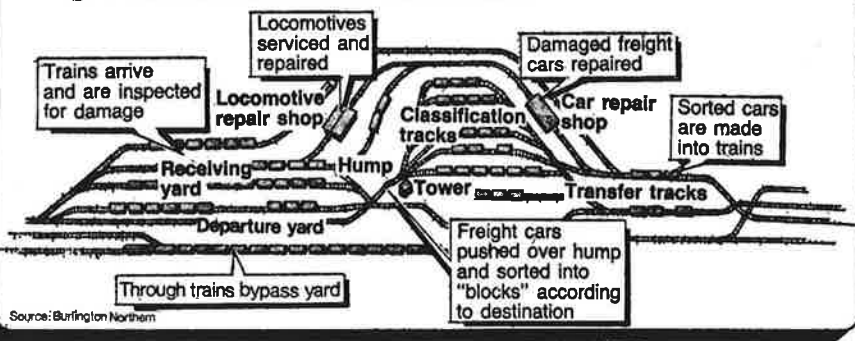
We need to do one other thing in this new type of journalism. We need to communicate. We need to communicate with the reporter to find out what the reporter knows. We don't want to wait until the city editor says, "Hey, I've got this great 20 inch story and can we illustrate it?" and it's going in the paper in two hours. That's a little late to do anything neat. But, if we know the reporter's working on this great expose and he's going to drop it off at the city desk tomorrow, maybe we'll go look over his shoulder and see what he's writing. Maybe even by doing this, we'll prove a point with the reporter (that we can help him or her report the story more effectively), and next time, that reporter is going to come and visit us.

All this effort is needless if you don't do one more thing, and that's to communicate with the reader. If we don't communicate with the reader, we've lost everything we've done. We've set up the perfect model for an organizational structure; we've taken power away from other people and conducted it into this new kind of graphic journalism. And if we don't communicate with the reader we've just blown in.

You can have the prettiest looking graphics in the paper and it doesn't mean anything if it doesn't communicate with readers. That's the most important thing as far as the Tribune and the graphics editors go. If we're not communicating with the reader, we've lost it all. It's my job to go for it.

### Typical modern railroad yard

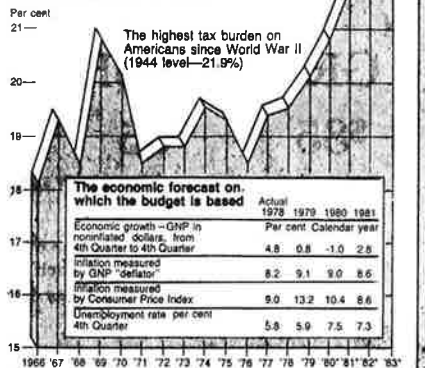
Burlington Northern Northtown facility in Fridley, Minn.



Source: Burlington Northern

### A tax burden growing heavy

Federal tax as a per cent of Gross National Product



Source: Office of Management and Budget

*Graphics: At the Chicago Tribune they must pay their own way.*