

**THE BLOG****Murder! Terror! Customer Service!**

By Marty Kaplan

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Maybe it's just me, and maybe I'm overreacting, but I think the Tribune Company of Chicago has just driven the coffin-nail home in the case for its being an unfit owner of the Los Angeles Times.

It happens on page A37 of the Sunday, September 24 paper. On first glance, the page looks like a full-page ad for a fun new musical. There's a blue-sky border around three sides, and a page-high frieze of royal palm tree tops. And inset into the page at the top, in black-and-white, is what you might think is a reproduction of a newspaper article, a rave review of the show.

But wait. It's not a review. It's actually the real paper, today's paper. Three articles, in fact. The jump from the front page of the lead story about an official report saying that the Iraq war is actually fueling terror. Then there's "Slain Pregnant Woman's 3 Children Found Dead," accompanied by a photo of smiling tots. Plus this troubling account of the toll of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: "Many More Veterans Complain of Stress."

And no, the ad's not for a musical, it's for "customer service like you've never seen before" from Time Warner Cable, the new monopoly in town, which has displaced Cox and Adelphia.

I've seen "creative" newspaper layouts before, with ingenious ways of interleaving editorial content with advertising. But this one crosses the line. It uses some of the most tragic and painful news of our time as commercial graphic design. It turns news into an attention-getting commodity that drains it of all journalistic content.

I know that newspapers depend on advertising revenue. But by selling this kind of layout, the business side of the LATimes - which is joined at the hip to the Tribune Company in Chicago - announces that there's no journalistic line they won't blur in pursuit of Chicago's mandate: a 7 percent annual growth in profits above the 20 percent profits they're already racking up.

What's next? Maybe they should float the obituaries on a page of Ralphs coupons. Maybe they can sell naming rights to the weather. If readers think war news is a downer, if enterprise journalism pieces run too long, what better way to zizz them up than by burying those pesky inches in double trucks for liposuction, bariatric surgery and back hair removal?

Do newspapers have guidelines and stylebooks that cover issues like advertorials? Sure. And at the LATimes, that topic has a particularly painful history, stemming from a Staples Center sponsorship of the paper's Sunday magazine. But whatever the rulebooks say, those borders are always being contested inside journalistic institutions. Publishers and sales departments are always trying to blur the lines in the name of revenue; the news side - at least if they know about it ahead of time - is always trying to resist. When news loses, we all lose.

Yeah, I know the moneyside's riposte: "People know the difference between news and advertising." Yeah, sure, just like they "know" the difference between the "facts" in a docudrama and the facts in a nonpartisan report, between the "news" on Fox and the news on The News Hour, between the body image "ideals" in advertising and the body image reality in reality.

On this faux-full-page ad for Time-Warner Cable, it doesn't matter that the news copy block abuts the center of the page's top margin. That's a fig leaf, and (to change the metaphor) a thin reed on which to hang the paper's reputation. Like it or not, there's a lizard part to our brains. The human eye, confronted by the contrast between black-and-white news and brilliant advertising color, dazzled by the pictures of palm trees, can't help subordinating and trivializing the journalism on the page.

Put yourself in the place of friends and relatives of those slain children. On what planet is it acceptable for their photo to become a decorative layout element for a blue-skies sales pitch for improved cable customer service?

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