

by Paul Martin Lester

# Front Page Mug Shots: A Content Analysis of Five U.S. Newspapers in 1986

*Mug shots from five U.S. newspapers: USA Today, Chicago Tribune, New Orleans Times-Picayune, New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, were analyzed for the same five-day work week of each month for 1986. The 300 front pages yielded 520 head shots of 1,148 photographs. USA Today and newspapers with its similar graphic style use more mug shots without an accompanying article on the front page than more traditionally designed newspapers.*

*Readers who like to have names sprinkled in their daily newspaper copy like faces just as much. Photographers have always capitalized on faces, but now editors are beginning to recognize their worth for design strategies.*

—Mario Garcia<sup>1</sup>

“Just come back with a mug shot” is a phrase uttered by photography editors that usually sends shivers down photojournalists’ spines. The postage-stamp sized portraits offer little room for gestures or revealing expressions by the subject. Photojournalists have resisted taking such pictures because they require little technical or creative expertise. Pulitzer prizes and other photojournalism awards are not won by taking mug shots.<sup>2</sup>

Mug shots are used, in the words of a

popular photojournalism textbook, simply because readers “want to see what the subjects in the news look like.”<sup>3</sup> Some of the earliest newspaper front pages, even before the halftone process became widespread, were head shots of important figures featured in news stories.<sup>4</sup>

If mug shots are so denigrated, why are they such a long tradition in newspaper photojournalism? Psychologists offer a few explanations. The human face is one of a person’s earliest memories. An infant first learns to recognize his parents’ faces and then learns “to distinguish teachers and friends from strangers [and] family pets from strays.”<sup>5</sup>

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The human face, therefore, is frequently used "on identification cards, in school yearbooks, and even in the familiar 'wanted' posters that appear in federal government post offices."<sup>6</sup>

A photograph of "a person's face also conveys expressive information, which may inform about [the subject's] emotional state."<sup>7</sup> Nonverbal communication researcher, Paul Ekman and others note that people can make accurate judgments of a person's emotional condition from a posed photograph. Particularly, expressions of happiness, surprise, anger and disgust are easily recognizable.<sup>8</sup>

Another reason newspapers print tiny head shots is because pictures can be taken by everyone and thus have universal appeal. Since the birth of amateur photography through the introduction of the simple box camera, people have had a love affair with photography.

The "Camera Epidemic" which began in the 1880s signaled an intense interest and growth in photography that continues today.<sup>9</sup> The universal nature of photography is evident by the fact that "photographs are as likely to be found in the homes of laborers and craftsmen as in those of government officials and industrialists."<sup>10</sup>

Because newspapers are generally respected and circulated through a large public, having one's picture published by the local press is an important event in the subject's life. Engaged, recently married and 50th wedding anniversary couples supply pictures to the newspapers. Family members readily give a

mug shot of a recently killed daughter to a reporter for inclusion into the next day's news. Yellowed and torn head shots are saved by family members like priceless heirlooms.

Newspaper researchers have generally failed to take the tiny images seriously. A 1976 study of newspaper front page photographs by Singletary eliminated mug shots from much of the analysis because it was felt that the pipsqueak pictures were "relatively contentless and uninformative."

Yet 30% of all the photographs used on the front pages in that study were mug shots.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, a recent study of U.S. and Canadian news photographs eliminated mug shots from analysis without explanation.<sup>12</sup>

The world of newspaper front page design has changed since 1976. Much of the change has been attributed to *USA Today*. The use of colorful photographs, charts and graphs to illustrate short, tightly edited stories on the front page has led graphic design experts to remark that *USA Today* "may have a profound effect on the future of American newspaper design."<sup>13</sup>

Newspapers around the country, concerned with circulation declines, have begun to look more like *USA Today* to attract a younger, more affluent readership.

Originally intended for busy, jet-setting executives with little time to read long, in-depth stories, *USA Today's* front page is designed to emphasize familiarity.

For example, the upper left corner of the front page always carries a picture

that illustrates a sports story; the upper right corner usually has a portrait of an entertainment personality. The center section always has a large photograph illustrating that day's "cover story;" the bottom left corner always has a chart with an illustration.

*USA Today* is a tightly controlled design instrument that makes it easy to find stories of interest. A group of front page editors recently named it one of the best designed newspapers in the country.<sup>14</sup>

A look at the photographs used by *USA Today* reveals a startling turnaround for the lowly mug shot. The newspaper uses many more picayune pictures than were ever used by newspapers in the past. In the present study, 74% of all the photographs used on the front page are head shots.

Such an overwhelming percentage forces researchers and graphic designers to take a more serious look at these head and shoulder portraits. There is evidence a change in attitude has begun.

Lain recently conducted a pilot study with implications for reader perception and editor judgment research. Students successfully matched impressions of positive, neutral and negative characteristics of stories with the article's mug shot. Such findings indicate readers do learn more from a head shot than simply what the subject in the news looks like. Also, editors may be selecting pictures that support the tone of the story.<sup>15</sup>

Garcia's recent edition of a popular newspaper design textbook emphasizes that "the head shot has become one of the strongest photographic elements on

the page."<sup>16</sup>

### Method

This research attempted to identify and classify the mug shots used on the front pages of *USA Today* compared with four other U.S. newspapers. *USA Today* was compared with the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The four newspapers were selected because of their varied geographical locations, similar regional prominence, large circulations and graphic design characteristics.

These four newspapers can be divided into two groups. The *Chicago* and *New Orleans* newspapers are graphically similar to the *USA Today* with their use of many more visual elements and shorter stories on the front page. The *New York* and *Los Angeles* front pages are more traditionally designed with fewer visual elements and longer articles.

Mug shots from each newspaper were analyzed for the same five-day work week of each month for 1986. Each portrait shot was examined as to size, location on the page, racial and sexual composition, source, subject, whether accompanied by an article, and whether it was used in combination with another visual element.

### Results

The 300 front pages yielded 520 mug shots out of 1,148 photographs. Table 1 shows all of the visual elements, photographic percentage and average along with the mug shot percentage and

**TABLE 1: Overall Use of Page One Visual Elements, Photographic Average, Mug Shot Percentage and Mug Shot Average**

	USA Today	Chicago Tribune	New Orleans Times- Picayune	New York Times	Los Angeles Times	Total
Photographs	75%	90%	70%	93%	97%	82%
Illustrations	7	2	24	2	--	9
Charts with Illustrations	14	1	1	--	--	5
Maps with Illustrations	1	--	--	--	--	1
Maps	2	4	3	4	3	3
Charts	1	3	1	1	--	1
Charts with Photographs	1	--	1	--	--	1
Photographic Average Per Page	5.52	4.78	3.92	3.28	1.7	3.8
(sample size)	324	287	235	200	102	1,148
Mug Shot Percentage	74%	38%	34%	29%	28%	45%
Mug Shot Average Per Page	4.08	1.8	1.3	.97	.48	1.7
(sample size)	245	108	80	58	29	520

Percentages may be slightly higher or lower than 100% due to rounding error.

average per front page for each newspaper.

The Los Angeles *Times* almost always uses a photograph as a visual element on the front page. *USA Today* and the New Orleans newspaper use many more illustrations and charts than the other newspapers.

*USA Today* uses many more mug

shots than the other newspapers. In fact, *USA Today* uses only 30 fewer thumbnail pictures than all the other newspapers combined. The overall mug shot percentage of 45% compares strikingly with Singletary's 1976 total of 29.9%, and approaches the 1936 high of 59.4%.<sup>17</sup>

Table 2 indicates that size, location

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**TABLE 2: Size, Location, Racial and Sexual Composition, and Combined Use of Page One Mug Shots**


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	USA Today	Chicago Tribune	New Orleans Times- Picayune	New York Times	Los Angeles Times	Total
<b>Size (by number of horizontal columns):</b>						
One	94%	91%	96%	100%	93%	94%
Two	1	8	1	--	3	3
Three	4	1	3	--	3	3
Four	1	--	--	--	--	1
<b>Horizontal Location:</b>						
Top of page	52%	13%	61%	59%	37%	46%
Center of page	40	76	16	18	34	41
Bottom of page	8	10	25	22	28	14
<b>Vertical Location:</b>						
Left-hand	51%	67%	21%	25%	27%	44%
Center	23	16	38	26	41	26
Right-hand	29	16	43	48	31	31
<b>Race:</b>						
White	83%	78%	84%	86%	90%	83%
Black	13	11	10	5	7	11
Other	4	11	6	9	3	6
<b>Sex:</b>						
Male	64%	89%	79%	74%	62%	74%
Female	36	11	21	26	38	26
<b>Combined:</b>						
Yes	18%	12%	18%	26%	41%	19%
No	82	88	82	74	59	81
(sample size)	245	108	80	58	29	520

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 Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding error.
 

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on the page, racial and sexual composition, and whether the mug shot was used with another visual element, all are similar between all five newspapers.

Almost all mug shots, as has been true historically, are one-column pictures. However, larger mug shots, some three- and four-columns in width, are used by all the newspapers except the New York *Times*.

Head shots are used more frequently in the top left section of the front page except for the Chicago *Tribune* which favors the right-hand position. The Los Angeles *Times* distributes its tiny images most evenly throughout the front page.

For all newspapers, the person in the picture is most likely a white male. Singletary, Geraci, Miller, Traves and Cook have also noted this trend.<sup>18</sup> The Los Angeles *Times* has the highest percentage of whites as subjects of mug shots. The Chicago *Tribune* features males more often than the other newspapers.

Finally, all newspapers usually do not use a head shot with another image, although the Los Angeles *Times* tends to combine pictures more frequently than the other newspapers.

Table 3 shows little similarity between the five newspapers and the source, subject matter and whether a story accompanied the mug shot on the front page.

*USA Today* uses many more freelance photographers than the other newspapers. The Chicago and New Orleans newspapers use a large number of uncredited mug shots. The New York

*Times* uses many more staff photographs. The Los Angeles *Times* uses many more Associated Press photographs than the other newspapers.

The content categories were suggested by Singletary with entertainment added because of *USA Today's* emphasis on that category. Sports and Entertainment subjects comprise over 50% of the mug shots used on the *USA Today* front page. Crime subjects are seldom used.

Politics is the single most popular subject for the Chicago and New York newspapers. The New Orleans newspaper emphasizes political news and human interest subjects. Crime and corruption is a popular subject for mug shots in the Los Angeles newspaper.

A clear difference exists between the two types of front pages and the story accompaniment category. Although a story is almost always included somewhere in the newspaper, *USA Today*-type newspapers more often do not include a story with a mug shot on the front page. On the other hand, the New York and Los Angeles newspapers almost always include an accompanying story with a mug shot on the front page.

### Discussion

If the use of head shots in *USA Today* is an indication, those tiny pictures, so maligned by photojournalists and omitted by researchers, are coming back with a vengeance. *USA Today* and the Chicago and New Orleans newspapers use mug shots more often than not without an accompanying story. Such use

**TABLE 3: Sources, Subjects and Story Accompaniment  
of Page One Mug Shots**

	USA Today	Chicago Tribune	New Orleans Times- Picayune	New York Times	Los Angeles Times	Total
<b>Sources:</b>						
Staff	24%	9%	4%	33%	14%	18%
AP	5	8	6	28	45	11
UPI	2	5	1	19	7	5
Other Sources	63	2	--	17	14	33
Not Indicated	6	76	89	3	21	34
<b>Subjects:</b>						
Crime-accident	2%	13%	16%	21%	34%	11%
Sex	--	--	--	--	--	--
Accident-disaster	2	--	1	2	7	2
Sports	28	9	16	2	3	18
Violence	1	2	3	--	14	2
Recreation	--	1	--	--	--	1
Social events	1	--	1	--	--	1
Human interest	7	9	20	14	24	11
Politics	17	53	20	55	10	29
Economic matters	11	3	6	3	7	8
Social problems	2	1	--	--	--	1
Science	1	1	--	3	--	1
Education	1	--	4	--	--	1
Health	2	--	1	--	--	1
Entertainment	25	8	11	--	--	15
<b>Story:</b>						
Yes	27%	31%	48%	88%	96%	41%
No	73	69	52	12	4	59
(sample size)	245	108	80	58	29	520

Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

indicates that the mug shots are seen as inside page teasers. Interviews with page one editors would indicate if this use is indeed a prime consideration.

Experts usually speak of *USA Today's* impact on other newspapers in terms of its use of color, illustrations and short stories.<sup>19</sup>

But mug shot use should also be a consideration for future research. Perhaps the mug shot is used as the visual equivalent to the short, easily readable story so common in *USA Today*. It will be interesting to note if this trend toward more mug shots on the front page continues.

Photojournalism instructors should emphasize head shot photography more in their teaching. Ways of making mug shots not simply a record of a person's face, but a carefully composed character study might be explored. Technical concerns of black and white and color film shooting and the use of telephoto lenses for close-up head shots should

also be discussed. A mug shot's small size is no reason to assume that the image has to be "contentless and uninformative."

### Summary

*USA Today* and newspapers with its similar graphic style use more mug shots without an accompanying article on the front page than more traditionally designed newspapers. Such numerous stand-alone pictures are used as inside page teasers, often stating page numbers where a story can be found.

Size, location, and racial and sexual composition of the tiny pictures are similar for all five newspapers. These findings are similar to percentages from pre-*USA Today* studies.

The use of freelance photographers, the popular subject categories of entertainment and sports, and the high number of mug shots used per day on page one by *USA Today* have not been taken up by the other newspapers.

### NOTES

1. Mario R. Garcia, *Contemporary Newspaper Design A Structural Approach*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), p. 185.

2. Look at award winning photographs and try to find any mug shots. Specifically, Sheryle and John Leekley, *Moments The Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1978) and *The Best of Photojournalism*, (Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, 1986).

3. Kenneth Kobre, *Photojournalism: The Professional's Approach*, (Somerville, Mass.: Curtin and London, Inc., 1980), p. 120.

4. Michael C. Emery, R. Smith Schuneman and Edwin Emery, *America's Front Page News 1690-1970*, (Minneapolis: Vis-Com, Inc., 1970), p. 55.

5. Vicki Bruce and Patrick R. Green, *Visual Perception Physiology, Psychology and Ecology*, (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers,



1985), p. 168.

6. Herschel W. Leibowitz, *Visual Perception*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 23.

7. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

9. Bill Jay, "The Photographer as Aggressor," in *Observations Essays on Documentary Photography*, David Featherstone, ed., (New York: The Friends of Photography, 1984), p. 10.

10. Gisele Freund, *Photography & Society*, (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1980), p. 4.

11. Michael W. Singletary, "Newspaper Photographs: A Content Analysis, 1936-1976," *Journalism Quarterly*, (Autumn 1978), 55:585-9.

12. Roy E. Blackwood, "International News Photos in U.S. and Canadian Papers," *Journalism Quarterly*, (Spring 1987), 64:195-9.

13. Sandra H. Utt and Steve Pasternack, "Front Pages of U.S. Daily Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly*, (Winter 1984), 61:879-84.

14. Margaret Mary Stark, *Newspaper Design Principles and Practices A Sur-*

*vey of Front Page Editors and Designers Representing 112 National Newspapers*, unpublished dissertation, Indiana University, 1985.

15. Laurence B. Lain, "How Readers View Mug Shots," *Newspaper Research Journal*, (Spring 1987), 8:43-52.

16. Garcia, *op. cit.*

17. Singletary, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

18. Michael W. Singletary and Philip C. Geraci, "Newspaper Illustration and Readership: Is *USA Today* on Target?," *Journalism Quarterly*, (Summer 1984), 61:409-13; Susan H. Miller, "The Content of News Photos: Women's and Men's Roles," *Journalism Quarterly*, (Spring 1975), 52:70-5; and Edward J. Traves and Bruce L. Cook, "Picture Emphasis in Final Editions of 16 Dailies," *Journalism Quarterly*, (Autumn 1977), 54:595-8.

19. Color is an important research and graphic consideration that should be included in analysis. Unfortunately, microfilm is black and white. For future studies, color microfilm would be a welcome addition to library archives.

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