Every weekday morning after breakfast, I open my laptop and visit media websites in search of news stories for Physics Today’s online News Picks department. Having followed that routine for four years, I notice when websites change. Lamentably, some recent redesigns have been terrible—or, to put it more diplomatically, have incorporated choices that make reading and navigating harder.

Among the chief offenders is my hometown newspaper, the Washington Post. Although not a candidate for News Picks, Helena Andrews’s 4 December 2014 story, “Jenna Bush Hager, Hanky-Panky, and the White House Roof,” epitomizes the downward trend. When I opened it on my 13-inch MacBook, the only editorial content in the browser window consisted of the 10 words in the title. Two ads, the top third of a photo of the former First Daughter, and a strip of buttons for sharing the story on Facebook and other social media filled the rest of the 62 cm² of the active browser window.

Devoting 6 cm² of window space to each editorial word is extravagant. Even children’s picture books are denser with verbal information. Why would the creators of the Washington Post’s website force readers to scroll immediately after opening a story? The answer has to do with two technical challenges.

The first is to ensure that content looks good on a range of devices, from desktops, through laptops and tablets, to mobile phones. To avoid having to code layouts for each type of screen, website creators have adopted so-called responsive design, which rearranges the elements on a page according to the browser window’s shape and size. Some outlets also serve a more streamlined website to mobile phones on the grounds that the difference in screen size between a desktop and a phone is too wide for responsive design to deftly bridge.

The second challenge is that online ads come in a narrow range of standard sizes. Unlike the other graphical elements in responsive design, they can’t be dynamically resized. Website creators are meeting both challenges by adopting simple, blocky designs.

Dividing a screen into a small number of columns and other containers is a smart simplification that can lead to a spacey look on the largest screens. But the design principle does not by itself account for the biggest reason for the low word densities of some newly redesigned websites: the overuse of images. The central column of National Geographic’s website, for example, is devoted to news stories. Because the accompanying images are so large, it takes three screens to display just six stories!

One recent redesign—that of Britain’s Guardian—has succeeded in simplifying what had become a cluttered site while preserving a decent density of information and without overusing images. The success was no accident. Besides applying sound principles, the redesign also took into account 26,000 comments that readers had made on prototypes. As London’s one-eyed, shrimp-clawed, vaguely anthropoid Olympic mascots demonstrated, design by committee can look ugly. But as the Guardian demonstrated, enlisting an army of testers can improve what a website is designed to do.

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