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To see what many U.S. newspapers will look like by the end of the decade, travel to a Swedish city a couple of hundred miles shy of the Arctic Circle, where designer Mario Garcia is applying the finishing touches to the extreme makeover of the Goteborgs-Posten. After 146 years, this serious, respected, politically liberal broadsheet -- the second-biggest morning daily in the nation -- is becoming a tabloid.

The GP, as everyone calls it, took its time making the transition. After eight years of internal hemming and hawing, the GP in March 2001 began publishing its entertainment section as a tab, and last year it switched the sports and business sections as well. The 262,000-circulation paper won't go completely tabloid until October, but for the past three years readers have asked one question repeatedly, Garcia reports: "They keep saying, why don't you do the whole thing? What are you waiting for?"

Garcia sounds like he's getting a little impatient, too—at newspaper publishers back in America who don't understand that readers want their hometown paper to be a tabloid. Garcia isn't talking about the many tab products—from quick-read commuter and youth-oriented papers to Spanish-language dailies and corporate-owned "alternatives"—that U.S. publishers are rolling out these days.

He's talking about converting your broadsheet to a tabloid.

"The readers absolutely want them. The trend is there, and this trend is unstoppable," he declares, speaking by phone from his Radisson SAS hotel in Goteborg in early May. He recently completed the much-lauded makeover of the Melville, N.Y., tab Newsday. "Since 1984, I have never seen a focus group ... where readers were presented with a choice of a broadsheet or a tabloid, which did not prefer the tabloid. Not once." And as for moving slowly to a tabloid, Garcia adds, that's more useful for timorous editors and publishers than for the public: "Readers don't care about evolutionary steps -- they just want you to do it."

Garcia isn't the only industry figure predicting that the typical American broadsheet is about to undergo a transformation that will make the universal newspaper adoption of narrow, 50-inch web width look like a baby step in evolution. In the view of a growing number of big-picture industry experts, the long-reviled tabloid format -- once fit only for smudgy papers devoted to gossip and gore -- will prove to be the savior of U.S. newspapers, just as it is

reviving the declining circulations of venerable European dailies.

"We expect to see more and more newspapers move to the tabloid format for a number of reasons, the biggest being that readers like them, and the second being that younger people in particular like them," says Len Kubas, president of Kubas Consultants, a Toronto-based consulting firm to U.S. and Canadian newspapers.

Edward Schumacher Matos, CEO and editorial director of Meximerica Media, is willing to go even further out on a limb: "I will tell you this: Twenty years from now every daily newspaper will be a tabloid. The New York Times will be a tabloid. The Washington Post will be a tabloid. The only paper in the country that won't be a tab will be The Wall Street Journal."

Small world

Certainly the rest of the world seems to be in the midst of a tabloid takeover. "Does the current tabloid boom spell the advancing death of the broadsheet?" asked a program note for a discussion during the World Association of Newspapers' annual meeting about what it calls global "tabloid fever."

In Europe, Garcia says, his Tampa, Fla.-based design firm Garcia Media is now doing two or three broadsheet-to-tabloid conversions every month. The same October day that the GP finally goes tab, so will Dagens Nyheter of Stockholm and the Sydsvenska Dagbladet of Malmo, Sweden. Tabloids are sweeping Germany. Every big-city daily in Spain is now a tabloid.

Even the hallowed Times of London now prints a tabloid version along with its broadsheet editions. And for good reason: In its first month, Times circulation jumped an average 35,000 on the weekdays it prints a tab version. Going tabloid may have saved The Independent from shuttering. Since becoming the first U.K. paper to offer twin versions of its paper in September, circulation is up 18%.

And on May 17, it dropped the broadsheet version and went completely tabloid.

Closer to home, every Canadian city of any size has at least one tabloid daily, Kubas notes. A year ago, The London (Ontario) Free Press converted its Sunday paper to a tabloid. The paper has been besieged by readers who hoped -- or feared -- the daily would become a tabloid, Editor in Chief Paul Berton wrote in an April 10 column. "We have no plans to turn The London Free Press into a compact," Berton wrote. "But here's what I think: It's only a matter of time."

And now, it seems, it's America's turn. The signs are already here. The San Francisco Examiner is now a tabloid. Just a few weeks ago, the Tracy (Calif.) Press shocked its readers by turning tabloid -- over a weekend. And when The Miami Herald was planning its redesign, it seriously considered going tabloid. Stymied by production constraints in adopting the format, the Herald nevertheless transformed its daily "Tropic" feature section into a tab.

The bad-boy format

Yet, even in the midst of this tabloid fever, the very word still frightens some U.S. publishers. Right now, Garcia is working on the redesign of a broadsheet he won't identify that has asked him to prepare a tabloid prototype along with other redesign ideas. "The publisher tells me, very seriously, that the term 'tabloid' is not to be used in this project," Garcia says. "He told me, 'You can do a tabloid -- but don't call it a tabloid.'"

This passionate advocate of tabloids won him industry renown for his work on broadsheets that literally covered the globe, from El Mercurio in Chile to Het Parool in Amsterdam. Among his recent U.S. redesigns, besides The Miami Herald and Newsday: the Staten Island Advance, The Charlotte Observer, and what he calls his "ultimate assignment," the redesign of The Wall Street Journal.

The tabloidization of the U.S. daily newspaper would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. Ron Reason, vice president and creative director of Chicago-based Garcia Media, recalls the reactions he used to get as recently as a year or two ago whenever he told people he was working on a redesign for a tabloid: "Oh, well, the tabloid format, pooh-pooh-pooh. It was like an instantaneous cut-off."

The tabloid's reputation as a vulgar format is not entirely deserved. To be sure, the full-throated antics of big-city tabs -- the New York Daily News publishing a photo of Ruth Snyder's electric-chair execution in the 1920s or the New York Post headlines such as "Headless Body in 'Topless Bar'" in the 1980s -- along with the excesses of the supermarket tabs, set a certain downmarket tone for tabloids.

But as journalism historian **W. Joseph Campbell** notes, America's original Yellow Journalism scandal sheets were broadsheets. The first U.S. tabloid, he says, was a one-day experiment, published by Joseph Pulitzer on Jan. 1, 1900, to represent the newspaper of the 20th century.

The century would be hard on tabloids. Of the 1,457 daily newspapers still around in 2003, just 43 were tabloids, according to the Editor & Publisher International Year Book. Certainly some serious, upscale newspapers flourished as tabloids, including the Rocky Mountain News in Denver and Newsday in Melville, N.Y. The Times Herald-Record in Middletown, N.Y., started life as a tabloid, but in 1960 decided it should go broadsheet to show that it was a serious newspaper, says Publisher James Moss. "From what I'm told, the readership and the market went nuts," Moss says. "They just did not like it, so that lasted very briefly, maybe a matter of a few weeks." It remains the only tabloid in the Ottaway newspaper group.

Moss says he's amused that tabloids have now captured so much industry attention. "We always knew that life would catch up with us sooner or later," he laughs.

That was a rare success story. A more typical experience was the short, unhappy life of the St. Louis Sun. The paper was created in 1989 by Ralph Ingersoll II, who at the time was considered one of the industry's young visionaries. In those heady early days of high-tech, Ingersoll marketed the tabloid as a "laptop" format, says Jim Mueller, an assistant professor of journalism at the University of North Texas.

Several factors, most notably an atrocious circulation system, conspired to kill the paper, Mueller says, but St. Louis readers also never really embraced the "laptop," either. "In their last three months, they did make a conscious attempt to take the paper downmarket, to be a tabloid -- and that really backfired on them," says Mueller.

The front page was reserved for increasingly bizarre stories, such as one about a giraffe with AIDS. Mueller recalls one particularly infamous headline over a story about a lawsuit accusing a man of biting a woman in the buttocks: "He Bit Hers. She Sued His." Readers and advertisers recoiled, and the Sun set after just seven months.

When Mueller interviewed Ingersoll in 1995, the publisher dismissed the Sun as a failed experiment. "In a sense, though, Ingersoll was too harsh on himself," Mueller says now. "He had a vision about these kinds of papers, and as it turned out, you can create them ... and be successful."

Choice of a new generation

So how did tabloid boosters go from pariahs to prophets? The transformation may appear startling at first, but it actually makes a lot of sense.

For one thing, the industry has already downsized the standard newspaper page. "I kind of wondered when the whole 50-inch craze would eventually lead to an embrace of the tabloid format," says designer Reason.

For another, newspapers noticed that young people who mostly shunned mainstream newspapers embraced alternative papers, which are virtually all tabloids. There's a natural attraction to tabs by kids who have grown up with a profound sense of mobility, observes Laura Gordon, the former consumer products marketer who heads The Dallas Morning News' new products division.

In research for a free daily youth paper that eventually became the recently launched Quick, the Morning News found that "for most people... mobility and the newspaper sometimes work at cross purposes," says Gordon, who became Quick's publisher. The portability and compact size of a tabloid were critical even in a city such as Dallas, which has few mass transit commuters, she says: "We call it the 'taco test,' the idea that you can have a newspaper open and have a taco at a Taco Bell without going into other peoples' space."

Newspapers discovered that other demographics they are trying so hard to reach -- especially women and Spanish speakers -- have no negative attitude about tabloids.

When Meximerica set out to create daily Spanish-language newspapers called Rumbo in four Texas cities, it intended to publish them as broadsheets. "We thought that would be the more respectable sort of shape, and we wanted to tell the reader that we are as good as any American paper," Meximerica CEO Matos said. Pre-launch research and focus groups, however, quickly established that its target audience of Mexican immigrants did not make that distinction. The Rumbo papers will be tabloids when they launch later this month or in early July.

A call to arms

But if there was one development that got publishers thinking about tabloids, says consultant Len Kubas, it was the entry of the quick-read commuter paper Metro into U.S. markets. The rapid growth of the Swedish-owned company scared big-city newspapers into countermeasures.

That's why the Chicago Tribune created RedEye. Metro never did come to Chicago, but the quick-read youth daily immediately faced competition from the Chicago Sun-Times' hurriedly created Red Streak. From the start, the Tribune never considered anything but the tabloid format for RedEye, says Editor Joe Knowles.

"It just seemed natural for a commuter town," says Knowles. The paper puts its gossip on the back page so there's something to read even if the commuter's subway or bus is too crowded to open the paper. Perhaps even more important, RedEye had to be different from the Tribune, he adds.

RedEye's newsroom also operates differently than the Tribune's across the hall. To come up with the front-page headline, for instance, the staff gathers and shouts ideas, a practice Knowles recalls from a brief foray at the New York Daily News.

As metros go tabloid, they, too, will have to change the way they operate -- not just the way they look, says designer Mario Garcia.

"This is why I like to call them 'compacts,' not tabloids, because not only are you compacting the page, you must compact the news," he says. But Garcia argues that even the most complete papers can make the transition successfully. He notes that the massive New York Times already prints as a tabloid insert carried in European newspapers. And the very wide broadsheet Wall Street Journal publishes a tabloid version every Thursday in Tribune Co.'s Spanish-language tabloid Hoy.

A dose of the 'Grecian Formula'

American newspaper publishers are notoriously slow to change. U.S. papers lagged behind other nations in almost every fundamental development, from converting to offset printing and adding color to narrowing the broadsheet page. So the likely U.S. path to tabloidization is what Mario Garcia calls "the Grecian Formula way" -- slowly converting the paper, one section at a time.

The Tracy Press took the opposite tack. For competitive reasons they didn't want to tip their hand too soon, so they announced they were going tabloid on a Thursday, and the following Monday published a radically different looking product, with a magazine-style cover, new font and a red front-page flag that reduced the "Tracy Press" name to small type under the huge letters: TP. Then they jokingly distributed rolls of toilet paper with the new banner printed on shrink-wrap.

Reader reaction to the new format is split nearly evenly, with both sides equally passionate in

their embrace or disdain, Editor Cheri Mathews says: "I didn't expect the reaction to be so strong from readers. Change is really tough for readers."

That's why Garcia says newspapers going tabloid should "market the hell out of" the transformation, and present it as a positive. "The change is much more abrupt than the 50-inch web," he says. "It's as if your wife left the house as a brunette, and came home as a blonde. You have to prepare readers."

There are choices inside the tabloid format, too. A popular format among alternatives is the Berliner, a longer tab that measures 17 inches in length. But experts like Laura Gordon say that younger readers show a marked preference for the most compact of the compacts, including the A4, a size basically equivalent to a letter-size, 8 1/2 by 11 page, or the even smaller "micro."

Your ad here?

Then there's the advertising problem. Consultant Kubas notes that when a newspaper turns tabloid, it doesn't really end up with a half-size page, but, because of the doubled borders, with one that has just 46% of a broadsheet's printable space. "If you're selling on a column-inch basis, and you have 54% fewer inches, you're going to have to double rates -- and you will hear a scream from clients like you wouldn't believe," he says.

What newspapers should do is prepare for tabloid conversion now by adopting the modular system of ad space that magazines use, Kubas says. "Start them buying in modular units in the broadsheet, and once you've got them used to that, then you can shrink the paper," he says. Advertising research, Kubas adds, shows that the impact of a full-page ad is the same whether it is a tabloid or broadsheet page.

The Tracy Press, though, took a different tack, and continues to sell by the column-inch even as a tabloid. The paper's advertisers, who tend to buy smaller ads, like the change, says Advertising Director Deitra Kenoly. "They like the fact that their ads now dominate," she says. Just to prevent any squawks, the newspaper also delayed a rate increase that had been scheduled for last October until the beginning of this month.

But the biggest challenge for publishers may just be getting started. Garcia and others think the tabloid will really start moving in the United States when a medium-sized, respected broadsheet makes the move. Readers everywhere, they say, are ready.

"The time has come for the tabloid," Garcia declares. "This is the buzz, this is, finally, the triumph of the less-is-more philosophy."