

27. Does print media have a future?

Ryland Fisher

I asked my 20-something daughter whether she thought print media, especially newspapers, will continue to exist, and she immediately said “no”. Her reason is that young people have other ways of finding news nowadays. Recent newspaper circulation figures appear to bear out this belief. In December 2001, the circulation of the Sunday Times, South Africa’s biggest weekly newspaper, was 503 000. ¹ Its circulation has dropped by more than 50 per cent to just over 240 000. ²

Other newspapers have shown similar spectacular declines: The Star, once the biggest daily newspaper in Gauteng, was selling 163 963 copies in 2001. It has fallen, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, to 71 692, the Business Day from 33 388 to 18 377 as well as The Cape Times, which I edited until the end of 1999, from 48 748 to 29 530.

Not one publication has seen an increase in circulation in recent years. Even the Daily Sun, South Africa’s largest daily newspaper which was founded by the brilliant newspaperman, Deon du Plessis in the early 2000s and caused a disruption in what was already a congested market, has seen its circulation declining gradually, and sometimes rapidly, over the past few years. It’s on 105 131, ³ after having reached highs of more than 300 000 in earlier years. What is also significant is that the Daily Sun’s readership has always been significantly higher than most other publications: at one point each copy had about 20 readers. ⁴ This high readership proved that literacy was not a problem as far as potential newspaper readership goes. Relevance and usefulness of the media were probably bigger factors.

“it is not the medium but the quality of the journalism that is important”

If this decline in newspaper circulation continues, it is likely that the prediction by the doomsayers – that the end of print media is nigh – will probably be realised in a few years’ time, if that long.

I have spent most of my career in print media, mainly newspapers. I am one of those with ink in my blood, as they say in the industry. I have worked at and with many newspapers, and have seen a few close over the course of my career. The first newspaper I worked at, the Cape Herald, targeted the “coloured” community of Cape Town. It was owned by the then Argus Company, but it was a paper that understood its constituency and, during the time I worked there, I did not foresee that it

would ever close. The Cape Herald closed in the early 1990s, when the trend was to close newspapers that served defined ethnic communities. In some ways, the Cape Herald became a victim of the non-racial society we were supposedly all trying to achieve.

When I was working for the Sunday Times, where I had first been tasked with transforming an Extra edition aimed at the “coloured” community into a non-racial Metro publication, I succeeded. I later was moved to Durban, where my editor asked me to do the same: transform the “Indian” Extra into a non-racial Metro publication. I failed hopelessly.

After the Cape Herald, I worked at a series of alternative, anti-apartheid community newspapers. They included Grassroots, South, and New Nation, all of which have since closed. But the reason for them closing was different to the commercial, mainstream newspapers. Most of these newspapers depended on funding from overseas organisations and countries which were sympathetic to the struggle against apartheid. When we became a democracy, many of these overseas funders no longer saw the need to support anti-apartheid organisations, and decided that they wanted to support the African National Congress government directly. This led to the demise of many non-governmental organisations, including community media throughout the country. The only alternative newspaper of that generation that still exists, but is also going through tough times, is the Mail & Guardian, which used to be known as the Weekly Mail. Another, Vrye Weekblad, was recently relaunched as an online publication.

As part of trying to redress the wrongs of the past, the relatively new government set up the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) - which was co-funded by the media conglomerates – as a way of funding community media. Community media at the time consisted mainly of newspapers, but there were also quite a few radio stations and even one or two television projects, such as Cape Town TV and Soweto TV. Most of the projects funded by the MDDA have been struggling, and some have closed because they were not able to attract advertising, which is the lifeblood of any media entity. None of the newspaper projects funded or started by the MDDA, I am afraid to say, achieved any remote success over the past 25 years of democracy. Most of them have been struggling, and hoping that government advertising would come to their salvation, but it has not.

The Association of Independent Publishers represents grassroots community newspapers (both online and print) throughout South Africa, but many of them have not been started with MDDA support. “There are over 200 AIP members who publish more than seven million copies per month (reaching close to 28 million readers). Over 70% of our publishers are black, and

our publications service the most rural parts of the country,” says executive director Carol Mohlala. “AIP member publications are distinct from mainstream media owned by large media groups like Media 24, Independent Media, Caxton Group and Tiso Blackstar. Members publish primarily in rural areas and disadvantaged communities, in a diverse range of languages and service a diverse range of interests. 85 members publish in a combination of English, Afrikaans and a local language. 78% of publications are black-owned with 28% owned by women. Our geographical communities range from rural Cofimvaba to the urban people of Bonteheuwel, Heideveld and the Cape Flats, from Makhado to Gansbaai, Mangaung to Jozini and many more in between.”

A worrying trend with community newspapers today is that they are still too dependent on government, and always look to it to come up with solutions to their problems. They fail to understand that, in order for newspapers to attract advertising support, it needs a decent circulation, and this will only come about if they provide their readers with relevant and engaging content. Too many newspapers, community or mainstream, seemed to have forgotten their mandate to “inform, educate and entertain”.

There is another group of community newspapers in South Africa which would not qualify to belong to the AIP because they are owned by one of the big media houses, Caxton, which also has printing presses throughout the country. According to their website, Caxton owns about 120 community newspapers, some of it in partnership with local owners, but most of them directly.⁵ Caxton, which was started by entrepreneurs Terry Moolman and Noel Coburn in 1980, also owns The Citizen newspaper and several magazines, and is one of the four big companies that have dominated the South African media landscape, and especially the newspaper industry, since the days of apartheid. The other companies are Independent Media, which used to be known as the Argus Company for most of its life (its first title, the Cape Argus, was founded in 1857), Media 24 (which was started as Naspers in 1915), and what is now known as Arena Holdings, but has gone through a succession of names over the past few decades, including South African Association Newspapers, Times Media Limited and Tiso Blackstar. Caxton’s only major daily newspaper, The Citizen, was started as part of a secret propaganda project of the National Party government in the mid-1970s. It was later exposed as part of the Information Scandal which led to the resignation of several ministers.⁶ The first “owner” of The Citizen, which he bought with government money, was Dr Louis Luyt. He later became the president of the South African Rugby Union, and who controversially summoned President Nelson Mandela to give evidence in a court case that he brought against the former statesman. Mandela attended court thereby demonstrating that he was not above the law,

Media24 was until recently the South African wing of Naspers, which has now grown into an international company. Naspers describes itself as “a global internet group and one of the largest technology investors in the world”.⁷ Naspers was reportedly founded in 1915, under the name De Nasionale Pers

Beperkt, as a publisher and printer of newspapers and magazines. The company was set up to support Afrikaner nationalism, and immediately launched its first newspaper, Die Burger, followed by its first magazine, Huisgenoot, the following year.

Independent Media is still South Africa’s biggest mainstream newspaper company, owning nine daily newspapers and 10 weekend titles. They also own 11 community newspapers, all serving local areas in the Cape Town metro. The company now describes itself as “one of South Africa’s leading multi-platform content companies”.⁸ The company owns The Star, Pretoria News, Daily News, The Mercury, Cape Times, Cape Argus, Sunday Independent and Sunday Tribune, among others. It further owns the Zulu-language Isolezwe and the Xhosa version, Isolezwe lesiXhosa. The company has ownership of GQ men’s magazine. Independent’s forerunner, the Argus Company, was owned by Anglo American for decades until they sold the company in 1994 to an Irish company headed by billionaire Sir Anthony O’Reilly. It sold the company to a South African consortium, led by Dr Iqbal Surve’s Sekunjalo Group, in 2013.

Arena Holdings is the new name given to the company previously known as Tiso Blackstar after it was bought by Lebashe Investment Group, led by entrepreneur Tshepo Mahloele.⁹ Arena owns the crown jewel of newspapers in South Africa, the Sunday Times, along with other titles, such as the Sowetan, Daily Dispatch and Eastern Province Herald. It also owns business publications, Business Day and the Financial Mail.¹⁰



Most media companies now have websites and dabble in social media, but some are more serious than others. Media24 leads the way with everyone else trying to catch up. But this is a more contested market than newspapers, and South Africa’s big media companies, with their long histories, now have to contend with a host of smaller local competitors along with major international competitors like Google and Facebook.

As someone who has been in the industry for almost 40 years, I have become accustomed to having to survive in changing environments. When I started out, we were still using manual typewriters, and had to type each story in triplicate. Nowadays, I sometimes type my weekly columns on my mobile phone. I have always been driven by a belief that what is important is not the medium, but the quality of the journalism. Despite the flood of information that is available on the internet and on social media, people will always be prepared to pay for good journalism, despite the platform it is on. Journalism, that people find

relevant, useful and informative, will always be able to find a home. As convener of the Vodacom Journalist of the Year competition, arguably South Africa's most prestigious journalism awards, I led the process a few years ago to grant awards based on content and not on platforms, which had been the case for almost two decades. The decision has been proven to be correct,

because we have discovered news outlets that we did not know exist – and they produce excellent journalism.

So, to the question of whether newspapers or print media will exist for much longer, the answer is probably no. But what is more important is that good journalism should continue to exist, with or without newspapers and other print media forms.

Footnotes

1. *Making the Media Work for You* – Ryland Fisher (Ryland Fisher Communications, 2002)
2. 'Newspaper circulation: Look to your niche' Financial Mail Ad Focus, 22 August 2019 <https://www.businesslive.co.za/redzone/news-insights/2019-08-22-news-paper-circulation-look-to-your-niche/>
3. Media24 website <https://www.media24.com/newspapers/daily-sun/>
4. The Media magazine <https://themedialine.co.za/2014/10/a-day-in-the-life-of-the-daily-sun/>
5. Caxton website <https://caxton.co.za/about/>
6. South African History Online website <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/information-scandal>
7. From Naspers' website <https://www.naspers.com/about>
8. Independent Media website <https://www.independentmedia.co.za/our-company/about-us/>
9. Sowetan, Timeslive <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-11-06-its-official-arena-holdings-is-the-new-owner-of-sunday-times-business-day-sowetan/>
10. From Arena Holdings website <https://arena.africa/brands/>



Ryland Fisher has almost 40 years of experience in the media industry as an editor, journalist, columnist, author, senior manager and executive. He is a former newspaper editor and works with several media companies in South Africa and abroad. Ryland was a guest speaker at the journalism Student Achievement Awards ceremony at the ML Sultan Technikon. He is the author of *Race* (published 2007), a book dealing with race and racism in post-apartheid South Africa. His first book, *Making the Media Work for You* (2002), provided insights into the media industry. More recently, Ryland wrote a book about the history of the Atlantic Philanthropies in South Africa, and his fourth book, about *The South Africa We Want To Live In*, will be published in 2020. He writes a weekly column for the Weekend Argus, called *Thinking Allowed*, dealing mainly with socio-political issues, and occasional articles for other publications in South Africa and abroad.