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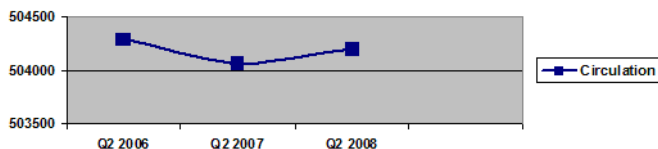
Sunday Times' slippery slopeAuthor: Mandy de Waal
Publish: 12 September 2008**Sacrificing truth for sensation will hurt the flat-lining newspaper in the long run.**

The *Sunday Times* became the most talked about media this week thanks to Zapiro and the [Transnet fiasco](#). Mndli Makhanya's [editorial response](#) to the latter sounded a lot like the *Avis* "we try harder's" ad, reading like a heart-tugging love note to the media's life blood, its readers. The editorial didn't admit that the paper had erred, but played the idealism harp, spoke about the dangers of journalism and then wrapped up by saying the paper would try harder to get things right in future.

Critics who think the storm may hurt the paper financially should think again. Advertisers don't give a damn about editorial, say marketing and media experts who believe that the paper won't suffer revenue losses in the short term. What it has successfully done is churn up legions of free publicity. Former award-winning journalist cum brand expert Chris Moerdyk says: "If I was the *Sunday Times*, I would not lose a minute's sleep over the fact that advertisers might withdraw. Advertisers don't give a hoot about editorial. All they worry about is value for money. The SABC has consistently got things wrong in a spectacular fashion over the past year, and I don't think the SABC has lost any advertising." The Audit Bureau of Circulation of Southern Africa's (ABC) Gordon Patterson agrees: "Marketers are pragmatic. They realise their view of a title is irrelevant. Advertising decisions are made on circulation and whether or not the media is able to influence or inform a consumer audience. Marketers rarely judge media."

The biggest issue is one of readership, and at this stage the *Sunday Times* can ill afford to lose just one reader given its circulation has flat lined in recent years.

SUNDAY TIMES CIRCULATION



The print title's circulation is stagnant while inflation and printing costs have risen. In fact the paper's readership shows a marginal decline from 2006 (504,301 April to June) to 2008 (504,200 April to June). According to the ABC, this speaks to the entire category - weekend newspapers are struggling. One title that's bucking the trend is *Naspers' Sunday Sun* which has shown good steady growth over the same period rising from 195,850 in 2006 to 209,501 in 2008. The *Sunday Sun* is modelled on the run away success of the *Daily Sun* which has a circulation of 513,291.

The natural inclination amongst journalists (who don't write for the Sun) and intellectuals is to put their hand on their brow and berate the growing trend toward sensational tabloid journalism, and hint that The *Sunday Times* is sliding down that slippery slope. Patterson says otherwise: "There is certainly a market for more topical journalism. Although I refrain from commenting on editorial style because circulation is democracy in print, reporting at those titles is journalism and it is encouraging people to read, which is not bad for the long term prospects in our country."

But will the *Sunday Times* alienate readers? Yes says spin doctor supremo Marcus Brewster: "I do believe that their credibility has been harmed by these latest stories. *Sunday Times* (ST), *Mail & Guardian* and *Carte Blanche* are three incredibly powerful mass media brands which owe their gravitas to their strengths in investigative journalism and their scrupulous respect for getting the story straight. *Noseweek* has similarly crusading principles but its niche circulation puts it in a bantamweight fighting class. *Sunday Times* cannot afford to be caught out in its editorial and fact-checking process as this undermines their entire market positioning."

Wadim Schreiner, head of local media analysis firm Media Tenor, says Makhanya's effort sounded like a half hearted apology. "The *Sunday Times* got it very wrong, and not just once. Then they followed this with silence. I agree with Makhanya that press freedom is paramount, but this should not be an excuse to hide behind in the event of seriously bad journalism. Media are in a fortunate position in that they have press freedom to defend themselves. Those they expose for alleged wrong doings don't have anything to hide behind: they are exposed, naked, and embarrassed with their reputation in tatters."

This view is shared by the ANC's Jesse Duarte who says: "The self regulation of the media suppresses the rights of citizens from taking the media to court. If the media is wronged there is recourse, but if citizens are wronged there is no meaningful recourse. The question is how to balance the right of the individual." Earlier Duarte accused the *Sunday Times* of being a member of a media cartel that that meets regularly with the aim of influencing the ANC agenda. Jacob Zuma has similar thoughts saying earlier this year that the media functions as if it were "an opposition party".

Schreiner adds that while readers are occasionally forgiving, they buy the press for truth. "Apologies are good and right. But then they should be followed up with an improvement of quality. People trust the media for placing difficult things into a context. If the media mislead people, they are no different from the other 'untrusted sources' like lawyers and politicians."

Former Professor of Communication and trainer of journalists Graeme Addison is a lot more pragmatic, saying that in a young democracy these things happen: "The press can never get things 100% right, but that is not the standard by which news media should be judged. Journalists are engaged in the search for truth, in revealing what is happening, uncovering facts that would otherwise remain hidden, and investigating the often conflicting versions offered by different sources. The more facts the press and other media are able to bring to light, the more falsehood is exposed. In this process, no journalist can be expected to know all the facts or report what others may see as the sole truth and nothing but the truth. The truth is that the truth is not yet known. The *Sunday Times* and others have got things wrong in the past and will get things wrong again. This is only to be expected, provided that when genuine factual errors come to light they are promptly corrected. Apologies are sometimes necessary when individuals have been wronged. But there is no rule, ethical or otherwise, that says editors must grovel over every allegedly incorrect fact in their columns."

Says Moerdyk: "The problem with politics is that there are so many people who are trying to get political advantage by stabbing their colleagues in the back. Dirtier politics gets the more the media ends up making mistakes, particularly with sources. It takes real experience to separate the wheat from the chaff." Addison adds: "Public figures (who frequently misquote things themselves and can have a vested interest in lying) deserve no special respect, and indeed, they deserve to be roundly exposed and condemned when they are caught out. South Africans are relatively new to the rough and tumble of genuinely democratic debate and investigative journalism. Get used to it."

What's happened at the *Sunday Times* story is an issue that is endemic to most local news media. The average age of journalists in newsrooms is getting younger and younger, and the wall between advertising and editorial has evaporated. The loss of institutional memory; the growing commercial pressure that is facing most print news; and an over reliance on 'sources' in the murky and messy arena of local politics is compromising the quality of news.

"Fifteen years ago editors of newspapers like the *Sunday Times* and *The Star* were completely separated from the financial management of newspapers. Nobody from management would be allowed on the editorial floor to speak to journalist or sub-editor," says Moerdyk. This, largely due to a lack of media competition in the apartheid era when there was an under supply of marketing space in newspapers. SA's young democracy has seen an explosion of television channels, radio and magazine titles. "By the mid 90's newspapers started taking strain and editorial staff got cut down drastically and editors were brought into the process of revenue generation."

Competition and commercial demands have put editors under huge pressure, particularly to gain readership in what Moerdyk calls "a thankless job." He quips: "It is easier to make money out of a pirate taxi than running a newspaper. It is a tough job. We just don't have the big numbers like they do elsewhere in the world."

While the *Sunday Times* needs to reclaim truth and some credibility, what should be applauded is the printing of Zapiro's cartoon and for the vital role it plays in our democracy. While it doesn't always get things right and will be going through a much needed editorial revision, it has put the debate right on the table. The voraciousness and vitriolic response from the ruling party together with the pervasiveness of public debate proves that, ideologies aside, the paper is getting the nation talking about some of the most important issues of the day. That is undoubted one of the most important jobs of journalism.

This article first appeared on Moneyweb.co.za.

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