

Why newspapers and magazines are giving print a bad name

By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Print is by no means dead. Far from it. The growing perception that it is dying falls squarely on those newspapers and magazines that seem to have some kind of death wish...

Data showing how circulations have fallen dramatically in the past 10 years - anything from 22% down to sales losses of almost 70% - shows that this applies mostly to national and large metropolitan daily and weekly newspapers and to national consumer magazines.

Commercial community newspapers are mostly doing exceptionally well and have created gigantic print orders of effective advertising inserts that are spewed out in the millions every week.

Equally, the custom magazine publishing sector is buoyant and well supported by the market.

So what's going wrong?

In simple terms, it's all about content.



Cape-based companies and individuals have a well-established record of giving generously - wherever the fire occurs. (Image: Public Domain)

Two examples of content fails were glaringly apparent this week.

Ill-informed and wildly inaccurate

Firstly, the *Sunday Times*. It is down 23% from where it was 10 years ago. And at that time the big discussion among *Sunday Times* managers was how much they had to raise their sales beyond 500,000 in order to retain the same profit and not chase advertisers away through infused advertising tariffs. Demand regularly outstripped supply.

Now it's a question of how they can get from an almost historic low of 385,000 to that magic half million again.

A clue to their falling circulation might well lie in an article* that was published this past weekend. It was written by one of their Johannesburg-based editorial staff who devoted an almost half page rant to why rich people and businesses in Cape Town did not make sandwiches for fire-fighters when they were fighting shack fires. It was one of the most ill informed, knee-jerk and wildly inaccurate pieces of journalism I have seen for a long time.

It made no effort to give both sides of the story.

It made no effort to indicate that when shacks catch fire, the blazes are regularly put out in less than a day. This is completely different to the six days of fires Cape Town experienced a week ago in which hundreds of volunteer fire-fighters boosted the number of those fighting the fires. Volunteer fire-fighters are rarely called upon for shack fires because the professionals are able to easily handle things. It was those volunteers who had to be fed and watered.

No mention was made of the myriad corporate-funded organisations providing fire damage relief to informal settlements or the fact that in many cases when 100 or so shacks are razed by fire, the local communities rally to the cause and in one

case, managed to have the shacks rebuilt within five days at no cost to the residents.

It is this kind of editorial stupidity that loses many readers and I would not be surprised if the *Sunday Times* circulation fell even further in the Western Cape as a result.

This is not a rare occurrence. Mainstream newspapers seem to be trying to be more and more sensationalist by the day in their quest to try to get more publicity and more advertising. And they still haven't realised that relevance, and not sensation, is what actually sustains newspaper sales.

And it rained...

Another example of content fail is a column* in the latest issue of *Getaway* magazine.

It was written by a regular contributor and was all about Miami in the United States. The writer spent only 24 hours there, on one of those rare days when the weather was chilly and rainy.

Contrary to *Getaway* magazine's policy, one presumes, of providing travel information to its readers, this column gave absolutely nothing of value to anyone considering Miami as a holiday destination. Something for which it is famous the world over.

The tone of the column was about the same as someone writing about Thailand but concentrating only on the day of the tsunami.

Overcooked

The more one looks at those newspapers and magazines that have lost significant sales over the past 10 years, the more it becomes clear that editors, often pushed by management, completely overcook controversy in a desperate bid to retain readers.

It is also abundantly clear that newspapers and magazines are still being run as though the internet did not exist.

They are full of old news and crammed so full of opinion that they should actually stop calling themselves newspapers and rather be known as 'opinion papers'.

It is clear that the majority of mainstream newspapers and consumer magazines are completely out of touch with what their readers want.

Until they start marketing their newspapers and stop relying on human gut feel and wild assumptions about their readership, they will continue to slowly bleed to death as have so many in the world over the past few years.

Which is probably why so many newspaper groups have decided, quite rightly, to become 'digital-first' organisations.

And also why groups such as Independent Media are firing journalists who are anti-government or write critically of their own companies in a desperate effort to try and survive on government advertising.

Print is by no means dead. A huge number of print products are still relevant and flourishing. In spite of newspapers and consumer magazines giving their industry such a bad name.

It's a team effort

**If you are wondering why I have not named the authors of the Sunday Times and Getaway magazine columns I used as examples, it is because I don't know whether it was the writers who came up with these ideas or whether their editors*

pushed them into doing them. I have no idea whether something went horribly wrong in the editing or any of a dozen other reasons for these editorial aberrations. Naming the authors would have been beside the point because blame must lie with the newspaper and magazine editorial and management teams. Newspapers and magazines are never just one person.

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