

Newspapers prospering despite themselves

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Newspapers are their own worst enemies, if statistics presented on the first day of the World Association of Newspapers Congress in Cape Town are anything to go by. Reporting on the state of the global newspaper industry, WAN chief executive Timothy Balding said that in spite of many media industry analysts sowing doom and gloom about falling newspaper circulations and drops in advertising revenue, this was an entirely wrong perception.

In fact, more readers were buying more newspapers and advertisers devoting more of their budgets to advertising in newspapers.

Balding illustrated the widespread reports of doom and gloom with a montage of, believe it or not, negative newspaper headlines. He was clearly not at all impressed that the newspaper industry itself was largely responsible for creating negative perceptions.

Internet fear

Another interesting fact was that in spite of a lot of talk and in some cases newspaper industry paranoia about the threat of the Internet, this new kid on the block has quite some way to go before it can match the sheer amount of revenue coming in to newspapers.

Internet revenue is expected to grow by about 18% a year and by 2010 should amount to about R350 billion. However, by 2010 newspaper revenue is expected to reach almost three times that amount - roughly R1000 billion. A lot of that new revenue coming in from a huge growth in free sheet newspapers.

Quite rightly, Balding suggested that newspaper owners should not be intimidated by the Internet because history had already shown that the Internet and the newspapers can co-exist very comfortably.

Higher quality

Right now the *New York Times* is presenting an online published version of its newspaper that is very different to traditional web page versions and very similar in picture quality, speed of read and visual similarity to a newspaper page.

At a concurrent media expo, South Africa's *Sunday Times* is demonstrating a similar product developed in association with Microsoft and due to launch quite soon. A quite remarkable advance in online publication.

But, getting back to the newspaper industry, as always the WAN Congress was opened with a global review of countries espousing press freedom and those denying it to their citizens. Of journalists killed and imprisoned, tortured, banned and oppressed. And quite clearly China is one of the biggest culprits.

But, most interesting in this opening session was an impassioned speech by the President of the SA Newspaper Association and *Mail & Guardian* chairman, Trevor Ncube.

Beyond sensationalism

His appeal for objectivity and the need for editorial quality in South Africa has not come a moment too soon. It has long been my contention that many of our editors need to start thinking beyond readership garnering sensationalism and pandering to the whims of advertisers in an effort to enhance the bottom line.

And something else I believe the newspaper industry needs to seriously give some thought to is the way in which it manages its mistakes. The news media quite rightly makes a huge song and dance about public and corporate bodies that get things wrong. Calling for retribution in all sorts of forms from the dismissal of sports coaches whose teams lose once too often and cabinet ministers who get things wrong.

Yet when newspapers get things wrong, they tuck an apology away in small print on the inside pages and general offer the excuse of human error. Occasionally with a "Sorry, we got it wrong." Radio and TV are much the same.

Two way traffic

I believe that if the news media want to continue to enjoy their freedom, then they need to demonstrate that they are prepared to practice what they preach. They also need to learn how to take criticism and not just dish it out. As media journalists or commentators will attest, hell hath no fury as a newspaper scorned.

Right now the perception is that the media can get hot under the collar and climb into all and sundry but when it comes to their own mistakes, these are pretty much swept under the carpet or dismissed in fine print and a lame apology.

Editors who want to be taken seriously or accorded any sort of credibility in the future might well have to consider giving their mistakes the same page-prominence that was enjoyed by the original story. If they got a front page story wrong, then they should be prepared to offer a front page apology just as prominently.

Perceptions count

Because newspaper owners and editors, more than anyone else, should know that perception is what counts today and not reality.

And a final thought, expressed by more than one delegate. If indeed more people all over the world are reading more newspapers, this in no way suggests that more people are believing what they read in newspapers. This is the statistic that counts. And this is the statistic that will decide whether newspapers will continue to grow and prosper.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

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