

Where's our sense of humour gone?

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

2 Apr 2014

Last Sunday I woke up full of the joys of spring, but by the time I had finished reading the Sunday Times I couldn't make up my mind whether to go back to bed with a bottle of whisky, or wander out into the street and throw myself in front of a minibus.

I am not picking on the Sunday Times as such but just about every newspaper in the country. And pretty much every online publication from B2B websites to [www.sewageandkakdisposalweekly.com](#).

Frankly, I really have to wonder whether South Africa's editors really are a humourless lot and whether the lighter side of life just isn't on their radar screens?

Now, I am not for a minute suggesting that all our newspapers and online portals start engaging in sunshine journalism or even that they tell us the good news.

What I am saying is that there needs to be something to make us smile, maybe even laugh so that we don't go to bed with a whisky bottle or throw ourselves in front of a minibus. We need balance. Our carbo-load of political skulduggery and crime needs to be balanced by some protein-enriched smile muti.

Not a smile to be seen

There was no protein whatsoever in last week's Sunday Times, nor any other newspaper I have read in the past month.

I am also still ratty about Finweek killing its amusing Piker column and replacing it with a crossword and some gratuitous tweets all under the tile of "Laughing Stocks"

That's a laugh, to say the least.

And where are all those wonderful headline writers? Have they died or are they just gagged?

Let me hasten to say, however, that I don't blame editors at all for keeping away from humour because editors are generally obliged to take very careful note of what readership research is telling them.

And what readership research is telling them is that, in terms of business-to-business media for example, what readers want to the exclusion of all else is serious business stuff without any form of frivolity.

Trouble is, as far as I am concerned, a lot of readership research is absolute crap.

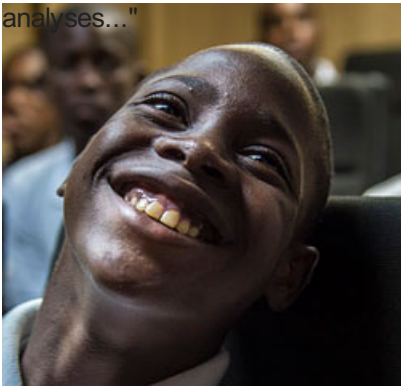
Here lies the problem

Especially that sort of readership research that asks readers what they like reading. And this is where the problem lies.

It is completely contrary to human nature for any self-respecting businessman, woman or entrepreneur to sit in front of a researcher or fill in an online survey and answer the question about what the most important thing they read and say: "Oh, without doubt, I like the jokes at the back and then the cartoons and then if there is anything about who is bonking whom..."

Of course not. What they will say is: "I first look at share prices, then the leader page editorial and then global economic

analyses..."



Consumers of news media enjoy a laugh or two every now and then. (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

In precisely the same way that if you ask any human being what wine they like most, they will unhesitatingly respond by mentioned the most expensive brand they have ever heard of and not consider for a moment telling the truth about their economically induced preference for cheap plonk.

I have seen a lot of misguided readership research in my day.

What the readers *really* wanted to read first

The very first experience I had of it was way back in the 1960s when The Natal Mercury did some research on what readers really wanted. As usual, the analysis came back showing quite clearly that readers wanted politics, opinion and analysis, business news and then sport.

The editor of the Mercury duly complied and decided to move the paper's extremely humorous Idler's column from the back page to the centre of the paper, to fall in line with most other newspapers by putting sport at the back.

The Mercury switchboard was jammed for three days solid with readers absolutely incensed about the change. Bear in mind, they were not complaining that the column had been dropped, but just that it had just been moved.

What was subsequently proved was that something like 70% of Mercury readers actually rated the Idler's column as the primary reason for buying the newspaper in the first place, even if they would not dare admit this in formal research.

I am not suggesting for a minute that all readership research has massive margins of error, but what I am saying is that news media management and editors need to be very careful about what a lot of readership research is perceived to suggest.

I am convinced that consumers of news media enjoy a laugh or two every now and then.

Oh and by the way, political satire, no matter how acerbic, is not humour. While many people will enjoy seeing a columnist sticking it to a politician or two, it doesn't actually raise a laugh but rather just exacerbates the desire to go to bed with a bottle of whisky or step in front of a minibus.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdyk@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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