

# Print media far from dead

The latest figures from the South African Audience Research Foundation (SAARF) show that daily and weekly newspapers account for 49% of local media consumption, making them still the most preferred source of news and information in the country.



By [Ingrid Louw](#) 29 Apr 2013

This is a far-cry from the predictions of doom that newspapers would have been dead a decade ago. In fact, there is evidence globally that newspapers have arrested their decline, which was largely caused by the rapid advancement and availability of the internet; which led to the provision of free news online.

Newspapers are enjoying new-found stability. Even more pleasing is evidence that they are growing in popularity in most of the developing world, including populous India.

## Continued attractiveness

Locally, the acquisition of Independent Newspapers & Media SA (INMSA), by a consortium led by Sekunjalo Holdings for a billion, points to the continued attractiveness of newspaper and magazine companies to investors. Also, the continuing growth of isiZulu language newspapers shows that those who wrote the obituary of newspapers and magazines have acted too hastily.

Now that the apocalyptic prophesies appear to have been off the mark, it is about time we changed the narrative about the print media. This is not an industry on death row but a dynamic one that is doing its best, and succeeding by continually innovating and embracing change. Admittedly, these changes, especially the swift emergence of online media, have changed the way newspaper and magazine owners do business.

They have successfully leveraged synergies between the print and online versions of newspapers and magazines. Newspaper companies have invested princely sums in recent times to adapt and ensure they stay relevant. They had no option if they were to continue doing what they have always done well - that is to be the most trusted platforms for news and for delivering desirable audiences to advertisers.

## A special significance in South Africa

Newspapers have a special significance in South Africa. They enjoy public trust that far exceeds that of other media platforms by far. This, combined with their historical watchdog role, makes them a vital part of society.

People trust newspapers because they largely owe their mere existence to the promotion of public good. This notwithstanding, newspapers are indeed going through the most challenging period since they were first published centuries ago. But, they are doing a good job of changing with the times.

All mainstream newspapers in South Africa have fully embraced the digital medium and are reaping the rewards in terms of attracting new readers. Far from being the killer of newspapers that it was supposed to be, the digital platform has seen newspapers and magazines gain new audiences.

The challenge local newspapers and magazines face, like their counterparts around the world, is how they can best monetise their journalism online and attract sufficient advertising to make their online offering viable. More and more pay walls are coming up as media houses try to recoup the costs of providing news online and profit from it.

## Willingness to pay

The good news is that people have shown a willingness to pay for quality journalism. As Lizette Rabie, a professor of

journalism at Stellenbosch says, people are willing to pay for news that they cannot get for free - just as they are willing to pay for satellite television. She also points out that people do not read news either digitally or in print to the exclusion of the other; but consume both media forms. And, importantly, newspaper readership has remained stable in South Africa, at 49% of all media consumption, representing 17.1 million people out of a population of just over 50 million. What this tells us at Print and Digital Media South Africa (PDMSA) is that print media, specifically newspapers and magazines, are going to be with us for a very long time, perhaps at least another generation.

As for magazine, it's something of a happy coincidence that the news of a drop in readership during the period under review, from 50, 5% to 46, 9%, comes at the same time as we celebrate the entry of yet another new title, Business Class from the Times Media stable. Watch this space.

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