

***Sunday Times* brand integrity taking a pounding**

Never before, in its proud 102-year history, has the integrity of the *Sunday Times* been under such great a threat. Once again, it has had to retract a sensational front page lead story - this time about Transnet "selling out our sea to foreigners" that appeared last week, ironically on the same day the paper had to print an apology on a story it ran on the Land Bank.

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#) 7 Sep 2008

Talk about a bad week at the office.

And, again, the same excuse that was used as the reason that the so-called racist Bullard column managed to get into print, was applied to the Transnet blunder - "one of our established practices were not followed.

Painfully flimsy at best and starting to wear a bit thin.

I am a fan

But, before, sounding off let me nail my colours to the mast. I am a great *Sunday Times* fan. For me, Sunday is not a Sunday without the *Sunday Times* and it has been that way week in and week out for the past 50 years. From the day I was introduced to the adventures of Prince Valiant and, later, introduced by father to the wonderful words, wit and wisdom of Joel Mervis.

In his column in yesterday's *Sunday Times*, editor Mondli Makanya, a colleague and friend for many years ended with these words: "If we have failed you in any way, reader, tell us and tell us loudly..."

I want to take him up on that offer.

First of all, for some time now I have found myself reading the average front page lead story and without really consciously thinking about it, tuning in to the Sunday evening TV news and scanning the Monday morning papers to see just how vehement the denials were from whomever The *Sunday Times* decided to pillory that weekend.

Whenever I see front page apologies, which seem to be more and more common these days, I am saddened that once again the mass media in this country has had to admit that they have got things wrong. For those who believe so strongly in the freedom of the press and the integrity of South African media, it is just plain bloody embarrassing.

Bloodthirsty competition

I am also getting more and more of a sense that, ever since our media industry moved out of the relative protected and commercially bountiful years of the apartheid era into an environment a lot more competitive and bloodthirsty, the newspaper industry in general - and the *Sunday Times* in particular - has started putting sensationalism ahead of editorial integrity and simple, fundamental, editorial checks and balances in an effort to stay ahead of the game in terms of readership and advertising revenue. The *Sunday Times* might argue that this is simply not true. Maybe so, but it is my perception and perhaps the perception of many others.

What worries me, is that if I, as a fan and supporter of the *Sunday Times*, am starting to think this way, how many readers who don't have my emotional attachment to the media industry, how many media buyers, advertisers and other important stakeholders, are beginning to seriously wonder about the integrity of this iconic media brand?

Now, I know that editors of newspapers are under a lot more pressure these days than their predecessors. Because, today, an editor is also expected to be very much part of the team responsible for revenue generation, readership increases and profitability. Twenty years ago, they had no such expectation or responsibility.

And I have no doubt that it is tough at the top. But, in spite of the immense pressure, the bloodthirsty competition, the fact that newspapers the world over are under siege from the electronic media, not to mention the enormous increase in new media eating away at the advertising pie, something has to be done. Something drastic has to be done and done fast.

Because The *Sunday Times* is in danger of seeing the value of its brand diminish. There is no doubt that today, in any form of media, accurate reliable content is critical to survival.

Once content can no longer be trusted, that's the start of a long slippery slope. The *Sunday Times* has been around for more than a century and it has set many a benchmark. A mistake by the *Sunday Times* results in every newspaper in the country suffering because of its status as a leader in the industry.

Media must be trusted

And right now - nothing is more important in South Africa than media that can be trusted. Already, I imagine politicians must be rubbing their hands with glee at seeing yet another example they can quote of newspapers being wrong. Given the frenetic nature of pre-election politics, I would not be at all surprised to see politicians simply dismissing any negative story in the mass media as being sensationalist, exaggerated and just plain wrong, because the *Sunday Times* and other newspapers have given politicians just the ammunition they were looking for on a silver platter.

I am extremely encouraged, Mondli, to see in your column yesterday you said that "we will be embarking on a process of reviewing the way we do our journalism and strengthening our verification and authentication mechanism. This will be a[n] honest, critical look at ourselves."

You go on to say that "we will be commissioning a panel of eminent individuals who will help us through this process."

I sincerely trust that this "panel of eminent individuals" will not turn out to be the usual newspaper industry collection of forelock-tugging yes-men and that instead it consists of people who are able to represent readers, advertisers and other important stakeholders who are not directly involved in the newspaper industry.

I hope too, that in your request to readers to shout loud and clear about their feeling towards the *Sunday Times*, you and your management colleagues take them seriously.

The newspaper industry in this country has a sad reputation of not taking kindly to criticism. It has always struck me as ironic that the very people who are so quick to criticise politicians, celebrities and business, a

so defensive, childish and protective of their turf when it comes to someone having a go at them. So much so, that some of my colleagues who comment on the media say they really hate writing about newspapers because editors and management executives take criticism so badly. They really need to grow up and put their pride and their egos in their pockets and start behaving like businessmen and not prima donnas. Newspapers are, after all, businesses above all else, and when it comes to the integrity of their brands and products they need to start acting for the greater good and nothing else.

Final nail

I hope that the Transnet apology is the final nail in the coffin of mass media apathy towards getting things right. To checking and verification. I will continue to look forward to my *Sunday Times* every weekend and hope really sincerely that this feeling of unease that I have had for many months now that the sensationalis is overwhelming editorial integrity will begin to dissipate.

The newspaper industry is facing a tough enough future without exacerbating the problem with arrogant, grandstanding cockups such as this appalling blunder over Transnet.

On a positive note, I am convinced that there are a lot of people who still respect The *Sunday Times* enough to want to help. For pity's sake, let them.

There are a lot of former editors and newspaper managers and CEOs sitting around in retirement. For some puerile reason, the people who run our newspapers today simply don't want their advice or counsel. Which is crazy. There is a lot of wisdom out there.

And if so many businesses are basing their sustainability and success on their ability to combine and harness the exuberance of youth and the wisdom of age - then newspapers could do themselves a favour by doing the same.

For more:

- Sunday Times retraction: [Sunday Times and Transnet](#)
- Mondli Makhanya's column: [Trying times will serve to make us stronger — for your sake and ours](#)

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

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