

## Sunday Times Extra goes tabloid as it seeks a new niche

 By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA 16 Mar 2011

This tale of the *Sunday Times Extra* is oft told in the halls of the Avusa as a cautionary to those who think they know better than the readers. After the death of apartheid, it was decided that the "Indian" *Extra* would be shut down and the readers be migrated into the main paper but there was such an outcry and a plunge in sales that the decision was hastily revoked.



Front page of *Sunday Times Extra*, 6 March 2011.

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The story it seems, is largely an office myth (see update below) is borne out of an abandoned proposal to merge the "Indian" *Extra* with the now-defunct Durban Metro supplement. At around the same time, in the mid 1990s, the "African" *Extra* for Gauteng's townships was rebranded the *City Metro* and it was later merged with the white suburban *Reef Metro* to become the *Joburg Metro* as the demographics of Joburg shifted and the suburbs became more intergrated.

### Seemingly peculiar anachronism of apartheid

But the "India" *Extra* - this seemingly peculiar anachronism of apartheid - is still with us today while the [Sunday Times](#) "coloured" and "African" *Extras* are not. In fact, this month the "Indian" *Extra*, which goes to all the readers in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and to strategic sales points and subscribers in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape, has entered an interesting new chapter by transforming itself from a broadsheet insert to a tabloid insert.



Front page of *Sunday Times Extra*, 13 March 2011.

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(In case you're confused, the front page of the main paper into which the *Extra* is inserted carries the *Sunday Times Extra* masthead.)

The new format, says *Extra* editor Yasantha Naidoo, comes after market research last year revealed that generally readers were feeling disconnected from the *Extra*. Some felt it was too highbrow; some thought was too sensational. Many felt they wanted more lifestyle-orientated content aimed at the Indian community

"What seemed to resonate with the readers [in the focus groups] was the good news and the success stories, as well as sport and education - these are very important in the Indian community," says Naidoo. "Our niche is that we're catering for the community's lifestyle aspirations."

### **Fresh new design**

Therefore, the new upbeat tabloid *Extra* with a fresh new design has fewer news pages upfront and lots more travel, health and wellness, weddings, youth, education and sport content - which adds to the existing cocktail of Bollywood, socials and cooking.

I must say, I do question charting a course for the *Extra's* future based on treating the South African Indian market as homogenous in this mixed-up globalised world we live in. Media consumers in the younger generation are increasingly sophisticated. Sure, the Indian community in South Africa has a very strong identity but many of the young Indians I know are questioning tradition and some have purposefully set out to escape from the insular, family-dominated world that is KZN.

I recently did a feature on women's media and found that many magazine publishers are wrestling with how to capitalise on an important shift in the black women's market. Where once it was good enough to treat them as a mass market, black women are now disaggregating in terms of lifestyle and aspirations, say the publishers, and the time is right for niche publications.

For how long will it be good enough to treat the Indian market as homogenous, I wonder? I know many very successful operations do - there is the SABC's [LotusFM](#), [DStv's](#) Indian bouquet and Independent Newspaper's [The Post](#) and the [Sunday Tribune's](#) *The Herald*, which is the counterpart of the *Sunday Times Extra*.

### **Was not positioned clearly enough**

The *Sunday Times* research of last year suggests that the *Extra* was not positioned clearly enough and a lifestyle-orientated news supplement may be just the ticket. Certainly Naidoo believes that, even with a migration of many young Indians from KZN to cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town, the ties to home and family are strong - and they remain interested in what is going on in the Indian community in KZN. Likewise, the families back home are heartened by success stories of Indians succeeding far from home.

To me, the history of the *Sunday Times Extra* editions is an insightful peek into how fast South Africa's formerly insular communities can move out of their comfort zones.

The legendary *Sunday Times* editor Joel Mervis pondered in his book *The Fourth Estate* that had the *Ra Daily Mail* had the money to do a supplement of black news that could go to the townships in the 1960s, rather than settling for "black news" pages in its main paper, it might not have lost so many white readers - one of the key aspects of the paper's financial woes.

By contrast, says Mervis, the various *Extra* editions at the *Sunday Times* flourished - as did the main "white" paper - although there was initial opposition to the "coloured" *Extra* from leaders of the coloured community who saw it as patronising and discriminatory. The "African" *Extra* was the first to be launched (in the

Transvaal round about 1969) and this was followed by the "coloured" *Extra* in the Cape Province and then the "Indian" *Extra* in Natal in the 1970s.

### **Made publishing sense**

The point is that even many so-called white liberals in the 1960s and '70s resented having their comfortable prosperous lives disturbed by news of what the increasingly militaristic apartheid state was doing to black, coloured and Indian people. Separate news for separate race groups made more publishing sense, allowed the moneyed white group (in whom the advertisers were most interested) to freewheel through two decades of sunny skies and Chevrolet.

And yet the children and grandchildren of this incredibly insular white community now happily read papers such as the *Sunday Times*, whose readers are black by a very large majority. And the content reflects the demographics.

How things have changed! How will it change for South Africa's Indian community? Where is the line between insular and traditional? Can a community be one without being the other? When it comes to consuming media in the 21st century, it's one thing to pass the time with a Bollywood flick but quite another to consistently seek out Indian-specific news. What becomes of the likes of *The Post*, the *Extra*, *The Herald* and LotusFM will be a barometer for the shifts and restyling of their audiences.

### **"Will always be an essential part"**

Avusa executive Hoosen Kolia, a former editor of the "Indian" *Extra*, says: "The *Sunday Times Extra* will always be an essential part of Indian life in South Africa. It is intrinsically bound to the affairs of the Indian people and is so warmly regarded that, even today, with South Africans of Indian origin spread out around the world, they still keep in touch through our website.

"When the Group Areas [Act] came to an end and many Indian people moved into previously white suburbs we received many requests to deliver the *Sunday Times Extra* to their homes. This we continue to do to this day. Distribution of the paper was never a problem: it went wherever it was wanted. In those days I used to often receive social notices and letters from places like Mozambique - where we did not distribute the *Extra* or from the Free State. How the paper got there remains a mystery.

*Sunday Times Extra* is about a community talking to itself. This is the sort of dialogue that cannot find a place in mainstream newspapers. Items of interest, like religious festivals, will be squeezed out of your regular newspaper. There is still a need for something like the *Extra* and, as long as this need exists, the paper will continue to be produced."

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#### **Update 17 March 2011 at 9.44am:**

Some office myths, it turns out, are true. Since this column was published Ryland Fisher, who worked for the *Sunday Times* for many years and later became the editor of the *Cape Times*, said that there was an attempt to shut down the "Indian" *Extra* in the early 1990s.

After transforming the "coloured" *Extra* in Cape Town into the non-racial Cape Metro, Fisher was made the *Sunday Times'* Durban bureau chief in the early 1990s and was tasked with doing the same with the "Indian" *Extra*.

"I failed dismally, after successfully having done the same thing with the Cape Town *Extra*," says

Fisher. "I realised then that there are significant differences between the coloured and Indian communities."

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**For more:**

- Facebook: [City Swank](#), the Facebook page for *Sunday Times Extra* socials and events
- Times Live: [Sunday Times' website with Extra content](#) at the bottom of the page
- Bizcommunity Press Office: [Avusa Media Live](#)
- SAhistory.org.za: [History of Indian community in South Africa](#) on the 150th anniversary (2010) of the arrival of the Indian indentured workers in the country

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