

An update to SANEF's 2020 Covid-19 interim report and some cross-cutting issues

THE STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA



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South African National Editors Forum

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Abbreviations

ABC SA - Audit Bureau of Circulations of South Africa

ALS - African Language Services

AMF - Advertising Media Forum

BRC SA - Broadcast Research Council of South Africa

GNI - Gross National Income

IAB SA - Internet Advertising Bureau of South Africa

ICASA - Independent Communications Authority of South Africa

MDDA - Media Development and Diversity Agency

PRC SA - Publisher Research Council of South Africa

SCM - Small Commercial Media

Executive Summary

Against the backdrop of an economy plunged into recession by Covid-19 and then roiled by unrest as it recovered, the news media has had a turbulent time these past two years. Ironically, the pandemic increased the need for trusted, reliable news as the blow to revenue from declines in advertising and third-stream revenue made life difficult for publishers and the public broadcaster, as SANEF's interim report in June 2020 detailed. Retrenchments and newspaper closures or rationalisation of titles and circulation cutbacks continued through 2021.

The print sector was hardest hit by the pandemic lockdowns in 2020 and continued to suffer the effects long after as readers lost the habit of buying newspapers or voted with their rands against content that did not satisfy their wants and needs. Circulations of major newspapers audited by the Audit Bureau of Circulation fell across the board in the last quarter of 2021 compared to the last quarter of 2019, before the pandemic hit hard – though some publications fell more than others. Local papers audited showed some variance but overall were also down. Community or small commercial media print publications were reported to be knocked by the pandemic, but no hard figures are available. The problem with the decline in print is that newspapers still produce a great deal of the news as well as the revenue of news organisations from copy sales and advertising. As newspapers have migrated online, they have found online ad revenue far lower than print ad revenue, as Google and Facebook receive the lion's share of online revenue. These two internet giants also, in the view of publishers, benefit unfairly from news content shared on the platforms and South African publishers have taken them to the Competition Commission to try to, in their view, put matters right and be compensated.

As print news media declines and news deserts threaten, the idea of a new version of the defunct South African Press Agency, which supplied a steady stream of news from around the country for decades, has been suggested. This report finds a South Africa-focused news agency is a promising project, though it needs a champion, and the failure of news wires connected to the Big 4 publishers to take off suggests it needs state and/or donor funding to get off the ground.

TV news received a significant boost during the pandemic. The figures tell their own story, with a notable increase in TV news viewers. However, the pandemic TV viewership bump was followed by some decline in 2021. Radio listenership, and along with that radio news audience, seems robust, though measurement problems prevented precise tracking. Using ad spend as a proxy, radio might have suffered a slight decline in 2021 to TV's benefit.

The pandemic accelerated the move from print to online news with a surge of new viewers, though this seems to have levelled off in 2021 and was not equally distributed. A big beneficiary of the move online was News24, which adopted a subscription model in 2020. Although most people, judging from the figures for TV news alone, probably get their news from TV and radio, online news is making inroads. Online news, which has low barriers to entry, has also seen the entry of new online-only outlets.

Among the online-only outlets are non-profit, donor-funded news organisations. This sector has contributed significantly to deepening news coverage, and donor-funding protected it from the pandemic-induced advertising drought.

Nominally non-profit is community radio, which boasts around 280 stations across the country. These range from those that compete with commercial radio to stations to those which the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), responsible for community media, confesses will never be commercially viable. Indeed, the MDDA pumped noteworthy amounts of money into the sector in emergency funding during the pandemic – over and above the money it already spends each year.

Amid global debates about the role government should play in ensuring media sustainability, MDDA funding shows that government is already funding media, and underlines the need for transparency in any further funding by, for instance, diversion of government advertising spend to any media organisations.

The advertising drought was identified as the key problem for news media during the lockdown period and it recovered well, showing a 16% increase in 2021 against 2020. As long as it stays a major source of revenue for news media, how advertising is allocated and to whom will be contentious. Advertising, the report notes, is supposed to achieve a purpose for the advertiser rather than being a subsidy. What this study also reminds us is that the advertising industry is one of most important public sources of measurement of news media as well as underpinning all but the non-profit news sector, despite attempts by news organisations to diversify revenue streams through media and non-media activities and by increasing subscription revenue.

Finally, in the light of international examination of what can be done to make news media sustainable, including state funding, this report looks at the defining characteristics of public interest news, the all-important flow of verified and verifiable information the society and economy depend on.

Reg Rumney

Introduction

As we enter 2022, it is time once more to assess the health of the South African news media.

More than two years have passed since the advent of the Covid-19 crisis and the first lockdown that roiled the news media business and led to the *SANEF Covid 19 Impact on Journalism Report interim report*. Four eventful years have elapsed since the publication of the *Paying the Piper* report, a comprehensive review of the threats to the very existence of a diverse and professional South African news media. In the interim a number of national and international reports have been produced, focusing on strategies to achieve news media sustainability.

Strategies and sustainability aside, it is time to take stock of what is actually happening to commercial, non-profit, government and public-service media from the point of view of audience. Over the years, much research has focused on the supply-side of news media, including diversity of ownership and funding mechanisms. Not enough attention has been given to the demand-side, that is the all-important audience, without which journalists and editors are speaking into the void. Without ignoring the structure of South Africa's mass news media, this research will aim to be audience centric.

In line with that, this report will focus on a review and analysis of the audiences and audience measurement as an initial step in assessing of the state of the South African news media, in other words the demand side of the business – business in the broadest sense, not simply commerce – of news. It will not revisit in any detail the supply side of the news media that has exercised the imagination of some members of the governing party, such as ownership status of news media and the supposed dominance of the Big 4 publishers since that seems to have changed little, so far at least, since the advent of the pandemic in South Africa.

The aim is to produce an evidence-based view of the changed and changing South African news media landscape, not as an academic exercise but as a basis for action by various stakeholders. The resulting document will be used as the basis for further policy and industry proposals to put South African news media on the path towards sustainability. Its starting point will be the SANEF Covid-19 impact report of June 2020.

Method and methodology

The methodology is both qualitative and quantitative. It relies on views of individuals deeply involved in the South Africa news media, such as publishers and senior journalists, as well as reflecting the views of media researchers. At the same time, it examines whatever quantitative information is available, for example on newspaper circulations and readership, without assuming that the numbers tell the whole story. In other words, the research will *not* ignore the fact that my worldview and innate philosophy will inform what views and numbers I choose to look at and what conclusions to draw. Something that follows from this is my caution about media-centricity, given the years I spent in various news organisations. Nor does my approach rule out the possibility of making objective assessments, in the broad sense, or rational judgement, about the figures and views. In practice, then, this will mirror

journalistic process which I argue must present the possibility of arriving at the best version of truth about particular realities.

The research examines in detail the effect of the lingering Covid-19 crisis on the three major classifications into which news media in South Africa is often slotted: print media, online, and broadcast media. Cross-cutting issues will be looked at: non-profit media; community media; the role of advertising; the concept of public interest media; and the idea of creating a new South African news agency to replace the defunct South African Press Association.

The numbers, though not as neutral as imagined, are essential for gauging the health of news media, just as we have relied on thermometers to tell us whether we should urgently be tested for Covid-19. One problem is that the numbers or “metrics” are designed for advertisers, not publishers or researchers assessing news media audiences. For instance, free publications or free editions of publications tell us that publications have been distributed but do not tell us about audience engagement with the news in those publications – or even whether any engagement took place. It is entirely possible that some recipients of some knock ‘n drop newspapers discard the newspaper and read the retailer inserts for shopping specials. Even when readers have paid for their copy of a newspaper or magazine, we do not definitively know their level of satisfaction with the quality of the news they find in those pages. Yet we need to use the data and information available, while being aware of its limitations.

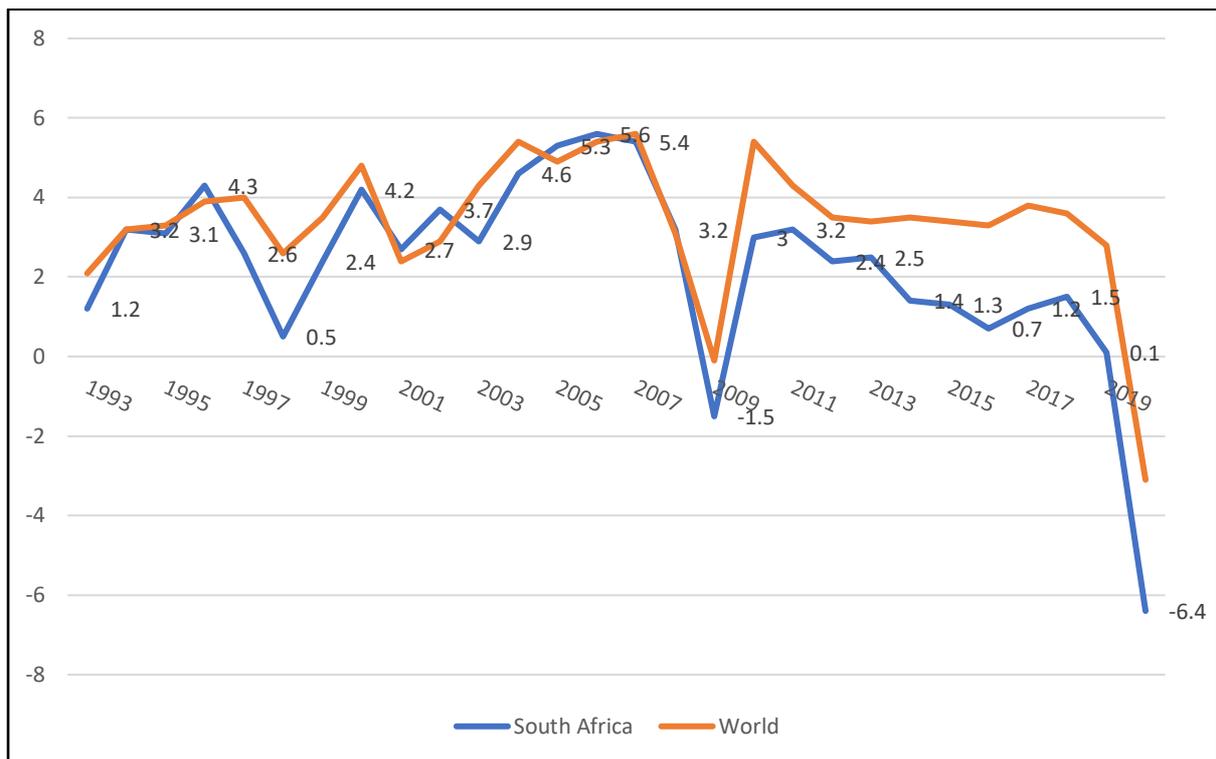
Broadcast audience measurement employs technology to sample viewers as well as surveys. Measurement of audience for individual programmes is made possible. Online, the popularity of particular articles can be assessed, though for advertisers, the important measure is the number of Unique Browsers, representing individual viewers of a website, and page impressions and views for a period. Each measure has its own advantages and disadvantages, and as journalists we need to become more tech-savvy to understand what this means and how it applies to our work.

In the context of sustainability, distinguishing what media, in the broader sense that includes for instance drama, may be a matter for debate, but the focus of the research is the news media, that is outlets and organisations that produce journalism. Following from this, what constitutes journalism, and within that, what constitutes public interest journalism, is analysed, along with other cross-cutting issues that affect the journalistic ecosystem.

Economic context

The effect of the Covid-19-induced recession on South Africa's economic output, measured by GDP, was, as set out in SANEF's June 2020 report, Treasury's "best-case" scenario of an around 6% decline. However, Covid-19 struck an already lackluster economy (See Figure 1).

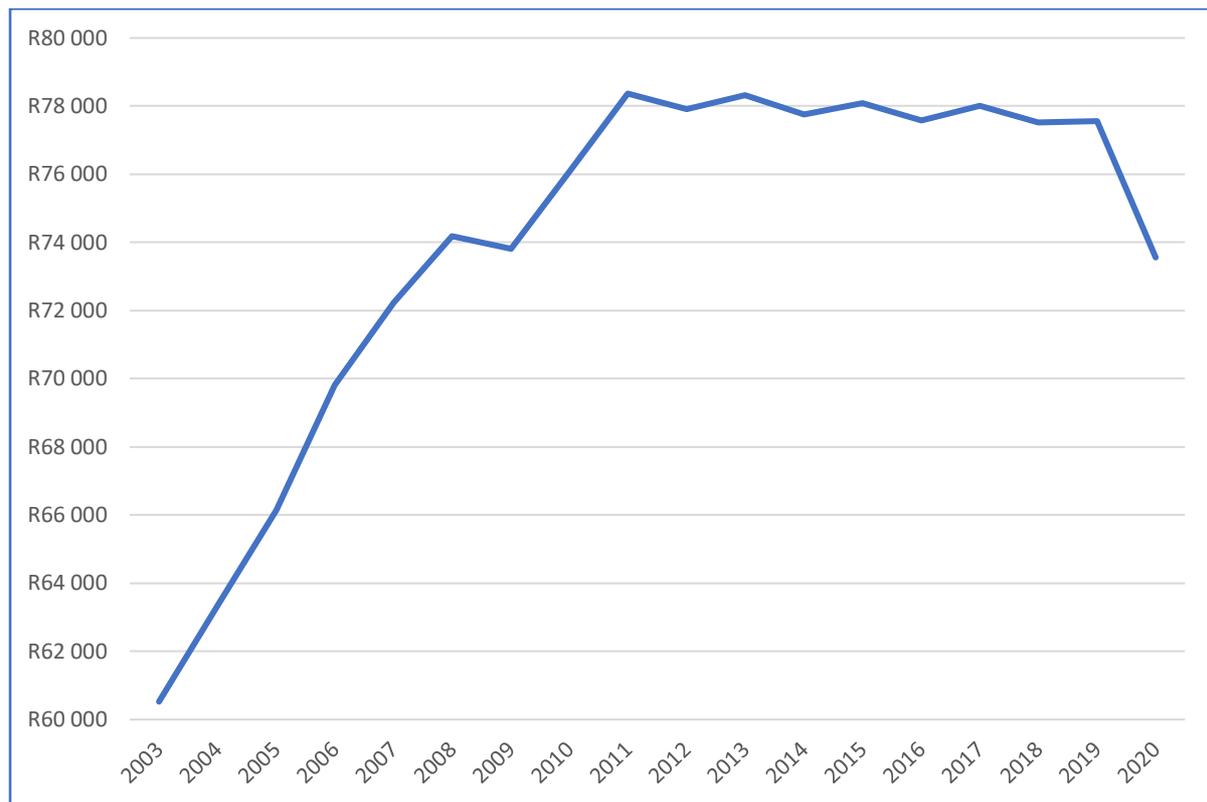
Figure 1: Real GDP growth (Annual percent change)



Source: IMF Data Mapper

The overall economic impact figure does not show the effect on individual South Africans as reflected in the change in gross national income (GNI) (See Figure 2) – and this average income level does not reflect the enormous inequality of income in the country. South Africa's GNI is now below what it was at the depth of the Global Recession in 2009.

Figure 2: Gross national income per capita

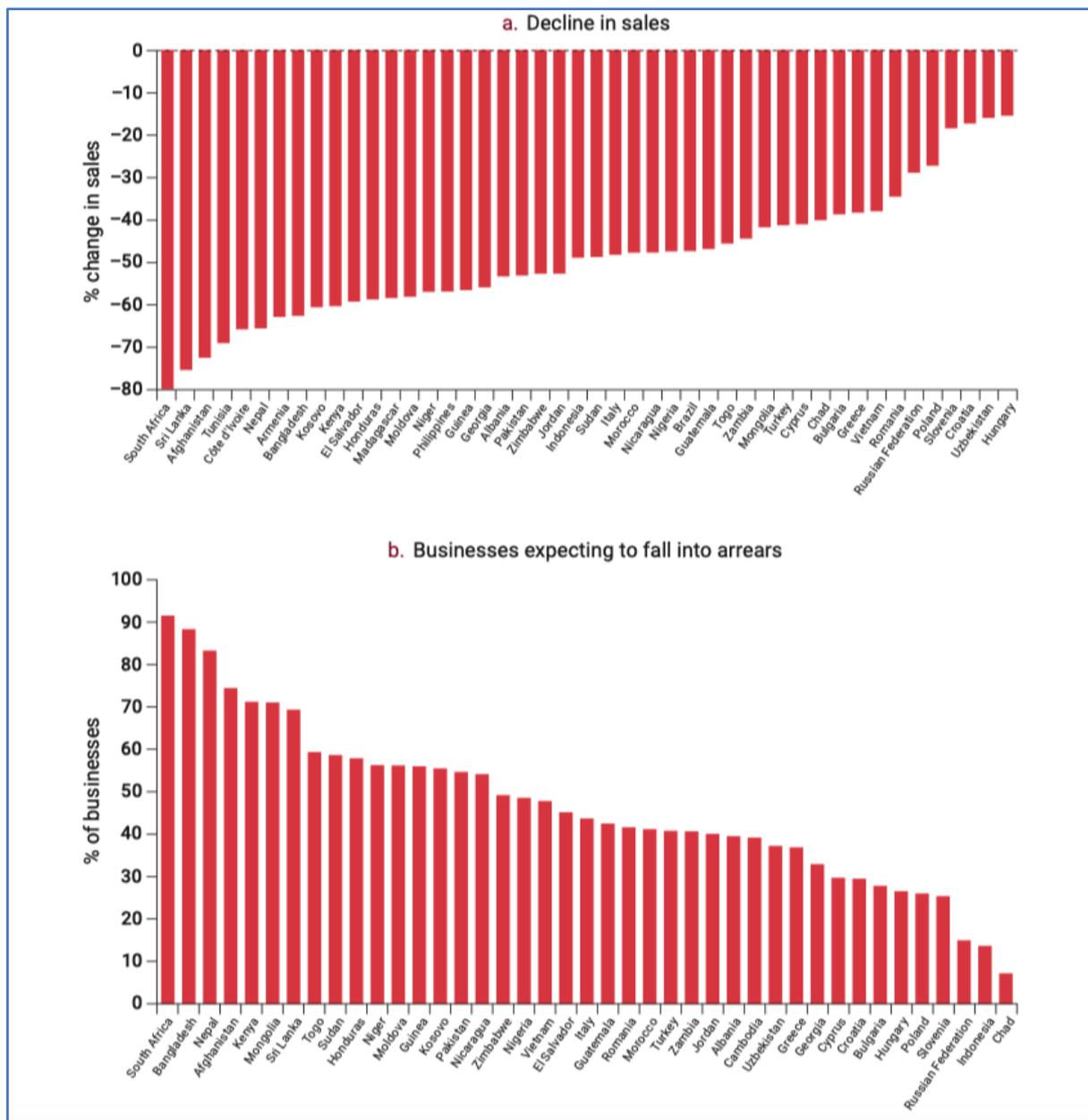


Source: Reserve Bank Quarterly Bulletin

Moreover, a World Bank study shows that South Africa's businesses and households were harder hit than many other countries by the pandemic. For instance, the World Bank Development Report 2022 found households in South Africa to be least resilient by far to income losses out of 24 countries.¹ Similarly the World Bank COVID-19 Business Pulse Surveys Dashboard found that out of 46 countries on declining sales and falling into arrears South Africa fared the worst.

¹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2022: Finance for an Equitable Recovery* (The World Bank, 2022), 32, <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/book/10.1596/978-1-4648-1730-4>.

Figure 3: Impact of Covid-19 on businesses in selected countries



Source: World Development Report 2022: Finance for an Equitable Recovery

The spate of violence and looting in July is likely to have retarded the economic recovery in 2021.

Commercial print, online and broadcast media

Print

The advent of Covid-19 in South Africa, and the ensuing state of emergency and the lockdown, devastated the print media, as was recorded in the 2020 impact report. The phrase “media extinction event”² was used about news media and one prediction was that Coronavirus might “spell the end for many of Africa’s print newspapers”.³ As that report emphasised, the problems print media faced were not new and the Covid-19 crisis simply exacerbated those problems by accelerating the shift from the relatively ad spend-rich print media environment to the ad spend-sparse online environment, a trend already noted in the Paying the Piper report.⁴

It is worth emphasising that circulations of all dailies are down sharply compared to the pre-Covid-19 crisis, and circulations of newspapers have been declining, seemingly inexorably, for years before this. South Africa is not alone. The top 25 news titles in the US were reported in February 2022 to have lost 30% of their circulations over the last two years.⁵ However, it is also worth remarking on the plunge in circulation of 50% or more of dailies in the Independent Media newspaper stable.

Magazines

SANEF’s Covid-19 Impact report was much concerned with the first casualty of the print media from the effect of the Covid-19 crisis, the magazine sector, though not all the content of the magazines in that sector genuinely qualify as journalism. Yet even apparently anodyne or frivolous publications can run articles surprisingly relevant to the society at large as well as the niche audiences the publications aim at. This is a matter, however, of subjective judgment. What is also important is that magazines are part of the journalistic ecosystem, employing writers, photographers, illustrators and other news media professionals. In any event, several magazines are indubitably journalistic, particularly business magazines. Here, 2021 saw the closure in November of Finweek, the financial magazine formed from the merger of Finansies & Tegniek and Finance Week in 2005.⁶

² Silverman, “The Coronavirus Is A Media Extinction Event,” BuzzFeed News, March 23, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/coronavirus-news-industry-layoffs>.

³ Ntibinyane Ntibinyane, “Coronavirus May Spell the End for Many of Africa’s Print Newspapers,” Global Investigative Journalism Network, April 27, 2020, <https://gijn.org/2020/04/27/coronavirus-may-spell-the-end-for-many-of-africas-print-newspapers/>.

⁴ Harry Dugmore, ed., “Paying The Piper: The Sustainability of the News Industry and Journalism in South Africa in a Time of Digital Transformation and Political Uncertainty” (Digital Journalism Research Project, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, South Africa, May 2018), 100, <https://themediainline.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/PAYING-THE-PIPER-The-sustainability-of-the-news-industry-and-journalism-in-South-Africa-in-a-time-of-digital-transformation-and-political-uncertainty.pdf>.

⁵ William Turvill, “US Newspaper Circulations: Top 25 Titles Lost 30% of Sales after Covid-19,” Press Gazette, February 11, 2022, <https://pressgazette.co.uk/us-newspaper-circulations/>.

⁶ “Finweek,” Academic, n.d., <https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/4267180>.

The Covid-19 crisis, as recorded in the Covid-19 Impact Report, led to the closure of the independent magazine publisher Associated Media Publishing and the magazine division of Caxton. After our report was published, this was followed by Media24 rationalising both its magazine and newspaper portfolio, with the expected loss of 510 jobs out of a staff complement of 2 971.

A media release detailed the rationalisation, which spanned magazines and newspapers. Of the magazine portfolio, Media24 announced that:

- Move! and the Hearst portfolio titles Men’s Health, Women’s Health, Bicycling, and Runner’s World would be closed.
- DRUM would be published in digital format only.
- Baba & Kleuter and Your Pregnancy would be published independently under a licensing agreement with editor Helen Schöer.
- Editorial production of the remaining monthly magazine portfolio, that is Fairlady, SARIE, SA Hunter/Jagter, True Love, tuis | home, Weg! | go! and Weg! Ry & Sleep | go! Drive & Camp, as well as the fortnightly Kuier would be outsourced.
- The monthly magazines would be reduced to six issues a year, and eight issues for tuis | home, SA Hunter/Jagter and Man Magnum.
- Flagship weeklies Huisgenoot, YOU and Landbouweekblad would continue to be produced and published in-house.⁷

The closures contributed to the shrinking the magazine sector. Examination of the reports produced by the Audit Bureau of Circulation for the last quarter of 2021 (October to December) and the last quarter of 2019, before the state of emergency and the first lockdown, shows that the number of magazine titles listed by the ABC had almost halved from 197 to 104.

Magazines that have been household names for decades have lost substantial circulation over the period before the Covid-19 crisis and now. One exception for the period was the Financial Mail, whose circulation decline at less than 5% in this environment of gloom for magazine publishing is quite a feat – and may have been helped by the closure of its closest print competitor, Finweek.

Table 1: Magazine circulations before Covid-19 and at the end of 2021

| Publication Name | Q4 2021 | Q4 2019 | Percentage change Q4 2021 vs Q4 2019 |
|---------------------------|--------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|
| | Circulation | | |
| Conde Nast House & Garden | 11 923 | 27 060 | -55,9% |
| Getaway | 16 250 | 30 575 | -46,9% |
| Popular Mechanics | 12 139 | 21 952 | -44,7% |
| Landbouweekblad | 12 559 | 20 692 | -39,3% |
| Car | 43 067 | 59 899 | -28,1% |

⁷ BizCommunity, “BREAKING: Media24 Considers Closures, Reduced Frequencies and Accelerates Digital Due to Covid-19,” July 7, 2020, <https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/15/205922.html>.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|
| Farmer's Weekly | 6 912 | 9 146 | -24,4% |
| Huisgenoot | 129 825 | 162 307 | -20,0% |
| You | 68 911 | 83 214 | -17,2% |
| Financial Mail | 12 759 | 13 380 | -4,6% |
| Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations | | | |

More so than with other print products, it has been argued that the contraction in the magazine business in 2020 was overdue. "The revenue model that had served publishers well was way past its sell-by date, and onerous contracts to publish international glossies at the mercy of volatile exchange rates became nooses around the necks of publishers. Airline magazines were grounded and dozens of smaller niche titles simply drifted away."⁸

Add to the supply-side problems of magazines the hurdle of distribution when the Post Office is too costly or does not function, a problem that began in 2014⁹ persists.¹⁰

More importantly, the troubles of the magazine sector ironically underline a problem for other print news media and news media online, as well as perhaps broadcast news, a problem evident for some years now. In 2018, after the sudden announcement of closure of magazine publisher Ndalo Media, a Sunday Times journalist wrote the following:

The surprise closure of Khanyi Dhlomo's Ndalo Media, publisher of *Destiny* and *Elle*, is a symptom of SA's struggling magazine industry, hit by falling circulation figures as younger readers turn to social media platforms for their fashion, celebrity and health news.¹¹

Rising print production costs are also mentioned – and delivery problems by the Post Office, but the observation points to the importance of putting the audience and its relationship to what marketers might term the "media product" first. A sluggish economy is on the list of problems, and this would affect audience propensity to spend money on what could be seen as a non-essential product. But it is the audience diversion to other sources of gratification of desires and provision of needs online that needs to be considered. Bluntly, were the magazines that fell victim to Covid-19 and before providing what the audience wanted or what advertisers thought they wanted? The same question may be asked of newspapers, if a levelling off of circulations is to be in sight. As was noted when Media24 introduced its subscription model, paywalls alone will not save journalism, only better journalism will.¹²

⁸ Sandra Gordon, "The Media Yearbook 2021," ed. Glenda Nevill (The Media Online, April 2021), 46, <https://www.iabsa.net/assets/Usedebbieiabsanet/Media%20Yearbook%202021.pdf>.

⁹ Martin Welz, "Dear Reader: Goodbye Mr Postman," *Noseweek Online*, October 30, 2014, <https://noseweek.co.za/wp/article/dear-reader-goodbye-mr-postman/>.

¹⁰ Editor, "Tracking 1kg Packages - Why Dysfunctional Post Office Can't Monopolise," *BizNews.Com*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.biznews.com/undictated/2021/11/18/post-office-service-delivery>.

¹¹ Mudiwa Gavaza, "Dhlomo Closure a Wake-up Call for Media in SA," *BusinessLIVE*, December 23, 2018, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bt/business-and-economy/2018-12-23-dhlomo-closure-a-wake-up-call-for-media-in-sa/>.

¹² Riaan Grobler, "Future of News Summit: Paywalls Won't Save Journalism - Good Journalism Will," *News24*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/future-of-news-summit-paywalls-wont-save-journalism-good-journalism-will-20200730>.

Daily Newspapers

Total daily newspaper circulation fell by almost 46% between the end of 2019 and the end of 2021. This was thanks largely to restructuring of the newspapers in the Media24 stable, such as the rationalisation of circulation of the Sun and the closure of the Eastern Cape edition of Son as well as steep declines in several newspapers in the Independent Media stable and Arena Holding's Sowetan newspaper.

The mass-appeal tabloid Daily Sun's circulation fell over the period by almost 60% and Son's circulation by 52%. In the Independent Media stable, Cape Times, the Cape Argus, The Star, and the Daily News all halved or slightly more than halved their pre-Covid-19 circulation. The company's Zulu-language newspaper lost 47% of its circulation while I.M.'s The Mercury lost 45%. Arena's Sowetan newspaper lost 47%, though other papers in the group held up better, particularly Business Day, while Beeld and Die Burger also fared better. The circulations of some newspapers in the fourth quarter of 2021 marked some bounce-back compared to the plunge in the fourth quarter of 2020. The circulations of the Cape Times, Cape Argus and The Star all rose by almost 25% in the fourth quarter of 2021 compared to the fourth quarter of 2020. Business Day rose 14%. Even the Pretoria News, which has plunged 76% from pre-Covid circulation, gained 22% in quarter 4 2021 compared to the last quarter of 2020 – though that gain represented a mere 405 copies.

Media24 was in the first quarter of 2022 the biggest publisher of daily newspapers, though as newspapers are closed or moved entirely online, that may change again.

Table 2: Daily Newspaper group share of circulation

| Publication | % of total circulation | % of paid circulation |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Independent Media | 33,3% | 29,3% |
| Media24 | 37,5% | 44,2% |
| Arena Holdings | 20,6% | 18,9% |
| Citizen | 8,6% | 7,5% |
| Total | 100,0% | 100,0% |

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

For publishers without a plan to build a robust business model that does not rely on either offline or online ad revenue, the future seems grim. The audience is shifting their attention quite rapidly elsewhere, helped by the growth of alternatives and perhaps disappointment with specific print products.

Table 3: Daily newspapers

| Publication | TOTAL CIRCULATION q4 2019 | TOTAL CIRCULATION q4 2021 | Difference | % Difference |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Pretoria News | 9 942 | 2 383 | -7 559 | -76,0% |
| Daily Sun | 99 485 | 40 164 | -59 321 | -59,6% |
| Cape Argus | 23 814 | 11 115 | -12 699 | -53,3% |
| Cape Times | 25 376 | 11 855 | -13 521 | -53,3% |
| Son (Daily) | 43 206 | 20 588 | -22 618 | -52,3% |
| Star The | 55 889 | 27 417 | -28 472 | -50,9% |
| Daily News | 19 606 | 9 687 | -9 919 | -50,6% |
| Sowetan | 55 248 | 29 252 | -25 996 | -47,1% |
| Isolezwe | 60 651 | 32 680 | -27 971 | -46,1% |
| Mercury The | 21 202 | 11 633 | -9 569 | -45,1% |
| Witness The | 9 935 | 7 366 | -2 569 | -25,9% |
| Citizen The (Daily) | 36 966 | 27 492 | -9 474 | -25,6% |
| Beeld Daily | 29 021 | 22 160 | -6 861 | -23,6% |
| Herald The | 14 342 | 10 958 | -3 384 | -23,6% |
| Daily Dispatch | 13 624 | 10 566 | -3 058 | -22,4% |
| Business Day | 18 201 | 15 297 | -2 904 | -16,0% |
| Burger Die (Daily) | 35 415 | 29 800 | -5 615 | -15,9% |

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

| Colour Code |
|-------------------|
| Independent Media |
| Media24 |
| Arena Holdings |
| Caxton |

Weekend Newspapers

The decline in weekend newspaper circulation resembled that of the dailies. The ABC's weekend category of newspapers fell 43.6% in total from the pre-Covid-19 last quarter of 2019. The total number of weekend newspapers sold fell from around 829 000 to 467 261.

South Africa's biggest circulating newspaper, Sunday Times, lost 42% of its pre-Covid circulation, despite 27% of its circulation being "free" as defined by the ABC. The Q4 figure did represent a bounce-back from the Q4 2020 circulation figure – but this amounted to under 4 500 copies.

All the titles lost circulation, but the Independent Media publications showed some steep declines. The Pretoria News on Saturday lost more than 80% of its circulation and sold on average under 1 000 copies each Saturday in the last quarter of 2021. The Saturday Star fell

almost 70%, followed by other Independent Media titles with large falls including the Saturday and Sunday editions of Isolezwe.

Table 4: Weekend papers

| Publication | TOTAL PAID | TOTAL FREE | q4 2021 | q4 2019 | % change q4 21 vs q1 2019 | % free of 2021 total |
|---|------------|------------|---------|---------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Pretoria News Saturday | 953 | 10 | 963 | 5 139 | -81,3% | 1,04% |
| Saturday Star, The | 5 426 | 3 694 | 9 120 | 30 238 | -69,8% | 40,50% |
| Weekend Argus | 8 843 | 4 319 | 13 162 | 37 305 | -64,7% | 32,81% |
| Isolezwe ngeSonto | 20 479 | 4 | 20 483 | 44 091 | -53,5% | 0,02% |
| Isolezwe ngoMgqibelo | 24 416 | 3 | 24 419 | 46 231 | -47,2% | 0,01% |
| Sunday Times | 84 854 | 31 158 | 116 012 | 200 734 | -42,2% | 26,86% |
| Sunday Tribune | 18 140 | 3 865 | 22 005 | 37 491 | -41,3% | 17,56% |
| Independent on Saturday | 11 066 | 3 893 | 14 959 | 24 927 | -40,0% | 26,02% |
| City Press | 20 634 | 286 | 20 920 | 34 694 | -39,7% | 1,37% |
| Ilanga Langesonto | 18 400 | 0 | 18 400 | 29 573 | -37,8% | 0,00% |
| Weekend Post | 8 329 | 379 | 8 708 | 13 493 | -35,5% | 4,35% |
| Weekend Witness | 6 417 | 131 | 6 548 | 9 351 | -30,0% | 2,00% |
| Citizen, The (Saturday) | 10 852 | 2 | 10 854 | 14 895 | -27,1% | 0,02% |
| Rapport | 71 908 | 276 | 72 184 | 95 556 | -24,5% | 0,38% |
| Beeld, Saturday | 27 155 | 194 | 27 349 | 35 649 | -23,3% | 0,71% |
| Sunday World | 26 500 | 3 600 | 30 100 | 38 120 | -21,0% | 11,96% |
| Daily Dispatch Weekend Edition (formerly Saturday Dispatch) | 9 749 | 100 | 9 849 | 12 048 | -18,3% | 1,02% |
| Burger, Die Saturday | 40 573 | 653 | 41 226 | 48 888 | -15,7% | 1,58% |

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

Weekly Newspapers

Weekly newspapers followed the pattern of dailies and weekend papers. All showed serious declines, though Ilanga, independent of the Big 4, was the most resilient. The Mail & Guardian, one of the few independent publishers and the sole survivor the 1980s alternative media, was down by 50,5%.

Table 5: Weekly newspapers

| Publication | Q4 2021 | Q4 2020 | Q4 2019 | % change Q4 2021 vs Q4 2019 |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Soccer Laduma | 83 823 | 90 412 | 191 897 | -56,3% |
| Ilanga | 39 390 | 46 517 | 50 966 | -22,7% |
| Post The | 20 489 | 21 840 | 36 699 | -44,2% |
| Mail & Guardian | 10 265 | 11 779 | 20 739 | -50,5% |

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

Hybrid newspapers

The Daily Maverick's 168 Weekend newspaper, which astonished the media business by launching during the pandemic, is listed under the "hybrid" section. Its circulation fell from 25 000 in Q4 2020, when it was free to Pick n Pay cardholders, to its present paid-for circulation of a little under 5 000 in Q4 2021, with more than 2 600 free copies for a total circulation of around 7 500.

Otherwise, the picture for hybrid free-paid-for newspapers is mixed, with some churn in titles making overall comparison of circulation less meaningful and showing varying degrees of decline. The Daily Maverick's newspaper, now with a cover price, should move into the weekly category.

Table 6: Hybrid paid and free publications

| Publication | Total Paid | Free Distribution | Q4 2021 | Q4 2019 | % change Q4 2021 vs Q4 2019 |
|---|------------|-------------------|---------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Daily Maverick | 4 763 | 2 678 | 7 441 | n/a | n/a |
| Die Pos. | 2 276 | 314 | 2 590 | 3 084 | -16.0% |
| Excelsior News / Nuus | 1 543 | 1 060 | 2 603 | 3 302 | -21.2% |
| Lowvelder Friday / Lowvelder Express | 14 432 | 19 720 | 34 152 | n/a | n/a |
| South Coast Herald incorporating UGU District | 6 113 | 7 664 | 13 777 | n/a | n/a |
| The Kokstad Advertiser | 4 980 | 5 721 | 10 701 | 10 849 | -1.4% |
| Zoutpansberger. | 899 | 466 | 1 365 | 1 944 | -29.8% |

Source: ABC plus own research

Local newspapers

Forty-seven local paid newspapers were listed as audited by the ABC in the fourth quarter of 2019, before the arrival of the pandemic. The list now contains 29. The overall circulation has dropped by 55,5% to a little more than 122 000. Most papers still listed in the local newspapers category lost circulation, declining by as little as 3% to as much as 64%, though three registered small increases.

Table 7: Local newspapers before and after Covid-19

| Publication | Q4 2021 | Q4 2019 | Q4 2021 vs Q4 2019 | % difference Q4 2021 vs Q4 2019 |
|---|---------|---------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Streeknuus | 1 316 | 1 172 | 144 | 12.3% |
| Middelburg Observer Fri | 12 368 | 11 744 | 624 | 5.3% |
| Witbank News Fri | 13 241 | 12 751 | 490 | 3.8% |
| The Courier | 1 091 | 1 126 | -35 | -3.1% |
| Daller, Die | 1 510 | 1 593 | -83 | -5.2% |
| Vaalweekblad | 3 750 | 4 526 | -776 | -17.1% |
| George Herald (Thursday) | 10 720 | 13 238 | -2 518 | -19.0% |
| Talk of the Town | 1 613 | 2 108 | -495 | -23.5% |
| Mosselbay Advertiser | 4 700 | 6 144 | -1 444 | -23.5% |
| African Reporter | 15 635 | 20 696 | -5 061 | -24.5% |
| Mpumalanga News | 6 246 | 8 477 | -2 231 | -26.3% |
| Worcester Standard | 5 788 | 7 873 | -2 085 | -26.5% |
| Oudtshoorn Courant | 1 057 | 1 443 | -386 | -26.7% |
| Graaff Reinet Advertiser | 947 | 1 324 | -377 | -28.5% |
| Limpopo Mirror | 4 170 | 6 070 | -1 900 | -31.3% |
| Weslander, The | 5 967 | 8 850 | -2 883 | -32.6% |
| Paarl Post | 7 410 | 11 068 | -3 658 | -33.1% |
| Zululand Observer Monday | 3 319 | 5 001 | -1 682 | -33.6% |
| Zululand Observer Weekend (Formerly Friday) | 6 047 | 9 329 | -3 282 | -35.2% |
| Northern Review Weekend | 1 716 | 2 660 | -944 | -35.5% |
| South Cape Forum/Suid Kaap Forum | 2 019 | 3 211 | -1 192 | -37.1% |
| Knysna Plett Herald | 1 307 | 2 142 | -835 | -39.0% |
| District Mail | 3 717 | 6 200 | -2 483 | -40.0% |
| Bosvelde Review | 1 299 | 2 205 | -906 | -41.1% |
| Newcastle and District Advertiser | 2 182 | 3 866 | -1 684 | -43.6% |
| Northern Natal Courier | 1 076 | 1 951 | -875 | -44.8% |
| Ladysmith Gazette | 1 119 | 2 250 | -1 131 | -50.3% |
| Vryheid Herald | 601 | 1 533 | -932 | -60.8% |
| Estcourt and Midlands News | 398 | 1 102 | -704 | -63.9% |

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

E-editions

E-editions, that is online replicas of the paper edition or even in the case of The Continent, completely newly created for web distribution, have shown some growth.

Free newspapers

The number of newspapers with free audited distribution fell from 187 to 157 from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the fourth quarter of 2021. However, the circulation of those newspapers fell by only 2,4% to 5 560 470. In sharp contrast to the rest of the newspaper industry, the circulation of free newspapers rose from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the fourth quarter of 2021, by 23%. On the face of it this is a robust performance. However, the free newspaper business is to some extent a supply-side business, driven by the needs of advertising rather than demands of readers. The whole point of paying for news is that it allows some measurement of engagement with the product, the concept being that almost no-one will pay for what they do not read, while a free newspaper may end up directly at the bottom of a bird cage. This is not to disparage or belittle the knock 'n drop or freesheet industry or rule out the possibilities for envisaging free media in terms of uses and gratifications media theory, but it is probably not what commentators have in mind when they think of public interest media or what used to be known as "crusading journalism".

Finally, the newspaper business cannot be seen in isolation. All the big publishers have digital platforms which aggregate the news produced by their newspapers, or in the case of Caxton, showcase their local and free papers. Independent local and free newspapers have digital platforms to supplement their print editions, a phenomenon known as multi-homing. I believe the web versions of local editions could play a greater role in communities, given the increasing role of community WhatsApp groups in keeping residents informed, and social media sites with pages devoted to local communities (e.g. I Love Greenside on Facebook) though social inequality offline may be mirrored online, with wealthier communities better positioned to take advantage of online community interaction.

The Problem of Print's Decline

From an overall public interest journalism perspective, why should we care about the plight of newspapers? For one thing, while broadcasting is almost certainly the way most South Africans receive most of their news, given the huge audiences of news on TV and the reach of African-language radio, fewer newspapers means the **production** of less news.

In 2009, news media fundi Tom Rosenstiel gave evidence before the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress:

There are first a lot of misconceptions about where we get our news. Only 54 percent of Americans say they regularly read the print newspapers, but those surveys don't tell us much about where the news actually comes from. Far more of what we know about our communities today still originates in newspaper newsrooms. A good deal of what is carried on radio, television, cable, wire services begins in newspaper newsrooms. These media then disseminate it to a broader audience.

In every community in America I have studied in 26 years of being a press critic, **the newspaper in town has more boots on the ground, more reporters and editors than any news organization in the community, usually more than all the other media combined.** When we imagine the news ecosystem in the 21st century, the newspaper, with all its problems, is still the largest originating, gathering source.

The newspaper newsrooms supply news to be aggregated or supplemented on the news websites.

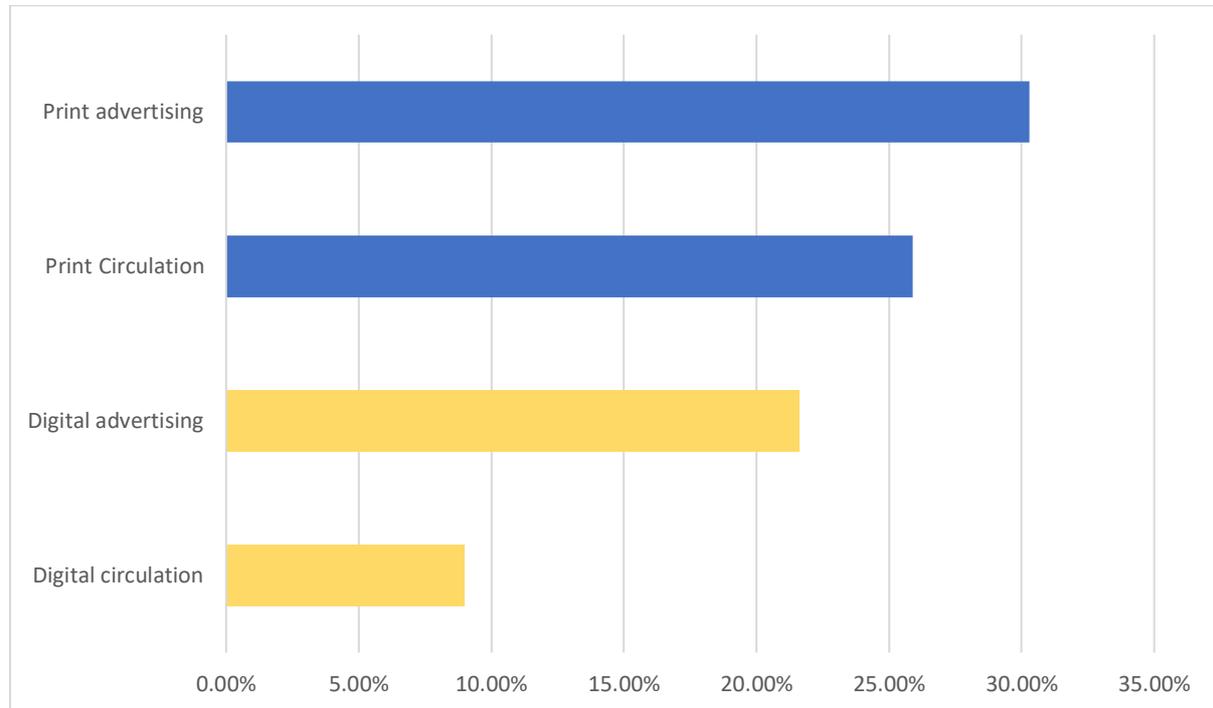
In South Africa the major online news sites – with a few exceptions – are arms of newspaper groups: news24.com, Arena Holdings' timeslive.co.za, businesslive.com, and Sowetanlive.co.za, iol.co.za (Independent Online), and citizen.co.za. A host of local newspapers exist alongside those of the big groups. However, standalone news website dailymaverick.co.za, and in the non-profit sector groundup.co.za, as well as businesstech.co.za and mybroadband.co.za together with the websites of broadcasters enca and Primedia's ewn.co.za (Eyewitness News) have for a while now provided new sources of news.

If the financial sustainability of the newspapers is in question, which they must be in the light of the astonishing declines since the pandemic, then sources of news will be diminished. And a decline in newspaper circulations means lower revenues for many existing news organisations. Initial findings of the World Press Trends Report 2021 were that print still supplies most of publishers' revenue, either from sales or advertising.¹³ Except for a few,

¹³ Teemu Henriksson, "Initial Findings from the Upcoming World Press Trends Report 2021-2022," *WAN-IFRA* (blog), November 30, 2021, <https://wan-ifra.org/2021/11/world-press-trends-preview-publishers-upbeat-about-future-business/>.

large news media companies, online subscriptions are unlikely to match the lost revenue of print advertising and cover price income of the print product.

Figure 2: Publishers' sources of revenue



Source: WAN-IFRA

Subscription models may work, but of the examples commonly given of success in the West, the Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal are both business publications, with a moneyed target audience and possibly bulk business subscriptions. Even The New York Times, which has a huge digital footprint, made 43% of its total subscription revenue of \$1 362 billion from print sales in 2021.¹⁴

Reuters 2021 Digital News Report found that the digital subscription model favours big companies:

In most countries a large proportion of digital subscriptions go to just a few big national brands, reinforcing the winner takes most dynamics that we have reported in the past.¹⁵

The implications for South Africa may be more consolidation and less actual news.

¹⁴ New York Times, "The New York Times Company 2021 Annual Report" (New York Times, March 11, 2022), 33.

¹⁵ Nic Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 10th Edition" (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021), 10.

Broadcasting

Radio

Television viewing and radio were both beneficiaries of the lockdowns and the work-from-home era. Radio appears to be remarkably stable and unaffected as yet by digital disruption.

In 2020 during the lockdown period, a news-hungry public drove viewing on TV to new heights.¹⁶ Radio listenership to news and other programme content might be expected to decline because of a fall in drivetime listening as commuting to the office was discouraged, but according to one survey of commercial stations covering almost a third of the SA adult population, radio listenership during the lockdown rose by 36%. Increases in streaming of radio were also noted.¹⁷

Multiple surveys in South Africa and across various other countries have consistently found that listeners are increasingly turning to radio for trusted news and information and a sense of connection to their community, country and the world.¹⁸

It would be interesting to see the specifics of increased listenership and whether that level of listenership rose further in 2021 or fell back to previous levels. Unfortunately, the Broadcast Research Council cannot “ascertain listenership figure changes from pre-Covid to present as we changed our supplier and methodology. Comparisons are therefore impossible”.¹⁹

The BRC has provided comparative figures for 2021 and the beginning of 2022 (Table 8), which shows a slight decline across the board, but it is fair to say that radio listenership appears to be robust.

Table 8: Past 7 days listenership comparison 2021-2022

| | | 000s | | | | |
|---|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------|--------------|---------|
| | | Apr'-Oct'21 Past 7 Days | Apr'21-Jan'22 Past 7 Days | Difference | % Difference | % share |
| 1 | Ukhozi FM | 7 925 | 7 834 | -91 | -1,15% | 15,4% |
| 2 | Metro FM | 5 314 | 5 234 | -80 | -1,51% | 10,3% |
| 3 | Umhlobo Wenene FM | 4 599 | 4 548 | -51 | -1,11% | 8,9% |
| 4 | Lesedi FM | 4 022 | 3 979 | -43 | -1,07% | 7,8% |
| 5 | Motsweding FM | 3 388 | 3 318 | -70 | -2,07% | 6,5% |
| 6 | Thobela FM | 2 942 | 2 841 | -101 | -3,43% | 5,6% |
| 7 | Radio 2000 | 1 974 | 1 877 | -97 | -4,91% | 3,7% |
| 8 | Gagasi FM | 1 552 | 1 492 | -60 | -3,87% | 2,9% |

¹⁶ Reg Rumney, “SANEF COVID 19 Impact on Journalism Report (Interim)” (Johannesburg: South African National Editors Forum, June 1, 2020), 15.

¹⁷ NAB, “Rising to the Contagion - South Africa’s Commercial Radio Sector Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic” (National Association of Broadcasters, July 2020), https://www.nab.org.za/uploads/files/NAB_CRC_COVID-19_Report__Rising_to_the_Contagion.pdf.

¹⁸ NAB.

¹⁹ Gary Whitaker, “Response to E-Mail Requesting Information on SA Audience Research,” March 25, 2022.

| | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|-------|-------|------|----------|------|
| 9 | RSG / Radiosondergrens | 1 373 | 1 406 | 33 | 2,40% | 2,8% |
| 10 | Munghana Lonene FM | 1 368 | 1 338 | -30 | -2,19% | 2,6% |
| 11 | Ikwewezi FM | 1 369 | 1 319 | -50 | -3,65% | 2,6% |
| 12 | Ligwalagwala FM | 1 329 | 1 297 | -32 | -2,41% | 2,5% |
| 13 | Jacaranda FM | 1 404 | 1 280 | -124 | -8,83% | 2,5% |
| 14 | East Coast Radio (ECR) | 1 260 | 1 243 | -17 | -1,35% | 2,4% |
| 15 | 94.7 (94.7 Highveld Stereo) | 1 119 | 1 097 | -22 | -1,97% | 2,2% |
| 16 | KFM 94.5 | 1 102 | 1 083 | -19 | -1,72% | 2,1% |
| 17 | 5 FM | 1 088 | 1 076 | -12 | -1,10% | 2,1% |
| 18 | Phalaphala FM | 1 134 | 1 059 | -75 | -6,61% | 2,1% |
| 19 | 99.2 YFM | 1 004 | 985 | -19 | -1,89% | 1,9% |
| 20 | Heart 104.9FM | 811 | 801 | -10 | -1,23% | 1,6% |
| 21 | Good Hope FM | 774 | 746 | -28 | -3,62% | 1,5% |
| 22 | 702 | 747 | 743 | -4 | -0,54% | 1,5% |
| 23 | SAfm | 762 | 721 | -41 | -5,38% | 1,4% |
| 24 | Kaya FM 95.9 | 701 | 705 | 4 | 0,57% | 1,4% |
| 25 | Capricorn FM | 610 | 574 | -36 | -5,90% | 1,1% |
| 26 | Algoa FM | 393 | 397 | 4 | 1,02% | 0,8% |
| 27 | Power FM 98.7 | 297 | 287 | -10 | -3,37% | 0,6% |
| 28 | OFM | 272 | 257 | -15 | -5,51% | 0,5% |
| 29 | Lotus FM | 260 | 255 | -5 | -1,92% | 0,5% |
| 30 | tru fm | 261 | 238 | -23 | -8,81% | 0,5% |
| 31 | Vuma 103 FM | 215 | 207 | -8 | -3,72% | 0,4% |
| 32 | Smile 90.4FM | 180 | 192 | 12 | 6,67% | 0,4% |
| 33 | 567 Cape Talk | 132 | 116 | -16 | -12,12% | 0,2% |
| 34 | LM Radio | 109 | 113 | 4 | 3,67% | 0,2% |
| 35 | Rise FM | 103 | 111 | 8 | 7,77% | 0,2% |
| 36 | YOU FM | 102 | 148 | 46 | 45,10% | 0,3% |
| 37 | Hot 1027 | 80 | 86 | 6 | 7,50% | 0,2% |
| 38 | X-K Fm 107.9 | 6 | 5 | -1 | -16,67% | 0,0% |
| 39 | Magic 828 | 15 | 15 | 0 | 0,00% | 0,0% |
| 40 | Classic FM | 100 | 0 | -100 | -100,00% | 0,0% |
| 41 | Hot Classic | 0 | 0 | 0 | | 0,0% |
| 42 | Hot 91.9 FM | 0 | 0 | 0 | | 0,0% |
| SABC stations | | | | | | |
| Source: Broadcast Research Council of South Africa | | | | | | |

This is confirmed to some extent by the Infinite Dial South Africa 2022 Edison Research report released in 2022, though this surveyed only South Africans aged 15 or older in the two upper Socio-Economic Measure Supergroups^{20 21} in the eight major metropolitan areas. The

²⁰ The SEM replaces the Living Standard Measure (LSM) and is an indicator of purchasing behavior. It groups people based on what they have access to in and near their homes. In this survey the SEM Supergroups chosen in practice exclude lower income groups.

²¹ BRCSA, "SEM User Guide," Broadcast Research Council of South Africa, February 25, 2019, <https://brcsa.org.za/sem-user-guide/>.

survey found that 69% of those surveyed had listened to AM/FM radio weekly in 2021, compared to 68% in pre-pandemic 2019.²²

From the public interest media perspective news (70%) and music (74%) were the most listened to content on radio, according to a 2021 Broadcast Research Council of South Africa survey, and 25% of those surveyed said they listened to radio to be more informed about the news, while a further 30% said they listened to talk shows,²³ which while not news as such often do focus on news events. The same report noted that most South Africans listen to radio from home (92%) rather than in a car (13%) and on ordinary radio sets (77%) rather than mobile phones, TVs or PCs.²⁴

As can be seen from Table 8, the SABC dominates the radio space thanks largely to what the corporation terms the African Language Stations (ALS) and Metro FM. The SABC claims to have a 73.2% share of the radio market,²⁵ with the remainder left to the commercial stations that entered the market after 1994 when the SABC lost its monopoly. Each of the radio stations is licensed separately by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) and each licence stipulates a certain amount of time be devoted each day to, among others, news and current affairs. ICASA monitors compliance and publishes compliance reports on every licensed station, public and private. Based on the compliance reports, SABC stations such as Ukhozi FM and Umhlobo Wenene provide more news and current affairs than they are required by licence.²⁶ The private radio stations too are required by licence to produce certain programming, including news.

While audiences appear to be relatively stable for radio stations the same cannot be said for advertising revenue.

The SABC reports – for the period that includes the strict lockdown – that ad revenue dropped by 18% in the 2020-21 financial year “due to the depressed economy compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of marketing and declining audiences”.

Radio station advertising revenue declined across the commercial stations (Metro FM, Good Hope FM, 5FM,) by R97 million and the so-called Fortune 4 (Radio 2000, Lotus FM, SAfm, and Radio Sonder Grense) by minus R23 million, though the African Language Stations’ ad revenue rose R20m, in the 2020-21 financial year – which was mainly in the disaster-struck 2020 calendar year – compared with the previous financial year.

Overall, radio ad spend rose by 13% in 2021 compared to 2020. Yet while radio's share of ad spend remained at a pre-pandemic level of 19% in 2020, it fell by three percentage points in 2021.

²² Edison Research, “The Infinite Dial,” <https://brcsa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Infinite-Dial-South-Africa-2022-Webinar.pdf>.

²³ askafrika, “Interim Radio Data Overview Overall January to June 2021,” July 2021, <https://brcsa.org.za/interim-radio-data-overview-overall-jan-june-2021/#top>.

²⁴ askafrika.

²⁵ SABC, “SABC Annual Report 2020-2021” (SABC, September 30, 2021), 12.

²⁶ ICASA, “Compliance Reports – Independent Communications Authority of South Africa,” n.d., <https://www.icasa.org.za/pages/compliance-reports>.

Podcasts

Podcasts range in format from amateur to professional, and from extensions of radio broadcasting to publisher-produced to those produced entirely outside the mainstream media business. As such, by claiming a share of audience attention they do pose a potential threat to mainstream broadcasting. Yet they can also broaden the audience for broadcaster content, and they hold the promise of spurring innovation and increasing competition in news media production of a sort.

Sixty-one percent of the total South African major metro commercial population 15+ listened to am/fm radio stations online and/or to streamed audio content available only on the internet in the last month, according to the Infinite Dial survey. The survey also found that 26% of those surveyed had listened to a podcast in the last month, while 20% had listened to a podcast in the last week.

Community radio stations

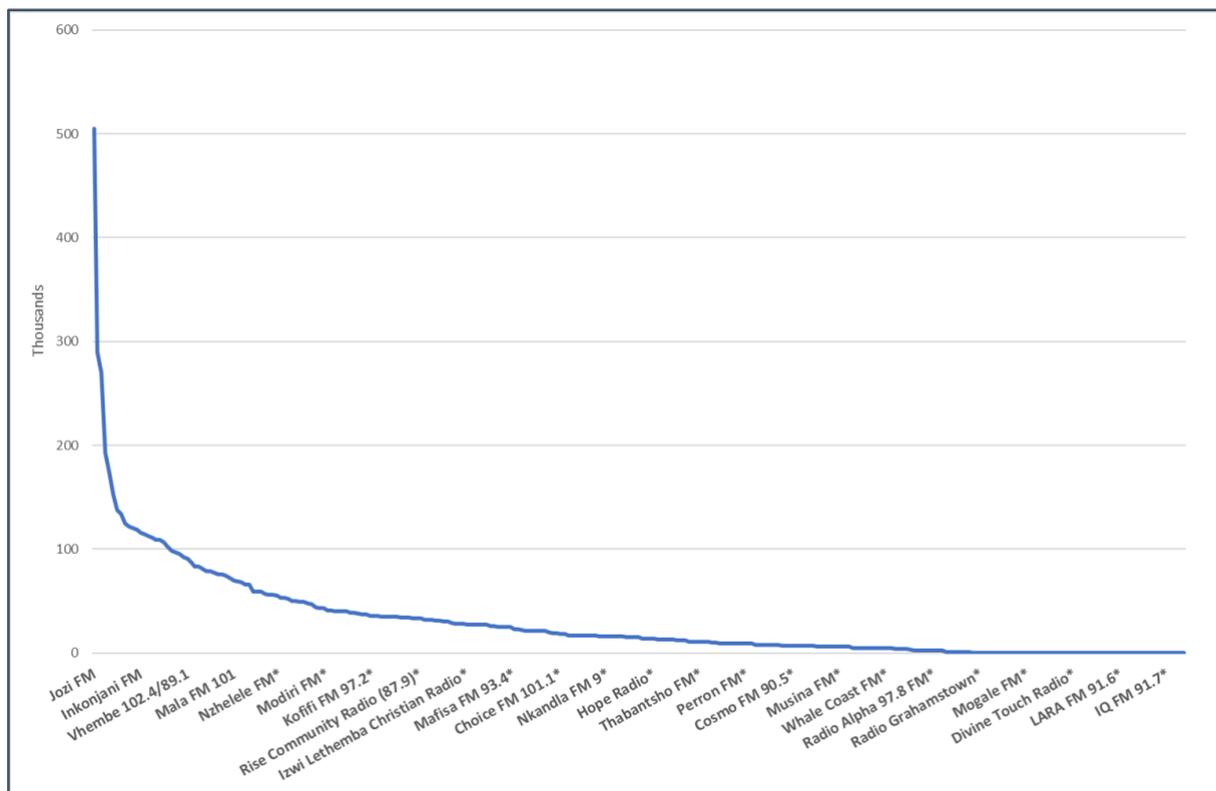
South Africa has an abundance of community radio stations, with the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRCSA) listing 281 in January 2022. However, they range in audience size, and some compete in listenership with the public and commercial stations, as can be seen from Table 9.

Table 9: Top 20 Community Radio Stations, past 7 days listeners

| Station | Apr'21-Jan'22 past 7 days '000s |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Jozi FM | 505 |
| Izwi LoMzansi 98.0 FM | 290 |
| Thetha FM 100.6 | 270 |
| Radio Zibonele 98.2 FM | 193 |
| Radio Tygerberg 104 FM | 174 |
| CCFM 107.5 | 153 |
| Mahikeng Community Radio 96.7 | 138 |
| Maputaland Community Radio 107.6 | 134 |
| Icora FM | 125 |
| Nongoma FM 88.3 | 122 |
| Kasie FM 97.1 | 120 |
| Nkomazi FM | 119 |
| Inkonjani FM | 116 |
| Voice of the Cape | 114 |
| Pretoria FM 104.2 FM (Radio Pretoria) | 113 |
| Bok Radio | 111 |
| Alfred Nzo Community Radio 98.3 / 93.8 fm | 109 |
| Kurara FM | 109 |
| Rainbow FM 90.7 | 107 |
| Eden FM | 102 |

Source: BRC SA IPSOS

Figure 3: Past 7 Days Listenership all community radio stations



Source: BRC SA IPSOS

*Caution: small base size for p7d listenership, <40; provided for indicative purposes only

Figure 5 shows how the listenership of community radio drops sharply to levels so low that they can barely be measured – and many reflect zero in BRC’s listenership table. It is no wonder that most stations are perceived to be “survivalist.”²⁷ Sustainability for many is an issue, as covered in the section on Community Media.

²⁷ Frans Krüger, “SA’s Rich Bag of Big, Small and Eclectic Community Radio Stations - Wits University,” Wits University, February 16, 2020, 3, <http://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/opinion/2020/2020-02/sas-rich-bag-of-big-small-and-eclectic-community-radio-stations.html>.

Television

Television certainly benefited in audience numbers from the pandemic. The increase in SABC viewers for news alone was staggering, as detailed in Table 10. The pay-TV operators DSTV and OpenView also gained, with OpenView increasing activations of its set-top boxes by more than 18% in year to end March 2021 to 2.4 million.²⁸ DSTV gained 0.5 million subscribers.²⁹

March 2020 saw a surge in TV ratings, especially for the public service broadcasts by the South African president on the status of the government's Coronavirus response, as well as increased viewing across all broadcast channels, including pay-TV.³⁰

According to one TV critic, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa and more recently the violence and looting in the country meant "2021's biggest TV ratings winner was undoubtedly television news".³¹ TV viewers still watch free-to-air TV for important news and general TV news is still among the most-watched TV output, though a glance at the Top 20 programmes for January 2022 shows what it has to compete with for attention. Peak viewing of TV drama Uzalo in January 2022 on SABC 1 was almost three times as high as the Zulu News.

Table 10: Top 20 TV programmes SABC 1 January 2022

| SABC 1 Mzansi fo sho | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------|------|------|---------|------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Top 20 Programmes All Adults 15+ January 2022 Prime Time 17h30 - 22h00 Adults 15+ years | | | | | | | | | |
| Day | Date | From | To | Station | Programme Title | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share |
| Thur | 27/01/2022 | 2030 | 2100 | SI | Uzalo | Dram | 18,08 | 6 995 444 | 61,1 |
| Thur | 27/01/2022 | 2000 | 2030 | SI | Generations the Legacy | Soap | 13,71 | 5 304 063 | 47,8 |
| Wed | 26/01/2022 | 1831 | 1900 | SI | Skeem Saam | Dram | 10,16 | 3 930 841 | 41,1 |
| Tue | 25/01/2022 | 2000 | 2159 | SI | SI 2000-2159 | Vari | 8,72 | 3 373 310 | 34 |
| Mon | 24/01/2022 | 1901 | 1931 | SI | Zulu News | News | 6,38 | 2 467 407 | 23,5 |
| Thur | 27/01/2022 | 1900 | 1928 | SI | Xhosa News | News | 6,01 | 2 324 789 | 22,4 |
| Fri | 07/01/2022 | 901 | 929 | SI | Uzalo -R | Dram | 5,76 | 2 230 498 | 44,1 |
| Tue | 25/01/2022 | 1800 | 1959 | SI | SI 1800-1959 | Vari | 5,32 | 2 058 019 | 22,5 |
| Fri | 14/01/2022 | 930 | 1000 | SI | Skeem Saam -R | Dram | 5,25 | 2 030 508 | 37,2 |
| Sun | 30/01/2022 | 1400 | 1425 | SI | Uzalo Omnibus | Dram | 5,23 | 2 022 317 | 29,8 |

²⁸ Duncan McLeod, "South Africans Flocked to Openview during the Pandemic," Moneyweb, May 29, 2021, <https://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/companies-and-deals/south-africans-flocked-to-openview-during-the-pandemic/>.

²⁹ Multichoice, "Multichoice Integrated Annual Report 2021" (Multichoice, June 10, 2021), 74.

³⁰ Thinus Ferreira, "TV RATINGS. The Coronavirus Lockdown in South Africa Leads to a Record TV Ratings Surge in March 2020.," Blog, *TV with Thinus* (blog), April 9, 2020, <http://teeveetee.blogspot.com/2020/04/tv-ratings-coronavirus-lockdown-in.html>.

³¹ Thinus Ferreira, "2021: SA TV's Ratings Winners and Losers," Channel24, December 31, 2021, <https://www.news24.com/channel/tv/news/2021-sa-tvs-ratings-winners-and-losers-20211231>.

| | | | | | | | | | |
|------|------------|------|------|----|----------------------------------|------|------|-----------|------|
| Thur | 20/01/2022 | 1800 | 1902 | SI | 2021 Matric Results Announcement | News | 5,21 | 2 016 441 | 24,5 |
| Sat | 22/01/2022 | 1930 | 2001 | SI | Real Goboza | Maga | 4,58 | 1 770 658 | 20,6 |
| Mon | 24/01/2022 | 1931 | 2000 | SI | The Estate | Dram | 4,55 | 1 759 359 | 16,8 |
| Wed | 05/01/2022 | 1800 | 1830 | SI | Ikas'lami | Real | 4,3 | 1 663 859 | 22,2 |
| Tue | 18/01/2022 | 1759 | 1829 | SI | Nyan Nyan | Real | 4,29 | 1 659 980 | 21,9 |
| Sun | 23/01/2022 | 1930 | 2000 | SI | African Dreams | Dram | 4,22 | 1 634 972 | 17,2 |
| Fri | 14/01/2022 | 830 | 900 | SI | Muvhango -R | Dram | 4,08 | 1 578 770 | 37,2 |
| Tue | 25/01/2022 | 800 | 959 | SI | SI 0800-0959 | Vari | 3,98 | 1 539 501 | 34,9 |
| Thur | 06/01/2022 | 1800 | 1830 | SI | Selimathunzi | Vari | 3,86 | 1 491 988 | 18,7 |
| Mon | 17/01/2022 | 1759 | 1830 | SI | Broken Society | Real | 3,67 | 1 419 480 | 20,1 |

Source: Broadcast Research Council of South Africa

Though television, like radio, can serve the public and nation through a host of genres, and “safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of South Africa,”³² of most interest to SANEF is public interest news.

The Zulu and Xhosa TV news bulletins are emblematic, although the news is only one part of the audiovisual offering that attracts viewers to the medium. However, at the height of the fear and uncertainty in March 2020 caused by Covid-19 and the measures put in place under the State of Disaster to deal with it, audiences, driven by the need for credible news, flocked to TV news programmes and special broadcasts by the president.

The SANEF Covid-19 Impact report of June 2020 noted that the average audience for Zulu language TV news on SABC, the week after the national disaster was declared, increased 40% and Xhosa News audiences rose by 60%.³³

The popularity of TV news continued in April.

“SABC News coverage broadcast on 21 April on SABC2 pulled an astounding 5.01 million viewers, while President Cyril Ramaphosa's national address on 23 April on additional Covid-19 relief measures pulled 4.68 million viewers, and his address on 9 April lured 3.4 million viewers,” reported Thinus Ferreira in May 2020.³⁴

In April 2020, not surprisingly, of the Top 20 programmes for the month on SABC 1, the news featured strongly with both the Xhosa news and Zulu news exceeding six-million viewers.

³² National Association of Broadcasters, “NAB Celebrates Television” (National Association of Broadcasters, November 29, 2021), https://www.nab.org.za/uploads/files/MEDIA_STATEMENT-CELEBRATING_TELEVISION__29_11_2021_.pdf.

³³ Rumney, “SANEF COVID 19 Impact on Journalism Report (Interim),” 15.

³⁴ Thinus Ferreira, “SA’s Astounding Record TV Ratings Surge Continues as Viewers Seek out Local Shows and News | Channel,” News24, May 15, 2020, <https://www.news24.com/channel/TV/News/sas-astounding-record-tv-ratings-surge-continues-as-viewers-seek-out-local-shows-and-news-20200515>.

Table 11: SABC 1 Prime Time April 2020 Top News Programmes

| Day | Date | From | To | Programme | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share |
|------|------------|------|------|------------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Thur | 23/04/2020 | 1900 | 1928 | Xhosa News | News | 17.26 | 6 215 597 | 38.2 |
| Wed | 22/04/2020 | 1900 | 1930 | Zulu News | News | 16.7 | 6 014 041 | 38.2 |

Source: Broadcast Research Council website

SABC 2 carried the biggest news audiences in April, being the direct address by the President to the Nation. Of the Top Five programmes in April 2020 on SABC 2, four were news, including the Sesotho/Tswana/Sepedi News. Viewers ranged from just under 3.5 million to 5 million, whereas in February 2020 no news programme on SABC 2 attracted more than around 656 000 viewers

Table 12: Top programmes in SABC 2 prime time top 20 programmes April 2020

| Day | Date | From | To | Programme | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share |
|------|------------|------|------|---|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Mon | 13/04/2020 | 2101 | 2129 | Muvhango | Drama | 14.48 | 5 215 075 | 38.9 |
| Tue | 21/04/2020 | 2038 | 2108 | SABC News: Covid-19 Updates | News | 13.92 | 5 012 727 | 28 |
| Thur | 23/04/2020 | 2048 | 2113 | President on Covid-19 Additional Relief | News | 13.02 | 4 686 974 | 25.8 |
| Thur | 09/04/2020 | 2001 | 2012 | Ses/Tsw/Sep News | News | 10.15 | 3 654 414 | 21.8 |
| Thur | 09/04/2020 | 2012 | 2049 | Covid-19: Update from the President | News | 9.48 | 3 414 750 | 20.1 |

Broadcast Research Council website

One year on, the figures for the most viewed TV news programmes on SABC 1 had dropped dramatically – though they still commanded huge audiences (Table 13)

Table 13: News programmes in the Top 20 TV programmes on SABC 1 April 2021

| Day | Date | From | To | Programme | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share |
|-----|------------|------|------|------------|-------|------|-----------|-------|
| Wed | 28/04/2021 | 1900 | 1930 | Xhosa News | News | 9.31 | 3 600 343 | 29.3 |
| Wed | 21/04/2021 | 1900 | 1931 | Zulu News | News | 9.16 | 3 542 430 | 29.3 |

Source: Broadcast Research Council

The viewership rose sharply again during the July 2021 unrest.

Table 14: News programmes in the Top 20 TV programmes on SABC 1 July 2021

| Day | Date | From | To | Programme Title | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share |
|-----|------------|------|------|-----------------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Mon | 12/07/2021 | 1900 | 1930 | Zulu News | News | 12.11 | 4 686 483 | 36.4 |
| Tue | 13/07/2021 | 1900 | 1928 | Xhosa News | News | 11.62 | 4 495 773 | 35.2 |

Source: Broadcast Research Council

And two years after the pandemic shot news through the roof, South Africa had settled down and the pandemic was, if not over exactly, not causing the same levels of anxiety. Good news was less newsworthy.

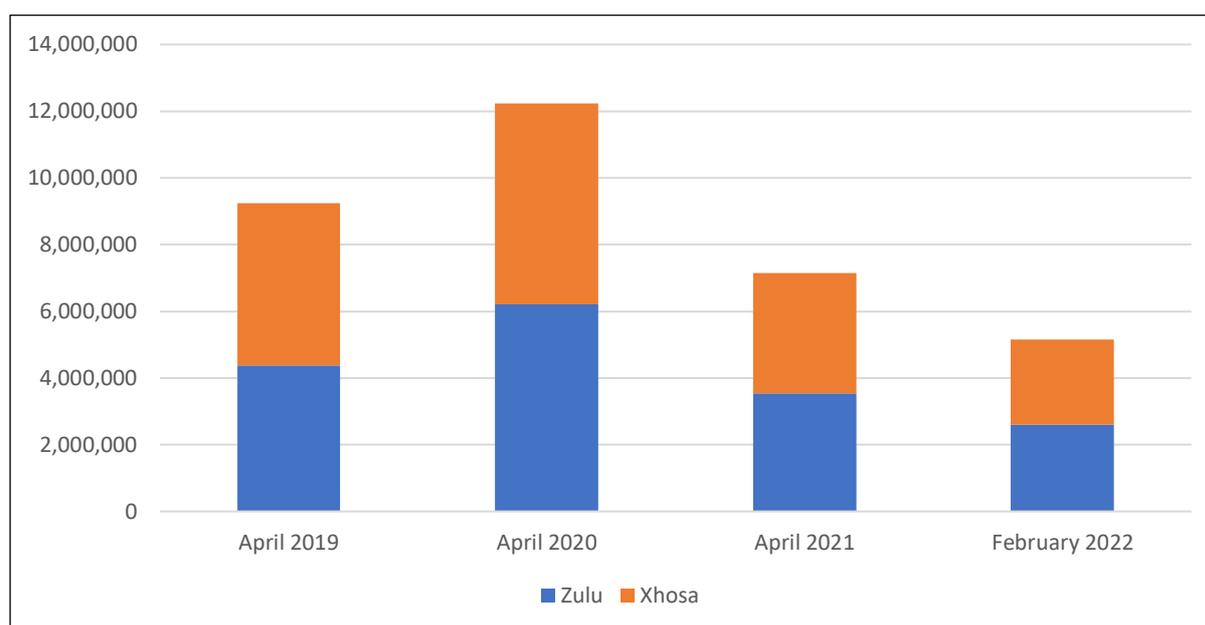
Table 15: News programmes in the Top 10 TV programmes on SABC 1 February 2022

| Day | Date | From | To | Programme Title | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share |
|-----|------------|------|------|-----------------|-------|------|-----------|-------|
| Wed | 23/02/2022 | 1901 | 1931 | Zulu News | News | 6.74 | 2 606 312 | 24.7 |
| Tue | 22/02/2022 | 1900 | 1930 | Xhosa News | News | 6.57 | 2 543 812 | 24.4 |

Source: Broadcast Research Council

The decline is illustrated in Figure 6, though the news in February 2022 was still attracting millions of viewers.

Figure 4: Viewership of the top SABC 1 news programmes in April 2019, 2020, 2021 and February 2022



Source: Broadcast Research Council website

Underlining the continuing interest in news and major news events, SABC 2 in February 2020 had high number of viewers for news and "actuality" programming.

Table 16: SABC 2 Top programmes prime time February 2022

| Day | Date | From | To | Programme Title | Genre | AR | Viewers | Share | Rank |
|------|------------|------|------|----------------------------------|-----------|------|-----------|-------|------|
| Thur | 10/02/2022 | 1853 | 2054 | State of the Nation Address 2022 | Actuality | 6.46 | 2 500 180 | 22.6 | 2 |
| Wed | 23/02/2022 | 1400 | 1455 | Budget Speech 2022 | Actuality | 3.33 | 1 287 467 | 21.8 | 4 |
| Wed | 16/02/2022 | 2000 | 2029 | Ses/Tsw/Sep News | News | 1.7 | 655 835 | 6.0 | 10 |
| Sat | 19/02/2022 | 1800 | 1812 | Nuus | News | 1.69 | 654 700 | 9.6 | 11 |
| Thur | 24/02/2022 | 600 | 800 | Morning Live | News | 1.61 | 624 507 | 23.8 | 12 |

Source: Broadcast Research Council

The analogue switch-off

At the time of preparing this report, the date for the final switch-off of analogue TV transmission had been delayed by a court judgment from end-March to end-June 2022. Some feared “millions” of poorer people would be left unable to access free-to-air TV because they had not managed to obtain set-top boxes.³⁵ Many South Africans, however, already access SABC-TV and the only other free-to-air broadcaster e-tv through Satellite TV services.

The controversy has shone a light on how households access TV. According to the Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, speaking in October 2021, “... almost 10.5 million households out of just over 14 million TV households (2018 StatSA estimates) self-migrated through private satellite boxes.”

Minister Khumbudzo Ntshavheni gave details:

- DSTV = 7.8 million households,
- OpenViewHD = 2.3 million households, and
- StarSat = 450 000.

This may be underestimated. Multichoice reported in June 2021 it had around nine million DSTV subscribers³⁶ and more viewers may have bought OpenViewHD to access SABC and e-tv channels.

What this means for TV news is that, potentially, more viewers can watch TV news from local and international broadcasters. E-Media Holdings DSTV news channel enca and the SABC News Channel on DSTV vie for viewers.

What of the sustainability of TV as medium for public interest news? In other parts of the world, the threat to linear TV is from diversion of audiences to unregulated streaming video on the internet, for example YouTube. Also, Over-the-Top (OTT) services which similarly bypass traditional providers are associated with subscription-based film and TV video-on-demand content providers such as Netflix, that have not relied on advertising income and show only entertainment.

The threat for now seems mainly to pay-TV from so-called “cord cutters” switching to Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV+ et al. Broadcasters are not sitting still and are either partnering with OTT services, starting their own, or using YouTube as a vehicle for their own content. Pay-TV provider Multichoice, for example, has responded with its own streaming service Showmax. Multichoice sees the evolution of media formats as presenting a risk and an opportunity and investment in local content as a “key differentiator and strategic advantage”.³⁷ It is hard to disagree that focus on local content remains a barrier to entry from foreign competitors – and this includes strong local public interest news.

³⁵ Fin24 reporter, “High Court Delays Analogue TV Switch-Off,” Fin24, March 28, 2022, <https://www.news24.com/fin24/companies/just-in-high-court-delays-analogue-tv-switch-off-20220328>.

³⁶ Multichoice, “Multichoice Integrated Annual Report 2021,” 74.

³⁷ Multichoice, “Multichoice Integrated Annual Report 2021.”

Limiting the erosion of audience and ad spend from streaming at present are "low levels of internet penetration, slow internet speeds and comparatively high data prices,"³⁸ but this must change if the mass of South African citizens are not to be shut out of what used to be called the "information highway".

Community TV

Community television arouses little enthusiasm in South Africa from commentators and the public. The MDDA in its 2020/21 Annual Report mentions community TV in passing. ICASA's latest list of community broadcasters lists the following five stations. Of them, Cape Community TV and Soweto Community TV are best known. Others, like Bay TV, only recently renamed Mpuma Kapa, seem to have quietly vanished.

Table 17: Licensed community TV stations

| Licensee |
|------------------------------|
| 1 KZN TV |
| Cape Community Television |
| Soweto Community Television |
| Trinity Broadcasting Network |
| Tshwane Community Television |

Source: ICASA

At one stage, Multichoice was hosting community TV and donating to the sector. Its 2021 annual report the company promised it will "establish news bureaus for regional community TV"³⁹ but gives no detail.

Though TV now has a reach as great as if not greater than radio, the cost of setting up a TV station is a hurdle. MDDA CEO Zukiswa Potye told Parliament the estimated cost of setting up a TV station would be R30 million.⁴⁰ That is a substantial part of the MDDA's budget. Perhaps it is time to rethink, given the opportunities provided by digital terrestrial television and the cost of setting up and running a TV station, the non-profit nature of community TV stations and regard them as commercial regional stations.

³⁸ Elize Rich, "Are Pay-Tv and OTT in the Same Relevant Market in South Africa?" (econex, February 2019), 1.

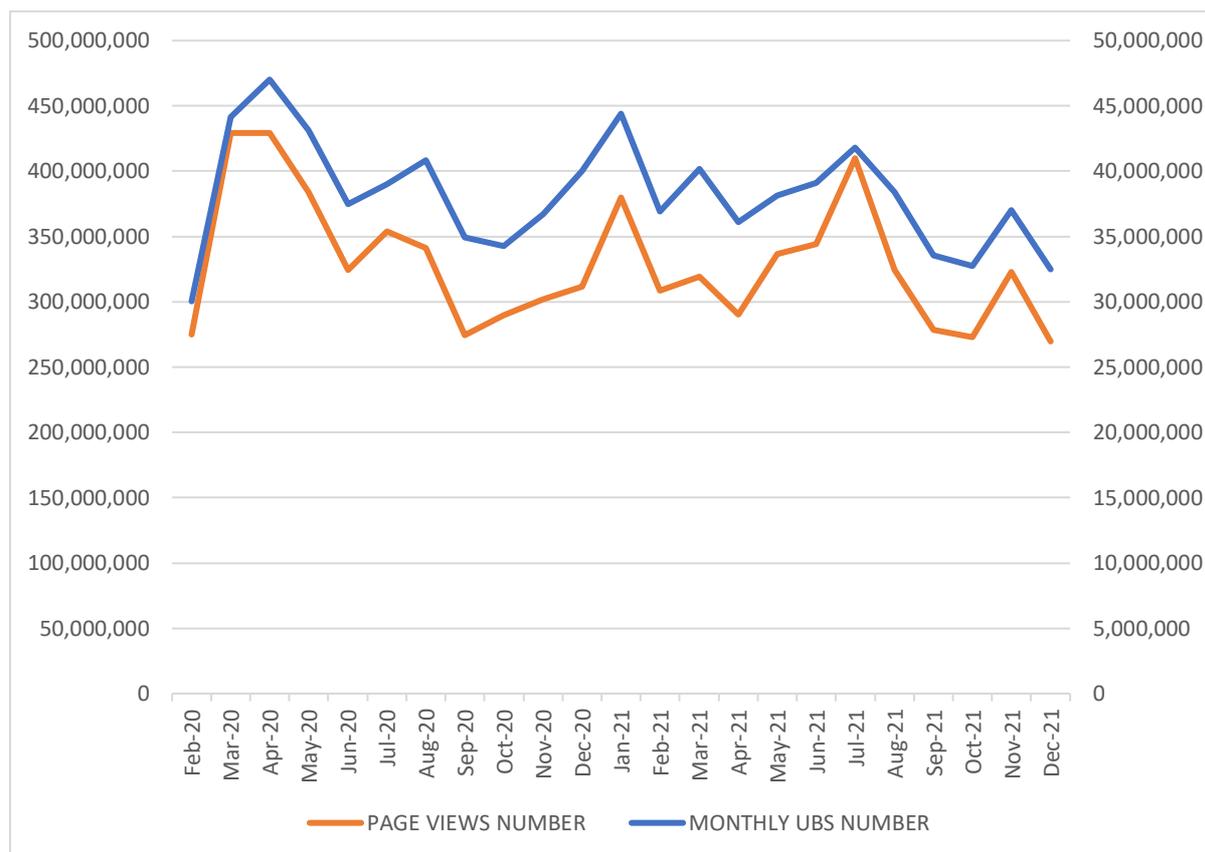
³⁹ Multichoice, "Multichoice Integrated Annual Report 2021," 45.

⁴⁰ PMG, "MDDA on Funding Model of Community Broadcasters and Their Operations across All Provinces; with Deputy Minister | PMG," Parliamentary Monitoring Group, March 23, 2022, <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/34665/>.

Online news

Little doubt exists that the pandemic helped the Great Trek from print to digital. The title of a table in the Publisher Research Council's Ad spend and Audience Tracker March 2022 Release is "Covid – The Catalyst for Digital Transformation." It shows the increase in Unique Browsers, that is individual visitors, to South African online news sites from February 2020 to December 2021 (See Figure 7).

Figure 5: Unique Browsers, monthly and daily, February 2020 to December 2021



Source: Publisher Research Council

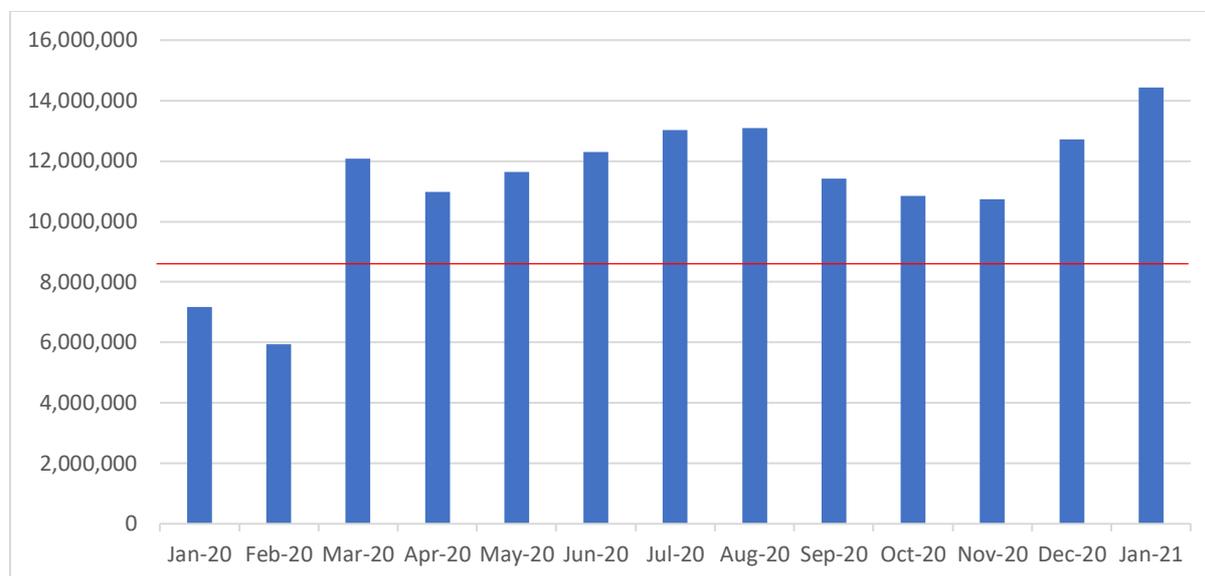
The increase in interest in news websites in the first phase of the pandemic was noted by the Internet Advertising Bureau of South Africa (IABSA) and remarked on in the June 2020 SANEF Impact report.

"The March figures for visitors to news websites surged, for News24 by 103%. Ironically, digital and TV saw the biggest rise in consumption, but their revenues declined as advertisers' cash flow started drying up due to their supply and demand coming to a halt."⁴¹

⁴¹ Advertising Media Forum, "Media Consumption through the Roof but Not Followed by Ad Spend," *The Media Online* (blog), June 30, 2020, //themediamonline.co.za/2020/06/media-consumption-through-the-roof-but-not-followed-by-ad-spend/.

The question about the rise in the visits to online news sites was always, “Would it last?” For the top online website, News24, it has. From January 2020 to January 2021 News24 monthly Unique Browser visits stayed well above the 10 000 mark (Figure 8).

Figure 6: News24 Unique Browsers



Source: narrative via IABSA

Also, as can be seen from Table 16, compared to other websites in Top 10 at the height of the pandemic lockdown month, news24.com increased its visitors in February 2022.⁴²

Table 18: Top news sites list April 2020 compared to February 2022

| | 20-Apr | 22-Feb | Change |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------|--------|
| Website | Unique browsers | | |
| news24.com | 10 978 640 | 12 416 981 | 13% |
| timeslive.co.za | 8 193 661 | 5 485 153 | -33% |
| iol.co.za | 8 137 007 | Resigned | |
| thesouthafrican.com | 6 407 726 | n/a | |
| businesstech.co.za | 5 910 517 | 5 809 590 | -2% |
| businessinsider.co.za | 5 339 567 | n/a | |
| citizen.co.za | 4 351 863 | 2 862 817 | -34% |
| fin24.com | 4 246 012 | n/a | |
| ewn.co.za | 4 154 725 | 2 593 346 | -38% |
| dailymaverick.co.za | 3 856 712 | 2 424 402 | -37% |

Source: narrative via IABSA

⁴² The ABC audits the online websites of newspapers as well as physical newspapers, though most publishers have signed up to the Internet Advertising Bureau of South Africa. The IABSA publishes on its website each month a list of the Top 10 websites as measured by narrative.

As testimony to its successful online news presence, news24.com changed its business model by introducing subscriptions and put up a paywall in August 2020. For the first time not all of News24's news would be free, but editor Adriaan Basson committed the site to publishing free breaking news.

We are under no illusion that we can charge for that [breaking news]. What we are talking about is the extra stuff, the premium content, the in-depth stories, the investigative journalism, the follow-up stories, some of the podcasts... it will be aimed at people who want to read more, want the world explained and analysed. I believe we do have a loyal group of readers in that bracket who would be able to help us build a sustainable model.⁴³

The site is thus behind a "freemium" paywall, with much of the content available without payment. Sister Afrikaans-language site netwerk24.com has charged subscriptions since its inception in 2014.⁴⁴ By March 2022 news24.com had almost 50 000 subscribers.⁴⁵

In going the subscription route, Media24 followed the Arena Holdings' timeslive and businesslive websites and moneyweb.com. The Mail & Guardian was an early adopter of a paywall and the Caxton group's sole metro newspaper. The Citizen has adopted a freemium paywall, leaving the Independent Media group as the sole non-paywall publisher. In one sense, a news outlet trades influence for cash by going behind a paywall, though a freemium model mitigates that. A testament to the success of the Media24's news24.com strategy is that the visitors to the site have, far from diminishing, actually increased despite the paywall. A glance at the World Association of Newspapers' website will show how news media the world over have turned their attention to using technological knowledge not only for disseminating journalism but to, among other monetising efforts, turning visitors into subscribers.

By the first quarter of 2021, news24.com had increased average daily unique browsers 45% year on year to 1.5 million. Netwerk24 subscribers had grown 29% year on year to 77 500.⁴⁶

Media24 has long been acknowledged to be the market giant in South African media,⁴⁷ even without a connection to Multichoice, which was unbundled from Naspers, of which Media24 is a subsidiary. The prospect of news24.com's continued growth accompanied by decline of competitors leading to a "winner-takes-most" outcome and a decrease in media diversity is not likely to be widely welcomed, even if it is caused by apparently ineluctable economic forces. It has not come to that yet. Moreover, barriers to entry of news providers are low in the digital age and the true online monopolies are not home-grown.

⁴³ Glenda Nevill, "News24.Com to Launch 'Freemium' Paywall," The Media Online, July 13, 2020, [//themediainline.co.za/2020/07/news24-com-to-launch-freemium-paywall/](https://themediainline.co.za/2020/07/news24-com-to-launch-freemium-paywall/).

⁴⁴ Nevill.

⁴⁵ Adriaan Basson, "EDITORIAL | A New Slogan for News24 in a New Era of Trust," News24, March 15, 2022, https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/reader_hub/editorial-a-new-slogan-for-news24-in-a-new-era-of-trust-20220309.

⁴⁶ Multichoice, "Multichoice Integrated Annual Report 2021," 60.

⁴⁷ Jane Duncan, "The Print Media Transformation Dilemma," in *New Paths, Old Compromises?*, New South African Review 2 (Wits University Press, 2011), 349, https://www.academia.edu/2033700/The_print_media_transformation_dilemma.

The real threat to South African news media at present comes from outside, in the form of global internet giants who compete for the diminishing attention of the audience in a glut of information (and misinformation and disinformation), disintermediation and a flood of user-generated content. In addition, the social platforms have been accused of being a conduit for uninformed and factually incorrect information as well as deliberate propagandistic communication. Facebook in 2020 in South Africa had 27 million users, though WhatsApp and YouTube were the most used social media platforms.⁴⁸

Table 19: Social media numbers in South Africa

| Platform | Users - millions |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| Facebook | 27 |
| YouTube | 24 |
| Instagram | 10 |
| Twitter | 9 |
| TikTok | 9 |
| Linkedin | 8 |
| SnapChat | 7 |
| Source: World Wide Worx 2020 | |

Facebook, the true giant of social media, has been accused in the film *The Social Dilemma* of manipulating our emotions,⁴⁹ elsewhere of encouraging partisanship and other ills through its opaque algorithms,⁵⁰ and its vast informational power has for a while now been a cause for concern.⁵¹ Though the democratising aspects of social media cannot be dismissed – it allows marginalised voices to have greater impact than ever before – social media is part of what authors of a UNESCO study of fake news call “a fresh crisis for journalism”. They remark on the “sheer scale, enterprise and reach of fraudulent news being shared online”.⁵² Also, social media is increasingly used as a tool of censorship against journalists, with the online harassment against Maria Ressa of the Philippines an often-used example.⁵³

Moreover, while trade and industrial policy, among other policies, informs government attempts to handle what other countries sell here and the effect on our markets, the internet

⁴⁸ Staff Writer, “The Biggest and Most Popular Social Media Platforms in South Africa, Including TikTok” (BusinessTech, July 1, 2021), <https://businesstech.co.za/news/internet/502583/the-biggest-and-most-popular-social-media-platforms-in-south-africa-including-tiktok/>.

⁴⁹ “The Social Dilemma - A Netflix Original Documentary,” *The Social Dilemma*, 2020, <https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/>.

⁵⁰ Katie Bell, “Facebook: The Devil in Disguise or Our Saving Grace? - INKspire,” January 7, 2022, <https://inkspire.org/post/facebook-the-devil-in-disguise-or-our-saving-grace/>.

⁵¹ Emily Bell, “Facebook Is Eating the World,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 7, 2016, http://www.cjr.org/analysis/facebook_and_media.php.

⁵² Cheryl Iretton and Julie Posetti, eds., *Journalism, “Fake News” and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (UNESCO, 2018), 19, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002655/265552E.pdf>.

⁵³ David Maas, “New Research Details Ferocity of Online Violence against Maria Ressa,” *International Journalists’ Network*, March 8, 2021, <https://ijnnet.org/en/story/new-research-details-ferocity-online-violence-against-maria-ressa>.

goliaths are unrestricted in diverting advertising revenue overseas – and our own precious and supposedly private data.

Five South African publishers, inspired by the Australian authorities' regulation of Google and Facebook to negotiate with publishers, have taken steps to get Google and Facebook to help pay for the news. Media24, Arena Holdings, Caxton, Independent Media and Mail & Guardian Media have made a submission to the Competition Commission in a bid to force Google and Meta (Facebook's holding company) to be compensated by the US technology giants for using their content. Facebook has defended itself,⁵⁴ the matter is complex, and SANEF has taken the position that "... interventions aimed at securing payments from technology platforms to news publishers may have short-term benefits but are unlikely to address some of the fundamental challenges for the sustainability of journalism."⁵⁵

The irony is that in the peak pandemic year, with its attendant recession, internet advertising grew by 18% year-on-year to R4,7 billion while overall South African advertising contracted by -27%.⁵⁶ Yet it is common cause that news media get little of the internet advertising cake. Paid search, i.e., mainly Google ads, and "paid social" – sponsored advertising on social networking platforms that aims to target specific customers – made up 75% of internet advertising in 2020.⁵⁷ R5-billion overall for internet advertising pales next to overall ad spend figures in the tens of billions and endorses moves to subscription models, though this itself may not be enough to make good the loss of print advertising revenue. Moreover, the internet has disrupted advertising revenue in other ways. The solid base of classified advertising has all but evaporated,⁵⁸ and the handy revenue stream of property advertising has apparently turned into a trickle in print. Online, news24.com's property24.com and IOL's Property360 compete with non-traditional media such as privateproperty.co.za, and estate agents themselves.

The migration of news into the online environment is not over, and Naspers, the holding company of Media24, which over decades transformed from a newspaper group to a global internet group with a market capitalisation of R750 billion (at the time of writing) has shown how media companies can profit from embracing technological change. From the SANEF perspective, however, what must not be forgotten is – to adapt an observation that emerged when Media24 launched its subscription service – paywalls will not save journalism, only good journalism will.⁵⁹

Other providers of online news in the commercial space are the broadcasters – Primedia's Eyewitness News and enca.com. While these are welcome additions, along with non-profit

⁵⁴ Duncan McLeod, "Facebook Defends Itself over Criticism from South African Publishers," *TechCentral* (blog), December 6, 2021, <https://techcentral.co.za/facebook-defends-itself-over-criticism-from-south-african-publishers/205610/>.

⁵⁵ SANEF, "Position Paper: The Sustainability of Journalism and Competition in the Digital Economy" (SANEF, March 2022), 5.

⁵⁶ PWC, "Internet Advertising Revenue Report 2020 Study" (IAB South Africa, May 2021).

⁵⁷ PWC.

⁵⁸ Gasant Abarder, "The Writing Was on the Wall for SA Newspapers Long before Covid-19," *The Mail & Guardian* (blog), May 2, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/coronavirus-essentials/2020-05-02-the-writing-was-on-the-wall-for-sa-newspapers-long-before-covid-19/>.

⁵⁹ Grobler, "Future of News Summit."

providers, to the news system, the websites of broadcast news organisations in South Africa do not replace the engines of news that newspapers represent. The BBC is a dominant news source internationally. Locally, the website of the public service broadcaster the SABC, lags its broadcast audience though the public broadcaster has a substantial presence on YouTube.

Cross-cutting issues

Advertising

While the purpose of this report is to look at the state of the media from the demand-side, that is the audience, in a sense media has traditionally been a two-sided platform, having to please two sets of customers, audience and advertisers. The ideological implications of being part of the materialist consumption machine aside, having a multiplicity of advertisers in the relatively prosperous print media past offered some defence against capture by vested interests since – usually – no one firm was irreplaceable as a source of advertising revenue. What the crisis of early 2020 showed, and which the first SANEF Covid-19 impact report commented on, was the media’s reliance, and perhaps overall over-reliance, on traditional advertising. However, the pandemic also showed that moves to make news outlets less reliant on advertising through third or more revenue streams such as events and out-of-home advertising would have been neutralised by the lockdown, an unforeseeable event.

At the start of what was to prove a long journey through the pandemic, the drop in advertising was obvious but its depth and length unclear. The immediate effect, in April 2020, was clearly dramatic, though hard to quantify.

As it transpired, the categories of mainstream non-digital advertising were not affected equally. Print was a palpable victim if not fatality. It seems intuitive that advertising on digital platforms – news, social media, and search engines – would be less affected and even boosted. The effect on TV and radio were less well-defined. Working from home would negate the need for radio-drivetime advertising, though the desire for timely news information about Covid-19 and government regulations might balance that out. TV, both Free-to-Air and Pay-TV was an obvious distraction for people stuck at home, but government had demanded prime spots to communicate with the public, primetime space formerly reserved for programmes that bring in lucrative advertising revenue.

The Advertising Media Forum (AMF), a collective of media agencies and individuals who claim to be the channel through which 95% of all media is bought in South Africa, confirms that while media consumption soared as everyone was forced to stay indoors, with TV and digital seeing the biggest growth, spending on advertising did not follow. Outdoor media, radio and print were worst affected.⁶⁰

The AMF says “... advertisers’ cash flow started drying up due to their supply and demand coming to a halt. Many marketers were unsure about where to prioritise investment in media

⁶⁰ Advertising Media Forum, “Media Consumption through the Roof but Not Followed by Ad Spend.”

during the crisis, as well as what to communicate.” Ad spend overall dropped by more than 35% in April compared to March 2020. Both print and out-of-home advertising (e.g. billboards) saw declines of 60%, while the crisis brought the curtain down on cinema advertising. TV ratings shot up with viewing time during the lockdown doubled, but TV ad spend fell by 27% between April and March 2020.⁶¹ Data on digital ad spend is not publicly available says the AMF but using the CPM (cost per thousand impressions) measure it appeared to have halved from February to March.⁶²

It should also have been obvious in mid-2020 that the precipitous drop-off in ad spend was a one-off – though at the time, while the hard lockdown had been lifted, restrictions were still in force and uncertainty about a return to normality reigned. Moreover, how badly the economy had been damaged and how much economic growth, and therefore consumer demand, was being retarded by the crisis were still to be seen.

At a distance, we can see from Figure 9 compiled from figures supplied by The MediaShop, that the crisis decreased ad spend across the board in 2020 compared to 2019. Cinema ad spend fell by 61%, direct mail by 39%, and print media 31%, while out-of-home fell 15%, radio by 12%, and TV by a mere 1,5% for an overall decline in ad spend of 10%. Last year saw out-of-home and TV bounce back, while radio returned to almost the same level as 2019, while cinema, direct mail and print all remained depressed.

As Chris Botha, group managing director of Park Advertising, holding company of media buying house The MediaShop, notes, all ad spend bounced back in 2021 to R47-billion, and by 29%, and was a still impressive 16% higher than 2019 (Table 20).⁶³

It must be stressed that the ad spend here is measured at the level of the media owners’ rate cards without factoring in discounts.

Table 20: Ad spend by media type 2019 to 2021

| Media Type | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2020 vs 2019 | 2021 vs 2020 | 2021 vs 2019 |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Cinema | R632 012 550 | R247 890 262 | R280 251 955 | -60,78% | 13,05% | -55,66% |
| Direct Mail | R154 184 964 | R94 853 814 | R116 536 832 | -38,48% | 22,86% | -24,42% |
| Out of Home | R1 452 091 559 | R1 233 347 789 | R1 814 148 399 | -15,06% | 47,09% | 24,93% |
| Print | R7 244 468 039 | R5 013 083 650 | R5 498 265 902 | -30,80% | 9,68% | -24,10% |
| Radio | R7 766 095 846 | R6 867 197 251 | R7 761 461 289 | -11,57% | 13,02% | -0,06% |
| Television | R23 878 623 861 | R23 525 665 872 | R32 416 296 463 | -1,48% | 37,79% | 35,75% |
| Total | R41 127 476 819 | R36 982 038 638 | R47 886 960 840 | -10,08% | 29,49% | 16,44% |

Source: MediaShop

⁶¹ Advertising Media Forum.

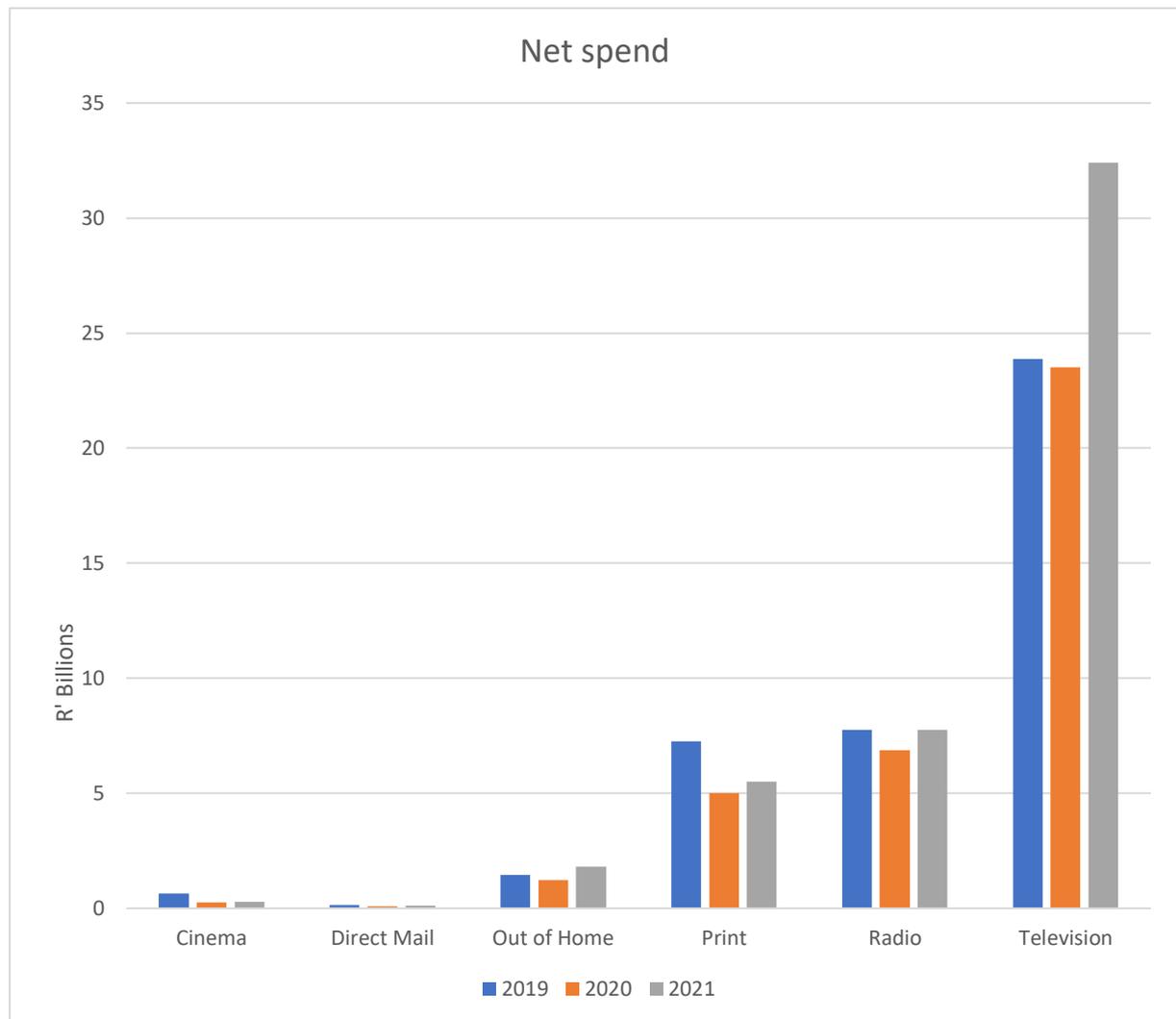
⁶² Advertising Media Forum.

⁶³ Jeremy Maggs, “Where the Advertising Money Goes,” BusinessLIVE, March 3, 2022, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/redzone/news-insights/2022-03-03-where-the-advertising-money-goes/>.

Digital spend as calculated by the Internet Advertising Bureau of South Africa rose by around 18% to R4,7 billion in 2020 compared to 2019. At the time of writing the 2021 figure was not available.⁶⁴

As can readily be seen from Table 20, the shares of overall spend, excluding digital, show that print ad spend rebounded in 2021 it was still 24% lower than in 2019, while TV ad spend climbed by 36% and radio ad spend was almost unchanged over the two-year period.

Figure 7: Percentage change in net ad spend year on year, 2019 through 2021

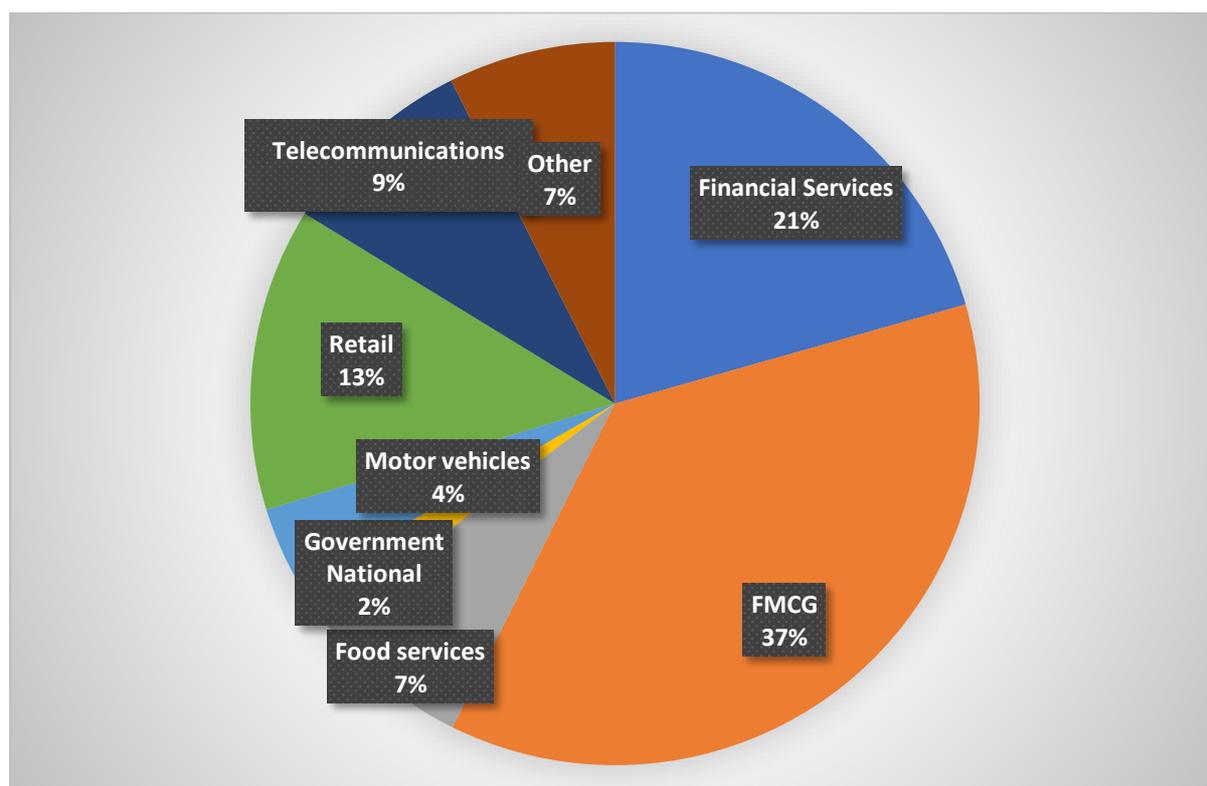


Source: Mediashop

Also of interest is who spends the most on advertising. Figure 10 and Table 21 show that any media group which managed to capture national government advertising in South Africa alone would have a not inconsiderable R424 million in income – though as a percentage of the total it amounts to a mere 2%.

⁶⁴ IABSA, “Internet Advertising Revenue Report 2020” (Internet Advertising Bureau, May 2021).

Figure 8: Top 40 SA advertiser spend by category 2021



Source: AC Nielsen, via the Financial Mail

Table 21: Top 40 SA advertiser spend by category 2021, actual figures

| Category | Amount | Percentage |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Financial Services | R4 241 475 119 | 20,6% |
| FMCG | R7 577 832 440 | 36,8% |
| Food services | R1 489 068 199 | 7,2% |
| Government National | R423 801 313 | 2,1% |
| Motor vehicles | R746 490 689 | 3,6% |
| Retail | R2 791 268 921 | 13,5% |
| Telecommunications | R1 808 042 650 | 8,8% |
| Other | R1 529 925 189 | 7,4% |
| Total | R20 607 904 520 | 100,00% |

Source: AC Nielsen, via the Financial Mail

Fast-moving consumer goods, such as snacks, over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, and cleaning materials, account for the majority of advertising, followed by financial services and then cellphones and cellular services. Unilever is the top advertiser, with ad spend of more than R2-billion, followed by Shoprite with around R1,5-billion, as can be seen in Table 21, which shows the top 30 firms by ad spend in 2021. The top 30 make up 40% of total ad spend in South Africa⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Maggs, "Where the Advertising Money Goes."

Table 22: The top 30 firms' ad spend 2021

| Rank | Advertiser | Net Spend |
|-------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Unilever SA | R2 039 148 264 |
| 2 | Shoprite Holdings | R1 579 902 419 |
| 3 | GlaxoSmithKline | R1 333 083 759 |
| 4 | Outsurance Insurance | R1 274 564 301 |
| 5 | Clientèle | R1 130 563 482 |
| 6 | Reckitt & Benckiser | R854 856 427 |
| 7 | Showmax | R812 559 693 |
| 8 | Vodacom Communication | R805 942 445 |
| 9 | Tiger Brands | R774 350 775 |
| 10 | Pepkor | R687 664 496 |
| 11 | Famous Brands | R684 483 838 |
| 12 | Spar SA | R671 617 645 |
| 13 | First Rand Bank | R663 464 469 |
| 14 | Pick n Pay | R653 339 932 |
| 15 | Mobie Telephone Network | R623 110 045 |
| 16 | Beiersdorf Consumer Products | R601 134 495 |
| 17 | Yum SA | R459 289 012 |
| 18 | Massmart | R438 362 168 |
| 19 | Standard Bank | R428 820 300 |
| 20 | Government National | R423 801 313 |
| 21 | Mondelez SA | R395 356 301 |
| 22 | Discovery Holdings | R383 395 878 |
| 23 | Volkswagen | R382 687 310 |
| 24 | Telkom SA | R378 990 160 |
| 25 | Heineken International | R376 432 513 |
| 26 | Toyota SA | R363 803 379 |
| 27 | Nedbank | R360 666 689 |
| 28 | McDonalds Restaurant | R345 295 349 |
| 29 | Samsung SA | R340 932 983 |
| 30 | Fruit Veg City | R340 284 680 |
| Total | | R20 607 904 520 |

Source: AC Nielsen, via the Mediashop and Financial Mail

Another observation is that of the top names on the table of big ad spenders, roughly 40%, such as Unilever, are foreign-owned. This reflects the broader economy, in which foreign investors have substantial stakes, courtesy of our colonial and apartheid history.

Advertising and media ownership

Economic Freedom Fighter Mbuyiseni Ndlozi at a South African Human Rights Commission inquiry into discrimination in advertising, called for the ad industry to be fined R50-billion for racism. He suggested that a foreign-owned and white-owned advertising industry was spending 60% of radio ad spend on a few radio stations – Primedia's 702, 94.7, and Kfm 94.5 plus Kagiso Media's Jacaranda FM and East Coast Radio – though they have 25% of South

Africa's radio audience share.⁶⁶ Beyond the political hyperbole – no rationale is given for the figure of R50-billion – the claim does raise questions as well as hackles. It recalls complaints that go back more than 20 years, from the parliamentary hearings that arose from the 1998 South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Investigation into Racism in the Media. In 2002, I wrote about the portfolio committee hearings into the advertising industry and racism:

As summarised by the Media Directors' Circle (MDC), whose presentation to the portfolio committee was characterised by actual figures, black media owners have complained that they are not getting a fair share of advertising spending. They believe their share is compromised because the media planning industry comprises predominantly "white women living in Sandton" who are not exposed to their particular media. The solution put forward has been to bring in more black media planners who will then give more support to black media, and possibly to legislate to divert more ad spend to black media.⁶⁷

The political history of the advertising industry pre-1990 is far from spotless. In the 1980s having black readers of a newspaper was considered a liability and was used against the liberal Rand Daily Mail by opponents of its political stance on apartheid. The alternative newspaper the Mail & Guardian was starved of advertising by those in the ad industry who felt the newspaper was anti-government and did not want to be associated with it.⁶⁸

The Ndlozi story was soon dismissed by a seasoned advertising media industry expert and commentator, incidentally a white woman, as ignoring the realities of target audiences and disregarding the professional expertise of media buyers.⁶⁹ Suspicions will remain about unconscious bias and it is good that the matter is aired, though possible solutions advanced may be impractical or even unconstitutional.

Ndlozi said at the last SAHRC inquiry: "A responsible government by now would have regulated [the industry]. We need rational spending in advertising." Rational spending on advertising implies a command economy of the kind common in the USSR and satellite states during the Cold War, not a market economy or mixed economy. One outcome of such thinking, as Ndlozi hints, is that all ad spend should simply go to the public or State broadcaster, a situation recalling the apartheid airwaves, when the State brooked no competition with the SABC. It is also an example of what media commentators call "soft censorship", an insidious form of state control that allows the appearance of democracy without the reality.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Tebogo Monama, "EFF's Ndlozi Says Advertising Industry Must Be Fined R50bn for Racism," News24, March 14, 2022, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/effs-ndlozi-says-advertising-industry-must-be-fined-r50bn-for-racism-20220314>.

⁶⁷ Reginald Rumney, "Chapter 18: Media," in *Empowerment 2002 - The State Steps In* (BusinessMap, 2002), 79.

⁶⁸ Irwin Manoim, *You Have Been Warned: The First Ten Years of the Mail & Guardian* (London, England; New York, N.Y., USA: Viking ; Viking Penguin, 1996), 41–42.

⁶⁹ Tonya Khoury, "Seven Days on Twitter: #Ndlozi the #MediaExpert, a Lesson in Media Buying," *The Media Online* (blog), March 18, 2022, [//themediainline.co.za/2022/03/seven-days-on-twitter-ndlozi-the-mediaexpert-a-lesson-in-media-buying/](https://themediainline.co.za/2022/03/seven-days-on-twitter-ndlozi-the-mediaexpert-a-lesson-in-media-buying/).

⁷⁰ Dan Podesta, "Soft Censorship: How Governments Around the Globe Use Money to Manipulate the Media - A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance" (Center for International Media Assistance, January 9, 2009), 4, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/unpan/unpan041876.pdf>.

The point is that the original complaint in the 2000s of black media, such as YFM, was that companies were letting racist thinking stand in the way of rational decisions to advertise in black media⁷¹ – not that preference should simply be given based on race. Media professionals could respond that their decisions are designed to get the best result from the money spent for the companies spending the money on advertising goods and services, and this is the guiding principle that should apply. Plainly speaking, advertising should not be a subsidy⁷² or weapon. Guy Berger, speaking as chair of the board of Makhanda community newspaper Grocott's Mail, which sued the Makana Municipality for pulling all its advertising from the paper, is quoted as saying, "... while the media are not entitled to receive any advertising at all, what they are entitled to is not to be discriminated against."⁷³

Another example of the threat of advertising money being used, not primarily or at all for the purpose of informing or persuading a target audience but rather as a way of rewarding political support was illustrated by a plea by the late Karima Brown, in her position as Group Editorial Executive of Independent Newspapers. In 2015, she argued that the government should place advertising with newspapers which were less critical of the ruling party.⁷⁴

Yet another example, and an egregious one, was the decision to support the Gupta-owned The New Age with government advertising and the separate decision by management of three State-Owned Enterprises, Eskom, Transnet and South African Airways, to channel money to the paper by buying ad space in The New Age and sponsoring its televised breakfast briefings for millions of rand. These are examined in the Zondo Commission of Inquiry Report Part 1 Volumes 1⁷⁵ and 2.⁷⁶

For instance, the Zondo report found that the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS), while Mzwanele Manyi was director general, spent, during the financial year to 28 February 2012, R6 329 082 on TNA Media, the second highest amount paid to any media house during the period despite TNA being able to show neither verified readership nor certified circulation figures. The issue of a lack of circulation figures, verified by the Audit Bureau of Circulation and supplemented by readership figures, supplied then by the All-Media Products Survey, comes up repeatedly in the Zondo Part 1 report. The commission found the spending by state-owned enterprises on TNA to be irregular and wasteful.⁷⁷

⁷¹ YFM, "YFM Submission to Parliamentary Portfolio Committee Hearings on Racsim and Advertising," Parliamentary Monitoring Group, November 6, 2001, <https://static.pmg.org.za/011106yfm.htm>.

⁷² Podesta, "Soft Censorship: How Governments Around the Globe Use Money to Manipulate the Media - A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance," 7.

⁷³ Podesta, 7.

⁷⁴ Staff Reporter, "Brown Tackles ANC on Media Transformation | IOL News," October 8, 2015, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/brown-tackles-anc-on-media-transformation-1927178>.

⁷⁵ Raymond Mnyamezeli Mlungisi Zondo, "Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State Report: Part 1 Volume 1" (South African Government, January 4, 2022).

⁷⁶ Raymond Mnyamezeli Mlungisi Zondo, "Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector Including Organs of State Report: Part 1 Volume 2" (South African Government, January 4, 2022).Z

⁷⁷ Zondo, Page 602.

South Africa's private sector is vibrant and therefore private sector ad spend dwarfs that of government. This makes government spending a less effective weapon against a critical press than in some other African countries.

But if the lesson is that government spending for purposes *primarily* other than reaching target audiences is ruled out, where does the repeated statements by government that it will set aside 30% of its advertising budget for community media? How can government direct advertising to members of the community media sector, print or broadcast, that do not have some independent and reliable way of measuring how many people they reach? This is something for the government, the Association of Independent Publishers and the National Community Radio Forum to figure out.

A total figure for national spending in 2021, as we have seen, was R424-million. Thirty percent of that is R128-million, a substantial yearly amount, so even part of that would be welcome in funding community media. It must be stressed that government – or anyone else – cannot be faulted for spending money on community media. Using community media may well broaden the reach and effectiveness of government advertising. How that 30% will be distributed transparently and in a way that achieves both government's purpose and the needs of community media has still to be decided – if it ever comes to pass.

Advertising as medium of expression

Advertising can be counterposed with journalism. Journalism is, or should be, concerned with reality and truth. The purpose of an ad is to sell product. Yet advertising is a form of communication and expression of thought and is an essential part of the capitalist system in a mixed economy. Also advertising purpose, though it is associated with puffery and connotation rather than fact, does not necessarily conflict with factual statements. Even offensive advertising can be regarded as a form of free expression protected by the South African Constitution.⁷⁸

Advertising as indicator

For journalism, the value of advertising lies in measuring audience. Without the publicly available figures of the Audit Bureau of Circulations, we, the public, would have no way of checking the veracity of the claimed circulation figures of publishers. Without the Broadcast Research Council, we would have no way of knowing how popular particular radio stations are or checking the claims of politicians. The same applies to the Internet Advertising Bureau of South Africa. All three bodies provide researchers with audience figures for comparison, even when the purpose is not identifying consumers to sell things to.

Advertising is even used as a proxy for audience. For instance, the National Association of Broadcasters stated in November 2021:

The continued popularity of traditional TV is also reflected in ad spend. While the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted advertising revenue, the PRC reports that

⁷⁸ Stefan W Vos, "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum: Regulating Offensive Advertising in a Democratic South Africa" (University of Pretoria, 2011), 67.

September 2021 marked the 12th month in a row of increasing ad spend, with TV's share (among print, outdoor advertising and radio) growing from 59% in 2019 to 68%.⁷⁹



MDDA CEO Zukiswa Potje addressing delegates at the Community Media Summit held at Birchwood Conference Centre. (Photo: GCIS)

⁷⁹ National Association of Broadcasters, "NAB Celebrates Television."

Community Media

Community Media and Covid-19

The two categories of community media were bound both to be affected by the decline in advertising at the height of the pandemic.

However, the community radio stations (see Radio Section), either located in geographical communities or defined by community of interest, e.g. religious stations, and most often funded by the MDDA did not face the physical barriers that the print publishers did.

Anecdotal evidence at the time of the lockdowns was the community print publications, the second category of community media, were hard hit by the regulations limiting movement et al. The members of this sector are known as small independent community or commercial publishers and are distinguished from the local print publications produced by the big commercial publishers such as Caxton, Media24 and Arena Holdings.

Community broadcasters are regulated by ICASA and are non-profit organisations (NPOs), though like commercial media they may rely on more than one revenue stream. For community radio, this will include grants from government, money from commercial broadcasters channelled through the MDDA, and donations, as well as advertising.

Originally, the major commercial publishers, through Print and Digital Media South Africa provided funding to the MDDA for the small print sector, which seems highly dependent on advertising, but the increasingly hard-pressed commercial publishers stopped doing so in 2014/15. The money in the MDDA coffers from the broadcasters is ring-fenced for community broadcasting, so it cannot be used for funding the community or small print sector.

The State, through the MDDA, did provide emergency financial aid to community media of R20-million in 2020, to both community broadcasters and to community and small commercial print publications.

An initial amount of R10 million in emergency funding was for “content generation, fuel, distribution costs for print, telecommunications, Personal Protective Equipment, and hygiene essentials”. According to Deputy Minister in The Presidency Thembu Siweya, by the end of April 2020, R10 million had been disbursed to 115 community broadcasters and 116 community and Small Commercial Media (SCM) publications in R45 000 relief packages, per station or publisher.

The second phase of the emergency relief fund opened on 25 May 2020, with R10 million made available in amounts of up to R50 000 for community broadcasters and R20 000 (for community and SCM print and digital outlets). During this period, the MDDA encouraged community media to help listeners and readers better understand difficult concepts, not only those around Covid-19 but health issues in general, wrote Siweya. “The second phase focused more on relief of operational expenses such as rentals/bond repayments, salaries/stipends, telecommunications and content generation and dissemination, but also

with an allocation for hygiene essentials as personal protection became increasingly important with the upsurge in the pandemic.”⁸⁰

By the end of October 2020, the MDDA says, the fund was closed, having disbursed R6.6 million to 89 community broadcasters and 94 community and SCM publications in different relief packages, for each station or publisher and two TV stations.⁸¹

Funding community media

The MDDA itself is now funded mainly by government through the GCIS and from broadcast service licensees via the Universal Service and Access Fund levy, and interest.

According to Mondli Gungubele, Minister in the Presidency, in a foreword to a fundraising strategy document released while this report was being prepared, over the past 18 years to date the MDDA has funded a total of 478 community media projects, including 303 community radio and TV projects, and 175 community print projects. While the limited funding flow to the MDDA from government and the mainstream broadcasters is known, he believes, expectations of funding and other support has increased. Noting “... the fragile sustainability of the community media sector is posing a threat to the very survival of the sector ...” he said the MDDA would look beyond government and current funders for further money to support the sector.⁸²

It would be instructive to see which of the radio and community media projects funded over the years are still operational and the reasons for the failure of those that did not. The MDDA reported at the beginning of 2022 that of more than 270 licensed community radio stations, 212 are on air.⁸³ A 2017 MDDA study presented to Parliament in 2018, noted, “Funding criteria are vague, and the media projects are not required to demonstrate how they will become self-sufficient by the end of the funding period. In addition, MDDA has not been able to resolve the impasse with government or the commercial sector to secure advertising support for projects to enable sustainability. As a result, a number of projects fold annually – and many that were around when the MDDA was started in 2002/3 are no longer in existence.”⁸⁴ Perhaps proposals will be put forward to resolve some of these problems when the consultancy appointed by the MDDA to do research on a Sustainability Model for Community and Small Commercial Media reports at the end of 2022.⁸⁵

On monitoring and evaluation, the MDDA says it “has a structured programme of monitoring each of the tranches it disburses to its grantees, in terms of compliance with the contract between the MDDA and the grantee. It also evaluates the impact of the community media project on its community at the conclusion of the MDDA’s funding of the project.”⁸⁶

⁸⁰ MDDA, “MDDA Annual Report 2020/21,” 2021, 10.

⁸¹ MDDA, 73.

⁸² MDDA, “Fundraising Strategy” (Media Development and Diversity Agency, n.d.).

⁸³ MDDA.

⁸⁴ MMA, “Impact of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) on Community Media Development and Diversity in South Africa Report and Recommendations,” October 2017, 4.

⁸⁵ MDDA, “Research Tenders/Documents/Toolkits,” MDDA Published Research Documents, n.d., <https://www.mdda.org.za/published-research-documents>.

⁸⁶ MDDA, “Fundraising Strategy,” 20.

Thereafter, it would seem that oversight, at least for community broadcasting, is left to ICASA, which monitors the licence conditions for broadcasters. Examination of ICASA's website section on compliance⁸⁷ shows that the latest reports for broadcasters are for 2019/20, including community broadcasters. We should have sympathy for ICASA in its monitoring task because of the sheer number of community radio stations.

An article published coincidentally while this report was being prepared on a particular community radio station raises the question: Who monitors the monitors of compliance? Anton van Zyl wrote on March 30, 2022, in an article that obtaining information from ICASA needs "extreme patience and perseverance". Van Zyl's report dealt with the allegation that ICASA had awarded a community radio licence to a company, a for-profit entity, which has been dormant for years. Also, he reported, as well as for at least the past five years being controlled by a profit-seeking company in contravention of its licence conditions, Makhado FM had no legitimate board, yet funders included the MDDA.⁸⁸

He also commented that ICASA's last report on Makhado FM, in March 2017, "... graphically illustrated the difficulties that community radio stations face in adhering to all the requirements of their broadcasting licence. Makhado FM, for instance, must broadcast 50 minutes of news per day, of which 70% must be local news. It may not spend more than 40% of the airtime playing music. Even the music content must be 70% local. The predominant language to be used (60%) is Tshivenda. The three other languages to be used are Sepedi (20%) Xitsonga (15%) and English (5%)." Makhado, ICASA is quoted as stating, "failed to comply with its language, music (as per promise of performance) and news obligations, as well as community participation".⁸⁹

Small independent publishers – Van Zyl himself is one – often run for-profit operations, while supposedly non-profit community radio stations can resemble private businesses, albeit precarious ones. Professor Frans Kruger concluded in a study of community media: "Most of the community radio stations operate on a survivalist level, and should be seen as struggling small, medium and micro enterprises [SMMEs]."⁹⁰

Viewed through the lens of small business, failure is not unusual. The attrition rate of small businesses even in developed economies high. In the US 20% of small businesses fail in their first year, 30% in their second year, and 50% after five years. And about 30% of businesses in the US survive their 10th year in business.⁹¹

As the Wits study implies, looked at as SMMEs, community media may face similar problems to other small businesses in South Africa, with the added disadvantage of often being located in economically marginalised rural areas. SMMEs, however, ordinarily are not set up using citizens' money – the money raised from the broadcasters is a form of tax and therefore

⁸⁷ ICASA, "Compliance Reports – Independent Communications Authority of South Africa."

⁸⁸ Anton van Zyl, "ICASA Issues Radio Licence to Deregistered Company," GroundUp News, March 30, 2022, <http://www.groundup.org.za/article/icasa-issues-radio-licence-deregistered-company/>.

⁸⁹ Van Zyl.

⁹⁰ Krüger, "SA's Rich Bag of Big, Small and Eclectic Community Radio Stations - Wits University."

⁹¹ Georgia McIntyre, "What Percentage of Small Businesses Fail?," November 20, 2020, <https://www.fundera.com/blog/what-percentage-of-small-businesses-fail>.

also citizens' money. It is not only that government agencies have to account properly for spending in terms of the Public Finance Management Act No. 1 of 1999, but citizens have the right to see how their money is being spent. Transparency is key, here, as in all other areas of news media, whose work, after all, relies on transparency and information not being kept secret.⁹²

In support of its plea for more funding, the MDDA acknowledges that while some community media projects can fully support themselves, and others partly support themselves some, "... will never be able to self-sustain due to the lack of economic activity in the communities they serve".⁹³

From an evolutionary economics perspective, there is little point in protecting moribund news organisations from waves of creative destruction. Projects that rely on constant funding, funnelled through the State, could be considered State media. The MDDA is aware of the need for political independence of community media and how this can be affected by State or government support, for instance by "renting affordable premises in government buildings".⁹⁴ As with State advertising, State capture rears its head.

More importantly, how much corporate philanthropy for media is there to go round and what do philanthropists ask in return? What would happen if MDDA funding ceased entirely? It is essential to answer these and other questions of sustainability of community media, which has added an important and interesting layer to our media system.

For instance, it recognised that community media enables people to hear broadcasts in their own languages, but to what extent is surprising. "The languages on air include not only German, Arabic and Urdu, for example, but also languages whose status as separate languages is not officially recognised. Among them are isiMpondo, isiPhuti, isiHlubi and isiBhaca."⁹⁵

Importantly, community media ticks the right boxes when it comes to development, in that it has created something entirely new, and diversity, in that many more media outlets broadcasting in a language other than English can share their perspectives with their own communities. And the sector holds out the hope of achieving other worthy objectives such as facilitating democratisation, and empowering communities – though to add a cautionary note, examples of community radio stations in conflict situations on the continent inciting hatred and even genocide also exist.⁹⁶

⁹² A distinction must be made between "secret," "confidential" and "private". News media operate on behalf of the public, and unveiling secrets is often the aim. Confidentiality is usually based on agreement or rules about disclosure.

⁹³ MDDA, "Fundraising Strategy," 19.

⁹⁴ PMG, "MDDA on Funding Model of Community Broadcasters and Their Operations across All Provinces; with Deputy Minister | PMG."

⁹⁵ Krüger, "SA's Rich Bag of Big, Small and Eclectic Community Radio Stations - Wits University."

⁹⁶ Peter da Costa, "The Growing Pains of Community Radio in Africa - Emerging Lessons Towards Sustainability," *Nordicom Review* 33, no. Special Issue (2012): 135, https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/362_da%20costa.pdf.

The MDDA is also charged with enhancing diversity, which goes beyond funding community media. Media diversity is hard to argue against, as is preventing media ownership concentration. However, to adapt media ownership expert Eli Noam’s argument about the misplaced overenthusiasm for media deconcentration,⁹⁷ while media diversity is arguably essential for the functioning of democracy, it is no panacea for all society’s ills. Having more diverse media will not solve poverty and inequality and it is hard to see how it will make the news media in general more resilient in the face of technological disruption.

How sustainable is the present funding model for the MDDA is illustrated by the spending over the last five years. From 2015/16 to 2020/21 the total funding of the MDDA rose by 63,5%, compared to the inflation rate over those years as measured by the Consumer Price Index of 23,4%.

Table 23: MDDA Funding over six years

| Funding source | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 | 2020/21 |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Total govt funding | R22 615 000 | R23 814 000 | R30 005 000 | R30 669 000 | R31 795 000 | R32 279 000 |
| Broadcast Income | R34 387 098 | R43 661 000 | R48 256 912 | R51 743 849 | R56 313 833 | R60 915 177 |
| Total | R57 002 098 | R67 475 000 | R78 261 912 | R82 412 849 | R88 108 833 | R93 194 177 |

Source: MDDA 2020/21 Annual Report

The MDDA’s answer, as Minister Gungubele states, is to seek funding over and above its present sources.

An issue is that the plethora of reports on media sustainability recently shows the problem of sustainability is not unique to community media. Media diversity may even be under threat from consolidation should one of the Big 4 fail commercially. The Covid-19 crisis showed the vulnerability of the print media in general, and the State-owned broadcaster has argued for support for its “unfunded mandate”. Moreover, non-profit community media will compete with non-profit media in general – and even for-profit outlets – for outside funding.

For the sake of those benefiting from community media, answers to sustainability beyond simply funding or waiting for more government ad spend need to be investigated and actioned urgently.

Media strategist Gordon Muller in 2016 urged those in the sector to think “of business ecosystems not survival of the fittest in a last man standing competition”. To survive, he believed, small community-based media needed to form into a Community Media Collective.⁹⁸ Certainly it might give community more chance of competing with the local media put out by members of the newspaper companies such as Caxton. However, co-operation rather than competition with the bigger publishers, which are also in the business of news production, should not be ruled out.

⁹⁷ Eli M. Noam, *Media Ownership and Concentration in America* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

⁹⁸ Gordon Muller, “Community Media: Victims or Entrepreneurs?,” *The Media Online* (blog), October 21, 2016, <http://themediainline.co.za/2016/10/community-media-victims-or-entrepreneurs/>.

Collaboration as well as competition is increasingly seen as a strategy in journalism itself. An interesting example is provided by the work of Anton van Zyl and community newspaper Limpopo Mirror in collaboration with freelancer Ray Joseph working for non-profit news organisation GroundUp on an investigation into corruption at the National Lottery Commission⁹⁹ – an investigation that started as a purely local article on an old age home project that the community had not asked for and was left abandoned and gradually decaying.¹⁰⁰ What was a purely local article which could have been left to die a natural death was taken up and amplified through the collaboration. Vital information flowed from the neglected periphery of the far-flung province to the attention of the digital news elites. This may be a marker of what could be achieved. A scan of locally produced news across the community media, aggregated and contextualised, can make for powerful news in the public interest.

Vuk'uzenzele

The State-owned newspaper is produced by the Government Communication and Information System and distributed at GCIS provincial offices, GCIS district offices and Thusong Service Centres. It had a monthly distribution of 850 000 copies in the last quarter of 2021, far higher than other free newspapers audited by the ABC, and those produced by the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) who are not audited by the ABC. It is a vehicle for government job advertising as well as government information. This seems to represent competition with the community print media that government is supposed to be supporting.

A South African news agency

The closure of the South African Press Association (SAPA) caused grief and some concern among journalists, one of whom pointed out that SAPA was “part of daily life”. SAPA, founded in 1938, was a fallback for newspapers to fill their pages and online news but also, according to the last SAPA editor Mark van der Velden, supplied the basic information which “is the vital platform of raw information that a lot of other media need”.

The SAPA support was not confined to print. The website News24, launched in October 1998, originally contained “about 70% wire copy (from the now-defunct South African Press Association, or SAPA), 20% translated newspaper content (mainly from Media24’s Afrikaans titles) and about 10% original stories.”¹⁰¹

SAPA originally offered cost-savings, operating as a co-operative, pooling news supplied by its member newspapers to provide “neutral, routine domestic news,” as well as bulk-buying

⁹⁹ GroundUp Staff, “Another Win for Lottery Investigation Team,” GroundUp News, November 11, 2021, <http://www.groundup.org.za/article/another-win-lottery-investigation-team/>.

¹⁰⁰ Anton Van Zyl, “Maila’s ‘old-Age Home’ Exposes Web of Lies and Deceit at Lottery,” Limpopo Mirror, March 12, 2022, <https://www.limpopomirror.co.za/articles/news/55677/2022-03-12/mailas-old-age-home-exposes-web-of-lies-and-deceit-at-lottery>.

¹⁰¹ Pieter du Toit, “Paying to Read: News24 Follows Global Trends in Ensuring Quality, Independent Reportage,” News24, July 14, 2020, <https://www.news24.com/news24/analysis/paying-to-read-news24-follows-global-trends-in-ensuring-quality-independent-reportage-20200713>.

international agency content. The idea of neutrality was always troublesome. No news is neutral, since even the choice of topic is conditioned by our beliefs and experience. During apartheid, how could anyone be neutral without moral compromise? SAPA, however, according to Van der Velden, also viewed as an important principle independence from government control and working “in the public interest.”¹⁰²

The agency continued to be independent and started in the 1970s to generate its own news content, which increasingly became its main function. It was fully fledged news agency, albeit increasingly starved of funds by its members.¹⁰³

The assets of SAPA were bought by Sekunjalo, whose portfolio includes Independent Media, and in a competitive industry this itself would have deterred potential buyers of news content for their own publications. The objective was not to recreate SAPA but create something else entirely, an African news service.

ANA, as a “syndicated multimedia news service” aims, according to the Sekunjalo website, to be, “the continent’s single source of reliable and credible news on government, politics, economies, markets, business, sports and lifestyle”. Given the language, social, political and economic differences of the more than 54 countries on the continent being the single source of news is an ambitious aim, but more importantly the Africa focus meant ANA from the start differed markedly from SAPA, whose area of operation was South Africa.

The idea of an African news agency to counterbalance Western dominance of international representation of Africa would be appealing to many Africans. The Pan African News Agency, launched in the 1980s with this aim did not really manage to get off the ground.¹⁰⁴ So, it may seem that an African focus was overambitious. The contrary view has been expressed that “resource-intensive but socially valuable” news agencies can no longer rely on the role they have played in national media systems and that transnational approaches are needed as well as support, financial and otherwise.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Van der Velden.

¹⁰³ Velden.

¹⁰⁴ Jeff Greenwald, “Wiring Africa,” WIRE, January 6, 1994, <http://www.wired.com/1994/06/africa/>.

¹⁰⁵ Staff Reporter, “Brown Tackles ANC on Media Transformation | IOL News,” 21.

Adjusting to a multiplatform environment presents an opportunity to increase public awareness of their operations, and they must seize this opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to produce reliable news. In order to secure the trustworthiness of their news, however, the independence of news agencies should be protected, irrespective of their ownership form.¹⁰⁶

ANA credibility was dealt a blow in 2021 by claims at the Zondo Commission that the agency had been paid R20-million by the State Security Agency (SSA).¹⁰⁷ ANA CEO Vasantha Angamuthu confirmed that in 2016/2017 the SSA had contracted ANA "... to provide multi-media training for SSA analysts and interns across Africa, and to use its platforms, in particular the African Independent newspaper, to carry positive stories about South Africa and the South African government."

Before the Zondo claims, the Citizen and eNCA both decided not to renew subscriptions to the newswire, making it reliant in South Africa on Independent Media titles.¹⁰⁸ In September 2019, ANA issued Section 189 retrenchment notices to journalists and photographers as part of a restructuring and a refocusing on Africa.¹⁰⁹

The late Raymond Louw had warned in 2016 that the government might want to fill the hole left by SAPA with a State news agency, but the State – apart from the SSA – has shown no interest. It has its own news agency, whose website is SAnews.gov.za, producing at least some non-controversial news for free that is at least occasionally picked up by other news sites.

Is there a commercial or social need and can a demand be created for a South African news agency? Van der Velden, writing a lengthy assessment of the reasons behind the demise of the news agency at the end of March 2015, reckoned intense competition in a slowly dying print industry made SAPA's death inevitable. "SAPA's story should be studied in further detail, but it is history. It cannot and will not be recreated," was Van der Velden's judgment after the agency's closure.¹¹⁰

Social media, in particular Twitter has taken over some of the news alert functions and news agenda setting functions SAPA used to perform. Indeed, it even supplies copy in the form of republished tweets for journalists. The print and online media are in the main cash strapped, leaving the broadcasters, and their licence conditions may not cover using agency news.

¹⁰⁶ Terhi Rantanen et al., "The Future of National News Agencies in Europe: Executive Summary," Monograph (London, UK: London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications, January 1, 2019), 22, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100062/>.

¹⁰⁷ Greg Nicolson, "DAYS OF ZONDO: Iqbal Survé's African News Agency Was Paid R20m by State Security Agency, Claims Sydney Mufamadi," Daily Maverick, January 25, 2021, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-01-26-iqbal-surves-african-news-agency-was-paid-r20m-by-state-security-agency-claims-sydney-mufamadi/>.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolson.

¹⁰⁹ Sasha Planting, "BUSINESS MAVERICK: Fear and Loathing at Survé-Owned The African News Agency," Daily Maverick, September 6, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-06-fear-and-loathing-at-surve-owned-the-african-news-agency/>.

¹¹⁰ Mark van der Velden, "Why Sapa Closed: The Editor's Story," *The Media Online*, July 30, 2015, [//themediainline.co.za/2015/07/why-sapa-closed-the-editors-story/](http://themediainline.co.za/2015/07/why-sapa-closed-the-editors-story/).

The Community Media section of this report described how an important local news article produced by the Limpopo Mirror was picked up by an online non-profit outlet and amplified, leading eventually to the exposure of many millions of rands worth of corrupt diversion of funds meant for the poor to private pockets. What other such stories might be out there? South Africa's news organisations are notoriously focused on the urban areas and in one view reflect the views of a suburban elite – a view from the suburbs¹¹¹ of the country and the world. A need would appear to exist for a news agency that could generate news about and for people and communities on the periphery, perhaps tied in with community and local news media. Government could supply seed funding for this. Continuous funding would simply mean the creation of another government news agency, but fears of government control should not prevent funding to strengthen journalism.

An apt example of government and donor intervention in the public interest to save a news agency came in Australia in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis, with the purchase by a consortium of philanthropists and “impact investors” of the Australian Associated Press (AAP) newswire. The failure of AAP would have boosted the market dominance of Rupert Murdoch's already dominant NewsCorp according to one economist. “NewsCorp have since threatened to set up a for-profit newswire.”¹¹²

The introduction of philanthropic and government support to the newswire service has had a major impact on the media diversity and competition during the crisis and as a newswire can only thrive when its customers thrive, the interests of the not-for-profit AAP are aligned with the health and diversity of the media landscape.¹¹³

Given the suspicion of government involvement in news media in South Africa, inherited from the apartheid era, it is not strange that no one thought to approach government to keep SAPA alive, and because of the history of location of trusted news media in the private sector, that no one thought to seek donor support. An independent, properly funded news wire would now need to be created from scratch. The MDDA's remit is media diversity, so it would be the natural government agency to lead such an initiative, though it would have to be set up as an independent agency producing more than “churnalism” or lightly rewritten press releases. Similar to the vision of injecting money into community news media through dedicated advertising, government could support the new news wire through “super subscriptions”¹¹⁴ for distribution to its own news wire and newspapers.

¹¹¹ Steven Friedman, “Whose Freedom? South Africa's Press, Middle-Class Bias and the Threat of Control,” *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 32, no. 2 (July 2011): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560054.2011.578887>.

¹¹² Anya Schiffrin, Hannah Clifford, and Kylie Tumiatti, “Saving Journalism: A Vision for the Post-Covid World” (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, January 2021), 13.

¹¹³ Schiffrin, Clifford, and Tumiatti, “Saving Journalism: A Vision for the Post-Covid World.”

¹¹⁴ Schiffrin, Clifford, and Tumiatti, 14.

Non-profit news

One of the bright spots in South Africa has been the rise of non-profit, purely web-based news organisations. During the Coronavirus crisis they seemed to be unaffected by the economic turmoil, because the financial commitments were long term.¹¹⁵ However, no funding comes without risks.

Non-profit news organisations that stand out:

- Daily Maverick
- AmaBhungane
- GroundUp

Several others are worthy of consideration, such as the health news site Bhekisisa, whose credibility, built up over a period of years, served it well during the pandemic and made it possible to disseminate reliable information to the public about the Coronavirus.

As Anton Harber has shown in his book *So, For the Record*, which focuses on the coverage of the Gupta leaks emails, donor-funded news organisations can have several advantages over their commercial counterparts in covering news of public importance. The book also illustrates the benefits of collaboration in the public interest by non-profits with for-profit or hybrid news organisations, in this case amaBhungane, Daily Maverick and News24.¹¹⁶

Who measures the reach and effectiveness of NPO sites? The answer at least in some cases is the donors, who bring to journalism a desire to measure not just audience size or reach but impact and sometimes pressure for new metrics to gauge impact. Journalists, as scholars Anya Schiffrin and Ethan Zuckerman point out, are themselves sceptical about metrics, especially if they regard journalism as a public good on its own merits. Traditional metrics may be insufficient, but the value of alternative metrics is also contentious.¹¹⁷

Media organisations, meanwhile, must watch out for threats to newsroom independence. The increasing focus on measurable impact may become an excuse to decide that only some kinds of coverage are worth supporting. If newsrooms limit their reporting to stories that can have immediate effects or quantifiable results, they might be unwilling to cover large, persistent — yet vitally important — social problems. Ultimately, the impact that journalists can have on society will erode if they must serve the whims of funders. That is true whether the funders in question are government officials, advertisers, corporate owners, or well-intentioned philanthropists.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Rumney, “SANEF COVID 19 Impact on Journalism Report (Interim),” 27.

¹¹⁶ Anton Harber, *SO, FOR THE RECORD - Behind the Headlines in an Era of State Capture*. (Johannesburg: JONATHAN BALL PUBLISHERS, 2020), 165–66.

¹¹⁷ Anya Schiffrin and Ethan Zuckerman, “Can We Measure Media Impact? Surveying the Field (SSIR),” 2015, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/can_we_measure_media_impact_surveying_the_field.

¹¹⁸ Schiffrin and Zuckerman.

Funding often comes with direct control, of for instance the area to be covered, say health in the case of Bhekisisa. In general, funders may informally suggest topics to be covered, or journalists may be indirectly influenced in their coverage by knowledge of donor preferences. A news organisation can insulate itself against influence by drawing on a number of donors. however. Moreover, hybrid models, such as Daily Maverick, which are financed by small membership and large foundation donations, as well as advertising, deserve consideration for replication as they are not dependent on any one source of revenue. In South Africa, non-profit media is most common in community radio, thanks to licence conditions – and yet it has been suggested that they often are small, survivalist businesses. Community TV certainly may not be suitable for NPO models.

These issues, along with how much money is flowing into donor-funded news and how many outlets exist, remain to be properly researched.

Public Interest news media

Old hands in newsrooms will be familiar with debates about what news is in the public interest and what news the public is interested in. Another way for journalists to phrase this is, “What is important” versus “What is interesting.” Election results versus Kim Kardashian’s latest red-carpet wardrobe may be used as examples.

Competition for audience attention in the age of a multiplicity of distractions on screens sharpens the focus on the divide between what the audience wants to know and what the audience needs to know. What has been described as, in the past an “almost ritualist practice of invoking ‘quality’” in defence against seriously interacting with readers, viewers and listeners has now been replaced with the “audience turn”.¹¹⁹

What the public needs to know and what the public desires to know are not always at odds, as the Covid-19 crisis illustrated. News consumption after the advent of the Covid-19 disaster in 2020 surged by 40% for Zulu news and 60% for isiXhosa news compared to before the crisis.¹²⁰

It might be easier to define public interest in times of crisis than in times of non-crisis. Putting the audience first in researching media, however, is not incompatible with normative approaches to journalism that emphasise ethics. Public interest has long been part of assessments of media performance and an important part of broader media governance.

The concept of the public interest has a long, well-established tradition in the realm of the governance of traditional media, serving not only as a guidepost for policymakers in their formulation and assessment of policies; but also as a professional norm for certain categories of media professionals (e.g., journalists); as well as an evaluative and rhetorical tool for civil society organizations in their

¹¹⁹ Irene Costera Meijer, “Understanding the Audience Turn in Journalism: From Quality Discourse to Innovation Discourse as Anchoring Practices 1995–2020,” *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 16 (December 9, 2020): 2327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1847681>.

¹²⁰ Rumney, “SANEF COVID 19 Impact on Journalism Report (Interim).”

assessments of media performance and their advocacy efforts on behalf of the broader public (McQuail, 1992).¹²¹

What exactly defines the “public interest,” a term often used to defend journalism in South Africa from perceived or real attacks, is not immune to contestation. Herman Wasserman and Arnold De Beer see the pursuit of the public interest as part of a functionalist, individualist market-based approach to news production and provision in the US social responsibility paradigm, where journalism fulfils a watchdog role, primarily against state abuses of citizen’s rights. It holds the danger of being an “ideological smokescreen to protect the proprietors’ interests instead of the workers’ rights” and an attendant self-defined professionalisation serving market rather than community interest.¹²²

However, in my experience of newsrooms, the “public interest” is more likely to be heuristic for working journalists, denoting journalism in pursuit of the common good as opposed to journalism serving vested interests, such as publishers using their publications to promote the goods and services of companies they own, in other words public interest journalism is *independent* of specific interests – though not necessarily neutral in political positioning. “Put simply, the public interest is about what matters to everyone in society. It is about the common good, the general welfare and the security and well-being of everyone in the community we serve.”¹²³ In South Africa, “public interest” or “public benefit” is also a key defence in cases of defamation,¹²⁴ and thus also arguably a tool for freedom of expression.

In any case, one definition of news is “verifiable information in the public interest.”¹²⁵ This only works if news that is clearly and definitively entertainment, such as celebrity news, especially when it is simply an extension of entertainment industry publicity mechanisms, is excluded, but the idea of verifiability is helpful. Since the existence of 10 babies could never be confirmed, the by-now infamous Pretoria News exclusive of Tembisa 10 decuplets, for instance, cannot be defined as news.^{126 127}

South Africa’s Press Council, an institution which has been instrumental in fending off statutory regulation describes news in the public interest as “information of legitimate interest or importance to citizens”. The paragraph continues:

¹²¹ Philip M. Napoli, “Social Media and the Public Interest: Governance of News Platforms in the Realm of Individual and Algorithmic Gatekeepers,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2014, 5, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2481886>.

¹²² Herman Wasserman and Arnold De Beer, “Which Public? Whose Interest? The South African Media and Its Role during the First Ten Years of Democracy,” *Critical Arts* 19, no. 1–2 (2005): 41–42.

¹²³ “The Public Interest,” *Ethical Journalism Network* (blog), n.d., <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/the-public-interest>.

¹²⁴ Dario Milo and Pamela Stein, *A Practical Guide to Media Law* (Morningside, Durban: Lexis Nexis, 2013), 30.

¹²⁵ Ireton and Posetti, *Journalism, “Fake News” et Disinformation*, 7.

¹²⁶ SANEF, “SANEF Outraged by Collapse of Journalistic Ethics at Independent Media’s Pretoria News,” *SANEF | Protecting Media Freedom* (blog), June 15, 2021, <https://sanef.org.za/sanef-outraged-by-collapse-of-journalistic-ethics-at-independent-medias-pretoria-news/>.

¹²⁷ SANEF, “SANEF Notes Report about Reckless, Irresponsible Journalism at Pretoria News Following Publication of Decuplets,” *SANEF | Protecting Media Freedom* (blog), October 28, 2021, <https://sanef.org.za/sanef-notes-report-about-reckless-irresponsible-journalism-at-pretoria-news-following-publication-of-decuplets/>.

As journalists we commit ourselves to the highest standards, to maintain credibility and keep the trust of the public. This means always striving for truth, avoiding unnecessary harm, reflecting a multiplicity of voices in our coverage of events, showing a special concern for children and other vulnerable groups, and exhibiting sensitivity to the cultural customs of their readers and the subjects of their reportage, and acting independently.

Independence is stressed in the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) feasibility study definition of public interest media:

Public interest media is defined here as media that is free and independent, that exists to inform people on the issues that shape their lives, in ways which serve the *public's rather than any political, commercial or factional interest* [my emphasis], to enable public debate and dialogue across society, and to hold those in power to account on behalf of the public interest. This implies a focus on ethical and credible media working in the interests of all people across a society, not just those who have the power or money to pay for – or influence – media.¹²⁸

The aim of the IFPIM initiative to mobilise funding for journalism sustainability gives the organisation's definition added weight.

What of news media's role in ensuring the development of democracy? It is tempting to define public interest in terms of democracy or the constitution that protects that democracy, but this is too narrow. A free flow of news serves a multiplicity of purposes, as is implied by Uses and Gratifications media theory: it is hard to imagine in 2022 what a completely unmediated society (social media is still media) might look like and how the members of that society might navigate their social, political and economic environment.

In summary then, several strands make up the idea of public interest: ethical journalism, credibility, striving for truth, avoiding harm, but most importantly independence. To this I would add transparency, of ownership,¹²⁹ and transparency of the journalistic process¹³⁰ with verification at its heart.

Transparency also helps establish that the journalist has a public interest motive, the key to credibility. The willingness of the journalist to be transparent about what he or she has done is at the heart of establishing that the journalist is concerned with the truth.¹³¹

As emphasised earlier, it is a mistake to confuse “public interest journalism” with what is “worthy”. Investigative journalism is often considered the pinnacle of public interest

¹²⁸ IFPIM, “Enabling Media Markets to Work for Democracy: An International Fund for Public Interest Media,” March 2020, p2, <https://luminategroup.com/ifpim>.

¹²⁹ Reg Rumney, “Media Ownership and Transparency: Regulation, Ethics, Accountability,” *Rhodes Journalism Review*, no. 33 (2013): 57–58.

¹³⁰ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (Atlantic Books, 2003), 80–82.

¹³¹ Kovach and Rosenstiel, 81.

journalism and as the Guptaleaks reporting showed it can be the very opposite of boring. Yet without the elements highlighted of independence, verification and verifiability and transparency, what parades as investigative journalism can simply be irresponsible sensationalism, as the Sunday Times’ rogue unit stories proved to be.¹³²

In essence then, a possible definition of public interest journalism would be journalism that is independent of political, commercial or factional interest, producing verified and verifiable information for an intended audience and transparent in its methods of pursuing the truth for the sake of the common good while being careful to do no harm.

Codes of conduct do not replace putting this at the heart of practice but they can help advertise to the public the processes and procedures that journalists employ as well as helping sustainability by bypassing expensive court cases. In this regard, the continued existence of the South African Press Council and the Press Ombud in South Africa should be safeguarded.

The Performance of the Press Council

Over the years the Press Council of South Africa has received a remarkably consistent level of complaints, despite the departure of Independent Media in 2016. The Press Council table of complaints received, with mass complaints i.e. many complaints about a single article, indicate that the system is working. If it were not the number of complaints presumably dwindle. Those aggrieved by press coverage are not prevented by complaining to the Press Council from taking legal action. A 2015 opinion piece by UNISA academic Julie Reid contended that, based on empirical evidence and research statistics, “The independence of the Press Council of South Africa is currently beyond reproach.”^{133 134}

Table 24: Complaints to the Press Council of South Africa

| 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 487 | 461 | 591 | 536 | 499 | 533 | 449 | 742* (442) | 845** (384) | 63 until March |

2020* (303 “mass” complaints, thus only 442 complaints in 2020)

37 – Complaints against TimesLive (“Master’s student freed after two years in jail for rape he did not commit”)

227 – Against Rapport (Crowd 1 – “Bok-helde val vir `piramideskema’) and 14 against SABC (“Rustenburg Community clash over electricity”)

26 – Against News24 (“Amed Free State farmers storm holding cells of Brendin Homer murder accused – police”) and 13 against Beeld (“2 vas vir lyk aan paal”).

2021** (464 “mass” complaints – thus only 384 complaints in 2021).

285 – Complaints against Rapport (Nampree and other complainants, about alleged rape by DJs.

22 – Against The Citizen and News24 (Siya Kolisi pic with article about sexual assault charges against former coach in Australia).

157 – Against City Press (Identifying Ngizwe Mchunu’s minor daughter, sexually assaulted).

¹³² Harber, SO, *FOR THE RECORD - Behind the Headlines in an Era of State Capture*.

¹³³ Julie Reid, “Independent Media’s Excuses for Ditching the Press Council Make No Logical Sense,” Daily Maverick, October 24, 2016, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-10-24-independent-medias-excuses-for-ditching-the-press-council-make-no-logical-sense/>.

¹³⁴ I am a member of the Press Council.

Conclusion

In our interim report on the Covid-19 impact in June 2020 on the news media, we warned that, "It would be a mistake to focus too much on the severe immediate effect of the lockdown and not on the longer term ...". We reminded that the risks extended beyond job losses to throttling the "flow of verifiable, credible information ... necessary for the health of democracies and economies" and opined that financial sustainability was essential for credible news media.

There has been little for our comfort since that report. Social media and other internet disintermediation, distraction, and disinformation remain a problem for serious news. Journalistic job losses have continued even at profitable companies as they sought to streamline operations in a persistently difficult economic environment. More newspapers have closed, cut back circulation to save money, or gone online.

Print media circulations have bounced back only a little and not evenly from the low levels to which they plunged as readers lost the habit of reading offline. Online journalism was boosted, though online ad revenue will not replace lost print ad spend and while online subscription as a model was endorsed, too few people may want to pay for news. The non-profit news sector has stepped into the gap left by diminished newsrooms, especially in investigative reporting.

Broadcasting has been robust and is still the way most people get their news, but the danger is that diminished news gathering capacity in print means that a lot of the news that appears online and on air is also threatened. Even with the financial support extended by the MDDA, community media, at least partially precarious at the best of times, came under pressure.

The emergency aid from the MDDA, which came on top of other continuing financial aid for community media and small commercial media, is mainly channeled from the commercial broadcast sector through a kind of tax. Government does transfer money from the budget to the MDDA, however. State financial support for news media, much discussed since the pandemic threatened news deserts around the world, is not unknown here. Whether the specific way the MDDA has funded initiatives is an efficient use of money, given the turnover of community media organisations, is moot. The agency suggests that some of its projects will never be self-sustaining. Yet both State and donor foundations often want to see funded initiatives stand on their own two feet rather than be eternal aid recipients, and long-term assistance is close to government funding, which has all kinds of implications.

That aside, the MDDA has created something entirely new in South Africa, along with generating jobs and training opportunities. It may need rethinking and retooling, rather than new injections of money but it shows intervention can have positive effect. The idea of intervention recalls the idea of the State stepping in to make up for market failure, but this neo-classical concept might need deprecation in favour of more heterodox economic approaches

This report stops short of making recommendations, because it is intended as an assessment of the state of the media to be used to support a range of SANEF recommendations in future.

However, certain themes appear, such as the potential for intervention. Just one is the idea of the State helping to start a new, independent, news agency. Along with other good ideas this will stay just that, like a rugby ball waiting to be played until someone sees enough benefit in it to pick it up and run with it.

All this discussion, it must be emphasised, aims at producing the kind of public interest journalism that makes news media an essential service to society. Part of that resides in balancing the flow of misinformation and disinformation that social media makes possible. And recent lapses in journalistic practice in South Africa serve to underline that not all fake news emanates from malign social media.