

BY BRIAN POTTINGER




days, you may have noticed, are not what they used to be in the days of puritanical observance laws.

Then it was  church, the  braai, Sunday paper and  **bad tv.** These days it is

international  **sport** (live or on the box), all-day shopping at the malls ,

 **drinks** in the pub and an **explosion**  of out-door  activities encouraged by the more  **relaxed** political climate.

And in the  **evenings** there is, at least for some, the **Internet.**

Battling to get a  look-in on our profoundly changed Sabbaths, meanwhile, are the papers that publish on this day...

➤ *continued on page 9*

Sunday newspapers

“Many, even most, Sunday readers are in a relaxed mode by the time they read the paper. A surfeit of serious analysis can easily tire and indeed bore them. A Sunday newspaper has certainly to be informative and reliable. It must also have the capacity to surprise, intrigue and amaze.”

S

UNDAY PAPERS world-wide have taken a bit of a knock in recent years. Sales are down for most of the quality and tabloid weeklies across the US, UK and Europe. In some places publishers are reduced to producing an “executive summary” paper to spare their less committed readers from having to plough through kilograms of newsprint. The South African Sunday market, alas, has not been able to escape its share of the trauma.

There are two distinguishing features about Sunday newspapering in this country. Over the last 20 years the number of papers sold on Sunday has increased by only 100 000 which on present population growth means a diminishing readership in real terms. The last audited six-monthly figure now stands at a hardly impressive 1,2 million newspapers sold on a Sunday. Out of an estimated population of over 40 million, it is small beer.

The second feature has been the rigidity in the share of the market. Out of every ten papers sold on Sunday, four are copies of the *Sunday Times*, three *Rapport* and two *City Press*. The remaining copy is a *Sunday Tribune* and now there are a few competitors nudging in on the fringes of the market—the *Independent on Sunday* and the Sunday edition of *The Argus* in Cape Town which together control about five per cent of the market.

Sunday publishing has thus been constrained by a market that is declining in real terms and by market leaders who have not been able to improve their share.

I believe there are three issues which the Sunday newspapers have to confront head-on: the role of the Sundays in the broad sweep of other media, their format and content and their markets. All three are closely interwoven.

The Jeremiahs over print media have long since been dismissed. First it was television that would finish us off. Then the Internet. Now satellite television.

This has not happened and the printed word has kept its place in the educational and entertainment life of the nation. What has happened, instead, is a growing awareness of the complementary, rather than adversarial, nature of media.

If radio provides the quick audio hit on the story, television follows with the visual, the dailies with the written news, the Sundays the backgrounders and analysis, the magazines deep background and the Internet a vast and largely uncharted archival cavern. All exist on the continuum of media.

At the *Sunday Times* we recently pioneered an interesting exercise in the way media can complement each other through our ill-fated *Sunday Times* Everest Expedition. The expedition as we envisaged it fell apart because of an explosive and unpredictable cocktail of human emotions and frailties, but the media principles on which it was built are worth a thought.

It was our intention to make the bid to put the country's flag on top of the world a multi-

EACH SUNDAY PAPER FACES ITS OWN LIMITATIONS:

- The very breadth of the *Sunday Times* readership is a challenge: how do you hold together a constituency that stretches from white farmers in the Limpopo Valley to black industrial workers in Langa — particularly in times of rapid political and social transformation?
- *Rapport* has benefited from coloured readers re-appropriating Afrikaans after the demise of apartheid, but its growth is limited by the number of people who speak the language.
- *City Press* has taken enormous strides in recent years — pushing its share from under six per cent to 19 per cent in less than seven years — but it still battles to provide a wide range of coverage for its increasingly far-flung readership.
- The coastal papers like *Sunday Tribune* and the *Weekend Argus* have loyal local readers but would have to look at massive investments in print capacity and staffing to become successful national papers.

media event. As principal sponsor we would carry the print news and pictures from the expedition. Our own magazine and *Out There* magazine, a sister publication, would have the magazine rights. We agreed to *Radio 702* running a daily bulletin from the mountain and welcomed attempts by the expedition leader to draw in television to provide both news and documentary coverage.

Finally we helped set-up and maintain an Internet site where we downloaded copy and pictures. Because of some truly imaginative innovations provided by some sponsors, 360 degrees quicktime for example, the site became the most popular in South African history. It was intended to evolve into an on-line link with a site at the Everest base camp but this did not materialise because of disputes with the expedition leader.

As a pilot it was an interesting experiment in how various media can be drawn together to drive a central story.

Our initial impressions are that the complementary nature of the media coverage gave a greater impetus to reader interest in the *Sunday Times*—and that was even before the row between ourselves and the expedition leader propelled us into an unexpected and not wholly welcome type of public prominence.

I use the expedition merely as an example of the way a weekly paper can be networked into a range of other media in a mutually reinforcing way to drive interest in its contents and sharpen reader interest in the paper. It is these linkages that will have to be explored in the future.

What then should be the Sunday's role in this continuum of news?

I believe in a traditional role: break the big news exclusive, give context to the news of the week and entertain imaginatively. The key to the success of such a paper is the mix between information and entertainment. Many, even most, Sunday readers are in a relaxed mode by the time they read the paper. A surfeit of serious analysis can easily tire and indeed bore them. A Sunday newspaper has certainly to be informative and reliable. It must also have the capacity to surprise, intrigue and amaze.

This leads onto the question of format. If it is true that Sunday people have less time than ever to read newspapers, if it is true that we are now competing for people's time rather than simply their money, it raises a compelling question. What should newspapers do to present themselves more effectively? It all depends on your market.

The *Independent on Sunday* represents one side of the coin. It presents itself as an unashamedly up-market paper. It focuses more on features than news and it is nothing if not indulgent in its use of space. It has a range of foreign lifting rights and uses them expansively. This is a newspaper for the languid Sunday hours and as there are not many people with either that time or inclination it is likely to be limited to its existing platform of 30 000 to 40 000 readers. Nothing wrong with that, but its very format and content militates against its reaching a broader market.

City Press, the hugely successful black targeted paper, has a different hit. It presents hard news in a punchy and truncated form. ➤ continued on next page



“ Since the elections white readers have to a large extent lost interest in public policy issues and are now fiercely focused on life-style issues — particularly those relating to personal finance, education of their children, sport and holidaying. The obverse appears true of black South African readers. Here there is an intense interest in public policy...”

BRIAN POTTINGER

Its design is brash and it knows its readers want to get the news quickly and without complications.

I suspect that the future challenge for circulation Sunday newspapers will be to publish a range of editorial products, each one of which will have to value a niche reader and the sum of which will appeal to the more committed reader prepared to peruse all parts of the package. A newspaper like the *Sunday Times* with its stable of business, magazine and regional editions is well positioned to develop these niche markets within its broader constituency.

But that has implications for how one presents the paper. Increasingly, I believe, the papers will become segmented into closely cropped news sections and more expansive feature ones. The business sections will become more popular to attract pull-through readers and the magazines more life-style focused. There will have to be a carefully constructed dispersal of news and features throughout the component parts of the package. Design will have to follow these imperatives.

The third aspect to successful Sunday newspapering is of course markets. I detect an intriguing ground swell since the general elections. General interest English-language newspapers have by-and-large shown a decline in circulation. The more niched publications: financial, Afrikaans-language and black targeted have either grown or maintained their readership.

The reasons for this decline in readership are various but a central theme seems to be emerging.

Since the elections white readers have to a large extent lost interest in public policy issues and are now fiercely focused on life-style issues—particularly those relating to personal finance, education of their children, sport and holidaying. The obverse appears true of black South African readers. Here there is an intense interest in public policy as the enfranchised groups appropriate ownership of the country's domestic and foreign policies—the clearest indication of this was in the fierce debate waged over South Africa's policy towards Nigeria. There is another interesting strand to

this movement: as South Africans begin to become more comfortable in their multi-cultural democracy there is a move back towards cultural, religious, ethnic and language roots and this reflects in readership interests. The deadening hand of enforced segregation has lifted: deciding voluntarily to be different and diverse is now OK.

This is a sign of a maturing democracy but it does pose serious questions to general interest English-language papers which have traditionally straddled vast racial and class divides.

The answer to keeping a broad based readership is again going to have to be a greater diversity of supplementary publications under the aegis of a main title. To a considerable extent this has happened on the *Sunday Times* where the main body newspaper carries national news and specialist features and the five metropolitan papers—including the highly successful *City Metro* which circulates in the historically black residential area—report on local community news and features.

It is this link between local readers and their publications that is crucial to the survival of the broach churches represented by the English-language Sundays. In this regard the battles between the *Sunday Times* and coastal competitors like the *Sunday Tribune* and the Sunday edition of *The Argus* is fiercest.

The long-term future of Sunday newspapers is linked to a host of external factors—political, cultural and infrastructural. It is linked to the ability to build press capacity in this country and the ability to maintain the sophisticated support that is needed to run advanced fourth-wave technology and operate simultaneous printing operations at remote sites.

Ultimately, of course, it depends on how successfully Sunday journalists can persuade a very active public to invest precious time in a newspaper of which they might only read part—and then probably between watching a soccer international and going to the shopping mall. It demands new creativity, new ways of engaging readers.

At the time of writing Brian Pottinger was editor-designate of the Sunday Times and has since assumed full editorship.

Your global guide to reporting **porn** and the **Internet**

BY W.W. WEB

ALL SUCCESSFUL STORIES on the Internet are based on the following fact: The Internet is a piece of high-technology whose single goal is to get porn and bomb recipes into the hands of children.

Ignore the fact that there are over 11,000 other interest areas available on the Usenet. All people ever talk about there is books, films, art, hobbies, cars, health, politics, financial issues, current events, religion, literature, and so on. Who on earth would read a story about that?

Give your Internet report a special polish by specifically targeting a particular group. For example:

If you're writing for a right-wing audience:

Tell them about the horrible perversions they can run into on the Net. There are actually areas of the Net where gay people can meet, and talk. Your message is therefore: The Internet is a piece of high-technology whose single goal is to allow perverted gays and lesbians to get to your children.

If you're writing for a left-wing audience:

Your left-wing readers/viewers will be suspicious of the Net because the government is involved with it.

The Internet is simply a bridgehead for a nationwide police database, identity cards, and the spectre of Big Brother. Your general message is therefore: The Internet is a piece of high-technology whose single goal is to allow the government to set up a Big Brother-like nationwide computerised monitoring system

If you're writing for the "moral majority":

Tell them anything. If a 15-year-old runs away from home, they've been kidnapped by an Internet paedophile ring. There are more paedophiles on the Net in the US than the population of some countries. The Middle East has an appalling paedophiles-on-the-Net problem, even though there is no Internet in the Middle East.

You get the best results if you make your message more or less:

The Internet is a piece of high-technology whose single goal is to allow every imaginable form of depravity and filth into every home in the country.

Horror stories about the Internet have already helped hundreds of your colleagues through dry spells in the flow of news. Preserve this valuable resource for future generations of journalists.

You can report virtually anything without needing to do any research or acquire any background information. Therefore the real purpose of the Internet can finally be revealed:

The Internet is a piece of high-technology whose single goal is to allow reporters to grab the headlines for a day or two with an absolutely minimal investment in time and effort.