

Newspapering is capable of a renaissance writes Kerry Swift.

BACK TO THE FUTURE



The solution, I believe, lies in ... bright and brash tabloids

It seems that everywhere one goes in media circles these days, the 'experts' are burying newspapers and funeral orations tumble from the lips of the chattering classes as if there is no way out for the press which, of course, is either nonsense or self-satisfying prophesy.

The argument goes that print is on a graveyard spiral, a gentle swallow dive into oblivion, while electronic media, in particular the second-wave delivery systems of radio and television, are the informational and advertising highways to the new South Africa.

If one were to go purely on ad spend statistics and the rather depressing circulation figures of a number of our existing newspapers, the experts would appear to have something of a case.

Their position, however, is tenuous. In the battle to titillate the collective attention of the nation, the show isn't over until, obesa cantavit, the fat lady sings, and in the media show newspapering is quite capable of a renaissance.

It is not newspapers per se that are facing a shallow grave, it's the idea that newspapers must peddle news. Selling hard news in print to our electronic generation is a bit like trying to sell Gideon bibles to New Age travellers. It's a case of misusing the medium and, in the fast-moving and highly competitive information business, it's the so-

called 'newspapers of record' that are most vulnerable in the battle against electronic media.

By way of illustration, a morning newspaper recently ran a front page story suggesting that a truckers' demonstration which had blocked traffic access to one of our cities was still continuing. This edition was still on sale in the beleaguered city hours after morning television had reported that the blockade had ended.

It is a simple but graphic example of the principle that newspapers, with their complex and time-consuming production procedures, cannot hope to compete against electronic media when it comes to breaking news.

How can newspaper reporters, even with the latest 486 laptops, modems and the electronic genius of AT&T, possibly compete with a Peter Arnett, TV camera and satellite dish to hand, perched on top of a Baghdad hotel recording live Uncle Sam's latest hand-out to the dread Saddam?

Of course they cannot. Nor should they even try.

It's a bit like the tortoise racing the hare. But, as the old fable has it, it is not only speed that counts in the battle for attention. Charm... flair... insight... rat-like cunning... all can achieve the purpose and put our electronic cousins firmly in their place.

If newspapers are to survive, however, they must either become niche

products by providing in-depth coverage and interpretation of specialist aspects of human endeavour (sport/business/politics/arts/culture etc) or emulate the British tabloids and peddle gossip and entertainment for all they're worth. In other words, "never let the facts get in the way of a good story".

While the niche product certainly has its place, and Business Day in the mainstream and Engineering News among the specialist press are examples of just how successful niche newspapers can be, it is harnessing the mass market that is the absorbing challenge for newspaper publishers and one that we in South Africa have not yet risen to.

The solution, I believe, lies in tabloid newspapers. Not the subsidised and politically correct variety that emerged as alternative voices in the eighties and are now being retreated to meet the market, but the bright and brash tabloids that sell millions each day in the United Kingdom and which have yet to emerge in South Africa.

Like them or loath them, the British tabloids are brilliant examples of journalistic flair and if they are approached with a healthy detachment and accepted as entertainment, which British readers in their teeming millions undoubtedly do, they are almost an art form. Low art perhaps, but who said mass taste was anything but vulgar. If it wasn't, how could Hollywood possibly have survived this long?

Historically it was Jim Bailey's Golden City Post which pointed the way. It was selling over a quarter of a million copies 30 odd years ago but its brilliance as a newspaper was not matched by economic fortune among its readers. It is difficult for advertisers to promote all the clutter of the modern consumer society to people who don't own houses and who are even without electricity.

All that is changing now. So too is the delivery of mass literacy. The pillars are being put in place on which to build a mass circulation tabloid press which, given the right editorial mix (i.e. less politics, more sport and vulgarity) could sell into the millions.

But newspapers must go back to the future. They have to turn back the clock to rediscover the editorial pulse that once pumped so hard but which all but disappeared through the apartheid years as journalists had to abandon the joy of newspapering and pick up the sword.

If a mass circulation tabloid press is to emerge here, it is unlikely to come from existing tabloids on show. Only the Sowetan has the potential to attack a mass market, but not under its parochial masthead. Something tells me, however, that for all its success, the Sowetan is only half way home.

I have spent many hours watching people buy and read their newspapers in the streets and, in most cases, they read from the back to the front as most readers used to do with the Sunday

Times before it was repaginated.

In the case of the Sunday Times, the back page was reserved for errant vicars being caught in flagrante delicto or for the sexual peccadilloes of the rich and famous all guaranteed to give readers something to chortle over after church.

In the case of the Sowetan, the sports pages at the back are the main drawcard both for the sporting news they contain and the extraordinary mafia antics of the sports administrators.

Perhaps therein lies the shining new path for newspapers in South Africa, a tabloid press which panders to the vulgar tastes of the lowest common denominator and which uses the British tabloid tradition as the visual model to breathe some life back into our ailing newspapers, which by and large have become tired, demoralised, uninspired and largely politically irrelevant.

An example, is the tabloid Goalpost which was launched late this year as an insert in the Evening Post in Port Elizabeth. Aggressive and colourful, Goalpost has led to delegations to the editor, threats to journalists and, most importantly, an increase in circulation.

In short, it's time we put some fun back into newspapering and stopped taking ourselves so damn seriously.

Kerry Swift is founding editor of Review.

Bright and brash, Goalpost attracted reader attention



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