

# Community newspapers: Prospects and challenges in a digital age

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# The Association of Independent Publishers – who we are

- We are a membership-based association, established in 2005 to represent online and print publications in SA.
- We are the biggest association of small publishers - we represent most but not all community publishers.
- At present we have 191 publications with a 2.6m monthly print run and approx 8m monthly readership.
- Our publications are not affiliated to the big media publishers Caxton, Arena, Media 24 or Independent – we have a diverse independent ownership.

# The Association of Independent Publishers - continued

- Majority of our members are for-profit SMMEs. A small group are non-profits e.g. GroundUp and Muslim Views.
- Some members are tiny - one to two person operations, others are bigger 10 to 15 people organisations. (Almost as big, sometimes bigger than publications such as the M&G.)
- The key thing about us - We are all about diversity!
- We cover all the 11 official languages.
- We cover a range of topics – news, current affairs, lifestyle, business, religion, the arts, education and the sciences.

# **The Association of Independent Publishers – examples that reflect our diversity**

- Slindile Khanyile – Umbele – An online isiZulu business publication. Launched in the last few years
- Anton van Zyl – Limpopo Mirror and Zoutpansberger. Published in Makhado Limpopo in English and Afrikaans. Been in existence for decades, published in print and online. Award winning investigative journalism covering municipal and lotto corruption.
- Mahmood Sanglay – Muslim Views. A decades old religious publication published online and print in Cape Town with local, national and international audiences.

# But it has been a real struggle - The problems of Covid and more

- Difficult times. In 2016 we had 204 publications (now we have 191). The overall print runs were significantly higher - 7.5m monthly (now we have 2.6m). In 2016 we had a readership of 22.6m. Now we have a readership of approx 8m. That is a 14.6m drop over 7 years.
- While mainstream media (e.g. News24) had surging audiences online during Covid – community media didn't. Difficult to access the internet at home in poorer households without internet access.
- The majority of our publications stopped printing over Covid. Actual figures difficult to obtain.

# Post Covid - Huge challenges

- Post-Covid – difficult times continue
- Over the last few years, the price of print has surged and publishers have been encouraged to go online. But going online is not the silver bullet. The lion's share of advertising is taken by Google and Meta as they can target consumers so effectively.
- Our publications particularly disadvantaged - it is all about internet traffic.... but small players don't have a lot of traffic. Nor should they!

## Some powerful solutions..

- So what is to be done?
- As AIP we have devised two sets of solutions....

## **Solutions One – Sustainability Group**

We started a sustainability group in late 2021 with publishers with support from tech experts and academics. The plan was to pool our collective expertise and to research, experiment and run pilots.

**The journey has begun....**



## Solutions Two – Trip to Ohio, USA

- In 2022 we won a grant from the US Embassy to send 10 publishers to the US to Ohio.
- Ohio is a state in Midwest America – rural and agricultural. Not glitzy, not big city New York! The similarities between the US publishers and our SA publishers was incredible.
- Publishers went for 3 weeks, spent time at Ohio University (E W Scripps School of Journalism) with one week spent with US publishers.

## What we learned...

Publishers need a collaborative mind-set. We are in this together. Yes, at one level we may compete but more importantly we need to share resources, training and ideas. We need collective troubleshooting.

We need a sustainability mind-set. Publishers need to be journalists and business people.

## What we learned...

- As a publisher you need to have a clear sense of who you are, what your vision and mission statement is.
- You need to have a clear sense of who your audience is. No matter what stage of the publishing journey (young or old) you need to directly survey your audience including their needs and wants. Use simple Google Forms (or similar) to ask questions. Publishers should gather information to shape their content - and for advertisers.
- Publishers can't rely ONLY on advertising. You need other income streams.

# What we learned...

## Income streams ...

- Subscriptions and membership models
- Newsletters on special topics
- Events – coffee mornings with the editor / publisher, agricultural shows, music festivals. Events must build your brand and audience.
- Consulting and training - Use your writing, editing and design and layout skills to make money
- Online shopping – books, clothing etc. Link up with local retailers – sell and market their products and take a cut.
- Travel and tourism
- Seek corporate and donor funding for special projects...

# What we learned - Solutions journalism

- Solutions journalism – particularly appropriate for local journalism. You are looking at the problems AND the solutions. You are looking at what the community can do to fix things.
- Get corporates, government, donors and other to support this.

# So, did we find the silver bullet?

No! But....

*“It was a journey where possibilities could be explored; a journey to open up our minds to new ideas.*

*Did the project succeed in changing our mindsets and make us more receptive to trying new ideas? I believe it did, even if it was just to make us realise that other publishers, sitting almost 14 000km away deal with the same problems but have not given up hope in finding solutions.”*

**Anton van Zyl, Publisher the Limpopo Mirror and Zoutspansberger**

# Steps toward sustainability

Questions?

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