

Has the Afrikaans press lost the power to influence?



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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There was a *groot gedoente* in the Afrikaans press a couple of months ago over consolidating the books editors' jobs at Media24 titles such as *Die Burger* and *Beeld* into one national position. Leader pages and the letters were positively humming with indignation. [\[poll\]](#)

It mystified many of us in the English media, where, sadly, positions such as full-time books editors were done away with many years ago because of commercial pressures to cut costs.

Although journalists are voracious readers, many editors at English newspapers came to the realisation that reading books is not a way of life for South Africans at large - and that, even for the readers of newspapers, a books page is a nice-to-have but not an essential part of the mix.

Illustrates an essential difference

However, while English-language journalists such as myself might have tittered at the high-brow debate over the Media24 books editor, it did illustrate an essential difference between the English and Afrikaans broadsheet press. Afrikaans newspapers are undoubtedly more intellectual than English newspapers in this country.

Though my Afrikaans is not great, I often suspect that the quality of the writing in Afrikaans dailies is far superior to that of their English counterparts and they certainly cover the arts in a manner that should make us *Engels* hacks hang our heads in shame.

Maybe it has something to do with the origins of the Afrikaans press. *Die Burger's* first editor, DF Malan (later the first National Party prime minister of South Africa in 1948), wielded the paper as a weapon for the betterment of Afrikaners' political position, their culture and language.

By comparison, English papers such as the *Rand Daily Mail* were started or acquired by the early mining magnates and, therefore, commercial interests were always at the fore.

Analytical vs aggressively news-driven

And so, while the Afrikaans press tends to be analytical, English newspapers in this country tend to be aggressively news-driven. While Afrikaans journalists tend to be erudite, English hacks are competitive.

Different strokes for different folks, for sure, and I'm no expert in Afrikaans media but surely the question should be asked: Are Afrikaans newspapers such as Media24's [Die Burger](#), [Beeld](#), [Volksblad](#) and [Rapport](#) still relevant to their readers in this mixed-up globalised world, in which more people read more widely and more variously?

Esmaré Weideman, the new CEO of Media24, declined to comment on this.

In the absence of input from the top, let's take a look at the numbers.

Latest ABCs

The latest ABC circulation figures - for the first quarter of this year - show that *Beeld* was at 83 330 (from 91 772 in the first quarter of 2010), *Die Burger's* Western and Eastern Cape editions combined were at 69 932 (75 013) and *Volksblad* at 24 968 (27 233). A downwards trajectory, then, for all three.

By comparison, the English daily broadsheets were a mixed bag over the same period. Some were down but some - such as *Business Day*, *Cape Times*, *Pretoria News*, *Daily Dispatch* and *The Herald* - held steady or fell back slightly.

When it comes to the Sunday broadsheets, *Rapport* was noticeably down at 231 215 sales in the first quarter of 2011 (from 260 897 in the same period of 2010). By comparison, Avusa's *Sunday Times* was up - at 463 034 (from 461 433), Independent Newspapers' *Sunday Tribune* was down at 86 472 (from 90 428) and *The Sunday Independent* was holding steady at 39 083 (from 39 493).

City Press - also owned by Media24 - was markedly down at 141 395 (compared with 176 025 in Q1 2010) so it's hard to read a trend over the year in these numbers if you're comparing English and Afrikaans newspapers. Further, *City Press* editor Ferial Haffajee told Bizcommunity last month that the paper was having [teething problems](#) with a new circulation and distribution system, so it's a little tricky to discern how *City Press's* content repositioning is faring.

Has lost its edge

From my perspective in the English media, it does seem that *Rapport* has lost its edge. When I worked at the *Sunday Times* in the 1990s, the two papers competed aggressively but now the *Sunday Times* is seldom interested in what *Rapport* is covering.

For one thing, the *Sunday Times* has wisely moved on and positioned itself as the black middle-class reader's newspaper of choice and, secondly, *Rapport* seems to have forgotten how to break stories of any consequence. *Rapport* is very good at the more sensational stuff such as Joost van der Westhuizen's [sex video](#). But then a succession of increasingly stale front-page leads about [Willem de Klerk's alleged love child](#) really baffled me.

Who cares, I wondered, if the son of FW de Klerk has a love child? Is there even legitimate public interest to justify running the stories? It's not as if Willem de Klerk is a public figure and surely, I asked myself, many readers would have found the stories embarrassingly low-rent?

But if *Rapport* needs more thoughtful content positioning, then the bigger problem seems to be that the Afrikaans newspapers have lost the power to influence SA opinion makers.

Readers getting older?

So, for example, *Beeld* or *Die Burger* may break some hot stories but the English papers often don't pick up on them - or they stumble on the same break later. This can be quite simply explained as many English journalists not bothering to follow the Afrikaans papers and many government leaders not reading Afrikaans but isn't this problematic in itself? I rather suspect that the readers of the Afrikaans newspapers are getting older, as a broad trend.

As the power of English grows globally, the decision-makers in this country appear to care less about the Afrikaans press - and maybe this is why *Rapport* has veered off in a more tabloid direction.

To me, it seems to have lost its way - Sunday papers are the glamour boys of the industry and they need to break big important stories that the dailies follow up on afterwards. They need to set the agenda. You can have a bit of fun but hard news and politics are the lifeblood of any Sunday paper.

The Afrikaans papers appear to be in uncharted waters - and dangerous one, methinks. I don't have the remedy but they would do well to think deeply about their markets and their futures.

For more:

- Bizcommunity Poll: [Has the Afrikaans press lost the power to influence?](#)
- Bizcommunity: [Publishers explain ABCs hits, misses](#), May 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Volksblad turns a crucial corner, arrests sales decline](#), Oct 2010

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