

Many shades of grey in AMPS readership figures



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetZA

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You might have noticed recently that some newspapers have been trumpeting their rise in readership based on the AMPS 2009 figures released by the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) at the end of last month. This is, of course, complete public relations hooey.

Last Sunday, for instance, the *Sunday Times* had a front-page piece saying the paper's readership has risen by 6.3%, from 3.9 million in the first six months of 2009 to 4.2 million in the last six months. A Google news search shows that *The Herald* in Port Elizabeth boasted that it rose 13.5% year on year from 245 000 readers in 2008 to 278 000 readers in 2009.

Can't compare unless...

First off, it's accepted in the print industry that you don't compare AMPS (or ABC circulation) numbers unless the periods are, well, comparable. Newspaper sales and readership are seasonal, so the [Sunday Times announcement](#) comparing the first and second halves of the year isn't useful. [The Herald's year-on-year comparison](#) is completely inaccurate as 2009 saw a change in AMPS methodology for print so it cannot be compared at all to 2008.

Neither sets of figures track ABC circulation figures at all:

- In the last quarter of 2009, the *Sunday Times*' total circulation was 464 393, compared with 505 374 in the last quarter of 2008. If you strip out the third-party bulk sales and "print media in education" (PMIE) papers that go to schools, the core circulation in the last quarter of last year was 395 560.
- *The Herald's* total circulation in the last quarter of 2009 was an alarmingly low 22 528, compared with 25 089 in the comparable period in 2008 (it didn't have any bulk sales or PMIE sales).

So what gives here? Is it that some editors don't understand how AMPS works? Possibly. I've certainly witnessed publishing decisions based on whim or sketchy market research.

Need to look at both

The experts will tell you that there is not necessarily a correlation between AMPS and the ABCs but it's clear that you need to look at both to get a fuller picture of a title's success or decline. It's no coincidence that both the *Sunday Times* and *The Herald* are Avusa titles as the company seems to have a policy of highlighting AMPS (probably because of the amount of bulking or PMIE that goes on with titles such as *Sunday Times* and the *Sowetan*).

On the other side of the scale, the bulk-averse Media24 that owns titles such as *Sunday Times'* competitors *City Press* and *Rapport* likes to emphasise ABCs.

Interrogating AMPS is tricky at the best of times. Even finding them on the SAARF website is an exercise in determination. (Luckily, dear reader, I've travelled this path so view the [full-year 2009 Average Issue Readership figures](#) here).

Change in methodology

The key thing to bear in mind is that the [change in methodology](#) for print titles means that 2009 is a new benchmark for AMPS, which means only later this year - when AMPS figures for the first half of 2010 are released - will we be comparing apples and apples (with the first half of last year).

An important distinction to make is that between the Average Issue Readership (AIR), which is the number everyone looks at, and Past Six-Months Readership. In the six-month readership filter, the interviewee is asked which newspapers they have read or paged through in the past six months. If they have read something in the past six months, they are asked whether they read it yesterday (in the case of dailies) and past seven days (in the case of weeklies).

If they read a daily newspaper yesterday, they form part of the AIR for that newspaper. In the case of weeklies, they are in the AIR if they were read in the past seven days.

SAARF does point out that is not yet possible to determine exactly if changes are due to the influence of the new methodology or to market forces.

Example of nuance

As an example of the nuance involved in AMPS, Michelle Boehme, SAARF's technical manager, points to the *The Star's* AIR figures, which trended down through 2009. The paper's six-month readership, however, remained stable. This suggests that people were still reading the paper but less frequently, possibly due to the recession putting the squeeze on spending on media.

Richard Lord, associate media director at media-planning firm The MediaShop, says theoretically you should be able to divide a title's AMPS figure with its ABC figure to work out how many people read it but this is not useful to advertisers. For media planners, AMPS is the key measure in determining how many people in a demographically-based target market (taking in income, gender, geography, lifestyle, consumer choices) are reading a particular publication.

Lord also points out that sharing of publications goes on at both ends of the market, from many different staff members reading a corporate subscription to a paper such as *Business Day* to people sharing the *Daily Sun* in a taxi.

So, while there are many shades of grey here, I would say it's fair to disregard press releases that say a paper's AMPS have increased in number. That alone tells you very little about a title.

One big winner

Interestingly, there is one big winner in terms of AMPS and ABCs of the past year and that is Media24's *Die Son*. The Afrikaans tabloid's AIR figure, as well as its six-month readership figure, was up through 2009, while its ABCs for the last quarter of 2009 was 124 572 - up from 105 419 in the last quarter of 2008. The growth has probably come from the paper expanding into the Eastern Cape, which may well have contributed to a culling of the bilingual readers from the bottom end of *The Herald*.

Rather than trotting out one-dimensional stories of AMPS or ABC figures, the country's editors would do better mining the numbers. If they don't understand how they work, they're operating in the dark - a frightening prospect considering how tough the print industry has become.

AMPS tells you a lot about your readers' lifestyles - from whether they bought a car to a pair of shoes in the past six months - and the ABC figures tell you a lot about what content sells best if you match weekly sales reports with front-page headlines, posters and other factors. Sadly, the days when editors could afford to worry only about editorial are long gone.

For more:

- Grubstreet.co.za: [Understanding Amps: Top media planner Gordon Muller speaks to Grubstreet](#)

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