

Financial crisis magnifying problems in Ghanaian newspaper industry

The newspaper industry in Ghana is being buffeted by an array of challenging forces ranging from changing trends in advertising, rising costs due to the worldwide financial crisis to a decline in circulation arising from economic constraints facing newspaper readers.

In a distressing case, the country's highest circulated private newspaper, the *Accra Daily Mail*, has been forced to cut down on printing and has not appeared in newsstands since January. For other newspapers, readership rates and subscriptions are drastically plummeting.

"Production in the independent press sector is rudimentary, advertising revenue is scarce to non-existent and distribution most inefficient," said A. R. Harruna Attah, managing editor of the *Accra Daily Mail*, to RAP 21. These pre-existing conditions are being exacerbated by the consequences of the worldwide recession.

Before the financial crisis, readership rates in Ghana had already begun to dip as a result of people turning to content originating from the printed press but being disseminated by electronic media, radio and television. In short, more readers are now getting news for free from different platforms. "It is a problem we have not been able to find a solution to yet, but it continues to bite into our sales," said Attah.

The prognosis for the printed press in Ghana is becoming increasingly grim. With everything from fuel, food to fertilizer becoming more expensive, buying a newspaper is becoming less of a priority.

Meanwhile, Attah said that the state-owned press is in a better financial situation. "State-owned newspapers are attracting whatever advertising there is. With state-of-the-art printing presses, they are also more efficient and have better distribution outlets," he said.

Editor Anas Aremeyaw Anas of the tri-weekly newspaper, *The New Crusading Guide* also spoke to RAP 21 about how the recession has brought worse times to the press industry. "Sales have dropped significantly since the crisis began. To describe our sales situation is truly embarrassing. As a tri-weekly, we used to produce 7000 copies per issue. Now this number has dropped to 2000 copies, which to us signifies a major decline in capacity," Anas said. In his view, prices cannot simply be raised because the readers' ability to pay must be taken into consideration.

Rather, Anas informed RAP 21 that his paper will become a daily as of mid-March. "This will facilitate production and supply, and it will allow us to keep providing information to readers. There is no use in cutting down our staff members, so we will maintain the current staff but readjust our overall management," he said.

At the same time, prospects for gaining both new subscribers and advertisers are looking increasingly dismal in Ghana. A fall in airline advertisements has been especially detrimental for newspapers like *The New Crusading Guide*. “We are not getting the number of ads we are supposed to get, meaning that the number of advertisement entries has declined and this is costing us dearly,” said Anas.

Meanwhile, for the *Accra Daily Mail*, new subscriptions are minimal and coming mainly from government offices, diplomatic missions and a few businesses. “Our daily print run is around 2,500 daily and with a “pass along” rate of at least five, we calculate that at least 10,000 people read us daily - of course the majority of whom would not have paid for what they are reading. The website gets a lot of traffic, basically from Diaspora Ghanaians - and it is for free!” said Attah.

There is also no professional newspaper distribution company or Audit Bureau of Circulation in Ghana, which is causing more disarray to the industry. Newspapers are left to organise their distribution requirements as best as they can, which Attah said, “is not cost effective and losses are often heavy due lack of accountability by the vendors.” Bolstering the distribution system is vital though Attah said, “there is no indication that a solution is any closer.”

The global economic crisis may have triggered the problems Ghanaian papers are confronting, but lack of government action and support is causing even further damage. “Traditionally, the media goes by the principle of ‘survival of the fittest’, which implies that your readers will sustain you. So any adjustments will have to come from media organisations themselves,” said Anas of *The New Crusading Guide*.

To help fill this void, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and Free Voice, based in the Netherlands, organised an international seminar in Accra this past February to set up a Media Development Fund. It is envisaged that the fund could be up and running by next year and newspapers like *Accra Daily Mail*, if they satisfy certain criteria, could benefit from the credit facilities and grants that the fund would make available.

Concurrently, some newspapers are resigned to the idea that Ghanaian publishers in the private press would have to pool resources to benefit from one another. For instance, *Accra Daily Mail* is currently discussing with the *Daily Guide*, the only private newspaper with a web offset printing press, about forming possible partnerships.

Long hailed as a beacon for having a strong independent press on the African continent, times are changing for Ghana's private publications. The most popular independent newspaper is absent from selling points and other editors are worried of also facing the same plight. In response, editors are trying to quickly coalesce resources and international media organisations are beginning to provide aid.

With a dose of optimism, Attah hopes to relaunch the *Accra Daily Mail* later this year.

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