

Watching *Argus* move for *Daily News* future - Indy KZN's Alan Dunn

By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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It's going to be an interesting year for KwaZulu-Natal's newspapers with Media24's *The Witness* making an aggressive play to break out of the Midlands under [Angela Quintal](#) (@angelaquintal, the former editor of *The Mercury*).



Alan Dunn

[Alan Dunn](#), the *Daily News* editor and Independent Newspapers' senior editor in KwaZulu-Natal, tells Bizcommunity.com how *The Mercury* will meet a challenge from *The Witness*, how the *Daily News* is watching the *Cape Argus*'s [move into the morning market](#) with great interest, and why the intense competition in the KZN media market is good for consumers.

The *Daily News*'s ABCs are interesting as, even though it's an afternoon paper, you don't see the sustained circulation decline that the *Cape Argus* has suffered. [In the last quarter (Q4) of 2009, the paper was at 36 808 and then it was up to 37 114 in Q4 of 2010 and down to 33 011 in Q4 2012.] What's going on here and are you guys considering taking the paper into the morning market [as has been done [recently](#) with the *Argus* in Cape Town]?

Alan Dunn: Look, our biggest pressure in the afternoon market is time and the starvation of it in the modern family - and that's true for afternoon newspapers across the globe. So we're pouring a lot of energy and passion and know-how into the *Daily News*.

It remains the biggest daily in the English language in KZN. It is still by some margin the most-read English daily in KZN. But the market is tough and we're working hard to produce a lively, newsy product. The *Daily News* is 134-years-old and that's a daunting guardianship to be given, so we're doing all that we can to look after it.



Daily News

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❖ **So at this point you guys aren't thinking about moving into the morning market?**

Dunn: Well, we're looking at our sister newspaper, the *Cape Argus*, and we're fortunate that [*Argus* editor] [Gasant Abarder](#) (@GasantAbarder) and his team are doing the pioneering work there. We're watching it very closely and, if their bold venture succeeds, it will no doubt be seriously considered for the *Daily News*. And I'd like to be part of that if it works for them. From what I've seen, the *Argus* has done a fantastic job. It looks very good to my eye.

❖ **I think the big thing about the KZN market is that it's very competitive. Independent Newspapers may have dominance with the English-language broadsheets and with the great success of Isolezwe in the isiZulu market but the *Daily Sun* (([Media24](#)) in strong in KZN and there's *The Witness*, plus there's all the community papers owned by [Caxton](#) and [Media24](#). Both of those companies are very aggressive and all over the province.**

Dunn: Ja, they're both very aggressive and very good. A lot of people are preoccupied with Johannesburg as the media city and it is the capital of the media world in South Africa, but the fact is that there's a lot happening in our province and we've got to remain on our toes. We're very much a part of that that dynamic...

Ultimately, it's to the benefit of the reader. Complacency is the big enemy so we're constantly thinking of ways to surprise our readers - not shock them - but surprise them in a good way.

❖ **In terms of positioning, is [The Mercury](#) [the morning paper] higher LSM than the *Daily News*?**

Dunn: Yes, *The Mercury* is a tad higher. It has the business supplement [*Business Report*] in it. But the *Daily News* remains very high on its LSMs. You're looking at LSM 7, 8, 9 and 10 perhaps. You're dipping down to LSM 6, 5 and 4 and only in a small way. But there is a differentiation - there must be a differentiation - between the two titles. If we both

fish in the same waters, it becomes self-destructive.

❖ **Does the Daily News have more Indian readers than The Mercury?**

Dunn: Well, it's got more readers to start with [*The Mercury* was at 31 013 in Q4 2011, compared with 33 332 in Q4 2010 and 34 299 in Q4 2009]. Then, on the Indian readership, there's a strong, loyal readership - about 46% or thereabouts [of the *Daily News's* total readers].

❖ **I know [The Post](#) [a weekly paper owned by Independent Newspapers aimed at the Indian community] doesn't fall under you but is it aimed at a much lower LSM group?**

Dunn: Well, I must tell you, *The Post* has a new editor - [Aakash Bramdeo](#) from broadcasting - and he's injected new zest into the title and it's looking very smart and very crisp. Its LSM go 6, 7, 8 and up to 10. It's a spread across a wide audience.

❖ **Now, let's talk about The Mercury. Its LSM are on a downwards trajectory but I also know it's being making a push into The Witness's territory of Maritzburg and the Midlands. Now The Mercury's former editor, Angela Quintal, is editor of [The Witness](#) and it is making an [aggressive play](#) to break out of its heartland and become the KZN newspaper of choice. This is going to be an interesting year for The Mercury and The Witness.**

Dunn: Ja, I've worked with Angela when she was editor of *The Mercury* and when she was political editor of our group. She really is a formidable newshound and I respect her for that. But to become the newspaper of choice for the whole province is a monumental task.

If it's a serious move, then Angela will have to improve on previous *Witness* efforts to grow beyond Pietermaritzburg and the Midlands. And I guess it would have to involve a restructure of the editorial staff - a bureau in Durban won't be enough [*three recent Witness appointments are The Mercury new editor [Zoubair Ayoob](#) and Avusa online deputy editor [Abdul Milazi](#) (@madodamilazi), both as [deputy editors](#), and the Sunday Times Durban news editor [Brett Horner](#) as [Durban bureau chief](#) - managing ed].*

And then there's the challenge of retaining one's existing readership while growing the new readership. This, as you know, is filled with pitfalls and dangers. Also, remember *The Witness* had tried very hard previously to penetrate the Durban area. About five years ago its Saturday edition, for instance, marketed really strongly in Durban. It had a huge lively presence with street sellers on Saturday mornings and they dressed in *Witness* branding and their street posters outnumbered ours by far in the Durban CBD. But it came to nought.

So whether *The Witness* challenge really materialises, newspaper readers are going to benefit. And if *The Witness* improves - and I'm sure it will under Angela - then we will, too. We're not underestimating Media24 at all.

❖ **Ja, I guess The Mercury is associated so strongly with Durban and The Witness with Maritzburg, it's hard for each to penetrate each other's core markets.**

Dunn: Ja, it goes against the history and the grain of these newspapers. Breaking out of those established lanes is really very, very difficult. We're keeping a watch on it and while we do, we're going to improve our own product.

❖ **How does The Mercury sell in Maritzburg and surrounding areas?**

Dunn: Well, it's limited. *The Mercury* and the *Daily News* all sell in the Maritzburg area but it's very similar to the *Pretoria News* and *The Star* [in Johannesburg; both are owned by Independent Newspapers]. The *Pretoria News* serves the Pretoria market and the Pretorian readers are happy to read about their water, rates and lights sagas and their own news, as opposed to what goes on in Johannesburg.

❖ **So you've got two [new editors](#) in KwaZulu-Natal: [Jovial Rantao](#) at the Sunday Tribune and [Philani Mgwaba](#) at The Mercury.**

Dunn: Yes, the extraordinary thing is that we've got seven titles [*Daily News*, *The Mercury*, *Sunday Tribune*, *The Post* and *Isolezwe* in its daily, Saturday and Sunday editions] coming out of this building at Independent Newspapers KZN, and five of our editors are below the ages of 45 and happen to be black. This is really an interesting change of events -



The Mercury

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and a good one.

⚡ **Now the [Sunday Tribune](#) has been declining for some time now [down to 79 521 in Q4 2011 from 86 196 in Q4 2010 and 91 038 in Q4 2009]. What's happening there?**

Dunn: Well, if you talk about the *Tribune* then you must talk about the Sunday market. I would say the *Tribune* remains the giant on Sunday in KZN - it more than doubles the other English-language Sunday papers in its circulation reach in KZN.



Sunday Tribune

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⚡ **Mmm, the [Sunday Times](#) (owned by [Avusa](#)) is actually a Gauteng newspaper that also sells in other cities. When I was at the *Sunday Times* about 10 years ago, I recall that about 70% of its sales were in Gauteng.**

Dunn: Ja, it prints in Durban and sells here and it remains a hell of a brand - and a great institution in South African newspapering. The fact remains though, that the *Tribune* outsells any other product in KZN quite considerably... Local news is of great importance to readers - what impacts on their immediate lives is of more relevance to them, and that comes through very strongly in that tale.

⚡ **[Jonathan Ancer](#) (@jonathanancer) [the head of Independent Newspapers' cadet school] told me a while ago there's been a big change in KZN because [David Canning](#), the former editor of *The Mercury*, is mentoring and training staff. Jonathan says it's making a huge difference and he is seeing an improvement in the journalism coming out of KZN.**

Dunn: Yes, David retired before Angela took over the editorship of *The Mercury*. It's very exciting because, for years, we've been accused of not investing in our journalism - and I suppose there's been a lot of truth in that.

But this is truly a sound investment because Canning gives the word 'dedicated' a new meaning. He's passionate about journalism and, day in and day out, he's here looking after the youngsters and some of the more experienced staff as well - taking them through ABC stuff, etc, and more advanced journalism.

So there's a whole new excitement here about growing our own talent. We're confronted by the juniorisation of our journalism and this is our attempt to try head it off. Canning's really been a power of good for us... It's a belief thing. It's put a new belief back in ourselves.

⚡ **And you can't underestimate the value of that.**

Dunn: Exactly. The staff see this guy being paid to advance us - and that's really encouraging to people at all levels.

⚡ **The last thing I want to ask you about is the amazing success of [Isolezwe](#) and other isiZulu papers such as *Ilanga* [owned by the Inkatha Freedom Party]. Have they had an effect on the English newspapers or is it hard to measure? Are these new readers, do you think?**

Dunn: Ja, largely. If it has had an effect, we haven't discovered or measured it. I think it's a whole new pool of readers... and, if it's not all new readers, it's certainly mainly new readers. It's been a wonderful success story - it really has.

Isolezwe [which doesn't fall under Dunn] has gone way beyond business plan and expectations. And the Saturday edition's been going for about six months and the Sunday for about two-and-a-half years. The fact is that the Saturday is already profitable, for heaven's sake. Have you ever heard of that? It's a publishing phenomenon and it's been very good for this branch because it creates its own effervescence and excitement among the staff.

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [Independent Newspapers KwaZulu-Natal press office](#)
- Bizcommunity: [Chris Whitfield on balancing act of Cape Argus move](#), March 2012
- Bizcommunity: [Newspapers dire but not dead, say latest ABC circ numbers](#), February 2012
- Journalism.co.za: [Quintal set to give Witness new horizons](#), October 2011

- Bizcommunity: [isiZulu Sunday Times a sign of the next big publishing frontier](#), November 2010

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