

Publisher sites news consumption soars as readers search for truth on coronavirus

 By [Josephine Buys](#)

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The rapid spread of the coronavirus pandemic has led to many changes in human behaviour. Washing hands frequently is one of them, but another is the increase in media consumption, and news in particular.



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Global Web Index was fast off the mark with its [custom survey](#) among internet users aged between 16 and 64; 2 310 responded in the US, and a further 2 229 from the UK. Four out of 10 of those reported reading the news more frequently.

Statista, too, [researched the impact](#) of Covid-19 on media consumption worldwide. It has had a “direct impact on in-home media consumption around the world, with 35% of total respondents professing to have read more books or listened to more audiobooks at home and 18% having listened to more radio due to the Covid-19 pandemic, while more than 40% of consumers spent longer on messaging services and social media,” wrote researcher Amy Watson.

It took a close look at South Africa and reported an 11% increase in reading newspapers, and a 24% rise in reading magazines. Plus a whopping 61% upsurge in watching news coverage on TV. There were also spikes in podcasts, streaming music, watching streaming services and traditional broadcast television. Radio listening grew by 36%.

Of particular interest to the Publisher Research Council, of course, is what is going on behind the increased news consumption.

Upswing in readership

Greg Mason, Narrative's regional lead for sub-Saharan Africa, looked at the total South African traffic across the news category of websites Narrative measured for the period 26 January 2020 until 26 March 2020. In total, there was a 32% increase in unique browsers over the period.



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Two distinct spikes in unique browsers can be observed on 5 March, when the first case of coronavirus was diagnosed in South Africa, and on 23 March, when the official nationwide lockdown was announced the night before.

Mason underlines the fact, as the PRC does, that domestic publishers are vital in times of crisis. "People, in general, move away from obtaining the latest facts on breaking news from social channels and instead rely on their local domestic publishers. Social media becomes peoples' crutch and support structure, while domestic publishers become their trusted source of news," he observes.

It is reassuring to note the upswing in readership of newspapers and magazines where there are stricter measures in place and proper fact-checking procedures at play in newsrooms across the country.

As 24.com editor in chief, Adriaan Basson, said in a [recent column](#), "Life at News24 has also changed dramatically since we sat down for that 5 March diary conference [the day the first coronavirus case was reported in South Africa]. Our audience has more than doubled and with that, our responsibility to get it right."



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Increase in page views

News24's numbers are quite staggering. Narrative's latest stats show the site had 129,683,820 page views between 1 and 30 March. There were 11,791,516 unique browsers. The percentage change in page views was 123%.

TimesLive's page views numbered 36,847,072, with 7,161,956 unique browsers, and 34% change in page views in the reported period. Also in the Arena Holdings group, DispatchLive in the Eastern Cape had a 177% increase in page views, growing to 4,727,865 during the one-month period. Caxton's *The Citizen* registered a 59% rise to 16 631 388 while IOL registered a 10% uptick to 36,356,061. *Mail & Guardian* online showed a 72% growth in page views, up to 935,059.

But of course, there is a downside too. As the World Economic Forum's project and engagement lead, information and entertainment system initiative, Stefan Hall, points out in a new report, 'Empty stadiums and online streaming: how coronavirus is affecting the media industry', brands often use keywords to place advertising online. "...and, to avoid certain associations, negative words are frequently excluded. In February, 'coronavirus' became the second-most common word on blocklists for publishers, meaning that important, in-demand and socially-relevant reporting is not bringing in the higher revenues it is capable of".

Captive audience

That's something Mason has highlighted in his latest Narrative report. He asks advertisers to consider digital publishers so reliant on advertising revenue to run their businesses and cover breaking news, working tirelessly to provide a trusted and reputable source of information.

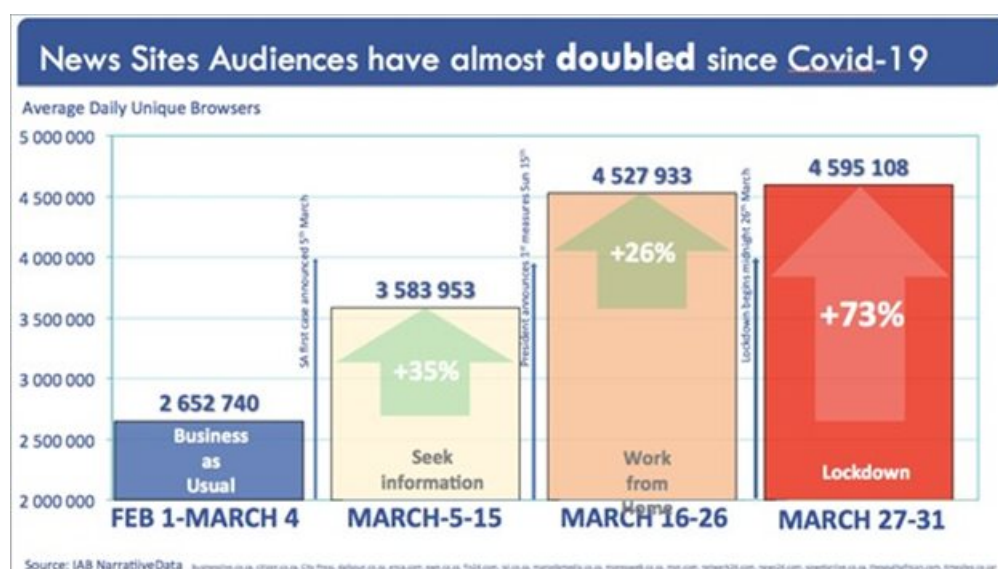


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The sterling work being done by South Africa's publishers and journalists during this extraordinary time should be supported, not just by readers, but by brands and advertisers too. Never before have advertisers had such a captive audience, with millions at home, tuned into media for information, and longing for reassurance that not everything they rely on and trust has disappeared.



As the PRC's Peter Langschmidt points out too, referring to the slide above, there is only a 1% difference between 'stay at home' and 'lockdown' phases. What this means is that even if/when lockdown stops in two weeks, the audiences will still stay high, because for the foreseeable future, South Africa will still be in pre-lockdown/no large gathering/stay at home mode. It will not be business as usual for quite some time, and the advertising business simply cannot grind to a halt.

ABOUT JOSEPHINE BUYS

Josephine Buys is CEO of The Publisher Research Council (PRC).

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