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Friday, November 9, 2012

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The walking unread: newspaper circulation continues long decline

MATTHEW KNOTT | NOV 09, 2012 12:24PM | [EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#)



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The latest circulation contain more bad news for newspapers, particularly in the Fairfax stable. But which paper bucked the trend?

Fairfax's metropolitan newspapers suffered demoralising print circulation declines in the September quarter, with *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* both posting double digit year-on-year drops.

News Limited papers fared better, but that company's unwillingness to follow Fairfax's lead and strip back on "marginal" sales to airports, schools and hotels helped prop up its figures.

The latest figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulations show newspaper circulation fell 5.5% overall, with Kerry Stokes' *The West Australian* again defying the trend as the only paper to increase its weekday circulation. With little to crow about when it comes to the dead tree editions, the national papers focussed on their digital performance today. On page two of *The Australian*, News Limited CEO Kim Williams and editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell **talked up** *The Oz's* 31, 241 paying subscribers — figures in line with **unaudited numbers released in March**. *The Australian Financial Review* **spruiked** its 163% increase in paid (but unaudited) digital subscriptions.

While a welcome source of revenue, digital takings aren't coming close to making up for the decline in print circulation and advertising revenue (**down by \$5 million** in the last quarter at *The Fin* and *The Oz*). A long-term digital subscriber base in the 20,000-40,000 range would mean dramatically leaner newsrooms and profits.

The real test for the Fairfax metros will come next year when *The Age* and *The SMH* begin to charge for access to their websites and iPad apps.

In an unpromising sign for *The Herald Sun*, which boasted about its print dominance



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over *The Age*, the paper still hasn't submitted its digital figures for auditing despite launching a paywall in March.

Fairfax Media's *The SMH* recorded an average weekday circulation of 161,169 — a 15.1% decline on the same period last year. The rooting out of unprofitable sales accounts for a large chunk of that fall, but the 5.6% drop from the June quarter shows real-world sales are falling as well. The Saturday edition dropped by 15.9% to 265,457. *The Sun-Herald* is in deep trouble, posting a 21.3% decline — the biggest of any paper in the country. Its circulation of 322,959 is now barely half that of rival *The Sunday Telegraph*.

Down south it's just as grim. *The Age* racked up average weekday sales of 158,485 — a 16.9% decline. Circulation slumped by 15.1% on Saturday and 15.4% on Sunday.

The Canberra Times continues to disappoint: its Monday-Friday circulation slid by 7.4% to 28,162 and by 9.6% on the weekend to 45,162.

The days when *The AFR* sold more than 70,000 copies seem lost forever. The paper's weekday circulation fell by 6.5% to 68,425; the weekend edition dropped by 3.9% to 69,012. Put together, this represents a 15.28% year-on-year decline for Fairfax Media according to media analyst Steve Allen.

Over at **News Limited**, weekday sales for *The Oz*, which has been unprofitable since 2009, fell by 4.6% to 126,901. That figure is much uglier if you discount the dubious marginal sales; a whopping 23% of *The Oz's* paid sales are in the accommodation, airline, education or bundled categories. That compares to 6.6% for *The SMH* or 10% for *The Fin*.

The Sunday Tele, which recently lost long-time editor Neil Breen, remains a stand-out performer with a circulation of 600,236 — virtually unchanged from the same period last year. *The Daily Tele* held firm with Monday-Friday sales of 341,583, a 1.8% drop, and even picked up readers for its Saturday edition. Just over 12% of *The Daily Tele's* sales are marginal.

Melbourne's *Herald Sun* slipped by 4.4%, but easily remains the country's top weekday seller with a circulation of 460,370. The *Sunday Herald Sun* decreased by 5.7% to 524,237.

The declines were noticeable — but hardly calamitous — in the one-newspaper towns of Brisbane and Adelaide. *The Courier-Mail* fell by 2.1% on weekdays to 190,915; *The Advertiser* slipped by 3.1% to 169,889 Monday-Friday. The Hobart *Mercury* shed 1.9% to 40,368.

Seven West Media's *The West Australian* remains a strong performer, lifting weekday circulation by 0.7% to 190,251 but recorded a 5.3% drop on the weekend.

In **magazine land** it was even worse, with only one publication, *BRW*, picking up readers. The worst performers were at Bauer Media's recently-acquired ACP Magazines stable. Fashion weekly *Grazia* shed a stunning 20.6% of its readers while lads' mag *Zoo Weekly* dropped by 15.8%. You wouldn't feel confident about a long future in the editor's chair at either of those publications given ACP's announcement yesterday that it was

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Lwin Sein

Posted Friday, 9 November 2012 at 1:43 pm | [PERMALINK](#)

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AFR is fudging it. The digital product is free to print subs. So it looks like the print has fallen

from about 76k in a year and the de-duped (singular) digital subs are also down from it seems about 9000 to somewhere around 4000. In fact it looks a bit like the new Screaming Lord Stutch brand of paper is not a hot property. Is all happening on his watch, and not helped by the Clegg lovefest with Packer and mates.

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