

# “ALITERACY”: A THREAT TO PRINT MEDIA

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## Summary

This paper focuses on the problems faced by South Africa because of its high incidence of aliterates. Whereas a literate person can read and write, an aliterate can read, but chooses not to do so. It was hypothesised that one of the reasons why people are aliterate is because they do not write. When a person writes, an interest in the use of words and what they mean is stimulated. This encourages reading. This hypothesis was tested as part of a survey of South African urban adults who had attended high school. It was presumed that such people could read. High levels of aliteracy were found, even with people in the top income category and among those in senior positions. There was also a significant relationship between reading and writing. The results have serious implications for educators, marketers and in the long term for South Africa.

The survey was conducted for the Print Media Association of South Africa. The results have led to a major campaign to improve reading skills of primary school children, as it was appreciated that print has no future without readers. The findings have also been of considerable interest to print media, especially newspapers.

Further research is suggested. A popular viewpoint is that aliterates do not read, because they do not want to make the effort. An alternative hypothesis is that people do not read, because they do not visualise what they are reading. If this were true, it would suggest that for the aliterate the reading experience is very limited. This has implications for how to gain and keep the attention of those exposed to print.

The results of the study could have worldwide implications, especially in countries where there is extensive competition between electronic and print media.

## Introduction

Words are the threads from which constructs are woven. They are the means by which humans convey some of their most complex thoughts. Despite all the developments in sophisticated technology, the written and spoken word maintain their prime position in the promulgation of laws and the settlement of disputes, in business, parliaments, politics and religion, in argument, commentary, criticism and in day-to-day communication.

Education standards in South Africa are already extremely low (CSS 1995). If, in addition to those who are illiterate, that is cannot read or write, is added a high proportion of aliterates, "unwilling to read, despite the ability to do so" (Brown 1993: 52), then this has serious implications, not only for print media, but also for education and society. If people are not reading, then how are they going to be taught? If consumers are unable, or unwilling, to read, how are marketers going to communicate with them? If people do not read and this leads to a reduction in vocabulary and complex thinking, then the whole development of South Africa towards first world nationhood is threatened. In Sullivan's view (1997) "the consequences are indeed too ghastly to contemplate, if the war against illiteracy and aliteracy is lost" (p. 16). Under such circumstances the study of aliteracy, its extent, and possible causes, is considered highly relevant.

The major aim behind this paper is to investigate aliteracy and related issues. Some results of a survey, commissioned by the Print Media Association (PMA 1997a) to investigate the possible reasons for a fall in print readership, are provided. This study covered South African urban adults who had been to high school, or who were still at high school, and were therefore assumed to be able to read. It tested several hypotheses related to literacy and its implications. In particular, the relationship between reading and writing was explored. The incidence of aliterates among those with high incomes and in senior positions of responsibility was investigated. Implications for education, marketing and media, together with wider societal outcomes, are discussed. The need to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between reading and the visualisation of what is read is emphasised, and further research in this area is suggested.

*\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Marketing Educators' Conference, Cape Town, April 1998.*

## Print Trends

Print effectively reaches most South Africa urban adults. Average issue readership (AIR) in 1998 for any print among urban adults was 68%† (SAARF 1998). Print offers extensive opportunities for reaching defined target markets. It also has above average coverage of those with higher levels of education and living standards (ibid.).

Furthermore, projections to the year 2005 indicate that in the South African context there is a growing potential pool for both newspaper and magazine readers, because of demographic and socio-economic changes (Koenderman 1996: 55).

Despite these advantages, advertising budgets are tending to favour electronic media at the expense of print. Table 1 shows the Rand value of advertising space for print, radio and television over the period 1990 to 1996. Print's share of the total has been declining.

**Table 1 Comparison of "Adspend" for print, radio and television 1990 to 1998 (Rand millions)**

Year	Print	Radio	TV	Total	Print's Share (%)
1990	1039	212	612	1863	55.8
1992	1413	351	1030	2794	50.5
1994	1724	524	1549	3797	49.5
1996	2338	658	1958	4954	47.2
1998	3167	795	2938	6900	45.9

**Source:** ACNielsen MRA. Adindex.

The downward share of print Adspend reflects a general declining trend in print readership (see Table 2).

**Table 2 Changes in magazine and newspaper Average Issue Readership (AIR) 1991 - 1998**

	Daily Newspaper	Weekly Newspaper	Magazine
1991	22.5	31.4	42.3
1992	20.5	30.4	40.5
1993	21.5	33.1	38.2
1994	19.4	30.1	33.5
1995	18.0	27.3	33.2
1996	17.2	27.6	36.4
1997	16.8	26.6	35.9
1998	18.1	27.2	34.0

**Source:** South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF). All Media and Products Survey (AMPS).

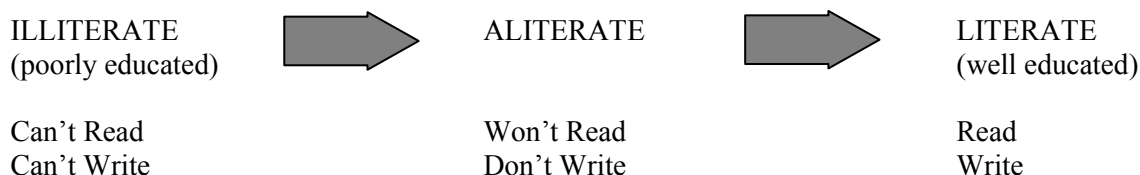
One of the possible reasons for print's decline is the growth in the number of people who are illiterate. Among 12-15 year olds throughout South Africa newspaper Average Issue Readership (AIR) is only 14%†, whereas for magazines it is 32%. In comparison, 53% viewed television and 58% listened to the radio "yesterday" (SAARF 1997).

† Excludes community papers and free sheets

### Aliteracy and Writing

A major objective of the PMA survey was to investigate the incidence of aliterates and reasons for this phenomenon. Despite an extensive literature search in library systems and the Internet, no previously published papers were found on the subject of the reasons for aliteracy. It was anticipated that people who had been previously disadvantaged would be more likely to be aliterate than those who had enjoyed a high level of education. In the South African context, it could be expected that Blacks, Coloureds and elderly people would be more likely to be aliterate and this was tested in the study. It was also hypothesised that there is a positive relationship between writing and reading. People who write are more likely to read than those who don't. When a person writes, an interest in the use of words and what they mean is stimulated. This encourages reading (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3 Hypothesised relationship between reading and writing**



Source: PMA (1997a). Project Wonderful.

### Research Method

A four stage procedure was used.

#### Stage one - initial contacts

An area-stratified, probability contact sample of 2,501 urban adults, aged 16 years and over, was taken throughout South Africa. Respondents were interviewed at home. From this contact sample, 520 people who had been to high school, or were still at high school, were asked to complete a diary of their activities over a 24 hour period.

#### Stage two - the diary

Participants were asked to record which activities they had engaged in by quarter hour periods from 5:00 a.m. on the first day to 1:00 a.m. on the following day and then a one 4 hour period from 1:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. Included in the diary were contact with main media, such as, reading a newspaper, reading a magazine, listening to the radio and viewing television. Other activities were: reading a book, personal grooming, preparing food, housework, eating, working, entertainment, leisure, shopping, sport, and sleeping.

#### Stage three - post diary completion

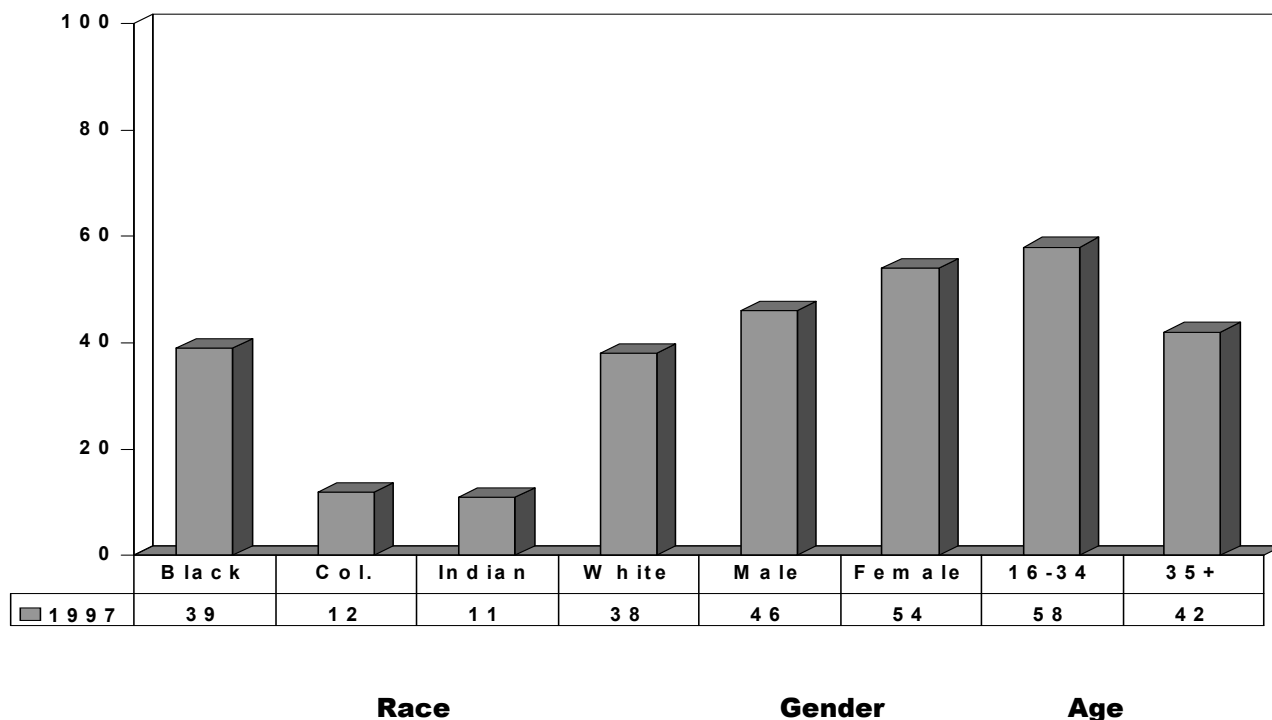
On a return visit, interviewers went through the diary and identified occasions when a newspaper and magazine had been read. They then went through each reading occasion in detail using a phenomenological approach, where each individual is seen as experiencing the world within and around them from their own particular frame of reference. A total of 196 reading events were probed.

Additional questions were asked of all respondents on their needs and perceptions of the four main media: magazines, newspapers, radio and television. Behaviour related to reading and writing during the previous 7 days was recorded.

#### Stage four - post diary completion extension

If it was not possible to complete the stage three interview within a reasonable time period, a further appointment was arranged. In this interview advertisements were tested for comprehension. A total of 505 people completed the full sequence of calls. This sub-sample was weighted by age within gender and race to the original proportions found in the contact sample (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Sample profile by race, gender and age



Source: PMA. (1997a). Project Wonderful.  
N=505 urban adults who have been to high school or are still at high school.

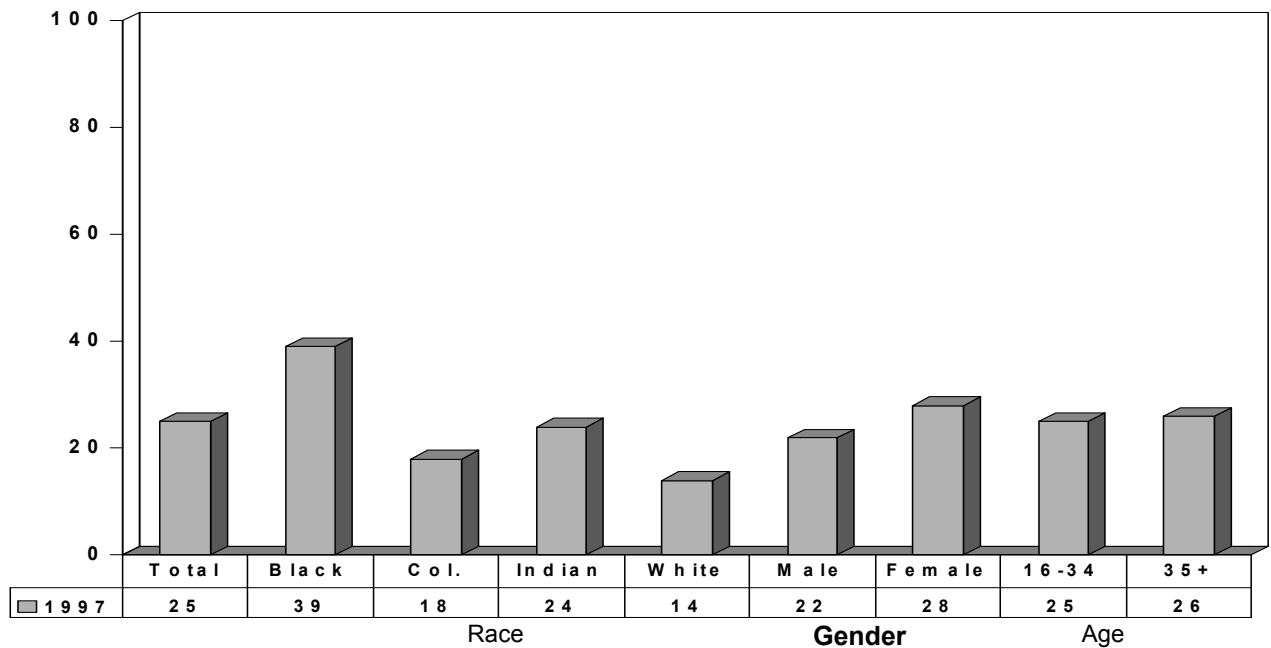
Fieldwork was conducted during September and October 1996 by interviewers in the employ of ACNielsen MRA. A 20% back check was done to ensure accuracy and validity. Respondents were given a gift of a pen

**Research Findings**

The findings of this paper are based on the sub-sample of 505 people who completed all stages.

**Incidence of Aliteracy**

An assumption was made that adults aged 16 years and over who attend high school would be able to read. It was found that one person in every four in the sample of 505 claimed not to have read a book, magazine, newspaper, or report in the last 7 days. These people were categorised as "aliterate" and the balance as "readers". Aliteracy was strongly linked with low levels of income and education and tended to be higher among women (28%) than men (22%). Two in every five Blacks (39%) and one in every four Indians (24%) were categorised as aliterate (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5 Incidence of aliterates by race, gender and age.**

**Source:** PMA (1997a). Project Wonderful.

N=505 urban adults who have been to high school or are still at high school.

### Relationship between Reading and Writing

It was found that there was a strong relationship between reading and writing (see Table 3). Those who read are far more likely to have written a letter or report in an average week (38%) than those who are aliterate (12%). They are also more likely to have consulted a dictionary (29% vs. 11%). Chi-square contingency tests showed that at an alpha level of .05 readers were significantly more likely during a 7 day period to have read a book, written a letter or report, looked up a word in a dictionary and done a crossword (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Interaction of reading with writing**

Activity last 7 days	Total	Aliterate	Reader	Sig. Level
N	505	127	378	
	%	%	%	
Read a book	44	-	59	.0001
Written a letter or report with a pen or pencil	25	11	30	.0001
Written a letter or report using a typewriter	5	1	6	.0152
Used a PC to write a letter or report	10	1	14	.0001
(Total written a letter or report)	31	12	38	.0001
Looked up a word in a dictionary	24	11	29	.0001
Used an encyclopaedia	4	-	6	.0044
Done a crossword	17	3	21	.0001

**Source:** PMA (1997a). Project Wonderful.

N=505 urban adults who have been to high school or are still at high school.

### **Aliteracy among People in Senior Positions**

Sixty six adults were categorised as in "senior positions" on the basis of being in a managerial or executive position in either the private or public sector. One in every five (20%) of these people, in the previous 7 day period, claimed not to have read a book, a business report, a journal, an article at work, nor read or paged through a business, or news magazine, a consumer magazine, a daily, or weekend newspaper. These people were taken to be aliterates. Among Blacks, Coloureds and Indians ( $n=26$ ) in senior positions the incidence of aliterates was 43% and among Whites ( $n=40$ ) it was 8%.

All people in senior positions had viewed television during the previous 7 days, and all Blacks, Coloureds and Indians had listened to the radio. Among Whites, radio listening was 88%.

In a 7 day period, 41% of those in senior positions had written a letter or report, 25% had looked up a word in a dictionary, and 11% had done a crossword. The incidence of writing was significantly higher ( $p < .0001$ ) among Whites (75%), than among Blacks, Coloureds and Indians (35%). Crosswords were more popular with Blacks, Coloureds and Indians (15%) than Whites (9%), though this finding is not significant ( $p < .513$ ).

### **Discussion**

When evaluating the results of this study it should be borne in mind that it was done among urban South African adults who had been to high school, or were still at high school. The findings have extensive implications for different fields, especially if it is considered that reading is strongly related to education. More than one South African adult in every three (36%) has not attended high school and the majority have not matriculated (72%) (SAARF 1998).

### **Advertising**

Many advertising messages are almost certainly ineffective because of the limited interest in reading. Even where reading takes place, the quality of communication achieved is likely to be below expectations.

### **Newsletters**

The extensive use of newsletters and written memoranda to clients and staff are called into question. It would seem to be advisable to supplement these with audiovisual material.

### **Packaging**

Of particular concern should be the instructions on packaging. Not only is there a risk that the product will be incorrectly used which could result in consumer dissatisfaction, but also in the case of dangerous substances the consequences could be more serious. The assumption made by doctors and chemists that all patients will follow instructions on medicines would appear to be ill founded. Verbal and visual instructions should also be given.

### **Educators**

At primary school level, there is clearly a need to focus more attention on teaching pupils to read and making it a more enjoyable experience. At secondary and tertiary level the extensive use of text-books and written material is questionable. Aliteracy could be a major contributor to the lack of success in the classroom. Educators cannot make the assumption that if a person has a Matric they are necessarily going to read.

### **Senior Decision Makers**

If many senior decision makers in commerce, industry and government are not making the time and effort to read the extensive amount of written material that is available to them, then the country faces a bleak future. First of all the lack of reading could be a manifestation of, either, a gross dereliction of duty, or, possibly worse, a basic lack of competence. The long-term consequences of a decline in the knowledge of the meaning or words Corder has warned (Koenderman 1997):

will lead to a lack of comprehension of business and scientific issues, an inability to communicate at a technical and sophisticated level, a decline in the quality of decision making and a deterioration in South Africa's international competitiveness and reputation (p.65).

### **Implications for South Africa**

The gravity of the threat facing South Africa, as a result of the high levels of aliteracy and illiteracy, demands a national strategy. The African National Congress (ANC) in its policy framework initially gave considerable attention to an integrated system of education (ANC 1994: 60-72). Radebe (1997: 1) reports that Trevor Manuel, Minister of Finance at the time, was planning for a real increase in the education budget for 1998. However cuts in allowances to educational institutions and the reduction in the number of full and part-time teachers are indicators that the immensity of the problem facing the country is perhaps not completely understood. Could it be that those taking such decisions are already victims of the situation that they should be addressing?

The Print Media Association has recognised the importance of an interest in reading to the future of the print industry and society. This has led to the greater proportion of the PMA's budget being allocated to "Project Mind", an initiative to improve reading standards at school level (PMA 1997b).

### **Further Research**

It is suggested that the differences in the ways in which people from diverse backgrounds perceive the external world should be further explored. Meyer (1984) questioned whether in the case of readers when "dealing with the same text they are following the same plans" (p. 3). While the Print Media Association (1997a) survey gave considerable insight into the relationships between reading and writing, and did investigate the internal processes taking place when a person reads, or tries to read a magazine or newspaper. It did not examine the relationship between visualisation and reading. For some readers, particularly those with limited visual imagery, reading might lack its enchantment, excitement, imagery, inspiration, magic and motivation. For the aliterate person, reading could be dull, even dead.

The further exploration of the mental processes that occur when people read would provide educators with insights into how to improve their teaching. It could also assist marketers with their communications.

Consideration could be given to extending research on aliteracy to other countries, as the findings of this study could have severe implications for print media worldwide.

### **Acknowledgements**

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