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Survival Strategies of *National Crusader* and *Newsgate* Magazines in an Era of Digital Media and Citizen Journalism

Taye C. OBATERU, *Ph.D.*

Department of Mass Communication
University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

Introduction

The growing challenges facing the print media industry around the globe as a result of access to digital technology has vitiated the traditional business model that relied heavily on advertising and copy sales, making many scholars and other observers to predict that the print news media are headed towards extinction. With many legacy newspapers already neck-deep in financial crisis and others already out of business in different parts of the globe, it is clear that print news media as a business is not in good times.

Tacitus (2018) notes that the impact of new technology and the changing global pattern of news consumption has radically affected the fortunes of the news media globally resulting in the current situation where a haze of death hovers over most print media houses globally. The situation has forced many print media establishments in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere; to explore various survival strategies to remain in business with varying levels of success and failure (Ekeanyanwu, Batta & Oyokunyi, 2017).

Despite the dire and gloomy situation, scholars and commentators (e.g. Garba, 2016; Ekeanyanwu, *et.al.*, 2017 & Tacitus, 2018) argue that with the adoption of appropriate strategies, the print media industry could bounce back as a business. Garba (2016, p. 104) notes: “in spite of gloomy predictions of the impending demise of newspapers, they continue to be important in our contemporary society [...] These core social functions explain why we continue to read them in the face of competition from radio, television, and now Internet-based news sources.”

The quotation above provides a glimmer of hope for the print media industry which has been facing survival challenges as a result of the evolution of digital media and its attendant impact on the generation and distribution of content. Garba’s position

also indicates that despite the general depiction of the print news media as a dying breed, survival is possible if appropriate measures or strategies are adopted or deployed.

The literature is replete with chilling statistics on the demise of several print news media around the globe in the past two decades while those surviving are having to adopt various strategies such as subscriptions, mergers, call for donations, etc. to remain afloat (Brookings, 2014). Competition from the electronic and online media has reduced the earnings from advertising by the print news media substantially, compounding the problem of dwindling income from circulation. There is also the problem of the migration of readers to online platforms of newspapers and magazines, putting hitherto booming print media businesses in financial difficulty. Saperstein (2014) in Ekeanyanwu, *et. al.* (2017) report for instance, that between 2006 and 2012 that the number of working journalists in the United States reduced by 17,000 as a result of a sharp drop in revenue amounting to over a billion dollars within the newspaper industry.

Garba (2016) also notes that in different parts of the world, all the key indices of success of the print media business have been declining over the past two decades. He states that the situation is worse in Nigeria, where the print media industry has suffered a more dramatic decline than other countries in Africa and elsewhere. “The general belief is that the circulation figures of Nigeria’s most popular newspapers have declined precipitately from hundreds of thousands each in the mid-1970s to mere tens of thousands today! (p.102). The situation is a far cry from the mid -seventies up to the early nineties when newspapers like the *Sunday Times* and *Weekend Concord* sold almost half a million copies or more. Tacitus reports that as of 2018, the combined daily sales of newspapers in the country are not up to two hundred thousand copies while most state-owned newspapers have collapsed. “Ravaged by dwindling sales, seemingly complex new technologies, poor public perception, miserable remuneration, low self-esteem, opinion-rigging and the commodification of news dissemination, the contemporary Nigerian print media is in dire straits indeed” (Tacitus, 2018, para. 24). His stand affirms a 2009 study by Brandwork Nigeria cited in Ekeanyanwu *et.al.*, (2017) which found that the total daily sales of the seven top newspapers in the country had reduced to 176,202 copies. Tacitus adds that the newsmagazine sector is worst hit leading to a situation where there is no truly national weekly newsmagazine currently circulating in Nigeria.

Despite this uninspiring scenario, examples of print news media that have continued to brace the odds against survival or even break even in the face of challenges exist. The case of the *Huffington Post* in the United States, an online only newspaper which was acquired for 315 million US dollars in 2013 by America On Line (AOL) (Brookings, 2014) and other print news media that have continued to survive the difficult time in different parts of the globe, keep being cited. This suggests that with the adoption of appropriate measures, it is still possible for the print media to survive as a business. This makes it imperative for the survival strategies being

introduced by various print media to be studied and propagated for possible adoption by others in the print media business in different parts of the globe. This study is therefore in furtherance of the above position.

Plateau State in Central Nigeria has also witnessed the establishment and demise of many print news media of different hues. Even the once popular and vibrant state-owned *Nigerian Standard* has had to scale down its operations drastically, publishing only twice in a week and with a small print run. In spite of this situation, two Jos-based news magazines – *National Crusader* and *NewsGate* – have continued to make fairly regular appearances on the news stand, prompting certain questions:

- How have the three print news media managed to survive despite the challenges facing the industry generally?
- Do they have a business model that other print news media entrepreneurs can learn from?
- Does the Theory of Circulation Spiral apply to the operations of the two newsmagazines?

To seek answers to these questions, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How has access to digital media and information from diverse sources, including citizens journalists, affected the print news media business?
2. What strategies have the publishers of the two identified news magazines adopted to survive?
3. To what extent does the Theory of Circulation Spiral apply to the operations of the two newsmagazines?
4. What can other print news media entrepreneurs learn from the experience of the two news magazines to keep afloat in business?

The research questions are germane to interrogate further, existing claims in the literature on the future of the print news media as a business enterprise as the review below illuminates.

Literature Review

Different scholars and writers have incessantly cited the advent of new technology as one of the harbingers of the difficulties facing the print news media as business concerns. Many, in fact, paint a picture of hopelessness. Donsbach (2010) For instance, notes that several developments in society and in the news media business are challenging the professional identity of journalism and its role. He adds that new technologies and access to digital communication tools have ended the monopoly of traditional news media in the generation and diffusion of information. Brookings (2014) corroborates this, noting that the competition from electronic and online media has reduced substantially earnings from advertising by the print media.

Owers, Carveth & Alexander (2004) align with this position, observing that the effects of new communication technology have had a huge impact on the operation of news media firms. According to them, the availability of alternative platforms to access needed information has shifted audience attention from the traditional media.

This has resulted in a fall in advertising income as advertisers 'followed' the audience to their new places of interest.

Filloux (2019) concurs that major shifts in the way consumers spend their time and money have created a stifling competition for the news media. Accordingly, the initial assumptions about the viability of the subscription model (whereby readers pay to read online news) have been proved wrong. "The migration to digital has put news content in direct competition with everything else. News, social, video-on-demand, games are now fighting for spending allocation, and time spent" (p. 2). A blogger, chestmaster30 (2019) supports the view that the Internet has removed the need to spend money on news in what he called a deadly prisoner's dilemma. In his opinion, "people expect free news, and if you do not give it to them, someone else will, so the market price for news is basically zero" (para. 25).

Chestmaster30 argues rather pessimistically, that many prescriptions such as subscriptions, purchase of articles from multiple publications in one-place, crypto currencies, and block chains that have been suggested to help the news media to survive current and emergent difficulties would not work; "because they miss the issue entirely" (para. 7). He adds that there is now an information glut online as a result of the possibilities afforded by the Internet for people to set up media outlets in the form of news sites, blogs, YouTube channels and others.

Similarly, Iro, *et. al.*, (2009) used the term, 'networked publics' to capture the changing patterns of media engagement from 'consumption' by audiences to active participation of people in the production and circulation of culture and knowledge via social network. Baran & Davis (2012) in explaining the active - audience theories, agree that new media have revolutionised how people use the media.

Picard (1990) and Thurman (2014), however, disagree with the pessimistic views on the survival of the print news media, stating that all hope was not lost if news media entrepreneurs responded appropriately to the challenges. Picard predicts that despite the sharp decline in newspaper readership, the adoption of technological innovations and adapting to the lifestyle changes of readers would help the news print media survive.

To Thurman, who in 2011 conducted a comparative and longitudinal study of the domestic and overseas consumption patterns on national newspaper brands in the United Kingdom, across print and online channels; a huge 96.7 per cent of time spent by the domestic audience with newspaper was in print. He concludes that, "in terms of popularity, the print channel accounted for a majority of domestic daily readers" (p. 156), but established that advertising revenues had shifted from print to online channels.

Owers, Carveth & Alexander (2004) believe that the adaption of media economics in the management of news media firms would lead to more efficient management and the survival of the firms. They note that, "economic principles must be emplaced by the media sector industries if viable firms are to continue in an ever demanding economic context" (p. 4).

This supports Breiner's (2019) argument that most people in the journalism career path need to have experience in the financial management of news media firms. He advises the firms to have proper accounting and budgeting procedures in place in the running of the firms. Proper budgeting and accounting which include exploring cheaper alternatives to cut costs, spending only on things that are important to the running of the organisation, and proper monitoring of the cash flow "would tell you how fast you are burning the fuel (money) you have in the tank, and how fast you are replacing what you have burned" (p. 2).

The various perspectives presented above illuminate the phenomenon of the challenge posed to the survival of the print news media. It justifies the importance of interrogating how the two print news media which are the focus of this study, have managed to survive, to serve as empirical frame of reference in discussions on the survival of the print news media. The next sections examine the theoretical framework for the study and the methodology adopted before presenting and analysing the data. The final section discusses the findings and answers the research questions.

The Theory of Circulation Spiral

This article adopted the Theory of Circulation Spiral as a framework. The theory, originated by Furhoff (1973) holds that in the struggle for survival in the print media business, circulation, and advertisement play complementary roles. The theory is that in a competition between two newspapers, the stronger newspaper benefits from factors (advertisement and circulation) which undermine its weaker counterpart. Higher circulation and advertisements spiral into a boost for the stronger paper which creates a storm for the weaker newspaper, and might eventually lead to its demise (Gabszewicz, Garella & Sonnac, 2007).

The core tenet of the theory is that since a high circulation figure attracts more advertisements to the stronger newspaper because of its readership, more advertisements would lead to an even higher circulation which would enhance its survival, but would endanger the survival of the smaller newspaper. Accordingly, "the interaction between newspapers and the advertising market drives the newspaper with the smaller readership into a vicious circle; finally leading to its death" (Gabszewicz, *et. al.*, 2007. p. 405). Gustaffson (1978) summarises the theory's argument:

The larger of two competing newspapers is favoured by a process of mutual reinforcement between circulation and advertising as a larger circulation attracts advertisements, which in turn attracts more advertising and again more readers. In contrast, the smaller of two competing newspapers is caught in a vicious circle; its circulation has less appeal for the advertisers, and it loses readers if the newspaper does not contain attractive advertising. A decreasing circulation again aggravates the problems of selling advertising space, so that finally, the smaller newspaper will have to close down (p.1).

Applied to the current state of the print media business in Nigeria where survival has become difficult as a result of a combination of factors, the theory suggests that the smaller or weaker print news medium would find it more difficult to survive since the 'pull' of circulation and advertisement by the stronger ones, occasioned by various factors, would create a vicious circle for them and might eventually lead to their extinction. It thus becomes necessary to investigate how the two newsmagazines which can be categorised as 'small' because of their limited circulation (mostly within Plateau State) as compared to those with wider circulation across Nigeria, have tended to disprove the propositions of the Theory of Circulation Spiral by remaining in business even when 'stronger' print news media have died.

This became more imperative because Gabszewicz, *et. al.*, (2007) found that while the arguments of the theory might be true to some extent, other factors play out in determining the survival or demise of newspapers beyond circulation and advertisements. They found that it is not always true that circulation spiral results in the elimination of competitors. Could this be the case with *National Crusader* and the *NewsGate* magazines?

Methodology

The qualitative research approach was used for this study. It employed in-depth interviews to elicit data from the proprietors of the two identified print news media (*National Crusader*, *NewsGate* magazines) to answer the research questions. The qualitative approach is considered best to enable the researcher engage the participants in open-ended, semi-structured interviews to make for a proper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Separate interviews were held with the participants who were coded as Participants 1 & 2 with the aid of an interview guide which contained semi-structured questions. The semi-structured nature of the interview made it possible to ask follow-up questions or to seek clarifications on some areas. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed, leading to the identification of themes that assisted in answering the research questions. Several findings emerged from the data.

- The introduction of digital technology is eroding the patronage of the print news media.
- The situation is compounded by the economic recession which has left people with less disposable income.
- The news organisations have adopted various measures, including unconventional ones, to survive the hardship occasioned by the situation, to stay afloat.
- The position of the Theory of Circulation Spiral is not supported by the experience of the magazines.
- With the adoption of the right measures, the print media would continue to survive as a business despite difficulties.

Discussion of Findings

Four research questions mentioned earlier guided this study and they are presented and discussed below:

RQ1 - How has access to digital media and information from diverse sources, including citizen journalists affected the print media business?

The participants agreed that the adoption of digital technology and the access to information on various platforms have posed serious challenges to their business. They concurred that income from copy and advertising sales has dropped drastically. The activities of citizen journalists who generate and distribute content via the social media were also posing a challenge: “we no longer break the news; citizen journalists beat us to it most times” (Participant 2). Participant 1 added:

We have been through thick and thin in the magazine publishing business in the past ten years because the demand for print media fell drastically as a result of the digital media. Although we have always had those we call ‘free readers’ who go to newsstands to read newspapers and magazines free of charge, the possibility of accessing news via various online platforms have aggravated the situation. Also, the advertisers know that people have migrated online so they are no longer advertising in the print media as much as they used to do.

From the responses, as Garba (2016) observes, the print media business is on the decline as a result of the digital revolution. Participants’ responses also align with Garba’s claim that the effect of the global economic pressure has equally eroded the expendable income among the citizens.

RQ2 – What survival strategies have print news publishers in Jos adopted to remain afloat despite the challenges of the digital era?

The primary motivation for this study was to investigate and document empirically, how the two print news media have remained afloat in an obviously difficult business environment. The participants in response to various questions relating to this, listed some of their survival strategies. A key finding is that some of the strategies mentioned are not the conventional advertising-seeking or sales boosting activities relating to the print media business. Rather, farming, animal rearing and others were mentioned as alternative sources of income:

I had to diversify into other businesses. We went into commercial printing – calendars, jotters and so on. I also delved into farming, animal husbandry, dog breeding, etc. as alternative sources of income. It has been a survival of the fittest (Participant 2).

We also introduced some cost-saving measures: The financial crunch has caused us to do some belt-tightening. We had to relocate into a cheaper office accommodation to reduce costs.

We were also forced to pay less to our workers especially the stringers who we pay per story (Participant 1).

I had to cut the print run from about 500 to 250 but still maintain the quality. This ensures that the copies left as unsold are less. We also increased the cover price of our magazine from three hundred to a thousand naira (Participant 2).

The responses of the participants demonstrated a determination to keep afloat and seeking additional income from outside, conventional sources for the news media business attests to this. This finding is in line with Brein's (2019) prescription for new media firms to explore cost-saving measures and to do a proper monitoring of their cash flow. It is also in line with the call by Garba (2016, p. 107) that the print news media "need to identify new revenue streams and adapt to contemporary realities in order to survive."

RQ 3 - To what extent does the Theory of Circulation Spiral apply to the operations of the two newsmagazines?

It is established that as far as the two magazines which are concerned, the position of the Theory of Circulation Spiral is only true to a very limited extent. While a drop in circulation and advertisement income have affected their operations, rather than put them in a 'vicious circle; the situation gingered the publishers to seek other ways of generating income to sustain the publications. This agrees with the finding of Gabszewicz, *et. al.*, (2007), in a previous study that the dynamics in the market are beyond the circulation spiral by Furhof's theory.

RQ 4 - What can other print news media entrepreneurs learn from the experience of the print media to keep afloat as a business?

The experience shared by the participants could be copied by others in the print news media business or might inspire other ideas for keeping afloat in the business. As the data have shown, such entrepreneurs do not have to rely solely on advertising and copy sales to remain in business.

One of the participants said it was imperative for those going into the print news media business to take journalism as a calling and not 'chicken out' when confronted by challenges. "I believe the print media will continue to survive despite the difficulties they are facing. They will always be there because they have their uniqueness which cannot be rubbished. They will also continue to have archival value and be needed for research" (Participant 2). This position supports Filloux's (2019) prescription that the news media should rather than despair, face the reality that they are in a hard time and evolve ways of appealing more to their audience through innovations to keep afloat. According to Garba (2016, p. 119): "However dim the prospects of newspapers may seem in today's circumstance, it is possible to go outside

the box to think up new business models and innovative revenue generating ideas that will ensure the continued survival and growth of the newspaper.”

Conclusion

To make the above realistic, it is recommended that the strategies already prescribed in the literature such as search engine optimisation (SEO) and hyperlocal news coverage (Ekeanyanwu *et. al.*, 2017) as strategies for re-gingering interest in the print media be adopted. By packaging their stories on their online platforms in a way that would make them easily discovered by news aggregators and search engines, the print media would attract more readers to their sites and this could attract advertising ultimately. Hyperlocal coverage is news reportage that focuses on a community such that the people become integrated in the newspaper because of the interest it is showing in their activities.

According to Ekeanyanwu, *et. al.* (2017, p. 440) “hyperlocal coverage obviously attracts new sources of funding to the media firm no matter how small.” It is believed that the awareness of these and other strategies for the survival of the print media, made available through research reports such as this, and other forms of knowledge sharing would immensely benefit the print media industry in Nigeria and elsewhere, in the continuous search for ways to keep the print media business afloat.

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