The Challenge of Online Newspaper Phenomenon to Offline Newspaper Patronage and Revenue in Nigeria

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Abstract

Since the predictions of Marshall McLuhan about the global village phenomenon, there has been an unequalled surge in the introduction of new and better information tools, which, are increasingly complementing and replacing older traditional tools of mass information. New media delivery systems, new information processing, storage and retrieval systems have become the vogue. Currently, newspapers and magazines make use of the World Wide Web (www) among other services of the net to create and maintain web servers in which they publish contents of their papers. The flourishing of newspapers and magazines online may not be unconnected with some possible secondary reasons- including enthusiasm for new technology and the general sense that one wishes to be part of the new wave at the moment not minding the adverse consequences. If these speculations and assumptions hold true, then the production and distribution of the offline editions may be hampered thereby impinging on the revenue profile of some newspaper organizations. Above all, this phenomenon may signal an attempt at subsuming and fusing the print media into the fast-paced communication technologies which are daily bestriding the communication space. To checkmate the challenge, the print media could package good and contemporary editorial, feature articles, and other genres that the online newspapers may not treat in great detail and the like.

Introduction

After the introduction of book as a medium of communication in 1580-135BC came newspaper, which essentially represents one of the earliest attempts at mass communication. Since Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 15th Century, the journalism profession has, no doubt, experienced tremendous progress powered especially by incredible advances in communication technologies (Agba, 2002: p. iv). The newspaper remained the prominent medium for many Centuries before the advent of the electronic media (radio) in the early 20th Century. It was not until the 1950s that we began to rely increasingly on television and radio for news, even though they provide little more than the headlines.

Okunna (1993: p. 56) thinks that the press has developed through "the acutely practical manoeuvres of the early journalists…to a press, which has embraced the full effects and vitality of both the print and electronic media". It is no surprise therefore that the

nagging problems that have dogged every step of the print media industry have been seen as challenges that trail any concern known for great strides and impact.

Ohaja (2005: p. 16) reflects that when the electronic media were introduced, they had an edge over newspapers because they were presenting the same condensed reports as the latter but at a faster pace and in form that clearly matched reality. Television, especially, moving and talking pictures of scenes were presented almost simultaneously along side the event itself. Feature writing became the print media's lifeline to prevent them from becoming obsolete and irrelevant to the public.... In view of the above challenges, Wilson (1997: p. 152) argues that "it is not true that the new technologies replace the old ones. They may replace some of their functions or create new functions or supplement the old one, but cannot replace them".

The late Canadian Professor of English, Marshal McLuhan, with the benefit of hindsight, in 1980, quoted in (Griffin, 1991: p. 295) submitted that "... we live in a unique revolutionary communication age, a balance point in history where the power of the printed word is over.... The age of print had its obituary tapped out by the telegraph". The thinking of the late Professor is among a handful of revelations that is the kernel of the current mind-blowing advances in information communication technologies today.

Since the predictions of McLuhan, there has been an unequalled surge in the introduction of new and better information tools, which, are increasingly complementing and replacing older traditional tools of mass information. New media delivery systems, new information processing, storage and retrieval systems have irresistibly dominated the communication scene.

Currently, newspapers and magazines make use of the World Wide Web (www) among other services of the net. They create and maintain web servers in which they publish contents of their papers for users of the Net to access. Newspapers and magazines using the web are connected to the internet via Local Area Network (LAN) that is directly connected to the Net via an Internet Service Provider's (ISP) facilities. In this way the electronic pages of newspapers are brought to the doorsteps of people in Nigeria and foreign countries as long as these people are connected to the Net.

The flourishing of newspapers and magazines online may not be unconnected with some possible secondary reasons- including enthusiasm for new technology and the general sense that one wishes to be part of the new wave at the moment. The fundamental reasons may be economic. The people who own newspapers have, by and large decided that the internet provides opportunities and challenges to which they need to respond.

Some of the opportunities as a matter of fact may be obvious. The offline newspapers (the hard copies) are in part a process of manipulating symbols and in part a straightforward industrial production process. Maybe once the journalists and the advertising people have delivered the made-up, final copy, the newspaper undergoes a series of transformations that constitute the physical production and distribution of the commodity.

Online newspaper on the other hand does not incur any of these costs so to speak. True, it requires some space on the server, but this is not a comparable expense to the printing processes and trucks needed for the physical product. The consumers themselves pay costs of distribution, buying the PCs and paying the telecommunications charges. The online newspapers, according to Sparks (1996), offer the proprietors the prospect of substantial cost reductions.

Online newspapers also confer what some journalists have come to perceive as an important competitive feature in newsgathering as compared with working offline. Physical newspaper, Sparks (2000: p. 272), says may produce several editions, but in general they only have one or at most two main publication points in any 24-hour period. The need to print, transport a physical product usually may impose strict time deadlines in the news day. This means that there is a risk that an important news development will occur too late to be put into the newspaper on the day of its occurrence. Some journalists think that covering these breaking stories is a very important part of their work. Printed newspapers may have long been thought of to be at a disadvantage to radio and television, both of which offer the opportunity continuously to update news throughout the day, although observation suggests that this facility is used, at best, for minority of items.

The online newspaper, essentially, is no longer distinguished by the fact that it appears every morning as opposed to the continuous flow of the broadcasters or the weekly and monthly periodicity of the magazines (Featherly, 1998). Moreover, all of these different media now exist in exactly the same space. The geographic distances that previously segmented the market so powerfully have now more or less, been abolished. The online reader can have access to any from anywhere in the world, at any time he/she wants. Conversely, the advertiser can gain access to the most dispersed readership through new media and in new ways. The upshot of all these is that for the first time in years, newspapers face serious challenge and competition in their core business. They no longer or hardly have the privileged relationship with readers and thus with advertisers, that were to a large extent the foundation of their success in the offline world.

The new competition and or challenge seems to affect both their editorial content and advertising. In the editorial field, the newspaper now faces direct competition from four different types of rivals. The first of these is competition from other newspapers. The effective abolition of distance means that no newspaper can rely on being insulated by geographical location. Titles that had previously enjoyed widespread dominion of their tiny local market now face competition from other newspapers. Obviously, some of these are also local tabloids that pose little threat, but others are the strongest brands in the newspaper business, like *The Guardian, The Punch, Vanguard, etc*. While newspapers like these might not be much of a threat to local news, they are certainly a strong challenge when it comes to the coverage of major national and international stories, since they can afford to dedicate many more resources, both online and offline, to such issues.

The second challenge may come from media that were previously delivered by different technologies, at different times and in different places but which now occupy the same place as online newspapers. Some of these like Cable News Network (CNN) pose a threat similar to that of the big metropolitan newspapers, since they have very strong brands that are attractive to news consumers. Others however like radio and television stations threaten to undermine the pre-eminence of the newspaper as source of local news and information in the online world. They can claim to have as much of a focus on the community as does the newspaper, and can offer the same kind of online news and feature material as well as possible supplementary material like sounds and images derived from their different offline locations.

The third type of competition is from the proliferation of news sources on the internet. In order to have news and related material, it is thought that it is not necessary to have an offline news presence. There are examples; particularly specialist areas like technology, of

enduring online news operations, because they do not have to invest in printing and distribution are also cheaper and easier to set up than offline enterprises, so the entry barriers, particularly for the suppliers of special kinds of 'niche' news, are much lower. Specialist news which previously was not economically viable, except either as part of a high-cost-production or as part of the general news provision of a newspaper can thus have a better chance of existing independently and profitably inline. The general news diet of newspapers is also under threat from large websites, for example the main portals that also carry news which they obtain from traditional news wholesalers like News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) or Agence France Presse (AFP) of France, etc. Given that these sites are amongst the most trafficked on the web, they constitute an apparent threat to the attempt to offer online newspapers as spin-offs from online operations.

Another type of challenge/competition comes from news sources themselves. The main generators of much of the standard news diet like government bodies, large businesses and corporations, pressure groups and so on hardly need the newspaper as an intermediary to reach the public. They can alternatively publish their own material, selected, edited and presented in ways that they see fit, and offer it directly to the public in competition with the newspaper journalists' reports of their doings. They are forced from what they perceive as the restrictions imposed by conventional news values, which they often believe stress conflict, edit for brevity and, which marginal and oppositional groups impose dominant frames on activities.

The Crux of the Matter in Perspective
The mass communication media in the present age are blurring and blending into what is now considered a single system or a set of interrelated systems. To a very large extent technologies are shaping the scope of the mass media and all media now share a common denominator- technology.

To a great extent the entrenched internet medium has utilized the power of the fast-paced Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in diverse ways and leaving its awesome influence in all spheres of human activities. One of such influences could be readily noticed in the online newspapers phenomenon that has greatly increased the accessibility of people to information services which the 'traditional' mass media- radio, television, newspaper, etc are pursuing after, especially in developed societies where computer usage is eagerly being embraced. For instance Vivian (1987) reports that "a San Jose, USA paper, *Mercury News* in the early 1990s got as many as 325,000 visits to its online site in a day against only 270,000 copies of the paper's newsprint product that were circulated. Some hard-line online journalism scholars may argue that a lot more information can be packaged into a layered online message than within the space and time confines of a print title or broadcast station…. Online communication allows the news to be updated at a moment's notice continually without interrupting online communication though."

But reasonably, production and distribution of any products like newspapers and magazines are not only incomplete until the consumer has been reached, but also have the consumer as the target for patronage and subsequently ensure revenue to complement subventions, grants, shareholders' funds, advertising revenue, etc for the sustenance of the establishment- overhead, maintenance, tax servicing, social responsibility and the like.

There is this speculation that the exposure of the contents of these online editions satisfies readers' needs for news and slows down the drive for the offline editions (the hard

copies). If this speculations and assumptions hold true then the production and distribution of the offline editions may be hampered thereby impinging on the revenue profile of the newspaper organizations that had been beefed up partly by production capacity, marketing ingenuity, public relations, etc.

The preoccupation of this investigation therefore is to verify the impact (positive or negative) of the online newspaper on print media revenue in Nigeria.

The Power of the Electronic Media

In the 'beginning' the hypodermic needle was used to represent an early but highly influential mass media version of the effect process. Media content was then viewed as injected in the veins of the audience that was then supposed to react in foreseeable and predetermined way.

Griffin (1991: p.288) clearly captures the scenario thus:

> Early mass communication theorists assumed that print and electronic media have an enormous power to mould opinion, arouse feelings, and sway behaviour. They viewed the mass audience as defenseless and relatively passive – a herd of sheep that is easy for manipulative advertising or clever propaganda. The 'powerful effects' model was likened to bullets of media messages fired from a machine gun into a crowd.

Consequently, the very first empirical findings of mass media effect research scientifically disproved the simple stimulus reaction model. Individual differences in people's personality organization–different motivation, capability to learn, attentiveness, awareness etc. were now taken into account. The effects of mass communication were no longer stringently regarded as deterministic since the personality structure of the individual recipient was perceived as an effect – modifying filter.

Behind the conception of the all powerful media effect perspective, McQuail and Windahl (1981: p.42) say "an image of a modern society as consisting of an aggregate of relatively 'atomized' individuals acting according to their personal interests and little constrained by social ties and constraints". A dominant view of the mass media as engaged on campaigns to mobilize behaviour according to intentions of powerful institutions, whether public or private (advertisers, government bureaucracies, political parties, etc).

Gauging the effects of the media McLuhan (1964: p.75) speaks in parables when he says new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics. If the operations are needed, the inevitability infecting the whole system during the operation has to be considered. The above statement is a call for caution by media operators in their use of the media in order not to experience a boomeranging effect on themselves and society. Following from the above, Mboho (1991: p.117) quotes Klapper (1960) as saying, "… Communication (including broadcasting) can lead to reinforcement, to conversion, to minor or major adjustments of attitudes, long-term or short tem effects and those, which are unintended, as well as those, which are intended."

Watson and Hill (1996: p.63) aver that "the actual effect of the media on audiences, so far as it can be ascertained, is arguably less significant than the perceived effect. Baran

(2003: p.338) says media content can be duplicated and transmitted easily without loss of quality. Individuals themselves can now be producers of media. Easier creation and distribution of content lead to more choice for media consumers. People can seek out and receive content they are interested in while ignoring other contents. But he raised some fundamental questions: what will happen to security of personal information if content can be easily copied and transmitted (privacy and security issues).

Audience Disposition to Media Messages

Perception is functionally selective. That is to say our cognitive worlds are organized and meaningful, and the way we perceive whatever we expose ourselves to in the mass media is determined by how it will be useful to us against the background of the cognitive structure we have already built.

This means that our perception of the world around us is a product of the cognitive process within us. It is also a process by which an individual maintains contact with his environment Gibson (1959: p.457). This contact with the environment is clearly noticed when an individual receives through the various senses and interprets them (Kollat, Blackwell and Engel 1970: p.48).

Akpan (1993: pp.30-31) agrees that perception is the means by which we learn about the world by selecting stimuli from the external world and simultaneously, mixing and blending them with internal stimuli. Myers and Myers (1973: p.28) see perception, as "a process of selecting, organizing and interpreting sensory stimulations into a coherent picture of the world. They further state that communication without due regard to the individual perceptual capabilities is a waste of time and resources and therefore doomed".

Moreover, studies that have taken a closer look at the influence of mass communication are at pains to point out what the media do not or cannot do. But some scholars would argue that there is no evidence to support the assertion that media glamour is responsible for a 'revolution of rising frustration' or indeed for any kind of revolution at all either at the individual or the national levels

The Scenario

More than 180 million Americans now have access to the internet, and about 120 million actively log on each month 9 Finberg, Stone and Lynch, 2002). Adult users cite research as a primary reason for logging on (Pew Research Centre for People and the Press, 2000b). Also, about 20% of the US public obtains daily news from the internet (McNamara, 2000). Growing internet use for research and information has raised concerns about the quality of information people are obtaining and how they are assessing its credibility (France, 1999; Tucher;, 1997). The Consumers Union, launching a 3-year Web Credibility Programme designed to educate the public on credibility issues, identified a key problem with online information.

The World Wide Web is so big, and offers so many different ways of being accessed and traversed that dealing with all the choices and excitement about it is a task in itself. One does not really need to know everything and try everything at once. There are learning curves to the mastery of the phenomenon and the slope of those curves and the time it takes for one to ascend them depends on one's computer experience and ability to conceptualise what one is doing.

What appears to be the downside of internet reporting is that the internet is accessible only to people with computers, modems and online subscriptions. Due to production costs, print titles face severe time restrictions. Once an edition is printed it can not be updated until the next issue.

Patronage of online newspapers may be a result of the following factors; to pass time and or entertain themselves, to decide on which of the newspapers to buy during the day, to fulfil official assignments and demands, to quench the taste and desire for news, to keep abreast of contemporary and burning national issues, to get the summary of the day's news, to gather information and education in their chosen carriers, to meet and fulfil their academic and research needs

Some readers may be motivated to buy the newspapers after accessing the online editions because of the following reasons; the use of colour pictures, the dept of reporting, interpretation of news, for documentation i. e. to keep for future references. They can also buy because of the reputation of and or credibility of the newspapers reviewed.

Some others may be less motivated to buy the offline papers after they have read them online because the core of the news stories may have highlighted, the zeal to buy the papers may go down after reading the papers online, some readers may think that the reviews may make the news stale thereby reducing the crave and longing for the offline editions, the money to buy the offline copies may not be readily available therefore they make do with the offline editions, buying of the offline copies may no longer be urgent if there were nothing to clarify in the estimation of the people. The details of what have been reviewed may be a motivation for buying the offline editions. Some readers may hardly ever get the time to read newspapers and magazines and so make do with the online papers. A great number of people may buy offline papers only when there is perceived job vacancies and advertisements.

The Challenge, the Dilemma

The online newspapers may slow down revenue in the offline newspapers and thereby capable of putting newspapers and to a large extent magazines out of business. It is also speculated that the phenomenon is capable of boosting sales and patronage for the print media industry generally. Form the look of events it seems the phenomenon is an infringement on the copyrights of newspaper proprietors. The activity is also an avenue of advertising goods and services of the clients of the electronic media. The phenomenon has also blurred the privileged relationship with readers and thus with advertisers that were the foundation of print media success before now. It may have engendered a new wave of competition between newspapers and newspapers on the one hand and between magazines and newspapers on the other. Above all this activity may signal an attempt at subsuming and fusing the print media into the fast-paced communication technologies which are championed by the internet.

But Rapp and Collins (1987: 64) looking at the challenge posed above argues that movies did not kill stage plays; free music on radio did not kill recordings. Free dramas on television did not kill Hollywood movies and television viewing did not kill listening to the radio or reading the magazine, newspapers and books. To survive the challenge it is imperative that the offline newspapers device some means of staying afloat in spite of the onslaught. One of such means should be the employment of advertising and public relations.

Justifying the efficacy of advertising, Varda Langholz Leymore in her book, the Hidden Myth (1975: 156) observes that like myth advertising reinforces accepted modes of behaviour and acts as an anxiety-reducing mechanism resolving contradictions in a complex or confusing society… to the constant nagging dilemmas of the human condition, advertising gives a simple solution… it simultaneously provokes anxiety and resolves it.

In a similar vein, William (1980: 158) says advertising is a 'magic system … a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies but rather strangely co-existent with highly developed scientific technology. Advertisement can skillfully be designed and produced, very attractive, entertaining and funny. But we should not lose sight of their ideological function, which is linked to their economic function nor of the real messages that lie behind their superficial gloss.

Farese, Kimbrell and Woloszyk (1991:374-75) reason that the best way advertising and public relations marketing tools can effectively yield results for the print media is through the following basic researches: advertising research, business research, operations research, corporate responsibility research, product research, and sales and marketing research.

Arens (2004: 206) agrees that marketing research helps mangers make marketing decisions … useful influential planning, economic forecasting and quality control. The essence of these researches should however be to obtain information about preferences, opinions, habits, trends, and plans of potential customers. Information about customers and the size of a potential market for instance the print media with product planning, advertising and promotion.

The Print Media Lifeline for Survival

1.   To checkmate the challenge, the print media should, at all times package good and contemporary editorial, feature articles, and other genres that the online newspapers may not treat in great details. Okoye (2002:16) agrees that feature can do this through in-depth analysis, interpretation, explanation and focusing on the side attractions. He justified this prescription by saying that feature is a summary of the big news of the week and that feature deals with the areas not usually covered or under-reported by straight news.

2.   The print media should build relationship with their customers through events sponsorship, marketing promotions, public relations, advertising,, etc Relationship building essentially involves delivering the goods and services that customers want and need, getting products (in this case newspapers) to them at the right time, in the right place and at a price they are willing to pay.

3.   The print media should conduct periodic researches to discover interests of readers, brand's position in the market and to meet the needs promptly. Successful business planning requires information about potential target markets, the competition, individual customers, and their reaction to products. The periodic researches to be evolved include the following: business research, operations research, product research, sales and marketing research, etc

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