
Survival Strategies of Select Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Era

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Abstract

This study explored the transformative impact of digitisation on the Nigerian newspaper industry through qualitative interviews with seasoned professionals representing diverse backgrounds within the sector. The study revealed a significant change in the operational landscape; this change was attributed to the substantial impact of digitisation on the industry. The traditional print-centric operations have shifted towards a digital landscape characterised by online platforms. This shift was a result of the growing influence of digital technology on the industry, leading to a change in consumer behavior and challenging traditional revenue streams. The findings showed that shift towards digital platforms has led to a change in consumer behavior, with the advent of the internet and digital technology, consumers now have access to a wide range of news sources and information. This has led to a decrease in the reliance on print media.

Keywords: News Source, Print Media, Online Media, Survival Strategies, Digital Era

Introduction

In Nigeria, newspaper publishing began with the publishing of *Iwe Iroyin Fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba* in 1859 at Abeokuta by a British Missionary, Rev. Henry Townsend. It was the first newspaper in Nigeria. Today, over 100 newspapers and magazines are available to the Nigerian reading public. Newspapers have the distinction of being the first channel for the mass communication of news (Esimokha, 2011). *Iwe Iroyin Fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba* was a Yoruba and English newspaper that ran for eight years (1859-1867) for the Egba people of Abeokuta and the rest of Yorubaland. Townsend main intention was to propagate the Anglican faith of Christianity and also to encourage the Egbas and other Yorubas to read and write. The circulation of the paper was around 3,000 copies fortnightly (that is, every 14 days) as of that time. The newspaper was cautioned by the Christian Missionary Society (C.M.S) authorities in 1863 for some of its contents that antagonised the colonial government, but the reprimand did not stop Rev. Henry Townsend from running the newspaper as he see fit (Akinbode, 2018). The paper embraced the anti-slavery movement of the time. However, the newspaper was involved in some political matters of the time, especially those emanating from the viewpoints of the Egbas which became a major repository of major views on different political events affecting the residents of Abeokuta during the period. There was an uprising in Abeokuta in 1867 due to political and cultural differences between the colonialists and the Egba

Survival Strategies of Select Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Era

indigenes that led to the expulsion of all Europeans from Abeokuta at that time, and the destruction of the newspaper's printing equipment which grounded its production as Egba rioters razed the premises, just eight years after its establishment (Akinbode, 2018). The demise of *Iwe Irohin* provided the opportunity for other newspapers to be established over the years. Interestingly, on Friday, December 21, 2012, *Iwe Irohin* was resuscitated in Abeokuta, the Ogun State Capital, after 145 years of its demise by the Nigeria Union of Journalists, Ogun State Council. This time, in six columns and eight pages, of the 32-page tabloid, in full-processed colours (Akinbode, 2018).

Nigerian media today are also dealing with some issues, and the primary factor is lack of funding, papers must publish advertisements to survive, which occasionally may affect the quality of some articles. In Adebayo (2018) article titled Digital Transformation in Nigerian Newspapers, the author focuses on the issue of understanding the impact of digital technologies on the Nigerian newspaper industry which has led to a decline in traditional print media and shift towards digital platforms. Another issue the author focuses on is the issue of revenue generation, this is known to be important for any industry. Adebayo (2018) also highlighted the challenges of fake news proliferation, loss of control and over content distribution posed by social media platforms. However, Oso (2014) opined that some of the key survival strategies employed by Nigerian newspaper industry includes—embracing online platforms in order to reach wider audience and diversifying revenue streams, this means that the industry will be enabled to adapt to changing consumer preferences and technological advancements.

The development of digital technology has presented significant obstacles for the Nigerian newspaper industry in recent years. The way people consume news and information has also changed and as a result of the widespread adoption of the internet, social media and mobile devices, there has been a decline in print newspaper readership (Hassan, 2018). To remain relevant in the digital age, Nigerian newspapers have had to adapt to the shifting media landscape by adopting digital technologies and developing new strategies (Hassan *et al* 2018). High cost of production and distribution of traditional newspapers, need for updates in real-time, general decline in reading culture, non-translation options, absence of interactivity, high cover price of traditional newspapers and the internet are the major challenges facing the newspaper today (Hassan *et al* 2018). However, publishers are missing powerful opportunities for competition. Traditional newspapers have a long tradition of providing accurate, reliable, and current news that contains thought-provoking and informative contents through news articles, features, editorials, sub-editorials, analyses and observations (Hassan *et al* 2018). Because of the abundance of information available on online platforms, differences between genuine news and rumors or fake news is often difficult to distinguish, by integrating the web, newspapers can play a significant role in providing credible information which could increase their popularity. In today's digital age, newspapers have the opportunity to provide both print and online news by expanding their reach because of a relatively large number of readers, especially old people who are still loyal to the broadsheet (Hassan *et al* 2018). Through full integration of the new technology, newspapers can attract advertisers for both print and online versions even though the print version remains the main source of generating revenue (Hassan *et al* 2018).

Statement of the Problem

One of the major challenges facing the Nigerian newspaper industry is the impact digitalisation has had on the business model of various Nigerian newspapers, this has led to the shift towards digital media from print media and also have affected the newspaper business revenue stream. Many businesses have had to cut down the amount of money they spend on newspapers advertising and rationalised the options available to them in terms of reach and impact. Also, government officials and civil servants of old who used to buy newspapers as a habit have cut their habits of buying for the purpose of saving (Oyokunyi et al., 2017). This research study aimed to understand clearly the impact of digitisation on newspaper's business model and provide an applicable approach to address the problem.

Another major challenge is reader's changing preferences and behaviors on newspapers operations. The failure of the Nigerian education system has resulted in a decline in the art of reading and a sharp rise in illiteracy. The education system no longer prepares the Nigerian school leaver for a life of thought and rigorous application (Oyokunyi *et al* 2017). There has been a discounting of ideas in favour of a culture of wealth without work and instant gratification. Young people in particular have fallen out of habit of reading newspapers, partly out of an antipathy towards reading anything that appears serious or extended, but also, because of their fascination with the growth of the Nigerian cybernetic space and its contagious speed, attraction and impact (Oyokunyi *et al* 2017). Again, this research study provides an applicable insight on how newspapers can improve readership among the public; thus, this study identified and examine the key factors affecting the survival of newspapers in Nigeria in the digital era.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the influence of digitization on Nigerian newspaper industry.
2. Assess the economic effect of digital disruption on Nigerian newspaper industry.
3. Investigate the economic strategies for survival of Nigerian newspaper industry in the digital era.

Newspapers in Digital Era

The digital era is characterised by technology that speeds up and broadens the economy's and society's transfer of knowledge. The transition from mechanical and analog electronic technologies of the Industrial Revolution to digital electronics is known as the Digital Revolution (Adesanya & Olutayo, 2017). Since the invention of the first digital computers in 1930s, the power of computing and storage capacity has improved extensively. The ability to access, modify, store and share digital media has been simplified by personal computers and smartphones, leading to digital revolution. Digital revolution refers to the transformation from analogue technology to digital electronics, this started in the late 1950s with the recognition and spread of digital computers that remain until present day. Digital media have rapidly transformed the society in the 21st century and generated a new era recognised as digital revolution (Bazillion 2001).

According to Lauer (2009), the advent of digital media is associated with technological innovations. The combination of digital media with other forms of media

Survival Strategies of Select Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Era

and socio-cultural factors is regarded as new media. The notion on moving toward a fully digital society is complemented by the fear that people might rather experience a digital dark period, in which traditional media will no longer be accessible on new devices. Digital media have a substantial, extensive and multifaceted influence on the society (Mizuko *et al* 2008). As a result of the emergence of digital technology, several newspaper organisations commenced both print and online operation. Online newspapers make report of events more believable as readers can easily press a button on the computer to verify such reports. Online newspapers use interactive features which allow audience to register their opinions about topical issues (Mathew *et al* 2013). Dominick (2007) states that online newspapers have several advantages: They are interactive and can provide photos and video clips to accompany news stories and advertisements. Online newspapers can feature user-generated content. Turow (2010) points out that newspaper websites encourage their audiences to engage with the site in numerous ways. For example, you can email a reporter whose story you have read or join a community of readers to discuss particular news topic and create a blog around any topic you like. You can also search for the week news by using words of your choice and browse an archive of newspaper issues that may go back to decades and beyond. The rise of the internet and other technologies completely changed how news is produced and diffused. It enables the entry of new intermediaries that create and distribute news, including online news aggregators, online news publishers, mobile news actors, and citizen journalism.

Theoretical Framework

Developing survival strategies can have a significant and positive impact on the media industry in the long-run as this will determine the overall success of the newspaper businesses in the digital era. This theoretical framework aims to provide a comprehensive understanding for the need to develop some survival strategies for Nigerian newspapers in the digital era, drawing upon various management theories and research studies.

Contingency Approach Theory

Previous management theories and approaches assumed that their principles or processes were universally applicable in managing organisations. It was later discovered that the opposite is exactly the case. A small organisation for instance, will require a different approach compared to a large and complex organisation (Robbins & Coulter, 2009). The contingency approach arose as a result of those who argue in favour of the approach that there is no best management approach and that any approach depends on the situation faced (Robbins & Coulter, 2009). Contingency theory was first introduced by Fred Fiedler in the 1960s and has since been expanded upon by other scholars. The theory emphasises the importance of fit between the characteristics of the organisation and its environment. It suggests that organisations should adapt their structures and management practices to align with the specific demands of their external environment. Amoah-Mensah (2013) agrees and succinctly concludes that ‘the dynamic and complexity of the external environment are pushing firms not to rely on their internal resources for competitive advantage’ (Amoah-Mensah 2013:108). This means that firms can no longer rely (only) on internal resources but must consider the contingencies of the external environment if they are to remain competitive and relevant. The contingency theory can be applied to the Nigeria newspaper industry to understand how different factors

influence the effectiveness of organisational structures and management practices. Some key areas where contingency theory can be relevant include external environment, technology, organisation size, goals and strategy and even leadership style. By considering these areas, newspapers can adapt their organisations to achieve optimal performance in a dynamic and competitive industry.

Methodology

These researchers adopted qualitative study with a descriptive research design and specifically utilised in-depth interview as its method of data collection. A qualitative study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the subject matter by examining the context and meaning behind human actions and interactions. A qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video or audio) to understand concepts, opinions or experiences (Bhandari, 2020). Qualitative research is used to understand how people experience the world. Descriptive research aims to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation or phenomenon. It can answer the *what, where, when* and *how* questions, but not the *why* question (McCombes, 2019). A descriptive research design can use a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables. The population of this study included newspaper publishing firms in Nigeria. The sample size of this study was limited to six (6) management staffs of selected newspapers publishing firms located in Lagos, Nigeria.

This study adopted a non-probability sampling technique known as purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a type of non-random sampling method where researchers deliberately select participants who possess specific characteristics or meet certain criteria that are relevant to the research objectives. The decision to use purposive sampling in this study was driven by the need to gather in-depth information from individuals who possess a deep understanding and expertise in this research's subject matter. This research study utilised an interview guide as its primary instrument. An interview guide is a structured set of questions designed to facilitate a conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee. It served as a tool to ensure that the interview process is consistent, comprehensive, and focused on gathering relevant information from the interviewee. The method of data collection this study utilised is in-depth Interview. In an in-depth interview, the researcher engages in a one-on-one conversation with the participant, allowing for a deep exploration of their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives on a particular topic. The interview required for this study was conducted with management staff whose beliefs and opinions matter to the topic under discussion, an interview guide that contain questions relevant to the research objectives was constructively designed and made available, respondents were contacted and interviewed at their chosen time, responses were collected, analysed and finally, sense were made out of the findings.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Thematic Analysis of Interview Sessions

This research project explored the impact of digitisation on newspapers, featuring interviews with individuals from diverse newspaper backgrounds. Respondents shared

Survival Strategies of Select Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Era

insights on their organisation's history, pre-digitisation operations and the challenges faced since embracing digital transformation. Respondents also shared a rich working experience and knowledge between themselves, respondent I is a journalist with seven (7) years working experience in the Newspaper industry, respondent II is with ten (10) years working experience, respondent III is with eight (8) years working experience, respondent IV has deeper knowledge and understanding in fifteen (15) years, while respondent V and VI have eight (8) and seven (7) years working experience respectively. Common themes identified includes shift in reader preferences to online platforms, economic impacts such as declining sales and advertising revenues, and adjustments made to cope with the changing landscape. Strategies discussed range from enhancing online presence and reader engagement to adapting business models. Despite the challenges, respondents express optimism and determination to navigate the evolving media landscape. This research shed light on the dynamic relationship between traditional and digital newspaper formats in the face of technological disruption.

Traditional Operating Model before Digitisation

According to the respondents, the traditional operating model before digitisation involved heavy reliance on printing newspaper copies and distributing them to readers through newsstands and vendors. The focus was on physical copies, with a predominant emphasis on winning the interest of advertisers. This model generally involved a print-and-distribute approach, catering to both direct subscribers and vendors for redistribution. Respondent I highlighted that traditional model involved printing papers and distributing them through newsstands and vendors. Respondent II mentioned reliance on printing batches of papers delivered to clients and various companies. Respondent III described a similar approach of printing newspaper copies and distributing them to subscribers or vendors. Respondent IV, with extensive experience, noted the focus on winning advertisers' hearts and delivering copies to vendors and subscribers. Respondent V talked about printing papers and delivering them to readers, especially through vendors. The key elements here are printing batches of newspapers, distribution through newsstands and vendors and direct delivery to subscribers and government agencies. From the elements, it can be deduced that the common thread among the respondents reflects a traditional newspaper industry model centered around physical printing and distribution.

Influence of Digitisation

The impact of digitisation, as indicated by the respondents, led to changes in the way newspapers operate. While the traditional model of printing and distributing physical copies still dominates, there is a noticeable shift towards the internet. The advent of digitisation has introduced online platforms and websites to cater to readers who prefer consuming news digitally. However, it is important to note that the overall process, despite adaptations, remains somewhat similar. Respondent I noted that there have been changes due to increased concentration on the internet, but the process remains somewhat the same. Respondent II acknowledged changes and adoptions made since digitisation. Respondent III mentioned adjustments made to new technology and the need to adapt.

Respondent IV stated that while the traditional process remains dominant, there have been some differences due to increased internet access. Respondent V pointed out an increase in focus on the internet and respondent VI, stated that the traditional business model remains the same but operates differently in the digital realm. The notable elements here are the shift in reader preferences to online platforms, decrease in physical newspaper sales and changes in advertising dynamics. Therefore, it can be deduced that digitisation has significantly influenced the reading habits of the audience, leading to a decline in traditional newspaper sales and necessitating adjustments in advertising strategies.

Economic Effect of Digitisation

The economic effects of digitisation, as mentioned by the respondents, are characterised by a decline in readership of physical newspapers. The shift towards online platforms has resulted in decreased sales of newspaper copies, impacting subscription and advertising revenues. The economic situation, influenced by factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to increased costs of operations, affecting the pricing of newspapers and reducing the purchasing power of customers. Respondent I noted a decline in readership and subscription, attributing it to increased online services. Respondent II mentioned a decrease in paper sales due to people preferring to read directly from the internet. Respondent III talked about a significant drop in paper sales and the organisation's adjustment to utilise the internet. Respondent IV also cited a decrease in sales of newspaper copies, subscription revenues, and advertising revenues. Respondent V mentioned facing competition from online media for advertisers, impacting the business and respondent VI highlighted similarly, an increase in online competition, making it difficult to win advertisers' interest. With decline in readership and subscriptions, increased competition affecting revenues and economic downturn impacting labor and machinery costs, it can be deduced that digitisation has resulted in economic challenges, including a decrease in revenue streams and increased operational costs, necessitating adjustments to maintain profitability.

Digital Transformational Adoption and Implementation

The respondents highlighted various steps taken in the adoption of digital transformation. Common strategies included the creation of websites, online platforms and in-app access to cater to the changing preferences of readers who now prefer obtaining news online. The goal is to maintain reader and advertiser interest by providing content through digital channels, indicating an industry-wide recognition of the importance of adapting to technological shifts. Respondent I talked about launching a website to cater to readers interested in online contents. Respondent II mentioned establishing an online platform for readers and advertisers, and using the website for product awareness. Respondent III mentioned creating online platforms and in-app access, continuously working to improve functionality. Respondent IV discussed having a website offering trending news and in-app access for live streaming and interactivity. Respondent V described adjusting towards the trend of people getting news from the internet and increasing online presence and

Survival Strategies of Select Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Era

respondent VI emphasised increasing online awareness, redesigning the website, and relying on the internet for attainment of success in operational activities. This means that organisations are actively adopting digital transformation measures to align with the changing landscape, focusing on online platforms to engage readers and advertisers effectively.

Strategies for Improvement

According to the respondents, the supposed strategies for improvement revolves around enhancing online presence, engaging readers through digital platforms, exploring new revenue streams, re-strategising online content, introducing subscription services, developing news apps and focusing on reader interaction. Some organisations also aim to differentiate themselves by investing in fact-checking processes, transparency initiatives and journalist training programmes to maintain trust and credibility. Respondent I indicated the hope of his organisation to re-strategise their online presence and provide a wider range of content to engage more readers. Respondent II highlighted his organisation's plans to encourage reader interaction through a news app for exclusive content and benefits. Respondent III organisation aims to reintroduce subscription services on the website and offer membership for exclusive content and benefits. Respondent IV organisation aims to focus on maintaining trust and credibility through fact-checking, transparency initiatives and journalist training programmes. Respondent V organisation also aims to study audience behavior and consumption habits to tailor the approach to fit readership needs. Respondent VI organisation plans to increase awareness, redesign the website for a better user experience and work on enhancing online presence. To improve operations, organisations are focusing on a multi-faceted approach, including technological enhancements, content diversification, and building trust through transparent practices.

Discussion

The impact of digitisation on the Nigerian newspaper industry is substantial, as revealed by the respondents. Before digitisation, traditional methods of printing and distributing newspapers were predominant. However, with the advent of digitisation, there has been a shift towards online platforms. Respondent I mentioned the launch of a website to cater to readers interested in online content, while Respondent II emphasised the establishment of an online platform for news delivery and advertising.

The shift to digital platforms has led to changes in readership patterns. Respondents III, IV and VI highlighted a decline in newspaper sales due to the increasing preference for online news consumption. There is also an evident struggle to compete for readership and advertisers in the digital landscape, as mentioned by Respondents V and VI. Digitisation has brought about a transformation in how news is disseminated and consumed, with a significant impact on the traditional newspaper model. This result is similar to a report by PwC Nigeria, stating that “the digitisation of the media industry in Nigeria has led to changes in consumption patterns, with a growing preference for online content over traditional print media” (PwC Nigeria, Entertainment and Media Outlook, 2022-2026).

The economic effects of digital disruption on the Nigerian newspaper industry are multifaceted. Respondents consistently mentioned a decline in traditional revenue

streams such as newspaper sales, subscription revenues, and advertising revenues. This decline is attributed to the shift in consumer behavior towards online platforms. Respondents I, II, III, IV, and VI highlighted the economic impact of decreased demand for printed copies and reduced advertising budgets. Additionally, the economic situation has compelled organisations to adjust their business models. Respondents I and IV mentioned workforce reduction as a cost-cutting measure, while Respondents IV and V discussed the challenges of increased operational costs affecting pricing and demand. The economic effects highlight the need for newspapers to adapt and innovate to remain financially viable in the face of digital disruption. The World Bank's report on Nigeria's economic outlook supports this result by highlighting that 'the challenges posed by digital disruption to traditional business models emphasises the need for businesses to adapt to technological changes to remain competitive (World Bank, Nigeria Economic Update, October 2022).

In response to the challenges posed by digital disruption, newspapers in Nigeria are implementing various strategies for survival. The most prominent strategy is the emphasis on online presence and digital transformation. Respondents I, II, III, V and VI mentioned the establishment of websites, in-app access, and news apps to cater to the preferences of online readers and advertisers. Diversification is another key strategy, with newspapers expanding their services to include a wide range of content and adopting approaches like subscription services. Respondents I, III and V discussed plans to reintroduce or enhance subscription services, offering exclusive content to generate additional revenue.

There is also a focus on reader engagement and interaction. Respondents II and V highlighted the importance of features like opinion polls, comments sections and live chats to encourage reader participation, which can contribute to increased loyalty and revenue. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these strategies is a matter of ongoing observation and adaptation, as mentioned by several respondents. Trust, transparency, and credibility, as highlighted by Respondent IV, remain crucial in maintaining readership in the competitive digital landscape. An article in *The Guardian Nigeria* can be used to support this result. The article discusses "the need for media organisations to embrace digital transformation fully, diversify revenue sources and invest in quality content and technology to thrive in the digital age (*The Guardian Nigeria*, "Surviving the Disruption in Media," September 2022).

In the complex landscape of the Nigerian newspaper industry, the findings of this study harmonise seamlessly with the contours of the theoretical framework, contingency theory, as elucidated by Fred Fiedler in the 1960s. This theoretical lens, rooted in the understanding that effective organisational strategies are contingent upon various situational factors, resonates profoundly with the challenges and adaptations unveiled in the research. The study's findings intricately weave into the fabric of Contingency Theory, portraying a narrative where the effectiveness of organisational strategies in the Nigerian newspaper industry is contingent upon the evolving dynamics of digitisation, economic shifts, and adaptive responses to a transforming media landscape.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted significant transformations in the newspaper industry brought about by digitisation. The traditional operational model, characterised by printing and physical distribution, has given way to a digital landscape where reader preferences have shifted towards online platforms. This shift has compelled newspaper organisations to

Survival Strategies of Select Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Era

adapt, necessitating a change in their traditional business models to remain competitive. However, this digital disruption has not come without economic challenges, including a downturn in traditional revenue streams and increased operational costs. Despite these challenges, the study reveals a resilience within the industry, with organisations actively developing strategies to enhance their online presence, engage readers and diversify revenue streams. Thus, the following recommendations are hereby given:

1. Newspaper organisations by recognising the shift in the industry should strategically transit from traditional business models to ones aligned with digitisation. This includes leveraging online platforms for content delivery and advertising.
2. Newspaper organisations should recognise the competitive landscape in the digital realm, invest in strategies to stand out, such as unique online content, interactive features and effective advertising approaches that capture readers and advertisers in a digital environment.
3. Newspaper organisation should innovate in revenue generation by exploring new opportunities in the digital space. This may include creative advertising models, partnerships and exclusive content offerings that add value and attract a broader audience.
4. Newspaper organisations should engage in strategic planning to navigate challenges posed by digitisation. This involves continuous evaluation of market dynamics, adapting business models accordingly and staying agile to respond to emerging trends.
5. Newspaper organisations should equip staff with digital competencies. Training programmes that focuses on enhancing technological skills, digital content creation and understanding the dynamics of the online media landscape should also be developed to continuously improve the digital capabilities of staffs.

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