

Nigerian newspapers and survival in the digital age

The history of newspapers in Nigeria dates back to 1859 when an Anglican Priest Rev Henry Townsend established the first newspaper – *Iwe Irohin fun awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba*, translated to mean “Newspaper for the Egba-speaking people and Yorubas” (Sunday, 2008). The newspaper was set up to help in the spreading of the gospel and literacy among local people. It combined cultural, political, social and religious commentaries in an effort to reach its readers. The advent of *Iwe Irohin* was followed by other publications which later were used as a tool by the nationalists to oppose colonial rule.

By Solomon Tommy

The demise of *Iwe Iroyin* later resulted in the emergence of other newspapers like *Anglo-African*, *Lagos Time and Gold Coast Advertiser*, *Lagos Observer*, *The Eagle and Lagos Critic*, *The Mirror*, *The Nigerian Chronicle*, *The Lagos Standard*, *Lagos Weekly Record*, *African Messenger*, *The West African Pilot*, *Nigerian Tribune* among others, which Sunday (2008) describes as the second phase of newspaper development in the country as it represented a break from religious newspapers (or more aptly, newspapers that had religious groups as their proprietors). The era not only resulted in the emergence of secular newspapers in Nigeria but also gave birth to articulate and vibrant nationalist newspapers established by journalists turned politicians, who made judicious use of this institution to fight colonialism. This led to Nigeria's independence in 1960 which has cemented their place in the annals of Nigeria's political history and development since then. Corroborating this, Kukah (1999) states that journalism was the major vehicle through which the anti-colonial struggle in Nigeria was carried out.

Newspapers served as platforms for mobilising the people, spreading nationalist awareness and for opposing the worst manifestations of colonial subjugation. Fred Omu (1978) in Ismail (2011) says the early Nigerian press availed the reader of the most distinguished intellectual forum in Nigeria history, one in which the high standard of debate, discussion, the quality of thought and expression did not fail to fascinate the modern reader.

The current generation of newspapers in Nigeria have their roots in the 1980s and after, with the exception of *Tribune*, which has continued publishing since it was established. Newspapers like *Guardian*, the *Punch*, *Concord*, *Comet* (which is the forebear of the current *The Nation* newspaper), *Vanguard*, *Sun*, *This Day*, and others were established within this period, but they have served to give the Nigerian newspaper industry the complexion it has today.

There is little doubt that the operations of newspapers have undergone a transformation as a result of technology. From Gutenberg's printing press to the automated printing process technology has been at the core of every revolution that has characterised the newspaper industry. Even though there are positions such as those held by Obijiofor and Green (2001) and Okoro and Diri (2013) that the future of newspapers is bright because there are inherent qualities that traditional



newspapers possess which enable them to withstand the internet news revolution, in truth, there are also reasons to worry, especially since the internet is encroaching into newspapers' audiences and their advertising revenue, not to mention the proliferation of news sources on the internet.

Ownership as a concern in Nigeria media environment is well documented. Ukonu (2005) points out the first, and perhaps most pressing concern: ethical practices. He argues that ownership usually influences the news selection and dissemination process, which may dilute objectivity and impair balance, thus rubbishing the sanctity of news. Government-owned media are converted to government stooges, while privately-owned media find that they are forced to pander to the wishes of their proprietors, especially in an environment like Nigeria where political parallelism is the dominant trend in media ownership (Ohaja 2005; Okoye 2002). This is also the same in countries that share similar political traits. For instance, Okech (2008) found that in Kenya, objectivity though practised in some instances, was widely affected by the editorial line. The editorial line was largely pegged to ownership influences in most cases. More so, according to Bagdikian (2004), ownership influence can be associated with three major sources of bias. First, media content reflects the owner's "highly conservative political and economic values". Second, the reliance on advertising makes the media averse to offending other firms. Third, and most relevant to this article, conflicts of interest can bias reporting on the firm's other interests.

Beyond that, it can be argued that professionalism might also suffer on account of ownership influence. Political economy is a key consideration at this point, because as Zubascu (2013) alludes to, the relationship between journalists, owners, politicians (who own or are interested in using these newspapers to promote their political agenda) and advertisers (who use newspapers to promote their economic interest in exchange for funding them through advertising revenue) is one that is blurred and

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results in conflict of interests, which as Norris and Odugbemi (2009) recognise, impedes the media's ability to play their roles (especially as watchdog) effectively. Beyond conditions of service, which in Nigeria is appalling in some cases (Uwosomah 2010), journalists are left to handle government high handedness, human rights abuses, physical assaults, death threats, for which they do not enjoy adequate cover from the owners of the organisations they work for. This also affects the objectivity of their major product – news – and could impact on how attractive they would be to prospective advertisers.

Current trends in Nigerian newsrooms

Interviews with eight top and middle management staff from four newspapers (*The Guardian*, *Sun Newspapers*, *Vanguard*, and *Tribune*) were conducted for this

article. These are the trends which emerged from the discussions with the interviewees:

1. The dominant form of newspaper management structure in the newspapers studied is the three-stage management structure involving the owner/publisher, an editor-in-chief, and a general editor (along with business executives on the same level in the hierarchy to manage the business aspect and report to the editor-in-chief).
2. Technological innovations, including online and social media platforms, are both a blessing and a curse to newspaper organisations almost at the same time, both enhancing their functions but impacting negatively on their long-term survival and relevance.
3. The cost of production is the biggest environmental factor that caused concern for newspaper management.
4. There is a dominant perspective that owners wield considerable influence on how the newspapers are run.
5. The primary strategy to tackle the environmental problems faced was to find a way to cut costs, which is the most pressing concern. There are also references to taking advantage of the potentials of online/new media as a solution to the biting problems of dwindling readership.

Recommendations

1. To checkmate the challenge, newspaper organisations should, at all times package good and contemporary editorial, feature articles, and other genres that the online newspapers may not treat in great detail.
2. Newspaper organisations should build relationships 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. Newspaper organisations should conduct periodic research to discover the interests of readers, the brand's position in the market and to meet those needs promptly. Successful business planning requires information about potential target markets, the competition, individual customers, and their reaction to products. Periodic research should include the following: business research, operations research, product research, sales and marketing research.
4. Government should provide subsidies, especially for the importation of raw materials and machinery until such a time as local capacity is built to cater to the needs of the Nigerian newspaper industry.
5. Newspapers must endeavour to leverage new media platforms to increase their reach and relevance in a cost-efficient manner.

Newspapers have played a key role in different revolutions since the Renaissance period, and their social relevance is still key in our world today. It is clear that technology is changing how we consume media products, and if television (which was the biggest threat to newspapers before) was not spared from the huge impact of the internet, then it is unlikely that newspapers will escape. But the argument is then made, that focus these days is not on the media form, but on the content. There is therefore the need for those in the newspaper business in Nigeria to still have some hope; but this hope can only be sustained if efforts are made to ensure that the content is revolutionary and will be captivating. It cannot be business as usual for newspapers anymore, and only those owners/managers who know this and adapt accordingly will survive.

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