The Print Media and the Consumer in the Cyber Age

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Abstract

This paper examines digital transformation of the print media industry in Nigeria and elsewhere and its impacts on the consumers. The research concludes that digitalization will not lead to the demise of the print media industry, as skeptics seem to predict. Rather digitalization with ICTs opens new frontiers for expansion, taste and distribution. Specific impacts on publishers will include: high productivity, upgrading of job skills, emphasis on research and development, capital requirements and impact on intellectual property rights. The impact of this innovated process on the consumers may include choice and flexibility, greater satisfaction and information overload. Hence, documents printed on paper and those on electronic display are quite likely to coexist and coevolve into an interdependent future. Therefore, digitalization is a plus to the print media industry and consumers in Nigeria.

Introduction

When broadcasting was introduced, people started singing the praises of radio and television and many started making predictions of about the death of the print media. Even though the cost of radio receivers and television sets were not cheap, many consumers unwittingly declared the era of everyday "Contribution" to oil and kept the wheel of publishing houses turning over. Media consumers expected that physical forms of distribution of information or news would eventually disappear. Why should people pay for something when the same thing is available free over the air? Consumers also claimed they will be in charge of what they hear or view as they have the power to turn-off or switch channels or stations as the case maybe. The print media was in the dock and accused of advertisement, classified and obsessed with grimness. This down-to-earth consideration, however turned out to be wrong because people listening to radio or watching television have to hear and see what others have decided that they should listen to or watch. When home tape recorder became available, a similar forecast, that people will buy recorders and blank tapes and will stop buying records and watching movies in theatres, was an equally easy guess. Why should people buy a record in the shop; if by waiting until the right time, they could get it free and in a reproducible form? Not only did the forecast materialize – people having better things to do in their lives than

scanning newspapers to see when a given program will be aired, but a great new business, overshadowing old ones, was created.

Now come digital media and some people make the "obvious" forecast that Digital Media or informatics as we knew them then (UNESCO, 1981) or Information and Communication Technologies [ICTs] as we know them now will certainly signal the end of media as we know them. The consumers expected that they will be able to get anything free, copy it as many times as they want to as many people as they want. Why on earth should they buy something when they can get exactly the same thing free? Why should one subscribe to one Newspaper or magazine, when he can read a dozen in the Internet? Though it is not an easy temptation to shrug off the threat of the doomsayers of the moment, it is pertinent to conclude that as much as the other media technologies and development that seemed to signal the end of the print media world did not succeed, this time with the application of ICTs, it is likely that either some equilibrium point will be achieved that will either magically leave things unchanged or, maybe, even create some great business for the print media industries and the freedom and satisfaction the consumers of print media have been yearning for. This paper sets out to examine the digital transformation of the print media industry in Nigeria, the impacts this transformation is having on the industry and the consumers.

The future is digital

It was Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick in 1968 that put together the movie and book: *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The book made many predictions ranging from the idea of routine commercial flights to earth orbiting Hilton Hotel and expedition to Jupiter's Satellites. Clarke also predicted multimedia newspaper and magazines designed for reading on portable electronic displays.

Since 1993 when the Internet and World Wide Web became accessible to practically any one with a personal computer and the right connection, hundreds of newspapers have created electronic editions. Today the notion of instantly conjuring up the world's major electronic newspapers from distant and remote locations is no longer fantasy. Every day hundreds of thousands of people around the world are reading the headlines (and accompanying stories) of almost any newspaper they prefer on computer screens.

While contemporary personal computers are not quite the "news pads" envisioned by Clarke, portable news pad-like devices specifically designed for reading multimedia publications are already commonplace now. It is called the News PAD or Portable Document viewers (PDVs) or tablets. Clearly the future of publishing is digital. That can no longer be denied. By digital communication we mean the conversion of sound, pictures and text into computer readable formats by breaking them up into strings of

ones and zeroes that carry information in encoded form. But does this technological transformation necessarily portend the death of print media, or the end of paper as a display and storage medium for typographic documents?

Theoretical Framework

This discussion on the Print Media and the consumer in the cyber age is based on two interrelated theories of communication, namely, technological determinism of Marshall McLuhan and democratic participant media theory. Two interrelated sub-theses of technological determinism are relevant in this discussion, namely: "we shape our tools and they in turn shape us" and "the medium is the message". At its core, McLuhan's theory of technological determinism postulates that inventions in technology cause cultural change. Whereas Karl Marx's Economic Determinism argued that changes in modes of production determine the course of human history, McLuhan concluded that it is specifically changes in modes of communication that shape human existence.

McLuhan considered every new form of media innovation to be an extension of some human faculty. For example, the book is an extension of the eye, the heel is an extension of the foot; clothing is an extension of the skin. Computer is an extension of the central nervous system. Hence, media are anything that amplify or intensify a bodily organ, sense, or function. Therefore, media not only extend our reach and increase our efficiency, they act as a filter to organise and interpret our social existence. Thus, cyber media help to extend our reach and access to the print media, increase our efficiency in the use of the print and also act as filter to organize and interpret our social existence. Rather than hastening the death of print, cyber media will prolong its life and open exciting new alternative functional uses of the print media. Hence, we shape our tools (media) and they in turn shape us. However, the magnitude of impact varies from media to media since the medium is the message.

In his aphorism, "medium is the message", McLuhan was convinced that the way we live is largely a function of the way we process information. Wolfe (1967:19) an analyst of popular culture summarizes McLuhan thesis thus:

> The new technologies … radically alter the entire way people use their five senses, the way they react to things, and therefore, the entire lives and the entire society. It doesn't matter the content of a medium like TV…

Hence, McLuhan put it more succinctly, "The medium is the message". Scholars have been debating what the theorist meant by the apparently simple equation. He obviously believed that a medium changes people

more than the sum of all the messages of that medium. According to him, the same words spoken face-to-face; printed on paper, or presented on television, provide three different messages. In the 1960s he brought out another variation on the same theme "the medium is the message". From this perspective the print message processed through cyber media will affect the consumer differently from the traditional newspaper and messages. The former is exciting and desirable and more enlightening than the latter. Hence the print, through cyber media, projects a renewed era of longitivity.

McLuhan also described the turbulent 1960s with another variation of the theme, "the medium is the message" as "the medium is the mass-age**"**. (Griffin 2000:217) Here he was still concerned with the transformational effect or the throughput process of the medium as the message. Hence, the new medium (cyber media) "heals" the weakness/limitations of the traditional print media and helps the message to appreciate in value. Therefore, his conclusion, according to Griffin (2000:317) is, "Be it oral, written or electronics, the primary channel of communication changes the way we perceive the world. The dominant medium of any age dominates people."

Democratic participant media theory is also relevant to this discussion since democratic participation will certainly increase consumer usage of media product. According to McQuail (1990), the central point of a democratic participant media theory lies with the needs, interest and aspiration of the active receiver in a political society. As asserted by Enzensberger, (1970) cited in McQuail (1999:122),: the theory has to do with, "the right to relevant information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in small-scale settings of community, interest group, sub-culture."

Further, other characteristics of the theory noted by Enzensberger, (1970) are: the rejection of uniform, centralized, high cost, highly professionalised, neutralized, state controlled media. Rather, it favours multiplicity, smallness of scale, locality, deinstitutionalisation, interchange of sender-receiver roles, horizontality and communication links at all levels of society, interactions, and commitment.

The practical expressions of the theory as observed by McQuail include underground press, private radio, community cable TV, "samizdat" publication, micro-media in rural settings; street sheets or neighborhood and political poster. The new communications technologies open more opportunities, via cheaper reproduction and access to electronic media channels.

From the above propositions, cyber age hopes to open more opportunities to print media. However, it might be quick to observe that professionalism may suffer since democratization may seemingly de-emphasize professionalism at the expense of information accessibility and sharing.

The Internet and electronic media publishing

Our general view of documents is characterized by the medium in which we conventionally use documents and for most of us in Nigeria, that medium has been, and is still paper. Electronic documents have been available since the invention of the computer. As the number of digital documents increases, the concept of a document and how it can be used has dramatically changed too. Electronic documents initially took the paper out of the documents although the documents could return to its paper form when it was delivered to a user.

The application of ICTs to print media operations has heralded the electronic newspaper via the Internet or online access. But the arrival of paperless or electronic newspaper and magazines has not meant that the procedures or consumers of newspaper used few printed paper or paper without pages. Quite contrary, it means that newspaper has gained flexibility as they have moved into the electronics and "digital media". The extensibility of digital documents or newspapers can now be exploited by systems designed to manage collections of docile digital document (like the world wide web). The global information structure that permits this is described as the largest single machine ever built. The Internet or for short the Net, is best described as a network of networks, for it is composed of numerous, proliferating types of communication and information systems that are variously interconnected. These are systems opened to the public, government systems, online services and intra-corporation information flows.

The Internet is a massive, searchable, dynamic, widely available, distributed multi-platform information system that possesses a number of capabilities. An organization may use the services provided by the Internet in a variety of ways for instance: electronic mail, public relations activities, commerce and publishing. The rapid development of the Internet and in particular the World Wide Web (www) coupled with the commercialization of every advanced communication and information technologies to exploit it, has opened an awareness to the print media industry to make more effective use of the Internet services, and the dawn of the electronic newspaper, electronic commerce and interactive television and it promises to deliver the information one wants, straight to one's PC (Dominick, 1999). It is postulated that the Internet and new advances in ICTs could notably speed up the cost of producing and distributing a newspaper as electronic technologies are contributing to change the process of publishing from the market place to the market space (Day, 1994).

Transforming print media into digital form

Returning to the perplexing view of many that the newspaper is on the verge of extinction, it is the view of this paper that it is obviously not. On the contrary, the development of flat panel display and digital publishing systems suggests that print media can be transformed into even more popular and versatile forms of communication. According to Fidler (1998:5), "the print media are not dependent upon pigmented ink and pulp paper or printing presses for their continuing evolution".

More than 500 years of associating publishing and print media with mechanical technologies, it is no wonder that so many people have difficulty separating them in their minds. But only by consciously disconnecting print media from mechanical printing phases and pulp paper can we begin to see that the adoption of digital publishing technologies represents a transition, not a termination, for newspaper, magazine and book publishing/printing whether manual, mechanical or digital, is essentially a production process – a means to an end – for replicating the written word and images on portable display media.

The raging debate now is that the traditional newspaper is playing for time as the Internet with the new ICTs is pushing the world to the paperless world where everything will be on the screen for those that are connected to either the Internet or a network that is offering the services. Attempts to move to the paperless revolution are greatly encouraged in many organizations today. For example in the west coast, office of Bill Gates Microsoft Corporation is the warning, "staff do not send telephone message to each other, they send E-mail". *The Financial Times* of London in an article said that the "newspaper is on the Electronic Chair" and the information superhighway is to render the business of news papering obsolete again. "How long" asked another headline in *The Financial Times* "for dead trees smeared with inks" (referring to wood which is converted to form the main component of newsprint). The columnist went on to state, "with the Internet access as a way of life; a small but growing number of young people will begin to rely on online service rather than the printed paper for news". (Quoted in Jenkins, 1996:408).

But Simon Jenkins, however, sees the matter differently. In an article titled "The Dead of the Written Word", Jenkins said

> …any cultural prediction based on the future development of technology is hopelessly unreliable. Prediction is distorted by the dazzle of the new and the technological fallacy states that the existence of technology does not presuppose its application, supply does not dictate demands. (Jenkins, 1996:410)

The application of ICTs into the operations of the print media, which has resulted in the Internet, will merely add to the portfolio of resources on which those of us who really need information may draw. Jenkins supported his position with the following reasons:

(i)   That it takes more time to access the internet and retrieve information than consulting a book, a newspaper or a magazine;

(ii)   There is nothing on earth more tedious than scrolling through references on a screen;

(iii)   Words on a screen are harder to absorb as psychologists say that peripheral vision is distorted by the flickering of the scanner;

(iv)   One cannot go to bed with a screen, cannot lie on the beach with one, stuff one in your rucksack or throw one across the room to a friend and say "try that paragraph";

(v)   The newspaper gives human contact and encourages good neighbourliness;

(vi)   Like a book, the newspaper is edited information, packaged knowledge and packaged entertainment, not raw(Jenkins, 1996:411)

Impacts of digital application on the Nigerian media industry

The impacts of this transformation on the publishers and the consumers is tremendous and thus have changed a lot of indices ranging from profit, loss, purchasing power to customer's right to media content.

Impacts on the Publishers

The incentives for publishers to make a complete transition to digital systems are great. Today, more than half of a typical publisher's overall cost are associated with manufacturing and distributing – costs related to presses, press plates, inserting and bundling machines, paper ink, electricity, facilities, truck leases gasoline and labour. According to Roger Fidler (1998:6), "Newsprint alone averages about one quarter of the cost of publishing a newspaper in the United States".

In Nigeria further significant savings can be expected from the adoption of more advanced digital systems by the essential "front end" departments – editorial, advertising, marketing and business. Substantial savings is also expected to come from the "back end" departments – pressrooms, mailrooms, paper handling and circulation.

Conversely, publishers are still not able to ascertain exactly in figures their profit and loss margins. Researches are inconclusive as many

publishers have chosen to maintain online and hard copy editions. Some online editions are free, some are free on subscription (monthly or daily). It is however expected that as soon as digital delivery and display systems begin to match the quality of mechanical technologies for producing and distributing publications and they can do it at a relatively low cost, most publishers will move quickly to make a full transition.

Higher productivity**:**

Perhaps the most fundamental impacts of ICTs application are greater productivity in terms of both quality and quantity. This is the main reason that most technologies are adopted. Newspapers produced today are better produced in terms of colour, layout and general aesthetics values and this in one way or the other influenced productivity. The application of computers and other ICTs in the business of news gathering, production and distribution have dramatically cut cost while enhancing capacity building and higher productivity.

Upgrading of job skills:

With the introduction of ICTs in the print media, jobs tend to become more intellectualized and otherwise upgraded. The job that once required a day labourer now requires a skilled crane operator, and the job that formerly required a desk clerk now requires a computer expert. While today's digital print media need more practical and sophisticated skills, it also needs less workforce. The Desktop process alone eliminates the job of the typist, layout editor, photo editor and proofreader. The reporter can type its stories, cast headlines and format it to meet a pre-determined space and house style. The Microsoft Word package allows you to create a customize style of spellings, word and sentence structure which aids editing and proofreading. Although computers are no substitute for writing talent, visual design ability, or editorial skills, the layout templates, text and grammar checkers that come with desktop publishing products have given many an amateur effort a professional appearance (LaRose, 2000:72). It is a fact that ICTs application has been tacitly accused of being responsible for job loses in the media industry of late.

Emphasis on research and development**:**

Another impacts of ICTs application on the media industry are in the area of Research and Development (R&D). Research concerns the creation of new ideas and development concerns and their useful application. The media industry today spends more on these new products, new marketing skills and the decision to go online or change an analogue printing press to digital, all in a bid to get the blessing of research to be able to meet set targets and budgets. According to Galbraith (1967), it is assumed that "new products

must be developed in order to keep abreast of competition and if something useful can be developed, production and sales will follow normally".

Capital requirements**:**
Another impact of ICTs application on the media industry is the large amount of capital required to ensure full application and utilization for optimal profit and growth. The cost of modern ICTs are falling but not to the level that will enable media industries in Nigeria to change over overnight. Hence, strategies like phase application and partial application are adopted to consolidate funds for raw materials, personnel and operational cost.

Impacts on intellectual property rights:
The application of ICTs in the business of print media has meant that the law and economics of intellectual property rights have changed more in the last century. "The activities of creating, distributing, and using digital forms of information are of growing importance in the lives of citizens, consumers and businesses" (Acheson and Mc Fetridge, 1996). Intellectual property law extends the right of property protection that was first granted to print material to inventions, literary and artistic works, and trade marks. Intellectual property protection while attempting to balance society's interest in the disclosure and dissemination of ideas with an exclusive right to control and profit from invention and authorship has been having a running battle with enforcement of legislation in many countries before now. But the applications of modern ICTs have made the social and political choices regarding the granting of intellectual property rights more complex as ICTs bring together voice, text, audio and visual materials within common digital formats and to copy this materials inexpensively and accurately. Though substantial amount of information from the print media tends to fall into the "public domain, the price paid for them adds up as "token royalties" and help in production cost. But with online access, the media industries seem to be losing revenue and control over the use of their content.

Impacts on the consumer
The position of the consumer is more elevated and consolidated with the application of each ICTs into the media industry. Consumer studies in the media industries take center stage as ICTs have opened a new vista of choice and interest thereby changing the taste and desire of consumers overnight in the following ways:

Choice and flexibility for the consumer:
One of the impacts of the application of ICTs in the Nigerian Print Media is the availability of wide range of choice and flexibility in consumption. The

Nigerian Print Media consumer's choice of newspapers, magazines and journals has increased tremendously. Their numbers have not only increased but their artistic design is revolutionary and undergoing serious re-engineering everyday. Newspapers have now increased in pagination and sections. Every paper looks like a special edition of the 80's. The use of colour in every page of choice instead of the covers only has left the consumer with a wide range of alternatives to choose from.

In the area of flexibility, the online version of Nigerian paper provides Nigerians outside the country or those not within the distribution network of the hard copy the opportunity to read and choose from. While skeptics predicted the death of the newspaper because of the Internet, so far, reactions and comments to Nigerian Newspapers and hits recorded in their website from abroad all point to the internet as a plus for the Nigerian print industry.

Greater satisfaction:
ICTs application has brought a lot of satisfaction to Nigerian Print Media consumers. This include the incorporation of permanent sections like Business, Sports, Maritime, Banking, Arts, education, Information Technology and Sports. These sections are sub-divided and each is given prominence in a particular day of the week. Readers have developed deep preference for sections and are getting deep satisfaction from them. ICTs application has made the design and composition of these sections possible in split seconds.

Information overload:
Scores of news and knowledge carried in a single day by the print media in Nigeria have been estimated to double every 3 months. The sheer volume of news and knowledge available on virtually everything is tremendous. The process of making a choice is not easy for the consumer. A large fraction of time is expended is sifting and pulling together the portions of news required for a particular purpose. Today, a large section of the print media workforce is occupied in generating news and information aided by ICTs. This contributes to what is frequently described as an information explosion, which because of its cumulative effects, might more accurately be described as an **information avalanche** or an **information overload**. Wilbur Schramm (1954) "fraction of selection" at the level of mass communication was a "natural response of doing without information one does not need". But in 1971, Schramm remarked that:

> The reservation I have about this idea, is that it implies a rationality that does not really bulk large in the process of selection. Much selection must be accidental: a person "just happens" to be where he can attend to a given

> message. Much is impulsive. On the other hand, over the
> years a person tends to seek the kinds of communication
> that have rewarded in the past (P.33).

Today's print media consumer in Nigeria seeks a new model in dealing with information overload. ICTs are rising however slowly to this challenge.

Conclusion

The discussion has explored the digitalization of the print media and concluded that it will not lead to the demise of the industry as skeptics seem to predict. However, digitalisation with ICTs opens a new frontier for expansion, taste and distribution. For example USENET and BITNET are now in use in developed countries. USENET also known as network news is an internationally distributed bulletin board system. Users enter messages, and within a day or so, the messages are delivered to nearly every other USENET host for everyone to read. The utility of this network will help to appreciate the print media. Hence, as Baran (2002:77) puts it "the internet makes us all journalists, broadcasters, columnist, commentators and critics". Furthermore, the discussion examines the impacts ICTs application is having on the publishers and the consumer, which can best be seen as challenges of technological change rather than problems and signs of "the death of the written word". This paper is persuaded to predict that documents printed on paper are quite likely to coexist and coevolve with digital documents "printed" on electronic displays well into the future. Digitalisation is a plus to the print media industry and consumers.

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