Editors' Perspectives on the Effects of the Decline in Printed Newspaper Readership in Nigeria

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Abstract
The printed newspaper readership had been on a progressive decline across the globe, particularly in the developed media world, where embattled newspapers had engaged in creative destruction approaches to reposition themselves. The phenomenon does not leave out printed newspapers in the developing market, including Nigeria where newspapers had witnessed depleting readership since the 1980s. Anchored on Schumpeter's Creative Destruction Theory, this study examined the depth of Nigeria's printed newspaper's readership challenge and analyzed the creative approaches they employed to overcome their plummeting fortunes. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 editors in nine mainstream newspapers. To analyse the data, an inductive thematic approach was used. Findings revealed that Nigerian newspapers were threatened by the migration of news readers online for news and taking defensive strategies imperative to survive. Innovations by the newspapers include regionalization of their operation to minimise loss, reduction in newspaper colour pages, cut in print run, and outsourcing of newspaper circulation. Other creative measures were scaling down editorial staff, with six newspapers undertaking job cuts, six newspapers shutting down unproductive bureaus; five newspapers relying on freelance or stringers; introduction of barter payment to procure operation vehicles, and suspension of staff recruitment, among others. The newspapers in the study are still to initiate a transformational innovation to recreate themselves into a hybrid digitized platform. The study recommended that newspaper managers should be aware of the overall impact on editorial content, which is what gives newspaper journalism its core value, as they continue to look for innovative ways to reverse the bad fortunes of the printed

newspaper caused by the disruptive technologies that are depriving it of its old readership and revenue base.

Keywords: *Editors, Nigeria, printed newspapers, perspectives, readership*

Introduction

Printed newspapers in different countries of the world have continued to face existential challenges caused by decline in readership and circulation. As is the case in developed economies like Europe, America, and China, among others, so it is in developing countries like Nigeria and Ghana. For instance, Chyi and Tenenboim (2017) established that two decades after venturing into online business, newspapers in the US were caught in the web of dwindling market for their printed version and a largely unsuccessful online business experiment. However, this trend later changed as the online platforms provided some respite for the shrinking readership and revenue fortune of printed newspapers in the US (L'Heudé, 2023), though it affected the coverage of local news due to newspaper consolidation and proliferation of online platforms.

Studies have shown that the introduction of the virtual newspaper has affected the sales and readership of the printed newspaper in Nigeria (Aliagan, 2011; Hassan & Azmi, 2018; Apuke & Omar, 2020). As a result of the observable gloomy trends in the newspaper sector once blooming, newspaper vendors in Nigeria (Daily Trust, 2012) and newspaper managers have felt the heat of a dearth of readers (Aliagan, 2015), though news managers were initially reluctant to admit it. Nigeria's printed newspapers are currently groaning under the yoke of poor patronage through a combination of factors, including the fact that readers have seen the better alternative in reading newspapers on the web (Hassan, 2018). Until recent times, the newspaper was arguably among the dominant mass-mediated information channel among the elite in Nigeria but the printed newspaper is a shadow of its glorious past (Sobowale, Sowumi & Emmanuel, 2014). The Nigeria's Vision 2020 report identified low readership as one of the problems confronting Nigeria's newspaper industry, which was corroborated by Jenkins and Nielsen (2020). There are several reasons for this development, but the chief factors include poverty and the unfavourable economic condition of the people (Agbese, 2008; Oso, 2012; Sobowale et al., 2014), among others.

However, the issue of printed newspaper readership decline in Nigeria has been a contentious one as it generates divergent views among scholars and practitioners. As argued by Ashong and Henry (2017), although there are reports

of dwindling printed newspaper readership due to online news sources in Nigeria, another contentious issue is whether the printed newspaper will regain its lost glory or become obsolete in its primary form (Amadu, Mohammed, & Alhassanet al, 2018). In addition, although there are a number of studies on newspaper readership challenge in Nigeria, preference for online news by readers and the problem of failing business model due to the erosion of the readership and revenue base of Nigerian newspapers, the views of managers and editors of printed newspapers on the phenomenon and the creative strategies they deployed to tackling the drought of printed newspaper readership have not been somewhat explored.

Furthermore, the major inspiration for this study stems from the challenge by Ashong and Henry (2017) that "there is no corresponding evidence regarding the trend of adjustments noted at the global level, i.e. newspapers filing for bankruptcy, spinning off, shutting down, laying off staff, reducing salaries, resizing, turning to web-only publication" (p.2). As the newspaper industry in Nigeria is an integral part of the world's press systems, it also possesses some peculiarities identified with newspapers in the developed media world in their reactions to the printed newspaper readership and revenue threats posed by the Internet and new media technologies (Clark, 2014; Edmonds, Guskin, Mitchell & Jurkowitz, 2013). This situation makes an examination of the Nigerian situation supported. The continued decline in printed newspaper readership has continuously put professionals/practitioners and proprietors on their toes for innovative coping strategies (Aliagan, 2011; Idiong, Idiong, & Udoakah, 2018; Aliagan, Babatunde & Briandana, 2020).

Based on this background, this study, therefore, examined the perspectives of editors and managers on the phenomenon of printed newspaper readership decline through ascertaining the depth of the problem of decline of printed newspaper readership in the country, and the creative steps taken by the newspapers to tackle their survival challenges.

Literature Review

Nigerian Newspaper Sector: A background to readership decline

The decline in newspaper readership is a worldwide phenomenon that predated the emergence of the internet and new media technologies. Different dates have been cited in the literature on the commencement of the readership slide (Althaus, 2008; Shoenbach, Lauf, McLeod, & Scheufele, 1999). In Nigeria, newspaper readership decline is traced to the aftermath of the late 1980s' introduction of the International Monetary Fund-inspired 'Structural Adjustment

Programme' (SAP) that witnessed the devaluation of the naira, the decimation of the purchasing power of average Nigerians, shutting down of industries, high unemployment rate, and job loss as well as the disappearance of the middle class, which represented the potential newspaper-reading class (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2009; Makgale, 2021).

With SAP, the newspapers entered a parlous state as the nation gradually became a graveyard of newspapers (Omegoh, 2006). This was further aggravated by the emergence of the internet and new media technologies. One of the newspaper casualties in the post-internet era was the *Next* newspaper established by one of Nigeria's finest journalists and Pulitzer Prize in Journalism winner, Dele Olojede which was discontinued in late 2011 after millions of naira had been sunk on it (Sahara Reporters, 2011). Lekan Otufodunrin, then Online Editor of The *Nation* was quoted as saying that "reports from the market, circulation figures and sales distributors attest to the fact that hardcopy readers have reduced…because they always read online from their phones and laptops before the hardcopies arrive" (Ashong & Henry, 2017, p.4). Faced with readership challenge, some newspapers in Nigeria reduced their print runs. Although many newspaper managers and editors confront this phenomenon stares all the time, what seems to be evident from the submissions of scholars on Nigeria's newspaper readership issue is that there appears to be some lack of agreement on the exact impact of the internet and new media technologies on printed newspaper readership and revenue.

Effects of readership decline on the business of printed newspaper

There is no gainsaying that printed newspaper readership decline has tough effects on many newspapers across the globe. Nigerian newspapers were not left out in this development. For instance, in Nigeria, *The Compass* owned by a former Governor, Gbenga Daniel, experienced economic challenges for quite a long time, and workers in the newspaper were owed salaries for several months before the newspaper was finally rested (Sahara Reporters, 2012). Even, supposedly strong newspapers like *This Day* reportedly owed its workers for several months, with the staff of the medium embarking on industrial action (*Premium Times*, 2015). Another newspaper, *The Guardian*, also disengaged some of its old hands in June 2016 (Encomium, 2016). Moreover, some newspapers, aside from shedding their workforce (The Nigerian Times, 2015) also embarked on the closure of non-revenue yielding state bureaus, a development also recorded in the developed media world following the depletion of newspaper readership and advertising revenue plummeting from the 1990s

when the internet and new media technologies were introduced (Fenez, John, & Marieke, 2009; Layser & Usher, 2010; Picard, 2004).

The effect of printed newspaper readership decline in the Western world is eminently documented. According to Lunden (2009), in 2008 alone, the print newspaper industry shed more than 30,000 jobs which represent 3.5% of the total workforce of 858,000. Other researchers also gave varying figures for job cuts, which led to the depletion of many newsrooms across the affected countries (Nel, 2013; Pickard et al, 2007; Entman, 2010; Usher & Layser, 2010). Many cities in the United States having one or more newspapers also had no newspaper to serve them anymore (Pickard et al, 2007) after many newspaper houses closed down. In Australia, the newspaper industry was said to have reached a 'point of contagion' because print newspaper sales continued to nose-dive year-on –year (Knott, 2013). The Australian School of Business described the year 2012 as a watershed in the history of Australian newspapers as the internet had dismantled the centuries-old "publishing business model" (Australian School of Business, 2013).

However, the diffusion of digital media technologies that is assumed to have facilitated the decline in printed newspaper readership did not have the same effects across many countries of the world. For instance, the newspaper industry was reportedly booming in India, China, Latin America, part of Africa, and the Arab world (Guiliano, 2000; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2009; Lunden, 2009). As proof then that the distress in the newspaper business was not universal, it was reported that some 300 newspaper companies in India reported a 12.9% increase in circulation in 2007. The Indian government also posted some 50% growth in newspapers and periodicals between 2001 and 2010 (Mcllroy, 2013). The Indian newspaper industry then appeared unaffected by the threats associated with the internet (Mcllroy, 2013), with Wilkinson (2013) stressing that in India "it is difficult to focus on a digital future amid so much print success". However, the rosy days are no longer there in China as the printed newspaper industries in that Republic have been witnessing not only readership decline but also plummeting of advertising revenue, and thus experienced economic difficulties (Wang & Sparks, 2019).

The situation in other climes and strategies to curb readership decline

Outside Nigeria, following the emergence of the internet and new media technologies newspapers, especially in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Australia, Canada, Argentina, Ireland, North America, and the Nordic countries, the printed

newspaper had faced a crisis of existence. Many newspapers folded up as they could not cope with the loss of readership and revenues. Many daily newspapers also became weeklies, while a good number of them also stopped their printed version and concentrated on online publishing only (Picard, 2004; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2009; Usher & Layser, 2010; Clark, 2014).

To curb the readership decline, some newspapers undertook a reduction in coverage and pagination, cancelled circulation in some cities where sales were poor, stopped or reduced home delivery of newspapers, eliminated unprofitable publishing days, and closed some city bureaus (Starr, 2009; Lunden, 2009; Usher & Layser, 2010; Pew Research Centre, 2013; Abenarthy & Foster, 2014). In order to woo readers, many newspapers also embarked on cuts in cover price, distributing their copies free as well as engaged in sales promotion through offering giveaways and promotional items (Patel, 2010; Australian School of Business, 2013; House of Lords, 2014). Many newspapers also embarked on job cuts, which had a lot of negative impact on newspaper performance and quality of coverage (Hirsch, Giuliano & Winning, 2003).

In France, the government made a bold decision in 2009 to bail out the crumbling French newspapers and magazines to the tune of 600 million Euros for a period spanning three years. This was to help them recover postal delivery price increases. In addition to this, 18-year-old French citizens were given a free year subscription to a newspaper of their choice. The government also waived employers' cost of 90 million Euros for employees delivering newspapers (Lunden, 2009). In Japan, newspapers had always restricted their online presence so as to encourage readers to patronize the printed edition (National assembly of Wales, 2009).

In Canada, 2009 seemed to be the year the industry was changing forever. Newspapers in the country were contending with extreme economic pressures. Newspaper headlines "sounded the death knell of an industry that had thrived for more than 300 years" (Estok, 2010). But the year 2013 was described as a probable breaking point for the Canadian newspaper industry as publishers scrambled to find "new streams of revenue and overhaul their business models as traditional print advertising dries up" (Freeman, 2013). In the heat of the internet threat, the Welch government instituted an inquiry to seek the way out for the country's newspaper industry. The government noted that the industry was in a precarious state as the internet and other associated media were eating into the profit of the newspapers. According to the report of the inquiry,

> Moreover, Irish newspapers were enjoying a boom as a result of a good economy, but with the internet, things appeared not to be the same again. More than 60% of the country's newspapers set up web editions, "partly due to fear of losing markets…keeping up with competition or experimenting with new technology" (Murphy, 2000, p.51).

This was the situation in different countries as the newspaper industry grappled with the disruptive innovation of the internet and new media technologies that altered the way news had previously been processed and consumed, and diverted the bulk advertising revenue and print readership online.

Creative destruction theory and the newspaper

The creative destruction theory supports this study in the sense that it helps us to understand steps that have been taken by the newspaper managers to arrest the effect of printed newspaper readership decline and strategies adopted to grow the industry. The theory is built on the belief that a company's longevity actually leads to stagnation and eventual destruction. The theory posits that as a company grows older and larger, cycles of creation and destruction set in. With this, the successful company is ultimately driven out of the market by one or more new innovating companies, which also eventually suffer the same fate (Jones, 2010). Put differently, the theory is about destruction of the old structure and creation of new ones (Emami Langroodi, (2021).

According to Foster and Kaplan (2001), the cycle of creative destruction follows four steps. This begins from the Foundation stage when the company starts as a small entity with little organizational structure, attains success, folds up or sells itself before it collapses; the Growth stage whereby the initial success recorded by the company leads to rapid expansion, a larger workforce and more formal organization; the Domination stage in which the matured company becomes a leader in its field and has established success, but in which the company may not notice threats or competition from new start-ups in stage one; and the Cultural lock-in stage where the established company is threatened by emerging stage one company and must take defensive strategies in order to survive.

Foster and Kaplan state that to survive, the company at the cultural lock-in stage, must overcome the threat of extinction by shedding its bloated workforce and introducing innovations in one or more of three ways, comprising (a) incremental innovation, which allows small changes over time (b) substantial innovation, which necessitates some structural changes in the company, like cost-

cutting, layoffs, and restructuring (c) or transformational innovation, in which the company essentially recreates itself. According to Doyle (2014), several studies on communication technology changes have adopted the creative destruction theory which stipulates that "constant restructuring, replacement and renewal of the old with the new are features of how industries innovate in response to technological change" (p.2). Applying the theory of creative destruction to the newspaper industry, Jones (2010) opines that newspaper companies are in the difficult position of cultural lock-in, as disruptive innovations such as blogs, social networking sites, mobile devices, and news aggregators are challenging printed newspapers. Virtually, newspapers, especially in the developed media market, have gone through all the processes suggested in creative destruction theory, and have adopted all the survival measures listed, as they grapple with survival challenges caused by depleting readership/revenue and the threats of new technologies. The same features are observable in the Nigerian newspaper industry and are being explored in this study.

Methodology

The study used in-depth qualitative interviews to generate its data. In-depth interviews were conducted in the three cities where most, if not all the national newspaper headquarters in Nigeria are based, namely Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja. The newspapers' strength in circulation served as the basis for the subject selection criterion. Except for *Blueprint*, the chosen newspaper publications represented the ten best-selling publications in 2009 (and arguably till date), according to the ADVAN circulation check (Zus Bureau Limited, 2009). These publications included *Nigerian Tribune*, *Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *This Day*, *The Punch*, *The Sun*, and *The Nation*. The study used purposive sampling to pick its respondents based on some set criteria.

The respondents not only satisfied the prerequisite of being the editor or manager of the newspaper's print or online edition, but they also satisfied the condition of having some level of competence in the area under investigation. Thus, 12 informants from the sampled newspapers were interviewed. To gather information for the study, editors of newspapers published in print and those that are managed online were interviewed in-depth during visits to the study areas between 2019 and 2020. Number codes were used to identify the 12 interview subjects. Inductive data-driven thematic analysis, through textual analysis of the interview data to generate observable themes, was used in analysing and presenting the data (see: Bowen, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall & McCulloh, 2011; Lorelli, Nowell et al, 2017; Mijan, Md Noor, & Jaafar, 2020).

Findings and Discussion:

Insight into the depth of readership decline experienced by Nigerian newspapers

Three perspectives were visible from the views of the respondents on the phenomenon of readership decline. The first is that printed newspapers were experiencing a readership decline as a result of several factors, including the emergence of the internet and new media technologies. The second perspective is that readership had actually been boosted as a result of the complementary role of online newspaper platforms, social media, and associated technologies. The third perspective is that it was circulation and not readership that was experiencing a decline. Thus, half of the informants in the study agreed that newspaper readers had decreased significantly, especially after the introduction of the internet and new media technologies, while five observed that the internet and new media technologies had boosted the readership of the newspaper, though caused a depletion of printed newspaper circulation, due to reduction of its traditional or potential subscribers while one had no view on this.

The analysis of the interview data threw up seven major factors responsible for the dwindled readership of printed newspapers. These were the emergence of the internet and new media technologies; the rise of online information platforms, social media, and citizen journalism; the new demography of readers not raised in printed newspaper tradition; editors and news managers trained in hard copy tradition not adapting to the online/digital journalism era; poor state of the economy; decreased purchasing power of the average newspaper reader, and decline in reading culture. The average rate of decline in circulation or readership of the newspaper from the perspective of the respondents was about 34%.

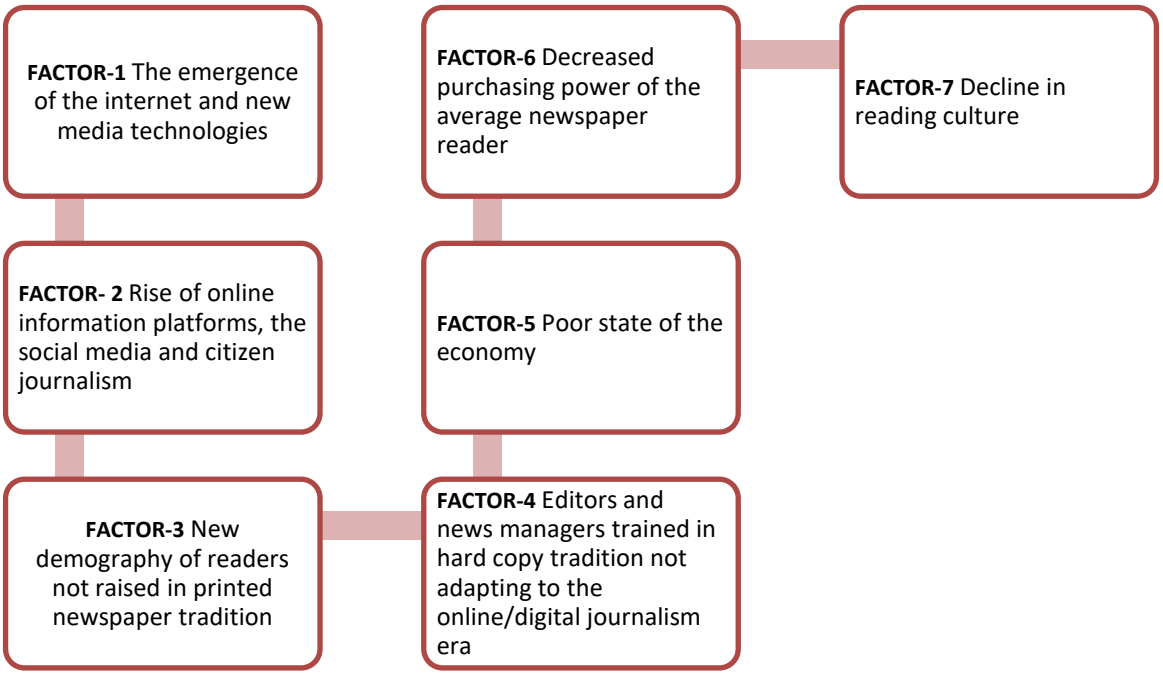


Figure: 1 Seven Factors Responsible for the Readership Decline

According to Informant 5, it was indeed not an exaggeration to state that newspaper readership had significantly dropped. In his words, "The decline is not just because of the internet. It is a generational problem that predated the internet and new media technologies." In the view of the senior editor,

> *younger elements of the society within the age range of 30 or a little over 30 are more interested in getting their information online and the newspaper organization had not also adjusted to this exigency because many of the editors grew up with the hard copy culture and they find it very difficult to adjust to the need of the new generation of readers. (Infor.5)*

Similarly, to Informant 11, the introduction of the internet and the online versions of the printed newspaper had robbed the print medium of major readers. According to him, "while you are struggling to get the hardcopy to the newsstand as early as 6.00am, somebody who has internet facility with his Smartphone would have read what you are trying to market on the newsstand." In the view of Informant 9, the decline in newspaper readership could be attributed to some factors, not limited to the incursion of the new media, demography of the readership as well as the decline in purchasing power of potential readers. Informant 3 reasoned that a combination of factors, including the poor state of the economy, the rise of online publications and other social media platforms as

well as waning reading culture were responsible for the decline in printed newspaper readership. Informant 12 attributed newspaper readership decline to the advent of the social media. He described the readership challenge facing the newspaper as a serious issue which has greatly affected newspaper print run and circulation. Corroborating the argument on the drop in the purchasing power of most Nigerians as responsible the newspaper readership decline, Informant 4 drew a paradox as follows,

> *I think the problem in Nigeria is not just about whether a newspaper will survive or whether the internet will become more profitable or whether the country itself will survive. When you look at the society we are in, a newspaper is not seen as a sign of affluence. It is a sign that you are educated; it is a sign that there are still some values you want to gain from reading because the business template you want to learn about is well explained in the newspaper and you can also re-consult it to get a more accurate information of what you designed; but what majority of people are battling with is how they will survive. So, when you see a very large population that is trying hard to survive, an enterprise like this will become meaningless. It is more about survival and we are talking about newspaper but we are not also talking about product industries. Is Coca Cola making the kind of money it was making 20 years ago? So, when you compare the value of the profit you declare today, does it have the same value as 10-15years ago in spite of the growing population?* ***(Infor.4)***

Newspaper readership had been on the decline for some time due to the emergence of what Informant 7 called the influence of alternative media, comprising citizen journalism and blogging. The diminishing purchasing power of the people, he stressed, made it necessary to prioritize feeding, shelter and education for the children, rather than spending on the newspaper. As for the factors responsible for the decreased newspaper readership, the introduction of the internet and new media technologies, demographic change among readers, Nigeria's poor economy, and de creased purchasing power of the people are supported by existing literature (Waterman & Wook Ji, 2012; Calcutt & Hammond, 2012; Abenarthy & Foster, 2014; Sobowale, Sowumi & Emmanuel, 2014).

The second perspective in the analysis of the respondents' views on the declining newspaper readership is the complementary role of the online newspaper platforms in boosting newspaper readership, canvassed by Informants 1, 4 and 5. They argued that the internet and online platforms were contributing significantly to newspaper readership. The third perspective on newspaper readership decline is that rather than readership, it was newspaper circulation that had been on the decline. This view suggests that although newspaper circulation had been on the decrease, newspaper readership had been boosted by the alternatives provided by the online newspaper. According to Informant 4, it might not be proper to claim that readership of the newspaper had declined. He argued, "One way is to look at the number of copies we print and how many copies you were able to sell per day. What are the sold and the unsold rate? You may think that readership is declining but the truth of the matter is that if I print 1,000 and I sell 900 and I compared that to the last ten years, and the pattern of sale is the same. Are we going to say the readership is declining?" Thus, he reasoned that rather than readership, it was circulation or the print-run of the newspapers that had decreased in response to several factors, including that of the introduction of the internet and new media technologies. This view was also supported by Informant 5 who stated that "There is no point pretending, circulation has fallen; the social media, the new media technologies have affected the patronage of the newspaper. It has affected my newspaper and other newspapers." Thus, it is generally agreed by the informants that the decline in the fortunes of the newspaper had been experienced either in terms of readership or circulation decline.

The views of the respondents however, differed on the rate of the printed newspaper readership decline. To Informant 11, for instance, printed newspaper readership had declined by as much as 35% while from the perspective of Informant 6, newspaper circulation (not readership) had fallen between 10-20% since the advent of the new media technologies. The rate of the readership decline was in the neighborhood of 40/50 %, according to Informant 9. This was attributed to the decline in the print-run of most newspapers. Thus, Informant 9 claimed that newspapers now print about half of what they were printing some 10/15 years ago. He admitted that his newspaper was not doing well in the whole of the South East and South South regions of the country, where it was selling less than a thousand, and insisting that a newspaper like *The Punch*, reputed to be the highest selling newspaper in the country, was circulating only a thousand in the South East and South South zones of Nigeria. This exposition brings up the issue of what had been described as regionalization of Nigerian newspaper, presented in the section below. In addition, Informant 12 said the rate of decline

of newspaper readership was slightly above 40%. Amplifying the severity of the situation, Informant 5 quoted a recent survey by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association of Nigeria, which revealed that all Nigerian newspapers put together hardly produce up to 2-3 million copies.

> *The production is abysmally poor. Even the most read newspaper, maybe they print about 250,000 copies per day. There is a newspaper in Abuja that prints about 2,000 or 3,000 daily for the entire nation. I don't have to mention that newspaper. Another newspaper also does not print up to 3,000/4,000 copies daily while Leadership prints less than 5,000, but Daily Trust prints up to 250,000 daily," he hinted.* ***(Infor.5)***

The absence of the Audit Bureau of Circulation in Nigeria however, makes claims on circulation strength by newspapers unverifiable. However, as nearly half of the respondents agreed that newspaper readership/circulation was on the decline, this represents a positive development as the issue of newspaper readership decline had been a subject of contention, particularly in the absence of empirical data to buttress this, although a cross-sectional survey will bring out the situation accurately. The revelation of declining newspaper readership corroborates the finding reported in Ashong and Henry (2017) and Sobowale, Sowumi and Emmanuel (2014) that point to incidence of decreased printed newspaper readership. In addition, the rate of printed newspaper readership decline in Nigeria put at 33.8% as attested to by the informants in this study is one of the world's average. For instance, McCombs, Mauro and Sons (1987) report that the proportion of adults reading newspapers in America from 1970 to 1984 on a typical day declined from 78.6% to 66.6% while Althaus (2008) says that as at 2006 only 50% of American adults were reading daily newspapers.

Creative steps taken by the newspapers to tackle the dearth of readership

(a) Regional, not national dailies

A major revelation from the analysis of the interview data was that of regionalizing newspaper operations. Nigerian newspapers describe themselves as national dailies, claiming to have a national spread. However, data from the in-depth interviews indicate that most newspapers were virtually regional in outlook and performance. Findings from the informants revealed that newspapers have retreated into the regions to tap into regional readership and to minimize loss from regions not effectively covered by them. In addition, they have and are making a significant investment in regional printing plants to boost their reach.

Informant 9 explained that the major newspapers in the country have their areas of strength, based on their coverage and acceptability of the people of different regions. He rated *The Punch* as number one in Lagos, while *The Sun* is number one in the entire South-East and South-South regions in terms of circulation and for the North, it is *Daily Trust*, even though all the other newspapers are making some feeble presence in areas outside their sphere of influence. Informant 9 further argued,

> *Today, even The Punch does not have what we call out-stations in many states. This means that their reach in those places had been cut to almost zero. A newspaper like This Day focuses on about three to four major cities in view of its approach to niche marketing, focusing on a specific audience, satisfying them and leaving out the rest. It might be that they are able to reach maybe only 500 people; they don't give a damn. About 80% of This Day print-run is shared among its niche audience. The newspaper targets the elite and this works for it. Thus, every newspaper has its own approach. For instance, The Sun is mass audience-based. It is a newspaper for the middle class, hence it has a mass approach. As for the Leadership and Daily Trust, they both seek to satisfy the North and probably send a few copies to Lagos.* ***(Infor.9)***

The newspapers also invested in regional printing plants to boost their readership reach. Through investing in regional printing plants, the newspapers have been able to solve the problem of long-distance freight of newspapers by circulation vehicles, late arrival of newspapers in the market, and huge maintenance cost on the circulation vehicle. Most of the strong newspapers have regional printing plants. For instance, *Vanguard* maintains three printing plants in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. *Nigerian Tribune* has its printing plants in Ibadan and Abuja. It is planning its third plant for Kano. *The Nation* has a printing plant in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt and is planning a fourth plant for Kano. *The Sun* has printing plants in Lagos, Abuja, and Aba. The printing plants were built to assist in readership and circulation. However, this did not appear to meet its target. Informant 5 further explained,

> *We also establish production plant. Instead of using fuel from Lagos to Port Harcourt, we just established a plant in Port Harcourt to serve the south-south and south east. We have another plant in Abuja to serve the*

> *north and we have the Lagos plant. We are hoping to have one in Kano to serve the North West and North East. With that, access to readers will increase. (Infor.5)*

The retreat to the regions by the newspapers as an economic policy is closely linked to the politics of ownership by newspaper proprietors. Regionalism in newspaper ownership and coverage, a development popular in the 1950s to 70s (Aliagan, 2008) ensures some form of parallelism between media discourses and political/ethnic discourses and readership (Olukotun, 2005; Oso, 2012).

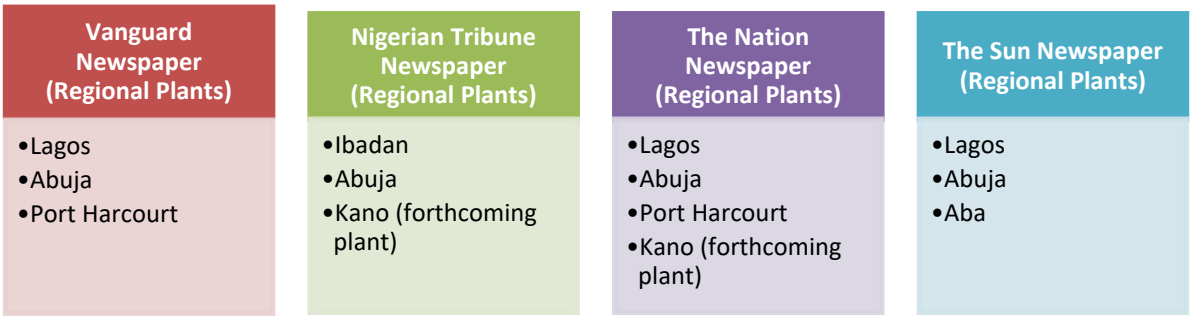


Figure: 2 The Four Newspapers and their Regional Printing Plants to aid Readership

(b) Reduction of colour pages and print-run

Some newspapers have reduced their print run in order to break even as attested to by six of the informants. Some of the newspapers are also reducing their colour pages in order to save cost, rolling many of the pages in black colour, unlike in the time past when newspapers competed in a lavish display of colours. This was admitted by Informant 11. For instance, *The Punch* has cut down on its print run, but not substantially, said Informant 7. This is because, as he explained,

> *if for instance, people had the power to buy about 100,000 copies two years ago, one will be deceiving himself if he thinks that the same 100,000 should be the buying power today because so many people have lost their jobs, and so many organizations have gone bankrupt. So, you don't expect those people who have lost their jobs to now prioritize buying newspapers. (Infor.7)*

Vanguard, of course, also cut its print run, but certainly not the pagination as admitted by Informant 10. Rather than decreasing, newspaper pagination was increased in some instances when there was an increase in the volume of advertisements. According to Informant 10, "Most newspapers run 48 pages but may increase depending on the advertisement volume. Pagination runs from 48, 56, or 64 pages depending on the advertisement flow." *This Day*, like other newspapers, was also adversely affected by the onset of new media technologies which led to the migration of newspaper readers online and shrinking the market share of the printed newspaper. According to Informant 8, the newspaper, in order to break even, has had to reduce print run. *The Guardian*, like every other newspaper, also had to cut its print run to avoid wastage. According to Informant 1, "… like any other business, you will see the need not to produce many copies as you were used to…"

(c) Reducing circulation cost

As an enterprise facing imminent collapse due to erosion of its readership and revenue base, the newspapers are forced to initiate several cost-saving and survival measures to keep afloat. Production cost has continued to escalate, while income from sales and advertising has been shrinking. Salaries are owed by many of the newspapers for months while some newspapers have stopped paying wages altogether. The approach of niche marketing or retreat to the regions is not saving the printed newspaper from its enormous challenge. In order to reduce their production overhead and running costs, a few newspapers also initiated outsourcing of newspaper distribution, though only one informant reported on this measure. *The Nation*, for instance, has suspended the purchase of circulation vehicles. It now makes do with commercial vehicle owners who registered with the corporation to circulate its newspapers. By this, the company is able to save 60% of what it was spending on circulation. In view of the bad condition of Nigerian roads, circulation vehicles were earlier being replaced by the newspaper every six months. Outsourcing of distribution services as an economic policy, though effective, apparently is not attractive to many newspapers in Nigeria. This explained the lack of interest by many and its adoption by only one newspaper. The explanation for this is derivable from the analysis by Dele Olojede, publisher of the defunct *Next* newspaper. He cited the issue of rivalry between newspapers which has frustrated collaboration at the level of printing and distribution of newspapers (Olojede, 2009).

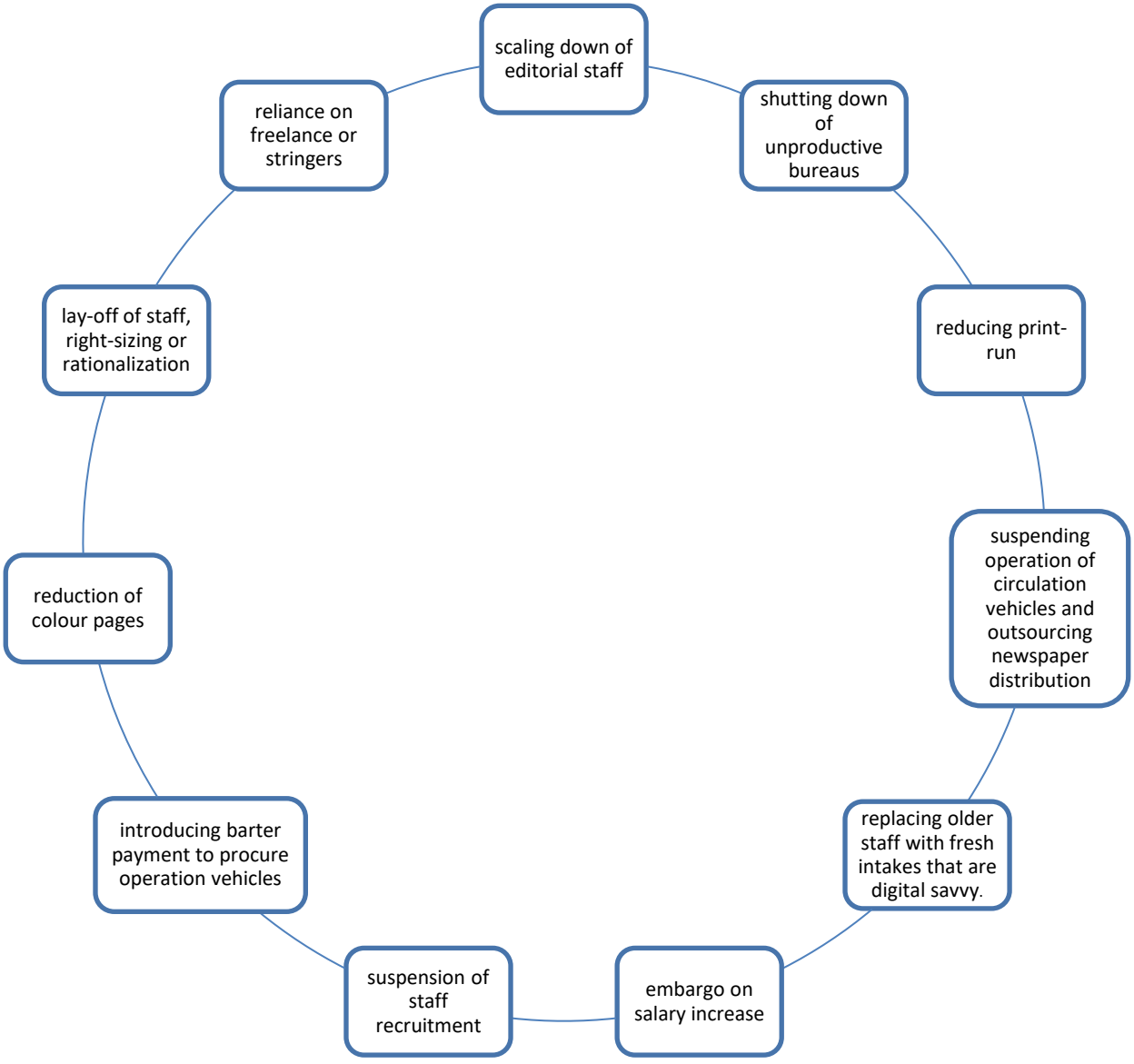


Figure: 3 Eleven Measures taken by the Newspapers for Cost Saving and Survival Strategy

(d) Scaling down of editorial staff

As admitted by Informant 3, the decline in newspaper readership has had a drastic effect on the newspaper business. Not only have sales plummeted, leading to loss of revenue, but the quality of news production has also declined because the newspaper had to scale down its editorial staff to reduce its revenue loss. Reviewing the state of its operation in view of the decline in printed newspaper readership which has led to the loss of revenue and other challenges, Informant

11 noted that the fall in readership had created a serious economic crisis for the newspapers. For instance, many newspapers find it difficult to pay staff salaries. According to him, the crisis goes beyond salary payment alone. Overhead expenses could not be met due to dwindling revenue. The cost of newspaper consumables like newsprint and ink had not only skyrocketed, newspapers sometimes had to take loans to procure them, yet they are not making a commensurate profit to offset the loans. As explained by Informant 5, most newspapers import newsprint, chemicals, and ink which are sourced with foreign exchange and the exchange rate had shot through the roof for some years now. Newspapers also take loans to purchase production materials at high interest.

Findings in the study revealed that six of the newspapers (*Nigerian Tribune, The Guardian, The Nation, Leadership, Vanguard, This Day*) had carried out staff rationalization in order to sustain their businesses, although some claimed they had no cause to reduce staff in spite of the hardship, while some had no report on staff cut. In the past, the *Nigerian Tribune* had correspondents in almost all the states of Nigeria, but now it had editorial representatives in barely less than half of the 36 states in the country. A newspaper like *The Guardian* also reportedly disengaged its entire staff, turning them into freelancers, though this was not confirmed by its informants. However, a newspaper like *The Nation* has not had cause to sack staff due to its economic challenges, but several coping strategies were initiated by the newspaper, including purging to break even. In the view of Informant 5, to save costs, the newspaper is running a very tight fiscal policy and has purged all the bad eggs in its system. It has also introduced a very tough disciplinary process, whereby if a staff commits any infraction, he/she would be summarily sacked. Informant 5 further elaborated:

> *We have ordinarily not sacked any staff and we pay salary as at when due. In fact, three days ago, if not for fraud in some departments, my newspaper would have broken even for the first time; we would have made a profit of about N120m. So, what we are trying to do is to block the loopholes. What we have not done is increase salary. The more we increase salary, the more the wage overload. The wage bill is very high and we find it difficult to survive. So, we made the staff understand. For instance, I have been on the same salary level for about ten years. In doing that, we also create opportunities for staff because we didn't reduce salary but we expanded their opportunities like if you source for an advert, you are*

> *entitled to commission. If the volume is high, we can give you up to 30-35%, but ordinarily, it is between 20 and 25%.* ***(Infor.5)***

Giving a hint to how the newspaper has scaled down its editorial staff, Informant 11 remarked, "all we do now is we try to fly lean, as lean as possible. We had to send away some people that are not contributing to the growth of the company." This way, a substantial number of staff in the newspaper had to be disengaged to prevent bankruptcy. Unlike other newspapers, *The Punch* claimed it is not badly affected by the economic crunch. According to Informant 7, if people were asked to go, it would not be because the newspaper could no longer pay salaries. The newspaper has continued to pay salaries to its staff and does not owe salary arrears, he asserted. Also, in spite of the economic downturn experienced by most of the newspapers, the *Sun* is among the print media that did not disengage any of its staff for economic reasons. It also pays its staff as and when due. According to Informant 9,

> *the Sun prides itself as a medium that is sensitive to staff welfare and so if people are disengaged, it is not because of a lack of funds to pay but what we are trying to do is to rejuvenate the system such that when a generation is going, you have another set, you have some new people coming in, … digital savvy fresh graduates who are coming in just to renew the system.*

Newspapers like *Vanguard* and *This Day* also engaged in staff rationalization. According to Informant 8 "For the newspaper industry, with escalating production cost and every input in the production process being imported and with low sales, only an inept manager will keep the same staff he had a few years ago. Thus, we are right-sizing." Although about half of the informants agreed that newspapers had adopted the creative approach of reducing wastage by laying off staff, the phenomenon appears graver with the increasing need for digitization and as a great number of the old hands being considered un-trainable, many editorial staff might be disengaged by newspapers subsequently. This is implied in the statement by Informant 1 who noted that, "The issue is that those who are good no matter the restructuring that takes place will still be retained. The issue is to consider how good you are; if you are good, we retain you." This is in line with the development in the developed media world, whereby content creation by the newspaper has been revolutionized by the digital technologies (Wang & Huang, 2011) and there are reports of severe job cut, which led to the depleting

of many newsrooms across the affected countries (Entman, 2010; Nel, 2013; Usher & Layser, 2010).

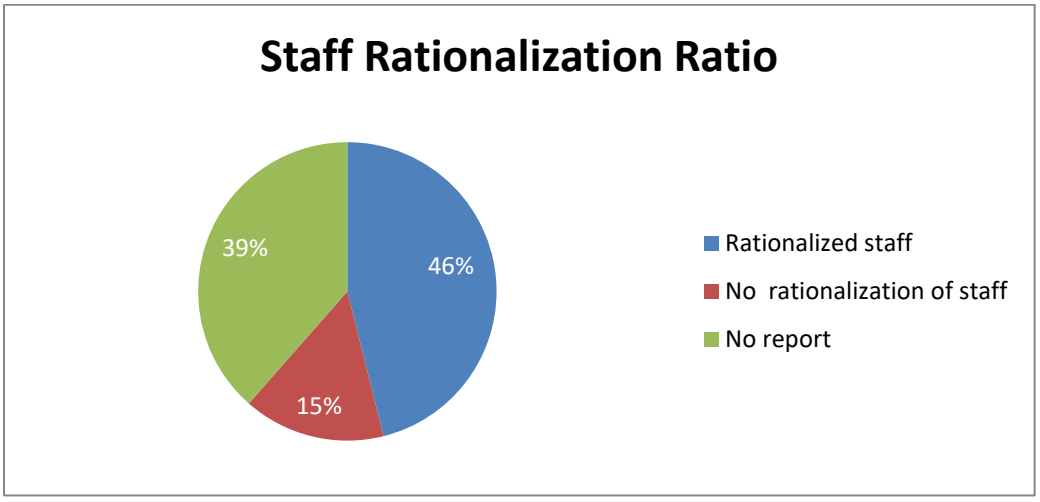


Figure: 4 Newspaper Staff Rationalization

(e) Shutting of Unproductive Bureaus, engaging freelance reporters

Six newspapers (*Nigerian Tribune, The Nation, The Punch, Leadership, Vanguard, This Day*) admitted shutting down unprofitable bureaus, while five engaged services of freelance reporters in unprofitable areas of coverage. For instance, *Tribune's* Bureau offices were shut in the entire South East and the South-South regions of the country where the newspaper was not doing well economically, circulating less than a thousand in the two regions. Most newspapers in the country like the *Nigerian Tribune* now relies on stringers/freelancers to generate copies in unproductive zones, instead of wasting resources in maintaining a presence in those places. Also, in some areas where readership is abysmally low, *The Nation* simply engages the services of freelance reporters. Aside from the economic cost of retaining reporters in unprofitable bureaus, Informant 3 informed that his newspaper, in shutting down unproductive bureaus, also considered the risk of putting vehicles on the road infested by armed robbers, fastidious policemen who demand gratifications, and the poor condition of the roads with a damaging effect on the vehicles and rising maintenance cost. He further elaborated,

> *We now discovered we don't really need reporters in those places. For people that you want to sell newspapers to, you need to travel seven hours to reach them. There are armed robbers on the road, bribe-*

> *taking policemen on the road, and the bad condition of the road too to cope with. And with the advent of social media and the concentration of newspaper printing machines in the regions, you really need to re-strategize. Some newspapers have three machines. We have two; we have in Abuja, and we have here in Ibadan, but then all of these have not helped the decline in readership and sales of the newspaper. So, we have had to cut down staff and close down offices due to low return on sales.* ***(Infor.3)***

In addition, unlike some newspapers, *Leadership* claimed that it tried to sustain its bureaus, but in some regions where traditionally it had a regional editor, correspondent, and reporter, it rationalized the staff and retained only a reporter, and "in some cases where we know a town or city is the headquarter of that region, we still retain the regional editor," Informant 11 explained. *The Punch* newspaper has not had cause to close any unproductive offices, because all along it had rationalized the opening and maintenance of its bureau. It maintained freelance reporters in those states that are not revenue-yielding, though the only states in which the newspaper does not have correspondents as of now are Yobe and Jigawa, said Informant 7. To Informant 10, his newspaper, *Vanguard,* does not keep reporters in all the states. "You can't keep an office in Gombe, in which you spend up to a million naira on maintenance and you do not sell up to 5,000 copies in a week. For unproductive bureaus, the newspaper maintains stringers who may work from their homes," he stressed.

Shutting down of bureaus as revealed in the study is in line with experiences in the developed media world, although there are variations. For example, in order to cut cost, some of the newspapers in other countries undertook a reduction in coverage and pagination, cancelled circulation in some cities where sales were poor, stopped or reduced home delivery of newspapers, eliminated unprofitable publishing days, and closed some city bureaus (Abenarthy & Foster, 2014; Edmonds et al, 2013; Layser and Usher, 2010; Lunden, 2009; Starr, 2009). However, the use of freelance instead of permanent reporters as well as cut in print-run may be novel or peculiar to Nigeria's situation. Virtually all the newspapers have not initiated any transformational innovation, with the exception of *This Day* newspaper. *This Day* newspaper has had to move "with the times by setting up its digital platform," as affirmed by Informant 8. "We have shut down most of our outstations," he confirmed.

Conclusion

Decline in readership of printed newspaper as a result of the internet and new media technologies is a global phenomenon that also affected the industry in Nigeria. The migration of many potential readers online robbed printed newspapers of their readership base. This study has been able to unearth the depth of the readership challenge from the perspectives of the editors and managers of the printed newspapers in Nigeria. Findings in this study constitute a significant contribution to literature on the printed newspaper since the emergence of internet and media technologies. As revealed by the informants in the study, newspapers readership decline in Nigeria is rated at an average of 34%. In order to break-even and overcome survival challenge, newspapers have introduced certain creative approaches, including retreat to the regions to tap into their sphere of influence. They have also set up regional printing plants although this does not yield commensurate return from increased sales, cut on their print run, reduced colour pages, introduced cost saving measure on circulation although this does not appear attractive to many newspapers, scaled down their editorial staff through rationalization and engaging freelance.

Rationalizing the editorial staff and engaging freelance have the tendency to depopulate the newsroom and reduce editorial quality as evidently reflected in older studies. More good hands in the newsroom will ultimately be lost as technology continues to reduce dependence on human element in the production process, including the newsroom. The shutting down of unproductive bureaus, as initiated by the newspapers, will cause reduction in news sources and cutting off some areas from news coverage radar. It is recommended that as newspaper managers continue to explore creative measures to salvage the bad fortunes of the printed newspaper due to the disruptive technologies that are robbing it of its old readership and revenue base, they should be conscious of the overall impact this has on editorial content, which gives newspaper journalism its core value.

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