

Managing change in media transition from print to multi-platform delivery: A case of Kenyan newspapers

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Managing change in media transition from print to multi-platform delivery: A case of Kenyan newspapers**Onyinge A. T***Communications Consultant***Kithae, P. Peter***Director, Research Development and Innovations
Management University of Africa, Kenya***Abstract**

Emerging challenges of the Internet and digitization on print media has resulted in loss of circulation and advertising revenue, job cuts and sometimes, closure of media companies. In the midst of these challenges is the pressure on the print companies to transition to multi-platform delivery. Whereas it is generally stated that developing economies still exhibit a prospering newspaper industry, the challenge of the Internet and digitization has been found to affect most Kenyan media. This paper involved literature review and document analysis to investigate the trends that have compelled newspapers in the first world to transition to Internet and digitized modes of news delivery, in order to understand the strategies that have bolstered management of this change process. Specific objectives were to investigate how digitization has affected profitability of media houses in Kenya and secondly, to find out the strategies that media houses use to cope with challenges resulting from Internet and digitization. The paper found out that most of the newspaper readership traffic has migrated to the Internet, with content increasingly being delivered through electronic devices such as computers, smart phones, e-readers and tablets; and that the print media have managed to continue surviving the Internet and digitization threats due to effective use of new media management models, and strengthening of technical and leadership skills of the media managers. The paper concludes that there is need for the print media to devise an appropriate change process to effectively counter the effect of Internet and digitization on content and revenue. Among recommendations of the paper is that empirical research be conducted in Kenya to establish the extent to which digitization and Internet has affected its traditional business model to inform the process of change.

Key Words: *Convergence; Digitization; Multi-platform approach; Print media;*



Onyinge Tabitha Awuor

Onyinge Tabitha Awuor is an entrepreneur in Communications, currently running Deer Leaps Communications Ltd. Ms. Onyinge is a trained communications practitioner in Journalism as well as Communication for Development. She has more than twenty years experience in the field, having worked for top publications and development organizations in Kenya and South Africa. Keen on transformational leadership, Ms. Onyinge is the current Secretary General of Christian Journalists Association and the immediate former Vice Chairperson of the Board of the Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK).



Peter Paul Kithae, PhD

Dr Peter Paul Kithae is currently the Director, Research, Development and Innovations of the Management University of Africa; the honorary treasurer for the Kenya Red Cross Society, Upper Eastern Kenya Region and a Senior Consultant with the Total Quality Management firm of Consultants. Among Dr. Kithae's published work include a Print book on "Technology adoption and its effect on performance of Youth-Led Micro and Small Enterprises, printed in June, 2015, a paper on the Extent the government has shaped MSE's destiny towards achievement of Kenya's vision 2030; A paper on the Effect of quality improvement practices on micro and small enterprise performance and another on Unleashing Potentiality of Our Youth through Entrepreneurship Training: A Must for Realization of Kenya's Vision 2030 among others. Dr Kithae is a career civil servant who has successfully worked as a Chief Youth Officer for three years and later as a Principal Youth Officer for two years in charge of Youth Development services in Makueni and Kirinyaga counties respectively. He has attended a lot of seminars and workshops and has facilitated a number of them. Among these are project planning and management, performance contracting, capacity assessment training and disaster preparedness and response. He is a renowned educationist, having been a senior Lecturer at the Management University of Africa for over three years, a part-time lecturer at the University of Nairobi, Embu Campus for four years and a lecturer of Entrepreneurship, management and Business Studies in various tertiary institutions for over 18 years. Dr Kithae has also been a Senior Examiner and Team leader for Business Studies with the Kenya National Examinations Council for over 10 years and a Senior Examiner for Research methods with the Kenya Institute of Management for over five years.

Introduction and research objectives

Studies the world over, have revealed that growth of Internet and digitization is having unfavorable effect on the business of print media (Doyle, 2014, Doyle, 2015 Franklin, 2012 and Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, & Villi, 2014). This implies that the traditional print media production and distribution model may soon be no more (Doyle, 2014). In the world over, most of newspaper readership traffic has migrated to the Internet, with content increasingly being delivered through electronic devices such as computers, smartphones, e-readers and tablets; in addition to cable news and company blogging platforms, among others (Hume, 2012 and Mitchelstein, & Boczkowski, 2009). This makes news more convenient to access and cheaper, as readers can reach a variety of news sources through a single avenue. Further, online media offers readers, convenient platforms to interact with the information that they are consuming through instant feedback forums, often exhibited through rich debates between the readers and moderators representing the news sources (Hume, 2012).

Statement of the problem

According to Jackson (2016), one of the Britain's oldest media entities, The Guardian Media Group, suffered a severe reduction in business revenue for over five years. Losses of The Guardian Newspaper hit £69 million in its half-year financial returns for 2016 in spite of measures the organization had put in place to reverse the drop (Jackson, 2016). Similarly, Britain's youngest newspaper, the 30-year-old Independent, stopped its traditional print business in March 2016 to concentrate exclusively on digital distribution. The readership of Independent Newspaper had dropped to 55,000 from a one-time peak of 420,000. Out of this catastrophe, more than 100 journalists lost their jobs as the *Independent* made the switch (Jackson, 2016).

Likewise, the print media in Kenya has initiated numerous endeavors over the past two to three years to salvage its traditional newspaper printing industry, following a severe disruption in its news distribution. However, very few studies have been done to establish the effect of these changes on the profitability of the print media. This study therefore seeks to investigate how digitization has affected profitability of media houses in Kenya with an aim of suggesting strategies necessary to cope up with challenges resulting from Internet and digitization.

The overall objective of the study is to investigate how media houses are managing change in media transition from print to multi-platform delivery, while specific objectives are to investigate how digitization has affected profitability of media houses in Kenya and to find out the strategies that media houses use to cope up with challenges resulting from Internet and digitization.

The findings will be of great assistance to media owners as they will seek to explore strategies to use to counter the challenges of Internet and digitization to remain competitive. The findings will also help policy makers to come up with appropriate policies to make the national media houses relevant. Finally, the study findings will enrich existing theories for use by other researchers and academicians in disseminating knowledge

Change management in organizations

Change is witnessed in every facet of life. At the onset of industrial revolution came in technological innovations. Today, the technological innovations have become the scene of information explosion. The world has shrunk in size to a global village. Yukl (2002) describes leading change as one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities. The author observes that “*The creation and establishment of a clear and compelling vision is useful to guide the organization through change*” (pp67). Change management is defined as the systematic application of knowledge, tools and resources; and the classification and adoption of corporate strategies, structures, procedures and technologies, to handle external and internal changes in an organization (SHRM, 2007). Kudray and Kleiner (1997) further define change as the continuous process of aligning an organization with its marketplace and doing so more responsively and effectively than competitors.

Naylor (1999) on the other hand observed that in any organization, change management is about responding to the

changing environment and the key part of the management function is to maintain an awareness of such changes and prepare appropriate responses. According to Parlakkılıç (2014), the process and actions of any change management are unique and specific to a particular organization, because each organization has unique needs, circumstances, resources, clientele, relationships, cultures, and objectives. Finally, Kotter (2012) observed that in 1996, Harvard Business Review Press had predicted a powerful macro-economic force that would grow stronger over the next few decades and push organizations to reduce their production costs; improve the quality of products and services presented to customers; locate new opportunities for business growth; and increase productivity. From the onset of the 21st century, Kotter's projection was evident in many industries as globalization and growth of information technology begun to threaten traditional business models, pushing companies and industries towards greater innovations to survive (Munck, 2002).

Changes as witnessed in the print media

Evolution in the print media has been witnessed globally leading to a fall in readership and downsizing in newsrooms (Goyanes & Gentile, 2017), as organizations that traditionally thrived in the business of printed newspapers and magazines are facing reduced profitability as well as extensive economic losses (Chen, 2013; Obbo 2017). Some of the traditional print titles have faced the prospect of, or undergone closure (Hume, 2012). One of Britain's oldest newspapers, *The Guardian*, has had to converge its operations to reverse a consistent loss over a five-year period (Jackson, 2016). According to Martinson (2016) the decline in revenue was largely witnessed in *The Guardian's* digital and print platforms, despite extensive measures having been put in place for economic recovery, including paid-up-membership and job cuts.

Similar trends have been noted in two Belgian media entities – *Corelio* and *Concentra* (Paulussen, Geens & Vandenbrande, 2011); and select Finnish newspapers (Larikka, 2014). In the case of Finnish newspapers, change in business model was employed and necessitated by the need for proactive decision making for survival and success. Media entities employed survival models including non-journalistic approaches such as e-commerce, gaming and lecturing (Larikka, 2014). In the UK, News International who publish *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Sun* and *Sun on Sunday*; The Telegraph Media Group, publishers of *Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*; together with Associated Newspapers, publishers of *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*; and the FI Group, who publish *Financial Times*, have all made a shift to multiplatform delivery model (Doyle, 2014). Finally, Select German newspapers had, by 2006, adopted multi-platform content delivery models, and in an ethnographic study conducted over a ten-year span, Kolo (2016) noted that the new approaches could not compensate for losses emanating from the collapse of print content circulation.

In Kenya, newspaper hawking was an unfamiliar business approach before 2014, as newspapers were either delivered into offices and homes, or sold at specific newsstands (Obbo, 2017). But as the number of people buying newspaper copies became fewer, newspaper hawking emerged, perhaps in the hope that the convenience would persuade more readers to buy the products. Likewise, free newspaper copy distribution was an unknown concept in the market, until July 2014, when Mediamax Group re-launched its newspaper *The People Daily* as the first free national newspaper in the country. There after other media groups followed suit. Staff redundancies have also become common in Kenyan Media Groups, being used as the easiest strategy to reduce operation costs as readership of newspapers drop and together with it, advertising revenue.

Whereas several scholarly studies have been done on print media transition to multi-platform delivery in the first world, empirical research on how this transition is being managed in Africa, and particularly in Kenya is lacking. This paper reviews scholarly literature and analysis research documents and newspaper articles to understand trends that have compelled newspapers in the first world to transition to Internet and digitized modes of news delivery. It seeks to highlight how the different media have managed the change, and attempts to draw lessons for Kenya's print media, which already faces challenges such as loss of, or a reduction in circulation and advertising revenue, job cuts and sometimes, closure of media companies.

Effects of digitization on profitability

The print media industry has been in transition from traditional print circulation approaches to more advanced models. Internet and digitally converged models of producing and distributing news has been employed to satisfy a more demanding audience, increase revenue and incur as little overhead costs as possible. Scholars term this new strategy the multi-platform delivery (Doyle, 2014; Doyle, 2015; Ndonye & Khasandi-Telewa, 2013; Larikka, 2014; Kolo, 2015). Print newsrooms are increasingly having to create and distribute content, not only in the traditional print models, but also in presentations suitable for the various Internet platforms – *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Blogs*, *WhatsApp*, *Pinterest*, *LinkedIn*, *Instagram*, etc. – and in forms that can be accessed through digital channels – computer, e-readers, tablets or smartphones (Doyle, 2015; Franklin, 2012).

This shift in print media has been occasioned by: first, the rapidly growing innovations in communication technologies, which have made relations between the public and the media more interactive (Franklin, 2012; Doyle, 2014; Obbo, 2017). Secondly, the news audience market is becoming more fragmented, which means that the media has to constantly scan its environment to keep a tight grasp on its existing consumers, even as it seeks new markets (Franklin, 2012; Doyle, 2014; Obbo, 2017).

Thirdly, the media's advertising revenue sources have become as fragmented as its news market (Franklin, 2012; Doyle, 2014; Larikka, 2014; Kolo, 2016; Obbo 2017). Fourthly, intra-media competition has been heightened by a reduction in entry costs, especially for online news outlets, as well as radical changes in government media policies (Franklin, 2012). Fifthly, social media has become a key source and driver of news; as well as advertising revenue (Franklin, 2012; Doyle, 2014; Obbo 2017). Lastly, the audiences' tastes for news have shifted to instant and constant news streams at the click of a button (Franklin, 2012; Doyle, 2014).

In 2016, *The Daily Nation*, Kenya's leading newspaper, reported a 15 per cent drop in its half year after tax profits (West, 2016). At the same time, the company let go of a sizeable number of staff, and announced that it was struggling to survive due to delayed payment of bills by the Government of Kenya. Ultimately, the newspaper's print revenue had fallen by nine per cent, thoroughly shaking its stability, which was supported by revenue from print sales and advertising (West, 2016). Obbo (2017) identifies **use of** new concepts such as newspaper hawking as efforts **used** by the Kenya media to survive threats of digital media on the traditional newspaper business model. *"The model of the mass general newspaper is dead. There is little to no news the newspapers will beat social media on...I don't have a sure idea about what the future newspaper might look like, but I now have seen data on some surprising changed reader habits..."* (Obbo, 2015, Para. 15).

Media house coping strategies against Internet and digitization

The susceptibility of survival by the print media, whether in Kenya or internationally is heightened by these two factors, and intensified by the absence of a vibrant change leadership (Obbo, 2017). Similarly, competition for advertising revenue is no longer limited to media competitors, but has broadened to include non-media organizations and individuals. Besides this, the newsroom space has somewhat opened up to the world through interactive engagement that traverses news and advertisement content (Quinn, 2004). The widened interactive media space empowers the public to influence the content that is pushed out for its consumption, by, for instance, demanding the organizations' editorial policy, should content be deemed unsatisfactory for a certain audience. The pressure that the Internet and digitization has exerted on existing newspaper groups demands change – new and innovative adaptation approaches to secure their survival (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). But change does not just happen; it has to be purposefully planned and driven/managed (Picard, 2011).

Traditionally, newspapers have used a multi-sided business model that involved selling the same product to consumers (readers), marketers and classified advertisers (Larikka, 2014). The traditional newspaper-publishing model is no longer sustainable, and the media has to innovate to survive (Kolo, 2016; Doyle, 2014). Since journalism is not just a business, but also a political and social concern that affects the entire society (Kolo, 2016; Doyle 2014), a solution to media survival has to be found in the multi-platform distribution. Doyle (2014) points out that much focus needs to be

laid on the survival of the newspaper industry, and its ability to adjust and renew because of its important role as a source of daily cultural exchange.

Multiplatform distribution, according to Doyle (2014) is a two-pronged strategy where digital publishing is low cost but also low in revenue earnings, while print distribution involves high production cost and high revenue earnings. Obbo's (2017) observation that three of Kenya's leading newspaper entities, *The Daily Nation*, *The Standard* and *The Star*, have high traffic to their websites, but do not make money from the growing digital space buttresses this.

It is not easy to manage a double-pronged business approach where one model merely functions to sustain customer traffic, while the other plays the more important revenue-generating model, but is threatened with imminent death. Based on the empirical analysis of the reinvention of four UK newspapers into multi-platform entities, Doyle (2014) cautions that in the new model, journalists have to constantly strive to meet the needs of audiences by constantly monitoring trends. Paulussen, Geens, and Vandenbrande (2011) also emphasize the need for journalists to acquire new skills since traditional training does not cater for the new skills needed in the converged model. There is also a general lack of basic skills to work with new technology, while in-house trainings tend to be too short and abrupt to accord the journalists proper shifts to the new technology (Paulussen et al, 2011; Doyle, 2014-B). Journalists also tend to resist change perceived to aim at business goals only; to the extent they are not convinced about benefits of the newsroom innovations. They also resist changes that might turn them into "jacks of all trades and masters at none" (Paulussen et al, 2011).

Quinn (2004) observes that whether driven to achieve better business or better journalism, convergence and multi-platform publishing model is a win-win scenario. From a business point of view, Quinn (2004) also argues that with the new models, the organizations are able to produce more news from the same journalists thereby cutting down costs on employment; the entities can earn more revenue from their multiple distribution channels; the brands get extended and the market is penetrated better as they meet and satisfy consumers' needs. On the journalistic front Quinn (2004) defines better journalism as the writer's use of better and more divergent tools, as well as gaining extra skills from their exposure to many delivery avenues.

Larikka (2014) however cautions that in spite of the opportunities provided by the growth of the Internet and digital convergence, the traditional and new media platform are fundamentally different and adopting multi-platform format does not guarantee sustained and increased revenue. This, the author says, is because the adopted new business approaches must have specific models catering for the various functions of the newspaper – advertising, subscription and transactions. In a study based on future forecasting, Larikka (2014) postulates that changes in business affect revenue, and media managers should therefore choose and only adopt models that are suitable for their company needs.

A new strategy within the multi-platform model of media transition is suggested by Paulussen et al. (2011). According to Paulussen (2011), the strategy that rides on breaking down walls between print and digital newsrooms; print and digital outlets (circulations); professional journalism and readers; and between editorial and commercial departments, was done in two Belgian media houses. The study found that journalists slow down change implementation in the newsroom because they are conservative and resistant to technological innovations. But Larikka (2014) argues that training of staff on new technology and business skills would help to reduce uncertainty, and enhance their marketing of the newspapers.

Paulussen et al (2011) finally recommends that changing the attitudes of journalists may require committed financial and human resource investment over a long period, as they deem technological innovations e.g. content management systems as too complicated and counterintuitive to their work routines, coupled with their intolerance for the frequent failure of technology.

In a case study of El-Pais Media in Spain, Goyanes & Gentile, (2017) reveal that newsroom leadership is informal – lacking formal authority or written rules, and is based on customs and beliefs. They note that many newsroom leaders are not necessarily de-facto leaders, as newsroom leadership is a social construct based on relationships and skills of the perceived leader. They argue that journalists are not used to conventional leadership models because of their attempts to

keep editorial independence, especially from owners and administrative bodies. Equally, important are journalistic skills to produce sellable content and high quality professionalism. They argue that functional shifts, where media managers are adopting new management duties occasioned by the shift to multi-platform, calls for the development of transitional skills. Therefore, newsroom leaders should be reputable journalists who have expertise and experienced in managing relationships, tensions and stress that is widespread in the field (Goyanes & Gentile, (2017).

Another study that cross-examines the difficulties of managing change to multi-platform models in the current media market was done by Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, & Villi (2014). The study is based on a comparative case study of two Nordic media organizations and analysis practices and micro-processes of strategies through which change is managed in media organizations, that is, how change is conceived, developed and executed to keep up with the changing industry. It postulates that “in planned change, stability is normal and change is the exception”. Concerning how newsrooms construct their leaders, Paulussen et al (2011) argues that traditional newsroom organizations tends to promote internal competition rather than teamwork and cooperation, which is key in change management.

Doyle (2015) in a multiple case study of *The Telegraph*, *The Times* and *Financial Times* states that multi-platform delivery has led to a vast expansion in the volumes of media content supplied and availed to media audiences in the midst of constrained production budgets. Because of that, Järventie-Thesleff et al (2014) recommend that transitioning media organizations ought to develop strategies and organizational practices that allow them to be flexible enough to simultaneously pursue incremental and radical change on all platforms. This is because constant incremental change through minimum innovations, changes and improvements on existing products and operations, give great value to audiences and prepare the organizations for radical change.

In a literature review based historical study of the newspaper in Britain, the United States and Kenya, Ndonye & Khasandi-Telewa (2013) trace how the media industry has in the past, survived threats posed by new technology, commercialization, policy change, political instability and economic downturn. He points out that the subsequent growth has been a result of adapting to change. The media in Kenya can therefore survive the threat of Internet and digitization if they adopt multi-media strategy as is the case in the first world media, Ndonye & Khasandi-Telewa (2013) concludes.

But Nyabuga & Booker, (2013) state that Kenyan audiences do not like to pay for content. This may complicate attempts by media to monetize content delivered through the Internet and other digitized avenues. In a literature review and interview based report, *Mapping Digital Media: Kenya Country Report*, Nyabuga & Booker, (2013) reveal that a majority of Kenyans still access their news via traditional channels – the radio being the most popular, since it is easily accessible on the affordable mobile phones; and the explosion of vernacular radio stations, following liberalization of the Kenyan airwaves in the last decade. Only younger technology savvy populations selectively access news via the Internet and mobile phones (Nyabuga & Booker, 2013).

Conclusions and recommendations

Print media companies have been found to continue surviving the Internet and digitization threats due to employment of appropriate change management strategies, new media management models, and strengthening of technical and leadership skills of media managers. It would therefore be foolhardy for print media companies anywhere in the world to fold their arms and watch the changes with the hope that they would soon pass away. There is however an absence of scholarly studies on how the print media in Kenya is managing the transition to multi-platform delivery, hence it is not clear if indeed the print media in Kenya needs the change; or if it has embarked on the transition or not.

Notable too is that the media houses have not engaged radical models to counter the threat of Internet and digitization, as the current two-pronged approach is complicated by the fact that it drags along the traditional model that is threatened by death, while the new digital model has not started to generate sustainable revenue. Even as the media businesses converge their models to include online and digital approaches, they are yet to start earning realistic advertising revenue from their digital platforms. The bulk of current online advertising revenue goes to social media platforms such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, yet newspaper publishers have to sustain their businesses. There is therefore need to develop a model that will thrive in content distribution without compromising on revenue earning. Finally, media

business leaders don't appear to be adequately equipped to drive the change that is occasioned by the changing communication innovations. Media houses ought therefore to proactively develop the skills of their business leaders with the competence to handle tough competition; centrality of economic considerations; change management; and prompt adaptation and response to market needs.

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