

The Traditional Newspaper Industry vs. the Technology Driven News Media - Predatory or Complementary Behaviour: Issues, Trends, Prospects and Emerging Realities of the Print Media faced with Emerging Technological Directions in the Sri Lankan Context

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Background

There is an emerging research interest worldwide about the nexus between the print media and the technological advancement in modern communications. The relevant corollary in this context is the fate of the print news media itself. A very pertinent question is how hard technology, namely the advancement in hardware, copes with the exponential mutations in web-based communications. Research carried out globally project to the possibility that the newspaper industry, famously connoted as “that sells letters to readers and sells readers to advertise”, is faced with “inevitable extinction” in the “near future”.

Studies carried out across the globe lead to suggest an eventual demise of the print media due to the fact that people as a percentage of total population are hooked on to the worldwide web for almost every bit of information they seek, be it current or historical, basic or in-depth. Research estimates predict that the last newspaper prints in the USA would occur by 2040, whereas, internet users have been growing exponentially, and currently stand at 65% of the USA population. The picture in North America is even more decisive notching a whopping 78.6% of the population using internet access while Europe is having about 61.3% population hooked on to it. In the meantime, the late starters are also doing a fast catching up job. For instance, in South America it reads at 43.3%, Central America 32.6%, the Caribbean 28.7%, and Asia at 26.2%.

The rise in the internet penetration in many countries is accompanied by a corresponding decline in the print media share. Not only in developed countries has this trend been in evidence, but also in developing countries. With the rapid enhancements in mobile telecommunication technology and drastic gains in costs of telecommunication infrastructure development, the worldwide web is becoming accessible to rural and far reaching places; more and more people opt for web-based news through mobile, notebooks and tablets. While this is the most visible trend, newspapers too have moved into new technology – based communication spheres for greater advantages, production economies and most notably for a global reach with a virtual information feed.

Over the past few years, the number of Sri Lanka’s internet subscribers or those who have access to the web has increased significantly, though the local internet penetration has not been in line with that of the world. The statistics published by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRC) estimates local internet user share at a lowly 4%. While it is true that Sri Lankan news paper houses run their internet on line versions, they are of a limited

use. Often, the internet edition is a below par effort, which often engages junior journalist staff. Thus, the web editions of Sri Lanka's news papers remain sketchy and also in contrast to the common global trend are not updated regularly.

Research Question

Is the Sri Lankan print media industry faced with an inevitable fate of being replaced by the internet based news media? What evidence is available to determine the time line of such a shift? What evidence is possible to be gathered to determine the threshold point of internet penetration that will decide the fate of the local print media industry?

Research Hypothesis

With the expansion of broad band penetration, development in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and resulting increase in internet access, the public will reduce their reading of newspapers. As a result, the reliance on newspapers will be reduced and at one point in the future the news paper industry in Sri Lanka may collapse.

Rationale

There has not been adequate research on the technological impact on the local print media industry. Given that the local print media plays a very decisive role in the Sri Lankan political economy and hence the development path and the impact of local news bulletins on social life remains a very crucial one, a sound understanding of the emerging trends in this aspect is of immense use for policy makers and development strategists.

Methodology

An opinion survey of internet users was carried out to see whether they have reduced their dependence on printed newspapers after they gain access to the internet. The survey methodology includes accessing a sizeable cross- section of internet users to respond to a web-based survey by responding to an opinion-based questionnaire covering three strata of respondents such as government employees, private sector employees and university students as the main focal groups. Current survey data were analyzed to extract the emerging trends and comparative assessments of selected countries with development characteristics similar to Sri Lanka. The data was analyzed using the SPSS data package as the main analytical tool.

Findings of the Opinion Survey

Television is the most attractive mass media for news for 60% of the people who were surveyed where less than 20% said they get news from the radio while 30% use newspapers. However, internet has become the most attractive mass media for news especially among the younger generation, below thirty years of age. The potential threat of the internet on newspaper is quite visible and over 40% said that they have reduced newspaper reading after they get internet access. Most of the internet users (over 60%) use office or university internet connections and a few use private internet connections and less than 10% use internet cafes.

The survey reveals that there is no decline in newspaper circulation and there is no real threat from the internet to newspapers, the newspaper circulation has increased over the past ten years. Also there is no decline in newspaper advertising, where as it has increased in most cases while there is no significant increase in online advertising.

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