



CONTENT PREFERENCE AMONG ONLINE AND HARDCOPY NEWSPAPER READERS IN IMO STATE

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of newspapers online has created an ambivalence globally. Whereas the general feeling is that the online version of newspapers are a threat to the print's business model, it is difficult to tell between online version and hardcopy newspapers which one is more economically rewarding as both are readily available and appear to thrive at least in Nigeria. This study is a survey of 392 newspaper readers in Imo State, selected in accordance with the Taro Yamane formula. Findings show that 80% of the respondents read both versions of newspapers, and that content is immaterial as a determinant of preferred version (76%). Rather, availability accounts for the version attended to per time. In addition, certain demographic and psychographic factors influence choice of content as well as media. It is therefore recommended among other things that the newspaper industry strive to provide both online and print versions provided that appropriate emphasis is laid on news which respondents consider the most valuable of newspaper contents.

Keywords: Hardcopy newspaper, Online newspaper, Spin-off, Content, Content preference, Industry players.

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Contribution/ Originality

This is one of the few studies that have investigated preference among Nigerian newspaper readers. Findings reveal that although the online version of newspapers is clearly preferred, readers are content with any version available to them provided that their information needs are met. Print is losing, but still viable.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

Reports indicate that globally the newspaper is passing through its hardest time ever, especially since the Internet came to provide online functionalities and possibilities far beyond what the newspaper could offer: instant and free news, interactive and multimedia features, and easy accessibility through very simple handheld technologies like mobile phones and personal computers. Internet news publication is also simpler and cheaper. With these attributes therefore, Varian (2013) sees the Internet as evidently a more superior way to distribute and read news. However, by astronomically increasing news sources, the Internet inadvertently threatened the newspaper's traditional stronghold on the news business. In fact, it was in an attempt to tap into the Internet's huge resources, that newspapers joined other mass media to also deliver their contents digitally. But the moment readers began to rush online, print newspapers also began to suffer in three major ways: "loss of breaking-news function, decline in newspaper readership and decline in advertising revenues" (Thottam, 1999). These are newspaper's major revenue streams, and the continuous failure of efforts of industry players (publishers, editors, reporters, media

scholars, etc) to contain the decline informed the prediction or conclusion in some quarters that the end of the newspaper is close (Chan, 2005).

Literature is replete with materials which chronicle the monumental shifts in news consumption occasioned by the emergence of online news and the resultant hasty decline of newspaper fortunes worldwide, or fear over its survival at the instance of the Internet. Examples include: "Growing up Digital: the Rise of the Net Generation" (Tapscott, 1998) "UK Children Go Online" (Livingstone and Bober, 2003) "Murdoch Predicts Gloomy Future for Press" (Plunkett, 2005) "Net to Newspapers: Drop Dead" (Business Week, 2005) "The Future of Newspapers: Who Killed the Newspaper?" (The Economist, 2006) "Goodbye to Newspapers?" (Baker, 2007) "Buffeted: Newspapers are Paying the Price for Shortsighted Thinking" (Morton, 2007) "Newspaper Circulation Continues to Decline Rapidly" (Pérez-Peña, 2008) "Daily Mail Group to Cut 1,000 Jobs" (Agence, 2009) "Tucson Citizen to Cease Publication March 21 if no buyer found" (Tucson Citizen, 2009) "Newspaper Closings Raise Fears about Industry" (Lieberman, 2009) "From Bad to Worse: The State of the Media in 2009" (Cooper, 2009) "Seattle Post-Intelligencer to Go Online Only" (Chicago Tribune, 2009). The reports are legion, and to McLroy (2013) they get more troubling and convincing each day.

Similar reports in Nigeria include: "Dwindling Sales: A Looming Media Challenge" in *Daily Trust* (Omoniyi, 2010) "Experts Debate Future of Print Media: Online Media, A Threat" in *Nigerian Tribune* (Ekeng, 2010) "Forget Circulation Figures, Print Media is still very relevant" (Adefaye, 2010, cited in Abdurraheem *et al.* (2012)) "The Solution to the Dwindling Newspaper Circulation in Nigeria" (Popoola, 2010) "Kaduna newspaper vendors say online publication disrupts sales" (Daily Trust, 2012). The decline is almost everywhere; what may differ is the degree or dimension of effect. Newspapers in Switzerland and the Netherlands for instance, have lost half of their classified ads to the Internet (The Economist, 2006). Some major newspaper chains are burdened by heavy debt loads, some have filed for bankruptcy, shut down, laid off reporters and editors, imposed pay reductions, cut the size of the physical newspaper, or turned to web-only publications (Kirchhoff, 2009). Papers in the U.S., have filed for bankruptcy, failed to find buyers and closed down (Chicago Tribune, 2009). Some have focused on more profitable niches, or cut down publication from daily to twice or thrice a week. Johnston Press UK, for example, stopped daily publication of several papers in 2012 (Stanistreet, 2015). *The Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News* of U.S. too, slashed home delivery to three days a week, while prodding readers to visit the newspapers' websites on other days (Lieberman, 2009). In 2008 and 2009, three U.S. newspaper chains got delisted in the New York Stock Exchange due to dwindling fortunes. More recently, some media corporations have taken to spin-off (running their newspapers as separate businesses to prevent their woes from affecting other more profitable media businesses), merger or outright acquisition as viable options for survival. The New Media Investment Group for instance, acquired Halifax Media's 36 community papers, while Amazon founder Jeff Bezos on August 5, 2013, purchased *The Washington Post*, with Digital First Media, being up for sale as at September 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

This unsettling global scenario draws attention to the local scene. Of course, reports have hinted at dwindling readership due to availability of online sources in Nigeria, but 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, etc. The impression this gives is that Nigeria's newspaper industry in a healthy one, or that both formats complement each other, or that the effect of online publication on hardcopy is still manageable; since the hardcopy still attracts advertising revenues in spite of the presence of online version. In view of this global scenario, Nigerians' burgeoning online presence and the fact that hardcopies still grace the newsstands, this study considers it imperative to understand how these dynamics are playing out to sustain the seeming health in Nigeria's newspaper industry. Besides, Nigerian publishers and media scholars seem not to have fully grasped users' response to online and print content, the demand for online as opposed to hardcopy, the format that serves readers' needs most or the role contents play.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The newspaper industry has been somewhat affected negatively by the digital revolution. Before the coming of online newspaper, the hardcopy newspaper had firmly entrenched and intensified its position as the primary and most common source of news for a lot of people. But the coming of online newspapers inadvertently threatened the print business model because by changing readers' traditional pattern of seeking for and consuming the news, it created a troubling dichotomy in news presentation and content preference, and with readers and advertisers drifting online, hardcopies lost their major revenue streams. Today, newspapers everywhere are losing readers, going bankrupt, laying off workers, spinning off, closing down, going online-only, thus triggering the need to also assess the Nigerian newspaper industry. Besides, it is difficult to say in Nigeria today for instance, between online and hardcopy newspapers, which one is more economically rewarding to the industry. Yet, the economics of the news is contingent upon the size and characteristics of the audience, which then determines the value of the news media to advertisers.

Again, considering the increasing number of Nigerians going online on a daily basis and the fact that major newspapers still grace the newsstands on a daily basis as well, it becomes even more imperative to ascertain whether there is any difference in the content selected by readers of the different versions of newspapers. It is with this background in mind that this study poses the question: what is the role of content when newspaper readers in Nigeria have to choose between online and hardcopy formats of newspapers?

1.3. Research Objectives

The research objectives are to:

1. Find out which contents readers search for in online and hardcopy newspapers.
2. Determine if readers go to online or hardcopy newspapers because of their preference for particular contents.
3. Ascertain the major differences readers notice in online and hardcopy newspaper contents.
4. Determine the alternative preference between online and hardcopy versions among newspaper readers.
5. Ascertain whether demographic and psychographic factors influence content/newspaper preference.

1.4. Definition of Terms

Hardcopy Newspaper: the traditional paper carrying news in print like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Nation*, *Punch and Vanguard*, available at newsstands and through vendors. In this study, hardcopy, paper, print and offline are used interchangeably.

Online Newspaper: the same or similar hardcopy contents published or delivered in digital multimedia form and accessed through computers and other Internet-enabled devices like ipads and smart phones.

Content: refers to those individual items carried by the newspapers, such as news stories, editorials, features, columns, opinions, advertisement, and cartoons.

Content Preference: refers to the reader's choice from among those individual items which constitute newspaper contents.

Readers in Imo State: refers to all the readers who read newspapers and are resident in the state, regardless of race, religion or any other such characteristics.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online publishing cannot be discussed in a context devoid of the computer and associated technologies, such as the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW). [Esuh and Ogaraku \(2013\)](#) define computers as "machines that depend on the control from a set of instructions called programmes to help us perform various tasks, such as calculations, electronic communication, etc." They translate letters, numbers, images, patterns and sounds as binary digit signals. While the Internet is "a vast interconnected hardware system made up of different types of

computers” and the World Wide Web, “a software system that simplifies Internet navigation” (Rodman, 2006). According to Baran (2002) “it is technologically simple to embed the Internet protocol into any technology.” So, by embedding the computer and other digital devices with Internet protocols, they became media of mass communication, but with greater capability than other media known. They create, store, send and receive contents in the forms of digital audio, video, photographic and textual equivalents of radio, television, films, magazines, newspapers, books. This constitutes a convergence of the functionalities of the older media and more. No wonder (Rodman, 2006) refers to the Internet as “the supreme being of the media.” However, it is the WWW that “brings the Internet into the realm of mass communication” (Dominick, 2009). The Internet facilitates texts and pictures publishing, as well as audio and video streaming online.

Being a function of the Internet, online newspapers leverage the huge resources of the Internet. “Online newspapers have unlimited space, enabling them to cover as many or as few articles as they choose, as in-depth as they want. They also have the capability to hyperlink, or connect to other related content” (Williams and Nicholas, 1998). “One can make use of multimedia features (e.g., video, audio, and pictures), and interactivity (e.g., users’ reactions and polls)” (Oggenhaffen and d’Haenens, 2011). In other words, online publication lets users see, hear or read the sources reporters relied on Smith (2005) via multimedia, while interactivity entails the “ability for readers to more easily interact with and respond to online news stories through reader forums, ratings, and reader-uploaded content” (Pavlik and Ross, 2000).

All these are not without their implications for print. Print readership has reduced drastically. Readers have developed the habit of wanting Internet news, free news, quick news and interactivity, i.e. news blog and user-generated content (Sternvik *et al.*, 2008). Again, in the same (Daily Trust, 2012) article which reported that “newspaper vendors in Kaduna State have complained that since the introduction of online publication by newspapers, they have been experiencing low patronage as some persons read news on the Internet,” Alabi was also quoted as saying “now smart phones penetrate newspaper circulation.” As it reported, readers find online versions cheaper and convenient, thus instead of about 150, each vendor now sells about 120 newspaper copies a day.

Some newspaper editors interviewed by Talabi confirmed, albeit hesitantly, that print sales are declining in Nigeria. In the words of Lekan Otufodunrin, Editor, Online and Special Publications of *The Nation* “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” (Talabi, 2014). Even Otufodunrin himself confessed to reading online newspapers, despite his being entitled to at least five copies of newspapers every day as an editor. To Mallam Yusuf, Senior Marketing Manager, *Daily Trust*, “the effect of online publication on sales is mostly with the younger generation who spend significant part of their lives on the Internet” (Daily Trust, 2012). Talabi (2014) too, found that the younger the age, the greater the tendency to read more online editions of newspapers, while the older the age the greater the tendency to read more of hardcopy. He also found that hardcopy newspapers still enjoy readership among very many readers even though their future is still uncertain as online editions continue to get more readers, and that newspaper reading is still largely a male business, whether hardcopy or online.

To Omoniyi (2010) many factors contribute to this. For one, many people are not brought up from childhood to appreciate the reading of newspapers. It is not just a part of them. So, as adults they do not even read books, let alone newspapers. Sometimes, availability of modern technologies is used to explain this trend. But Uwosomah (2010) while agreeing that Nigerians are active Internet users also avers that the new media technology still has not penetrated in its fullest. Besides, some Nigerians who have access to the Internet may have developed a mindset: why should I buy a newspaper when the same news is available on my mobile phone free of charge? Moreover, the Internet gives access to different sources for the same information - mostly free. Plus the conspiratorial activities of vendors; many of them allow readers access to newspapers for a token which goes into the vendors’ pockets, while copies are returned as unsold. Why would one want to buy a paper for N200 when one can read as many as possible

for as low as N20? That is what these vendors subtly encourage. Against this reality, some newspapers in Nigeria have reduced their print runs as Mr.Otufodunrin of *The Nation* and Mr.Eya of *The Sun* confirmed in their respective interviews with Talabi (2014).

Mr.Adefaye, Editor-in-Chief of *Vanguard*, in his paper, '*Forget Circulation Figures, Print Media is still very relevant*', argued that the newspaper is evolving, that in spite of the influx of new technologies, it is still regarded as one of the most trusted sources of information by many Nigerians. He opines that although the new media now provide various platforms of communicating, a lot of Nigerians are not sophisticated enough to take full advantage of the new technology (Abdulraheem *et al.*, 2012). Talabi (2014) shares similar sentiments thus:

Looking at the digital divide, everyone is not online-compliant. Not everyone is connected, and among those who are, there are vastly different skill levels. Some people are clearly less comfortable with this new technology than others, so this has to be acknowledged and respected – this does not simply relegate people who are not Internet adept as a new breed of slow learners. Notwithstanding, hardcopy still has its place in news gathering (p.18).

Meanwhile, the permanence of the written word and the accessibility of words on paper as pointed out by Merrill and Lowenstein cited by Okunna (1999) can offer advantages such as believability, trustworthiness, factualness and accuracy. Nwabueze (2011) also notes print's up-to-date designs with high fidelity aesthetic value and outlay of publication, as well as in-depth coverage and presentation of facts that continue to satisfy print audiences. These attributes partly account for the remaining crop of loyal hardcopy readers still available in Nigeria today. This finds corroboration in Ahlers (2006) opinion that some users will go online only for their news, others will never abandon the traditional news media, some will be light users of all media, and still others will embrace all media and be multichannel news consumers. For only a small group, the online news media will act as a substitute for the traditional news media. For the majority, it will act as a complement. To Dutta-Bergman (2004) too, there are audiences for both print and Web as they currently exist.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Functional Displacement Hypothesis, the Technological Determinism, and the Diffusion of Innovation Theories.

Functional Displacement Hypothesis: New communication media often arouse predictions about the demise or displacement of older media. This is because technological innovations come in the realm of higher order. The newer usually outperforms the older thereby displacing them. This hypothesis emerged in the 1950s, and one study which supports the idea that the Internet is replacing other communication media was carried out by Dimmick *et al.* (2004). In their study, they considered the "new medium in communication" (the Internet) and the possible "changes in use of traditional media" the Internet may be causing, and found that "clearly, the Internet has a competitive displacement effect on traditional media in the daily news domain" with newspapers and television being the most displaced (p.19). According to Jonassen (2004) "the functional displacement hypothesis holds that one medium will displace another when it performs some of the functions of the displaced medium" (p.268). Evidently, whatever the hardcopy newspaper does, the online version does and more.

Technological Determinism: The theory holds that machines and their developments drive socio/economic and cultural changes. Scholars use the emergence of print to illustrate this theory; that print led to a fundamental shift in the world, from oral culture to literate culture. According to the theory, "the introduction of every new technology changes society, sometimes in unexpected ways" (Rodman, 2006). And putting it in the context of the media, McQuail (2010) affirms that, in each cultural era, the medium in which information is transmitted is a decisive factor in determining the character of that culture. In that context too, Grossman (1999) assertion that "Gutenberg made us all readers. Radio and television made us all first-hand observers. Xerox made us all publishers. The Internet makes us all journalists, broadcasters, columnists, commentators and critics" fits aptly.

Proliferation in digital devices, online platforms; news sites, social media and chatrooms, and users' willingness to use them situate the Internet as a determinant force in contemporary living. They characterize the information society context in which we now live as people go online.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory: This theory propounded by Rogers (1995) explains how innovations: ideas, behaviour, or objects are taken up in a population. Diffusion researchers broke the population into five different segments, based on their propensity to adopt a specific innovation: Innovators are the few enthusiasts who often lavish great time, energy and creativity on developing new ideas and gadgets. Early adopters are those who quickly embrace innovations. Early majority are those who rush after confirming the benefits. Late majority are those who for the fear of risk joined late. Laggards are people who see a high risk in adopting a particular product or behaviour. Rogers (2003) also added a sixth group; Non adopters. As an innovation, not everyone has adopted the Internet or goes online, even in the most technologically advanced countries (Baran, 2002). So many factors affect the rate of diffusion: access, level of literacy, technological development and economic power among others and these factors incidentally play out in Nigeria.

3. METHODOLOGY

Survey research technique by way of a questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaire consisted of sixteen (16) items, made up of 15 closed-ended items and 1 open-ended question, to allow the respondents free expression. The population drew from the 2014 projected population of Imo State which the Ministry of Economic Development, based on a growth rate of 3.2% put at 5,114,191, while the Taro Yamane formula was used to arrive at the sample size of 400 as shown below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N (e)^2}$$

Where

n = is the Sample Size

N = Total Population Size

E = Desired Level of Precision (where e = 1- precision)

Therefore, N = 5,141,191; e = 5%

Using the above formula, the sample size of 400 was obtained as follows:

$$n = \frac{5141191}{1 + 5141191 (0.05)^2} = \frac{5141191}{1 + 12852.9775} = \frac{5141191}{12853.9775} = 399.96 \approx 400$$

For equitable representation, the number was distributed among three local government areas randomly selected from the three senatorial zones in the state. Accordingly, Isu emerged from Orlu senatorial district with a proportional sample of 133, Owerri North emerged from Owerri district with 134 respondents, while Ihitte/Uboma emerged from Okigwe district with 133, totaling 400. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on respondents among certain population clusters using the major roads and their adjoining streets or clans. Incidentally, all the major roads started and ended at notable junctions such as market squares, local government headquarters or parks. And beginning with the third house, and following a skip interval of two houses, the purposive sampling method was then used to isolate readers of newspapers from non-readers.

Data Presentation and Analysis: Out of the 400 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 392 (98%) were retrieved and found suitable for the analysis. All 392 respondents read either or both versions of newspaper.

Table-4.1. Demographic Distribution of the Respondents

Age Bracket	No. of Respondents	Percentage
18 – 25	86	22%
26 – 33	104	26%
34 – 41	101	26%
42- 49	57	14%
50 above	44	11%
Total	392	100
Gender		
Male	278	71%
Female	114	29%
Total	392	100
Highest Educational Qualification		
FSLC	22	5%
O'Level	106	27%
OND	85	22%
HND/Degree	148	38%
Post-graduate	31	8%
Total	392	100
Occupation		
Student	137	35%
Farmer	42	11%
Bus. man/woman	74	19%
Civil/Public Serv	123	31%
Others	16	4%
Total	392	100

Source: Fieldwork 2016

The table above shows that young readers from 26 years through 41, those with HND/ Degree and O'Level, and those who are Students and Civil/Public Servants dominated the sample. These demographics correspond well with reading ability; a factor crucial to this study.

Table-4.2. Newspaper Choice among the Respondents

Newspaper Version that Respondents Read			
I read	Print Only	Online Only	Both Newspapers
Yes	17 (4%)	61 (16%)	314 (80%)
No	375 (96%)	331 (84%)	78 (20%)
Total	392 (100)	392 (100)	392 (100)

Source: Fieldwork 2016

The above table shows that there is a significant number of readers for both online and print newspapers (80%). Interestingly, there are still a few print-only readers, and a larger number of online-only readers.

Table-4.3. Search for Particular Content in either or both Newspapers

Print Newspaper	17 (4%)
Online Newspaper	54 (14%)
Both Newspapers	236 (60%)
I do not	85 (22%)
Total	392 (100)

Source: Fieldwork 2016

Results show that the majority of readers attend to both versions of newspapers. Few possibly reserve the Net or peruse the hardcopy for particular content.

Table-4.4. Preferred Contents among Print and Online Newspaper Readers

Preferred Contents	Print	Online		
	No of Resp	No of Resp	Total	Perc
News	93	187	280	71.4%
Editorials	9	16	25	6.4%
Features / Columns / Opinions	14	11	25	6.4%
Advertisements	23	6	29	7.4%
Special Beats (Sports, Fashion, Health etc)	8	22	30	7.7%
Letters to the Editors	-	-	-	-
Cartoon	2		2	0.5%
Grand Total			392	100

Source: Fieldwork 2016

Table 4.4 compared content preference among online and print readers and discovered that for both newspaper formats, news is by far, the most-sought-after content, followed by special beats, advertisements, features/columns/opinions, editorials and cartoons in that order, with letters to the editors recording nothing. The distribution also shows common trends and minor variations between both formats in the number of people going for particular contents.

Table-4.5. Particular Content as Determinant of Readers' Choice of Newspaper

Particular Contents determine my Choice of Newspaper	No of Resp	Perc
Yes	96	24%
No	296	76%
Total	392	100

Source: Fieldwork 2016

The above table shows that many readers do not consciously or intentionally reserve certain contents to be read online and others to be read in print. In other words, content types do not necessarily determine whether they read the online or print versions of newspapers. Probably, they go for whichever version of newspaper that is available any time as Table 4.6 suggests.

Table-4.6. Readers' Alternative Preference between Print and Online Newspapers

Readers' Alternative Preference between Print and Online Newspapers		
I read	Online when Print is not available	Print when Online is not available
Yes	313 (80%)	177 (45%)
No	79 (20%)	215 (55%)
Total	392 (100)	392 (100)

Source: Fieldwork 2016

In Table 4.6, while many alternate between the two, majority read online when print newspaper is not available. Yet there are online-only and print-only readers. Availability remains a strong factor. Others could be cost, convenience, literacy or technology know-how.

Table-4.7. I read Online Newspapers as much as I read Hardcopy Newspapers

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agreed	127	32%
Agreed	84	21%
Undecided	49	12%
Disagreed	67	17%
Strongly Disagreed	65	17%
Total	392	100

Source: Fieldwork 2016

This reported a little more than half of the respondents reading online newspaper as much as they read hardcopy, suggestive of a relatively good number of readers, for both versions of newspapers in Nigeria, at least for now.

Table-4.8. Preference for Particular Content Determines My Choice of Newspaper

Options	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agreed	52	13%
Agreed	66	17%
Undecided	75	19%
Disagreed	91	23%
Strongly Disagreed	108	28%
Total	392	100

Source: Fieldwork 2016

Here, a large number of respondents (30%) report that their preference for particular content determines the version of newspaper they read, which corroborates Table 4.5 where 96 (24%) readers out of 392 reported that preference for content actually determines whether they read online or print, leaving the majority 296 (76%) reporting otherwise.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1: Which contents do readers search for in online and print newspapers?

The purpose of this question was to find out the distribution of preferred contents among readers of print and online newspapers. The comparison reveals that news items by far emerged the most sought-after content by readers of both newspaper types (93 for print, and 187 for online). Again, more people read editorials and special beats in online newspapers than they do in hardcopies. More people also read advertisements and features/columns/opinions in hardcopies than in online newspapers. Meanwhile, Letters to the Editor do not constitute a strong enough incentive to attract readers to either newspaper. But combining the two newspaper types shows that out of the 392 readers, 280 (71.4%) search for news items, 25 (6.4%) for editorials, another 25 (6.4%) for features/columns/opinions, 29 (7.4%) for advertisements, 30 (7.7%) for special beats (sports, fashion and health etc.), letters to the editors (nil), and 2 (0.5%) for cartoons.

Barring minor variations such as more people reading certain content mostly in online newspapers and others in print newspapers, the study found that there is really no marked difference between the contents readers search for in either version of newspapers. Of course, a given group of consumers may share a common characteristic that can make them display similar media consumption behaviours. That does not dispute the fact that individual preferences exist, or that certain intervening factors come to bear during that decisive moment of choice between alternatives. From existing studies such as Ahlers (2006) and Dutta-Bergman (2004) for instance, it was reported that media audiences display a broad range of news consumption behaviours. While some are ardent online users, others cling to print publications, and while some are ardent pure news readers, others may prefer editorials, features, columns, opinions, sports, fashion or health articles to pure news stories.

Research Question 2: To what extent does content determine readers' choice between online and print newspapers?

This question was asked to determine the extent to which content determines readers' choice between the two versions of newspapers. Out of the 392 respondents, only 96 (24%) agreed that their preference for specific content determines whether they read online or print newspapers, while the majority 296 (76%) reported that they do not depend on their preference for specific contents to choose between print and online newspapers (Tables 4.5). The implication here is that, even when some readers have preferred contents, such contents do not necessarily

determine their choice of newspaper types. Again, Table 4.8 also reveals that only 52 (13%) and 66 (17%) strongly agreed and agreed respectively that their preference for particular content determines the version of newspaper they read. Seventy five respondents (19%) could not decide, while 91 (23%) and 108 (28%) disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively, that their preference for particular content determines the version of newspaper they read. Therefore, content largely does not determine the version of newspapers that many persons read; probably, availability of newspapers does as table 4.6 suggests. This agrees with Dutta-Bergman (2004) assertion that there is an audience for both print and Web as they currently exist. To Ahlers (2006) too, there is no one-size-fits-all pattern of news consumption, but rather, a broad range of news consumption behaviours. Some users will go online only for their news, others will never abandon the traditional news media, and while some will be light users of all media, others may embrace all media and be multichannel news consumers.

Research Question 3: What major differences do readers notice in online and hardcopy newspaper content?

This question focused on the differences in online and print newspaper content based on the readers' observation or perception. The answers from readers were varied yet related. They are aggregated as follows:

1. Online contents are usually summarized, straight to the point, timely and accessible through common technologies (phones and PCs); links readers to other or related stories, and are speedily updated. They are also cheaper or free sometimes compared to print (especially since telecom companies in Nigeria offer both free and paid-for data which enable readers go online). Online uses multimedia: combines texts, audio/sound, line/graphics, pictures and videos to display news/information; easy to use, can be shared on social media; interactive/participatory in nature. Online can be customized, aggregated, stored, searched and retrieved when needed, and with unlimited storage in virtual space. All these make it more enjoyable but online more frequently publish false information.
2. Print is prestigious to read or carry about; authoritative or more believable or credible (they are well-researched and mostly error-free); thus more trusted for facts and accuracy compared to online newspapers. Print is usually more detailed, comes with general interest appeal, yet tiresome to read or heavier to carry about. It is costlier and takes more time to publish, distribute and even to read, and sometimes may not be found or accessed the moment they are required unlike the online newspaper. Print newspapers are durable, yet perishable. They fill physical space and are less enjoyable than online versions.

Various authorities validate the above findings. Opgenhaffen and d'Haenens (2011) for instance, confirm that online newspapers "make use of multimedia features (e.g., video, audio, and pictures) and interactivity" which is the "ability for readers to more easily interact with and respond to online news stories through reader forums, ratings, and reader-uploaded content" (Pavlik and Ross, 2000). "Online newspapers also have the capability to hyperlink, or connect to other related content" (Pavlik and Ross, 2000). Online newspapers have unlimited space, which enables them to cover as many or as few articles as they choose, and as in-depth as they want, plus the ability to more easily locate information in them than in print (Williams and Nicholas, 1998). Again, news events can be accessed in the same instant that they occur. These attractive attributes are not obtainable in print; so, readers seek Internet news, free news, quick news and interactivity (Sternvik *et al.*, 2008).

For print, Merrill and Lowenstein note the permanence of the written word and the accessibility of words on paper (Okunna, 1999) which offer advantages such as believability, trustworthiness, factualness and accuracy. For instance, Adefaye sees print as one of the most trusted sources of information for many Nigerians. Nwabueze (2011) also notes print's up-to-date designs with high fidelity aesthetic value and outlay of publication, in-depth coverage and presentation of facts that continue to satisfy print audiences. All these attributes possibly contribute to sustain the significant number of print readers we still have in Nigeria.

Research Question 4: What is the alternative preference between online and print version among newspaper readers?

The question was aimed at ascertaining between online newspaper and print, the most sought after by readers. Findings indicate that although both versions of newspapers share a significant number of readers, the online newspaper has the greater share of readership (Table 4.2). Also, as shown in table 4.6, the majority (313 or 80%) reported that they read online newspapers when print newspapers are not available, while only 79 (20%) maintain that they do not go for online versions even when print newspapers are not available. This agrees with Ahlers (2006) postulation that, there is no one-size-fits-all pattern of news consumption, but rather, a broad range of news consumption behaviours. Some users will go online only for their news, others will never abandon the traditional news media, and while some will be light users of all media, others may embrace all media and be multichannel news consumers. Corroborating Ahlers, Talabi (2014) observes that, not everyone is connected or online compliant, and that among those who are, there are vastly different skill levels. Butfor Adefaye (cited in Abdulraheem *et al.* (2012) and Uwosomah (2010)) the new media technologies have not fully diffused in Nigeria. This draws attention to the laggards and non-adopters Rogers identified. Some respondents may not have accepted, or have the ability to access online newspapers till date. Meanwhile, Talabi (2014) reports that the hardcopy newspaper still enjoys readership among very many Nigerians, even though its future is uncertain as the online version continues to grow.

On the other hand, 177 (45%) reported that they read print newspapers when online versions are not available, while the relative majority 215 (55%) maintain that they do not read print newspapers even when online versions are not available. It can be inferred from the above data that although many who read print also read online, more persons are willing to go online than read print. However, caution was taken while interpreting this alternative preference, owing to the fact that the preferences might be due to a number of intervening factors such as cost, availability, situation (like when one is too busy or unable to access a given newspaper version), literacy or technology know-how or need, rather than being a truly independent choice.

Again, with 127 (32%) strongly agreeing and 84 (21%) agreeing that they read online newspapers as much as they read the hardcopy, and 49 (12%) being undecided, while 67 (17%) and 65 (17%) disagree and strongly disagree respectively (Table 4.7), stronger evidence emerges that more of them may be preferring the online version. According to Daily Trust (2012) “newspaper vendors in Kaduna state have complained that since the introduction of online publication by newspapers, they have been experiencing low patronage as some persons read news on the Internet.” This scenario may equally be playing out in Imo state. However, while some of the editors that Talabi (2014) interviewed owned up to recording low print circulation; an indication that more readers could be drifting online, others such as Mr. Joseph Adeyeye (Daily Editor, *The Punch Newspaper*), Mr. Wale Onapade (*The Tribune Newspaper*), Mr. Babatunde Jimoh (Head of Internet *Vanguard Newspapers*), believe the online version has little negative effect on print readership. Findings show that while some people read both newspapers, more read online. This suggests some displacement effect.

Research Question 5: To what extent do demographic and psychographic factors influence content/newspaper preference?

Demographic and psychographic factors influence content/newspaper preference; age and education for instance. While most respondents 42 years and above go for print, the majority of the younger population (18 through 41 years, constituting 291 or 75% of the sample, and comprising mostly the more educated) go for online versions. This finding agrees with Talabi (2014) view that the younger the age, the greater the tendency to read more online editions of newspapers, while the older the age the greater the tendency to read more of hardcopy. To Mallam Yusuf, “the effect of online publication on sales is mostly with the younger generation who spend a significant part of their lives on the Internet” (Daily Trust, 2012). Besides, many people are not brought up from

childhood to appreciate the reading of newspapers. It is not just a part of them [Omoniyi \(2010\)](#). Again, the multimedia and interactive appeal of online publications may be instrumental to its attraction to younger people.

On their major technology (device) for online access, the majority 214 (54.5%) use mobile phones, (I pads, blackberry, android and smart phones), while 93 (23.7%) use laptops, and 8 (2%) desktop computers. This indicates that readers are evolving alongside technology to remain contemporary; the newer technology (online) seems to be displacing the older medium (print) albeit gradually, just as mobile phones seem to be diffusing more than laptops and desktops. A vendor, Isa Suleiman confirms that the handsets sold now with Internet facilities make their work (sale of newspapers) difficult, because before anything happens, it would have circulated round especially on blackberry. Hence, before newspapers carry the news the following day, only a few would bother to read it because they have already had the details online. And according to [Edogor *et al.* \(2014\)](#) some of the online newspapers they read come as shared links on social media like facebook and twitter.

Sex is another factor. Women do not read print newspapers as much as the men do. Out of the 114 females representing 29% of the sample, only 44 claim to read print newspapers alongside online newspapers. The rest read only online newspapers. Men dominated as the ones who read print, although more of them emerged from the more urbanized Owerri North than Isu and IhitteUboma LGAs. [Talabi \(2014\)](#) study too found that newspaper reading is still largely a male business, whether hardcopy or online.

Income was found to be negligible since many people, irrespective of income, own mobile devices, with many taking to browsing with their mobile phones as a hobby, and or to show their being part of the current trend or what some scholars call the online or net generation ([Tapscott, 1998](#); [Livingstone and Bober, 2003](#)). In this way they read news online. However, access to the new media and work environment were found to be instrumental to content or medium preference. From the findings, people in Isu and IhitteUboma read more online because print is not as accessible there as it is in Owerri North. In other words, readers who ordinarily prefer print but cannot get it, have recourse to online newspapers, which they access mostly through their mobile phones wherever they are. Even people in Owerri North who may fancy but cannot buy print copies go online. Again, people who read print versions in Owerri North are mostly public/civil servants working in various ministries, and most of these ministries receive almost daily supplies of print newspapers which their workers can access easily and without charge. As such work environment affects media/content preference.

5. CONCLUSION

Emerging realities in the media business, especially the newspaper, show that the paradigm is shifting. With the coming of the online newspaper, the print newspaper seems to be losing its hegemony. Although both versions of newspaper still possess unique features or attributes which endear them to their respective readers, both appear to complement each other in Nigeria. However, as more readers appear to go online, and print still graces the newsstands daily, questions about the role of content as a determinant of newspaper choice naturally arise, especially now that publishers earnestly seek for a better business model to save the already troubled print industry. In this regard, while preferred content slightly differ across board, for many, contents do not necessarily determine whether they read online or hardcopy, rather, availability and certain demographic and psychographic factors do.

The findings here, alongside the literature, suggest that the hypothesized migration of readers from the print to the online newspaper has occurred, but not to a magnitude that could be characterized as apocalyptic for the print newspaper in Nigeria, at least for now. Again, although the online version may be enjoying some relative edge over its hardcopy counterpart, a handful of readers still go for hardcopy newspapers no matter what. So, for the foreseeable future, it may continue to be a mix of print and online journalism, with the online possibly taking over from print with time.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

1. Since contents do not necessarily determine the choice of newspaper among readers, publishers should concentrate on the most economically rewarding between online and print, or better still go hybrid or try print-on-demand (POD) as books did.
2. Newspapers should concentrate more on news, as the most-sought-after content by readers of both versions, and then mix other contents in their order of importance to gratify readers.
3. Publishers should consolidate the key features or attributes which endear each version of newspaper to its respective readers.
4. Industry players should not fear risks, they should invest in new experiments, monetize online content, and train journalists in audio, video, photos, blogging, wikis, maps, blog search, interactivity and more, since the future of journalism points in that direction. Let them stop thinking of themselves as newspaper-only people.
5. Readership research on who uses the Internet, how long, through which search tool or medium, and for what purpose, etc., is also imperative to guide their future directions.

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