

Factors Influencing the Demise of Private Newspapers in Rwanda

TWIZEYUMUKIZA Alexandre

Abstract: *Despite a significant increase of factors that might have been favoring the viability of newspapers in Rwanda, private newspapers have been massively declining and dying out all along their history whereas other types of media were increasing in number. The present study aims at establishing the causes that might have been behind that massive demise of private newspapers. Participants to the research were conveniently selected from 63 private newspapers that closed after 2000. The findings have shown that the demise of Rwandan private newspapers is due to both internal and external issues. Poor planning and management in media sector have been pointed out as the biggest motives of the constant death of newspapers in Rwanda among others. The culture that doesn't too much favor reading, the emergence of digital journalism and inadequate infrastructure to streamline affordable production and easy distribution were also evoked as hindrance to newspapers' viability.*

Keywords: demise, newspaper

1. Introduction

All along its long and complex history, the newspaper has undergone many transformations (Lule, 2016). With the invention of radio and television, newspapers have faced challenges over the decades. However, publishers have always adapted and persevered (Blair & Romano, 1993). Nowadays, the emergence of digital journalism (Russel, 2007), ecological concerns (Barnhurst, G et alii, 2001), etc. are deemed to be the main hindrances to newspaper's growth worldwide. However, the factors that can lead to the slow death of newspapers vary from region to region.

In Rwanda, until 1960^s, newspapers were the only one electronic media in the country. Due to the place that they had already acquired in informing and influencing masses at that time, the country went on experiencing a relatively constant birth of newspapers (Bart, 1982). Although they have been experiencing slow but assured development, modest infrastructure for production and distribution as well as unfavorable political environment were important challenges that impeded newspapers' growth at the time (Mamdani, 1996). The early 1990^s, the private newspaper industry witnessed unprecedented rise whereby more than 80 private newspapers were born within a short span of four years (Mutsinzi, 2007). Unfortunately, this explosion was also short-lived and almost all newspapers died out one after another in a short while. From then, the trend has persisted so that, so far private owned newspapers are launched but quickly disappear from circulation whereas broadcast goes on prospering and diversifying despite challenges (Media High Council, 2010).

Future prospects of current ones are also unclear, since most of them are no longer publishing on regular basis and when published, their sell points do not go beyond the capital (Rwanda Governance Board, 2015). This severe decline of private papers has been and is still occurring when mechanisms such as clear media laws (law n°18/2002 of 11 May 2002, N°22/2009 of 12/08/2009 and N°02/2013 of 08/02/2013 for instance) to promote and set up a conducive media environment have been gradually put in place. Private newspapers are also massively and constantly vanishing while public ones are still working

and private broadcasts are increasing in number and seem to be likely sustainable.

Even though the advent of online journalism might be seen as one of the factors that are currently behind the death of newspapers in the world (Christiansen et alii, 2011), it might not be directly applicable for Rwandan ones since papers have been experiencing that serious demise from 1970s while internet was not yet adopted within the country of thousand hills. Besides, internet penetration in Rwanda is still at a rate of 31.4% in January 2021 (ITU, 2021) so that it might not have significantly impacted on papers' circulation and readership.

This research is therefore motivated by these considerations and intends to investigate the factors behind the severe demise of private newspapers in Rwanda where other types of media are relatively prosperous.

2. Theoretical Framework

Uses and gratifications theory is an approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Sundar et al., 2013). The theory suggests that media use is motivated by needs and goals that are defined by audience members themselves (Eveland, J. D., 1986), and that active participation in the communication process may facilitate, limit, or otherwise influence the gratifications and effects associated with exposure (McQuail, 1983).

With the theory, there is an assumption that the public may cease gradually reading newspaper because they might not suitably fit the audience's expectations due to a diversity of challenges they have been facing.

The theory fits well the topic because if private newspapers die out, it is probably because they are not read. If they are not read one may conclude they are no longer attractive in some extent because they are no longer meeting audience's expectations.

3. Methodology

Qualitative method was referred to. Primary data were collected from participants that were either former publishers or senior managers of newspapers that died out after 2000. The respondents were selected conveniently. Semi-structured interview was the main data collection tool. Besides, secondary data were gathered from a diversity of documents.

4. Results and Discussions

The demise of private newspapers in Rwanda is mainly due not only to internal but also to external factors. The internal factors include poor planning and management among others. As for external factors, they include the culture of Rwandan people that doesn't too much favor reading and inadequate infrastructure to streamline affordable production and easy distribution. The absence of governmental subsidies and the emergence of digital journalism were also evoked as hindrance to newspapers' viability.

Rwandan private newspapers do not long last due poor planning. A business plan for a newspaper helps to identify target market and decide what kind of newspaper to start and what audience to reach. Adequate planning orients in approaching investors and advertisers with a clear picture of media business. Performing market research to look for areas of need such as niche populations that aren't being served is important to succeed. A cost analysis of salaries, operating expenses and printing costs should be covered in the sales forecast. Once a reasonable prediction has been reached, one can begin to set advertisement's rates and prepare an overall budget. Researching to find out what the competition is charging, and set rates appropriately is another vital step that investors in newspaper industry should take into consideration before launching their publications. Nevertheless, to primary data of the research, analyzing the market, predicting staff needs, hiring advertising representatives and putting in place salespeople is a stage that has not been really taken into account by media entrepreneurs before launching their papers.

To Baker (2007) a good media business plan should outline the market for the paper. This analysis allows the owner to understand to which extent the newspaper meets the current and future market needs of the target audience. Regrettably, investors in media print media field in Rwanda do not seriously consider this key point. More publishers have launched their papers without any proficient prior SWOT analysis and long term plan. Those who have tried did not predict for their media environment that is constantly changing. To the to the research, this might have been one reason why their papers have not been sustainable since most publishers launch their businesses without any prior tough business plan as if it is a very short term project. Hence, newspapers fail as they start without a prior overall plan.

The second hindrance to newspaper's viability in Rwanda consists in their management. To Albarran (2010) media

management consists of the ability to supervise and motivate employees and the ability to operate facilities and resources in a profitable way. Management is an extremely important function in every organization. It provides an invigorating force that brings life in an organization. It is through effective application of management principles and techniques that an organization can fully achieve its goals (Aris & Bughin, 2009). In every business, managers have to design and maintain an environment in which individuals work in groups to achieve selected missions and objectives. Managers direct the effort and activities of each and every employee towards common objectives. To Küng (2008), efficient management plays a pivotal role in a newspaper organization. To him, the success of a newspaper organization is determined by the effectiveness of its management in terms of its competence, integrity and performance. Management makes the human efforts in a newspaper organization more productive. The inputs of labour, capital and news content do not themselves ensure growth of a newspaper establishment. It requires the catalyst of management to maximize the results.

Howsoever sound and credible the journalistic product of a newspaper organization may be, the fact remains that it cannot succeed without professional management. The managerial functions of planning, organization, coordination, motivation and control must be performed effectively and purposefully in the newspaper organization (Crook, 2014). The activities in the editorial, advertising, printing, personnel, accounts and other departments have to be planned, organized, coordinated and controlled (Lowrey, W., Gade, P. J., 2011). In this regard, intense competition among newspapers as well as from other media necessitates adopting suitable and better marketing strategies in a newspaper organization as newspapers need strong promotion to sell their services on account of competition from other media (McManus, 2013). It is widely admitted that if financial resources are properly managed and utilized, newspaper publishing may be a profitable activity (Pinson, 2004). Equally important is employee motivation that is the driving power which carries out plans of management through enthusiasm of the group (Meyer, 2004). Thus, the hazards in a newspaper enterprise that impede stability, profitable operation and continuance of publication can be removed by adopting techniques of modern management. Unfortunately, findings have shown that the founders of the vast majority of Rwandan newspapers seem to pay very little attention to this important point.

Running a newspaper requires enough funds. As any other media outlet, newspapers must hire enough employees for its management; provide relevant content the audience needs. Newspapers also need enough money to afford whatever they need to operate efficiently. Professional newspapers distribute door-to-door, which is a really tough. They hire hawkers for this purpose. Surprisingly, this good practice does not exist in Rwandan newspapers' environment as newspapers have a very few personnel, are sometimes in hands of nonqualified staff and have no clear competition mechanisms. In most cases, the owner is all in one and in most of the time without any required

skills and competency. That poor planning and management, finally lead to the inconsistency of the content that ends up by leading to loss of interest for the audience that cares too much about its needs.

Creating a truly engaging content has been one of the greatest challenges that Rwandan papers face. To effectively develop content that meets the audience's needs and expectations, newspapers' strategy has to be exceptionally focused. Through this focused strategy, they can accurately target the individual readers, rather than the nameless masses, as they must address readers' specific wants and needs to actually engage with them. Once unsatisfied with the content, the audience rapidly goes away as relevancy of content is key to audience's engagement. And once dissatisfied with the content, the papers miss money to run. Therefore, media have to find out who their audience are in order to create content that is meaningful to them and then make the business successful and sustainable (Prescott, 2009). For this study, though the Rwandan newspapers operate in an environment that doesn't favor reading too much, irrelevant content discourages subscriptions and newspapers lose a portion of their audience that is a source of income to effectively run it. Later on, the papers end by closing.

Financial challenges also hinder private newspapers' sustainability in Rwanda. For the participants to the research, private media can't be viable without governmental financial support. Most government has measures to support their media (Sparks, 1992). The most important press support instruments are tax breaks whereby media benefit from some form of reduced VAT rates on sales of newspapers and magazines (Jones, 2009). Those measures can be direct or indirect, general or selective. While direct support refers to payments to media organizations, indirect support includes measures that help create a favorable economic situation for media organizations. However, this mechanism to support media does not yet exist in Rwanda while its media are still fragile and need a lot this governmental support.

Apart from internal factors that lead to the decline of private newspapers, a number of external factors are also to be considered. The culture that favors much more oral communication rather than reading makes the newspapers very vulnerable in Rwanda. Though the rate of literacy is constantly getting higher in Rwanda, its newspaper circulation is among the lowest worldwide with 0.1 per 1000 in 2017 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). According to a survey aiming at understanding media consumption and usage in Rwanda by Incisive Africa in partnership with Media High Council (2018) it has been noticed that Rwanda is a verbal communication society that loves to listen more than to read. Over 89% of the households listen to radios but do not read newspapers. Only 8.2 percent of Rwandans managed to read a newspaper at least once a week. The same survey revealed that less than 2.9 percent purchase their own newspapers, while the rest borrow from friends or work. Hence, newspapers suffer from this situation since; a newspaper without enough reader can't be viable.

In nowadays society of information, newspapers do not meet the audience needs due to their delayed information as the best comes once a day, meaning that anything that happens thereafter can't be reported until the very next day. Broadcast can report a story on the minute and as it happens, even before it happens (Mitchell, A., & Rosenstiel, T., 2012). For instance, when the news of Osama Bin Laden's death hadn't yet been made official, CNN was there to break it whereas the paper published this news the following morning. In this 21st century, people simply do not have to rely on newspapers as their only source of news anymore. Both young and old generations rely on news channels that provide them with almost instantaneous information and this has taken the place of print media, pushing it towards the depths of failures.

Print media sources contain limited information. The next information and news comes after a specific period of time. Hence, this medium isn't no longer effective enough to get instant and fresh news. This is another reason for the declining of print media these days. Many of the individuals find it difficult to access print media. The readily available sources are considered to be unauthentic and without any references. This has led the print journalism get ruined seriously. The people are always in search of fresh information, this is why check on the websites for latest articles instead of newspapers.

Digital journalism has come to almost finish off print media. Even though there is no consensus among scholars regarding the impact of the internet on newspaper on African level (Ingram, 2013), there is widespread concern that newspapers face an uncertain future, and many fear a long-term decline due to the rise of the electronic media (Chyi, Lewis & Zheng, 2012). Economic pressures based on a loss of advertising share and increasing costs of production and distribution, and falling sales (Langeveld, 2010) are also important obstacles to papers' viability. For this research, there is no direct linkage between the decline of newspapers and the advent of internet as long time before internet newspapers were not prosperous in Rwanda. This fits To Gentzkow's (2011), internet is not responsible for the demise of the newspaper industry since the popularity of papers had already significantly diminished between 1980 and 1995, well before the internet age. He finds that sales of papers have dropped at roughly the same rate ever since. He concludes that people have not stopped reading newspapers because of the internet. Newspapers are also dying out because they cost money. As the old age goes, young generations don't figure out why to pay for something that's free. The cost of the newspapers has increased and most of people are relying on convenient and reasonable alternative source for knowing the day to day events and happenings.

5. Conclusion

Pundits have been predicting the demise of newspapers ever since the first radio broadcast crackled onto the airwaves (Salman et alii, 2011). When TV came along, many felt certain the medium represented the nail in print journalism. Though newspapers are facing tough times,

they are not yet dead. Prognosticators have been predicting the death of newspapers for decades. Radio, TV and now the Internet were all supposed to kill them off, but newspapers are still there (Benioff, 2009). Contrary to most popular accounts, the growth of the Internet has not obviously caused a large decline in newspaper readership. Readership has fallen progressively since the Internet was introduced in the mid-1990s, but it had been falling at almost the same rate since 1980, and the small acceleration of this trend accounts for a drop in readership of only about 10 percent.

As far as this case study is concerned, even if local newspapers are facing the common challenges worldwide, they are also fronting their specific ones. The real factors that have been influencing the demise of private newspapers in Rwanda are mostly poor planning and management among others. As for external factors, the cultural environment which does not favor reading are at the origin of the death of the private press in Rwanda are mainly.

6. Recommendations

To succeed in any business, you need to have good planning and organizational skills. Many people start a business thinking that they'll turn on their computers or open their doors and start making money. Starting a business requires analytical thinking and determined organization. This will help managers complete tasks and stay on top of things to be done. Launching a business needs meticulous identification of target market and scrupulous strategies to overcome all potential challenges the business might face. It's important to be aware of competitors and either appropriate or improve upon their successful tactics. Business owners should not be afraid of studying and learning from competitors as they may be doing something right that they can implement in their own business. Delivering good service/products to meet customers' expectations is crucial to gaining their loyalty, retaining customers and make business grow and sustainable. There are many successful businesses that forget that providing great customer service is important. If a company provides better service for its customers, they'll be more inclined to come back anytime they need something instead of going to competitors.

Consistency is a key component to making businesses successful. Hence, the company has to keep doing what is necessary to be attractive day by day. This will create long-term positive habits that will lead to sustainable success.

Always be looking for ways to improve your business and make it stand out from the competition is an important key to the success of any business. Recognize that you don't know everything and be open to new ideas and different approaches to create an outstanding business.

The old saying "Rome wasn't built in a day" applies here. Just because you open a business doesn't mean you're going to immediately prosper. It takes time to let people

know who you are, so stay focused on achieving your short-term goals.

Media work for public interest by educating and informing masses so as they can take right decisions timely. Thus, they are good partners of any government. As public media get their full budget from the government and as private media equally participate in mobilizing and sensitizing masses, they should get subsidies from the government however minimal they may be according to the available means.

References

- [1] Albarran, A. B. (2010). *Management of Electronic Media*, 4th ed. Belmont
- [2] Aris, A. and Bughin, J. (2009). *Managing Media Companies: Harnessing Creative Value*, 2nd ed. London
- [3] Barnhurst, G., & Nerone, J. (2001). *The Form of News: A History for an overview of newspaper form the late 17th to late 20th century*. New York, NY: St Martin's Press.
- [4] Bart, A. (1982). *La presse au Rwanda: production, diffusion et lecture depuis le début du siècle*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Bordeaux
- [5] Baker, R. (2007). *Goodbye to newspapers*. The New York Review of Books.
- [6] Christiansen, T Barthelemy, S., Bethell, M., Jarsvall A. & Koinis, K. (2011). *The Future of Print Media*. Capstone Report. Retrieved from www.sipa.columbia.edu/academics/workshops/documents.pdf
- [7] Benioff, M. (2013). *Behind the Cloud: The Untold Story of How Salesforce.com Went from Idea to Billion-Dollar Company-and Revolutionized an Industry*. Kindle Edition
- [8] Chyi, H. I., Lewis, S. C., & Zheng, N. (2012). *A Matter of life and death? Examining the quality of newspaper coverage on the newspaper crisis*. *Journalism Studies*.
- [9] Crook, T., (2014, January 23). *Why newspapers will survive the digital age*. The EpochTimes. Retrieved from <http://printarchive.epochtimes.com>
- [10] Eveland, JD (1986). *Diffusion, Technology Transfer and Implementation*.
- [11] Ingram, M. (2013). *Newspapers may be dying, but the internet didn't kill them*. Retrieved from <https://gigaom.com>
- [12] Jones, A. (2009). *Losing the news: the future of the news that feeds democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [13] Küng, L. (2008), *Strategic Management in the Media: Theory to Practice*, Los Angeles 2008.
- [14] Langeveld, M. (2010). *Is print still king? Has online made a move?* Retrieved from www.niemanlab.org/2010/04/is-print-still-king-has-online-made-a-move-updating-a-controversial-post/
- [15] Lowrey, W., Gade, P. J. (2011). *Changing the news: the forces shaping journalism in uncertain times*. New York: Routledge
- [16] Lule J, (2016) *Understanding Media and Culture: an introduction to Communication*. Minneapolis; University of Minnesota

- [17] McManus, J. H. (2013). *Market Driven Journalism*. London: Sage; William F.
- [18] Meyer, P. (1995). Learning to love lower profit. Retrieved from <http://www.unc.edu/~pmeyer/ajrprofits/profits1.html>
- [19] McQuail, D. (1983). *With benefits to hindsight: Reflections on uses and gratifications research. critical studies in mass communication theory: and introduction*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- [20] Mitchell, A. and Rosenstiel, T. *The state of the news media 2012: an annual report of American journalism*". The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Retrieved from <http://stateofthemedias.org/2012/overview-4/>
- [21] Mutsinzi, P. C. (2007). *Etude lexico-sémantique des noms des journaux au Rwanda*. Unpublished mémoire dissertation, Université Nationale du Rwanda: Butare
- [22] Pinson, L. (2004). *Anatomy of a Business Plan: A Step-by-Step Guide to Building a Business and Securing Your Company's Future* (6th Edition). Dearborn Trade: Chicago, USA.
- [23] Prescott, J. T. (2009). *Media Management Manual*. Unesco
- [24] Russell, N., (1993). *The future of the mass audience*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- [25] Salman, A., Faridah, I., Mohd, Y., Normah, M., & Maizatul, H. M., (2011). *The impact of new media on traditional mainstream mass media*. Universiti Kabangsaan Malaysia
- [26] Sparks, C. (1992). The Press, the Market, and Democracy. *Journal of Communication*, 42 (1), 36-51. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00767.xtec00001
- [27] Sundar, S. S.; Limperos, A. M. (2013). Uses and grats 2.0: new gratifications for New Media. *Journal of broadcasting & electronic media* 57