

An Obit too Soon? A Qualitative Examination into the 'Death of the Newspaper' Argument

Communication & Journalism Research
7 (1) pp 115-123
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masscomhod@uoc. ac. in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

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Abstract

Ever since digital technologies have started making their impact felt in human lives and the society at large, the 'death of print media' has been the buzz word in discussions on the future of mass media. While the doomsayers cite the alarming decline in newspaper circulation, especially in the advanced countries in the west, the rise and rise of social media news platforms and the plunging advertising revenues for print to write the obit for the Print, the optimist lot points towards the trials and tribulations the print media had been through and how it emerged the winner. Globally, print media grew 5 percent in 2016. About 2.7 billion people around the world read news in print. Newspapers arguably retain a fair share of their readers and may continue to do that in coming future. This paper attempts to examine the displacement effect of Internet on newspaper in Indian context.

Keywords:

Digital Technologies, Displacement Effects, Indian Newspaper, Niche Theory

A new survey from Pew Research Center shows that the two thirds of Americans (67%) turn to social media for some of their news(Pew Research Centre, 2017). The emergence of Internet has not only changed the way people consume traditional media but also gave rise to a scenario where digital and mobile news media gained popularity over traditional news platforms like newspaper, television and radio. Initially internet which is armed with millions of websites created a huge shift in the way people use mass mediated messages, later YouTube, blogs entered the scene, followed by social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and Snapchat which in turn changed the very basics of communication (Perloff,2015). Without no doubt, the

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entry of New Communication Technology (NCT) brought with it, vast array of opportunities and challenges for conventional media (Garrison, 1996). While the presence of new media and the Internet has posed challenges to conventional media, print newspaper is the most affected (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). US newspaper industry is the most affected one, with its total weekday circulation (both print and digital) fell 8% in 2016. According to the data, the current circulation rate (US Newspaper) is the lowest since 1945, a total weekday circulation of 35 million and total Sunday circulation which fell down to 38 million (Pew Research Centre, 2017). "Newspapers have not yet started to shut down in large numbers, but it is only a matter of time" (www.economist.com), the plight of newspaper in US leads to a generalisation among media scholars, that newspaper has no future at all, it is in the death bed.

But India has got a totally different story, here the digital media news platforms failed to replace the print news papers like they have done in many other countries. Print media is still thriving in India according to Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) report (May, 2017), India has bucked the global trend of declining readership of print media. In this context, this paper seeks to examine the displacement effect of Internet on newspaper in Indian context.

Displacement Effects

The idea of Displacement is closely related to time, which is a limited resource. Every individual has only a fixed time, that is 24 hours a day. A new activity enters into an individual's daily schedule which is already packed with activities, what will happen then? There is a high chance for one of the activity to be displaced by the new activity. In displacement theory, the core assertion is that media consumption will displace some other activity or activities, such as exercise or social interaction, or even shift time from one medium to another (Nabi, Robin L, & Oliver, Mary Beth, 2009).

The term displacement gained maximum attention with the advent of Internet, nonetheless it is not a new concept. "Speculations about the death of old media in the face of new communication technology are widespread" (Nguyen & Western, 2006, p.2). The pioneering study on displacement effect dates back to twentieth century, when impact of radio on newspaper was studied by Lazarsfeld (1940). Television is the only medium that was adopted quickly and broadly in the twentieth century (Carey, 1993). Henceforth, for a long time displacement effects studies revolved around television, which focused mainly on television viewing by children. (Nabi, Robin L, & Oliver, Mary Beth, 2009).

Later displacement effects of cable television (*Kaplan, 1978*), VCR (*Henke & Donahue, 1989*), mobile media, text messaging, video games

(Anderson & Dill, 2000), and computer-mediated communication (Finholt & Sproull, 1990) were investigated.

Whenever a new form of technology makes it into the mass media realm, displacement effects studies followed them. “Based on the argument that people have a limited amount of time to spend on the consumption of different media, displacement theorists argue that consumption of different media is driven by a zero sum game in the competition of audience and revenue resources” (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Medium of communication in a society over a long period of time plays an important role in shaping civilisations and when a new medium which is more efficient in communicating knowledge across time and space enters the scene, existing dominant medium will be replaced (Innis, 1951). If a new medium successfully satisfies a particular social need, it may eventually lead to lesser usage of old medium, and further leads to the complete displacement according to McLuhan’s (1962) “Displacement Hypothesis”. Later, McLuhan refined his hypothesis and categorised the interaction between different media; amplification, retrieval, displacement, retrieval, reversal (Meyrowitz 1985). Accordingly Hillel Nossbeck and Hanna Adoni (2007) raised four basic questions from the four categories of media interaction: Which aspect of communication does each type of medium amplify?, does the new medium conserve any element of the existing dominant medium?, has the new medium displaced its predecessor?, and when the new medium achieves its full potential, into which medium will it either revert or revolve? (Nossbeck and Adoni, 2007, pp.241).

Principles of relative constancy (McCombs, 1972) also corroborate the competition based displacement perception which substantiate competition between different media. Charles E. Scripps, chairman of the board of Scripps-Howard newspapers proposed Relative constancy, which was later tested empirically by McCombs in a 1972 Journalism Monograph. As per the hypothesis, relatively constant amount of money is spent on mass communication, while the spending follows general economy with no consideration about the technological changes within the industry. Two studies conducted in England and USA in 1950’s focused on children and television viewing, produced surprisingly similar results. These two studies can be considered as seminal in the field of displacement. Himmelweit, Oppenheim, and Vince (1958) conducted the first study after television made its entry to England while latter was performed by Schramm, Lyle, and Parker (1960). The studies revealed that, it was the lighter forms of recreation (comic books, radio) that was replaced by TV while time spent on home work, serious reading remain unchanged. Himmelweit et al. (1958) based on the study findings, later developed three principles of development namely functional displacement, transformation and marginal fringe activities. In a situation where two media perform similar function, selection of medium depends upon the extent to which one satisfies a given need more effectively is

the underlying concept of functional displacement. The medium under the threat of displacement should make changes in its functions as per transformation principle. According to marginal fringe activities principle, there is high chance that the activities that are not measured by time to be replaced.

Niche theory is another framework with which scholars measured the competition and the resulting displacement effects. Niche Theory is originally an ecological study of animal species which was later adopted by sociologists and applied in psychology and economics (Dimmick & Rothenbuhler, 1984).

Indian Newspaper Scenario

Drop in circulation is nothing new for newspapers, more over it is baseless to think that news paper circulation decline began with the arrival of internet. The drop in circulation figures has been there for decades, that is more visible in America, western Europe, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. Still it is true that, internet fastened the pace of downward run of newspaper sales in recent years, but Indian newspapers refused to follow the suit.

As per the data from ABC, India enjoys highest growth rate for print in the world. While print circulation figures have shown a fall of 3-6% in countries like Australia, France, Germany, the US, and Japan between 2013 and 2015, circulation of Indian dailies grew 12% in the same period. The UK saw the highest decline of 12% in this period.

Between 2006 and 2016, India's print publications grew to 62 million a day, at the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.87% as per ABC data. 23.7 million copies have been added to the circulation of Indian print media (including newspapers and magazines) in the last decade. Another noteworthy trend in this circulation rise is the increase in circulation of regional language newspapers.

The lion's share of this circulation boom has been contributed by regional newspapers, shows ABC data from 2006 to 2016. Hindi, Telugu and Kannada are the top three language publications that grew at a CAGR of 8.76%, 8.28% and 6.40%, respectively, While English media publications managed only a growth at a CAGR of 2.87% in the same period. The region wise figures of growth rate shows, the north exhibited the highest growth at 7.83%, followed by the south (4.95%), west (2.81%) and east (2.63%).

While ABC data provides the circulation figures, IRS offers fine points on newspaper readership, Newspaper has got 110 million new readers in three years, say latest Indian Readership Survey (IRS) released on 31 January, 2018. The total readership of the dailies is now 407 million, which was 295 million in the last report that was released in 2014. 70 million of new readers is

contributed by Rural India and a 40 million by Urban India. People over 12 years of age were chosen for the survey.

The story how Indian newspaper industry is on a relentless growth path, bucking the global trend where the market has been taken over by the digital, continues to find new evidence of support. Now, according to the latest Indian Readership Survey (IRS), released on 18 January, released after a gap of four years, in the last three years, the newspaper readership grew by an impressive 39%, adding 110 million to the existing number. The total readership of the dailies now stands at 407 million compared to 295 million in the last IRS report released in 2014. Rural India has contributed 70 million of these new readers, while the urban markets have added 40 million readers.

Total readership is the number of readers who have read the newspaper at least once in the last one month. The survey was conducted amongst the population of over 12 years of age across urban and rural India. Hindi newspapers with a 176 million total readership stand first in the list, with Tamil and Marathi (34 million each) dailies in the next positions. English newspapers with 28 million which is now fourth in the list. Telugu (25 million) followed by Malayalam (24 million), Gujarati (23 million) and Bengali dailies (21million), respectively.

“These numbers most definitely tell us that there is a bright future waiting for the print industry. I'm also hoping that we will now begin to see advertisers and media agencies taking print more seriously,” said Ashish Bhasin, chairman, MRUC and CEO-South Asia, Dentsu Aegis Networks. He further adds that “increased readership numbers for newspapers and magazines will pave the way for publishers to increase their revenues, which would in turn help increase the size of print as a medium.”

Youth around the world are abandoning the newspapers for digital news platforms which constitutes a major sub plot in the newspaper death story, and that myth was busted here. 42% of the population in the 12-15 years age group, and 50% between 16-19 years have read the hard copy of at least one daily in past one month, reports IRS survey. 42% of the population in the age group of 20-29 years also read newspapers.

Baddie in the story, the Internet that is supposedly thrashing and destroying newspapers in a murderous rage, what is its penetration rate in India? As per a survey conducted jointly by IMAI-Kantar IMRB, the number of Internet users in India is expected to touch 500 million mark by June 2018. The report titled ‘Internet in India 2017’ was the result of a joint survey conducted in 170 cities and 750 villages.

While urban India has around 295 million Internet users, rural land has around 186 million users, says the report.

Purpose of Internet Access in Percentage

Nature of Service	Urban	Rural
Online communication	86	56
Entertainment	85	58
Social Networking	70	49
Online Finance	44	16
Online Services	35	35

Comprehensive studies are yet to be undertaken to recognise the contributing factors in circulation boom of newspapers in India. This paper surveyed the few available literature pertaining to newspaper survival in other parts of the world and to arrive at a conclusion and to have a big picture of the scenario.

‘The Economist’ in an article titled ‘Why India’s newspaper business is booming?’, observes that rising literacy rates and localised content coverage in India are main factors behind the increase in regional newspaper sales. Failure of online versions of physical newspapers in attracting readers in a way helped print. Poor user interfaces, broken links, and advertisements covering the news were identified as the factors that forced that took readers away from the online edition. (www.economist.com)

Unlike the declining markets of US and parts of Europe, print is growing in India, China, Brazil and few more nations around the world and the growth will continue, says Vanita Kohli Khandekar in her book *The Indian Media Business*. The home delivery of Indian newspapers is an important factor and as long as this delivery mode works economically “it will be difficult to dislodge dailies from the family’s media basket”. The author speculates that there are several signs that online may affect English paper market. (Khandekar, Vanita Kohli, 2013)

Malaysia is another safe haven for newspapers, where print media is still thriving. Though the operating circumstances of newspapers in India and Malaysia may be different, we may still make use of findings from Malaysian studies because they share the same story of survival. The study titled ‘The Impact of New Media on Traditional Mainstream Mass Media’ argues that Malaysian people rely on newspapers for news while Internet has privacy, content accuracy, reliability and credibility issues. They conclude that new

media and traditional media will coexist and reinforce each other (Salman et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This paper observes that the displacement concept is not applicable to Indian newspaper environment. Absolute displacement - not even replacement - is not in there in near future, as far Indian newspaper is concerned. As of now, newspapers in India are very much alive and kicking and are seemingly at ease with the internet. When we say the story of Indian newspaper, internet should be described as another player in the field, if not its friend, rather than a foe.

Here, the newspaper was not affected by the advent of Internet, instead they follow the path of historical coexistence of new and old media. The increase in rate of literacy is seemingly driving more people towards newspaper reading. We can also conclude that internet is complimenting newspapers by prompting their readers to read more, and grabbing their attention to indepth analysis on various news and information. Though digital divide poses a problem in India, still large part of population have access to internet, who should be reading their print newspapers too. It confirms the IRS and ABC data shown earlier in this paper. Displacement concept postulates that time is a limited resource and when a new activity enters into an individual's daily schedule which is already packed with activities, there is a high chance for one of the activities to be displaced by the new activity. Here in India, no such thing has happened till date and it looks like people divide their available time between various media to satisfy their needs. Yet we need more research studies on Indian newspaper readers, to find why do they read newspaper when they have access to digital media news platforms, suggests this paper.

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