

CHANGING TIMES: PROSPECTS OF COMMUNITY PRESS IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: A CASE OF GWERU TIMES

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ABSTRACT: *The means and ways through which communities receive information has transformed over the past years. Circulating of news through printed newspaper has evolved into a more digital path leaving many questions regarding the future of the printed press. Harper (2010) notes that this shift is sometimes called the social media revolution. Community newspapers play a pivotal role in promoting and maintaining the quality of life in small communities. These roles arise because the community press is often the only media source that provides exclusive local content. To keep the citizens of that community informed of the events, decisions, discussions and debates occurring in their own community. In this information age the community press is undergoing changes and as such the community press should be aware of how people access information in order to stay relevant and prosperous. Nasir (2012) notes that The Information Society or Information Age is a new phenomenon since 1950 which brings with it new challenges as we seek to integrate an expanding universe of print and multimedia sources into our daily lives. Community papers are also becoming more and more prevalent in the country. Sawasky (2010) summarizes that there are three general duties that a community newspaper attempts to fulfill and notes that firstly, the community newspaper is responsible to the citizens of that community to keep them informed and aware of current events. Secondly, the newspaper supports and encourages local businesses as it also a local business that thrives economically when the community thrives. Finally, the community newspaper performs as a vital communications tool for the services of the community.*

KEYWORDS: Community Press, Information Society, Newspaper, Blog, E-News

INTRODUCTION

Newspaper, radio and television have for long been the customary means through which people share and exchange information. For smaller communities information has been conveyed through established community newspapers which would fulfill the information needs of each community. As espoused by Picard and Stern (2011:51) community newspapers became a fundamental resource of information for particular communities. Against this backdrop community newspaper enjoyed information needs monopoly within communities for decades since the inception of the printed newspaper in 1904. The turn of the new millennium saw the coming in of new ways through which communities would share and exchange information. The advent of new technologies brought forth exciting means through which people share information. This study analyses the prospects of the community press in the wake of new technologies. Underlying this study is the assumption that community press will survive the taste of time and resist the great tide posed by the new technologies. Thus, the belief is the community press faces certain challenges in the information society where new media have undertaken the role that the traditional community newspaper had been performing. This chapter gives a backdrop aligned with how this topic was acknowledged. Other noteworthy features that are going to be explored include significance of the study, research questions, objectives, statement of the problem, delimitations and limitations of the study.

Background to the study

The idea of the community newspaper was formulated as means of bringing news to the people. The community press initiative sought to fill the information gap that was left void by the big daily newspapers which basically cover stories within big cities. Events occurring in the smaller towns no matter how news worth they may be, are often left out or are simply flight in a corner of a page. In addition, stories occurring in remote rural areas often do not get recognition by the mainstream media. As such small communities had no coverage in terms of print media news. Important events in the rural areas were not covered and as such the idea of community newspaper was incorporated. The community newspaper industry in Zimbabwe is vastly a domain of the government while some are owned by individuals and a group of business people. Mathema (2001: 21) notes that the government in Zimbabwe was of the notion that information was suppose to be decentralized from the urban-centered mainstream newspapers to the rural communities. Mandava (2006:33) agrees with Mathema(2001) and notes that like most former colonies, at the attainment of independence, the Zimbabwean government formulated and implemented policies geared towards establishing what can be described as a pro-people media system. The move has been influential in keeping the citizenry informed and with the new government adopting this idea it could remain in power as it sold its propaganda through the community press.

While newspapers had been the dominant media for years, the birth of radio in the 1920s led to widespread speculation that radio would destroy newspapers. The inception of television in the 1950s also cast into doubt the existence of the newspaper, radio and the motion picture industry (Thottam, 1999). Of late the sprouting of the new media has once more led to widespread outcry regarding the survival of the printed press Norris (2000). There is pervasive concern that newspapers face a doubtful future, and many panic a long-term decline due to the rise of the electronic media, economic downturns attributed to loss of advertising share, ever escalating costs of production and supply, and falling sales. *The Gweru Times* has been in existence for over a decade and is still publishing. *The Gweru Times* is a subsidiary of the Community Newspaper Group (CNG) that is owned by New Ziana and has been an influential paper in providing information to the citizenry of the Midlands Province reaching remote areas such as Gokwe, Nembudziya, and Chirumanzu. However with the government's rural electrification program in full swing community households can now access news via satellite dish plunging into danger the community newspaper role of being a torch bearer. Furthermore competition amongst the mobile service providers in the country has seen increased network in the community and with the numerous functions of smart phones individuals can share and receive news easily.

With the advent of new technologies the community newspaper is now at risk as some of its subscribers, advertisers as well as readers have been exposed to the internet, face book, twitter, Myspace and whatsapp. Ostrow(n.d) cited in Harper (2010) notes that facebook dominates the social media landscape as the most popular way to share information online., e-mail comes in second followed by twitter and, in last place, MySpace. The quick evolution of electronic media has taken a heavy toll on newspaper readership. The newspaper industry is certainly experiencing the challenges triggered by digital innovation. Akesson (2009) contends that the constant introduction of new digital technology, increased mobility, changing media consumption and advertising patterns, as well as digital convergence have fundamentally changed the newspaper industry. The Midlands community where the *Gweru Times* circulates has seen the arrival of online news networks such as *Gweru Today*. *Gweru Today* is an online

network that is circulating news happening in the Midlands Province hastily. *Gweru News* which can be accessed on the website <http://www.world.einews.com/news/gweru> is a news live feed that is publishing current happenings within Gweru. *Gwelo Rhodesia/ Gweru Zimbabwe* is a face book page with over 3000 members who were either born, worked, lived, still working and living in *Gwelo Rhodesia/ Gweru Zimbabwe*. Against this background the future of *Gweru Times* as a community press is shrouded in uncertainty and as such the area requires academic pursuit.

Statement of the problem

The community press which had enjoyed monopoly as the only source of information for the community is reeling under immense threat from the new media. One would therefore wonder if this information resource for the community will survive in the information society considering that people had been acquainted with it.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Examining the community press in the information age

Norris (2000) in his book *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communication in Post Industrial Communities* contends that there is extensive distress that newspapers face an uncertain future, and many fear a long-term decline due to the rise of the electronic media, economic pressures based on a loss of advertising share and increasing costs of production and distribution, and falling sales. Norris (2000) poses a question ‘... have the electronic media gradually replaced newspapers, as some fear, so that the press is heading towards the technological graveyard, rather like wind -up phonographs, vinyl long-playing records and post office telegraphs?...’ The literature by Norris becomes vital for this study as it interrogates factors that have led to the demise of the printed newspaper. It can be noted however that little on community newspapers was mentioned in the text.

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New media and the press.

New media has been defined by many scholars with the hope of unpacking the meaning of these new communication platforms. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) contend that all digital technologies used for communication purposes are termed new media. This includes platforms such as whatsapp, face book, you tube, twitter where persons share news and information. New

media have emerged and have occupied a greater part of society. As Lesame et al (2012) noted many institutions depend on new media for the purposes of recording, storage, sharing and monitoring of vital information. The government, education sector, nongovernmental organizations and also the army form part of the institutions that are now dependent on the new media for their day to day operations. New media can recover any information on every topic; to satisfy people's needs on cultural, social, political and economic life.

It has been argued that media are a space which promotes practices, serves to build unique types of subjects, and a type of technological determinism (Livingstone & Lievrouw 2006:135). What it means is that new media allow people to become aware of and realize new social and practical phenomena, through virtual communities. Research that has been done appear to have reached the consensus that digital technology, the World Wide Web and the internet in general is the ultimate in individualism (Singer 1998:10). The internet has been attested for its strength to equip a people with the information they seek and the information they create. In as much as existing literature provides in-depth information to new media for information dissemination, the departure point in this study was that the research sought to establish if the social media networks are indeed a threat, a compliment or a positive replacement to the traditional community press.

The social media networks which are also known as Web 2.0 technologies are characterized by high levels of engagement and interactivity (Hodkinson (2011). The new technologies are regarded as engaging in character in that they always seek to convey text and or images that allow people listen to sounds or interact with visuals (ibid). Web 2.0 technologies are dialogical in that they permit people across the globe to meet and interact with the same content which was mainly facilitated by interpersonal media (ibid). Social media networks allow people to exchange views, thoughts and ideas on any given subject. As such, the role of the audience and consumers becomes very difficult if not impossible to differentiate. On social media platforms, users are given the opportunity to share notions and perceptions. In addition, the digital technologies such as mobile phones permit people to interact across the globe. This has an immediate danger of users tempted to be glued onto new media material. To this effect, this research project sought to find out the impact of new media on the community press.

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RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Research approach encompasses the plans and procedures for investigation that cover the steps from broad supposition to meticulous techniques of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In line with the above Hussey and Hussey (1997) contend that research approach is the hypothetical structure which underpins the research process. The triangulation method which combined the qualitative and quantitative methods was employed to gather data in this study. Content analysis, document analysis and discourse analysis were the methods used for data analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The study was an investigation on the threats posed by new media on the community press. It goes further to look at the reaction of the readership of the community press to new media platforms in a community. The study sought to find out whether the community press changed its content in reaction to new media platforms. It sought to establish the whether the community press has put in place survival strategies in the wake of the new media platforms.

The methodological triangulation was adopted in this research project. The study had to combine both qualitative and quantitative research instruments in collecting data. The data gathered through interviews, observations and questionnaires was analysed to obtain answers on the effects and influence of new media social networks on the readership of the community press. In this study, the researcher used both document and discourse analysis strategies. Using these two forms of analysis, images and content on new media platforms were analyzed. Out of the total number of hundred people sampled the researcher managed to interview only twenty were interviewed. The interviewees were drawn from different geographical areas in the Midlands province where the community press where the community press circulates. Eighty questionnaires were distributed to individuals and observations were also conducted.

Rate of readership of *The Times*

On being asked how often they read *The Times* 97% (66) of the respondents indicated that they read *The Times* on a weekly basis while 3% (2) said that they read the *Times* occasionally as the pie chart below illustrates.

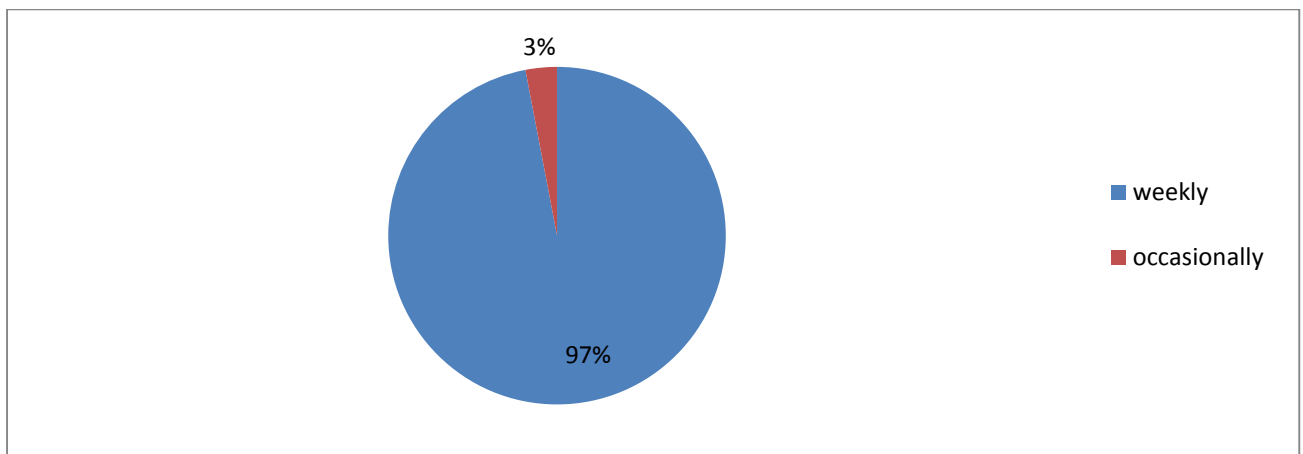


Figure 1: Rate of readership of *The Times*

As the pie chart above illustrates majority of the people read *The Times* frequently while the minority occasionally interact with the community newspaper.

Use of new media

Asked to indicate new media platforms they use, the relative usage rate of new media platforms is as follows: 25% use whatsapp, 40% use facebook, 5% use You Tube and 3% use Twitter as illustrated by the chart below.

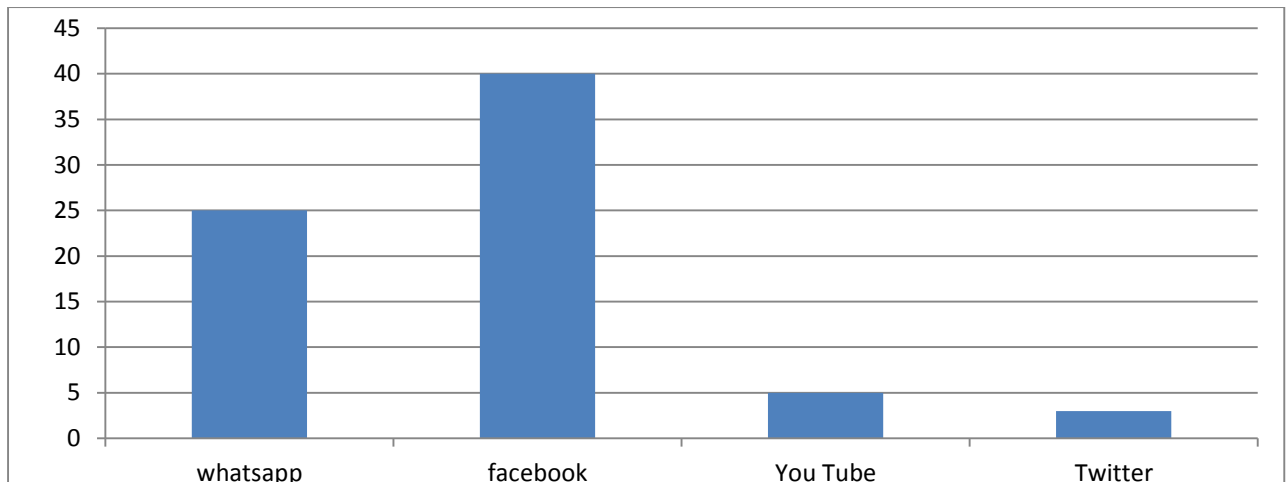


Figure 2: New media platforms used

As shown in the graph above facebook has the highest number of users.

Intended use of new Media platforms

In both interviews and questionnaire people were asked their purposes of using new media platforms. Respondents have indicated that they use new media for various reasons including interacting with friends and family around the globe, knowing what is happening in the world around. One of the respondents in an interview said that,

‘I use new media platforms to know the latest in sport news, to interact with family members outside the country and also to know who is who in society’.

They indicated that new media platforms help them in a way since they cuts space and time. New media platforms enable a quick and prompt communication cutting geographical boundaries as confirmed by one respondent in an interview,

‘I gained a lot of things through interacting with social media networks because they are quick, they save space, there are efficient and remove hindrances of communication with other people across the globe. It makes it relatively simple to convey and give out information to distant people. New media platforms are a new way that has come to substitute interpersonal communication. The exchange and sharing of information through social media networks has made it simple for people to be aware of what would be happening around the world.’

They indicated that the new media platforms are cheap and hence they use them for communication purposes. One respondent said,

‘Whats up is a very cheap and convenient way of communicating that I use. Worse still I have free access to the internet at work and so I use these platforms to communicate with friends and relatives around the globe’.

Community News sites and Facebook pages followed

In both interviews and questionnaire people were asked if they follow any particular community news site or facebook pages. Respondents have indicated that they follow community sites and facebook pages as indicated in the chart below.

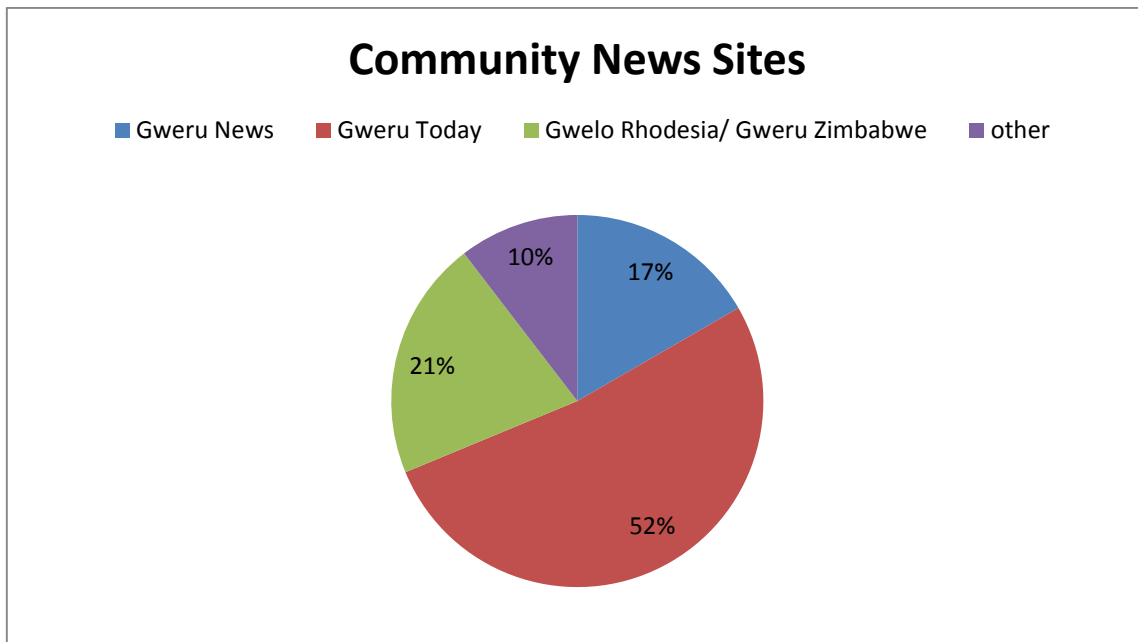


Figure 3: Community News sites and Facebook pages followed

As shown in the chart above the majority of the people indicated that they are following Gweru Today for news about the province. Gweru news and Gwelo Rhodesia/ Gweru Zimbabwe are also popular with the people. Other respondents indicated that they use face book groups such as Mkoba Nhasi, MSU facebook page and WOW City , to satisfy their information needs about the happenings in the community.

The Times as the preferred news source

People indicated in both interviews and questionnaires that they prefer reading the Times for information needs about the going on in the community. They indicated that The Times helps them in that they get detailed information of what is going on in the community. One respondent in an interview said

‘I read *The Times* to get detailed information about what is going on in the community, for example I could not miss a single copy when the Machaya story was in the courts. I would get detailed information from *The Times*’.

A respondent noted that the community press is in direct contact with what is happening in the community and as such you tend to get factual information.

‘I read *The Times* because I get real information on what is going on in the city. Newspapers have a record of telling facts unlike new media where anyone can pass false information, council employees were not getting paid and I got information about that from *The Times*.’

People indicated that they receive information from all corners of the community. In an interview one respondent said that

‘I am from Lower Gweru but I stay in Riverside, if I want to know things happening back home I read *The Times* since it at times covers issues *dzekumusha kwangu* a thing that is not done by the daily newspapers or on the internet.’

People indicated that they prefer reading *The Times* because it is a full package of news. Asked in an interview one respondent said,

‘I prefer reading *The Times* for news in the community because I read almost everything in one copy. I read things happening in Shurugwi, I get to know how Chapungu is fairing in the premier league. Also I get to know the value of houses as I read about Trevor Dollar properties. Adverts about jobs in the community are also in *The Times* something you cannot easily get on the internet or facebook.’

Respondents also indicated that they prefer the Times as they are addicted to it. In an interview one respondent said,

‘I have been in Gweru for years and this has been my source of news for the past years, I have an emotional attachment with the newspaper and week in week out I have to read it. It is my preferred source of news about what is taking place in the community.’

Dual usage of new media and *The Times*

Asked if the respondents (76) read *The Times* and also use new media for information needs as illustrated in Figure 4.

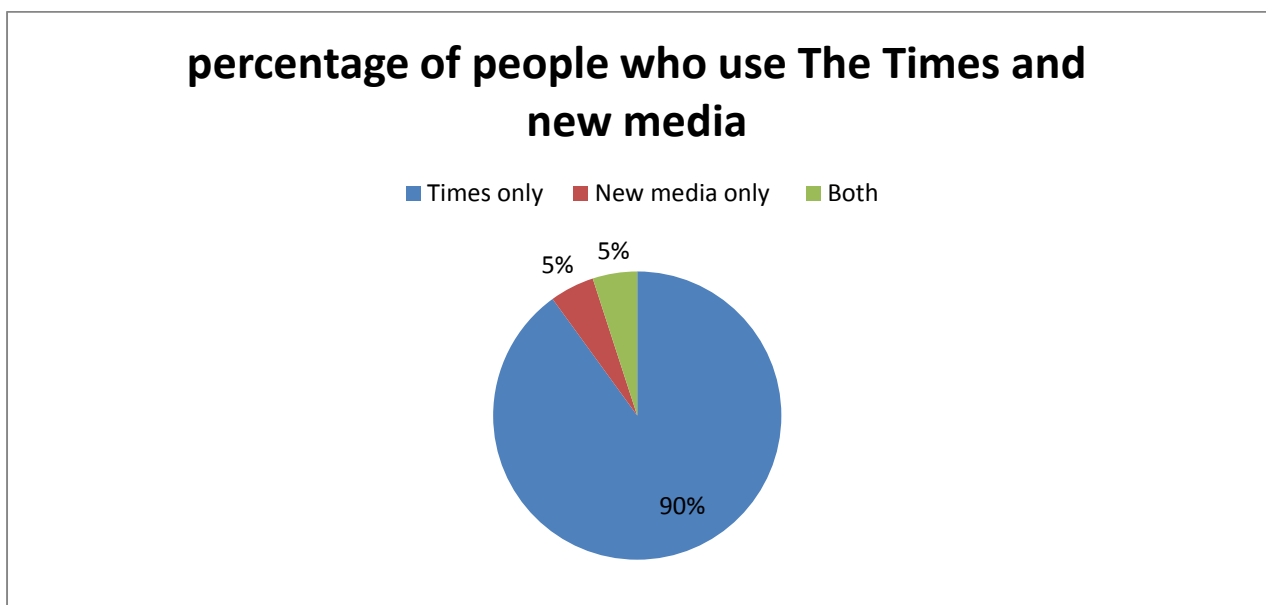


Figure 4: Percentage of people who use *The Times* and new media

The table above shows that the majority of the residents interact with *The Times*. This therefore shows the popularity of the community newspaper in Gweru.

Content Change

In interviews conducted people noted that the community newspaper has not changed the manner in which it publishes its story. One interviewee said,

‘The manner in which the stories are carried in the Times is still the same as they still did years back. They report on things that will have happened over the past week but still to us its news. I can say when Chanpugu beat Dynamos, the story and results were in national papers and also on face book but still the Times carried a story about that match’.

The community press is culturally rooted and as such, is part and parcel of the daily life of the people and as such should inform the community about the community.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented and analysed findings of this study. The data collected through questionnaires and interviews was presented in both qualitative and quantitative form. Data was presented in thematic form and the triangulation method was applied in presenting the data. The exposure attained from using new media platforms has an effect on people’s culture. New media platforms were used to find new fashion updates. Commodification of culture is noted on new media platforms especially with such fashion pages on twitter and facebook

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