

Challenges Faced By The Zimbabwean Print Media Due To The Introduction Of Digital Products And Services

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges faced by print media due to the introduction of digital products and services. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combined qualitative interviews with editors and management and quantitative surveys of 200 readers, to assess shifts in readership, revenue and consumer behaviour. Findings indicate a pronounced migration of audiences from print to digital platforms, driven by the immediacy, affordability and interactivity of online news, alongside demand for diverse viewpoints not fully available in traditional newspapers. Economic hardships, high unemployment and declining advertising revenue further exacerbate the challenges for print operations. The study also identifies slow digital adoption, print-centric editorial culture and infrastructural constraints, such as expensive and limited internet access, as critical factors limiting competitiveness. Independent online news producers and social media platforms are recognised as major disruptive forces, often aggregating or republishing Zimpapers content, accelerating audience shift. The research concludes that digital disruption is reshaping readership patterns, revenue models and operational processes, posing a significant threat to the sustainability of traditional print media. Recommendations include accelerating digital transformation, enhancing audience interactivity, diversifying revenue streams, strengthening editorial and technical capacity, and leveraging data analytics to inform content strategy. The study underlines the urgent need for Zimpapers to adapt strategically to the digital era to sustain relevance, retain readership and maintain financial viability in Zimbabwe's evolving media landscape.

Keywords: Digital disruption, Print media, Zimpapers, Online news, Consumer behaviour, Zimbabwe, Media sustainability

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I. Introduction

Continuous development of digital communication technologies in recent years has facilitated the growth of many firms across various industries to strive and generate value by using these technologies in completely new ways and the media industry is no exception. However, with such an increase in digital developments within the media industry, there is an increase in the options availed to the reader of today that the reader is able to choose between traditional products and digital products or services in terms of news consumption. It is due to such increase in digital services and products that newspapers such as *The Sunday Mail* and *The Herald* are losing more readers to digital and social media platforms. In the process of incorporating digital services and products, these newspapers are also having diminishing number of readers and advertisers.

As an incumbent, Zimpapers has been slowly incorporating digital platforms and this has led to customers opting for other sources of media like online media and other media houses that already have digital platforms in the print media industry. Readers are now even relying on social media platforms like X and Facebook at the expense of hard copy newspapers. Also, revenues for Zimpapers are dwindling as a result of readers and customers opting for digital platforms. The study intends to look at strategies employed by Zimpapers to retain customers in the age of digital disruption with special reference to *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*.

Background to the study

The global print media industry has been undergoing profound transformation due to the rapid rise of digital technologies, changing audience behaviours and shifts in advertising expenditure. Statista (2024) reports that digital channels accounted for approximately 73% of global advertising investment in 2024, reflecting the migration of both audiences and advertisers to online platforms. This structural shift has had a significant impact on the sustainability of traditional print newspapers.

In the United States, one of the largest and most mature news markets, Pew Research Center (2024) documents sustained declines in print circulation, advertising revenues and newsroom employment. While many legacy newspapers have established online platforms, digital revenues have not been sufficient to offset print losses. The industry's struggle to monetise digital audiences effectively highlights the scale of disruption facing traditional print organisations.

The academic literature reinforces this picture. Verhoef et al. (2021) argue that digital transformation, understood as a process that goes beyond digitisation and digitalisation, has fundamentally altered consumer expectations and behaviours. They emphasise that for traditional media companies, success depends not only on integrating digital tools but also on redesigning business models, organisational processes and value propositions. Similarly, Bai (2021), in an analysis of the closure of the *Beijing Morning Post*, concludes that traditional print media face a "compressed living environment" due to technological disruption, changing consumption patterns and economic pressures. The author argues that incremental adjustments are insufficient, instead, print organisations must adopt transformative strategies informed by local market conditions.

Saragih (2020) frames the digital era as a decisive test of newsroom capabilities, requiring journalists to master multi-platform production, deliver rapid but accurate reporting and innovate in content formats. These demands are accompanied by structural challenges, including intensified competition from online-native outlets and the dominance of digital platforms in news distribution.

The African news industry reflects many of the global trends but also faces unique contextual factors, such as smaller advertising markets, high internet costs and infrastructural constraints. The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* (2024) highlights that in markets such as South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, audiences increasingly access news via social media and messaging platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube. While this broadens potential reach, it also increases dependence on third-party platforms whose algorithmic changes can drastically affect audience flows.

Kalombe and Phiri (2019), examining the Zambian print media sector, observe that online media growth has precipitated declining readership and advertising revenues for newspapers. They argue for integrated strategies combining newsroom convergence, audience analytics and diversified revenue streams such as events, commercial printing and paid digital content. This aligns with the findings of recent studies on African media innovation, which suggest that the most resilient organisations are those that invest in both editorial transformation and product development capabilities (Mabweazara, 2022).

The shift in advertising from print to digital in African contexts is compounded by the dominance of global technology companies in capturing the largest share of online ad revenue, leaving local publishers with smaller revenue bases to sustain journalism. This economic pressure forces print organisations to weigh the costs of sustaining physical editions against the potential returns of scaling up digital operations.

In Zimbabwe, the traditional print media industry is undergoing a significant transformation. Zimpapers, the country's largest integrated media group and publisher of *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, has publicly adopted a "digital-first" strategy. This strategy includes the launch of low-cost e-paper subscriptions priced at US\$1 per month, as well as the development of a consolidated Zimpapers Newshub mobile application. These initiatives demonstrate a strategic attempt to expand the organisation's digital footprint and monetisation capacity (Zimpapers Annual Report, 2024).

However, this shift brings challenges. First, as advertising spending migrates to digital platforms, the yields per digital impression are generally lower than for traditional print advertising (Statista, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). Second, increased dependence on social media and messaging apps for content distribution exposes publishers to traffic volatility driven by algorithmic changes. This reflects Nielsen's (2016) earlier observation that the core challenge for news organisations is not simply publishing online but developing sustainable business models in a platform-intermediated environment.

Third, while the introduction of e-papers and apps constitutes a form of digitalisation, Verhoef et al. (2021) note that long-term resilience requires full digital transformation, which includes business model redesign, new value propositions and the integration of product and audience analytics into core operations. Bai's (2021) analysis reinforces the point that defensive measures and incremental digital adoption are insufficient in the face of structural change. Fourth, as Saragih (2020) notes, survival in the digital era demands significant newsroom capability upgrades, including multi-skilled teams, faster production cycles, and rigorous verification processes.

In Zimbabwe's competitive news environment, the rise of online-native news outlets further fragments audiences, requiring established print brands like *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* to differentiate themselves through trusted journalism, brand loyalty and innovative digital products. Kalombe and Phiri's (2019) findings in Zambia suggest that diversification, through events, commercial printing, branded content, and paid subscriptions, may be essential to sustaining revenues in the long term.

Newspapers in Zimbabwe have gone through several stages of uncertainty. This began with the emergence of online newspapers and websites which formed part of the new media and were made possible by the Internet followed by the incoming of various social media platforms that are now dominating in information dissemination. In the initial stage, the emergence of the new media made traditional media owners worry about losing their influence and consequently, their profitability and Zimpapers is no exception. The fear was not only that the new media were fast, colourful and borderless, but also that they affect the mind and psychology of readers who opt for alternative media (Daud, 2008). This has affected print media marketing negatively as the Internet and social media platforms have now taken a bigger market share.

There has been a trend of a decline in terms of newspaper readership in Zimbabwe. According to the 2013 ZAMPS results, general readership of daily newspapers for 2013's second quarter from the 44% registered in the fourth quarter of the previous year to 42 percent. Weeklies also recorded a decline from 28% the previous year to 27% in 2013 (ZAMPS). According to the same ZAMPS results, *H-Metro* had the sharpest decline from 17% to 13%, followed by *NewsDay* whose readership base lost 2% from 13% to 11%, and then *Daily News* and *The Herald* which lost 1% each. According to ZAMPS (2013) in 2013 *The Herald* had 24% of the market share.

The decline in circulation of newspapers in Zimbabwe may also be attributed to issues on credibility as the mainstream newspapers are too government friendly and serve as the propaganda tools. Digital media not only have gained popularity, but have also managed to attract advertisements and this is also a challenge to the mainstream newspapers (Yap, 2009).

Newspapers and the new media in Zimbabwe are complementing each other. At present quite a number of Zimbabwean newspapers have online presence. *The Sunday Mail* and *The Herald* are marked examples. Both versions of online newspapers are free and thus increasing their penetration.

The role of Zimpapers in the Zimbabwean media industry

Zimpapers, occupies a central and dominant position within the Zimbabwean media landscape. As the oldest and largest integrated media and commercial printing company in Zimbabwe, Zimpapers traces its origins to 1891 and has maintained a leading role ever since (<https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/about-zimpapers-2/>). It publishes a wide array of publications, including flagship dailies *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, Sunday editions such as *The Sunday Mail* and *The Sunday News*, as well as tabloids like *H-Metro* and niche weeklies such as *The Manica Post*, *Kwayedza* (Shona), *uMthunywa* (Ndebele, among others, totaling over a dozen print titles (State Media Monitor, 2025).

Beyond print, Zimpapers has diversified into broadcasting and commercial printing. Its Broadcasting Division includes radio stations such as Star FM, Diamond FM, Capitalk FM, and Nyaminyami FM, and it has established a television presence via Zimpapers Television Network (ZTN) (State Media Monitor, 2025). The group also incorporates commercial printing through Natprint (Harare) and Typocrafters (Bulawayo) (Zimpapers, 2025).

Structurally, Zimpapers is a listed public company, one of the longest-standing listings on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange, tracing its roots to a public float in 1927 under the name Rhodesian Printing and Publishing Company (<https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/about-zimpapers-2/>). However, it remains effectively state-controlled, with the majority of shares held by the Government of Zimbabwe via the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT) or directly, and governance is strongly influenced by political interests (State Media Monitor, 2025). Since the dissolution of the independent ZMMT in 2000, editorial independence has been widely questioned; analysts describe Zimpapers as functioning with a distinct pro-government editorial orientation (State Media Monitor, 2025).

In relation to the shift from print to digital media, Zimpapers has pursued an explicit digital-first strategy. Leadership has articulated a commitment to building what is described as "one of the biggest newsrooms in Africa" anchored in digital content production, with the aim of growing both audience and revenue while still maintaining print and broadcast operations (The Herald, 2024). The group has also undertaken digital transformation initiatives including the launch of an integrated e-paper and subscription platform, initially launched in 2014 as "Zimpapers News Hub", and other digital services (Gambanga, 2014). More recently, management reaffirmed the digital pivot at a strategic launch event in late 2024, characterising the transformation as cultural, behavioural, digital, and business in scope (The Herald, Zimpapers launches digital initiative, 2024).

Executive leadership links these efforts to broader national development goals, such as transitioning toward upper-middle-income status through embracing the fourth industrial revolution (Zimpapers report,

2024). Operationally, the company has invested in modernising its newsroom infrastructure and processes across its divisions, establishing digital teams within print, radio, and television units, and optimizing websites and mobile applications to better serve increasingly digitally-oriented audiences (Zimpapers seeks wider digital presence, 2023).

The scale and reach of Zimpapers are reflected in recent audience growth: a 19% increase in total reach, amounting to 11.3 million across all platforms, was reported for the quarter ending March 2025, an outcome attributed to its digital transformation efforts (Zimpapers, 2025). The Deputy General Manager of Zimpapers' Digital and Publishing Division emphasizes the shift towards interactive features, personalized delivery and innovation as central to the redefinition of journalism in a digital era (Zimpapers, 2025). Thus, Zimpapers serves as Zimbabwe's dominant media conglomerate, spanning print, radio, television, and digital platforms. Its institutional evolution, from colonial-era press to state-linked modern multimedia conglomerate, positions it both as a barometer of industry transformation and a locus for observing the challenges and opportunities posed by digital disruption in Zimbabwe's print media sector.

Research problem

The introduction of digital products and services has disrupted traditional revenue models, consumer behaviour and operational processes in print media. For Zimpapers, challenges such as declining print circulation, digital monetisation struggles and infrastructural limitations require urgent attention. This paper aims to identify and analyse these challenges to provide actionable insights.

Research objectives

To identify key challenges faced by ZIMPAPERS as a result of introducing digital products and services.

To analyse the impact of these challenges on the sustainability of Zimpapers' print operations.

To explore potential solutions to address the identified challenges.

Research Questions

What are the primary challenges faced by Zimpapers due to the introduction of digital products and services?

How have these challenges affected the print media operations of Zimpapers?

What strategies can Zimpapers implement to mitigate these challenges?

II. Literature Review

Challenges brought to print media marketing due to the emergency of digital products.

Emerging digital products

With the coming of the new media, people who have long been on the receiving end of one-way mass communication are now increasingly becoming information producers and transmitters. Social media platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube and WhatsApp have provided readers with a number of choices on choosing their source of news. According to Creeber and Martin (2009) and Bennett (2003) the distinction between information producers and consumers have become increasingly difficult to draw. Thus, the empowerment offered by distributed, networked digital communication platforms have become shared more widely. This has warranted an important adjustment to media hegemony theories.

The long-term picture of new media or mass media information flow is not easy to predict. Bigger media houses like Zimpapers are struggling with changing gate-keeping standards due to demands for interactive content produced by readers themselves through various social media platforms and the Internet. Readers and ordinary citizens are empowered to report on their social platforms and accounts, economic and political experiences while being held to high standards of information quality and community values. Thus Bennett, (2003) predicted that in the long run, these tendencies may be the most revolutionary aspects of the new media environment.

In exploring the distinctions and complementarities between the new media and mainstream mass media, one must understand the technical distinctions between these various media forms (Brydon, 2011). Mainstream mass media are typically highly centralized, require significant investment and resources and can be heavily influenced by governments through various mechanisms and forms of control (Banerjee, 2008). However, the new media on the other hand have radically different characteristics. The new media such as the Internet can be used for both points to mass communications as well as point to point and mass to point message distribution. They are also extremely de-centralized, require very low investment, provide greater interactivity and public participation and are much more difficult to control (Banerjee, 2008). Hence most readers are now opting for new forms of media at the expense of the traditional newspapers resulting in the latter decreasing in number of sales in the streets thereby losing more readers.

In such a scenario, social media platforms, and the Internet in general, have been gaining more popularity by each passing day while traditional media continue to suffer losses in terms of revenue and readers.

Readers are now free from media manipulation, and have the opportunity to create their own news as well as to get the other side of the story by getting news from the Internet which is seen as free from control and manipulation by the political elite (Rosenstiel, 2005).

In Zimbabwe, the new media has been gaining popularity and acceptance because of the need for readers to have freer and less expensive information flow as the mainstream media is perceived to be controlled and carry particular editorial policies that do not give more room for readers' participation. This was the case when opposition parties, among them Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was formed in 1999. Private and public media carried opposing editorial thrusts that left readers as victims regarding the choice on which newspaper to follow and which one not to follow due to the rampant polarisation that was created as a result of political rivalry.

The nature of the Internet has made it possible for online newspapers to be in operation as it is easy to join and involve low costs to launch an online publication. Moreover, in Zimbabwe at the time when there was too much polarisation of the media in the early 2000s, readers wanted something different, a fresher look and different perspectives in the mainstream media. Hence, the introduction of online media saw most readers opting for new forms of media and leaving traditional newspapers.

The expansion of the new media in Zimbabwe has been so extensive that it is no longer called an alternative media anymore as it is gaining more popularity and relevance in the media landscape than the traditional mainstream media. Events are reported as they are unfolding through the new media unlike what the traditional media used to do. However, the traditional media is now upping the game by digitizing through having online editions and creating social media platforms as a way of maintaining a stake of their consumers and readers.

Effects of digital platforms on customer retention

The Internet has continued to blow up worldwide and digital platforms have become an important source of competitive advantage in the marketing of products and services. The influx of various digital platforms has also come as a challenge to the traditional media as they were used to market their products and products in a traditional way. According to Leeflang et al. (2014) much attention has been given to the incredible opportunities digital platforms presents to marketing with the little to the drawbacks they have to traditional marketing. Thus, the shift by the media industry from advertising and marketing their products from using traditional means to digital means remains complex.

Fader and Winer (2012) assert that there is a widening gap between the accelerating complexity of markets and the capacity of most marketing organizations to comprehend and cope with this complexity. In this case the use of Internet remains the main reason for the widening gap (Day, 2011).

According to Fader and Winer (2012), the 1990s is the decade of e-commerce whilst the earlier parts of the 21st century have become an era of social commerce. This means that marketing has slowly been driven by digital platforms through the use of social media platforms. Thus, in the newspaper industry social media platforms can be utilized as a way of retaining clients, both advertisers and readers. People are looking up for news products and latest news on social media platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube and WhatsApp amongst others.

Clay (2012) claims that organisations have utilized the Internet and social media platforms to gain and retain lost consumers. The author further opines that digital platforms are a new cheaper way organisations can catch up with current emerging digital trends. In such a case, media houses like Zimpapers, through its titles can utilise on the digital platforms and retain customers lost to other digital players through formulating their own social media platforms for advertising and marketing their products.

According to a study by IBM Institute for Business Value (2011) the introduction of digital platforms has formulated a number of challenges. Some of these challenges include explosion of data (big data), the introduction of social media platforms, an increase in the number of digital channels and shifting consumer demographics. The study conforms to the current situation where everyone is now interested in using social media platforms for both marketing and news consumption purposes.

Kung (2017) posits that digital platforms are advantageous in that they accommodate integrated media where videos, audio and pictures can be accompanied in a single message. This has resulted in more readers and consumers shifting to digital platforms because of their interactive nature as compared to traditional media. In this case, for them to retain customers and readers newspapers like *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* should embrace Internet of Things and embrace digital platforms as suggested by Cheredar (2012). This is because digital platforms have seen newspapers having drops in copy sales and dwindling revenue. Revenue streams have been stressed by the influx of digital players in the media landscape, especially the print media industry.

The Internet has become one of the most important market places for transactions of goods and services. Evidence shows that the Internet has now become a transaction channel. According to Cheredar (2012)

on its peak day in 2012 on the 26th of November 2012 Amazon customers ordered more than 26.5 million items worldwide across all product categories, then it was a breaking record of 306 items per second.

Digital music sales in 2011 surpassed copy sales in the United States for the first time in history (Fisch, 2010). Johns (2014) asserts that the increase in the use of online news by readers increased from 10% to 20% in 2013.

Internet users in 2011 were over 225 million in North America and more than one billion in Asia (Business Monitor Intelligence, 2012). Two years after the introduction of Facebook, there were already 50 million users (Fisch, 2010). In 2011, in the USA, Brazil, Europe, and India more than

70% of the population were members of at least one social media network (Business Monitor Intelligence, 2012).

In 2011, more than 50% of social media users followed brands on social media and companies were increasingly investing in social media, indicated by worldwide marketing spending on social networking sites of about USD 4.3billion (Williamson, 2011). Dholakia& Durham, (2010) opine that managers invest in social media to create brand fans who tend to have positive effects on firm word of mouth and loyalty. Albuquerque et al., (2012) predicted that more than 115 million people in the United States would create online content at least monthly in 2013. Hence, in such cases brand managers are no longer controlling the content produced by readers and customers. This has also seen readers of newspapers being active on the content produced by newspapers through giving their views and opinions via social media platforms.

The introduction of digital platforms has also resulted in the practice of social media marketing. Chaffey (2011) suggests that social media marketing involves encouraging customer communications on a company's own website or through its social presence. Unlike traditional marketing, social media marketing can allow organisations to distribute their messages to targeted audiences without making any payment to the publishers or distributor. This has been a big blow to the newspaper industry as they rely much on adverts from various organisations. Giese and Gote (2000) noted that customer information satisfaction for digital marketing can be conceptualized as a sum of effective response of varying intensity that follows consumption and is stimulated by focal aspects of sales activities, websites, digital products and services, customer support, aftersales service and company culture.

Digital platforms have also opened opportunities for companies to market themselves through email that is email marketing. According to Yasmin et al. (2015) when a message about the products or services is sent through an email to the existing or potential customer, it is defined as email marketing. Direct digital marketing is used to send adverts, to build brand and customer loyalty, to build customer trust and to make brand awareness. A company can promote its products and services by using digital marketing easily. This is because digital marketing comes with lower costs as compared to traditional marketing the business in which *The Sunday Mail* and *The Herald* are still so much into. Yasmin et al. (2015) suggested that a company can bring complete attention of the customer by creating attractive mix of graphics, text and links on its products and services.

Digital disruption in the print media industry

Digital disruption in the print media industry refers to the sweeping, technology-driven changes that alter value creation, audience behaviour, and revenue models so fundamentally that legacy newspapers must reconfigure how they produce, distribute, and monetise news. A large, multidisciplinary body of scholarship depicts disruption not as a single technological shock but as a cumulative reordering of markets, institutions and routines. Verhoef et al. (2021) describe this shift as moving from the digitisation of analogue content, through the digitalisation of processes, to full digital transformation of the business model, critically, they argue that digital transformation and resultant business model innovation have fundamentally altered consumers' expectations and behaviours, thereby placing sustained pressure on incumbent firms that remain organised around print-era assumptions.

Economic underpinnings of disruption are equally stark. For more than a century, the print newspaper model relied on cross-subsidy from advertising to finance costly newsgathering. Anderson, Bell and Shirky (2012) argue that "the model long adopted by the majority of news outlets, a commercial entity that subsidises the newsroom with advertising dollars, is in trouble," because the internet has unbundled attention and moved both consumers and advertisers to cheaper, targeted and platform-mediated alternatives. This erosion of the advertising subsidy, compounded by the growing role of search and social intermediaries, has destabilised the legacy print cost structure, fixed costs tied to printing and distribution persist even as marginal digital revenues often fail to replace losses.

Audience behaviour further amplifies disruption. Pew Research Center (2024) documents that daily newspaper circulation has continued to fall over the past two decades, even when combining print and digital editions. At the same time, a growing majority of adults now obtain news via digital devices, while reliance on

print has declined to a minority preference. These patterns illustrate the attention shift that undermines print's habitual usage advantages, long-standing reach and pricing power.

On the supply side, digital disruption is inseparable from the rise of intermediary platforms that restructure distribution and discovery. Research from the Reuters Institute (Nielsen, 2016; Cornia, 2016) shows that publishers negotiate asymmetrical relationships with large platforms, especially search engines and social networks, whose algorithmic changes directly affect traffic and revenue, while data ownership and monetisation terms remain skewed toward the platforms. This platform intermediation reorients newsroom incentives toward speed, social optimisation and continuous updates, while exposing publishers to volatility and reducing their control over audience relationships.

The disruptive effects are also visible in advertising markets. Statista data summarised in global industry reports indicate that digital formats have captured the dominant share of advertising expenditure worldwide, with online channels accounting for most of the growth since 2019 (Statistica, 2024). For publishers, this translates into intense competition with platform ecosystems that offer precision targeting at scale. Even when individual publishers grow digital audiences, yield per user frequently lags behind print-era benchmarks, necessitating diversification into reader revenue, memberships, events, branded content and business-to-business services to rebuild sustainability.

Scholars have long traced how technology reshapes journalistic practice alongside economics. Pavlik (2000) anticipated profound changes in newsgathering, interactivity and audience participation, while later empirical studies mapped the organisational strains of multi-platform production, verification at speed and data-driven editorial decision-making (Anderson et al., 2012). Contemporary newsroom research shows that innovation capacity, product management, analytics and cross-functional teams, correlates with the ability to launch viable digital offers such as e-papers, newsletters, and podcasts, rather than merely replicating print content online (Verhoef et al., 2021).

Finally, disruption is uneven across geographies, with emerging markets facing distinctive constraints and possibilities. Platform-first discovery, mobile-centric access and payments frictions complicate digital monetisation for many African publishers; nevertheless, studies suggest that integrated strategies, newsroom convergence, audience analytics and diversified revenue mixes, can mitigate dependence on volatile platform traffic and low-yield display advertising (Reuters Institute, 2016).

Theoretical framework

This study uses the Disruptive Innovation Theory, which explains how new technologies disrupt existing markets by offering lower-cost and more accessible alternatives.

First conceptualised by Christensen (1997), the disruptive innovation theory explains how novel technologies or business models enter a market, often serving niche or underserved segments and gradually displace established incumbents. Christensen and Raynor (2003) argue that disruptive innovations typically start with simpler, more affordable or more accessible products that incumbents initially perceive as inferior, but which evolve to meet mainstream standards, ultimately transforming the competitive landscape. In the context of the print media industry, digital technologies, including online news platforms, mobile applications, and social media, constitute such disruptive innovations. Initially, these platforms offered quick, low-cost and interactive news that appealed to technology-savvy audiences rather than traditional newspaper readers. Over time, however, they have improved in content quality, multimedia integration, and credibility, drawing significant audiences away from print.

Applied to the Zimbabwean context, Zimpapers, publisher of *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, fits the profile of an incumbent facing a disruptive threat. Historically dominant in Zimbabwe's print media landscape, Zimpapers has relied on a business model centred on physical newspaper sales and advertising revenue. However, the emergence of digital entrants, including independent online news sites, social media platforms such as Facebook and X and mobile-based citizen journalism, has altered the competitive dynamics. Thus, Saragih (2020) emphasises that in the digital era, speed of publication, multi-platform presence and audience interactivity have become critical determinants of market relevance.

In the context of this study, digital news sites and social platforms are "disruptive entrants" that have redefined speed, accessibility and interactivity in news delivery. Zimpapers, as an incumbent, is challenged to either embrace innovation early or risk losing relevance. This aligns with Christensen's (1997) assertion that incumbents often struggle to respond effectively to disruption because their organisational processes, resource allocations and performance metrics are optimised for sustaining innovations rather than radical change. In Zimbabwe, this is evidenced by the gradual shift of younger audiences to mobile-based news consumption, which threatens Zimpapers' traditional revenue streams and necessitates a strategic pivot towards integrated digital products and services. Hence, by framing the research problem through disruptive innovation theory, the study seeks to analyse the extent to which Zimpapers' challenges are a function of its response, or lack thereof,

to the disruptive forces brought by digital products and services and how these responses can be aligned with sustainable innovation strategies in Zimbabwe's evolving media ecosystem.

III. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine readership and revenue trends at Zimpapers. In-depth interviews with management, editors, and IT personnel explored organisational challenges in adapting to digital platforms. Structured questionnaires were administered to 200 readers of *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* to assess digital adoption and print preferences. Secondary data, including reports, revenue records, and readership trends, provided additional context. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of knowledgeable Zimpapers personnel. Data from interviews were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns. Quantitative survey data were examined using descriptive statistics. This combination enabled a balanced view of internal organisational perspectives and audience behaviours. The methodology ensured both depth and breadth in understanding the impact of digital transformation. Findings from the analysis informed the study's evaluation of challenges and potential strategies for Zimpapers.

IV. Results And Discussion

Documentary findings showing decline in copy sales

According to a survey by Zimbabwe All Media Products in the first quarter of 2019 shows that WhatsApp is the most used Internet platform with 97% usage in the urban areas and 98% at national level (ZAMPS, 2019). The same survey indicated that Facebook follows the trend with 66% usage in urban areas and 29% in rural areas whilst at national level it is at 54%. This clearly indicates that more people are now resorting to social media both for social interaction and reading news.

The reason for poor and drop in hard copy sales was blamed on readers and consumers' shift towards social media as sources of news breaking and information sharing.

Zimbabwe social media penetration as source of news

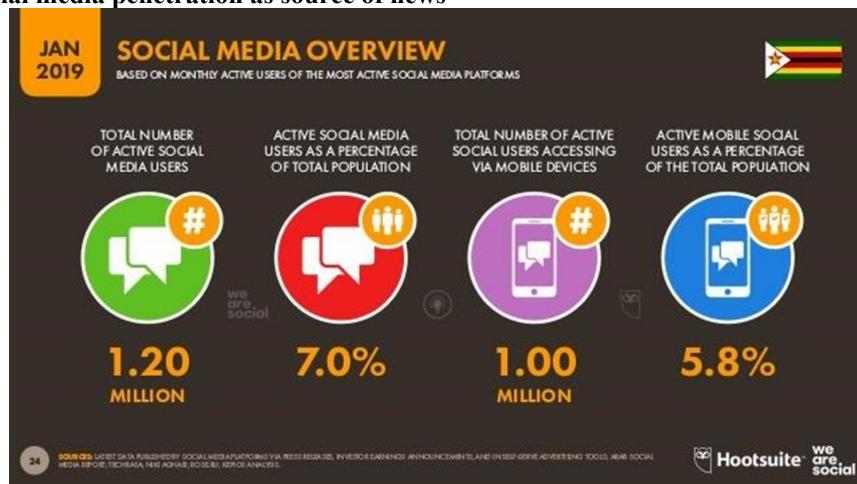


Figure 4.1 Hootsuite Social media penetration ration

The figure 4.1 above reflects how social media, through mobile phones, has penetrated the country population. Out of a population of about 14 million, more than half has an active mobile phone and a quarter has a smart phone. These numbers have kept increasing over the course of time since social media, beside its many challenges, brings new information each minute and at a cheaper rate as compared to traditional hard copies.

V. Major Findings

The study revealed that Zimpapers' flagship titles, *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, are facing significant challenges due to the rise of digital platforms. Editors acknowledged that cheaper, faster, and more interactive online news sources—such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, blogs, and online newspapers—have eroded their traditional readership base. The weekly publication cycle of *The Sunday Mail* in particular has left it unable to compete with real-time news dissemination online, often making its content outdated by the time it reaches readers.

Economic pressures have compounded the situation. The high unemployment rate and prevailing financial hardships in Zimbabwe have reduced the public's ability to purchase newspapers or advertise in print. This, combined with the free or low-cost accessibility of digital news, has driven a steady decline in print sales and advertising revenues. Evidence of this shift is seen in the growing number of unsold newspapers, leading to reduced print runs and bulk returns sold at scrap value.

The loss of interactivity in traditional print was highlighted as another factor driving the migration to digital platforms. Social media and online news outlets allow readers to engage in real-time discussions, give feedback instantly, and access multimedia content, whereas newspapers offer limited and highly curated reader input.

Content policy constraints were also identified as a major limitation. As a state-owned entity, Zimpapers is bound to portray the government and ruling party positively, limiting its ability to present diverse political viewpoints. This perceived lack of editorial independence has pushed audiences toward independent and social media platforms that offer more varied perspectives.

Competition from independent digital publishers was another critical issue. Many online news producers aggregate or republish Zimpapers' content, often before it appears on Zimpapers' own platforms, attracting readers away from the original source. This practice is facilitated by Zimpapers' slow adoption of digital publishing, a result of leadership that remains heavily print-focused and hesitant to embrace new media technologies.

The study also found that Zimpapers is unable to fulfil its traditional role as a breaking news provider in the digital era. Social media, blogs, and online outlets now dominate real-time news delivery, making print editions less relevant for timely updates. Furthermore, the high cost of internet data in Zimbabwe and occasional government-imposed internet shutdowns were cited as barriers to digital engagement for both publishers and readers, particularly in rural areas with poor connectivity.

Finally, hyper-competition in the digital space emerged as a growing concern. With minimal entry barriers, individuals and small groups can start news blogs or websites, creating an oversaturated market where audiences shift frequently in search of fresh content. This has intensified the challenge of attracting and retaining loyal readers in both print and digital formats.

Surveys indicated that over 60% of readers found print newspapers expensive, while digital alternatives are perceived as low-cost or free. In addition, 68% of respondents reported regularly accessing news online, with social media channels such as WhatsApp (41%), Facebook (36%), and X, Instagram and LinkedIn (22%) dominating as preferred sources. Younger readers under 35 exhibited the highest digital engagement, with 78% consuming online news daily, while older audiences largely remain print loyalists.

Interactivity emerged as another critical factor. Both editors and readers highlighted that traditional newspapers offer limited opportunities for feedback, whereas digital platforms enable readers to comment, share, and engage with news in real time. Content policy restrictions further exacerbated readership decline, as Zimpapers is constrained in its coverage of political issues, particularly regarding government and ruling party reporting. As a result, readers seek alternative perspectives online, with 65% indicating they look for diverse political viewpoints on digital platforms.

VI. Conclusions

The study concludes that Zimpapers' flagship newspapers, *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail*, face substantial challenges in the digital era, resulting in declining print readership and revenue. The shift of audiences toward cheaper, faster and interactive digital platforms has undermined the traditional business model. Economic hardships, high unemployment, and affordability issues have accelerated this transition, reducing sales and advertising income.

The study further concludes that Zimpapers' slow pace of digital transformation and print-centric editorial culture has limited its ability to retain readers. The inability to provide real-time news, combined with restricted interactivity and state-influenced content policies, has pushed audiences toward independent online and social media platforms. Additionally, competition from digital news aggregators, hyper-competition in the online space and infrastructural limitations such as expensive data and poor internet connectivity have intensified the challenges faced by Zimpapers.

The integrated findings indicate that Zimpapers' traditional print business model is under severe pressure from digital disruption. The study concludes that the digital era has not only transformed audience behaviour but also introduced structural and operational challenges, including hyper-competition, content aggregation by independent platforms, restricted interactivity and infrastructural barriers. Without strategic adaptation, Zimpapers risks further erosion of its readership and relevance in Zimbabwe's media landscape.

Overall, the research indicates that digital disruption is not merely a technological shift but a systemic challenge affecting audience behaviour, revenue streams, editorial independence and operational efficiency.

Without strategic adaptation, Zimpapers risks continued erosion of its market share and relevance in Zimbabwe's evolving media landscape.

Opportunities for mitigation

Despite these challenges, Zimpapers can explore the following opportunities:

Revenue Diversification: Introduce innovative revenue models such as paywalls, sponsored content, and premium subscriptions.

Infrastructure Partnerships: Collaborate with government and private stakeholders to improve internet access, particularly in rural areas.

Content Innovation: Utilize multimedia formats (e.g., videos, podcasts) to attract digital audiences while retaining print loyalists.

Skills Development: Invest in training and technology to enhance digital capabilities.

Recommendations

Accelerate digital transformation: Invest in digital infrastructure, including mobile-friendly websites, apps and multimedia content platforms, to provide timely news and match audience expectations.

Enhance audience engagement: Create interactive channels for readers to comment, share and participate in discussions, bridging the interactivity gap between print and digital media.

Leverage social media platforms: Actively distribute content on WhatsApp, Facebook, X, Instagram and LinkedIn to increase reach and attract younger audiences.

Diversify revenue streams: Introduce digital advertising, subscription models, sponsored content and events to compensate for declining print advertising revenue.

Content strategy reform: Broaden editorial policies to present diverse viewpoints, particularly on political issues, to regain readers seeking balanced coverage and enhance credibility.

Capacity building and training: Equip staff with digital journalism skills, multimedia production expertise and data analytics knowledge to improve content quality and operational efficiency.

Address infrastructure barriers: Collaborate with telecom providers and policymakers to improve internet affordability and accessibility, especially in rural areas, to expand digital readership.

Monitor and respond to competition: Track independent digital news producers and ensure timely online publication of Zimpapers' content to maintain audience share.

Utilize audience analytics: Use data insights to understand reader preferences, track popular content and produce targeted content that maximizes engagement and loyalty.

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