



Print will not Die!

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Abstract

The print media might be seen heading to South in the Western countries, but in Indian context, it continues to register substantial growth year after year. Not only the number of newspapers is on the rise, but the circulation of newspapers, particularly the Indian language newspapers, also registers considerable increase. Surely, the readership is shifting from urban areas to the rural areas. This study shows that the readers still feel more comfortable with the print form of the newspapers than the digital form i.e. reading a newspaper on computer laptop or mobile phone screen. The media experts feel that the print will continue to grow until the country achieves 100% literacy and the people who are now around 50 stop reading the print newspapers. Also in both the urban and rural areas, the print will reinvent itself in newer formats, which may be a paperless format, where the newspapers will be supplied to the readers through most modern gadgets.

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Introduction

The debate whether the print media is going to die, as the digital rapidly dominates day-by-day, is still inconclusive. The media planners and experts are divided over this issue. Some believe that the print is going to vanish, as it is on the verge of disappearing in most of the Western countries, but some are confident that the print will not die at least for three more decades or until the developing countries like India achieve 100% literacy. The argument that print is going to vanish gained momentum around 2005 when the US scholar Philip Meyer (*Meyer 2004 & 2009*) in his book, *The Vanishing Newspapers*, predicted that ‘the last newspaper in the US will be printed in first quarter of 2043’. But, some veteran Indian journalists, who are witness to the ups and downs in the Indian media for over six decades, suggest to see the prediction by the US scholar in the Western context only. Veteran journalist Dr Nand Kishore Trikha (*Trikha, 2015*), who has about seven decades experience in journalism, argues: “When television was introduced in India in 1959, people started saying that print would now die. But, nothing wrong happened to the print. At that time, the Indian Newspapers Society (INS) had even demanded the Government of India not to issue advertisements to *All India Radio* (AIR) and *Doodarshan* (DD) expressing fear that it would adversely affect the advertisement revenue of the newspapers. But that fear proved to be baseless. Print still survives and the Radio as well as TV channels are seen losing their impact and trust. What Philip Meyer said about the print may apply to the West, but not to India. People in the West think in their own way. But, in India nothing wrong is going to happen to the print. Web and social media, which were cited as newer threats to the print, basically increase the appetite for print news. Not only the circulation, but also the readership of the newspapers is on the rise in India. Nothing wrong will happen to the Print if it adopts the new technology, which should be seen as a friend, not as an enemy and also change according to the changing tastes and requirements of the readers.”



Methodology

The present study is based on the opinion expressed by media experts from print, digital and television during a focus group discussion organised by the researchers in New Delhi on April 3, 2017. Also, the opinion of 151 newspaper readers in New Delhi and 169 journalists working in the newsrooms of print, online and television media in New Delhi was gathered through two separate opinionnaires in April 2017.

Substantial Rise in Circulation

The print scenario outside India may be disquieting and internationally reputed publications like *Newsweek* (Saba et al, 2012) discontinuing print edition in December 2012 and *The New York Times* (Outing, 2014) seem to be preparing to follow the suit and even the European Union proposing to impose “snippet tax” on internet aggregators like Google News (AFP, 2017), the situation of print in India is very much different. Amid global slowdown, the latest figures of circulation released by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) in May 2017 show a substantial rise in the print. It shows that “the country’s print publications have risen by 23.7 million copies in average daily circulation in the 2006-2016 period at a compounded growth rate (CAGR) of 4.87%. The average number of copies circulated per day grew to 62.8 million during this period from 39.1 million in 2006. Incidentally, among the four geographic zones, North India showed the highest growth at 7.83%, followed by South, West and East zones with CAGRs of 4.95%, 2.81% and 2.63% respectively. The number of publishing centres went up from 659 to 910 during the period, an increase of 251 at a CAGR of 3.28%. Notably, the bulk of circulation is dominated by English and language dallies that account for nearly 56 million of the total circulation in the period. Hindi language dallies were the highest in circulation at 22 million copies per day on an average followed by English at 8.55 million copies, Malayalam (4.55 million copies), and Marathi (4.33 million copies) (ET Bureau, 9 May, 2017). “There are many reasons of this growth. First, there is impressive growth in the literacy rate—from 64.8% in 2001 to 74% in 2011. Second, as the income of villagers increases they start reading newspapers. Eying at this new readership, the newspapers too are getting hyper local which has proved very fruitful,” claims MV Shreyams Kumar, Joint Managing Director of Mathrubhumi Group (Kumar, 2017). If growth in literacy rate and income are accepted the reasons for increase in print circulation, it should further grow, as the country is still to achieve 100% literacy and the income of people is continuously rising.

A look at the annual reports of Registrar of Newspapers India (RNI) also show rise in the print media. According to RNI data, the number of registered newspapers in the country rose from 6,407 as on July 1, 1956 to 1,10,851 as on March 31, 2016 (RNI 2015-16). This number was 51,960 in 2001-02, 55,782 in 2002-03, 58,469 in 2003-04, 60,413 in 2004-05, 62,483 in 2005-06, 64,998 in 2006-07, 73,197 in 2007-08, 73,146 in 2008-09, 73,383 in 2009-10, 82,237 in 2010-11, 86,754 in 2011-12, 94,064 in 2012-13, 99,660 in 2013-14 and 1,05,443 as on March 31, 2015. This shows the print media in India is still growing (Catalog, 2016). The stagnation or slight decline in the figures during 2007-08 is attributed to the action taken by the government against the titled registered with the RNI but not in publication.

Meyer Contradicted

While studying the reading/viewing behaviour of the newspaper readers/TV news viewers and web users when the respondents were asked whether “the TV Channels have posed a major challenge before the newspapers”, 80 out of 151 respondents (53%) disagreed, while 43 (28%) agreed. A total 28 (19%) did not express their opinion. Similarly, 68% readers said reading the news in print form is more convenient



than reading it on computer or mobile phone screen. When the journalists working in the newsrooms were asked “as the digital media is getting stronger day-by-day, the newspapers in print form will vanish”, 45% disagreed, 41% agreed and 14% did not express any opinion. It contradicts the observations of the US scholar Philip Meyer who has predicted that the newspapers are going to vanish.

During the Focus Group Discussion organised in New Delhi by the researchers on April 3, 2017, Director General of Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), New Delhi, KG Suresh, who has a long and distinguished career in journalism with *PTI*, argued: “Newspapers in India have multiple editions even at district levels. Not only their circulation, but also the number of readers is on the rise. As a person gets literate, he/she starts reading a newspaper. In India, newspapers are also a symbol of empowerment. ‘I can read a newspaper and I buy a newspaper regularly’ are regarded as symbol of empowerment. The newspapers are symbol of education and knowledge too. It also has a psychological effect. No matter, many TV channels and innumerable digital online platforms have come up and howsoever we criticise the media while sitting in the drawing rooms or seminar halls, newspapers still enjoy credibility and trust of the people. Majority population of the country still believes that ‘it would be true, as it has been published in the newspaper’. However, they do not trust the TV news channels or online platforms, as nobody knows when they change their headlines or withdraw the news. But, if something has been published in a newspaper, it is trusted more. Also, the newspapers in India have high recycle and re-sale value. Sometimes the situation is that the readers get more money from the waste paper than they spend on purchasing a newspaper. They know there is no loss in buying a newspaper. The other factor is connected with pollution and environment. As the curbs on using plastic bags are on the rise, people are fast turning to paper bags and envelops. We must understand it. I don’t visualise the situation in India in coming 20-25 years when people living in remote areas, will get the news digitally. They may adopt e-governance, digital payments, etc, but they will prefer the news through print newspapers only. I believe myself as tech savvy, but I don’t feel satisfied until I read a newspaper with the morning tea. I don’t know how bright is the future of print form of newspapers, but I know that at least today I don’t see any black clouds over them. Yes, I support the argument that the newspapers should change themselves as per the changing time and needs of the readers (*Suresh 2017*).”

Former executive editor of *India Today* (Hindi) Jagdish Upasane (*Upasane 2017*) argued that the craze for newspapers in print form will continue at least until 100% literacy is achieved in the developing countries like India, China or South Eastern Asian countries where the literacy rate presently is low. As long as the craze for print among the readers survives, the market and scope for advertisements will also continue. “No doubt, the advertisement revenue is declining and most of the advertisers are fast turning to digital in India also, the struggle for survival that the print in the West and European countries faces today is not there at least in India. However, I am of the firm opinion that the newspapers will continue to exist in, perhaps, the paperless form, may be in the form of any gadget, etc,” Upasane adds. Digital head of *Network 18*, Nidheesh Tyagi, who has experience of leading newsrooms in *Dainik Bhaskar* and *BBC*, argues, “The average age in India by 2020 will be around 28 years. That is a big marker, which shows how the audience is changing. How newspapers will be relevant and useful for this segment of population is the big question (*Tyagi 2017*).”

Editor of leading Hindi weekly *Panchjanya*, Hitesh Shankar, who has long experience of working with the leading Hindi daily ‘*Hindustan*’ and ‘*India Today*’, supports KG Suresh that newspapers would survive. He is of the firm opinion that we should not hesitate to draw lessons from the good experiments conducted in the West with regard to adoption of technology. “Recently, I came to know about a



newspaper *Columbus Dispatch*, which is over 100-year old. Its format provides some lessons. It continues to change according to the changing times, needs, preferences of its readers and also technology. Instead of getting panicked, the Indian language newspapers can learn from such experiments. The English newspapers were sure to slip down after the saturation point. The vernacular press drew lessons from it and availing the opportunity to prosper and survive they changed themselves. The biggest example whether the print newspapers will survive or not can be seen in the sports pages that majority of the youth still prefer to read. People see live score, ball-to-ball result of the match on internet, but the other relevant information that the sports readers want to read is still available on the sports page of the newspapers according to their taste. It shows the way how value-addition has to be done, what should be the different angle, what the people would like to read in newspapers. Instead of blindly aping the speed, I feel the newspapers should try to be more analytical and provide the new content with a difference. I think the newspapers will continue with this USP, especially in the areas where literacy rate is low, internet speed is crawling and financial condition of the people is still poor (*Shankar 2017*).”

Manohar Singh, news coordinator in ‘PTI-BHASHA’ says, despite changes in technology the demand for credible news will continue. “I believe that the newspapers in print form will not die in near future because of the people’s trust in newspapers. There are still committed readers of newspapers like *Times of India*, *Navbharat Times*, *The Hindu* or *The Indian Express*, etc. The trust of readers will help the newspapers survive. The technology might have posed a challenge to newspapers, but it has made the news operation very cost effective. I feel the newspapers should not compromise with their content (*Manohar 2017*).”

Prof. Govind Singh, who heads the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication in Central University of Jammu, argues that the print is changing according to the demand and taste of the readers. He says, “Print faced instability from 1990s to 2000. Even leading Hindi dailies like *Navbharat Times*, where I used to work then, were on the verge of closure. There were major cuts in resources by owners. The situation of other newspapers too was not good. It was feared that the television would eat the newspapers. Most of the advertisements also shifted to television and content of the newspapers was hugely disturbed. What was published in newspapers was already shown by the news channels. But around 2004, the print and television fixed their constituencies. TV channels decided to show the news to a particular level only and the next level of the news was picked up the newspapers. Hence, the newspapers again started growing. Since the television in those days was not covering local and regional news, the print received good audience there. By the year 2010, the TV news channels, which were once ready to swallow the print, started losing credibility and the trust of the audience towards print strengthened. However, the threat from internet and digital media is the strongest ever today. But even after digital challenge, the print could save themselves if they change according to the changing taste of their readers. Appetite for reading is still there, only the newspapers need to change their style, content and presentation. The young generation may not be seen reading newspapers in metro cities, but in small cities and rural areas, there are readers in large number. They want variety of content in newspaper. I have seen at many places in Uttarakhand that people complained that the content provided by *Amar Ujala* and *Dainik Jagran* is small and it is finished within an hour only. They want more content (*Singh 2017*)”

Debobrat Ghose, Chief of National News Bureau in *Firstpost.com*, (*Ghose 2017*) feels that the future of newspapers largely depends upon the penetration of internet, because without internet the digital technology is not much useful. The internet penetration in India is still very poor. Bandwidth is very slow. Even in the national capital New Delhi, the network is very poor. Forget receiving proper networks in



basement, people do not find network in their mobile phones even in the VIP areas and market places. The government is promoting digital payments, but people have to wait for transaction even at the petrol pump due to poor network, speed and bandwidth. Until, the network strengthens, print can continue by introducing changes in their format and content,” he adds. Former editor of *Hindusthan Samachar* multilingual news agency, Dr Ravindra Agrawal said: “Normally we mix certain things. Technology has been changing since the days when people hunted with stones. This is also a time-tested fact that those who do not adopt the changing technology are sure to be defeated. In the debate of Print vs digital the main focus should be the reader. I am sorry to say that no print newspaper or TV channel cares for the readers. They run newspapers or news channels for earning money through advertisements, and not for providing ‘ correct information’ to the readers. The big question is what is being done for the readers? If the print has to survive, it will have to be reader-centric (Agrawal 2017).”

Conclusion

Growing social and online media in the present digital era is seen as the major threat to print media. But the fact, which cannot be ignored, is that the social and online media, like the TV news channels, do not enjoy trust of the audience because of the misleading information in the form of abusive content, morphed pictures or fake videos being exchanged there. Secondly, like the TV news channels, what is circulated in the digital media may be changed any time, which is not with the print media. What is published in the print is published with full responsibility, which the majority readers still trust. This trustworthiness of readers will not let the print die even if the literacy is 100 %. What is needed is to use the digital technology for expansion of the print and to make it more cost-effective. Also, the print needs to serve the content, which is not served by the digital or television channels. There is huge scope for the content, which the readers want. The major challenge before the print today is how to satisfy the readers with the content, which they do not get in the digital or electronic media.

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