



**ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS
& PROFESSIONALS OF NIGERIA
BOOK SERIES**



CANADA UNIVERSITY PRESS

EMERGENT PRACTICES OF NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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To cite this article:

Adeniran R. A. & Atofojomo O. A. (2017). Emergent Practices of Nigerian Newspapers in the Digital Age in *Digital Media, New Order? Emergent Practices in the Nigerian Media Environment*, ACSPN Book Series (2), pp. 7—22
Retrieved from <http://www.acspn.org/index.php/books>

(Institutional or Subscribed access may be required)

Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article published by the Canada University Press, Concord Ontario, Canada for Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN).

The ACSPN Book Series is exclusive to the Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria.

ISBN: 978-0-9948339-6-9

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Editor and Contributors

Layout/Design: Sharafadeen A. Oyewole

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CHAPTER
TWO

**EMERGENT PRACTICES OF NIGERIAN
NEWSPAPERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

***Raheemat A. Adeniran &
Omolade A. Atofojomo***

Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed the media and communication industry particularly with the emergence and increasing availability and affordability of internet access, and enabling gadgets such as the mobile smart phones. This has led to an increasing access to the social media and opened up opportunities for open and public interactions across various platforms. Conventional media organisations have tapped into these opportunities and are increasingly evolving new means of engaging their audience in the mass communication process. Many media organisations are making their contents available through various digital and mobile platforms thus making their contents readily available and also accessible to their audience. There is increasing audience control of mass media contents as audience members are at liberty to select what information to receive and which to ignore. The conventional mass media are also responding to the trend by tailoring their contents to meet audience interests. One of the various means being explored is to dedicate media airtime (for broadcast media) or space (for print media) to audience generated contents from the internet particularly the social media platforms. This study explores specific contents of newspapers that have emerged as regular sections of the publications that are driven primarily by the internet and social media, using the qualitative content analysis research method. This is being done with a view to gauge media engagement of their audience vis-à-vis its implication for journalism practice in Nigeria.

Internet usage in Nigeria

Nigeria, with a population of about 170 million people, is a country to watch in terms of mobile and internet penetration across Africa. The country is reported to have one of the largest internet penetration in Africa with an estimated 56 million internet users as far back as December, 2012. The rate of increase in mobile and internet penetration is very high in the country and the figures keep increasing by the day. A local business newspaper in the country noted that internet penetration grew from a paltry 0.06 percent to 34 percent between 2000 and 2012, and that the trend will continue likely continue beyond 2020 (How Nigerians use social media, 2013). The projection is supported with the country's large youth population and growing middle class who “traditionally drive internet usage around the world” (How Nigerians use social media, 2013). The continuous growth rate in the sector has also been attributed to the shift from feature phones to smartphones largely influenced by the “availability of more low-cost smartphones” (Ojabo, 2015) leading to a preponderance of smartphones among the teeming population, especially the youths.

Latest data from the country's regulator for the telecommunication industry, the Nigerian Communications Commissions (NCC) show a steady increase in the number of mobile subscribers on a monthly basis. As at June 2015, NCC put the number of active mobile subscribers in the country to be 148,592,767 with GSM subscribers dominating with a massive 146,486,786 active subscribers ahead of CDMA's 2,105,981 active subscribers. Active GSM and CDMA Subscribers were put at 138,530,830 and 2,108,960 respectively as at January 2015. There has also been a gradual increase in the number of mobile internet subscriptions in the country with the NCC noting a rise in mobile internet subscriptions from 81,891,840 as at January 2015 to over 88 million by the end of May, 2015 (Okonji, 2015).

The availability of internet access has led to increasing use of the social media networking sites among Nigerians especially its youth population. This is despite findings from a *Business Day* study with mostly mid-level and senior management staff respondents, majority of who rated information seeking, e-mails, and work tool, as their major use of the internet ahead of social media (How Nigerians use social media, 2013). Available statistics however support the growing and active use of Social media among Nigerians. An online report ranks 'News and information search' and 'social networking' and 'sending e-mails' as top online activities in Nigeria (Terragon Limited, 2013). Facebook appears to be the social networking sites mostly visited among Nigerians. A January 2014 report estimates the number of active Facebook users to be 11.2 million (Kayobi, 2014). The *Business Day* survey also rates Facebook as the most visited social media sites ahead of Twitter and LinkedIn. All these points to the fact that Nigerians are increasingly experiencing the conventional media through varying online platforms and are more active in engaging the media through the array of social media platforms being used by media organisations in the country.

Journalism in the age of new media

The proliferation of internet access and increased social media engagement of individuals has influenced the day to day activities of conventional mass media around the world. The social media is increasingly becoming a primary source of news for journalists (and other users) as they regularly monitor various social networking sites of prominent individuals, institutions and organisations for newsy posts as they emerge. Scholars have however expressed concerns about the reliability and quality of information being provided (Schiffere, Newman, Thurman, Corney, Göker and Martin, 2014). Reliability is especially important as these individuals and organizations sometimes claim their social media accounts have been hacked whenever unfavourable reports are gleaned from their sites. The recent controversies over mockery tweets from an allegedly hacked tweeter account of Zahra, the daughter of President Mohammadu Buahri readily comes to mind -- a reminder on the need for caution in making news out of social media posts.

Views of the falling standards of journalism are well established in existing literature and new media and communications technologies have been identified as a contributing factor, particularly with the expectations of multi-tasking ability by media professionals (Ursell, 2001). Citing Sparks (1991), Ursell noted that multi-tasking detracts from the 'unitary core' of journalism principles and practices which need to be applied if journalists are to produce well-substantiated, accurate and pertinent news. Despite such reservations, the social media is now considered "part of a journalist's occupational responsibilities", with creation of new positions such as "social media editors" in many media organizations (Hermida, 2013).

Social Media and Journalism in Nigeria

Almost all mass media organisations in Nigeria have been able to integrate the internet and varying social media platforms into their day to day activities, with many having at least one personnel in charge of the medium's social media and online engagements.

With increasing audience control, media convergence, disintermediation, and mobile mobility emerging as new trends in mass communication (Dominick, 2010), media organisations in the country are engaging their audience like never before. Most media organisations in the country have personalised mobile applications, websites, and an array of social media platforms notably YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus; through which they make their contents readily available to today's bulging audience across varying platforms. Portable mobile devices (Smartphones and tablets), laptop and desktop computers are now used to receive media contents by the audience who are better equipped to engage the media.

Media organisations encourage their audience to interact with them through the various platforms provided in a number of ways. From news to sports, business, health,

environment to entertainment, media content producers now leave a line with the viewers through which they can “join the conversation”, or “share a report”. Many television stations now include segments in their major news bulletin where they report on audience feedback generated through the various social media platforms they have created. For example, Nigeria's nine-time television station of the year, Channels Television, has the i-witness segment in its “News at 10” where it shows selected news-worthy pictures sent in by audience members from across the country through the i-witness platform on its mobile app. Viewers are repeatedly reminded on how to participate for their pictures to stand a chance of being broadcast. The news segment has equally been developed into a 25-minutes programme tagged i-witness report in which the producer picks two of the pictures (or video) uploaded and do a follow-up to produce a detailed report on the issue originally reported by the “eye-witness reporter”.

Another independent television station, Television Continental (TVC), has a “Question of the Day” segment on the station's evening news. A question on a recent issue in the news is presented for viewers to respond to. Selected responses are then broadcast the following day by dedicated personnel of the medium in charge of the medium's online/social media platforms. Another question for the following day is usually presented after airing the viewpoints of the selected respondents. Media audience are thereby continuously engaged through varying online platforms, and are able to contribute to issues of public discourse; while equally generating news items for news media organisations. Based on these observations, we examine selected national newspapers published in the country to find out how they deal with readers' online interaction, and incorporate such into their print editions.

Research Questions

The following research questions that guided our enquiry were subsequently discussed:

1. How popular with Nigerian newspapers is the use of internet and social media - influenced columns?
2. What are the emerging themes of the internet and social media- influenced columns in Nigerian newspapers?

Method

We observed that some newspapers have created section dedicated to their online or social media interactions in their print editions. We therefore decided to examine as many national mainstream newspapers published in Nigeria we could assess around Lagos to find out those that had created new sections in their print editions focusing on the internet and online interactions of people. Twelve newspapers including The Punch, The Nation, Tribune, Guardian, Thisday, Daily Sun, New Telegraph, Daily Trust, Vanguard, National Mirror, Nigerian Pilot and Observer were purposively sampled . We flipped through every edition of the selected newspapers published in the month of July, 2015. Only three out of

these sampled newspapers have dedicated sections for audience's online interactions. The Punch has a two-facing page which it called i-punch; The Guardian has a one page section called e-GUARDIAN while Daily Trust has a one-page section named HAS#TAG. The sections are published only in the weekday editions of the three newspapers. The contents of the three sections were subsequently analysed qualitatively in the study. Our focus was however on the manifest content of the newspaper content rather than the rationale for such content.

The Punch's i-punch

The i-punch section in The Punch, which the newspaper refers to as “your daily internet monitor” is usually printed in colour and appears regularly between pages 10 to 20 of the newspaper. It has a number of regular columns thus:

Online articles: This is a component of i-punch section regularly positioned on the first column of the first page of the two opposite facing page of the i-punch. It is devoted to digital technology-related articles culled from websites of international media organisations and other websites. Among the stories that featured during the month under review are, “Social media privacy and users” culled from voanews.com (July 10); “How identical twins reconnected on YouTube” culled from theguardian.com (July 15); “Auto makers and digital security” culled from cheatsheet.com (July 16); “Major computer hacking forum shut down” culled from usatoday.com (July 17); etc. These articles mostly centred on creating awareness on issues surrounding digital and mobile technologies, internet and social media usage.

News: The news portion is the dominant component of the i-punch section usually positioned at the centre of the two-facing pages. It runs through the left-side page of the i-punch section and into the right-side page. The stories are usually accompanied by supporting cartoon illustrations. It features a news story usually generated from online interactions or postings of popular Nigerians with subsequent generated reactions from members of the public. Occasionally, it chronicles the features and shortcomings of websites of selected government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). The section basically makes news out of online and other social media interactions of varying segments of the society. It sometimes publishes stories outside the social media interactions that are considered relevant to digital technology and the resultant social media. This is evident in the story it published in the July 1 edition titled “Use digital technology to create jobs, youths urged” which originated from the newspaper's reporter's interview with a digital technology expert at the Pan African University, Lagos, Nigeria. The story challenged Nigerian youth on the productive and innovative use of digital technology to create economic gains for the country rather than enrich other countries by being mere consumers. Some other news stories that featured during the month include, “A peep into El-Rufai's social media community” (July 3), “Fraudsters

open multiple linkedIn accounts for ex-governors” (July 8), “Armed forces grapple with fake online recruiters” (July 10), “I earn \$50 per tweet, says ex-governor's daughter” (July 13), “When Abati got cold reception” (July 27).

Column: This regular component of the i-punch section is usually positioned on the opposite facing page. It features regular columnists writing about digital and mobile technology issues as it relates to everyday living and other varying aspects of human endeavour. Most of the writings centre on how individuals can harness the opportunities inherent in digital and mobile technologies in enhancing their day to day business and personal endeavours. Some of the columns that featured during the month under review were “Harnessing the gains of social media networking” by Segun Akiode (July 10); “How best to post on social media” by Tayo Elegbede (July 17); “What you require to build a smart website” by Adeola Kayode (July 21); “Dividends of mobile innovation” by Muyiwa Moyela (July 23); “Tips for writing a better blog” by Ifesinachi Okpagu (July 30).

Buzz...social media diary: This component of i-punch so named by the newspaper usually contains readers' comments on one or two recent news item(s). Then readers' comments usually start with the headline and a couple of introductory paragraphs on a recent news story as background to the issue. Selected readers' comments posted online on the particular story are then collated and presented under the story. Most of the stories that caught the interest of the readers sufficiently enough to be included in the newspaper border on governance, economy, and politics. Each edition featured readers' comments on only one or two of such stories. Some of the stories to which readers reactions were published included, “Okonjo-Iweala spent \$2.1bn without approval, says FG” (July 1), “Naira drops to 241 against dollar” (July 15), “Buhari, APC reps meeting ends in deadlock” (July 29).

The social media diary is not always about readers' comments. Occasionally, it features news, innovations and developments on any of the varying social media platforms. The July 8 edition features two of such articles without any readers' comments. The first article titled “IBM supercomputer increases access to clean water”, which reports recent scientific discovery facilitated by a virtual supercomputer created by IBM. The second article, “PS 2 game emulator arrives for android” describes a new innovation in mobile gaming.

Photo of the day: Another component of the i-punch section is the Photo of the day which usually features online generated weird and funny pictures from varying online platforms. It is mostly intended as a comic relief for readers. Most of the pictures posted in the section were sourced from Facebook and africagag.com. Some of the pictures that featured during the month under study were a Facebook Picture of a signpost that

reads “Please, Don't throw your cigarette ends on the floor, the cockroaches are getting cancer” (July 14). Another picture credited to africagag.com showed a man lying inside a deep freezer filled with water (July 13).

i-tip: The i-tip named segment provides a useful tip on proper utilisation of any of the varied digital and mobile technologies and enabling devices. The hints are succinctly presented in a sentence to grab the attention of the reader at a glance. It addresses issues covering telephone conversation, online working relationship, gadget maintenance, social media interactions, internet security, among others.

Trending Nigeria: This portion of the i-punch usually contain a list of 10 words or phrases trending on the internet across the country.

The newspaper also allocated an ear-piece space on the top-right corner of the facing page to advertisers. The space was never patronised by advertisers throughout the studied editions published in the month of July. The space was consistently vacant, with the inscription, “Do you want this space? Call: 08184737491”, featuring in all the editions examined throughout the month.



The Guardian's e-GUARDIAN

The Guardian has a one page section dedicated to the internet and other social media engagements tagged e-GUARDIAN. The section focuses on “readers' reactions to stories trending on The Guardian website, www.ngrguardiannews.com, and the social media”. The section appears on different pages of the newspaper. In the editions published in the

early days of the studied month, the section mostly appeared on page nine but moved to widely ranged pages as the month progressed appearing on page 49 (July 31), page 57 (July 29), page 70 (July 27), page 15 (July 23), and page 11 (July 21).

Typically, the page contains audience reactions to different news stories, features and opinion articles published a couple of days earlier in the newspaper's print and online editions. Each edition of the newspaper features readers' reactions to 3 to 8 different news headlines. The audience reactions are grouped under the headline of the earlier reported story. The number of comments published under each headline varies from two to 14 comments during the month under study. Unlike The Punch which features other text-based content on its i-punch section, the Guardian only focused its major text-based content on the online comments generated by its news stories, opinion articles and other components.

The majority of the stories that generated reader's reaction focused on governance, economy and politics. In addition, The Guardian published readers' reactions to stories concerning sports, security and occasionally health.

The e-Guardian page was spiced with two different images in every edition published during the month under review. The images were most likely culled from the internet even though the sources of majority of the pictures or images were not acknowledged. The pictures are weird and funny images that also demonstrate the creativity of the authors. Among the pictures that feature during the month under review are:

A plate containing gravels, nails, screw and nuts, leaves, among others creatively set to appear as food (July 31, p. 49).

A sign post that reads "Win a FREE ride in a Police car by shoplifting from this store. Lucky winners can also get their names in the newspaper for their friends to see! Wont mom be proud? (July 22, p. 15).

A seeming satellite dish made from cranes (July 16, p. 9).

A man queuing up with a keg in a wheel barrow behind car at a petroleum products filling station (July 15, p. 9).

Officials of Kano State Road Traffic Agency attempting to lead a donkey unto a truck with the caption, "Kano State Road Traffic Agency arrest donkey for traffic offence" (July 3).

A portion of the page is also dedicated to the social networking site, Twitter. With the constant heading: "Trending yesterday...on twitter", it highlights 10 trending words on twitter the previous day. It also includes tweets posted on any issue from any two twitter accounts.



Daily Trust's HAS#TAG

Daily Trust has a one-page section dedicated to the internet and other social media engagements tagged HAS#TAG. The newspaper noted describes its HAS#TAG section as containing “all the buzz that's hot on the web”. The placement of the section is irregular and it appears the newspaper places it in any available position. Sometimes the section disappeared completely likely due to preference for advertisement space.

Typically, the HAS#TAG section contains four basic components thus:

Online article: This is the dominant component of the page. It usually contains an article sourced online with accompanying graphic image. It focuses on varying issues relating to the effective and proper use of the social media or any of its varying platforms. Most of the stories provided useful information on how readers could maximise and harness the benefits inherent in social media for their personal and professional development. The sources of the articles and accompanying image are usually acknowledged. Some of the stories that featured during the month under review included: “Ways to have more relevant one-on-one conversations on social media” (July 1, p. 42), “Types of visual content that gets shared” (July 8, p. 42), “A quick guide to 10 social media platforms for the newbie (July 15, p. 42 & July 16, p. 47), “Follow fail: reasons you might not get twitter followers” (July 27, p. 49).

Images from the net: This part of the HAS#TAG section contain hilarious and weird images similar to the images usually published in The Punch's i-punch and The Guardian's e-Guardian. However, in addition to publishing the images, Daily Trust adds a rhetorical comical question regarding the content of the image to add to the humour. The sources of majority of the images were acknowledged and the newspaper tends to indicate when the source of an image could not be ascertained. Some of the image captions that featured during the month included: "Whole-rat meal: What will be your reaction if you were served this pounded yam and rat dish" (July 13, p. 53); "What will you do? The moment when an elephant chooses to play with an object and that object happens to be your car, you are in deep trouble...what would you do in this situation?" (July 20, p. 43); "How to paint a portrait. Art Class 101: You want to paint a portrait? Why waste time drawing on canvas when you can just paint the person directly like this kid in the picture" (July 30, p. 51).

Question of the day: This is usually a small strip below the page containing a question relating to a recent issue in the news which readers are expected to react to online. Some of the question that featured during the month included "N4bn debt: should WAEC seize results in 19 states?" (July 29, p. 45), "What do you think about America's refusal to sell arms to Nigeria?" (July 27, p. 49), "Nigeria is without ministers one month after. What do you think?" (July 8, p. 42).

From our Facebook page: This portion of the HAS#TAG section usually contains audience reactions to a question earlier posted under Question of the day copied from the newspaper's Facebook page. It usually features the Facebook profile picture of respondents and their usually short comments. The Facebook comments published in each edition range from three to six during the month studied.



Analysis and Discussion

1. Popularity of online-influenced section among Nigerian newspapers

During our study, we found that the online section is still very new and has not been widely accepted as a regular newspaper section by most Nigerian Newspapers. Out of the twelve newspapers examined in the study for online-dedicated section, only three had regular columns devoted to online interactions and needs of their audience and the general public. The three newspapers also have dedicated personnel for their respective sections, each of whom oversees the production and content of the page.

It should be noted that the online section being referred to differ significantly from the regular (information and communication technology) ICT sections already established in most newspapers. The ICT section usually covers stories relating to issues and developments in the general ICT. Our online-dedicated sections in contrast focus on enhancing public use of various online platforms and maximising the potential inherent therein. The fact that the three newspapers having the online-dedicated sections among the examined newspapers also have the regular ICT column, also confirmed the differences in orientation and scope.

In addition, the other newspapers, despite not creating online-dedicated sections in their print editions, have established web presence enabling them to make their content available across various digital and mobile platforms. These varied platforms also allow for user interaction through which they engage the public and allow audience control of information flow and consumption. Also, there are avenues provided for audience reaction through published contacts' telephone numbers and various social media handles in specific sections and opinion columns of the newspapers. The reason for their exclusion in our study is that the generated reactions are either not published or are published under the same section where the issue of discourse was first raised. Our focus is however on how Nigerian newspapers are able to creatively and successfully manage these online activities and interactions, with supporting elements, to produce a dedicated section in their print editions.

2. Emerging themes in online-influenced section published in Nigerian newspapers?

During the course of our analysis, a number of themes emerged thus:

- a. Public-driven content:** the dedicated online-influenced section analysed in the study shows a shift in newspaper content creation sources. Major parts of the two sections in the *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers rely on audiences' online postings; in addition to online postings, presence and interactions of prominent personalities and institutions within the country and beyond. *Daily Trust* also devotes one-fifth of the section five columns layout to audience's Facebook postings. This is a paradigm shift in the way newspaper contents are created, particularly in Nigeria where prominence and personality are the dominating determinants of news content. The emerging online-influenced section provides an avenue for ordinary and unknown individuals to become major voices in news reports as evidenced in *i-punch's* online

interaction driven stories. Besides the online-generated readers' comments provides an avenue for ordinary members of the society to become news commentators, expressing their views on issues of public discourse. Reprinting online-generated comment in the print edition of the newspapers further increases the visibility and reach of the diverse viewpoints expressed online. Such comments could provide a gauge for public perception of issues of public discourse which may influence the subsequent decision of policy makers and influencers.

- b. Watchdog role:** The newspapers also perform their watchdog role through the online sections by monitoring and reporting on the activities of governments through the online platforms of their ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). The watchdog role is also carried out through monitoring of online interactions of politicians, entertainers and other influential personalities within the society. By so doing these individuals and personnel of the government MDAs are expectedly cautious of their online interactions and likely to be mindful of the implication of their online postings.
- c. Promoting Personal development of readers:** the internet dedicated sections that have emerged are geared towards enhancing personal development of the readers. They provide information for readers to keep abreast of developments in the ever-evolving world of digital and mobile communications. They safeguard reader's interest by notifying them of activities of online fraudsters so as to beware of their online engagements. They also provide information on ethical, personal, and professional use of digital and social media technologies for maximum benefit.
- d. Information Role:** The online sections in newspapers provide an avenue for sharing information on innovations and developments of mobile and digital communications technologies, as well as the social media platforms. They also provide information on online activities of the public by reporting on what people are saying online and also the leading topics of discussion.
- e. Escape:** The online sections also provide entertainment with contents for readers to unwind and laugh; particularly with the funny and weird pictures that regularly grace their pages. Such pictures are likely to help ease tensions faced by readers from their day-to-day endeavours.
- f. An extension of the "third space":** The online-influenced sections may be described as an extension of what Wright (2012) described as "third space: online discussion spaces with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations". It is unlikely that the newspapers created their social media platforms solely as a forum for political discussion. Political issues however tend to

arise every now and then which readers tend to react to. Wright noted that the “third spaces” are linked through shared links that draw people together. By republishing online comments in their print editions, the newspapers are extending the avenue for their online audience to freely react to issues of public interest; and widening the reach of the varying viewpoints to its non-online audience.

- g. Susceptibility to Advertiser's domination:** the section is also susceptible to advertisers' domination as newspapers are forever likely to sacrifice other contents to meet the demands of advertisers. Although, the Punch newspaper only allocated a small ear-piece space to advertisers, there is every possibility that it may sacrifice some of the contents' page should an advertiser demand a larger space for its advertisement to be placed on that section. Also the haphazard placement of the sections in The Guardian and Daily Trust may not be unconnected to the newspapers' desire to satisfy advertisers' need for media space above other editorial content.

Implications of incorporating online interactions into the print editions of Nigerian newspapers.

The emerging practice of producing print newspaper columns or sections out of online interactions has the tendency of creating interest in digital and mobile technology issues among the older populations believed to be the major subscribers of newspaper print copies. It provides a platform of broadening the internet-based knowledge of its readers, creating some level of interest among readers across varying strata of the society. Creating contents that will naturally interest the youth may likely draw more youthful readers to a publication and also encourage them to regularly patronise the newspapers. Moreover, the availability of newspaper content on other electronic platforms increases the reach of the newspapers and the possibility of satisfying the internet-based information needs of their youth audience who may then be drawn to other contents of the newspaper.

The emerging online section may be perceived as an acknowledgement of the revolutionary tendency of the new media by conventional mass media, as it provides an opportunity to harness the inherent potential of the new media for the sustainability of the conventional mass media in our contemporary society.

Conclusion

The print column of online content, though yet to be widely adopted among Nigerian newspapers, has a great potential to develop into a regular section in Nigerian newspapers. This is more likely with the continuing affordability of the enabling gadgets and increasing number of youths within the country. It has the potential of attracting young readers to the newspapers as the section focuses on issues most likely to interest the youths. Getting the

youth population to read conventional newspapers is a major issue in newspaper journalism, and increasing readership is a major requirement for the sustenance of the industry. Newspapers are also making significant effort to reach the youth population by making their contents available through various platforms by creating online, mobile and digital versions of their contents. We believe that sustaining the print version of newspapers is vital for the industry and creating more stories and sections around digital and mobile technological issues, the social media, and other online platforms is one of the ways to stimulate young reader's interest in the physical print editions and also ensure the sustainability of newspapers in the age of new media. Therefore, there is an urgent need for more newspapers in the country to create similar online sections in their print editions so as to extend their reach and gain more patronage particularly from the dominant youthful audience.

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