



Publish or Perish: The case of a local Philippine E-Paper

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Abstract

This descriptive study determined whether a local daily tabloid in Cebu City, Philippines, called Sun Star Super balita Cebu would continue to survive in the coming years despite the presence of its e-paper counterpart or readers would prefer the digital format over its printed form. Eighty respondents conveniently selected and interviewed included jeepney and taxicab drivers, dispatchers, security guards, parents, house helps, and salespersons conveniently selected claimed that they preferred more the printed format due to its accessibility and were contented with the print platform; majority had no access to its e-paper or even not familiar with its concept; and Sun Star Superbalita Cebu would not totally go digital in the coming years, but would retain both its hard copy and its e-paper. The Uses and Gratification and Media Ecology Theories supported the findings leading to the conclusion that since the local tabloid, would not remain an e-paper only, but would retain its traditional print form, then, it has been true to its information function to the masses. Recommendations included that the tabloid continually improve its features; readers be gradually educated on the e-paper concept; that it continuously produce both print and e-paper formats; and news writers sustain or improve work ethics and standards.

Keywords: publish, perish, SunStar Superbalita Cebu, tabloid hard copy, e-paper

1. Introduction

Technology has always been the main driver to make things easier for people. Empirical evidence shows that in this digital age, everything around the community is a product of technology, whether out for driving or merely communicating with a friend over mobile phone. Indeed, things move faster and easier because of technology. Technology may be low, middle or high. Mass media messages also come to the audience in various forms whether low-tech, mid-tech or hi-tech. With the technology abounding in these global times, this needs to be studied as to its reach and influence so that better dissemination of information would be realized.

To illustrate the convenience and speed brought about by technology, is the people's accessibility of reading news stories. Before, people were just delimited to the availability of newspapers in order to know the latest news. This time, however, news is available over one's mobile phone, more popularly known as smart phone. In fact, one need not buy a newspaper just to have the latest scoop of news. Nowadays, news stories are available online and much more, for free.

Aside from news, company advertisements are also venturing to online marketing since it has a wider coverage and it is cheaper compared to the print advertisements, or print ads. "More people get their news from the Internet than from newspapers – and more ad dollars went to online outlets than to newspapers, too," Jolie O'Dell said in her article *For the First Time, More People Get News Online than from Newspapers* [O'Dell] ^[5].

With these developments, it is not surprising that online newspapers or also known as electronic newspapers or e-papers have become a trend among the world of mass

media. E-paper is known as the alter-ego of newspapers in the electronic world. Just like newspapers, people read news stories and advertisements from e-paper; this time, however, through the aide of gadgets such as smart phones, tablets, net books and laptops.

It has been empirically observed that electronic paper is now closer to the situation that the printing press invention in the 15th century would be replaced by the electronic or e-paper and library holdings of hard copies to be replaced only with chips that are convenient to read, requiring ultra-low power consumption, replacing most printed newspapers before the end of the next decade.

The *Newsweek* magazine is a good manifestation that construes how e-paper has become as the new "IT thing." For 79 years in the business as one of the forefront runners in print media, *Newsweek* decided to cease publication and opted to go digital. Accordingly, "the decision to go all-digital underscores the problems faced by newsweeklies, as more consumers favor tablets and mobile devices over print in an increasingly commoditized, 24-hour news cycle."

One type of technology which is used in journalism is the traditional newspaper. Newspaper comes in varied forms as to local, national, international; broadsheet or tabloid. Some newspapers also have their e-paper counterparts. In the case of Cebu City, Philippines, the tabloid paper SunStar Superbalita Cebu otherwise called SunStar Superbalita has been popular among many readers. With the onset of its e-paper also, it is deemed significant to study the state of the tabloid whether it would continue to stay as a tabloid, or would it slowly fade out and be replaced by its e-paper.

Because of the trend of some global newspapers and magazines shutting down in favor of their online formats,

this research paper seeks to determine if such can also happen in the local setting, specifically in Cebu City, Philippines.

This study, titled *Publish or Perish: The Case of A Local Philippine e-Paper*, aimed to reflect and analyse the future of the Cebuano local tabloid, *SunStar Superbalita*, investigating whether its Cebuano readers would agree to have only e-copies of the tabloid and replacing the printed format through and through in the coming years. Likewise, it is worth investigating what the future of local newspapers would be with the onset of technology or digital platform, specifically, the social media. Worth knowing would be the future of these local newspapers, in relation to the fate of *Newsweek*, *U.S. News* and *World Report*. The *Newsweek*, for instance, a print magazine, ceased its print publication on December 31, 2012 and transitioned to a digital platform known as *Newsweek Global*. According to *Newsweek* editor Tina Brown the entire concept of weekly news magazines has become outdated, as has the economics of print media in general. In a momentous (though not totally unforeseen) development, Brown has announced that the magazine will move to an all-digital format and shutter the print edition just shy of its 80th birthday [Bennet, 2012] ^[1]. Indeed this development of a global print news magazine may also have significance as regards the fate of Philippine local newspapers. One such example is the *SunStar Superbalita*. A study to look into the trend of local papers such as *SunStar Superbalita* would be a significant endeavor to find out and enable readers to contemplate if the e-paper alone would be acceptable to the Cebuano tabloid readers.

This study uses two mass communication theories. These are the Uses and Gratification Theory and the Media Ecology Theory. The Uses and Gratification Theory which was conceptualized by Blumler and Katz, suggests that consumers choose the best kind of media which they think can best satisfy their needs. Accordingly, there are five categories that state on the needs and gratification of the consumers. These are the cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and tension free needs. The Communication Theory Online Library (2013) said that the cognitive needs means that people choose media as their source of knowledge and other information they deem as important. Affective needs deal with emotions; hence, people use media to “satisfy their emotional needs” [Uses and Gratification theory in Mass Communication, Psychology, 2018] ^[10]. Personal needs, on the other hand, deal with the self-esteem of the consumers. They choose a medium that can help boost their confidence or morale in the society. The social integrative needs are more on the need to socialize with the people around. Nowadays, most people socialize through online social networking sites. Lastly, the tension free needs deal with stress relievers. People need to watch TV, surf the internet, read magazines and the like in order to relieve themselves from stress.

As used in this study, the Uses and Gratification Theory explains that the readers of *SunStar Superbalita* find gratification in using electronic gadgets when reading the news stories either in its e-paper or in its print format.

The second theory which supports this study is the Media Ecology Theory. Introduced by Postman in 1968, the Media Ecology Theory was given more life by McLuhan in 1964 ^[3]. According to McLuhan (CCJK, 2013), the “media ecology theory centers on the principles that technology

puts profound influences on the society while technology remains control over virtually all walks of life. It is a study of how media and communication processes affect human perception and understanding” (McLuhan, 1964) ^[3]. McLuhan cited four epochs which construed technology’s influence to media – Tribal Era, Literate Era, Print Era and Electronic Era.

McLuhan also emphasized that “it is the medium which has the ability to change the meaning of a message which makes it more powerful than the message” (McLuhan, 1964) ^[3]. McLuhan also introduced the concept of global village wherein technology makes the world smaller. He said: Instead of face-to-face communication, people prefer to converse using Face Time on their smart phone, thus shaping the way the society communicates nowadays. (McLuhan, 1964) ^[3]. In the same vein, Deputy Director Amy Mitchell said that “News organizations have a big opportunity in the social and mobile realms” [Mitchell and Rosenstiel, 2012] ^[4].

Media ecology is the study of media as media, which follows from McLuhan’s (1964) ^[3] famous maxim, “the medium is the message. Such maxim is McLuhan’s wake-up call to individuals who tend to ignore the medium and only pay attention to content. McLuhan’s goal was the liberation of the human mind and spirit from its subjugation to symbol systems, media, and technologies. This can only begin with a call to pay attention to the medium, because it is the medium that has the greatest impact on human affairs, not the specific messages which are sent or received. It is the symbolic form that is most significant, not the content. Strate [2008] ^[8] mentions that it is the technology that matters the most, its nature and its structure.

In this study, the Media Ecology Theory is used. It can best explain the impact of technology on the preference of *SunStar Superbalita* readers when it comes to the format they want for *SunStar Superbalita* – whether they want it in e-format or still in print format.

These two aforementioned theories serve as foundation to this study as they could explain whether *SunStar Superbalita* is ready to become an e-paper fully without producing anymore its print format for the next ten years based on the preference of its readers.

The Uses and Gratification and Media Ecology Theories serve as anchors to this qualitative research which is deemed significant as it analyzes how media should perform its tasks and fulfill the best interests of the public, manifesting its social responsibility in providing the public with relevant information in a most convenient way. By understanding the interests and needs of its readers in this digital age and delivering to them in a manner appropriate to their needs and capabilities, the audience could still be informed critically and develop or enhance their media consumption quality.

Since this study analyzes how media should perform its tasks and fulfil the best interest of the public, this research is deemed significant as it could contribute to the social responsibility of the media in providing the public news and other relevant information in a most convenient way. Most importantly, this study contributes to the academic research and analysis on how media changes through time. It elucidated and gave better understanding on how media switches its style of news delivery in accordance to what is new in the society.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study uses the descriptive method employing the interview as the technique in gathering data from the respondents of this study.

2.2 Research Respondents

A total of 80 respondents of this research consisted of 10 jeepney drivers, 10 taxicab drivers, 10 dispatchers, 10 security guards, other newspaper readers, such as 10 mothers, 10 fathers, 10 househelps, and 10 salespersons, who had access to the SunStar Superbalita tabloid. Convenient sampling was used in the selection of the respondents.

2.3 Research Instruments

Interview, observation, and data analysis, were used as tools in the study. With the use of interview, observation, and data analysis, as tools in the research, the study contemplated on the future of the Cebuano local tabloid, SunStar Superbalita, in becoming an e-paper for the next 10 years, based on the respondents' perceptions. This instrument contained questions that asked the respondents whether they read the tabloid, what particular sections they liked to read, what their perceptions were on the present form of the tabloid, whether they have access to smartphone or technology that would replace the paper, whether they find it more accessible and convenient if they would have the e-paper, and what their preference would be in the next 10 years, that is, either the tabloid paper or the e-paper.

2.4 Research Locale

The research has been conducted in one of the cities in the Philippines, that is, Cebu City, popularly known as the Queen City of the South. The respondents came from various barangays in Cebu City and were conveniently selected and interviewed as to their ideas and perceptions with regard to the phenomenon on the future of the SunStar Superbalita, a local newspaper tabloid whether it would continue to survive in the coming years or continue to print out hard copies despite the prevalence of technologies which have been always upgrading periodically as well as the existence of its online paper still of the same name, SunStar Superbalita.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The interviewees chosen conveniently were approached and requested to be the respondents of the study and were asked to sign a letter of informed consent on the conduct of the interview. After the data were gathered, these were tabulated and collated. Respondents' names were coded to ensure confidentiality. After the interview, the names were held in strictest confidence. The analyzed data were discarded after.

3. Results and Discussions

In sum, the study presents the following findings: 1) SunStar Superbalita readers are contented on the print format it has at present; 2) majority of the respondents either do not have access to the e-paper of the SunStar Superbalita or are not familiar with the concept of the e-paper; 3) and SunStar Superbalita would not totally go digital in the coming years, but would retain both its tabloid or hard copy format and its e-paper format.

Data gathered reveal that respondents are contented on the print format of the SunStar Superbalita tabloid local paper. Among the five reasons given which include the presence of clear, complete, and varied features, and good layout, the main reason for their preference for the SunStar Superbalita is the simple language used by the tabloid. This finding shows the application of the Uses and Gratification Theory. Since the mass media consumers prefer the printed form of the tabloid, they have an active role in choosing the kind of media source they like to use. The users choose the media source that can best feed their interest; that is, in relation to their comprehension aspect. In this particular instance, the SunStar Superbalita reader respondents are gratified upon using the said tabloid because its simple language, which ranks as the number one reason, caters to their level of understanding, or their easy comprehension.

As to the second research objective whether the respondents or readers have daily access to SunStar Superbalita, majority answered that they do not have daily access to the Internet through personally-owned laptops/netbooks, tablets and smart phones. This finding shows the application of the Uses and Gratification Theory. What the mass media consumers prefer is the printed form of media which is the newspaper tabloid, SunStar Superbalita. The media users or the audience have an active role in choosing the kind of media source he/she likes to use. The users choose the media source that can best feed their interest. They have the freedom to choose what media they will use and how such media can affect them. For the respondents, it can be implied that they belong to the low economic stratum of the society because majority of them cannot afford to buy laptops, netbooks, Ipads, Ipods, tablets, and smartphones. It further implies that this group of readers prefer to read the print newspaper rather than the e-paper.

With regard to the third objective of this research which is to analyze whether Sun. Star Superbalita readers are familiar with the concept of e – paper of the tabloid, the data yielded that only 27% have familiarity with the e-concept of the tabloid. This number is less than one third of the total population. The Media Ecology Theory as found in Rainie and Fox, 2012 ^[6], states that the rapid adoption of cell phones and, especially, the spread of internet-connected smart phones are changing people's communications with others and their relationships with information. Users' ability to access data immediately through apps and web browsers and through contact with their social networks is creating a new culture of real-time information seekers and problem solvers" [Rainie and Fox, 2012] ^[6].

In this particular population, however, such is not the case. The data obtained imply that the majority of the research population are not so immersed yet with the use of technology or online media in terms of obtaining news information. They still rely heavily on the print form of the tabloid. On the contrary, the population may have their own individual cellphones, yet their use of the communication gadget is implicitly either for call or text messaging, or not mainly for the information getting. However, in European countries, news is better preferred to be read online. A recent study published by the University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, based on surveys in UK, US, France, Germany and Denmark, found that while the majority of Germans prefer print news over online, US and UK residents prefer to access their news online [Some Countries Still Prefer to Read the Newspaper, 2012] ^[7].

With regard to the fourth objective which is to evaluate whether SunStar Superbalita readers prefer to have an e-format of the tabloid instead of its current print format, the answer gathered through the data is negative. Respondents answered that they want the hard copy of the tabloid, its print form be continually published daily. Their answer implies that although there is the onset of technology, more readers still prefer the traditional medium, one of which is the print form because they have been used to this, they have felt comfortable in using their preferred medium because they feel gratified that their need is answered. It can be said that the traditional media have a place in the hearts of majority of the readers since these are very accessible and affordable aside from being able to get information right away without going to a computer cafe or searching for an internet connection.

Data also reveal that 75 % of the total respondents are not in favor of phasing out the print form of the SunStar Superbalita tabloid. They would rather have the tabloid retained rather than having to access its e-paper. This goes to show that in the Uses and Gratification Theory, the readers choose the media source that can best feed their interest. In this particular case, it can be inferred that the respondents still prefer the conventional form of getting the news or they would want to be informed of what is going on in the community, across the nation and around the world through the conventional paper format because they could get all of these information through buying a cheap form of mass medium which they could just bring anywhere, read anytime, and read again in case they want to go back to the full details with deeper understanding, and at their convenience. Moreover, today, when readers easily depend on their phones, tablets or the Internet to stay connected to one another and know the events around the world, they could not get the total or complete stories from these technologies which provide fleeting stories and so the need for interpretation has been increased. The people need a medium that gives only brief, easy-to-understand sound bites, but a complete perfect counterpart to the other short messages that could be given by the newspapers which could help them interpret the news they get from the gadgets [Style Over Substance The Online Newspaper: A Postmodern Medium. Volume 4, Issue 1: Current Thinking on the Economics of Electronic Publishing, 1998] ^[9].

With the aforementioned response from the readers whether they prefer to have an e-format of the SunStar Superbalita tabloid, and their corresponding reason, it logically follows that SunStar Superbalita would not totally go digital in the next 10 years. In other words, it would not totally leave its paper form. Instead, it would retain its printed form, while still having their e-paper. As such, SunStar Superbalita would cater to both the masses who could afford only its printed form, and would also continue to serve the digital migrants and natives who would access the news through the internet or the e-paper of the said tabloid. This finding is similar to a report made from the site called Mail Online made by Daily Mail Reporter when he says that the rapid growth of smartphones and electronic tablets makes the internet for people to get the news from [Daily Mail Reporter] ^[2]. Internet will soon be top choice to get news in America as it overtakes newspapers for first time, 2011].

In sum, the study gives the following findings: 1) SunStar Superbalita readers are contented on the print format it has right now due to its simple language used; 2) majority of the

respondents do not have access to the e-paper of the SunStar Superbalita; 3) or they are not familiar with the concept of the e-paper; 4) majority prefer the printed form or tabloid version instead of the e-paper; 5) and SunStar Superbalita would not totally go digital in the next 10 years, but would retain both its tabloid or hard copy format and its soft copy or e-paper form, too.

4. Conclusion

On the bases of the findings of the study, since the Cebuano local tabloid, SunStar Superbalita, would not totally become an e-paper, but will still produce its printed form in the next 10 years or so, then, the printed form would not perish; instead, it would continue to publish or exist for the target reader segments of the local daily. It can be concluded that the SunStar Superbalita is true to its function of giving information to the public who are both the masses or CDE classes and those who belong to the AB audience segments. Being true to its most important function to inform, and role as a mass medium, the local daily would be continually updated on matters of public concern.

5. Recommendations

The study recommends that the SunStar Superbalita tabloid be continually improved by management by adding features that could maximize media use like entertaining, educating, and also helping mold the public opinion. Likewise, the readers may be gradually informed or educated on the e-paper concept to be abreast of the technological advancements of the times. Further, it is recommended that said news outfit continue to publish hard copies or print format while continuing to go digital to cater to all audience types, who would be gratified in being served. Since the e-paper would not perish, therefore it is urged that the news writers and staff be loyal to their work as well as sustain it; if not, improve their work ethics and standards since many readers are wanting to be informed through the said SunStar Superbalita tabloid.

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