

ADOPTION OF DIGITAL MEDIA BY AFRICAN LANGUAGE PRINT NEWSPAPERS: THE CASE OF *ISOLEZWE*

Abiodun Salawu, Fortune Tsutsa & Phillip Mpofo

ABSTRACT

Digital media have transformed media's news gathering, production and news dissemination traditions. However, African language newspapers' use of digital media has been overlooked and understudied. Therefore, this study explores the adoption of digital media by *Isolezwe*, a South African indigenous language newspaper that publishes in IsiZulu. Data were gathered using the interview and observation methods. Deploying strands drawn from media convergence and diffusion of innovation theories, the study shows the convergence of African language print media and digital media, and advancement of African language newspapers towards increasing their digital and social media presence. This development has positively enhanced *Isolezwe*'s journalistic functions of newsgathering and dissemination. The study provides insights into understanding African language journalism in the context of the advancement of digital and communication technologies. Findings from this research show that *Isolezwe* has expanded its digital presence to social media. Over and above the online version, *Isolezwe* is also actively engaged on Twitter and Facebook which are the two most popular social networking sites in South Africa. The platforms are strategically deployed for newsgathering and news dissemination purposes. This is a timely contribution to existing scholarship on the adoption of digital media by indigenous languages newspapers in South Africa in particular and Africa in general. The study also provides insights into understanding African language journalism in the context of the advancement of digital and communication technologies.

Keywords: African language newspaper, digital media, *Isolezwe*, news dissemination, newsgathering

INTRODUCTION

While literature on African language media is burgeoning, the adoption of digital media by African language print media remains understudied. However, present literature show that digital media as modern innovations have transformed and revolutionised the investigation, storage, publishing, and consumption of information in today's world (Alejandro, 2010). Ultimately, the said digital revolution has changed the media industry's journalistic traditions in terms of news gathering, news production, and news dissemination (Boczkowski, 2005; Mdlongwa, 2009).

Previously, media personnel relied on physical presence at geographical places and events of news, such that the news was gathered using traditional methods of journalism that involved interaction with sources, journalists' observation, telephone conversations, and press conferences (Krotoski, 2011). Digital media instead, have created new inventive methods of news collection

and gathering- journalists can now discover fresh events, and actually gather information from digital platforms that include social media. The print media industry relied on traditional journalism's news dissemination methods that primarily involved physical distribution of daily, weekly, or monthly hardcopies of newspapers. However, following the increased use of digital media, most newspaper establishments have created online platforms that can be useful in generating news and distributing news. Thus, in this digital era, newspaper stories are also shared news on digital media platforms such as webpages and social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Use of digital platforms of sharing news are hailed for their efficiency and facilitation of interaction between media and audiences, and among audiences (Van der Wurff et al, 2008; Schifferes et al, 2014).

In spite of this, scholars have remained adamant that new media, that is, digital media will not supplant traditional forms of media such as the hard copy newspaper and radio, instead newspapers are pushed to adapt the new media for them to find different niches (Glantz, 2004). In economic terms, owing to the decline of newspaper revenues that may be necessitated by decreased hardcopy circulation and advertising returns, newspaper publishers may turn to digital platforms (Dywer, 2010; Van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014).

However, the adoption of digital media by African language newspapers in their journalistic operations has not been considerably investigated. Present studies have focused on the adoption of digital media by English language newspapers (Mabweazara, 2010). Yet, African language newspapers are also crucial means for disseminating development communication and promoting regional and national cultural identities (Mpofu & Salawu, 2018). Other studies also debate issues relating to sustainability and tabloidisation of African language newspapers (Salawu, 2006; Ndlovu, 2016; Wasserman & Galitz, 2013; Mpofu & Salawu, 2018).

Given that African language press have unique historical experiences, successes and failures, it would be disingenuous to generalise findings on English language newspapers' adoption of digital media. Therefore, this study analyses the use of digital media by *Isolezwe*, an African language newspaper in South Africa that publishes in IsiZulu language in its journalistic functions of news gathering and dissemination. This aim is pursued by exploring the extent to which *Isolezwe* deploy digital media for journalistic purposes and broadly the dynamics involved in African language digital journalism. The study is a timely contribution to limited literature on African language digital journalism, especially providing insights into understanding the adoption and adaptation of digital media by indigenous language newspapers in South Africa in particular and Africa in general.

The article is organised into six sections. This introduction is followed by the literature review section which contextualises the use of digital media by African language newspapers within existing literature on digital journalism and African language media. The theoretical framework section discusses the study's theoretical lens that informs this study. The methodology section outlines the structure of the inquiry, as well as the methods that were employed in the study. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of the study findings. The penultimate section discusses the findings within the context of the above discussed theoretical framework and existing literature. As a final point, the conclusion shows the contribution of the study to the limited scholarship on the adoption of digital media by African language newspapers in South Africa in particular, and Africa in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section contextualizes the use of digital media by African language newspapers by appraising literature relevant to this study. Present literature show that the web has transformed the world, and has also revolutionised how information is stored, published, searched, and consumed (Alejandro, 2010). In particular, the development of the Internet has given rise to the development of digital media and content (Jenkins, 2006). Digital media refers to digital methods, systems and apparatus that include among others the Internet, audios, videos, computer software, and images that are used for interactive purposes. It facilitates the existence of many other communication technologies including social media, websites, eBooks, and databases. These digital technologies are often used as means of distributing content and news to people. The number of people using digital media has also increased over time. It is important, therefore, to understand how African language newspapers that often lag behind have adopted digital media and the associated infrastructure of social media for journalistic purposes of news gathering and dissemination.

Digital revolution has transmuted the media industry to a point where media personnel have been prompted to adopt new processes and practices for them to remain viable (Pavlik, 2004; Mdlongwa, 2009; Boczkowski, 2005). Specifically, Boczkowski (2005) suggests that digital media have influenced newspapers and their traditions. Use of digital media is argued to be effective in the collection, production and dissemination of news. Before the emergence of digital media, newspaper personnel relied on being physically present at events, places and incidents that they considered newsworthy. To gather information, they relied on press conferences and interviews reports. In terms of production, newspapers were produced through writing which is still important part of newspaper production even in today's digitalised world. Newsgathering is an important element in newspaper production. The four most commonly used methods in news gathering used in traditional journalism are observation, telephone conversations, research and interviews (Krotoski, 2011). Observation entails the journalists' actual presence at an event and then reporting what would have been seen in the form of a news story. However, the advent of digital media has changed the information environment for journalists (Williams & Nicholas, 1997). Digital media have created new ways of news production that include publishing raw information in forms of video, audios and pictures without writing anything but just titles. In the modern and digital world journalists can learn about an event and gather information from the digital platforms such as social media without being physically present at the news scene. It is also important to explore how African language newspapers like *Isolezwe* have adopted and adapted to new information gathering and dissemination processes that are necessitated by digital media.

At the end of the journalistic processes, there is a process of distributing the collected news which is an important part of media industry. News dissemination refers to the entire process by which specific contents are articulated, selected, transformed into news, and received by news audience (Karlsson, 2011). News dissemination involves processes of verbalization, mediation and reception (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, Hanitzsch, & Nagar, 2016.). Verbalization refers to the circulation of claims, frames and agendas from sources of news and information such as digital media and newspapers. Mediation refers to the selection and transformation of the articulated content by the professional news media platforms either digital media or hard copy newspapers.

Reception refers to the appropriation and (re)use of the distributed news content by audiences. Therefore, this study explores the use of digital media in the verbalisation, mediation and reception of African language media content using the *Isolezwe* example.

Prior to the digitalisation drive, the newspaper industry relied on the publication of daily, weekly, or monthly hardcopies. The influential development of Internet saw paid circulation decreasing and a shift from print to new media (Baben, 2015). The increased use of digital media in the media industry has resulted in the development of online platforms that are used to generate news and distribute news in digital form. Digital media have made it possible for news stories to be shared through digital media platforms such as webpages and social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Van der Wurff et al (2008) and Schifferes et al. (2014) show that digital platforms are characterised by attractive features that include interactivity, selectivity, speed, use of multimedia, and easy updating to provide attractive online news and advertising services, which makes migration from hard copy to digital newspaper imperative for publishers.

Furthermore, online readers of newspapers are now able to create and circulate content through sharing among themselves and also to the newspaper producers. Hermida (2010) argues that the Internet has changed the relationship between journalists and audiences, that is, from a one-way, asymmetric model of communication to a more participatory and collective system, where citizens have the ability to participate in news production processes. Spence *et al.* (2017) terms this practice exemplification to refer to the use of emotional and arousing messages or images as responses by readers that can show their perceptions of events, individuals, and organizations. Considering that present studies have largely focused on English language newspapers, it is pertinent to examine African language newspaper online readers' interaction with the newspaper, and among themselves.

Scholars such as Van der Wurff et al (2008) and Jenkins (2006) have predicted that print newspapers and traditional newspaper publishers may become obsolete in the digital era. However, the other perspective on the contrary show that new media do not necessarily replace existing media but rather force them to adapt and find different niches (Glutz *et al.*, 2006). The general observation is that digital media have brought simplicity and efficiency in journalism in terms of news collection and news dissemination. Therefore, due to the increased use of digital media in the media industry, it is imperative to ascertain African language newspapers' use digital media in their journalism functions in the context expressed concerns on their sustainability in the context of the favoured English language press.

The current studies that treat the impact of digital media on the newspapers industry have shown concern on the effect of digital media on newspapers' revenues due to the decline in hardcopy circulation and advertising returns (Dwyer, 2010; Van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014). Use of digital media by African language newspapers in their journalistic operations remains understudied. According to Mabwezara (2010), African studies have emphasised issues around the democratisation of the media, as well as new technologies and their role in political and democratic processes. Studies that have focused on how newspapers have adopted digital media in their journalistic functions have largely focused on English language newspapers (Mabwezara, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to study how African language newspapers, in this case *Isolezwe* are adapting to the use digital media in news gathering and dissemination.

Mpofu and Salawu (2018) show that African language newspapers are vital for disseminating development communication to ordinary people as well as ensuring their participation, promoting regional and national cultural identities, and development of African languages. Existing studies on African languages have largely focused on sustainability issues and the tabloidisation of African language press (Salawu, 2006, 2013; Ndlovu, 2016; Wasserman & Ndlovu, 2015; Mpofu & Salawu, 2018). With specific reference to South Africa, Salawu (2015) shows that in 1930, there were 19 registered African language newspapers but today most of those newspapers are now non-existent. This is an indication of the volatility of African language press in post-colonial Africa. The foregoing validates the need to explore African language newspapers' adoption and adaptation of digital media in the journalistic functions of news gathering, production and dissemination.

METHODOLOGY

The study explores the adoption of digital media by *Isolezwe*- an African language newspaper in its journalistic practices of news gathering and news dissemination which are qualitative and subjective matters. Hence, the study adopts an interpretive research paradigm that helps to understand the world from the perspectives of the participants (Ponelis, 2015). *Isolezwe* was purposively selected since it is one of the few South African indigenous language newspapers that have survived the test of time, and which has a significant digital presence. Data was gathered from twenty-five purposively and conveniently selected participants that comprise of the Editor and four journalists, as well as twenty readers of the newspaper. Participants were identified because of their involvement in daily functions of the newspaper, primarily the gathering and dissemination of news. Using personal interviews, the Editor and journalists provided hands-on data on their involvement in digital journalism. Through questionnaire, readers provided audience's perspectives on the African language newspapers' use of digital platforms. We also observed instances and patterns of *Isolezwe's* use of digital and social media platforms for newsgathering and news dissemination. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, that is, by identifying, reporting and analysing themes that emerged from the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis and discussion of findings were done within the context of the above discussed theoretical framework and existing literature. We ensured that data collection, data analysis and reporting of findings were conducted ethically, that is, by adhering to the ethical standards that govern good research practice. Specifically, permission to conduct research was granted from *Isolezwe* and the involved research participants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by the media convergence and diffusion of innovation theories. Media convergence entails the flow of content across different forms of media as they come together (Jenkins, 2006). Specifically, the theory describes how different mass medium eventually merge (Paine, 2015). Media convergence entails the coming together of different media in the context of new technologies in a way that redefine the media environment. This convergence changes relationships that exists between technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences, thereby

blurring the boundaries between old and new media. The current study is interested in the convergence of print and digital technology, that is, newspaper industry's utilisation of digital media to achieve its goals. The convergence can manifest at various levels, that is, global, technical, economic, cultural or organic levels (Jenkins, 2008). Economic convergence happens when a company controls several products or services within the same industry. In this study, *Isolezwe's* use different digital technologies to position itself in the digital world, when it is traditionally a print company is a form of technical convergence. There is also organic convergence where there is adoption and concurrent use of different multimedia, which is an emerging feature in the newspaper industry. Cultural and global convergence refer to the flow of content across various platforms that include sharing of cultural content using digital platforms despite geographic position, a feature that can enhance African language newspapers' newsgathering and dissemination mechanisms in the digital world. Technological convergence refers to the merging of technologies such as newspapers and digital platforms, in ways that alter patterns of news creation, consumption, and interpersonal interaction (Jenkins, 2006; Kumar, 2017). This theoretical lens provides the basis for understanding the convergence of African language newspapers with digital media, that is, the transformation of African language journalism in the digital era.

To explain the steps and factors that may contribute to the adoption of new media, the study also deploys the diffusion of innovation theory. Diffusion of innovations theory explains how, why, and at what rate new ideas, products, and services spread (or are rejected) through a social system over time, and with what consequences. (Rogers, 2010). Diffusion is the instant flow of ideas and technologies, while innovation refers to a newly introduced method, idea or product. The diffusion of innovation theory explains how innovations like digital media gets to be adopted by different sections of users. In this study digital media are the innovation while diffusion is the adoption of digital media by African language newspapers in their journalistic practices. According to Jeong *et al* (2017), the adoption of an innovation is influenced by five main factors that are relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trial ability, observability. Therefore, this study analyses the relative advantage brought by digital media to African language journalism. The study also checks the compatibility and complexity of digital media with African language newspapers' newsgathering and dissemination methods. Furthermore, using the diffusion of innovation theory's categories of adopters, the study ascertains the *Isolezwe's* level of adoption of digital media in comparison to the English language newspapers.

FINDINGS

The study analysed *Isolezwe's* adoption and use of digital media in its journalistic functions. That is, it explored the extent to which the newspaper employ digital media for news collection and dissemination. The study explored how digital media are used in gathering news and disseminating news to readers using digital platforms. The purpose is to understand African language newspapers' adoption and use of digital media in South Africa in particular and Africa in general. In this section we present and analyse the findings for this study following a thematic form drawn from the collected data.

Isolezwe's Presence on The Digital Space

To appreciate *Isolezwe's* adoption and use of digital media in news gathering and news dissemination, it is imperative to ascertain the extent to which digital media, and in what forms have been adopted, particularly from the perspective of editor and journalists. Interviews with the newspaper Editor and journalists reveal that use of digital media in news gathering and news dissemination has been embraced at *Isolezwe*. Firstly, the study established that *Isolezwe* personnel have incorporated the use of digital media technologies such as computers, smartphones, tablets and iPads in news gathering and dissemination. This shows that the newspaper is fast moving towards becoming a new media company where journalists are expected to be multimedia adept. Secondly, the newspaper now has an online version which can be accessed on different digital technology devices that include desktop computers, laptops, tablets, iPads, and mobile phones. This means that though *Isolezwe* has largely remained a print company, it now has a digital version which can be accessed in digital form readers. The online version is uploaded with news few hours after print copies are sold and is updated regularly with breaking stories.

According to one *Isolezwe* factsheet, the audience's age ranges from 15 to 50+, and they are predominately males who are approximately 53% of the total population of readers, and the newspaper's readership is approximately 1 157 000, with a circulation of about 94 581, and an 85% daily purchase (www.isolezwe.co.za, accessed 15. 10. 2017). Against the backdrop of dwindling circulation of print copies in the context of advancements in new digital and communication technologies, *Isolezwe* have opted for digital media to reach audiences of different age groups and social classes. Thus, just like English language newspapers, *Isolezwe* now has significant digital presence to survive in the digital era. However, *Isolezwe's* deployment of the digital version primarily safeguards the existence of the print version. The digital version is targeted at a particular niche of readers who are technologically savvy, but not necessarily to eclipse the print version.

Isolezwe's Social Media Presence

The findings show that *Isolezwe* has also expanded its digital presence to social media. Over and above the online version, *Isolezwe* is also actively engaged on Twitter and Facebook- the two popular social networking sites in South Africa. The platforms are strategically deployed for newsgathering and news dissemination purposes. To show the importance social media is given at *Isolezwe*, two staff members "are dedicated to growing social media presence of the newspaper" (Interview with *Isolezwe* Editor, October 17, 2017). The interactive nature of social media is purposefully deployed in news gathering and news dissemination activities, that is, digital journalism. Over and above traditional methods, journalists at *Isolezwe* also gather news on Twitter and Facebook through the use of user-generated content which is posted and shared on these platforms. Since social media pages afford readers with chance to post stories, journalists can discover news on Twitter and Facebook. Thus, through interaction with the online readers, *Isolezwe* journalists gather and generate news. On the other hand, social networking sites are also useful in publishing breaking stories in a fast and efficient way. Journalists also post digital images that tell stories directly on social media platforms. Though *Isolezwe* has an online version, the

interactive nature of Twitter and Facebook and their large following increases the visibility of and interest in the newspaper. Specifically, Twitter and Facebook affords readers with options to follow the newspaper, comment, and share the uploaded trending news stories. Ultimately, social media pages enhance the publishing of breaking stories at whatever time of the day. We also observed that *Isolezwe*'s social media pages are connected to other blogs and other newspaper's social pages where stories are constantly shared. The foregoing indicates that *Isolezwe* journalists strategically utilises social media platforms for newsgathering and news dissemination.

Impact of Digital Media on Isolezwe's Journalistic Functions

The foregoing has shown that the adoption of digital and social media has positively revolutionised *Isolezwe*'s journalistic operations. Use of digital media technologies has greatly changed ways in which news is gathered and disseminated to readers. Responses from the Editor show that use of digital media gadgets, the online edition and social media accounts of have modernized journalism at *Isolezwe*. Firstly, both journalistic practices of news gathering and dissemination are now quicker than it was traditionally. On one end, journalists now expeditiously gather news stories, photos and videos, and produce them for dissemination or even published straight from the field. On the other end, readers also use digital technology to download news in forms text, images, or videos from the newspaper's online version and social media accounts. On the part of newspaper personnel and technologically savvy readers, newsgathering/dissemination and reception has become straightforward and convenient. Secondly, *Isolezwe*'s digital journalism provides for more heightened newspaper-readers relationship characterised by interaction as noted on the comments on the online version and the newspaper's social media handles. However, the said convenience is relished by a niche of readers with the technological know-how and interest. Responses show that there are still readers who still prefer the hard copy of *Isolezwe*. Hence, presently the digital platforms provide the auxiliary function to the hard copy. Overall, the findings show that digital media have enhanced the newsgathering and dissemination operations of *Isolezwe* and its accessibility to a widened audience. Thus, *Isolezwe*'s adoption of digital media has moved the institution from 'template journalism', that is, from using the obvious routes of news gathering and news dissemination. This exposé shows that this African language newspaper has exploited the digital specific opportunities which are based on the use of multimedia and digital platforms that are modern, timeous, convenient, interactive and easy to update. As a result, *Isolezwe* has remained an important source of information in the South African IsiZulu speaking community in the digital age.

DISCUSSION

The study was set out to examine the use of digital media by *Isolezwe*, an African language newspaper in its journalistic functions of news gathering and dissemination. Results show that the newspaper has significantly adopted digital media technologies as shown by the existence of the online version, social media presence, journalists' use of digital media technologies, as well as online readers' interaction with the newspaper. *Isolezwe*'s personnel have now enhanced their journalistic functions of newsgathering and disseminate news by utilising digital devices and

increasing the newspaper's digital and social media presence. This indicates the newspaper's convergence with digital and social media to create a more functional newspaper that can be accessed from variety of options, including social media. *Isolezwe's* use of digital media signifies the diffusion of digital media as an innovation to African language newspapers, and the convergence of African language print media with digital media.

The above response is demonstrated by *Isolezwe's* use of digital media in its journalistic functions of news gathering and news dissemination. The study exposed that this African language newspaper can now be accessed online just like most English language newspapers in South Africa. The practitioners who include the journalists use different digital devices such as mobile phones, tablets, iPads, and computers to gather and disseminate news. The newspaper has active Twitter and Facebook accounts which are instrumental in gathering and disseminating news. Ultimately, the newspapers' interaction with readers has greatly increased. Furthermore, the use of digital media by *Isolezwe* has widened its readership through the addition of a niche of online readers. Overall, the study shows that the adoption and use of digital media by the *Isolezwe* newspaper has enhanced its operations, thereby making it more efficient in newsgathering and dissemination as well as in interacting with readers.

Therefore, the study corroborates existing literature which shows that the convergence traditional forms of media such as newspaper with digital media, an innovation that enhance journalistic operations and improves efficiency (Pavlik, 2004; Jenkins, 2008). It is proven that digital media and the technologies enhance the speed of journalism in collecting news (Schifferees et al, 2014). Digital media technologies makes it easier for reporters to gather and disseminate information with sophisticated equipment, and enables information to be disseminated at a faster rate. News gathering has improved mainly due to increased mobile phones equipped with cameras, thereby enabling live streaming of videos, photos and other content relatively way easier (Umair, 2016). The adoption of a new innovation of digital media has transformed its newsgathering and dissemination at *Isolezwe*, and has widened the audience. This has made it a functional and relevant newspaper in the context of technological advancements and the overbearing competition posed English language newspapers. The study findings also confirm the increased use of websites and social media by newspapers, including African languages and their usefulness in news gathering and news dissemination (Schulte, 2009; Hutchinson. 2017). Existing literature show that social media allow journalists to keep in touch with everyday happenings from anywhere in the world. This study compliment studies that also show social media's expediency in news dissemination. Bullard (2013) and Mdlongwa (2009) note that as people turn to social media sites for news and information, news organizations respond by using social networks as platforms to deliver content. Digital media has made it possible for stories to be shared by newspapers through their digital media platforms such as Webpages and social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Contrary to the view by Sparks et al (2016) and Van Kerkhoven and Bakker's (2014) that print publications may close down or face budget problems when audiences and advertisers move online, in fact *Isolezwe's* presence on digital platforms actually has widened its readership in the context of the continued collapse of African language newspapers (Salawu, 2013). The study has established that the more readers of *Isolezwe* use digital media to access the newspaper. The study also augments studies that show that the Internet has changed the relationship between journalists and audiences from a one-way, asymmetric model of communication to a more participatory and

collective system, where citizens have the ability to participate in the news production process (Hermida, 2010). Digital media does not only make it easy to interact with the audience but has then opened up opportunities for them to access other newspaper that write in African languages that are well templated in digital media.

CONCLUSION

The study makes a contribution to limited scholarship on the adoption of digital media by newspapers in South Africa in particular, and Africa in general. It specifically explored the use of digital media by *Isolezwe*, an indigenous language newspaper in its journalistic functions of newsgathering and dissemination. The study provides insights into understanding African language journalism in the context of the advancement of digital and communication technologies. The adoption of digital media by African language newspapers has enhanced their journalistic functions of newsgathering and news dissemination. The study demonstrates that the use of digital media by *Isolezwe* newspaper has improved the operations of the newspaper and widened its audience. The online version of the newspaper has promoted *Isolezwe* and has ensured that it remains relevant to the readers. It is worth noting that digital media have increased interaction between African language newspaper and their online readers. Based on these deductions, the study implores other African language newspaper publishers to adopt the new innovation of digital media to increase their online and social media presence if they are to remain relevant in the modern world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

PROFESSOR ABIODUN SALAWU

North-West University, South Africa
abiodun.salawu@nwu.ac.za

FORTUNE TSUTSA

North-West University, South Africa
fortune.tsutsa@gmail.com

DR. PHILLIP MPOFU

North-West University, South Africa
phillip.mpofu@gmail.com