

Why some publications are born to perish

 By [Emeka Enyadike](#)

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There seems to be a rush to publish magazines on every subject under the sun and to start newspapers and while this may be a good development given the educational and information value of these publications, what is worrying is their high mortality rate.

The titles often disappear faster than they arrived, usually for reasons unconnected to business. They simply vanish, and you wonder how many of the major publications actually existed as businesses because ego and politics or the latest fad influenced the decision to go into publishing.

In the beginning, newspapers were a solid tool for the quest for independence from colonial rule and early activists like Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and Earnest Ikoli used West African pilots such as the *Daily Times* to reinforce their agitation. These publications were, however, run as profitable businesses and the *Daily Times*, for instance, sold over 300,000 in the post-independence era and 70's until they were taken over by government.

In the last 20 years government or opposition politicians launched newspapers for propaganda reasons; it didn't matter if they turned a profit or even broke even, but editors who leave to start their own publications often carry this mentality over to the private world.

Sadly, many have no business plan, are based in Lagos, but with little capital, attempt to sell all over Nigeria. But distribution has failed to evolve from the system adopted 50 years ago and while street hawking and vending may be useful in Lagos, a lack of invention has stunted sales growth. They also find it increasingly difficult to attract advertising.

In a changing world where publishing has advanced globally as a business, it still operates like a joke in Nigeria. Business owners take delight in ascribing the fancy title of "Publisher" to themselves without providing direction for the business.

If the newspapers can be excused for trying, about 10 of the top newspapers including the likes of *The Guardian*, *ThisDay*, *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Independent*, *The Sun*, *Daily Trust*, *Tribune*, a resurgent *Daily Times* have continued to innovate. The same cannot be said of the magazines.

The scope of these publications sometimes makes me wonder; when most of the news and views focus around Lagos, you often hear of the Lagos/West axis, hence the *Daily Trust* is perceived as providing balance from the north.

In the case of magazines, the public hardly knows about them because so much emphasis is placed on getting the content and printing, and very little on getting sales and especially marketing. How many people outside Lagos get to know, yet

these publishers expect advertisers to come drooling?

The challenge today is to set in motion a reform agenda that will begin to re-focus and re-direct these publications to begin to operate as businesses – or close. They need to respond to the growing threats of the Internet. How many Nigerian publications attended the world congress in Cape Town?

There's been a lot of talk about re-establishing the audit bureau of circulation. What are your KPIs and how do you justify advertising rates or deliver value to advertisers?

In a country of 140 million people, surely with growing literacy levels and perhaps higher output of university graduates, we should see high circulation figures, but that unfortunately is not the case. I still find preposterous the long-held belief that Nigerians don't read. I was going through the circulation and readership report in the latest OMD Mediareach's *Media Facts* book and it was appalling.

Finally, it calls to question, what manner of journalism of media education, academic practical really abounds. There is a serious need for re-education.

The pan African University's Lagos Business School recently launched a media business programme and let's hope that others will follow suit. Most of all, perhaps publishers need to expand their revenue base to remain viable and achieve sustainability.

***ThisDay* music festival – an example in sustainability**

ThisDay, more than any other publication in Nigeria, has tried to set the pace in visionary publishing. They are not the market leaders by circulation, but they have earned the respect and confidence of advertisers and sponsors. They have also defied the notion that media businesses can only operate in a small space, by embarking on very ambitious projects such as fashion shows, awards, expansion into South Africa, and, most unbelievably, *ThisDay* Music Festival.

They didn't succeed with the ambitious South African *ThisDay* project but I am sure they learnt enough valuable lessons to give it a second go.

Then, of course, what can you say about the fact *ThisDay* entertainment has re-written the rulebook with an annual music festival that has seen some of the world's top artists perform in Lagos. Last year, it was Jay-Z, Beyonce, Snoop Dogg, Missy Elliot, Busta Rhymes, Ciara... and last month we had Kelly Rowland, Diddy, Rihanna, Ne-yo, John Legend, UB40, and the ever impressive Shakira all in one night.

That's business and surely it will continue to impact positively on the publication...

Surely this, and the equally successful annual *ThisDay* awards, and numerous fashion shows have greatly improved the newspaper's viability?

It's not that other media houses have not tried their hands at innovation, far from it, but sustainability is of the essence. I was once sceptical about *ThisDay*'s dynamism because I witnessed their attempt at a Nigerian-style national paper first-hand in South Africa, but they have certainly won me over.

Now let's see it reflected in huge numbers in the newsstand and readership. Perhaps they will also consider going public... they have the capacity for a successful IPO.

ABOUT EMEKA ENYADIKE

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