



Trial and Error: U.S. Newspapers' Digital Struggles toward Inferiority (Media Markets Monographs)

H. Iris Chyi

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The so-called *new media* experiment launched by traditional news organizations has been going on for nearly two decades. Motivated initially by high hopes for market opportunities, newspaper firms in the U.S. and other media markets have expended substantial resources digitizing and distributing their content online, managing a cross-media product portfolio that includes Web, e-readers, smartphones, tablets, and social media. However, the performance of these digital products has fallen short of expectations.

In retrospect, most U.S. newspapers entered the digital jungle unprepared, so they outsourced their homework to business consultants such as Clayton M. Christensen, whose disruptive technology thesis served as the theoretical foundation behind the newspaper industry's technology-driven approach. In the meantime, long-term declines in print circulation quickened, and death narratives surrounding the print edition went viral. The problem is that most assumptions on the all-digital future have no empirical support. As a result, during nearly 20 years of trial and error, bad decisions were made, unwise strategies adopted, audiences misunderstood, and product quality deteriorated.

As of 2014, most newspapers are stuck between an unsuccessful experiment (for their digital product) and a shrinking market (for their print product). Ironically, the (supposedly dying) print edition still outperforms the (supposedly promising) digital product by almost every standard, be it readership, engagement, advertising revenue, or paying intent.

Is the future really online?

To answer this question, this book provides a candid, research-based review of U.S. newspapers failing yet still ongoing digital experiment from an independent perspective free from the over-optimistic bias that often sways newspaper executives' judgment in their decision-making process. The goal is to elucidate readers' response to news in print and digital formats. Presenting the Ramen Noodles Theory, which suggests that users perceive online news as an inferior alternative to the legacy product, this book explains why digital revenue opportunities for newspaper firms may never materialize.

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