

GENDER DISPARITY AND ONLINE NEWSPAPER READERSHIP AMONG CIVIL SERVANTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

Sunday Jessie ANTAI

Department of Mass Communication
Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus
sondejay@gmail.com# 08023290347

Bassey Esuk Bassey, PhD & Prof. Church Akpan

Department of Mass Communication
Akwa Ibom State University
ObioAkpa Campus.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the disparity between online newspaper reading habits of male and female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State. The objectives of this study included: to find out the level of awareness of online newspapers among civil servants in Akwa Ibom State; to ascertain the extent of readership of online newspapers among male and female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State and also determine whether the male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts in Akwa Ibom State. The adopted the survey research design using the questionnaire instrument for data gathering. The population of the study was 11,643, and relying on Krejcie & Morgan (1970), a sample size of 370 was selected from the population. Technological Determinism and Uses and Gratifications Media theories underpinned the study. Findings showed that a total of 327 respondents accounting for 91.6% agreed on the awareness of online newspapers among civil servants in Akwa Ibom State. The study revealed that 66.6% of the respondents agreed that male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts while the female civil servants (72.6%) preferred reading online newspapers for entertainment and fashion news. The study recommends that the Akwa Ibom State Government should by way of advocacy narrow the awareness and frequency gaps between its male and female officers among others.

KEYWORDS: Online newspapers, Civil Servants, Online Journalism, Reading Habits, Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that gender plays a role in human communication, and is a veritable predictor of news use (Nangog, 2011; cited in Saleeman, Budiman& Ahmad, 2015). Thus, human males and females generally look for, receive, and interpret information in gender-centric ways. This is apparently because magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans show that men use only two centres, while women use seven centres, of their brains when communicating (Tracy, 2010). The implication of this is that such perceptual disparity is congenital and thus global.

Tracy asserts that while men normally focus on one issue at a time, women can focus on several matters concurrently. Similarly, while women are usually aware of details of issues, and are deeply sensitive to their environment, men tend to focus on only major details of issues. Antai (2014, p.201) posits that while communicating, men generally “go straight to the points they want to make,” while the female gender seems more interested in the emotional, light and human interest issues providing details of whatever they want to discuss, ahead of the conclusion.

These communication differences between the males and females go beyond quotidian engagements to include consumption of mass media products (Pahore, Memon, Haid, & Ismail, 2021). The authors posit that women consume mostly soft news, while men prefer hard news. It is also perceived that men consume more newspaper news than women do. Pahore *et al.* (2021), citing Adnansyed (2011) note that whereas newspaper readership among Pakistani men stood at 56 per cent, that of their women stood at only 13 per cent – a 4:1 ratio situation. A study done in Enugu, Nigeria, on gender differentials in newspaper consumption concluded that news consumption seemed to be more dependent on, among others, “reader gender ... than on whether the news appears in print or online” (Asogwa, 2018, p.3).

The newspaper has for millennia occupied a prime position in the mass communication pantheon. Its first online-only version was *News Report*, created by Bruce Parrello at the University of Illinois in 1974 on the Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations (PLATO) system. PLATO was “the first generalised computer-assisted instruction system” ((www.wikipedia.org, citing Silberman, 1997). Silberman notes that on July 1, 1980, *The Columbus Dispatch* became the first newspaper to move online. This implies that it took at least two decades since the first online website in the world was birthed in 1993 by the University of Florida’s Journalism Department before the newspaper took advantage of the new platform (Duru, 2016). In 1996, *Post Express* became the first Nigerian newspaper to migrate online (Kperogi, 2012). By 2022, Nigeria had about 125 online newspapers

(www.onlinenewspapers.com). Their readership is increasing. Many local newspapers in Akwa Ibom State have websites which constitute the bases for all online newspapers.

Online newspapers have come with the convergence of text, audio and visual in media business. These features also come with interactivity, multimediality and hypertextuality. According to Iwok, Umoh and Bassey (2024, p.16), the new media technology has “fostered interactivity, thus making it possible to customise the converged media to highly refined audience segments or even to individual tastes.” Online newspapers are now available virtually free and offer ease of access almost from anywhere, and anytime, so long as there are the right devices and internet connectivity.

Studies have shown that online newspapers have precipitated a decrease in the publication, and by extension, readership of hardcopy newspapers globally (De Waal, Schonbach&Lauf (2005); Siapera&Veglis, 2012; Ashong & Henry, 2017; Visnovsky, R., &Radosinska, J. (2017); Tonui, E. (2020). In Nigeria, however, print newspapers are still strong relative to their web version (Mathew, Ogedebe, &Adeniji, 2013; Ashong& Henry, 2017). At the same time, the readership of print newspapers has expanded considerably (Egan, 2008). This indicates that web-based newspapers have diffused profusely in Nigeria, with the decade 2002 – 2012 witnessing “migration of all major Nigerian newspapers to the Internet, while actively sustaining their print versions,” (Kperogi, 2012, p.1).

To make use of online newspapers, there is need for technological media devices and data to connect the Internet. As salary earners, civil servants have relative advantages of funds and literacy to access the Internet and make use of online newspapers if they so desire. According to www.statista.com, as of January 2023, Nigeria had 122.5 million internet users, more than one-half of its estimated 200 million people. In October, 2023, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), Nigeria’s digital regulatory body over Nigeria’s Information Technology Policy and IT development, honoured Akwa Ibom and Oyo States as the “Most Digitally Compliant States” (*The Frontier Online Newspaper*, October 27, 2023), indicating that the states had embraced digital governance. Accordingly, with this study delimited to senior civil servants in Akwa Ibom State, expected that they would be aware of online newspapers. However, being digitally proficient is not the same thing as being aware of, or making use of web newspapers. To find out, among others, awareness of online newspapers and reading habits of male and female civil servants in the AkwaIbom State were the focus of this work.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The advent of the Internet in the 1960s sired digital journalism, which in turn birthed digital newspapers, which are of two types: e-version of the print, and hybrid of print and web. Producing them is now relatively easier. They come with features of multimediality, virtuality, ubiquity, interactivity and hypertextuality (Auwal, 2016, citing Idiong, 2012; Karlsson, 2011). This has made them very popular.

Nigerian operators of online-only newspapers between 2003 and 2010, were quite few, but as of 2016, “the list of online newspapers in Nigeria is endless” Duru (2016). Some online newspapers run by Nigerians include *Sahara Reporters*, *Nigeria*, *Premium Times*, *TheCable*, and *NewsOnlineGazette* (www.en.m.wikipedia.org). Online-only newspapers in AkwaIbom State include *The Metro-Times*, *Media Connect*. *StraightNews* and *The Evangelist* are basically online, while *WatchmanPost*, *theMail*, *The Pioneer*, among others, are both in print and online.

As at December 2020, there were 11,893 senior staff members (6,769 males and 8764 females) in the AkwaIbom State Service. Of this number, 11,643 were senior staffers serving in the Pooling Ministries, Departments and Agencies (PMDAs) (*2020 Annual Report, AkwaIbom State Civil Service Commission*). Since several studies show that there is a disparity in the media consumption habits of men and women, while others say otherwise, this study investigated how male and female civil servants in AkwaIbom State use online newspapers: Are they aware of online newspapers in gender-centric ways? How often do they use online newspapers? What motivates their use of online newspapers? Providing answers to these questions constitute the crux of this study.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Find out the level of awareness of the existence of online newspapers among male and female civil servants in AkwaIbom State.
2. Ascertain the extent of readership of online newspapers among male and female civil servants in AkwaIbom State.
3. Determine whether the male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts in AkwaIbom State.
4. Ascertain the motivations for online newspaper reading habits of male and female civil servants in AkwaIbom State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following were the research questions for this study:

1. What is the level of awareness of the existence of online newspapers among male and female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State?
2. What is the extent of online newspaper readership among civil servants in the Akwa Ibom State Civil Service?
3. Do male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts in Akwa Ibom State?
4. What are the motivations behind online newspaper reading habits of Akwa Ibom State civil servants?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Newspapers

Online newspapers, also called e-newspapers or electronic newspapers (Tonui, 2020), are products of new media technologies. They exist as web pages on websites, which themselves are on the internet. They could exist independently or as e-versions of the printed ones. Thus, there are two genres of the newspaper (Okonofua, 2016; Mathew, 2013 (cited in Oladosu, I., Sanni, A., &Tanimowo, O., 2021).

According to wikipedia.org, the first ever “online-only” newspaper was *PLATO News Report*, sired in 1974 by Bruce Parrello. But the first newspaper to move online was *The Columbus Dispatch*. It debuted on July, 1, 1980. For Nigeria, the pioneer online newspapers was defunct the *Post Express*, which migrated its content to the web in 1996 Kperogi (2012). Currently, it seems most Nigerian newspapers have developed websites, where they run their *newspapers*.

The emergence of online newspapers has elicited serious implications for their print version, in terms of production and readership. Thus, there is an ongoing scholarly debate over whether they would replace the hardcopies or complement them. Some studies have shown that their coming on stream has, at least in part, brought about a decrease in the sales and readership of their print version (Duru, 2016; Ashong& Henry, 2017; Oladosuet *al.*, 2021). This is attributed in part to their portability, ubiquity, and updatability. Contrariwise, some other studies show that in spite of the rave of online newspapers, especially among the younger persons, hardcopies are not substantially affected (Visnovsky&Radosinska, 2017, p.4).

Online newspapers have virtually unlimited space, do not require big capital for hiring office spaces, procuring printing machines, or a large staff. They also have a quick updatability advantage unknown the print versions. They do not have to contend with issues of ‘unsold copies’, vendors or distributors not making returns on sales. They have a global audience, unlike

their offline counterparts. They can be accessed virtually anywhere in real time as long as there is active network and relevant devices. Thus, AkwaIbom civil servants have virtually the same opportunity as other states in the country to make use of this media.

Online newspapers also have challenges. The costs of data and requisite new media technology devices are relatively high in Nigeria. As of 2022, according to data from the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 133 million Nigerians were multi-dimensionally poor. Such people would have difficulties procuring internet-enabled gadgets and data to access online newspapers. By early 2023, there were 31.60 million YouTube users in Nigeria, according to www.datareportal.com, but only a relatively few Nigerian newspapers like *The Punch*, *Leadership*, *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard* have YouTube channels. This is a minus for the newspapers, considering the fact that Google and YouTube advertisements reached 25.8 per cent of Nigeria's internet users in January 2023, with 44.7 per cent of that being females, an equivalent to 14.3 per cent of Nigeria's total population (www.datareportal.com).

ONLINE NEWSPAPER PREFERENCE AND READERSHIP IN NIGERIA

Ha, Zhang, Yun and Kisung (2010); Skogerbo&Winsvold (2011); Ashong and Henry (2017); Hassan and Amzi (2018); Haruna (2018); are among scholars who have done studies on online readership. Many of these studies have focused on comparison of readership between the two genres of newspapers. According to www.datareportal.com, Nigeria's internet penetration rate was 55.4 per cent of the estimated population of 221.3 million people (50.5% male and 49.5 per cent female) in 2023. Of this figure, 122.5 million (44.6 per cent) were internet users as of January 2023. This implies that males had an edge of 1% over females in the use of Internet.

Ascertaining accurate number of online newspapers in Nigeria is, however, difficult. In 2022, according to onlinenewspapers.com, there were no fewer than 125 online Nigerian newspapers, whereas in about 2016, the number was countless, according to Duru (2016), implying a huge dip in the numbers.

REVIEW OF RELATED EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Asogwa, C. (2018). Gender Differentials in Newspaper Readership Pattern Among Residents of Enugu State, Nigeria. *Global Media Journal*, 16(31), pp.1-7

With focus on gender differentials in the readership of newspapers, the study had three objectives which were to: determine gender disparity in the

choice of print and web newspapers among residents of Enugu State; and determine the gender disparity in the duration of online and print newspapers' consumption among Enugu State residents. The study tested three hypotheses, adopted the survey research design and used the questionnaire as data gathering tool. The population of the study was 384 (192 males and 192 females). It deployed a mix of cluster, purposive and simple random sampling techniques, as well as adopted 50% of the population as sample size for both sexes. Uses and gratifications theory was deployed to underpin the study. Some of its findings were that: female respondents read online newspapers most, while male respondents read the printed version most; most males read newspapers for information on current issues, while females read newspapers for advertisements and entertainment. By and large, the study reported that gender significantly influenced newspaper readership.

Both the reviewed study and this current one adopted same research design and data collection tool. However, whereas the current study focused on male and female civil servants in AkwaIbom State, the reviewed one focused on residents of Enugu. The former study compared the readership of both versions of newspapers between the two sexes, the current one did not cover offline newspapers.

Ismail, Haruna (2018). A study of online newspaper reading habits among university students in Nigeria. *International Journal of Communication: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies*, December, 35-46.

The study had four objectives; among them: to find out Nigerian university students' favourite online newspapers; discover gender differences in online newspaper reading habits of those students, and find out what problems students encountered while reading online newspapers. It deployed technological determinism and uses and gratifications theories, employed survey as research design, and questionnaire as data gathering tool. The population of the study was the 1,558,000 students in the 61 public and 50 private universities in Nigeria. The sample size had 3600 students drawn from six universities across the six geo-political zones in the country with each zone having one university.. Findings showed that 62.75 per cent males and 37.25 per cent females respectively said that they read web 2.0. Also, 41.86 per cent and 58.14 per cent males and females, respectively, said that they did not read online newspapers.

The reviewed study and this current study deployed the survey research method as the research design, and questionnaire as data-gathering tool. Dissimilarities in the studies were that whereas the reviewed study focused on students in Nigerian universities, this study focused on male and female civil servants in PMDAs of AkwaIbom State Civil Service.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the theories of Technology Determinism and Uses and Gratifications. The Technological Determinism Theory was propounded by Marshall McLuhan in 1964. The basic assumption of the theory is that the media bring new perceptual habits; while their technologies create new environments with the implication that whatever predominate the media contents, influences human beings and, thus affect the way they perceive the world. Bassey and Ufot (2023, p. 54) explains that technology determinism theory is concerned with “how technology especially the media shape the way individuals think, feel and act as well as how societies organise themselves and operate.” According to Asemah (2011), the theory of technological determinism posits that changes in the modes of communication invariably influence human experiences. In their exposition of the theory, Anaeto *et al.*, (2008) assert that technology is the proponent factor in development; that technology is an inexorable, irresistible and overwhelming force, which is a message in its own right. They aver that technology can transform any environment and in a communication sense, media technology can be both a channel and a message at the same time.

Citing Eze *et al.*, (2013), Bassey and Ufot (2023, p. 54) note that “new media technologies have radically changed the way people use their five senses, the way they react to things, and therefore, their entire lives and entire society.” According to Iwok, Umoh and Bassey (2024, p.18), “technological determinism is a reductionist theory that assumes that a society’s technology progresses by following its own internal logic of efficiency.” The theory of technological determinism is appropriate for this study because it brings to the fore how new technology has shaped human communication in recent times.

Uses and gratifications theory, propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 (Anaeto *et al.*, 2008; Hassan & Amzi, 2018), underpinned the study. It posits that people use the media for self-gratifying reasons. Other assumptions of the theory are that; media audiences are not monolithic or passive, and individually select which media to consume. Audiences can also influence media content (Anaeto *et al.*, 2008). The theory notes that media audience members are not passive, and their decisions on media products depend on the value they attach to the media or their content. Thus, this theory answers the question: why do audiences use the media? (Anaeto *et al.*, 2008). In his exposition of this theory, Bassey (2020, p. 149) notes “ media users come with diverse social background, have different needs and experiential background such as different levels of education, upbringing, socio-economic and political affiliation, which influence the way

media contents appeal to them and how they use them.” Bassey (2020) explains further that uses and gratifications theory remains one of the most appropriate perspectives for assessing why audience members choose to be exposed to different media channels. Since this study focused on the preference and readership of online newspapers, the theory is relevant to this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study made use the survey method of research where the questionnaire was used to collect information from the respondents. The population of this study was based on the number of staff members recorded as at December 2020 in Pooling Ministries, Departments and Agencies (PMDAs) which stood at 11, 643. Out this number, 4,914 were males representing 42.2% while the number of females stood at 6,776 accounting for 57.8%. Using the sample guide by Kejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample size of 370 was selected from the population.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Data collected for this study was computed and analysed in Tables using simple percentages and weighted mean score (WMS) based on a 5-point Likert Scale. The responses were weighted as follows: Strongly Agree (5); Agree (4); Undecided (3); Disagree (2); Strongly Agree (1). From the computation, the WMS is 3.00 (5+4+3+2+1/5). The mean score of 3.00 was used as the basis for a decision on the responses to each item. Any mean score which is equal to or more than 3.00 is positive and accepted while any mean score that is less than 3.00 is tagged negative and is rejected. Out of the 370 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 357 were completed correctly and returned while 13 copies could not be retrieved. The return rate was 96.5 per cent. The computation was done on the basis of the 357 returned copies of the questionnaire.

FINDINGS

RQ1:What is the level of awareness of the existence of online newspapers between male and female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State?

Table 1: Level of awareness of online newspapers among male and female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	180	50.42
High	147	41.18
Low	16	4.48
Very low	14	3.92
Total	357	100

Source: Field work (2024)

The Table 1 shows that 180 (50.42%) respondents agreed that the awareness level of online newspapers was very high among civil servants in Akwa Ibom State; 147 respondents accounting for 41.18% noted that the awareness was high while 16 (4.48%) respondents claimed that the awareness was low and another 14 (3.92%) respondents claimed that the awareness was very low among civil servants in Akwa Ibom State.

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Findings

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RQ2: What is the extent of online newspapers readership among civil servants in the Akwa Ibom State Civil Service?

Table 2: The extent of online newspaper readership among civil servants in Akwa Ibom State

Online Readership	Frequency	Percentage
Daily Readership	110	30.8
Regular Readership	178	49.9
Very Rare Readership	39	10.9
No Readership	30	8.4
Total	357	100

Source: Field work (2024)

The Table 2 shows that a total of 110 respondents accounting for 30.81% read online newspapers daily among civil servants in Akwa Ibom State civil servants; 178 (49.86%) read regularly; 39 respondents representing 10.92% read very rarely while 30 respondents accounting for 8.40% do not read at all.

RQ3: Do male civil servants read online newspapers more than the female civil servants in AkwaIbom State?

Table 3 – Differences in online newspaper readership between male and female civil servants in AkwaIbom State

Item	Questionnaire Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total	N	WMS	Decision
8	Male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts	270	564	150	186	19	1,189	357	3.33	Positive/ Accepted
9	Female civil servants do not read online newspapers like their male counterparts	570	540	123	58	38	1,329	357	3.72	Positive/ Accepted

The Table 3 above indicates a positive weighted mean score (WMS) of 3.33 showing that male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts. Similarly, another a positive weighted mean score (WMS) of 3.72 on item 9 reveals that female civil servants read less online newspapers than their male counterparts.

RQ4: What are the motivations behind online newspaper reading habits of civil servants in AkwaIbom State?

Table 4. Differences in reading motivations of online newspapers between male and female civil servants in Akwa Ibom State

Item	Questionnaire Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total	N	WMS	Decision
9	Male civil servants read hard news online more than the females.	625	568	96	72	22	1,383	357	3.87	Positive/ Accepted
10	Male civil servants read more sports news online than the	125	296	165	324	41	951	357	2.66	Negative/ Rejected

	females.									
11	Female civil servants read more entertainment/fashion news online than their male counterparts.	600	404	168	88	36	1, 296	357	3.63	Positive/ Accepted

Source: Field work (2024)

The information on Table 4 shows that male civil servants read hard news online more than their female counterparts with a positive weighted mean score of 3.87. The data show that reading of sports news from online newspapers by male civil servants more than the females could not be ascertained and the weighted mean score recorded negative figure of 2.66. The analysis on the female civil servants preferring entertainments and fashion news online recorded a positive weighted mean score of 3.63.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study set out to investigate the influence of gender disparity on online newspaper readership among senior civil servants in AkwaIbom State of Nigeria. Findings of the study were discussed based on the research questions raised.

RQ1:What is the level of awareness of the existence of online newspapers among civil servants in AkwaIbom State?

The information on Table 1 shows that 180 (50.42%) respondents agreed that the awareness level of online newspapers was very high among civil servants in AkwaIbom State; 147 respondents accounting for 41.18% noted that the awareness was high while 16 (4.48%) respondents claimed that the awareness was low and another 14 (3.92%) respondents claimed that the awareness was very low among civil servants in AkwaIbom State. The implication of this finding is that 91.6% of the respondents agreed that civil servants in AkwaIbom State service were highly awareness of the existence of online newspapers. This shows that media literacy is high among the civil servants in AkwaIbom State and people have come to depend on the “media as purveyor of information to inform, educate and interpret government policy” to them (Akpan&Bassey, p. 39). It also indicates that the civil servants in AkwaIbom State are progressing with the current technological age, thus making technological determinism theory as applied in the study apt.

RQ2:What is the extent of online newspapers readership among civil servants in the AkwaIbom State Civil Service?

The data presented on Table 2 show that a total of 110 respondents accounting for 30.81% read online newspapers daily among civil servants in AkwaIbom State civil servants; 178 (49.86%) read regularly; 39 respondents representing 10.92% read very rarely while 30 respondents accounting for 8.40% do not read at all. The implication of this finding is that online readership of newspapers among civil servants in AkwaIbom State service is very high scoring 80.67%. This finding supports Hassan and Azmi (2018) that online newspaper readership in Nigeria was growing and that more readers were getting more interested in reading online newspapers.

RQ3:Do male civil servants read online newspapers more than the female civil servants in AkwaIbom State?

The computation on Table 3 above indicates a positive weighted mean score (WMS) of 3.33 showing that male civil servants read online newspapers more than their female counterparts. Similarly, another a positive weighted mean score (WMS) of 3.72 on item 9 in that Table 3 reveals that female civil servants read less online newspapers than their male counterparts. This implication of this result is that the male folks read newspapers online more than the females in the AkwaIbom State civil service.This finding corroborates Talabi (2014) who notes that newspaper reading whether online or offline was still dominated by males. However, it contradicts a study by Asogwa (2018), which showed that females read online newspapers more than the males while the males read the printed version the most.

RQ4:What are the motivations behind online newspaper reading habits of civil servants in AkwaIbom State?

The information on Table 4 shows that male civil servants read hard news online more than their female counterparts with a positive weighted mean score of 3.87. The data show that reading of sports news from online newspapers by male civil servants more than the females could not be ascertained and the weighted mean score recorded a negative figure of 2.66. The analysis on the female civil servants preferring entertainments and fashion news online recorded a positive weighted mean score of 3.63. The import of these results is that different people use media contents for different reasons. This makes the application of uses and gratifications theory appropriate in this study. The high and positive weighted mean score of 3.63 or 72.6% on the preference of female civil servants to entertainment and fashion news corroborates Asogwa (2018) who found out in a study that females read newspapers mainly for entertainment and advertisements.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study, it is hereby concluded that civil servants in Akwa Ibom State civil service have high level of awareness on the existence of online newspapers and that male civil servants read more online newspapers than their female counterparts in the Akwa Ibom State civil service. The female civil servants prefer reading more online newspapers for entertainment and latest fashions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Akwa Ibom State Government should leverage on the high awareness of the existence of online newspapers among its male and female civil servants to encourage its struggling weekly newspaper, *The Pioneer* to strengthen its online version as the state work force is a huge market waiting to be explored.
2. Government, labour unions and individual civil servants should work towards closing the gap between civil servants' awareness of online newspapers and the utilization of the medium especially among the female civil servants.
3. Online newspapers should broaden their coverage of issues to attract more readership and earn more advertisements so as to influence the vitality and lifespan of any news medium.

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