

Assessing the Viability of a Free Newspaper (Free Sheet) in the Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Kenya

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Cite this article in APA

Mburu, S. N. (2026). Assessing the viability of a free newspaper (free sheet) in the Nairobi metropolitan area, Kenya *Journal of media and communication sciences*, 5(1), 50-58. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jmc.v5i1.926>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2026-01-07

Accepted: 2026-02-05

Published: 2026-03-02

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the viability of establishing a free newspaper (free sheet) in the Nairobi metropolitan area to fill the significant coverage gap created by mainstream paid newspapers, such as the *Daily Nation*, which primarily cater for high-income and elite audiences and offer limited, superficial reporting on issues affecting low-income populations, marginalised communities, at grassroots levels, leaving underserved groups without adequate access to relevant news on small and micro enterprises, education, water supply, transport, crime, security, entertainment, and human-interest stories. The study employed a qualitative methodology within a political-economic framework, combining semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected respondents (10 newspaper readers and 10 non-readers) in Nairobi City County during the month of July 2013 and content analysis of the *Daily Nation*, with respondents recruited from diverse public venues including streets, markets, estates, bus termini, eateries, barber shops, and community gatherings. Findings revealed strong demand for a free newspaper focused on grassroots concerns, with participants censuring the *Daily Nation's* inadequate attention to less-privileged communities, indicating clear potential for wider readership and advertising support. The study concludes that the Nairobi metropolitan area is well-positioned for a free newspaper to address this content and access deficiencies and recommends producing high-quality, relevant content, exploring advertising-based and subsidised revenue models, designing effective distribution to ensure broad reach and prevent misuse, and conducting further research on sustainability and business viability, offering insights for media houses, investors, and policymakers to promote more inclusive journalism.

Key terms: Circulation, distribution, free newspapers, paid-for newspapers, viability.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, newspapers have been a primary source of print media worldwide, providing news and information longer than any other media form and traditionally offering an inexpensive way for people to access news and advertising. Most newspapers, however, are paid-for, meaning they are sold at a cover price. This study focuses on the emerging trend in print media of free newspapers, also known as free sheets. As Croteau and Hoynes (2003) observe, media saturate our everyday lives, and our understanding of politics and the world would be fundamentally different without newspapers, television, books, and other media forms. Similarly, Sawisky (2010) notes that newspapers are essential for maintaining civic engagement and informing communities about decisions that affect their lives.

In Kenya, mainstream newspapers include *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, *The Star*, *The People*, *Business Daily* (which specialises in business reporting), and *Taifa Leo*, the only national Swahili daily. The *Daily Nation*, with its sister publications, the *Sunday Nation* and *Saturday Nation*, remains the largest and most influential, commanding a 35 per cent readership share in 2023, followed by *The Standard* at 21 per cent, *Taifa Leo* at 14 per cent, and *The Star* at 8 per cent (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). Both the *Daily Nation* and *Business Daily*, along with *Taifa Leo*, are published by the Nation Media Group, which also publishes *The EastAfrican*, while *The Standard* and *The Nairobiian* are published by the Standard Group. *The Nairobiian* targets younger readers with light news, gossip, and entertainment within Nairobi City County. Despite their reach, none of these newspapers is distributed for free.

Coverage in mainstream newspapers in Kenya, particularly within the Nairobi metropolitan area, tends to prioritise political, elite, and high-income interests, while issues affecting low-income and underserved communities are often relegated to brief mentions, inner pages, or ignored unless crime is involved. Political-economic pressures influence content selection, as newspapers prioritise stories that maximise sales and revenue. The cover price of mainstream newspapers, currently Kenya shillings sixty (KES 60), also restricts access for many potential readers, with two-thirds of weekly newspaper readers relying on shared copies from households or offices

(Ipsos Synovate, 2011). The Constitution of Kenya (2010) introduced devolved governance through 47 county governments, which would benefit from grassroots coverage, but mainstream newspapers cannot cover every local event of significance to low-income populations.

Between 2009 and 2010, *The Star*, known for focusing on grassroots stories, was distributed free every last Thursday of the month, sponsored by Safaricom. The newspaper reportedly disappeared from newsstands faster than paid-for editions, and habitual buyers of mainstream newspapers also picked up free copies. Although the regular price of *The Star* was KES 35, its free distribution on these days demonstrated clear demand for accessible newspapers, indicating that a free newspaper focusing on grassroots issues could reach wider audiences, attract advertisers, and generate revenue.

Research by the Steadman Group (2008, cited in Mbeke & Mshindi, 2008) shows that Kenyan print media readership remains relatively small, with approximately 37 per cent of Kenyans not having read a newspaper in more than a year. Picard (2011) observes that while free newspapers are common in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, the concept is relatively new in Africa, with examples only in Morocco, Egypt, South Africa, and Botswana. Apart from *The Star's* sponsorship experiment, there is little literature or experience of free newspapers in Kenya, highlighting a gap that a free sheet could fill.

Globally, free daily newspapers, such as *Metro* (founded in Sweden in 1995), rely on advertising revenue and larger readerships to succeed (Wadbring cited in Bergström & Wadbring, 2008). Larger audiences also reduce distribution costs as readers willingly accept free copies. This model demonstrates the potential for similar ventures in Kenya, particularly within the Nairobi metropolitan area, which has a population of 3.1 million and a literacy rate of 97.7 per cent (KNBS, 2009).

It is against this background that this study explores the viability of establishing a free newspaper in Nairobi to address the coverage gap left by mainstream paid newspapers. A free newspaper would provide accessible information to grassroots populations,

highlight issues often overlooked by mainstream media, and offer insights for advertisers and investors. The study advocates for a publication that serves as a voice for the voiceless, informs low-income populations, and enhances the dissemination of news at the local level. The findings may guide media houses, county leadership, publishers, and investors in exploring free newspaper ventures and inform the development of detailed business plans for sustainable implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of free newspapers or free sheets is relatively new in Kenya, as evidenced by the limited literature on such publications. Consequently, there is a lack of prior research studies in Kenya on free newspapers. However, communication scholars who have researched and written on free newspapers in other contexts provide relevant insights that inform this study.

International Examples

The world's first modern free newspaper, *Metro*, was founded by three journalists in Sweden in 1995 to serve the Stockholm metropolitan area, and it has since become one of the world's leading free newspapers. Straw (2007) traces its origins to 1994, when Pelle Anderson, Robert Braunerhielm, and Monica Lindstedt conceived the idea. After numerous rejections from Swedish banks, investors, and media companies, Jan Stenbeck, chairman of the Kinnevik Group, agreed to finance the project. In 1995, the first issue of *Metro* was launched in Stockholm and became a runaway success. The publication went on to revolutionise the industry and was recognised in 2006 by the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest free newspaper (Straw, 2007). The *Metro* is published in many large cities around the world, and people can easily pick it up at shopping malls, on trains, and at bus stops. Its successful story has since motivated investors across the globe to publish similar free newspapers (Picard, 2011).

Picard (2011), who has extensively researched on the audience of free dailies, argues that the target audience of free newspapers differs from that of paid dailies. The potential newspaper audience includes the literate population within a market, but this audience can be divided into three important subgroups. First,

there are habitual or core readers who regularly read newspapers and desire a steady flow of information to understand the world and make decisions. Second, there are occasional readers who seek information and diversion but are less committed to investing time or money in newspapers. Finally, there are individuals who can read but do not, those who have never developed the reading habit and perceive newspapers as insufficiently interesting to justify spending time or money on them.

Modern free dailies across the world present opportunities to regularly reach occasional readers, convert non-readers into readers, and generate new advertising revenue streams. However, in Kenya, no investors have shown interest in starting such a free newspaper in the country, let alone in the Nairobi metropolitan area.

Kenyan Print Media Landscape

The concept of free newspapers or free sheets is relatively new in Kenya, as evidenced by the limited literature on such publications. Consequently, there is a lack of prior research studies in Kenya on free newspapers. However, communication scholars who have researched and written on free newspapers in other contexts provide relevant insights that inform this study.

According to Mzungu (2013), the cost of paid-for mainstream newspapers has often been cited as a key barrier to accessing newspapers, particularly among the rural population. The researcher observes that among the three traditional media platforms in Kenya (radio, television, and newspapers), newspaper readership has the lowest incidence of weekly engagement among the adult population. Mzungu (2013) reports that six million out of the twenty-two million persons interviewed claimed to have read newspapers on a weekly basis, representing approximately 22 per cent of the adult population. About three-quarters of weekly newspaper readers are male and affluent.

In addition to purchasing their own copies, newspaper readers also obtain publications from household members or from workplaces. A slightly higher proportion of rural readers who read newspapers weekly purchase their own copies compared to urban

readers, who are more likely to access newspapers at the workplace or office. Mzungu (2013) argues that print media must, therefore, be dynamic in order to maintain and grow audiences. Key to growth is the provision of local news, which is a major driver of readership, particularly under devolved governance structures. There is a need to provide content at both regional and national levels and to tailor content to suit the media consumption habits of different demographic groups. Major dailies have already introduced content-specific publications, particularly in sports and county editions. Society should, therefore, expect a highly fragmented media audience, the emergence of sub-brands within major media houses, and increased demand for quality content tailored to diverse media consumers. For this study, the researcher was keen to find out if a free newspaper would be received positively and if it could help change the way people read newspapers.

Free Newspaper Audiences

Paid dailies have traditionally targeted habitual readers as their primary market while seeking to expand circulation among occasional readers. In contrast, free dailies primarily target occasional readers as well as some habitual readers and non-readers. To attract these groups, free dailies develop editorial profiles based on short, easily digestible stories designed for quick reading. They rely heavily on news agencies for national and international coverage and typically emphasise local entertainment, television, and sports. Locally produced articles are limited and often do not focus extensively on public affairs (Picard, 2011, pp. 168–169).

Advertising Models

Correia-da-Silva and Resende (2013) argue that free newspapers, like other newspapers, function as platforms connecting readers and advertisers. On the readers' side, free newspapers provide news, editorial content, and advertising free of charge. On the advertisers' side, free newspapers supply readers "eyeballs" in exchange for advertising fees or rates. Since advertisers' marginal revenue from advertising increases with readership size, a larger readership increases advertisers' willingness to pay for advertising space.

According to Zhang (2011), the rapid growth of freely distributed newspapers has been one of the most

significant developments in the press industry. The emergence of free newspapers has generated debate regarding whether they function as alternatives or complements to paid newspapers. A key issue is understanding the composition of free newspaper readership, specifically, whether readers shift from paid newspapers or whether they were previously non-readers of paid publications.

Drawing on international models such as *Metro*, this study seeks to assess whether a similar model could fill an existing gap in the Kenyan newspaper market. As Picard (2011) observes, while the concept of free newspapers is well established in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, it remains relatively new in Africa. Similarly, the concept is still emerging in Kenya, as evidenced by the limited scholarly literature on the subject. This article, therefore, examines the viability of establishing a free newspaper (free sheet) in the Nairobi metropolitan area to address barriers to access, target occasional and non-readers, leverage advertising-based revenue models, and potentially increase readership among underserved populations at the grassroots.

This study could contribute to scholarship, including filling the knowledge gap on free newspapers not only in Kenya but around Africa, assessing audience behaviours, and exploring advertising viability. This study was motivated more by the gap in related literature on the assessment of the viability of free newspapers in Kenya, particularly in the Nairobi metropolitan area.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative design to assess the viability of introducing a free newspaper (free sheet) in Nairobi's metropolitan area. Given the novelty of free newspapers in Kenya and the need to examine an uncommon phenomenon deviating from mainstream media practices, an exploratory qualitative approach was adopted. This design facilitated in-depth insights into respondents' experiences, perceptions, emotions, and readership habits, producing rich, descriptive data aligned with the meanings participants assigned to social phenomena (Boeije, 2010). Data collection involved two primary techniques: in-person semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis. Interviews,

conducted without prior appointments at diverse public locations (streets, business centres, estates, bus termini, hotels, eateries, low-end barber shops, and social gatherings), enabled flexible probing of readership patterns, accessibility issues, views on free newspapers, and viability potential. Handwritten notes were taken due to respondents' reluctance toward recording. Content analysis examined the first six news pages of the *Daily Nation* across July 2013 issues (selected for typical coverage without major overriding events), assessing story usage, space allocation, placement, prominence, and treatment of grassroots/low-income issues (total stories: 229).

The *Daily Nation* was purposively chosen as Kenya's leading newspaper by circulation and readership. Purposive non-probability sampling targeted 20 respondents (10 newspaper readers and 10 non-readers), believed to offer relevant insights, drawn from Nairobi City County, the capital, with a historically high readership. Sample size justification drew from qualitative norms emphasising depth over breadth (Bryman, 2004; Baker & Edwards, 2012), with respondents aged 20–60, varying education levels (primary to bachelor's), and employment types. Data analysis followed grounded theory-inspired coding:

open coding for categorisation, axial coding for interconnections, and selective coding for core themes, using pre-tested manuals. Ethical considerations included obtaining verbal consent, assuring research-only use of information, respecting confidentiality and refusal of recording, and keeping interviews brief to minimise inconvenience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Concept And Need for the Establishment of a Free Newspaper

The researcher posed the question: “Have you ever heard of a free newspaper in Kenya?” The majority of the respondents stated they have never heard of free newspapers, not only in Kenya, let alone Nairobi metropolitan area. However, a few, three out of 20, attested to having come across a free newspaper. They cited *The Star*, which they explained used to be given freely on offer or promotion.

R1: “I’ve never heard. Even gutter press is sold for small amount like Sh10. If a newspaper is free, who is sponsoring it? Who is going to pay for printing and materials? Nothing goes for free.”

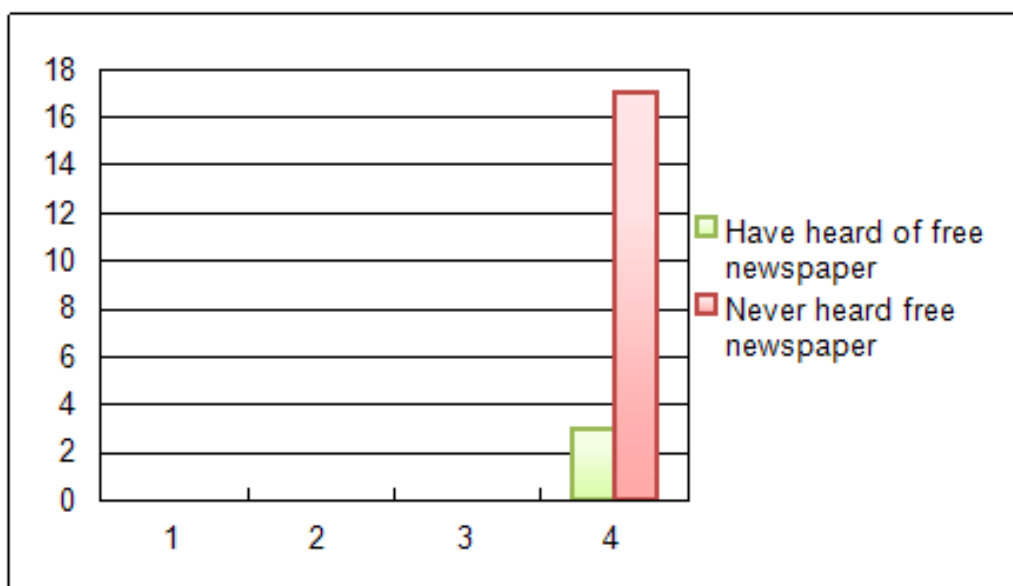


Figure 1: Concept of Free Newspaper

The researcher sought respondents' views on whether they would support the introduction of a free newspaper in Kenya, particularly in the Nairobi

metropolitan area. The researcher probed the respondents further, seeking to know why they would support or not support such an idea. Most of the

respondents, 16 out of 20, were of the view that such a newspaper was viable. Some of those who were in favour of the idea were of the opinion that a free newspaper would make more people read and get informed. A free newspaper, they argued, would encourage many people to develop a reading culture. A free newspaper, others argued, would help in highlighting issues on low-income populations and marginalised communities, while another respondent said many Kenyans would welcome a free newspaper, due to the fact that many people just like free things. One respondent who described himself as a keen newspaper reader, stated:

R1: Free newspaper should target those poor people in rural areas or grassroots who cannot afford newspapers. They should educate the people to think out of the box in terms of jobs and careers. That is, to think on diverse issues to educate the people on what they can do after college without necessarily looking up to jobs they studied for at college.

There was a respondent who argued that, instead of having a free newspaper, the cost should be subsidised. He argued he would not waste his money if a free newspaper were introduced.

R2: "The cost is high. It should be between Sh25 and 30."

Readers argued that a free newspaper would help cover in-depth issues of the less-privileged communities at the grassroots. Such a newspaper, they argued, should highlight issues at the grassroots so other people can know what is happening. A keen newspaper reader and a buyer stated:

R3: "The newspaper can help discover talents in sport, for instance in football. If local talents are highlighted and have been exploited, we can have people of national calibre."

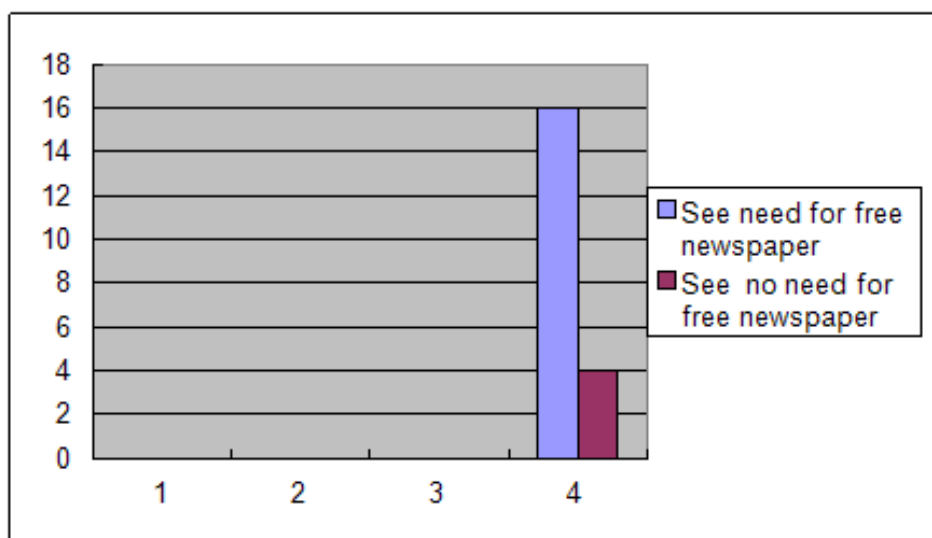


Figure 2: Need for Free Newspaper

The few respondents who were opposed to the idea of a free newspaper argued that such a publication should not be offered, as most publishers would not make profits, and still, people who did not know how to read would not read them at all, even if the papers were freely available to them. One respondent, citing the Nation Media Group, argued that instead of giving it for free, publishers should start a county newspaper and subsidise the cover price of such a newspaper,

say, between KSH 20 and KSH 30. Other respondents, not for the idea of a free newspaper, argued that some people would misuse a free newspaper, as many do with free things.

R1: "I think free newspaper cannot give quality information. Well-researched information. They better cover a lot of stories and sell."

The few respondents who were not for the idea of a free newspaper argued that such a newspaper would not make profits and would not have quality content. As such, people would not read it. Others said people just do not like free things.

R2: *“People do not like free things. They would misuse it. They would use it as toilet paper.”*

Some respondents said a free newspaper would not only help readers get free information, but also help them save money. Others argued that a free newspaper would help them relax and keep them busy.

Content and Readership of a Free Newspaper

This researcher sought the views of respondents on issues which they thought should be covered in a free newspaper. Many of the respondents were of the opinion that such a newspaper should not have a lot of politics. Instead, its contents should be rich in business and development issues, education, human-interest, as well as sport and entertainment.

R1: *“It should not have politics. A free newspaper should contain a lot of information, like on education, lifestyle issues, health, small businesses.”*

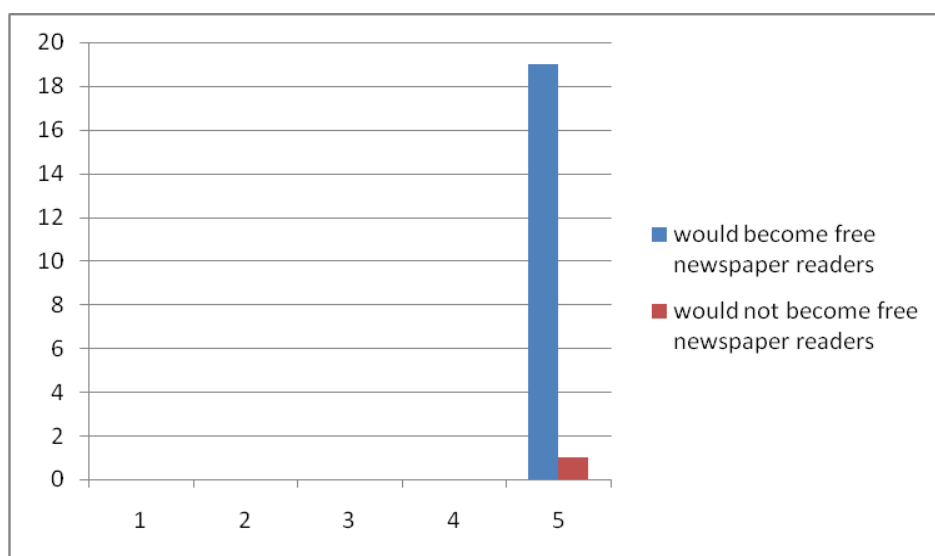


Figure 3: Free Newspaper Readership

The researcher posed the question: “If a free newspaper were introduced, would you become a free newspaper reader?” and further probed the respondents on whether they would continue to read or buy their favourite paid-for newspaper. Some respondents said they would start reading such a newspaper to get free information.

R1: *“It would not cost me anything. I would spend money on food.”*

Another argued that a free newspaper would be a welcome idea.

R2: *“Because everybody should get updated. Many people would read and get information.”*

Some respondents stated that they would continue to buy the mainstream newspaper, as they were not sure a free newspaper would have quality content or provide all that they get in a paid-for newspaper. One respondent stated he would continue buying the *Daily Nation* as he had loyalty to the newspaper. Some argued they would continue to buy mainstream newspapers as they believed that a free newspaper would not contain the information they needed. However, some stated they would not continue to buy mainstream newspapers as this would be a waste of money.

R3: *“If there is free newspaper that has the information I need, I don’t see the need to buy a newspaper. If education is free, there is no need to pay fees!”*

Another respondent stated he would still continue to buy the *Daily Nation* “because of loyalty”. The study showed that there were those who thought a free newspaper would be of low quality, hence would not go for a free newspaper.

R4: “Quality of information is high in paid-for newspapers. If a free newspaper has nothing as far as information is concerned, why read it?”

Another argued:

R5: “I would still continue to buy because I don’t think a free newspaper would cover well all the issues I look for.”

Most of those interviewed, 16 of the 20 respondents or 80%, thought the time was ripe for the establishment of a free newspaper in Kenya, and in particular in the Nairobi metropolitan area. The research revealed that most of those who thought Nairobi should have a free newspaper indicated that such a newspaper should have little or no political content at all. Instead, it should focus more on business and development, education, human-interest and lifestyle stories, as well as sports.

The study further revealed that should a free newspaper be established, 19 of the 20 respondents, or 95 per cent, would become free newspaper readers. Many were of the view that such a newspaper would not only provide free information, but would also encourage non-newspaper readers to develop a newspaper-reading culture. The study also revealed that a free newspaper should contain quality content if it is to attract and retain readers.

The findings were in line with the observation by Picard (2011) that the target audience of free newspapers differs from that of paid dailies. The research found that, as Picard (2011) argues, potential free newspaper audiences could be divided into three sub-groups. First, habitual readers or core readers who regularly read newspapers and desire a steady flow of information to understand the world and make decisions. Second, the occasional readers who seek information and diversion but are less committed to investing time or money in newspapers. Finally, there are individuals who can read but do not, those who have never developed the reading habit and perceive

newspapers as insufficiently interesting to justify spending time or money on them.

Research revealed that the range of coverage of issues on low-income populations at the grassroots, almost always published by such mainstream newspapers, is narrow, mainly due to political-economic factors, which dictate that newspapers should carry content that would help them sell and, in turn, bring in revenue. The findings further revealed that some respondents were sceptical about free newspapers and would not trust that such newspapers would give well-researched and in-depth coverage. Some interviewees were of the view that free newspapers would face various challenges, such as gathering and publishing high-quality content, attracting advertisers, and overcoming production and distribution barriers. Such scepticism implied the business of free newspapers would not be sustainable in the long run.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study revealed affordability is a significant barrier to newspaper access. At KSH 60 per copy, mainstream newspapers are inaccessible to many potential readers, who, instead, rely on borrowing or reading copies in shared spaces such as workplaces, eateries, and barber shops. This pattern reflects both demand for news and structural constraints in access.

Interview responses further demonstrate support for an alternative model. Most respondents indicated that Nairobi is ripe for the establishment of a free newspaper focused on grassroots issues. A Nairobi-based free newspaper could bridge the identified coverage and accessibility gap. However, its sustainability would depend on the provision of high-quality content capable of attracting both readers and advertisers. Overall, the study establishes both demand and contextual justification for exploring the viability of a free newspaper in the Nairobi metropolitan area.

Recommendations: The study recommends exploring the establishment of a free newspaper in the Nairobi metropolitan area to address the identified coverage and accessibility gap. Such a publication should prioritise high-quality content, particularly in business

and development, education, human-interest, lifestyle, and crime and security reporting.

Further research should assess the feasibility of alternative business models, including a subsidised cover price, as well as effective distribution strategies to ensure broad grassroots reach. Given the advertising-dependent nature of free newspapers,

future studies should also examine sustainable revenue models that balance circulation expansion with financial viability. Policy actors, media houses, and potential investors should conduct market and advertiser assessments to evaluate commercial sustainability. Any such initiative should be supported by qualified journalists to ensure editorial credibility and public trust.

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