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Papers face a tightrope in new era, experts say

The Associated Press

GÖTEBORG, Sweden: As readership and revenues shift onto the Internet, top news media executives must seek new digital opportunities without neglecting their traditional print publications by rushing headlong into cyberspace, media experts said in a report released Tuesday.

The second annual World Digital Media Trends report, issued at a meeting of the World Association of Newspapers, said the digital platforms of newspapers were growing at a double-digit rate worldwide.

One study showed that the Internet in some countries would "become the primary news and information source within five years, while newspapers will lose the dominating position they have held for more than a century."

Newspapers cannot count on their print editions alone to keep them solvent, the report said. However, the association's president, Gavin O'Reilly, warned that newspapers should not rush unprepared into new mobile and Internet markets, in part because about 60 percent of the new revenue goes to two companies, the search engine giants Google and Yahoo.

"The Net is a wonderful place if you know what you are looking for," he said at the meeting. "But we run the risk that running headlong into digital will turn our dollars into pennies."

Newspaper companies must also continue to invest in the medium they know best — printed editions — since there are few accurate overviews of the effect of Internet revenue on newspapers, he said.

O'Reilly dismissed the notion that newspapers would soon be a relic of the past because they were "not up for the challenge — or indeed, the many opportunities — that the digital world offers."

"All of us in the industry know the big strategic issues and challenges at play in the fast evolving digital world," he said. "And, the really successful publishers are those who recognize and capitalize on the newspapers' relative position in the busy media matrix. Happily, that is the majority of publishers today."

Even after newspapers generate enthusiasm among their traditional print staff for new media, they still have to find and provide the resources and qualified personnel for doing both, he said at the three-day meeting of 1,800 publishers, editors and other top newspaper managers, which started Monday.