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Establishing Awareness and Implementation Methods for Topic Planning in Academic Journals (Postprint)

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Abstract

Traditional academic journals often insufficiently emphasize the significance and role of topic planning, focusing in their routine work merely on the collation and publication of academic papers, while lacking the awareness to refine, energize, specialize, and brand academic journals. **【Objective】** To enhance distinctiveness on the basis of professionalism, enable academic journals to achieve standout communication effects within homogenized models through topic planning, and exchange corresponding experiences with other academic journals for mutual learning. **【Methods】** Guided by national policy orientation, taking hot topics within the disciplinary domain as the entry point, and combining the exploration and application of new media communication methods, to conceive and practice the establishment of awareness and habits regarding academic journal topic planning. **【Results】** In recent years, *Marine Environmental Science* has conducted topic planning centered on national marine policy priorities and disciplinary hot spots, producing multiple special issue and column products that have achieved favorable social benefits, and has consequently experienced improvements across various statistical indicators including industry attention, reputation, and impact factor. **【Conclusion】** Academic journals should strengthen their capacity to capture policy and disciplinary hot spots, hone their topic planning capabilities through practice, and explore breaking the limitations of traditional publishing forms through new media technological means, thereby enhancing journal brand value and disciplinary influence.

Full Text

Academic Journal Topic Planning: Establishing Awareness and Implementation Methods

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Abstract

Traditional academic journals often fail to recognize the significance and function of topic planning, focusing routine work solely on organizing and publishing academic papers without cultivating the awareness to refine, popularize, specialize, and brand their publications. **[Objective]** To enhance distinctiveness on the basis of professionalism, achieve standout communication effects that differentiate academic journals from homogeneous models through topic planning, and share corresponding experiences with other academic journals for mutual learning. **[Methods]** Guided by national policy orientation and using hot topics within relevant disciplinary fields as entry points, this study explores and applies new media communication methods to conceptualize and practice the establishment of awareness and habits for academic journal topic planning. **[Results]** In recent years, *Marine Environmental Science* has conducted topic planning centered on national marine policy priorities and disciplinary hotspots, producing multiple special issues and columns that have achieved strong social benefits. Consequently, the journal has gained in industry attention, reputation, and various statistical indicators including impact factor. **[Conclusion]** Academic journals should strengthen their capacity to capture policy and disciplinary hotspots, hone topic planning skills through practice, and explore breaking through the limitations of traditional publishing forms via new media technologies, thereby enhancing journal brand value and disciplinary influence.

Keywords: topic planning; policy hotspots; disciplinary hotspots; academic journals; new media

The concept of topic planning in publishing is routine and essential for books and newspapers. Good topic planning directly determines whether publications can attract attention and gain readership, while also facilitating smooth production processes to achieve expected social and economic benefits. However, many traditional academic journals have long overlooked the necessity of topic planning. Most maintain conventional column settings year after year, simply listing papers in standard columns, leading many editors to develop habits devoid of creative application of topic planning principles. As calls to break the “paper-only” evaluation system grow louder, demand for academic papers across

disciplines will inevitably shift from quantity to quality. In this context, academic journals can no longer remain satisfied with the status quo; they must recognize the necessity of topic planning to demonstrate both professionalism and distinctiveness, proving that academic journals can be refined, popularized, and developed into recognized brands.

1. Analysis of Reasons for Lack of Topic Planning Awareness in Academic Journals

1.1 Seller' s Market Position

China' s decades-long certification and evaluation systems across disciplines and institutions—such as professional title evaluation, degree certification, and award assessment—have largely linked evaluation criteria to the number of published academic papers, often with requirements tied to journal tiers (provincial, national, core journals, SCI/EI, etc.). With numerous research institutions and personnel but limited high-level journals, this imbalance has created an absolute seller' s market for academic journals [1]. Journal editors can simply “sit at their desks while manuscripts arrive online,” facing no shortage of submissions and consequently lacking passion and drive for innovation and creation.

1.2 Lack of Economic Pressure Reduces Innovation Urgency

Currently, most Chinese academic journals are established by universities or research institutes, with editorial offices operating as non-independent branches or subordinate agencies. Editorial staff are institution-affiliated personnel on permanent or contract payrolls, with salaries covered by host institutions and operational funding allocated by them. Even when journals generate income through data services, copyright transactions, or distribution, revenues are typically managed separately by host institutions, with profit levels having no direct positive or negative impact on journals or editorial staff [2-3]. This reality inevitably reduces practitioners' urgency for innovation.

1.3 Technical Limitations Restrict Implementation and Effectiveness

Academic journal editing, publishing, and distribution are constrained by publication cycles, staffing, workflow processes, and the “three reviews and three proofreads” system. These objective limitations make journals less flexible than books and slower than newspapers. Consequently, even when journals develop good topic planning ideas, by the time implementation is complete, the hotspots may no longer be hot, or the breadth and depth of planning cannot be fully realized due to constraints. Repeated unsuccessful planning attempts gradually extinguish creative enthusiasm.

2. The Necessity and Entry Points for Topic Planning in Academic Journals

Topic planning is an indispensable component of editorial work, reflecting editorial vision and professional competence while serving as an effective means to enhance academic professionalism, brand competitiveness, and publishing influence. The *Opinions on Promoting the Prosperous Development of Academic Journals* issued by the Central Propaganda Department, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Science and Technology on May 18, 2021, explicitly states that academic journals should continuously strengthen editorial planning capabilities, create key columns and special issues around major themes, and enrich content forms through innovative column designs for disciplinary information, academic reviews, and commentaries [4]. Topic planning should not be an optional processing step for academic journals; it determines whether journals can achieve disciplinary status, brand value, and social reputation. As the concept of breaking “paper-only” evaluation deepens, market demand for academic journals will inevitably shift from quantity to quality. Like rowing upstream, journals that rest on their laurels and rely on passive submissions without pursuing innovation will find themselves on a narrowing path of decline.

Effective topic planning for academic journals is not difficult. The intersection of national policy priorities and disciplinary research hotspots provides excellent entry points. In China, publishing must first serve socialist politics and maintain political correctness [5]. As legitimate publications, academic journals must adhere to this principle: published articles must align with national political lines and policies, avoiding ideological errors and maintaining proper public opinion guidance. Additionally, journals should analyze latest policy priorities and identify connections with their disciplines [6]. National policies provide both hard constraints on political direction and precise angles for topic planning. Following policy priorities ensures correct political orientation while enabling prediction of future disciplinary developments, allowing journals to grasp operational direction holistically. Moreover, national policies undergo sufficient deliberation and testing, ensuring stability and guaranteeing the operability and continuity of topic planning derived from them.

Simultaneously, academic journals should monitor the latest research hotspots in their fields rather than rehashing old topics. As presenters of academic innovation, journals must stay at the forefront of research [7]. They should track disciplinary dynamics, understand policy-related, theoretical, and technical hotspots, attend academic forums and conferences, solicit contributions from leading scholars, and extract inspiration for thematic design. By organizing columns around disciplinary hotspots and characteristics, journals can enhance brand value and competitiveness [8].

3. Conducting Topic Planning Around Policy Priorities and Disciplinary Hotspots: A Case Study of *Marine Environmental Science*

Marine Environmental Science is a comprehensive academic journal in marine environmental science under the Ministry of Ecology and Environment. Previously accustomed to routinely categorizing submissions into conventional columns such as “Investigation and Research,” “Technology and Methods,” and “Reviews,” the journal eventually created aesthetic fatigue among readers and authors while editorial staff themselves developed inertia. However, since the 18th Party Congress, under Xi Jinping’s ecological civilization thought, China’s marine ecological and environmental protection efforts have intensified, making marine environment-related research increasingly “hot.” *Marine Environmental Science* recognized this as an excellent opportunity to adjust its rhythm, change its approach, and establish brand image.

To strictly implement the deployment decisions of the Party Central Committee and State Council and fulfill the requirements of the *Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening Ecological and Environmental Protection and Resolutely Fighting the Battle against Pollution* (Document No. 17 [2018]), the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Natural Resources, and other ministries jointly issued and organized the implementation of the *Bohai Sea Comprehensive Management Battle Action Plan* [9]. To align with and leverage this policy hotspot within the discipline, *Marine Environmental Science* capitalized on its host institution’s role as an important participant in Bohai Sea comprehensive management and launched a special issue on “Bohai Sea Comprehensive Management” in Issue 6, 2021 [Figure 1: see original paper]. The creative concept gained attention and support from relevant researchers during planning and solicitation, with enthusiastic submissions. The editorial office collaborated with relevant units, project teams, and researchers to solicit and organize manuscripts, selecting excellent papers based on research direction and academic value to promote exploration of new technologies, models, and mechanisms for marine ecological and environmental governance, better supporting the comprehensive management battle in key sea areas during the 14th Five-Year Plan period [9]. After publication, the special issue received widespread praise and positive response within the discipline, generating good feedback and results in terms of audience reputation and paper download/citation frequencies.

Additionally, in September 2016, 13 ministries including the National Development and Reform Commission and State Oceanic Administration issued the *Notice on Issuing the Technical Methods for Monitoring and Early Warning of Resource and Environmental Carrying Capacity (Trial)* (Document No. 2043 [2016]), launching comprehensive trial implementation of research on resource and environmental carrying capacity early warning technologies. In September 2017, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Of-

Office of the State Council issued *Several Opinions on Establishing a Long-term Mechanism for Monitoring and Early Warning of Resource and Environmental Carrying Capacity*, requiring standardized, normalized, and institutionalized monitoring and early warning work to guide and constrain local economic and social development according to resource and environmental carrying capacity [10]. *Marine Environmental Science* published a special issue on “Marine Resource and Environmental Carrying Capacity Monitoring and Early Warning Theory and Technology Research” in Issue 4, 2018, marking China’s first special issue in this research area. It gained widespread attention from researchers, provided important scientific support and achievement demonstration for implementing the central government documents in marine environmental research and monitoring, and facilitated further deepening of basic theory and key technology research. The special issue received disciplinary recognition with high citation frequency, enhancing the journal’s social benefits and achievements.

Furthermore, as China’s marine ecological and environmental protection work advances, more hot topics have emerged in marine science, including “carbon peak and carbon neutrality” goals and “biodiversity protection.” In marine disciplines, research directions such as marine blue carbon, marine microplastic pollution, coastal wetland mangrove protection, and marine biodiversity protection have gained increasing attention. In this context, *Marine Environmental Science* has conducted targeted solicitation and organized columns including “Environmental Behavior of Microplastics,” “Research Progress on Marine Carbon Sink Capacity,” and “Research Progress on Microplastic Pollution and Control in the Environment (Ocean),” concentrating on publishing disciplinary achievements and sharing field developments. This facilitates researcher exchange and reference while demonstrating the journal’s creative direction and guiding subsequent submissions and reader inquiries [11]. Regarding academic hotspots from public attention to greenhouse gas impacts on the marine environment, the journal published the “Marine Greenhouse Gas Observation and Assessment” column, inviting renowned domestic scholars to write an editorial commentary [Figure 2: see original paper]. Combined with subsequent promotion, articles in this column were more frequently cited in clusters, achieving excellent publishing results. This series of special issues and columns also created “citation magnetism” among papers, mutually promoting increased download and citation rates.

After years of practice and accumulation, *Marine Environmental Science’s* statistical indicators have continuously improved. Its composite impact factor in the *Annual Report on Chinese Academic Journal Impact Factors* released by CNKI increased from 0.790 in 2015 to 1.386 in 2021, ranking in the Q1 zone among Chinese-language journals in the “Marine Science” field [12]. Detailed data analysis shows that most articles published in special issues and columns generated higher download and citation frequencies.

4. Expanding Implementation Channels for Academic Journal Topic Planning Through New Media Technologies

Under traditional publishing models, the timeliness of paper publication and result release has been a persistent challenge [13]. A considerable proportion of natural science journals are bimonthly or even quarterly, and constraints from fixed publication schedules plus typesetting, proofreading, and printing processes often cause specially designed thematic products to fail in achieving expected results, leaving both publishers and readers facing the awkward situation of “new methods that aren’ t new and hot topics that aren’ t hot.”

These problems find excellent solutions in today’ s era of rapidly evolving new media technologies. With the rapid development of mobile internet technology and intelligent penetration into every stage of academic journal publishing, traditional workflows can no longer keep pace. Various new media and convergent media technologies provide comprehensive supplementation and support to traditional print journals, enabling faster, more comprehensive, and richer three-dimensional thematic publishing [3,14-15]. In terms of specific implementation, academic journals can use WeChat public accounts and website OA platforms to create and promote hotspot column products, utilize DOI pre-publication functions to prioritize promoted accepted papers, and employ convergent media technologies such as hyperlinks, charts, and short videos to enrich paper presentation and achieve better communication effects. Additionally, precision push services developed by some institutions based on big data analysis provide new outlets for journal promotion, further targeting concentrated delivery of planned papers to audiences in the same field.

In recent practice, *Marine Environmental Science* has fully utilized its WeChat public account and editorial website to organize content creation and promotion of planned columns and special issues aligned with themes such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of the Parties (COP15) and World Environment Day. The journal has also opened green channels for reviewing and editing suitable submissions to promote them as quickly as possible for optimal timeliness. Through summary and accumulation, new media channels have become important publishing platforms for *Marine Environmental Science*.

As academic evaluation, professional title review, degree certification, and other evaluation systems mature, societal demand for academic journals will inevitably shift from quantity to quality. Academic journals must develop crisis awareness, avoid complacency, and pursue higher product quality. Topic planning is an essential prerequisite for publishing work that demonstrates editors’ creative abilities and provides a direct channel for publication value enhancement. Key points and hotspots attract attention—academic journals should strengthen their awareness and ability to capture policy and disciplinary hotspots, hone topic planning skills through practice, and develop new media communication capabilities to enhance journal brand value and disciplinary influence.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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