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## Preliminary Exploration of Digital Transformation Strategies for Print Media in the Attention Economy (Postprint)

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### Abstract

The Internet has transformed media communication patterns while concurrently driving changes in public reading habits, prompting print media represented by traditional publishing institutions to make corresponding adjustments. However, after years of exploration, the vast majority of digital publishing enterprises have yet to identify effective revenue-generating pathways. This article addresses this situation by analyzing digital transformation issues in the publishing industry under the attention economy, proposes several implementation strategies for transformation, and ultimately identifies the key to digital transformation.

### Full Text

### Preamble

#### A Preliminary Study on Digital Transformation Strategies for Print Media in the Attention Economy

*(China Architecture & Building Press Co., Ltd., Beijing 100037)*

**Abstract:** While the internet has transformed media dissemination methods and altered public reading habits, prompting print media represented by traditional publishing institutions to adjust accordingly, most digital publishing enterprises have yet to identify effective revenue-generating pathways after years of exploration. This article analyzes the challenges of digital transformation in the publishing industry under the attention economy, proposes several implementation strategies for this transition, and ultimately identifies the key to successful digital transformation.

**Keywords:** digital publishing; print media; attention economy; digitalization; media transformation

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Rapid technological development has changed audience reading habits, leading increasing numbers of publishing professionals to discuss the issues and possibilities of publication digitization. Most articles treat this situation as an inevitable and unstoppable trend, accepting it uncritically without reflection [1]. This simplistic equation of digital publishing with the digitization of print media pervades the thinking of many print media practitioners. However, examining actual operations reveals a stark reality: digitizing traditional print media has not only failed to generate greater economic benefits but has also not substantially increased readership. This phenomenon stems from a failure to carefully consider the distinct characteristics and respective advantages of print and electronic publishing products, representing an inevitable consequence of applying old mindsets to new media. Therefore, this paper attempts to return to fundamentals, clarify the differences and respective strengths of traditional print and electronic publishing products, and explore how to combine these advantages to form a “1+1>2” development strategy.

## 1. Definition of Digital Publishing

The “Opinions on Accelerating the Development of China’s Digital Publishing Industry” issued by the General Administration of Press and Publication defines “digital publishing” as: “a new publishing method that uses digital technology for content editing and processing, and disseminates digital content products through networks, characterized by digital content production, digital management processes, digital product formats, and networked dissemination channels” [2]. Although this 2010 document clearly defined digital publishing, after more than a decade of exploration, most digital publishing enterprises have yet to identify other effective revenue pathways. This does not mean digital publishing cannot be profitable, but rather that the industry lacks precise market positioning during transformation, creating an imbalance between investment and returns.

## 2. Digital Transformation of the Publishing Industry

The internet has changed media dissemination methods and public reading habits, prompting print media represented by traditional publishing institutions to adjust accordingly. In this wave of transformation, most publishing institutions have adopted strategies of: (1) meeting minimum industry application standards, and (2) applying traditional resources in “new” ways on new plat-

forms. While these business strategies appear to align with market trends and maintain competitiveness, implementation results demonstrate they are not optimal. Since strategy formulation is closely related to target market preferences, reading habits, and online communities, failure to recognize that digital transformation represents a reconfiguration of the media ecosystem—and to propose corresponding implementation plans—will inevitably lead to market abandonment [3].

In reality, the media ecosystem is in constant flux. From Gutenberg's printing press enabling mass reproduction and dissemination of textual information, to electronic media changing dissemination scope and speed, to today's digital era, each transformation signifies not only changes in dissemination methods but also a redistribution of communication power. The relationship among publishing institutions, authors, and readers has undergone subtle shifts from a unidirectional output model to a bidirectional interaction among audiences, authors, and publishers. Content is no longer the sole factor attracting audiences; reader interaction and community management have become key to drawing audiences to publications. The traditional "write→read" relationship has changed, meaning authors and publishing institutions must establish authority through "symbolic capital" to attract audience attention and loyalty. Meanwhile, communication and exchange on digital media have become crucial—only through the management of virtual and physical communities can publications maintain topicality and sustained audience attention.

The emergence of the World Wide Web marked the beginning of the Web 1.0 era, symbolizing more rapid and extensive information circulation—what David Harvey termed "compression of time and space." During this stage, print media remained the primary carrier of textual content, especially for portable reading. Although internet companies placed various textual contents online through commercial activities, computers lacked portability at the time (even laptops), preventing the general public from having a good reading experience. Consequently, while internet resources surpassed print media in information circulation speed, they could not replace print media. However, the 2007 launch of the iPhone fundamentally changed people's lifestyles. By integrating computer and tablet functionality with convenience, it eliminated print media's monopoly on portable reading, enabling people to read easily through their smartphones. Compared to the challenges print media faced during Web 1.0, the iPhone's emergence posed a more significant threat—not merely a matter of network speed advantages, but enabling arbitrary transmission and portability of various documents and books, challenging another advantage of print publications. Simultaneously, the 3G mobile data era replaced 2G, substantially increasing file transmission speeds and solving the problem of large-file network circulation, allowing electronic scans of books to be transmitted and circulated online.

The emergence of Web 2.0 in 2004 transformed internet platforms from content production and provision to user participation in guiding content, with more

reading experiences, impressions, and reviews appearing in cyberspace. Interaction with readers allows traditional publishing institutions to understand market focus through community management, guide community topics, and collect market evaluations of publications. Meanwhile, authors can no longer remain silent writers; they must interact more with readers and pay attention to their needs. This interaction does not mean authors must completely cater to the market, but rather that bidirectional interaction breaks traditional audiences' confusion in interpreting works independently, enabling readers to grasp authors' thinking more clearly. By 2021, widespread discussion of the metaverse concept heralded the arrival of the Web 3.0 era, meaning that if print media digitization transformation is positioned only for Web 2.0 media changes without advance planning for Web 3.0, such transformation plans will ultimately fail to address rapidly evolving digital technologies. We must deeply understand that digital technology changes are not the focus of print media transformation; instead, we should focus on changes in interaction patterns and communication modes following technological shifts. After all, the core concern of print media cannot 脱离 “people,” and the purpose of technological problem-solving remains serving human needs. The Web 3.0 era represents more effective information and data collection through computing power and big data to provide precise information and content. Such technological changes truly minimize the impact of spatial attributes on populations, enabling management and interaction with groups sharing similar characteristics through computing power and big data analysis—this should be the primary focus of print media digital transformation. Meanwhile, in the decentralization process, the relationship among publishers, authors, and community members changes, allowing the three to be viewed as a “content production community.” This means that during digital transformation, effectively strengthening their interconnections and tightly binding authors, audiences, and publications becomes another crucial task.

Therefore, we must clearly recognize that publishing institutions' digital transformation is not simply changing from traditional print to electronic publishing—it also falls within the scope of the attention economy [4]. The attention economy was first proposed by Michael H. Goldhaber in a 1997 article titled “Attention Shoppers.” He pointed out that in an information society based on computer networks, when people face vast amounts of information, information is no longer a scarce resource but relatively abundant; the scarce resource is human attention. Consequently, as the focus of digitization shifts from information transmission in the Web 1.0 era to information interaction in the Web 2.0 era, and even future community interaction in Web 3.0, the emphasis differs from traditional print publications' focus. The original sole focus on information itself has transformed into simultaneous attention to people, content, and audiences—two complementary dimensions. How to effectively capture audience attention has become a key issue in contemporary communication, making it crucial to become the “spectacle” described by Guy Debord. This “spectacle” does not use external coercive control but rather guides through 隐性 control by attracting public attention [5]. Simultaneously, incorporating community

focus and transforming it into part of digital publishing becomes vital. Both print and digital publishing products must understand that technological transformation is not merely a change in content carriers but more importantly a reorganization of relationships and boundary shifts among publishers, authors, and readers. The convenience brought by digital technology means on one hand that information circulates more rapidly, but on the other hand that competition becomes fiercer—not just from content itself, but more from community management and audience loyalty. Without user attention, the possibility of being read in the information flow is lost.

### 3. Implementation Strategies for Digital Transformation in the Attention Economy

As previously discussed, current digital transformations by traditional publishing institutions mostly involve digitizing print publications, establishing public accounts, and media livestreaming. However, these approaches overlook the core concept of the attention economy: converting attention into actual revenue. Therefore, focusing on this key point, the following implementation strategies are proposed.

#### 3.1 Market Segmentation

Even during periods of changing dissemination methods and reading habits, content remains critically important. Taking *The Architect* magazine—a prestigious academic journal in architecture—as an example, rigorous academic papers remain the core attraction for architecture professionals. However, when print media faces industry digitization, simply digitizing print content does not necessarily attract more readers. Current digital strategies mostly involve straightforward conversion of existing content to provide digital publications for original readers whose habits have changed. This approach merely re-segments existing readers. Without distinguishing similarities and differences between print and electronic publication readers, mechanical digital conversion cannot expand readership. While it satisfies some customers' new needs, it fails to broaden the reader base. The primary significance of journal digitization is changing content dissemination methods. Technology changes dissemination methods but does not necessarily mean substantial increases in readership—evolution in dissemination only means expanded reach. Establishing readership, beyond convenience and habits, still depends on precise content positioning as the key to capturing reader “stickiness.”

This reader “stickiness” can be mastered through data analysis and computing power. Using current digital technology development, we can conduct precise predictions through information collection, heralding a more humanized era distinct from traditional customization. This data collection and analysis is group-based, studying different characteristics such as profession and interest to provide solutions that best meet groups' common traits.

Therefore, we must fully understand that digital transformation does not equal platform expansion. True readership expansion requires differentiated content presentation for different audiences. This differentiation demands precise and effective reader analysis—using big data analytics for accurate market segmentation and positioning. We must study content preference differences and common focus points between two types of readers, distinguish differences between electronic and print journal readers, position characteristics of each format to attract different groups, and expand readership range. In short, print journal digitization should not be viewed as simple carrier conversion or changing reading habits, but as adapting to some users' changing habits while upgrading and expanding journals to target potential customers with these new reading preferences.

### 3.2 Diversified Reading Formats and Capturing the Lower-tier Market

According to the “2021 China Book Retail Market Report” published by *The Beijing News* on January 6, 2022, China's book retail market reached 98.68 billion yuan in 2021 [6]. Another report from Qianzhan Industry Research Institute, “Analysis of China's Digital Reading Market Development Status in 2021: Digital Reading Market Scale Continues to Grow,” indicated that the digital reading industry reached 35.16 billion yuan in 2020 [7]. Comparing these figures, the digital reading market appears to be growing dramatically, with most research reports highly optimistic about its prospects. However, digital reading refers to content presented digitally, including e-books, online literature, and audiobooks. According to Zhiyan Consulting's “2021-2027 China Digital Reading Industry Market Deep Analysis and Development Trend Report,” professional reading accounts for only 7.08% of the digital reading market, with online literature occupying the largest share [8]. The “2020 China Online Literature Development Report” released at the 5th China “Online Literature +” Conference stated that the online literature market reached 24.98 billion yuan in 2020 [9].

Most print media have not carefully evaluated post-transformation market size or mistakenly equated the digital reading market with the print media digitization market. This fallacy often leads to incorrect market positioning and strategy selection during digital transformation. These reports still yield important insights. First, e-readers or tablets are not the best carriers for digital text publications in China; smartphones remain the most commonly used digital reading tool. In 2020, Chinese adults spent an average of 100.75 minutes daily on smartphones, 67.82 minutes on the internet, 11.44 minutes on e-readers, and 9.73 minutes on tablets. A 2016 survey showed that only 40% of citizens who had accessed digital reading methods would accept paid downloads, down from 50.2% the previous year, with an acceptable average price of only 1.78 yuan [10]. These data clearly reveal that simply presenting print publications as paid e-books is unrealistic.

Therefore, based on these reports, we can clearly recognize that print media digital transformation cannot be limited to e-book formats. Format diversification and targeting lower-tier markets deserve attention. For format diversification, audiobooks show particular promise—the digital audiobook market reached 9.47 billion yuan in 2020, with over 31.6% of adults having audiobook habits [11], showing continuous growth for nearly seven years. Print media should consider audiobooks as a new presentation format during digital transformation. For content, beyond professional reading markets, attempting to attract more digital reading users through popular science content can expand market influence.

### 3.3 Establishing Online Symbolic Capital

Mark Poster wrote in *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*: “The stages of the mode of information...The third stage is characterized by informational simulations...In the third stage, the electronic communication stage, continuous instability decentralizes, disperses, and diversifies the self” [12]. Precisely because of this network characteristic, people face “information overload,” losing their ability to judge information.

In facing this phenomenon, how publishing institutions establish authoritative positions in the industry and guide users and potential users becomes crucial. Unlike traditional real-world interpersonal communication, electronic communication is faster with broader audiences. Consolidating existing users, making more potential users aware, and becoming opinion leaders among similar publishers or journal media become important issues for traditional publishing institutions’ digital transformation.

Taking journals as an example, professional journals’ opinion leader status is first established through content professionalism review and control. However, in the internet era, beyond content control, showcasing professional characteristics through the internet is essential. Unlike traditional print media’s offline physical activities contacting reader groups, digital publishing era journal-reader contact has diversified. How to push professional content to more potential readers becomes an extremely important topic. A key characteristic of the internet era is the blurring of the “center” position, even a “decentralized” state. However, “decentralization” does not mean the disappearance of the “center” ; rather, it represents a competitive situation of “dispersion,” “diversification,” and “multi-centers.” While this decentralization means possibilities for diverse voices, it also means that failure to be included as a network node will lead to elimination. The traditional notion of “good wine needs no bush” will quickly be buried among numerous new media and self-media, losing market share. However, this does not mean professional content can be neglected—after all, network convenience only facilitates dissemination and diversification, while long-term user loyalty still depends on content. Therefore, for publishing institutions represented by journals, the digital path requires not only original professional content control but also using network communication methods to establish a professional image, creating complementary effectiveness between the two.

### 3.4 Community Management

As previously mentioned, professional content production is the core of publishing institutions. However, facing changing dissemination methods and reading habits, establishing a professional opinion leader image through the internet is also crucial. In this regard, virtual and physical community management offers a good operational solution—through which reader loyalty can be increased, with the key being integration of online and offline resources. The importance of community management stems from how information acquisition in the network era has fundamentally changed. Readers' reading processes have undergone several transformations: from traditionally waiting for print journals, to actively searching and retrieving journal content online, to today relying on social platform friends' sharing for information. More books and articles become known through news events or recommendations and discussions on relevant social platforms. Social platforms have replaced traditional web pages and fan pages. Through big data analysis and understanding users' reading trajectories, publishing institutions can strengthen interaction and stickiness with readers through social platforms, further enhancing user loyalty and institutional influence.

Virtual and physical community management also changes the relationship between publishing units and readers. Traditional dissemination could be described as unidirectional “top-down” knowledge transmission, which remained unchanged even in the early internet era. Only with the emergence of social communication combined with big data analysis did unidirectional communication transform into bidirectional interaction. Print media can expand audience reach through social websites' influence, which is also communication with potential consumers. Through reading, forwarding, and liking behaviors on social platforms, publishing institutions can effectively grasp reader preferences to adjust publication topics and business strategies. However, virtual community management does not mean ignoring the physical level—community management integrates virtual and physical resources, with offline activities, experiences, and exhibitions also contributing to virtual community growth. Only by mastering both physical and virtual levels can long-term community relationships be effectively established.

Community management does not rely solely on publishing institutions; author participation is also indispensable. Publishing institutions' social platforms connect authors as content producers and readers as content receivers. All texts are no longer tools for author sanctification. The interaction process between authors and readers is actually a form of “disenchantment” —authors can clarify readers' misinterpretations, and readers can more accurately grasp authors' true intentions. In this sense, community management not only changes the interaction relationship between authors and readers but also transforms original content dissemination models. In fact, as the three subjects of reading behavior—readers, authors, and publishing institutions—all three parties can achieve closer connections.

The source of this close connection appears to be measures taken to protect publishers' interests, but careful study of Web 3.0 reveals this is an inevitable result of adapting to the Web 3.0 era. Generally, decentralization is considered a Web 3.0 characteristic, but it might be more accurate to call it multi-centralization. Multi-centralization operates through different nodes and blockchains—failure to become a node will still lead to elimination. The aforementioned discourse repeatedly mentions the importance of becoming a digital publishing node. Node strengthening requires not only publishers' unilateral efforts but integrating all available resources from authors and audiences to achieve maximum effectiveness. On digital blockchain nodes, the relationship among authors, audiences, and publishers more resembles a cooperative relationship. Unlike traditional community management completely controlled by publishers, blockchain-era community management requires joint participation and management by authors and community managers, becoming a stakeholder community where content creation becomes more diversified and profound, continuously expanding media influence.

Digital media transformation has significantly impacted traditional print media, with numerous publishing practitioners attempting changes to adapt. However, during adaptation, publishing institutions have invested substantial resources without achieving expected results. The reason is that these changes often overlook the fundamental root: “people.” During print media digital transformation, the focus is often only on how to digitize print content, ignoring the key point: although technology has changed readers' habits, the critical issue is not just carrier transformation but focusing on the new interaction pattern changes among readers, authors, and publishing institutions. How to effectively present content to existing users and potential readers, cultivate their trust and loyalty, use new technologies to satisfy new and old users with different reading habits, and accurately deliver content to segmented audiences—these are the issues publishing practitioners must address. Media digital transformation does not mean abandoning everything about print media. Traditional media' s dilemma lies not in content but in failing to differentiate from digital media and ineffectively delivering content and products to readers accustomed to print publications while establishing an audience willing to pay.

The above strategic models apply not only to digital publishing institutions but are also necessary for traditional publishing institutions primarily producing print publications to use digital platforms for promotion, management, and sales. If digital transformation is simply understood as content digitization without grasping that the true meaning of the digital era lies in changes in “people,” the result will be elimination by the times. Therefore, facing digital transformation opportunities, “the problem is never technology, but people.”

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