

Inherent Logic and Path Optimization in County-Level Converged Media Center Construction: A Participatory Communication Perspective (Post-Print)

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Abstract

Since 2018, the number of research papers on county-level converged media centers has surged. However, most studies remain at the level of case analysis, status quo examination, and model exploration, lacking theoretical depth and profound understanding of their social impact. To address this gap, this paper adopts the theoretical perspective of participatory communication to delve into the underlying logic of county-level converged media center construction. It proposes that further improvement requires building new communication platforms, enhancing original content production capabilities, and emphasizing differentiated development.

Full Text

The Internal Logic and Path Optimization of County-Level Media Convergence Center Construction from a Participatory Communication Perspective

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Abstract: Since 2018, research on county-level media convergence centers has proliferated, yet most studies remain at the level of case analysis, status quo description, and model exploration, lacking theoretical depth and profound understanding of social impact. This paper examines the internal logic of county-level media convergence center construction from the theoretical perspective of participatory communication, arguing that further improvements require building new exchange platforms, enhancing original content production capabilities, and emphasizing differentiated development.

Keywords: participatory communication; county-level media convergence center; media convergence construction; path optimization

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At the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work held on August 21-22, 2018, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: “We must solidly advance the construction of county-level media convergence centers to better guide and serve the masses.” This marked a shift in the focus of media convergence from exploring the “central kitchen” model to a new round of media convergence actions centered on county-level media convergence centers [1]. Although domestic research on county-level media convergence centers has grown substantially, it lacks theoretical depth in grasping the construction of these centers. Participatory communication theory, which emerged in the 1970s, has been widely used to guide communication system construction and regional development projects in developing countries with good results. Does a logical connection exist between county-level media convergence center construction and participatory communication theory? Does participatory communication theory offer enlightening significance for the construction of county-level media convergence centers?

1. Research Status of County-Level Media Convergence Centers

Since 2018, literature on county-level media convergence has grown exponentially. A search of the CNKI database reveals that as of July 6, 2021, there were as many as 3,111 relevant documents, demonstrating the high level of research interest in this field.

Among these works are comprehensive reports based on extensive case studies. For instance, Xie Xinzhou’s team employed questionnaire surveys to investigate platform construction, platform functions and content development, management, and talent team building across 2,741 county-level new media platforms nationwide [2]. Chen Guoquan conducted in-depth research on 23 county-level media convergence centers in eastern, central, and western China, producing the “Report on the Reform and Development of China’s County-Level Media Convergence Centers” [3]. There are also practice-oriented reports focusing on specific centers, such as Wang Xiaowei’s detailed analysis of the construction of the Changxing County Media Convergence Center in Zhejiang Province, examining its foundational work, platform construction, and innovation [4].

Additionally, scholars have intensively discussed and analyzed the models, paths, and dilemmas encountered in county-level media convergence center construction. For example, Zhu Chunyang and Zeng Peilun identified two basic models:

the “single-unit diffusion” model, which involves self-integration based on county-level broadcasting, and the “cloud interconnection” model, which integrates into higher-level platforms [5]. Li Biao summarized four construction models: the “broadcasting + newspaper” central kitchen model, the mobile communication matrix model led by broadcasting, the county-level media group model, and the model leveraging provincial media cloud platforms [6]. Chen Guoquan and Fu Shasha considered construction from the perspectives of institutional reform, content quality improvement, and technical support [7]. Regarding dilemmas, Xie Xinzhou summarized the four major challenges facing current county-level media convergence centers as “six uncertainties” : unclear supervisory agencies, unclear coordination mechanisms, unclear original content production mechanisms, unclear talent cultivation and utilization mechanisms, unclear “self-sustaining” mechanisms, and unclear technical directions [8]. Qin Zhencheng proposed that the dilemmas manifest specifically in three aspects: first, low activity levels, click rates, and readability of county-level media content; second, complex personnel composition and outdated institutional structures in county media departments, with few truly talented individuals; and third, the difficult predicament of an “absent audience” for county-level media, making it hard to achieve substantial communication effects [9].

Overall, although domestic research on county-level media convergence centers is substantial, most studies remain at the descriptive level of case analysis, status quo examination, and model discussion, severely lacking theoretical depth and profound understanding of social impact.

2. Participatory Communication Theory

Participatory communication is an important branch of development communication studies and represents the third-generation paradigm (also known as the pluralistic paradigm) of development communication. Prior to this, the dominant paradigms were the modernization paradigm and the dependency paradigm.

While the dominant paradigm centered on economic development and the dependency paradigm had certain political orientations, participatory communication returns to culture—especially local culture—emphasizing the value of traditional culture, the particularity of different cultures, people’s participation, interpersonal communication, and the establishment of small-scale communication systems. Servaes summarized two understandings of participatory communication: the first is Paulo Freire’s advocated dialogical pedagogy, and the second emphasizes concepts such as access, participation, and self-management. Additionally, Servaes argued that participatory communication can bring about social change because it places people at the core of development, helps local communities regain confidence in their own culture, values, and environment, and educates and motivates people to actively participate in self and social improvement while maintaining ecological balance [10]. In the World Bank’s *Participatory Communication: A Practical Guide*, the editors, drawing on Paulo

Freire' s ideas, summarized the core concepts of participatory communication as: free and equal dialogue, giving voice to vulnerable groups, liberation from old “top-down” education, and simultaneous action and reflection [11]. Chinese scholar Han Hong identified basic characteristics of participatory communication as being process-oriented, endogenously driven, and reflective of local values and environments [12].

3. The Internal Logic of County-Level Media Convergence Center Construction

3.1 Accessibility Logic

Unlike previous development communication theories that simply regarded the public as information recipients, participatory communication fully emphasizes the public' s subjectivity in the communication process, advocating a shift from top-down, elite-dominated communication that “instills” development information to the public toward a bottom-up information dissemination model. Participatory communication attaches great importance to access, which refers to the use of public media services. It can be defined as the public' s ability to provide feedback and convey their views and demands to production organizations when choosing diverse and relevant programs. According to the 43rd “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China” released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in Beijing, as of December 2018, China' s internet user population reached 829 million, with an internet penetration rate of 59.6%. In this context, netizens are both the target of media competition and a driving force for deeper media convergence. Traditional county-level broadcasting systems represented a top-down information “dissemination” approach, while current county-level media convergence centers aim to enhance public access to county-level media by comprehensively integrating resources, deploying all-media communication channels, improving multi-level functions including news, government inquiry, and livelihood services, and building mobile platforms.

3.2 Endogenous Drive Logic

Both the dominant and dependency paradigms situate development communication discussions at the international level, emphasizing distinctions between developed and developing countries, the impact of external forces on a nation' s development, and attempting to use external forces to change backward conditions in developing countries, while ignoring each country' s internal factors and forces. As noted in the literature, “The endogenous drive here refers to the fact that the development promoted by participatory communication is not based on a universal model but should adapt to local socio-cultural environments” [13]. Participatory communication precisely recognizes the particularity of each country, thus emphasizing differentiated paths for development communication and guiding people to pay attention to and confront internal contradictions in developing countries, thereby achieving genuine change by combining national

conditions and leveraging local people' s power.

Similarly, county-level media convergence center construction is a localized response that came relatively late in the broader trend of media convergence development. On August 18, 2014, the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms approved the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Convergence Development of Traditional and Emerging Media,” marking media convergence as a national strategy. Since then, mainstream media have actively responded to this national strategy, exploring new development paths for media convergence and forming the “central kitchen” production model, which has enhanced mainstream media influence. However, it was not until 2018 that this media convergence “movement” began to pay attention to the vast number of county-level media. Compared with mainstream media, county-level local media represent local forces. Therefore, developing county-level media convergence centers should start from local values and environments, enhance the influence of local media, and use local forces to influence and mobilize more citizens to participate in grassroots governance.

3.3 Participation Logic

“Participation” is the core concept of participatory communication, though scholars have long debated its specific meaning. Essentially, participation is a process of mobilizing community members to engage jointly in various stages of development projects, including decision-making, planning, design, implementation, and feedback. Self-management represents the highest form of participation, where the public exercises decision-making power in media and is fully involved in the execution of communication policies and plans [14]. Servaes, a leading figure in participatory communication, believed that “participation” means higher levels of public involvement in communication systems, including participation in production processes and in the management and planning of communication systems. On this basis, participatory communication should achieve local people' s self-management [15].

In August 2018, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work: “We must solidly advance the construction of county-level media convergence centers to better guide and serve the masses.” To better “guide the masses” and “serve the masses,” county-level media convergence centers have incorporated the public into their construction systems during the development process, giving full play to public enthusiasm and creativity. For example, most county-level media convergence centers currently built or under construction generally possess intelligent aggregation and distribution capabilities similar to Toutiao, and some applications are also equipped with UGC (user-generated content) platforms that support users in uploading and sharing pictures and videos, meeting users' personalized information reception and expression needs.

In summary, the internal logic of county-level media convergence center con-

struction demonstrates consistency with the characteristics of participatory communication, including accessibility, participation, and endogenous drive. This not only reflects the progressive nature of county-level media convergence centers but also indicates that participatory communication theory has guiding significance for their construction.

4. Path Optimization for County-Level Media Convergence Center Construction from a Participatory Communication Perspective

Most current research on county-level media convergence centers primarily proposes platform-based construction paths. Platform-based construction emphasizes aggregation and integration, which is crucial in the initial stages of county-level media convergence development. However, the operation of county-level media convergence centers requires not only platformization but also balancing various internal and external relationships, such as the balance between dissemination and communication, between technology construction and content production, and between standardization and differentiation.

4.1 Building New Exchange Platforms to Balance Dissemination and Communication

Participatory communication can theoretically be understood as an “action toward understanding,” and communication is key to achieving understanding. Unlike previous development communication theories, participatory communication no longer focuses solely on Communication (information dissemination) but discovers Communicating (dynamic exchange), shifting its emphasis from informing and persuading to facilitating communication among different stakeholder groups and solving problems through joint discussion, participation, and action.

In today’s rapid development, many counties have also experienced swift transformation. In the process of rapid economic growth, contradictions have become increasingly apparent, particularly rising conflicts among different interest groups. For instance, environmental damage or unreasonable resource occupation in county economic development can easily strain government-public relations; weak legal and social responsibility awareness among county enterprises can infringe upon employees’ legitimate rights and interests, causing conflicts between enterprises and labor. The key to alleviating these contradictions and conflicts lies in communication, making the construction of a multi-level exchange platform essential. Traditional county media, dominated by broadcasting and television, focused on “disseminating” national policies or major local government affairs. In contrast, transforming county-level media convergence centers need to reconsider their role in social “communication” to achieve a balance between dissemination and communication. To this end, county-level media convergence centers can attempt to build a new exchange platform with

joint efforts from all parties, incorporating different local stakeholders into their mobile platforms to give government, enterprises, NGOs, and the public opportunities to voice their concerns. For example, they can continue to improve website and app government inquiry services, open hot discussion zones in apps, assign dedicated staff to compile hot issues into special columns to help local governments better understand public sentiment, and actively invite involved parties to the studio for face-to-face exchanges.

4.2 Enhancing Original Content Production Capacity to Balance Technology Investment and Content Production

The modernization and dependency paradigms advocate introducing advanced communication means into developing countries to promote local media communication capabilities, but participatory communication focuses more on communication content than technical means. Moreover, the essence of participatory communication is emphasizing the unique value of culture in social transformation. In the modernization process, local traditional culture is not regarded as an obstacle to be conquered and abandoned but rather as the foundation, intermediary, and booster of modernization. Local traditional culture carries a region's humanistic history and local people's identity and value recognition, and traditional culture itself is a medium. Folk stories, folk dramas, traditional festivals, customs, and other interactive forms of religious or secular communication constitute a communication system embedded in culture—a trustworthy medium and information resource for local people.

Currently, many county-level media convergence centers are preoccupied with integrating various high-end technologies such as big data, 5G, and AI to build all-media communication matrices. Technology is a driving force for development, and vigorously promoting communication technology innovation is undoubtedly justified. However, the problem is that technology updates occupy too many resources in county-level media convergence center construction, while the equally critical issue of content production is rarely mentioned. Traditional county-level media have long excerpted content from mainstream media, and local news content has long focused on local government meetings and officials' work, lacking innovation. Today, county-level media convergence center construction represents a significant opportunity for county-level media. These centers must fully recognize the importance of content production, especially original content related to local traditional culture. As the saying goes, "The advantage goes to those in favorable positions." County-level media convergence centers can fully utilize local culture as raw material, combine traditional culture with modern media, and center information production and dissemination on local people, hopefully bridging the gap between mass media content and local people's lives. This can both enhance the influence of county-level media convergence centers and effectively protect and promote local culture.

4.3 Emphasizing Differentiated Development to Balance Standardization and Differentiation

Unlike the universalism of the modernization paradigm and relativism of the dependency paradigm in development communication theory, the philosophical foundation of participatory communication is pluralism, which in practice emphasizes differences among developing countries and requires communication system construction to adapt to local conditions and find optimal strategies.

Under the influence of standardized documents and policies, current county-level media convergence center construction has experienced “one-size-fits-all” approaches, blind follow-up, and imitation phenomena. This complete disregard for local realities and genuine public needs has further led to resource waste and redundant construction. As one scholar noted, “China has 2,851 counties, each with different conditions and different media operation circumstances. There are both common and individual problems that require differentiated research and responses.”

County-level media convergence centers can achieve differentiated development through two main aspects: positioning and development models. First, regarding positioning, the national level positions county-level media convergence centers overall as mainstream public opinion positions, comprehensive service platforms, community information hubs, important components of national governance capacity modernization, and indispensable parts of the modern communication system. However, beneath this overall positioning, each local county-level media convergence center should further refine its own positioning based on local realities and its own advantages, adjusting its positioning according to different stages of center construction. Second, regarding development models, county-level media convergence centers should formulate differentiated development models by comprehensively considering local economic strength and the center’s original development foundation. For example, Beijing’s Yanqing District adopted the “broadcasting + newspaper” central kitchen model; Pizhou, Yumen, and Xiangcheng formed a mobile communication matrix model led by broadcasting; and Changxing in Zhejiang established a county-level media group model.

Of course, emphasizing differentiated development does not mean completely negating the value of standardization. Policy documents such as the “Construction Standards for County-Level Media Convergence Centers” and “Network Security Standards for County-Level Media Convergence Centers” jointly issued by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the National Radio and Television Administration have made overall requirements and arrangements for business types, network security, operation maintenance, and monitoring and supervision of county-level media convergence centers. These have important guiding significance for construction, especially in the initial stages when such standardized norms are necessary. Therefore, county-level media convergence centers must neither ignore standardized norms nor fail to

formulate differentiated development strategies based on actual conditions to achieve a balance between standardization and differentiation.

5. Conclusion

This paper innovatively employs participatory communication theory to analyze county-level media convergence center construction. The analysis reveals that concepts from participatory communication theory—such as accessibility, participation, and endogenous drive—are consistent with the internal logic of county-level media convergence center construction. Furthermore, under the enlightenment of participatory communication theory, further improvement of county-level media convergence center construction requires balancing three pairs of forces: dissemination and communication, technology investment and content production, and standardization and differentiation. This may provide a new perspective for current research that lacks theoretical connection and is dominated by descriptive and inductive studies. However, this paper's review of participatory communication theory is somewhat incomplete, and its analysis lacks empirical data support. Future research could attempt to start from specific cases to more deeply analyze the guiding significance of participatory communication theory for county-level media convergence center construction practice, while also reflecting on how participatory communication theory can be localized to better guide the construction of county-level media convergence centers.

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

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