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Institutional Isomorphism and Practical Paths for Digital Transformation of University Presses: Postprint

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Abstract

Amidst the rapid development of big data and artificial intelligence, the digital transformation of university presses faces new opportunities and challenges. From an institutional theory perspective, the digital transformation of university presses exhibits characteristics of coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional isomorphism. This paper analyzes how these three types of institutional pressures drive university presses to undertake digital transformation, and beyond these three institutional pressures, identifies two moderating variables—“self-drive force” and “organizational resources”—thereby constructing a driving force model for the digital transformation of university presses, and finally explores the practical paths for digital transformation of university presses under institutional pressures.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: Institutional Isomorphism and Practical Pathways for Digital Transformation of University Presses

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Abstract: In the era of rapid development of big data and artificial intelligence, the digital transformation of university presses faces new opportunities and challenges. From the perspective of institutional theory, the digital transformation of university presses exhibits characteristics of coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional isomorphism. This paper analyzes how three types of institutional pressures drive the digital transformation of university presses, and beyond these three pressures, identifies two moderating variables—“self-driven

force” and “organizational resources” –to construct a driver model for university press digital transformation. Finally, it explores the practical pathways for digital transformation under institutional pressures.

Keywords: university press; digital transformation; institutional isomorphism; practical pathway

1. Institutional Theory Review

Institutional isomorphism theory posits that organizations embedded in their social contexts and institutional environments can obtain cognitive legitimacy through isomorphism [1]. Legitimacy refers to the positive and legitimate evaluation an organization receives from relevant stakeholders, indicating consistency between the organization and external groups, which largely determines the actor’s posture in society [2]. From this theoretical perspective, university presses often view their academic resources as monopolistic assets. Combined with external control over their organizational behavior, this creates substantial cognitive legitimacy pressure during digital transformation.

Hawley defines isomorphism as a coercive process in which an organization, driven by external pressures, becomes increasingly similar to other organizations through various practices [1]. The theory maintains that when external environments change and generate pressure, they compel an organization to resemble other organizations. In recent years, with the rapid rise of audio content, short videos, and live streaming, publishing institutions have begun opening official accounts on audio platforms, short-video platforms, and live-streaming platforms to produce and sell audiobooks and conduct digital marketing through short videos and live broadcasts. The development of internet technology has transformed knowledge production and dissemination patterns while changing audience content consumption habits. Such spontaneous reform behaviors, driven by external environmental pressures (media convergence and new media impact), conform to the definition of isomorphism. However, existing research has found that publishing institutions face certain entry barriers during digital transformation, including not only regulatory constraints from various digital platform policies but also the risk of struggling to survive due to inability to adapt to digital platforms’ operational rules.

Coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism represent three pathways to obtaining cognitive legitimacy, with an organization’s external environment determining the trade-offs among these paths [3]. Through continuous development, institutional theory has become an important branch of sociology for studying external factors’ influence on organizations. As isomorphism theory has evolved, it has transcended the limitations of single institutional logic, proposing that organizations can identify a reasonable institution for isomorphism under multiple institutional logics, thereby alleviating pressure from diverse institutional logics.

2. Analysis of Isomorphic Drivers in University Press Digital Transformation

University presses constitute a unique category of publishing institutions with intricate ties to their parent universities and strong characteristics of public institutions. Consequently, the driving forces for digital transformation isomorphism in university presses appear somewhat insufficient compared to commercial publishing houses. Against this backdrop, how traditional university presses can maintain their distinctive features while adapting to current digital transformation trends and better embedding themselves in contemporary social contexts has become an urgent research question. This article attempts to elucidate the institutional pressures driving university presses toward isomorphism with digital platforms, explore a driver model for university press digital transformation from an institutionalist perspective, and reveal the underlying mechanisms.

2.1 Coercive Isomorphism Under Policy Pressure

Since 2014, the state has accelerated the introduction of policies promoting digital transformation in the publishing industry, from the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting Digital Transformation and Upgrading in the Press and Publication Industry* to the *13th Five-Year Development Plan for Digital Publishing in the Press and Publication Industry*, and further to the *Notice on Deepening Digital Transformation and Upgrading in the Press and Publication Industry* and the *14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through 2035*. These policy initiatives have created coercive isomorphism pressure for university press digital transformation.

2.2 Mimetic Isomorphism Under Peer Pressure

Beyond mandatory state policy provisions, when university presses perceive that similar organizations possess greater legitimacy or better adapt to current market development trends, they tend to imitate, thus generating mimetic isomorphism pressure. The mimetic isomorphism of Chinese university presses' digital transformation primarily originates from two sources: domestic and international university presses. Currently, a group of domestic university presses with strong development momentum have formed relatively mature digital development models. In terms of digital product formats, Tsinghua University Press' s online learning platform "Wenquan Classroom," Beijing Jiaotong University Press' s M+Book, and Zhejiang University Press' s Cube represent outstanding practical achievements in university press digital exploration. Meanwhile, foreign educational publishing institutions began digital transformation practices years earlier, not only achieving global operations through digital content and services but also strengthening user connections and enabling real-time user interaction. For example, Oxford University Press began constructing online databases years ago, with platform visits exceeding 30 million accumulatively, and has now formed four mature online databases for academic reference books, significantly advancing digital publishing development [4].

From a sales channel perspective, relevant surveys indicate that approximately 61.02% of university presses cooperate with online distributors [12], while some have independently developed digital marketing channels. For instance, Tsinghua University Press's Wenquan Bookstore enables publication sales, e-book lending, and print-on-demand services. Typical models for foreign university presses after digital sales transformation include the "B2B2L Model" (Business to Business to Learner) and "D2C Model" (Direct to Consumer), which rely on digital transformation to adapt to digital technology development and achieve revenue and profit maximization goals. Regarding promotion and operations, live streaming and short videos have become important marketing tools, with many university presses beginning to utilize these new media forms for marketing. For example, East China Normal University Press collaborated with Yueyue Books Tmall flagship store to create brand-specific live broadcasts, introducing books in more intuitive and vivid ways that stimulated audience consumption and achieved excellent results.

Driven by technological development, university presses have accelerated digital transformation. According to research, by 2018, 52% of university presses had established dedicated digital departments, 76% had developed and launched digital products, and over 90% promoted products through digital marketing methods [9]. However, successful transformation practices remain limited to a minority, concentrated among top-tier presses with substantial academic and human resources, such as Tsinghua University Press and East China Normal University Press. Although all university presses recognize the importance of digital transformation, it represents a complex systematic project requiring robust content and human resources while inevitably encountering multiple development challenges. Moreover, university presses receive support from national policies as well as university academic and human resources, enabling basic survival even without transformation. Consequently, without strong self-driven force, digital transformation remains difficult to achieve.

Therefore, based on the actual conditions of university press digital transformation development, this paper modifies and extends original institutional isomorphism theory by adding two new dimensions— "organizational resources" and "self-driven force" —to the traditional institutional isomorphism model. This better characterizes university presses' isomorphism process with digital platforms' cross-media attributes and enhances the coupling degree between university presses and overall digital development, as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

2.3 Normative Isomorphism Under User Pressure

China currently possesses the world's largest information and communication network and the largest netizen population, with digital infrastructure continuously strengthening [6]. The *2019-2020 China Digital Publishing Industry Annual Report* indicates that China's digital publishing industry revenue reached 988.143 billion yuan, maintaining double-digit high growth for over a decade [7-

8]. China's online audio-visual user base reached 944 million, with 45.5% of users paying for online video programs within six months. These data demonstrate that digital transformation infrastructure is complete, online user numbers continue growing, and user payment habits have formed, making digital transformation an inevitable future trend. Normative pressure enables publishing institutions to perceive that cooperation with digital platforms yields greater social legitimacy and recognition. Generally, normative pressure originates from external stakeholders with close organizational relationships. As increasing users invest substantial time and money in digital platforms, these platforms ultimately become the primary venues for publishing operations and marketing. For university presses undergoing digital transformation, both content formats and marketing channels cannot be limited to traditional e-books and e-commerce platforms; they must achieve normative isomorphism with short-video platforms to maximize audience reach.

3. Construction of a Driver Model for University Press Digital Transformation Under Institutional Isomorphism

University press digital transformation has become an unstoppable trend. From an institutional isomorphism perspective, external pressure constitutes the primary driver. Three major factors—institutional and business model innovation and external pressure—directly affect digital transformation outcomes. Notably, between external institutional pressure and digital transformation, self-driven force and organizational resources serve as moderating variables that reconcile the contradiction between external institutional pressure and actual organizational development conditions. In practice, this ensures university presses can adapt to publishing industry development trends while maintaining distinctive features and fulfilling their responsibility to disseminate academic and educational resources, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

Currently, university presses face varying degrees of digital platform legitimacy pressure, with these differences originating from the presses themselves and external digital development conditions.

4. Innovative Pathways for University Press Digital Isomorphism

4.1 Increase Government Coercive Institutional Supply

As a rigid constraint, institutions provide clear regulations and guidelines for organizational development. In China's publishing field, the government serves as a crucial force driving university press digital transformation, not only guiding institutional change but also acting as the decisive institutional supply subject that determines development forms, pathways, and even directions for various publishing institutions. Unlike Western publishing enterprises' pure profit motives, Chinese university presses' isomorphism with digital platforms also incorporates the mission of disseminating academic and educational resources. To

ensure university presses can more effectively leverage their distinctive features during transformation and development, the government must play a leading role in providing comprehensive institutional supply for university press transformation.

First, strengthen autonomous institutional supply. China's university presses and digital platforms fall under different management jurisdictions, with the Publicity Department, Cyberspace Administration, Press and Publication Administration, and Ministry of Industry and Information Technology all imposing constraints on the isomorphism process from different aspects, involving numerous policy barriers and systemic obstacles. This requires further strengthening of government coordination for digital transformation development management and increased institutional guarantees to ensure university presses have substantial autonomy in conducting digital practices, enabling them to carry out digital transformation and media convergence practices according to actual cultural development needs.

Second, provide flexible power-based institutional supply. Beyond operating books that generate direct profits, university presses should integrate book-related derivatives and cultural products into their product systems to establish visible bridging relationships with the online commercial world. For example, Shanxi Education Press collaborated with a technology company to develop the "Daouxuehao" product, thereby expanding online value-added services for its supplementary teaching materials.

Third, innovate resource-based institutional supply. To adapt to current video-based transformation, the government should provide support by organizing relevant training activities where successful university presses can share experiences, leveraging a "head-to-waist" effect to help more university presses adapt to industry development trends. Additionally, the government should use relevant platforms to provide "traffic support" for university press innovation achievements, thereby solving the "no attention" dilemma during initial innovation stages.

4.2 Strengthen Mimetic Institutional Innovation in University Presses

University press imitation objects fall into two main categories: mature internet digital platforms and existing successful practices in university press digital transformation. Based on these two targets, university press mimetic institutional innovation primarily involves three aspects:

First, strengthen theoretical research on digital transformation development for publishing institutions. Currently, many university press managers and practitioners still maintain strong senses of superiority and conservatism, with widespread debates about new media practice and transformation legitimacy. Through theoretical research on university press digital development, we can enhance understanding of media convergence and digital transformation, increase theoretical confidence in digital transformation, and guide publishing

practitioners to transform their thinking.

Second, promote platform-based development. University presses must reposition themselves in digital transformation, moving beyond being mere publishing institutions to learning from digital platforms and becoming knowledge service providers. They should aim to meet user needs and knowledge value-added goals by providing valuable information and services. Publishing institutions can develop toward different knowledge service types based on their advantages and resources, such as deeply processing content to meet long-tail demands in academic markets, becoming consulting service providers to build academic think tanks, or leveraging technical advantages to become academic resource integrators. Platform-based development enables university presses to maximize academic resource utilization and identify their positioning in digital development while highlighting their advantages.

Third, introduce digital technology. An important goal of university press digital transformation is leveraging their advantages to enhance influence and facilitate the shift from publishing institutions to education service providers, using rich academic resources to attract more audiences. Digital technology introduction can effectively support this goal by maximizing academic resource dissemination. For example, Tsinghua University Press' s “Wenquan Classroom” not only digitizes various teaching resources but also develops classroom management modules to achieve close integration with classroom teaching and promote maximum resource sharing.

4.3 Strengthen Market Normative Institutional Introduction

From the current development status of the publishing industry, digital transformation represents a crucial pathway for university presses to achieve marketing and organizational transformation. Greater participation from more publishing institutions will further promote healthy digital transformation development and maximize resource utilization.

First, obtain cognitive legitimacy from digital platforms. Under the media convergence framework, digital platforms are generally treated as marketing channels and means of media convergence innovation. University presses should emulate book-recommending hosts and self-media institutions by presenting cultural symbols on digital platforms that both embody core values and conform to digital platforms' operational “rules,” thereby avoiding value conflicts arising from cultural symbols. For instance, when conducting video marketing on short-video platforms, accounts should not be named after the publishing institution itself but should instead adopt names compatible with short-video platform aesthetics to obscure potential conflicts between the institution's symbolic meaning and platform culture.

Second, conform to visual culture development characteristics. Visual culture represents a cultural form that uses images as symbolic representations, with image symbolism depending on image consciousness [10]. The continuous growth

of online video users and video platforms demonstrates that visual culture has become a conventional media cultural ecology. University press digital transformation must adapt to this cultural development characteristic by creating video-based knowledge content, either independently or through authorized cooperation with knowledge payment platforms to develop video courses, and by leveraging live streaming and short videos for visual communication that enables “soft” dissemination of cultural knowledge and enhances audience interaction. For example, during the Beijing Book Fair, China Renmin University Press launched five series of live broadcasts simultaneously on four platforms: Xiaoe Tong, Bilibili, Weibo, and WeChat Video Channel. These featured not only heavyweight authors interpreting professional topics at the fair but also bestseller giveaways and real-time flash sales, attracting nearly 10,000 viewers across platforms and nearly 1,000 participants in live interactions, flash sales, and topic discussions.

4.4 Build Self-Driven Force for Digital Transformation

First, establish incentive mechanisms for university press digital transformation. Although the state has established some awards for digital transformation achievements, the incentive level remains insufficient. To further motivate university presses to enhance digital transformation drivers, clear incentive mechanisms should be established, with corresponding awards and incentives for digital content formats, digital publishing channels, and digital marketing to enable university presses to maximize their advantages in different aspects. The core principle is to ensure university presses can clearly see “profit returns” to stimulate transformation enthusiasm.

Second, establish scientific talent cultivation systems. In recent years, university presses have experienced serious talent drain, with online education institutions and knowledge service enterprises poaching numerous professionals. Facing this challenge, university presses should create “collective-style” talent cultivation systems, appropriately introducing democratic decision-making mechanisms at all levels to better reflect employee suggestions and enabling departments with hierarchical relationships to maintain relatively independent operational authority. Through various cultivation systems, all levels of employees should be granted certain intellectual and operational freedom, with timely collection of public opinion to allow diverse talents to maximize their potential and demonstrate unique value, thereby forming a favorable talent cultivation and development environment within the press.

Third, incentivize authors. For university presses, university teachers are important providers of knowledge resources, but current royalties for university teachers are very low, significantly dampening their enthusiasm and affecting university presses’ access to academic resources. To address this, university presses can redistribute benefits through digital transformation to stimulate university teachers’ enthusiasm for knowledge production. In digital production, university presses can emulate the “Dedao App” operation model, collab-

orating with university teachers to develop courses, provide knowledge services, and create diversified product formats. In digital marketing, university presses can conduct live streaming and short-video marketing together with university teachers, leveraging teachers' influence for book sales, which not only increases book sales but also improves teachers' enthusiasm through revenue distribution.

4.5 Promote Maximization of Organizational Resource Utilization

First, rely on parent universities for specialized publishing. University presses' publishing culture and characteristics largely derive from their parent universities' influence. Therefore, university presses should maximize their reliance on parent universities' distinctive disciplinary resources to form specialized publishing characteristics that highlight their academic publishing advantages. For example, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press leveraged its parent university's strengths in foreign language studies to plan and publish high-quality textbooks such as *English Translation of Chinese Classics, Reading Course: Chinese Culture*, and *Chinese Reading and Writing Course* that inherit Chinese culture and advocate civilizational mutual learning. The press also pioneered digital courses for English majors, integrating audio-video content, MOOCs, and micro-lectures through multimodal approaches to create a sustainable and vibrant ecosystem for English-major publishing.

Second, utilize local cultural resources for distinctive publishing. Resources in university presses' locations represent unique assets and advantages. University presses should deeply explore these resources to develop distinctive publishing that not only conveys academic value but also showcases local characteristics, thereby facilitating international cultural exchange. For example, Sichuan University Press collaborated with two renowned image scholars, Zhou Mengqi and Xue Kang, to plan and publish the bilingual 画册 (picture album) *Twin Treasures 150: The 150th Anniversary of the Scientific Discovery of Giant Pandas and Golden Monkeys*. The exquisite images in this 画册 come from the photographers' recent tracking shots of giant pandas and golden monkeys, with concise and poetic text providing a visual feast for domestic and international readers.

Digital platforms serve as massive traffic portals that play crucial roles in enriching publishing content, optimizing publishing channels, and improving publishing marketing. This presents both a tremendous challenge and higher demands for university presses facing the trend of publishing convergence transformation in terms of organizational optimization, mindset transformation, and flexible execution. Approaching from institutional isomorphism theory provides a differentiated perspective for exploring university press digital transformation, highlighting the importance of constructing an institutional isomorphism driver model to further clarify development pathways. University press digital practice must better leverage the value of academic and educational resources to meet the public's growing spiritual and cultural needs, which will facilitate better university development and drive innovation in the publishing industry.

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