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Abstract

Based on a systematic review of the university publishing industry’s evolution, this paper examines the new development trends of university presses within their affiliated university contexts, specifically addressing the challenges that China’s university presses face amid the digital transformation.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: Exploring the Integrated Development of University Presses Within the University Ecosystem

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Abstract: Based on a historical review of the university publishing industry, this paper examines the developmental challenges faced by China’s university presses in the digital transformation process and explores new trends in their growth within their affiliated university environments.

Keywords: university publishing; digitalization; establishing information connections; expanding methods; teaching resource dissemination

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The “post-pandemic era” is not merely a temporal concept following the COVID-19 outbreak, but rather encompasses the changes, challenges, and reflections that have emerged during this period. Confronted with the reality of long-term coexistence with the virus, university presses must seek and develop new growth patterns to meet future challenges.

This study focuses on university presses as its research subject. Through a historical review of the university publishing industry and an examination of the difficulties in digital development, this paper explores new developmental trends for university presses within their university environments, using the “Guidelines on Accelerating the In-depth Development of Media Convergence” adopted at the 14th meeting of the Central Committee for Comprehensively Deepening Reform as its policy framework.

1. Overview of the University Publishing Industry

University presses in China were established successively in the 1980s to meet the developmental needs of higher education disciplines, gradually growing by leveraging their institutions’ academic standing and brand foundation. In 1986, under the guidance of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and coinciding with the first National University Press Work Conference, the “Interim Provisions on Several Issues Concerning University Publishing Work” was formulated. This document explicitly defined the status, nature, tasks, and developmental direction of China’s university presses, serving as a programmatic document for the industry and marking the end of its initial establishment period.

In the subsequent decades, university presses moved beyond their tentative early steps to expand rapidly, gradually establishing deep roots across various disciplinary fields with distinctive characteristics and advantages. Today, China has 114 university presses, accounting for approximately 19.5% of all domestic publishing houses and constituting a significant and influential component of the nation’ s publishing industry.

Due to their inseparable connection with their affiliated institutions, the development trajectory of university presses has been closely linked to the pace of disciplinary construction within universities. During the formative period of modern disciplines, the publishing industry facilitated disciplinary accumulation and construction, from monographs and book series to textbooks, and even supplementary materials and exercises, all distinctly reflecting the functional orientation of university publishing [1]. As disciplines matured and following the 2007 “Implementation Plan for the Reform of University Publishing System” by the Ministry of Education and the National Press and Publication Administra-

tion, which transformed university presses into corporate entities, the landscape began to shift. On one hand, the accumulation of publishing materials, the expansion of higher education, and the growth of readership demanded higher standards for book selection and themes. On the other hand, the profit and management constraints of the reformed corporate system exerted certain inhibitory effects on the publishing environment. University presses have thus evolved beyond their former functional identity, gradually establishing characteristic and brand advantages while expanding their audience base and influence. For example, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press launched the “Music Shanghai Studies” series, skillfully leveraging the unique elements of “music” and “Shanghai” and capitalizing on the conservatory’s “first-class discipline construction” in musicology. Similarly, the joint publication “5 Years of College Entrance Exams, 3 Years of Simulations” by Capital Normal University Press and Educational Science Publishing House fully utilized the natural advantages of resource and talent collaboration between the two presses, remaining after more than a decade an essential “miracle book” for college entrance exam students [1].

Despite these objective advantages distinguishing university presses from other publishers, the pandemic has revealed their vulnerabilities—weaknesses that require fundamental change and adaptation for long-term development across the entire publishing industry.

2. The Digital Development Dilemma of University Presses

The sudden impact of the pandemic severely disrupted traditional publishing supply chains and exposed a widespread problem: most Chinese university presses have weak digital publishing foundations and singular formats, leaving them ill-equipped to face and adapt to changing circumstances and somewhat helpless in the face of major crises. At this critical moment, a small number of university presses that had timely launched digital reading initiatives were able to respond to the crisis with composure.

Although university presses brainstormed and implemented various emergency measures during this extraordinary period—such as author lectures, instructional videos, and online group discussions—these efforts represent only a fraction of online resource construction. In reality, the digital publishing development of university presses remains a long and arduous journey. According to data from the “Analysis of Digital Publishing Transformation Survey Results” report presented at the 2019 Annual Conference of the China University Presses Association: “Among university presses, 52.54% reported digital product sales revenue accounting for less than 1% of total sales revenue, while 44% reported between 1% and 10%, with the combined total reaching 96%” [2]. This data starkly reveals the fundamental crux of university presses’ weaknesses—such low product revenue makes digital publishing initiatives extremely difficult to sustain. Moreover, in terms of format, most digital products from university presses remain tied to traditional publications, differing only in reading method or presenta-

tion form. These can hardly be called true digital products and thus cannot break free from being appendages of traditional publishing to form independent capital accumulation.

Although the state has introduced multiple policies and provided financial support to promote digital publishing over the years, the situation remains far from ideal. With the arrival of the post-pandemic era, the concept of “converged media” emerged from the pandemic context. In June 2020, the “Guidelines on Accelerating the In-depth Development of Media Convergence” adopted at the 14th meeting of the Central Committee for Comprehensively Deepening Reform emphasized “promoting in-depth media convergence development through institutional mechanism reform and establishing an all-media communication system with content construction as the foundation, advanced technology as support, and innovative management as guarantee.” Simultaneously, the comprehensive launch of online courses at universities during the pandemic period, along with the thematic report “Responding to Crisis, Turning Crisis into Opportunity, and Proactively Seeking Change: Developing International Online Teaching Platforms and Course Resources” by Wu Yan, Director of the Department of Higher Education at the Ministry of Education, which emphasized that “various teaching resources strongly support university teaching,” has powerfully propelled the pace of content-media convergence development in university publishing. “Converged media development” may thus open up a new path suitable for China’s publishing industry.

3. Discussion on Integrated Development of Publications Within the University Environment

After elaborating on the current state of China’s university presses, this section explores how content resources can achieve integrated development by leveraging university environment advantages, focusing on three categories: academic publications, reference books, and educational teaching materials.

3.1 Sharing Academic Resources and Establishing Information Connections

This approach draws inspiration from Oxford University Press’s “Oxford Scholarship Online.” According to 2003 research data, the platform included over 700 academic articles across various disciplines, with plans for annual expansion, and could be freely linked to other Oxford University Press electronic books and journals (Wang Yue, “Research on Digital Publishing at Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press”). This product can be analogized in China to commonly used article retrieval platforms such as CNKI, Wanfang, and VIP. While CNKI’s coverage is extensive and comprehensive as a knowledge infrastructure and large-scale database, its connection to specific university disciplines and cutting-edge academic achievements remains limited.

In reality, every university press possesses publications that compile disciplinary

achievements, typically appearing as “collected papers” or “handbooks.” These publications share similar properties with journals, offering compilation value, common attributes, and interconnections. Some universities established both press and journal departments simultaneously, though their organizational structures vary—some share resources and information, while others operate independently, creating information silos [3].

Following the logic of Oxford Scholarship Online, if university presses and journal departments could categorize, organize, and link content by discipline, their search functionality would gain highly specialized focus. This would maximize the development of publication added value while optimizing the organization and collection of academic resources. In fact, this operational model has already taken preliminary shape in Chinese presses’ WeChat public platforms, where QR codes and hyperlinks commonly connect similar or series products in new book promotions. However, this approach has limited reach and cannot form a systematic retrieval function [4].

Naturally, adaptation must consider local circumstances. Oxford University Press’ s network product involves deep connections with publishers, operators, and servers, demonstrating substantial investment while providing user convenience—an economic foundation China’ s university publishing industry cannot replicate. Therefore, how to achieve “connection” becomes a valuable lesson to learn: how to design search and linking functions, how to manage information exchange access, and which projects can operate without cost expenditure.

3.2 Expanding Tool Usage Methods and Enhancing Retrieval Specificity

The term “tools” here encompasses all books with reference functions, including but not limited to dictionaries and translation references.

Even in today’ s information explosion era, where search engines have gradually replaced reference functions to become the universal method for information collection and retrieval, reference books remain irreplaceable for rigorous academic research as tools for organizing and sequencing knowledge. For years, university presses have actively published or introduced specialized dictionaries for various disciplines, though sometimes preempted by other publishers—for example, Hunan Literature and Art Press’ s introduction of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. This encyclopedic music dictionary, hailed by countless scholars as a milestone in music encyclopedia publishing history, remains voluminous and priced at thousands of yuan, yet has not released an electronic reading format years after publication. Even discipline-specific reference books published by university presses, such as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Press’ s “Score Reading” series, which provides detailed interpretations of symbols and markings for strings, winds, and vocals, remain limited to traditional paper book circulation.

Referencing Oxford University Press’ s digital reference transformation, its dig-

ital tool products include not only digitized versions of original paper reference books but also new creative products. Beyond the Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED), Oxford Dictionaries Online (ODO), and Oxford Language Dictionaries Online (OLD), additions such as Oxford Reference, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and Who's Who and Who Was Who Online have substantially enriched database storage and enhanced retrieval specificity.

While these products also face various funding challenges, this discussion focuses on resources already available in China's university environments. Every university is equipped with libraries offering certain retrieval functions. Under such conditions, university presses could grant libraries access to reference publications in certain ways, potentially expanding usage and circulation possibilities by drawing on Oxford University Press's operational models.

3.3 Supporting Teaching Resource Dissemination and Optimizing Teaching Activities

Education has its purposes and functions, implemented through teaching methods centered on disciplines and curricula. Teaching involves a series of processes including curriculum design, course systems, teaching methodologies, teaching evaluation, and teaching practice, through which educational significance is realized. Teaching resources, as fundamental elements and conditions for satisfying teaching needs, constitute an important component for achieving teaching objectives and optimizing teaching activities [5-6].

In modern society, "resources" serve as crucial support for any social activity, and teaching is no exception. Moreover, university knowledge systems feature logically rigorous independence and interconnection among disciplines and majors, making teaching resources particularly significant. While the pandemic was a disaster, the implementation of online courses during the crisis provided valuable references for teaching resource dissemination.

Mention of online courses naturally brings to mind education publishing leaders such as Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press. Both have established comprehensive online resource centers that provide teaching resources to complement textbooks for instructors while offering self-directed learning tools for students.

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

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