

Post-print of the Development and Transformation of Self-Media

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Abstract

Self-media represents a product of the mobile internet era, having disrupted traditional media's communication paradigms and achieved rapid development characterized by personalization and robust interactivity. Presently, self-media has become ubiquitous, surpassing traditional media across content formats, operational modalities, dissemination velocity, and communication channels. Furthermore, its diverse operational forms and multifunctional presentation approaches have attracted substantial user bases. Self-media consistently adheres to the principle of close integration between the virtual and physical realms, capturing user attention while concurrently establishing an online-offline dual-channel model that renders service modalities more comprehensive, thereby attracting heightened attention and favor from capital investors. This study primarily investigates the developmental transformation of self-media, detailing its evolutionary trajectory, taxonomic forms, and future development prospects, while explicating the specific characteristics of self-media through individual case studies.

Full Text

Preamble

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Abstract: We Media, a product of the mobile internet era, has subverted traditional media communication models and developed rapidly with characteristics of personalization and strong interactivity. Currently, We Media is ubiquitous, surpassing traditional media in content form, operational methods, dissemination speed, and communication channels. Moreover, its diverse operational formats and multifunctional presentation modes have attracted massive

user bases. We Media has consistently adhered to the close integration of virtual and real worlds, forming an online-offline dual-channel model while capturing user attention, thereby creating more complete service forms and attracting greater attention and favor from capital markets. This paper examines the development and transformation of We Media, detailing its evolutionary history, classification forms, and future development space, with specific characteristics illustrated through individual case studies.

Keywords: We Media; mobile internet; communication model; diversification; specific characteristics

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1.1 The Concept of We Media

American internet writer Dan Gillmor argues that new media represents an emerging media form arising from changing media environments and digital development. He defines We Media as a public participation activity and process in journalism and communication, predicting it will become the dominant communication form. Shein Bowman and Chris Willis provide a more specific elaboration, defining We Media as a pathway for ordinary people to provide and share their own facts within a digitally enhanced global knowledge and information system, which is why “Self-media” is commonly used to denote this phenomenon. In China, many scholars consistently view We Media as a new form of universal participation, whose subjects are not professional media practitioners but ordinary individuals or organizations. We Media operations must be supported by internet technology and rely on third-party platforms to complete their entire system operation.

We Media exhibits characteristics of autonomy, simplicity, and personalization throughout its development. Individuals can be both information disseminators and receivers, meaning that persons or organizations may serve as origins, nodes, or endpoints in information flow. Unlike traditional media, where information could only be disseminated by professional media organizations—creating monopolistic and one-sided communication—We Media has continuously upgraded and reformed alongside diversified internet forms. From early-stage blogs, forums, post bars, and communities to current platforms like QQ, WeChat, and Weibo, We Media has truly gained momentum. Modern We Media communication incorporates not only text and voice but also images and video, achieving professional media development models [1].

1.2 Classification of We Media

We Media can be classified through multiple dimensions. First, by communication symbols, which include text-image, audio, and video categories. Text-image We Media encompasses WeChat Official Accounts, Weibo, and other platform accounts, with Toutiao being the most widely used currently. These platforms allow users to upload text-image content for public reading, while individuals can also search for relevant information according to their needs. Audio We Media primarily relies on sound transmission, exemplified by platforms such as Qingting FM, Himalaya, and Litchi FM, which host numerous audio readings spanning both entertainment and educational categories with extensive variety. Video We Media is now widely utilized, mainly including Douyin, Xigua Video, and Toutiao's video platform, where users can shoot and upload their own videos or browse others' content. Additionally, these platforms enable live-streaming with minimal restrictions, accessible to everyone, and can even function as video players for directly searching and watching movies or TV series [2].

Second, classification by operator category divides We Media into individual and organizational forms. Individual We Media targets ordinary citizens operating independently, allowing them to showcase their lives, personalities, or habits according to personal preferences. Organizational We Media is primarily organization-based, usually operating under company names with dedicated management for greater professionalism, more orderly administration, and standardized operations. For instance, popular live-streaming e-commerce operates on organizational platforms divided into multiple departments with specialized responsibilities, representing a professionalized business model.

In summary, regardless of form, all We Media aims to realize its own value by sharing intangible or tangible goods through We Media channels.

2.1 Competitive Phase

“Media” can be simply understood as channels, carriers, or technical means for disseminating and obtaining information. In the communication context of the new media era, “platform” in its narrow sense refers to an environment providing channels for ordinary people to smoothly conduct their own communication activities, while in its broad sense, it represents a stage for everyone to display their talents, including not only communication subjects and functional users but also commercial operators. Conceptually, media theory shares similarities with platforms: media build platforms to transmit information through these channels, while recipients have now expanded to vast audiences. Compared with traditional media, both the audience scope and communication content of We Media have changed [3].

On the other hand, media development has consistently followed the pace of internet evolution. To match the rapid changes of the internet, media must continuously innovate and transform. The current social development situation presents both challenges and opportunities for We Media. Meanwhile, tradi-

tional media has begun transformation paths during social change, constantly moving closer to platforms in hopes of changing their status through platform power. In essence, a long-term game is underway between old and new media, with both investing considerable effort in development, transformation, and user attraction.

2.2 Integration Phase

As internet technology continues advancing, related companies have embarked on integration paths between corporations and media. Internet companies not only provide sharing platforms for the public but also expand their own communication channels to increase platform awareness and usage while attracting investor attention. Yu Guoming points out that compared with traditional media ecosystems, the “entrance” is crucial in today’s internet era, with openness, activation, integration, and service summarizing the internet’s essential characteristics and core. Competition for the “entrance” has become key to development in the new era. Internet platforms possess inherent advantages, leveraging their openness and convenience combined with scientific and technological development to secure preconditions for competing for the “entrance.”

On the other hand, internet media platforms have expanded from text-image formats to audio and video, harvesting massive resources and thoroughly expressing communication content, with even higher-level expression forthcoming. Against the “Internet Plus” backdrop combined with big data statistics, platforms can easily recommend information users want to obtain, thereby increasing user attention to platform changes. In summary, integration across various dimensions has made media development more simplified, diversified, and globalized. Users need only open an App to search for information from around the world.

3.1 Content Considerations

American scholar James G. Webster notes that human attention is limited, as is daily time—an inescapable constraint for the attention market. Therefore, to gain more users and higher attention, We Media must create maximum value within limited time. Initially, We Media operated in a static environment where backend statistical difficulties emerged as user numbers increased. Regarding content, continuous changes occurred due to differing focus points. Since individuals hold initiative, they can 随时 select directions of interest at any time; overly rigid content only reduces user engagement rates. The moment new forms of entertainment emerge, users are instantly attracted away. Consequently, We Media must continuously innovate its content. For example, early We Media primarily featured text-image content, but aesthetic fatigue eventually set in, necessitating later introductions of audio, video, and mini-program formats that allow users to intuitively understand main content and better attract attention [4].

As is well known, attractiveness represents We Media' s greatest pain point and key factor. We Media operations generally constitute content management. Without clear, topical content that creates visual impact, user attraction fails. Therefore, future development requires proactive topic selection that stays close to hot issues while appropriately simplifying to create “small yet beautiful, refined yet simple” works. Additionally, originality must be maintained. Although relative content repetition exists among We Media works, higher originality remains more attractive. For instance, to make short videos more attractive, users must streamline content within limited duration to instantly capture viewers' eyes. After watching, users can also imitate, comment, or repost. Current short video innovation better meets netizen needs, allowing users to browse Douyin during fragmented time without affecting other work.

On the other hand, many We Media platforms have begun introducing paid content models. Platforms like Himalaya and Zhihu have embarked on fan-based models where users can tip after viewing content, with options for single payments or monthly/quarterly/annual subscriptions for premium content. At this point, We Media is no longer purely a service platform but has begun pursuing profit models.

3.2 Platform Considerations

With We Media' s rapid industry development, professional talent has become highly sought after. Many We Media platforms independently undertake talent cultivation tasks to provide better, more professional services for their own platforms. Currently, various platforms are recruiting professional talent in hopes of creating higher profits. Against the big data backdrop, intelligent development continues growing, and We Media communication forms and content are also changing. Therefore, media platforms can no longer view issues through previous perspectives but must adopt dynamic, progressive viewpoints regarding current media development professionalism. Media professionals require more forward-looking vision and progressive thinking. Judging from current We Media content, only a handful of platforms attract the most users. For example, Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili, and Xigua Video collectively occupy over 90% of We Media industry resources [5].

On the other hand, platform development is not arbitrary but constrained by professional regulatory mechanisms and laws. In We Media' s early development, its unconstrained environment led to reckless behavior for attention-seeking. Consequently, numerous problems emerged later, including plagiarism, infringement, and improper propaganda. Moreover, We Media holds absolute discourse power on platforms while granting users freedom of speech. Therefore, users may exhibit strong personal characteristics when publishing information or mix personal emotions when commenting on news, causing information distortion or dissemination of negative public opinion, which subsequently creates adverse social impacts. These situations not only trample moral bottom lines but also challenge legal authority.

Consequently, urgent oversight from relevant social legal departments is required for We Media platforms. Simultaneously, We Media platforms need to activate self-purification capabilities. Current laws may exhibit regulatory lag, sometimes requiring reports before authorities pay attention to incidents. Therefore, platforms must play their own purification role by curbing negative incidents from their source, shielding videos or statements containing negative information, or even directly banning publishers' accounts in serious cases.

3.3 Industry Considerations

The “sharing economy” was first proposed in a 1978 paper by Marcus Felson, sociology professor at Texas State University, and Joe Spaeth, sociology professor at the University of Illinois. The sharing model's characteristic lies in third-party-created network platforms where individuals exchange idle resources, including items and shared experiential knowledge, or conduct crowdfunding and crowdsourcing activities through platforms. The We Media industry was initially built upon this sharing foundation, establishing cooperative relationships between platforms and users. Meanwhile, under the sharing concept, resources can be utilized and shared more precisely and rationally. Traditional media could only convey information to a few people at a time, whereas We Media can transmit to multiple people simultaneously through its delivery advantages, generating more clicks and enabling revenue through click rates.

On the other hand, platforms have maintained their original aspiration throughout development: attracting more people during media operations. When a platform becomes sufficiently powerful, strong stickiness emerges between platform and users, who become stable platform assets. For We Media, the initial operational stage involves brand promotion to gain higher recognition, thereby acquiring more registered users and traffic support. However, many media practitioners distribute identical content across different platforms, creating substantial information redundancy and reducing We Media value. Therefore, the We Media industry must first maintain personalized, liberalized development directions rather than following the crowd. Simultaneously, platforms must continuously innovate and develop new entertainment methods to continuously attract users and achieve sustained revenue generation.

4.1 Case Study: WeChat Development and Operation

Recent We Media statistics reveal that WeChat Official Accounts lead the industry. WeChat Mini Programs now cooperate with numerous platforms and merchants to initiate diversified business operations. Moreover, WeChat Mini Programs can provide real-time push notifications based on user search content, enabling customization according to individual needs. Users can function as both senders and receivers, changing roles anytime and anywhere.

The current WeChat Official Account platform not only pushes news and hot topics but also cooperates with specific industries for support activities. For ex-

ample, the agricultural assistance section of WeChat Official Accounts regularly promotes local specialty agricultural products or slow-moving goods, allowing other users to place orders directly through the account. This achieves both promotional purposes and increased farmer income. Additionally, some WeChat Mini Programs partner with local supermarkets or shops, enabling users to select products directly through Mini Programs for home delivery. These convenient shopping models not only expand WeChat's user base but also enhance related shops' visibility, creating win-win outcomes. Presently, WeChat also features subscription accounts, service accounts, and official accounts, allowing enterprises to create distinctive We Media and promote their products through independent or commissioned operations to improve corporate visibility [7].

4.2 Case Study: Douyin Development and Operation

Douyin can be considered the most popular We Media platform in recent years, featuring rich, colorful content in diverse formats. Data shows Douyin's daily active users exceed 600 million, with over 400 million daily video searches, demonstrating tremendous platform activity. Because Douyin allows users to publish content in video format according to their needs while enabling text editing, many users share their daily lives through Douyin, and other users can comment on or like these videos. Furthermore, Douyin's backend can push similar content based on user search history or viewing habits, allowing users to utilize fragmented time for viewing without impacting their lives. Conversely, some people can use Douyin's content diversity and entertainment to shift their moods [8]. For instance, when feeling down, users can watch funny videos on Douyin to relax. Users can even learn about interesting events and news from around the world through Douyin content. Precisely because Douyin satisfies users' various high-level demands, many have become loyal fans over time.

Additionally, Douyin users span broad age ranges, from young children to elderly people, all deriving enjoyment from the platform. People share their lives anytime and anywhere through Douyin, potentially gaining followers. The backend can select outstanding users based on follower counts or like and comment numbers. Users meeting certain requirements can earn income through video posting. Moreover, Douyin has launched live-streaming functions. Due to the pandemic, many commodities could not be sold through conventional channels, but merchants could sell products through Douyin live-streaming. Users enter merchants' live rooms to watch product introductions and make purchases, which to some extent stimulates domestic demand and accelerates economic development.

In summary, We Media not only possesses media attributes but also serves as a communication platform for conducting numerous commercial activities. We Media is no longer one-sided media but a sharing platform. As an emotional outlet for ordinary citizens seeking identity recognition on the internet, We Media can more clearly perceive social public opinion trends, grasp social sentiment pulses, and provide more channels and strategies for social governance

and public opinion guidance. To ensure sustainable development in the future, We Media requires increased technological updates and resource investment. Simultaneously, We Media must continuously self-examine and strictly abide by laws and regulations to maintain long-term development.

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

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