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How Traditional Publishing Can Integrate into the Digital-Intelligent Reading Era Post-Print

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Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

With the emergence and development of technologies such as 5G systems, live streaming, and virtual reality, people's reading habits have undergone unprecedented transformation. It has become commonplace for readers to discover content of interest through browsing cloud-based VR bookstores, immersive AI audiobook experiences, and similar modalities. The digital reading industry continues to expand annually, with various regions continuously developing diversified digital reading platforms to address readers' multi-dimensional needs. In this holographic, all-scenario reading paradigm, how traditional publishing can keep pace with contemporary developments, proactively adapt to mainstream digital reading trends, explore implementation pathways and modalities for diversified digital publishing, and identify new economic growth points has become a critical issue that publishing entities urgently need to address.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: How Traditional Publishing Can Integrate into the Era of Digital-Intelligent Reading

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Abstract: With the rise and development of 5G systems, live webcasting, and virtual reality technologies, people's reading habits have undergone unprecedented changes. It has become commonplace for readers to explore content of interest through cloud-based VR bookstores and immersive AI audiobook experiences. The digital reading industry continues to expand annually, with regions constantly building diversified digital reading platforms to meet readers' multi-dimensional needs. In this holographic, all-scenario reading mode, a critical issue facing publishing houses is how to keep pace with the times, actively

adapt to the mainstream development trends of digital reading, explore diverse pathways and methods for digital publishing, and identify new economic growth points.

Keywords: 5G systems; webcasting; virtual reality; traditional publishing integration; digital-intelligent reading

CLC Number: G230

Document Code: A

Article ID: 1671-0134(2021)12-050-03

DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2021.12.014

Citation Format: Wang Yan. How Traditional Publishing Can Integrate into the Era of Digital-Intelligent Reading [J]. China Media Technology, 2021(12): 50-52.

Introduction: A Decade of Transformation

At the 2011 World E-Reading Conference a decade ago, some publishers argued that tablets were not suitable reading platforms. They believed that in on-screen competition, reading would inevitably lose to games, videos, and web news. Indeed, reading is hard work—how could it compete with the fun of “Angry Birds”? People could easily pass time by scrolling through Weibo, reading gossip, or social chatting, so why bother with reading at all? Publishers, they contended, had to compete with all forms of media, yet digital reading still couldn’t rival the entertainment industry. Ten years later, has this phenomenon changed?

The Digital Reading Landscape: Data and Trends

In 2019, the total revenue of national book, newspaper, and audiovisual/electronic publishing (excluding printing, reproduction, and import/export data) reached 181.15 billion yuan [1]. In the same year, digital publishing revenue hit 988.143 billion yuan [2]. Among these figures, mobile publishing generated 231.482 billion yuan (23.4% of total digital publishing revenue), online games brought in 71.383 billion yuan (7.2%), and web animation and online music earned 29.5 billion yuan (3%). Traditional publishing, encompassing internet journals, e-books, and digital newspapers (excluding mobile newspapers), contributed only 8.908 billion yuan—less than 1% of the total. Mobile publishing here includes mobile reading, mobile music, and mobile game publishing, while traditional publishing refers specifically to internet journals, e-books, and digital newspapers.

According to the *2020 China Digital Reading Report*, China’s digital reading industry reached a scale of 35.16 billion yuan in 2020 [3], representing a 21.8% increase from 28.88 billion yuan in 2019. The average adult read 6.2 paper books, 9.1 e-books, and 6.3 audiobooks. Average reading time was 63.2 minutes

for paper books, 79.3 minutes for e-books, and 62.8 minutes for audiobooks. In total, the average digital reading volume was 2.5 times that of traditional paper books, and digital reading time was 2.2 times longer. These figures reveal that both the volume and time spent on paper publications among Chinese adults have declined, while digital reading time continues to rise. The data shows significant changes in reading habits and choices among Chinese nationals, with mobile phones, tablets, and the internet becoming their primary media channels. Audiobook reading has grown rapidly, with listening becoming a preferred option. While tablets have indeed proven to be viable reading platforms, they still struggle to compete with online games and other entertainment. Notably, mobile publishing revenue has comprehensively surpassed traditional publishing, which holds a pitifully small share in the digital publishing industry—indicating substantial room for improvement.

The large-scale outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 forced unprecedented home confinement starting in the first quarter. Government agencies, enterprises, and schools largely adopted online work and teaching methods, creating a nationwide shift to digital. With full-day home stays and reduced outdoor activities, interpersonal communication seemed to become a distant memory. The internet became the primary tool for work, communication, entertainment, and learning, driving increasing demand for digital reading. This gave rise to cloud libraries and cloud bookstores, which greatly satisfied readers' all-weather reading needs and propelled rapid growth in China's digital reading industry. Faced with this new reading landscape, how can traditional publishing establish a firm foothold, confront challenges bravely, and swiftly integrate into this transformation?

2. Shortcomings of Traditional Publishing

Compared to digital publishing, traditional publishing possesses certain advantages, including vast reserves of high-quality content and authors, rigorous editorial and proofreading processes, highly professional editorial talent, and greater authority in its publications. However, as digital publishing continues to compress the reading market, traditional publishing has exposed numerous problems.

2.1 Overly Long Publication Cycles

From conception to formal publication, a typical project takes anywhere from a year and a half to several years—an extremely long cycle that represents a significant disadvantage. For time-sensitive topics, such prolonged publication cycles mean missed opportunities and lost markets. For instance, when writing a paper in the second half of 2016, I wanted to cite some industry data, but the most recent available book was published in 2013—data that was clearly outdated. I ultimately had to cite media websites from the first half of 2016 instead.

2.2 Lack of Product Diversity

Beyond paper, CDs, and USB drives, traditional publishing struggles to develop new media formats. For large-scale works, portability becomes a major issue. Our press once published a multimedia product titled *A Comprehensive Study of Chinese Yue Opera*, comprising CDs, CD-ROMs, and books that weighed over 5,000 grams—essentially a display piece for bookshelves that was difficult to even lift down. Accessing a specific performance or piece of information required hauling down this massive set, making it extremely inconvenient. Similarly, traditional books are heavy and difficult to carry, preventing readers from utilizing fragmented time for reading.

2.3 Single Profit Model

Traditional publishing relies primarily on product sales with few alternative revenue streams. Although publishers sign 5- or 10-year contracts with authors, they typically only reprint well-selling books during this period without exploring other profit models. They do not prioritize full utilization of copyright resources, essentially using them as one-time assets. Meanwhile, authors cannot republish their works elsewhere during the contract period, resulting in wasted resource potential.

2.4 Rigid Development Concepts

Many editors believe their job is simply to conscientiously work on their assigned projects, complete the three-review and three-proofreading process, avoid quality inspection issues, and publish on schedule. They consider digital reading and integrated media development irrelevant to their work. In their view, digital publishing merely involves converting traditional paper books into e-books—a simple task. However, they fail to consider how to gain reader recognition through appropriate channels, technologies, and services. As cross-screen connectivity, cross-scenario interaction, and cloud reading become new industry trends, publishers can no longer cling to conventional practices but must shift their mindset to focus on digital publishing.

2.5 Loss of Professional Technical Talent

Low income at traditional publishing houses is an undeniable reality. At smaller presses, editors may earn less than 100,000 yuan annually—a figure that holds little attraction for young editors, most of whom hold master's degrees, as it makes home ownership and car purchases difficult to achieve. This results in an inability to retain talent and substantial brain drain. In 2017, when collaborating with a university press on an industry report, the assigned editor changed three times in less than three months—one left the industry, another resigned to pursue graduate studies, and the final one departed after a year. At some publishing houses, editorial staff turnover resembles a revolving door.

3. Digital Publishing Development Trends

In recent years, the state has continuously increased investment in new infrastructure construction, accelerating the deep integration of 5G commercial technology, big data, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things. Publishing has gradually shifted from digitalization to digital-intelligentization. Many digital publishing platforms now leverage big data to enable content subscriptions and personalized precision recommendations, significantly enhancing user experience. Against this backdrop, traditional publishing cannot afford to become disconnected and marginalized; understanding and mastering digital publishing trends is particularly crucial.

3.1 Continued Industry Integration and Optimized Content Allocation

Publishing houses are utilizing advanced technologies to integrate various content elements, creating converged media books that combine graphics, text, audio, and video. Some publishers are dedicated to developing VR/AR books, forming VR/AR product series that enhance reading interest, accessibility, and the 感染力 of high-quality content.

3.3 Knowledge Payment Becomes the Mainstream Trend

As readers increasingly pursue high-quality digital reading content, knowledge payment—primarily through knowledge-based audio—has become normalized. To further enhance user experience, AI-simulated human voice technology has been widely applied in audiobook software and smart speakers, making them more intelligent. Knowledge payment is entering an era of content depth cultivation: whoever controls quality IP and top anchors will become the platform's leading enterprise, generating greater benefits and dividends.

3.4 High-Quality Development as the Focus with Enhanced Brand Awareness

Through industrial policy deployment and guidance, the state continues to increase support for premium content, prioritizing value orientation and content quality as the focus of high-quality digital publishing development. As important platforms for thematic content dissemination and ideological propaganda, digital reading platforms will undoubtedly become the main force in guiding and disseminating the socialist core value system, exerting greater influence.

3.5 Deconstruction and Reshaping of the Content Industry Ecosystem

Continuous innovation and application of new technologies have made convergence across different content production domains increasingly urgent and frequent. The maturation and popularization of 5G technology will inevitably drive

new consumption demands and business formats, potentially causing tremendous changes in the ecosystem of multi-domain and even the entire content industry.

4. Paths to Achieving Digital-Intelligent Integration

Recognizing the importance of the emerging digital reading market to traditional publishing, publishers must seize this new opportunity, understand the general direction and trends of industry development, carefully consider and actively explore response methods to diversified reading formats, and promptly adjust strategies. This will enable rapid and deep integration into the wave of the digital-intelligent era, becoming part of the new reading ecosystem and ensuring that traditional publishing maintains vigorous vitality and achieves long-term development.

4.1 Adjust Management Mechanisms

As early as 2015, the National Press and Publication Administration explicitly stated: “Adhere to correctly handling the relationship between traditional and emerging publishing, achieve parallel development and mutual advantages based on traditional publishing as the foundation; adhere to strengthening internet thinking, and actively promote innovation in concepts, management systems, operational mechanisms, and production methods” [4]. Beyond improving topic development, quality supervision, and marketing mechanisms, traditional publishing should continuously optimize management systems to adapt to new integrated development formats. Market-oriented evaluation and assessment methods could be introduced to establish long-term effective incentive and competition mechanisms that stimulate enterprise innovation and employee enthusiasm. While ensuring publication quality, flexibility for new situations should be maintained, with the primary goals of boosting employee motivation and increasing efficiency, thereby retaining talent and enhancing core competitiveness.

4.2 Innovate Product Presentation Forms

Beyond traditional media like paper books, CDs, and USB drives, publishers should fully utilize big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and IoT technologies to research various mobile media and apply them to traditional publishing. Innovative reading formats such as QR codes, WeChat mini-programs, mobile apps, smart speakers, short videos, AR/VR books, e-readers, and databases can make “everything a medium” and all-scenario reading the new normal. Unlike digital platforms, traditional publishing houses lack substantial R&D personnel and technical resources, making new product development challenging. However, they can invest in partnerships with internet technology companies to leverage their technical capabilities, or adopt outsourced customization, commissioning digital technology companies to design VR scenarios and voice narration according to publishing requirements. For example,

Jilin Electronic Audio-Visual Publishing House collaborated with a technology company to publish the 3D animation book *Insect Empire*, creating a certain brand effect [5]. This approach solves the difficulty of insufficient R&D staff while significantly reducing operational costs, making it an excellent option for traditional publishers.

Developing WeChat mini-programs is also a bold attempt that requires minimal investment and offers considerable convenience. This is particularly effective for audio-visual products such as opera and educational programs, which can vividly display sound, video, images, and text with a simple click. Mini-programs, together with WeChat official accounts, can be developed into various featured columns based on user preferences for paid subscriptions. Additionally, pre-recorded QR codes and short videos can become new forms of publications that satisfy users' fragmented reading and viewing needs, creating new economic growth points for traditional publishing.

4.3 Develop Characteristic Service Models

Beyond resource integration, content processing, and operational maintenance, traditional publishing lacks truly distinctive service models. Although many publishers have developed app clients, thematic databases, or digital schoolbags, these are essentially just electronic versions of paper books—one-time products without further deep processing of resources or interactive communication with readers. Traditional publishing should abandon this rigid mindset and draw inspiration from digital reading trends: in audiobook reading, paid audio accounts for 62.6% of revenue. By combining publications with audio using an “audio + graphics/text” approach that provides high-definition or even 24-bit lossless audio quality, publishers can create continuous audio knowledge products that allow readers to “listen and view anytime, anywhere.” This delivers an immersive listening experience, transforms one-way knowledge dissemination into two-way interaction, generates resonance and stickiness, and attracts long-term attention. Meanwhile, traditional publishing can choose specialized or popular development paths based on their expertise and conditions, optimizing content services to the fullest.

4.4 Expand Platform Channels

“Cloud” reading requires people to change previous reading habits and methods while fully expanding dissemination channels. Beyond offline physical bookstores, online marketing has gained increasing importance among traditional publishers. Today, live-streaming sales and short video marketing are gradually being adopted by some publishing houses. Due to the pandemic's impact, in 2020 approximately half of all users purchased or accessed desired content through e-commerce live streams and short videos. About 47.6% of users expressed willingness to use a comprehensive reading ecosystem platform offering “paper + electronic + audio + knowledge services + hardware/software.” These platforms provide e-books, course videos, Q&A sessions, live broadcasts,

and other knowledge content forms that meet users' diversified reading needs, making them highly popular. Traditional publishing must keep pace with the "paper, electronic, and audio synchronization" trend, learn from digital reading platforms, and strive to build new supply chain collaboration models with large supply chain platforms. This involves 打通整个供应链 (打通整个供应链), achieving warehouse and variety sharing, implementing personalized customization on demand, accelerating overall industry integration, and continuously improving readers' shopping and reading experiences to gain a share in the blue ocean of digital publishing.

4.5 Strengthen Talent Cultivation

As the publishing industry continues to integrate and develop, building a professional technical talent team becomes increasingly important. In the converged media environment, traditional publishing technical professionals can no longer meet the needs of digital publishing project development, testing, and acceptance, nor can they handle daily hardware and software use and maintenance. They must be transformed into all-media talents with comprehensive media control capabilities and deep integration thinking, including all-media operators and internet marketing specialists. These technical talents are urgently needed and heavily relied upon in digital content publishing, representing the future workforce of the digital publishing industry. In other words, in the all-media era, the overall operation of publishing content, products, and brands becomes increasingly important, making the cultivation of composite talents essential.

In the digital-intelligent era, reading has long become a pathway to knowledge acquisition and value demonstration, with more and more readers willing to pay for quality content and reading formats becoming increasingly diversified. This presents both pressure and opportunity for traditional publishing. The future presentation forms of publications will inevitably depend on user demand patterns, knowledge acquisition channels, and terminal devices. The shift from paper book reading to digital reading represents not merely a medium leap but a profound transformation of the entire reading and publishing industry. Only by actively adapting to this transformation, evolving from content providers to content service providers, delivering high-quality publishing content services that meet readers' personalized needs, and continuously driving technological innovation and upgrading can traditional publishing keep pace with digital publishing, achieve diversified development, and increase its market share in digital publishing.

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

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.