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Traditional Publishing's Transition to Digital Publishing and Post-Print Innovations

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Abstract

The continuous development of the information age constantly challenges traditional publishing, and only through transformation can it survive. This article analyzes the dilemmas confronting traditional publishing and the current types of transformation from traditional publishing to digital publishing, provides examples of successful enterprises in digital publishing transformation, and analyzes innovative strategies for this transformation.

Full Text

Preamble

Transformation and Innovation from Traditional Publishing to Digital Publishing

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Abstract: The continuous development of the information era has relentlessly impacted traditional publishing, making transformation imperative for survival. This article analyzes the dilemmas confronting traditional publishing and examines current transformation models, illustrates successful enterprises that have achieved digital publishing transformation, and explores innovative strategies for transitioning from traditional to digital publishing.

Keywords: traditional publishing; digital publishing; transformation types; case studies; innovation strategies

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Digital reading has become the mainstream reading mode in contemporary society, significantly squeezing out paper-based reading and causing a severe decline in traditional publishing economics. To avoid obsolescence, an increasing number of traditional publishers are transitioning toward digital publishing models and seeking innovative breakthroughs. The government has already introduced relevant policies for digital publishing, and the state has provided substantial funding to traditional publishing houses. Under these supportive conditions, traditional publishers are continuously attempting to move toward digital publishing. Although traditional publishers currently possess certain transformation capabilities, their transition processes often follow stereotypical patterns. Conversely, some digital publishing enterprises, despite lacking the “unique advantages” of traditional publishing, have achieved success through innovative forms and business models, attracting large user bases for their digital reading products. By exploring how these enterprises break traditional thinking and achieve breakthrough innovation, it becomes evident that human, material, and financial resources alone are insufficient for transforming traditional publishing to digital publishing; breakthrough thinking and strategies are even more critical. This article inventories successful cases of traditional publishing’s transition to digital publishing and discusses innovative strategies.

1. Dilemmas of Traditional Publishing and Advantages of Digital Publishing

Traditional publishing faces four fundamental dilemmas. First, despite its long history spanning thousands of years—from movable type printing to today’s computer-based publishing—paper has remained the constant medium for recording information. While printing methods and machinery have gradually upgraded to improve efficiency, no breakthrough progress has been achieved. The advent of digital publishing has shattered the conventional paper-reading paradigm, enabling readers to access content directly through terminal devices. This not only enhances reading convenience but also allows for portability, significantly improving the reading experience.

Second, traditional publishing primarily focuses on authors, who publish works based on their abilities and expertise while readers passively consume content. Although publishers may theoretically pay attention to reader interests due to sales concerns, in practice they prioritize their author databases and rarely conduct market research to investigate reader needs and preferences. In the digital publishing era, however, readers can select books according to their hobbies and interests on reading terminals, enjoying not only abundant choices but also diverse reading formats including text, audio, images, and video. Readers can choose their preferred reading methods based on personal interests and convenience, while intelligent networks guided by big data recommend relevant books

according to reader preferences, further enhancing the appeal of digital publishing. Consequently, an increasing number of people are abandoning traditional paper books in favor of digital reading.

Third, traditional publishing's business model aligns with industrial-age civilization and characteristics, featuring clear divisions of labor among technology, production, and sales functions. In this model, authors serve as technicians who complete book creation, equivalent to raw material suppliers in the industrial age; publishers handle printing and publication, equivalent to manufacturers; and sales channels rely primarily on bookstores. This excessive dependence on bookstores hinders book circulation and disadvantages traditional publishing development. In digital publishing, however, authors can publish directly. Producers can also transform authors' works into various formats such as video, audio, or book interpretations. Simultaneously, multiple sales channels exist, allowing readers to encounter book promotions across various online platforms, which increases promotional channels and stimulates purchase desire.

Fourth, communication between publishers and readers in traditional publishing is minimal, with limited information exchange, resulting in slow feedback on paper books. Publishers and authors can only obtain relevant sales data after publication by examining bookstore sales figures, and the data collection methods are simplistic, lacking reader feedback on books and failing to reflect their true value. In digital publishing, readers can provide feedback and communicate at any time, even engaging in face-to-face online exchanges with authors. Readers can comment on any part of a book, while important information such as reading volume and evaluation ratings fully reflect reader satisfaction and demand levels.

The development of the internet has transformed people's traditional reading habits, making digital reading a customary practice that has replaced most paper books. Therefore, for traditional publishing to continue developing, it must address these four dilemmas. The more fundamental concern behind these challenges is that publishers fail to accurately grasp reader needs, and some publishing staff lack forward-looking vision, adhering to rigid thinking patterns in their work. Traditional publishers should seize their potential customer base; if they cannot attract readers through content, they cannot open breakthroughs for innovation and will ultimately be eliminated by the era.

2. Transformation Models from Traditional Publishing to Digital Publishing

Due to insufficient digital technology and lack of direct reader relationships, transformation efforts by traditional publishing institutions often prove unsatisfactory. Traditional publishers generally achieve digital product design and transformation through their copyright resources, forming several distinct models.

Literary publishing houses represent the first model. In 2002, reading websites

such as Qidian Chinese Network and Jinjiang Literature City initiated paid reading models and collaborated with China's three major mobile operators to transition toward digital publishing. With the cooperation of massive user bases, these platforms achieved relatively successful transformations, realizing a "low-cost, high-profit" economic model. Simultaneously, with the emergence of devices such as Hanwang e-books and Amazon Kindle, along with software promotion on mobile devices, literary publishing institutions gradually increased. However, during transformation, these institutions gradually lost discourse power and fell into passive positions due to the absence of their own proprietary platforms and direct reader relationships.

Professional publishing houses constitute the second model. Databases represent both a product form and business model that dominates international digital publishing, characterized by high pricing, low competition, stable user bases, and high profit margins. Internationally operated journal databases include the American *Science Citation Index* and *Social Sciences Citation Index*, while China has also developed authoritative databases such as CNKI and Wanfang, achieving considerable benefits. Therefore, during transformation, relevant domestic professional institutions have prioritized leveraging content resource advantages to construct vertically segmented database models, achieving considerable success.

Educational publishing houses form the third model. Educational books have always been bestsellers in traditional publishing, and some textbook titles are unsuitable for digital publishing, thus featuring low barriers and large user volumes. When transitioning educational traditional books to digital publishing, educational publishers have focused on multimedia print reader (MPR) publications for supplementary teaching materials, such as the "Waiyantong" point-reading pen. In transitioning to MPR, educational publishers have not only achieved controllable sales channels but also mastered core technologies. However, due to low MPR barriers, numerous publishers have participated in competition, preventing any outstanding enterprises or distinctive products from emerging in this field. In recent years, some educational publishers have also concentrated on developing question banks and exercise solution projects, successfully transitioning through such content. Terminal software such as "Zuoyebang" now boasts massive user bases and has achieved high reputation and economic benefits.

Children's publishing houses represent the fourth model. Compared with the transformation approaches of other publishing institutions, children's publishers face greater disadvantages. First, they have fewer book types and have not achieved scale. Second, digital reading requires terminal devices that cause significant eye damage to children, greatly reducing usage time. Therefore, children's publishers often use media e-books as breakthrough points, achieving good results through technology outsourcing and cooperative creation of quality products. However, due to intense market competition, children's publishers have experienced declining revenues year after year, with many facing closure—

a concerning situation.

3. Successful Cases of Traditional Publishing' s Digital Transformation

In recent years, several new knowledge entrepreneurship ventures have emerged in China. These enterprises have achieved success not through extensive reading content development or excessive cost investment, but rather by combining “a single founder,” “meeting one reader need,” and “a compatible content platform” to transfer book content and knowledge to the internet, accessible via mobile phones and other terminals for viewing and listening. They attract users and capture substantial reading markets through personal charisma and user demand orientation.

Below, several typical cases are selected for brief analysis.

The first case is “Fandeng Reading Club.” Founded by CCTV host Fan Deng, the club records one book per week, interpreting its highlights and summarizing its content, presented in the app through multiple formats including audio and video to help readers who struggle with book selection or lack reading time. Since its establishment in 2013, “Fandeng Reading Club” has operated for eight years, consistently showing upward development trends through its unique system. In recent years, the club has continuously explored new methods of internet knowledge services, establishing a new media matrix with over 80 million followers and becoming a major cultural IP on short-video platforms. Beyond audio-visual formats, “Fandeng Reading Club” also disseminates digital knowledge through live broadcasting and other forms, not only keeping pace with trends but also maintaining continuous internet popularity that converts more readers into users.

The second case is “Kai Shu Tells Stories,” a leading children' s reading brand in China. Established in 2013 by former CCTV host Wang Kai after leaving his position, the brand created a WeChat public account that updates stories recorded by Wang Kai every evening specifically for children. By 2020, “Kai Shu Tells Stories” had broadcast over 19,000 stories with total playback exceeding 6 billion times and nearly 40 million users, earning the reputation as “the parenting bible for hundreds of millions of parents.” The brand has currently raised over \$120 million in funding. “Kai Shu Tells Stories” not only provides free reading services through WeChat self-media but also produces paid story boxes on video websites that have achieved strong sales performance, while diversifying into multiple fields such as story machines and animated cartoons, generating substantial revenue.

The third case is “Luoji Thinking.” Created in 2012 by former CCTV planner and host Luo Zhenyu in the form of knowledge talk show videos and a WeChat public account, “Luoji Thinking” has broadcast over 200 episodes since its inception, accumulating more than 1 billion views and generating numerous topics

in internet economics and social history, with a company valuation exceeding 7 billion yuan.

These three typical digital publishing enterprises did not rely on extensive reading content development or excessive cost investment. Instead, they transferred book content and knowledge to the internet based on three foundational elements: “a single founder,” “meeting one reader need,” and “a compatible content platform,” enabling people to watch and listen through mobile terminals and other devices. They captured substantial reading markets by attracting users through personal charisma and user demand orientation.

4. Innovation Strategies for Traditional Publishing’s Digital Transformation

First, publishers must leverage their own advantages and characteristics. Publishers should capitalize on their specific strengths to achieve progress. For instance, publishers such as People’s Transportation Press have utilized content advantages combined with the rigid demand from various industry examination users to achieve digital transformation.

Second, project content should be planned in advance to drive digital transformation through projects. Under the current publishing context, if traditional publishing aims to apply projects to drive digital publishing, three aspects should be addressed: (1) Advance planning with thorough justification. During the transformation from traditional to digital publishing, advance planning and adequate demonstration are essential. (2) Leverage external forces to improve compilation quality. Publishers should solicit opinions from relevant leaders of the National Press and Publication Administration and invite experts in project application and evaluation to participate in assessing project feasibility and rationality, demonstrating forward-looking risk prevention and control to enhance overall project quality. (3) Prepare project reserves. Since 2016, project applications have followed a two-step process: the first step is the “Reform and Development Project Database” in November each year, which has become a threshold for obtaining central financial support; the second step is the “Major Press and Publication Project Application” from April to May of the following year. With projects selected from the database, the interval between notification and deadline is often less than 30 days. To complete high-quality project applications within such short timeframes, traditional publishers must seize timing and prepare project reserves.

Third, achieve integration. The transition from traditional to digital publishing has spanned nearly two decades, during which industry consensus has gradually formed. For instance, during digital transformation, the process involves not only the digital publishing department but also cannot be completed by traditional publishing alone. To facilitate this transition, integration should first be achieved through projects as entry points, creating multi-method, multi-format, and multi-channel integration. For example, digital publishing should pene-

trate editorial departments to interface with editors and promote integration, while simultaneously achieving business process reengineering for digital transformation from topic selection and copyright to development and distribution, advancing integration across multiple domains including government, industry, academia, research, and technology. Additionally, when cooperating with relevant commercial partners, publishers must maintain leadership, focusing on feasible system development rather than “flashy but impractical” functions. In partnerships, risks should be shared with commercial parties rather than being borne solely by the publisher, while benefits should be shared.

In the transformation from traditional to digital publishing, innovative development and conceptual reform constitute important content and manifestations. With policy and financial support, this transformation demonstrates significant development trends. Traditional publishing should not remain complacent but should proactively adapt to new environments, utilizing new technologies to develop new products. By leveraging subjective initiative and utilizing their own resources for digital transformation, traditional publishers can form new publishing models that meet societal needs.

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

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