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Reflections on the Development of University Presses in the New Context: Postprint

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Abstract

The digitalization of the publishing industry presents multiple challenges to university presses. In facing this new situation and these new circumstances, university presses—particularly small university presses situated in old, young, border, and poor areas with underdeveloped regional economies—must fully recognize their various inherent deficiencies. For certain highly specialized publications issued by university presses, this challenge can be addressed through a “digital publishing + internet + on-demand printing” model. Only by calmly and acutely discerning the various opportunities that the new situation presents to presses can university presses discover the path toward sustainable development.

Full Text

Some Thoughts on University Press Development Under New Circumstances

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Abstract: The digitalization of publishing presents multiple challenges to university presses. In the face of this new situation, university presses—particularly small ones located in economically underdeveloped, remote, or border regions—must fully recognize their various shortcomings. For certain highly specialized publications, this dilemma can be resolved through a “digital publishing + internet + instant printing” model. Only by calmly and keenly identifying the opportunities brought by this new situation can university presses find a path to sustainable development.

Keywords: university press; transformation; challenge; digital publishing; online publishing

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After several years of operation following enterprise system reform, university presses have achieved some accomplishments while encountering new problems. In today's fully networked era, digital publishing is burgeoning and digital terminals are rapidly iterating, placing traditional publishing, distribution systems, and physical bookstores under severe pressure. This manifests in two ways: first, the publishing industry has completed structural reform, requiring deeper coordination of mechanisms; second, reading terminals such as tablets, Kindles, and mobile phones are on the rise, and the unstoppable wave of online digitalization has changed people's reading habits, leading to a sharp decline in print book sales. How can the problem of shrinking readership for traditional books be solved? [1] These new issues in the new situation raise questions about how traditional publishing should face new inflection points and opportunities, how to break through talent and technology bottlenecks, and how to use the internet to expand into publishing-adjacent industries to better adapt to market needs. These are questions that every publishing professional must seriously consider.

Faced with this new situation, university presses—particularly small ones in remote, underdeveloped regions—must fully recognize their shortcomings. From a macro perspective, we must broaden our vision, intensify reform efforts, expand our capabilities, and gradually enhance our brand influence. From a micro perspective, we must segment our book categories: those that can succeed in the market should pursue market channels, while those that cannot should actively seek publication funding from the state, enterprises, society, and individuals. Simultaneously, we believe the state should introduce more policies for small presses with low marketization but distinctive characteristics, such as tax reductions or exemptions. The management model of publishing administrative institutions must be transformed—they cannot manage enterprises using methods designed for public institutions. For presses that have genuinely restructured into enterprises, publication scope, ISBNs, and edition numbers should be liberalized to create a relaxed yet orderly policy environment for fair competition.

We must also recognize that the fundamental nature of a press remains that of a cultural institution whose primary task is cultural dissemination and accumulation. While it contains market elements, its public welfare component cannot be denied, and indiscriminate complete marketization is debatable. Like education, healthcare, and public transportation, complete marketization is not advisable.

After enterprise reform, some presses have shown positive growth in economic indicators, but a considerable portion have not met growth expectations, with some even experiencing contraction. In the publishing market, books with guaranteed print runs and profit potential are increasingly being “pulled away” by powerful, branded presses with favorable policies, creating a winner-take-all sit-

uation. Meanwhile, books with academic and social value but small audiences and no profit prospects are increasingly left unpublished.

Some argue that the purpose of enterprise reform is to let presses enter the market and allow market forces to select and eliminate. However, we believe Chinese presses are cultural enterprises with certain special characteristics. First, the market “freedom” of Chinese presses is not particularly high. Second, industry “monopoly” has not been eliminated after restructuring; some presses have actually strengthened their positions due to certain policies. Finally, the separation between government and enterprise is not entirely clear.

1. Multiple Challenges Faced

In recent years, the structural reform of university presses has largely promoted the development of publishing productivity, but it has also created new problems. University presses have both special and general characteristics compared to other publishers. Their special characteristics are threefold: First, a considerable portion of their publications have high social value but low market value, meaning most books have small readerships and low print runs. Second, some staff are “dual-role” personnel who are both teachers and publishing house employees. Although the “old staff” issue was resolved through the “old methods for old staff” policy after restructuring, a new situation has emerged where university personnel are unwilling to work for the press. This raises questions about how to advance talent introduction and cultivation to ensure sustainable development. Third, power checks and balances are a feature of modern enterprise systems, but university presses are all single-investor entities owned by universities—state-owned sole proprietorships—making mergers, acquisitions, and utilization of social capital difficult.

The general characteristic is that published books are commodities that must follow market economy laws. [2]

2. Planning Digital Publishing Transformation

Digital transformation in publishing presents both opportunities and challenges for traditional publishing. How can we turn challenges into opportunities and make digital publishing contribute to overall industry growth? This requires understanding the digital publishing landscape, clarifying misconceptions about digital publishing, recognizing the extraordinary significance of mobile internet for publishing transformation, and addressing key obstacles to digital publishing development. [3]

Globally and in China, the digital publishing landscape can be summarized as follows: powerful platform companies are rapidly expanding their digital publishing 产业布局, the industry is largely dominated by these platforms, and their business models have distinctive characteristics. In this landscape, traditional publishing appears passive, with a tendency toward marginalization. Therefore, the digital publishing landscape poses enormous challenges to traditional

publishing.

Within publishing houses, because many people lack computer knowledge, they have little or partial understanding of digital publishing, leading to misconceptions such as “digital publishing requires high technology” or “digital publishing means fragmented content.” Coupled with scarce professional talent, insufficient financial resources, and inadequate copyright protection, traditional publishing lacks competitive advantages. Under these difficulties, failed digital transformation could be catastrophic for traditional publishing, let alone upgrading and development.

Does traditional publishing still have opportunities for digital transformation? How can it seize the opportunities presented by mobile internet to achieve digital transformation? Using our press as an example, we believe digital publishing should be planned from the following aspects.

First, leadership is critical for digital transformation. As the saying goes, “the train runs fast only if the locomotive leads.” Publishing leaders are the “locomotive” of digital transformation. Only when they have profound understanding and knowledge of digital publishing can they promote and advance transformation.

Second, actively cultivate and recruit talent. Digital publishing cannot be achieved without relevant professionals. There are only two paths: cultivation and recruitment. Talent cultivation involves identifying existing staff with computer foundations and providing specialized training. Recruitment involves hiring experienced digital publishing professionals or relevant university graduates from society. [4]

Third, fully recognize our own advantages. Traditional publishing’s strength lies in robust content screening and filtering, solid editorial expertise, and years of accumulated publishing and author resources. In the initial stage of digital transformation, based on these accumulated resources, we can select content with republication value and convert it into relatively simple digital products with minimal processing. This approach allows us to gradually explore and accumulate digital publishing experience, laying a solid foundation for transformation.

Fourth, position digital product models. How should publishers’ digital products reach readers? Should they be based on “digital publishing + internet,” or “digital publishing + internet + instant printing”? This requires positioning digital product models according to published content and reading habits. We believe that for academic content with small audiences, the “digital publishing + internet + instant printing” model is appropriate, while for literary, entertainment, and popular content, pure digital reading models are more suitable.

Fifth, make moderate hardware investments. Digital publishing requires corresponding equipment, but investment must align with established digital goals. The approach of being greedy for scale must be firmly avoided. This is par-

ticularly important for small and medium-sized presses with limited financial resources. Press leaders must have clear ideas about short-term goals and long-term planning for digital development. Only with clear stage-by-stage objectives can investment be scientific and rational.

The above discusses digital transformation from the publisher level. From the national level, issues such as how to improve copyright protection after digital transformation, particularly combating piracy, and the compatibility and interoperability standards between digital products must be urgently addressed.

3. Integrating Publishing with Internet

Today, the internet has entered every domain of society. In publishing, internet popularity has dramatically changed reading habits. The rapid development of mobile terminals particularly poses a huge challenge to traditional publishing—the sharp loss of readership. Simultaneously, the rapid rise of online bookstores strongly impacts the traditional publishing industry.

Facing this harsh reality, traditional publishing should actively strive to catch up. Currently, some large publishing groups are creating their own e-commerce platforms and actively achieving digital publishing based on their accumulated resources, authors, and information advantages, all wanting to ride the internet express to achieve new breakthroughs in publishing business and expand development space. However, entering comprehensive development of internet and mobile terminal content faces challenges such as high R&D costs, scarce professional talent, and digital publication copyright protection.

If large publishing units face numerous difficulties in digital publishing, are small university presses with limited scale and resources excluded from digital publishing? The answer is no. The key for university presses is to identify their positioning, recognize their service objects, and select the right digital publishing model.

University presses mainly publish university textbooks and academic works characterized by small audiences. For highly specialized content with even fewer readers, using traditional publishing methods inevitably results in high costs. Due to small audiences and low print runs, bookstores are unwilling to stock them, making it difficult for presses to recover costs and resulting in losses. Moreover, after publication, revision and reprinting become impossible. How can this publishing dilemma be solved? We believe the “digital publishing + internet + instant printing” model can resolve it.

The “digital publishing + internet + instant printing” model involves publishing highly specialized books with small readerships in digital form. Presses promote and publicize these books to the public through their own websites. Upon receiving orders, they print instantly and mail to readers. For high-quality, low-volume publications from university presses, this model’s feasibility lies in: First, using traditional publication typesetting files directly as digital publications

without additional investment; second, eliminating traditional printing costs; third, eliminating worries about overprinting or underprinting, with no inventory storage costs; fourth, enabling 随时 revisions; and fifth, solving the dilemma where bookstores won't stock but readers can't purchase.

In terms of investment, this model requires equipment investment of 3-5 million RMB, which is manageable for university presses. Calculated against annual investment in small-volume publications, this is not excessive. Moreover, in a university environment, this equipment can generate additional income for the press.

In conclusion, reform must continue deepening, and internet development is accelerating. Whether willing or not, everyone faces the impact of emerging transformation waves. Only by calmly and keenly identifying the opportunities this new situation brings to small presses can we find the path to success.

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Note: The final section appears to be a continuation from a different article about enterprise IT architecture and media industry middle platform strategies, which has been omitted as it is not part of the main manuscript.

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

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