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## 2020 Review of Chinese Online Audio Development Postprint

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### Abstract

This article surveys network audio broadcasting phenomena in China in 2020, screening for memorable events based on the criterion of innovation characterized by creation from scratch or qualitative change from quantitative accumulation, and subsequently summarizes them into ten thematic topics for corresponding analysis, with the aim of leaving a record for audio media research. The ten topics are: Lizhi' s listing in the United States, the popularity of voice-based social interaction, the inception of audio live-streaming e-commerce, the rapid rise of podcasts, audio dramas plus film and television, the platformization development of broadcast media, music platforms entering the audio market, smart audio technology connecting multiple scenarios, vulnerable groups receiving attention from audio media, and the formation of a community through academic-industry collaboration.

### Full Text

#### A Review of China' s Online Audio Development in 2020

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**Abstract:** This article surveys the landscape of China' s online audio dissemination phenomena in 2020, identifying and analyzing ten thematic areas that represent either innovative breakthroughs or qualitative transformations significant enough to merit commemoration. These ten topics are: 1) the U.S. listing of "Lizhi," 2) the popularity of voice-based social networking, 3) the emergence of audio e-commerce, 4) the rapid rise of podcasts, 5) the convergence of audio dramas and film/television, 6) the platformization development of broadcast media, 7) the entry of music platforms into the audio market, 8) smart audio technology linking multiple scenarios, 9) increased audio attention to vulnerable groups, and 10) the formation of an academic-industry research community.

**Keywords:** online audio; voice social networking; “Lizhi” App; audio e-commerce; podcast; smart audio

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The year 2020 was defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced daily life and work to revolve around epidemic prevention principles and made the internet an essential infrastructure for communication and mobility. Under these circumstances of home isolation and normalized pandemic response, the media industry experienced significant disruption. For instance, in-car radio listening rates plummeted during the first quarter when people could not travel, while online audio seized a development opportunity due to its relative convenience in production and cloud-based completion. Surveying China’s online audio landscape in 2020 reveals several noteworthy trends—some rekindling the fundamental vitality of audio communication, others appearing as transient and artificial constructs. This article integrates these developments into ten core themes for brief analysis and commentary. It should be noted that “online audio” here specifically refers to content centered on spoken language, including programs, audiobooks, and dramas; relatively independent online music is not the primary focus of discussion.

### 1. Lizhi’s U.S. Listing

On January 17, 2020, the audio platform “Lizhi” listed on the NASDAQ exchange, earning the title of “China’s first audio industry stock.” This marked a historic step for China’s audio industry at a time when image-based economies like short video and livestreaming dominated the landscape.

Compared to video, audio indeed represents an underdeveloped blue ocean market. However, it must be recognized that competition for traffic in China’s audio industry has never ceased. The various audio business models currently visible merely represent the results of particular competitive rounds among audio economy players, and have not yet clearly defined the future development structure of the industry. For internet companies heavily influenced by policy and capital, one must periodically question whether they have chosen audio merely as an entry point to accumulate advantages for the next round of competition, or whether they genuinely embrace sound as a philosophy to build lasting influence in auditory culture. After all, in some cases, these two motivations are not entirely consistent—a question that those of us uncritically enjoying audio’s benefits should occasionally revisit.

### 2. The Popularity of Voice Social Networking

In an era where loneliness has become a social condition, voice-based social networking gained remarkable popularity. Although relevant apps did not necessarily emerge in 2020, the pandemic indeed led many users to rediscover this functionality. Beyond mobile applications like “Soul” that focus on voice-based matchmaking, manufacturers across gaming, music, and video sectors

also launched corresponding projects. A typical case is Douyin, the short-video platform that opened voice livestreaming interfaces on March 2, clearly aiming to capture more traffic through sound as an entry point.

Unlike one-to-many audio livestreaming where a host broadcasts to multiple listeners, voice social networking tends toward one-to-one matching principles or many-to-many fluid services. In audio livestreaming, a single host typically disseminates content broadly to numerous listeners. In voice social networking, everyone is simultaneously a signal transmitter and information receiver. While appearing as one-to-one chats, users actually have many uncertain choices, which clearly aligns with the individualized “user-centric” psychology. However, two disturbing phenomena in current voice social networking warrant attention. First is the tendency toward vulgarity: lowbrow content similar to sexual innuendo frequently appears in strangers’ online voice interactions, even forming an industrial chain of voice-based companionship services. Second is the lack of substantive content. According to a survey by the China Youth Daily Social Survey Center, 32.8% of respondents’ primary motivation for use is to pass time [1], which indirectly reflects that the information quality of voice social networking needs improvement. How to make voice a tool for rational interaction and sincere communication rather than a vehicle for instant gratification may be the future vision for high-quality voice social networking development.

### 3. The Emergence of Audio E-commerce

If voice social networking tends toward emotional exchange between users, another phenomenon has clear commercial objectives: e-commerce, a field previously untouched by online audio. In April, prompted by work resumption, many video media outlets assumed e-commerce roles to help solve the problem of unsold agricultural products in Hubei. For instance, “Yangshipin” (China Media Group Video) led the “Lend a Hand, Buy for Love” campaign. Simultaneously, online audio also made contributions.

Ximalaya embedded store links for products like crayfish in the playback pages of “Tingtang FM” programs, and later collaborated with 13 celebrities including Lin Zhiling and Li Chen to launch the “Cloud Farm on the Tip of the Tongue” campaign to support Hubei agricultural sales, enabling instant purchasing. In this regard, the author believes this phenomenon resulted more from special circumstances, driven by multiple factors including social responsibility and business expansion. Audio e-commerce itself is difficult to sustain long-term and need not be considered a new growth point. After all, consumers trust products they can see, and auditory media holds no inherent advantage in this domain. Moreover, when future technologies mature and tactile, olfactory, and gustatory media emerge—allowing remote goods to be touched, smelled, and tasted—they will naturally capture user traffic.

#### 4. The Rapid Rise of Podcasts

Data shows that between 2014 and 2019, Chinese podcasts added 6,380 new shows, while in 2020 alone, 6,569 new Chinese podcasts were launched [2]. These programs cover topics ranging from finance and education to gender and law, film and music—virtually everything. Behind this rapid emergence are new podcast applications, such as “Xiaoyuzhou,” launched in March and hailed as China’s first dedicated Chinese podcast network platform. It later partnered with QQ Music, which subsequently introduced a “Podcast” section on its homepage separate from the “Radio” module.

Undoubtedly, podcasts provide a new window for understanding various aspects of contemporary Chinese society, as they embody the concept that anyone can be a host. Unlike formats such as audiobooks or audio dramas, which require professional voice training or teams comprised of traditional radio personnel—setting entry barriers and resulting in hosts who mostly “speak others’ words”—podcasts are different. The low cost of online audio access technology enables users to share personal stories anytime, anywhere. Podcasts encourage everyday users to “speak for themselves,” requiring a different kind of expertise: basic knowledge and unique insights within the discussed topic area to stand out. This also distinguishes podcasts from the “knowledge payment” trend of previous years, which featured “one-person lectures” by instructors with prestigious academic credentials or rich practical experience, serving dual purposes of knowledge transmission and commercial revenue. Podcast formats resemble “multi-person conversations and idea sharing,” typically featuring two or more vocal participants in a chat rather than broadcast or lecture style. Moreover, due to sound’s ephemeral and intangible nature, podcast topics enjoy greater freedom and breadth than text and video. In short, podcasts in China hold promising prospects.

#### 5. Audio Drama + Film/Television

The spring of 2020 brought COVID-19, adding another layer of chill to the film and television industry’s “winter.” At this time, some film and television workers began targeting audio dramas. For example, the original audio broadcast drama “An Jia” (I Will Find You a Better Home) represented Yaoke Media’s first foray into the broadcast drama field [3]. Unlike previous cases, the “An Jia” audio drama maintained synchronous updates with the television series, rather than following the primary-secondary sequence of TV broadcast first, audio drama later. Meanwhile, traditional audio drama production teams also began drawing inspiration from the film industry. On December 6, the “Bian Bian Bu Shi Hai Tang Hong” (Winter Begonia) broadcast drama team held an offline premiere event at the National Theatre of China—a first in audio drama history [4].

Whether film workers entering audio drama or audio workers borrowing film development concepts, whether out of necessity or mutual “circle-breaking” opportunity-seeking, the author holds a dialectical view of this behavior’s im-

pact. On one hand, film production teams can leverage their experience to bring high-quality auditory production standards—such as foley techniques—into audio production. On the other hand, if they simply process existing film and television works by deleting silent shots, adding some narration, and converting them to audio for platform distribution—rather than crafting scripts, vocal performances, and post-production with pure audio thinking—this will not be a sustainable approach. This is because the two media affect psychological reception differently: film and television originally interpret information through the trinity of image, sound, and subtitles, where sound is not the absolute 主体. Film workers handling sound must accommodate visual needs; even if a line is unclear, image performance and subtitle cues compensate. Audio dramas, however, center on sound, and whether simply transplanting film’s approach to voice treatment is appropriate remains questionable.

## 6. Platformization Development of Broadcast Media

On March 4, China Media Group launched the national-level 5G audio network media platform “Yunting” App. On Double Ninth Festival (October 25), it introduced the “Yunting Client (Senior Edition)” to serve elderly groups. On June 28, Shenzhen Media Group launched the “Shen Aiting” App. On July 23, Zhejiang Traffic Radio’s App 3.0 “Beigaofeng” officially launched [5]. In 2020, an increasing number of radio stations joined online livestreaming. It can be asserted that radio broadcasting nationwide has essentially fully entered internet platforms.

Notably, “Yunting” not only provides broadcast visualization channels—opening video livestreams of broadcast program scenes at appropriate times—but also offers video-to-audio conversion services, presenting CCTV’s premium video programs in audio form. This design, in an era advocating “audio visualization,” somewhat reasserts sound’s subjectivity, which the author believes is appropriate. After all, users’ primary motivation for using audio apps is to listen; if they seek visual enjoyment, they can surf video clients—why linger in the audio world? This is not to deny various visualization explorations by some audio media, as new attempts may generate new value. However, it is necessary to reiterate that audio professionals should not neglect sound’s unique attributes and professional quality in their development process.

## 7. Music Platforms Entering the Audio Market

If radio stations building their own online audio platforms constitutes “building a boat to sail the sea,” then internet companies previously focused on text and music entering the audio market resembles “borrowing a boat to sail the sea.” On April 23, World Book Day, Tencent Music Entertainment Group (TME) launched the new product “Kuwo Changting” App, announcing its focus on the long-form audio market. Subsequently, TME frequently collaborated with China Literature Group, which possesses abundant online literature resources, granting it priority rights to adapt many popular online novels into audio content. For

example, “Kuwo Changting” has already launched audiobooks or audio dramas like “Lord of the Mysteries,” “Day and Night,” and “Sword in the Snow.”

What warrants reflection is that these platforms focus on long-form audio strategy, contrasting with short-form audio that academics once discussed and industry attempted to promote. To date, short-form audio has not become a hot communication phenomenon like short video, leading some to conclude that audio itself offers little potential. The author argues that short-form audio’s failure to popularize does not stem from audio’s media attributes, but from its brevity. People primarily use audio for companion listening, creating a co-present listening state, rather than focusing intently and speedily browsing audio like they do videos. Needless to say, before finishing a meal, completing a workout, or commuting to work, a mere dozens-of-seconds program has already ended, requiring constant switching and even manual operation—where is the companionship and convenience in that?

## 8. Smart Audio Technology Linking Multiple Scenarios

On April 1, Ximalaya announced the launch of the smart audio device “Dream Sound Machine,” aiming to create user-customizable dreams through sound. Although this product was later revealed as an April Fool’s Day reference, the underlying technical principle is not impossible, as sound can indeed play a special role in dreaming. Currently, practical applications include Ximalaya’s collaboration with Midea to launch a smart voice air conditioner on June 18. It can not only control the air conditioner and temperature via voice but also broadcast story content and connect with other home appliances. Additionally, other audio companies have begun using intelligence as an entry point to link and trigger various social life scenarios; for instance, “Lizhi” has started deploying in-car audio and will fully enter smart headphones, smart speakers, and other IoT fields [6].

Undoubtedly, the rapid emergence of smart audio devices greatly facilitates people’s lives but also inevitably raises concerns. Envisioning a more distant future, when autonomous vehicle technology fully deploys and listeners accustomed to in-car audio are freed from driving, will they choose to indulge in visual feasts instead? When smart robots become standard home fixtures, what survival space will remain for pure audio smart devices? These will likely be real questions that audio media must confront in the wave of intelligence. In other words, viewed from a broader future perspective, artificial intelligence has developed multiple forms of audio but may also squeeze certain audio survival spaces.

## 9. Vulnerable Groups Receiving Audio Attention

On December 25, 2020, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology held a press conference announcing accessibility renovations for 43 mobile apps, with “Ximalaya Audiobooks” among them. Beyond usage dimension considerations, audio media also provides new livelihood hope for another group through

career opportunities. A typical example is Ximalaya's collaboration with the China Disabled Persons' Federation, which provides free access to paid programs for disabled persons and offers voice training and industry employment channels. Currently, over 8,000 disabled persons work as hosts, with the highest annual income approaching one million yuan and the most-played album exceeding 800 million listens [7].

As a fundamental mode of human communication, sound plays an irreplaceable role. One criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of online audio development is whether its humanistic care is properly implemented. Compared to the past, online audio in 2020 gradually developed awareness of being sound-led and covering diverse populations.

## 10. Academic-Industry Integration Forming a Community

On December 19, 2020, the Broadcasting (CCData Audio Media) Research Institute was officially inaugurated. Established jointly by Jinan University's School of Journalism and Communication, Zhongke Network Data Technology Co., Ltd., and Chongqing Normal University, this is reportedly the first broadcasting research institution in domestic universities. The conference also released the "China Audio Media Development Research Report" (2020) Blue Book [8].

Integration of industry, academia, and research has always been a media pursuit, but overall, explorations by both academia and industry in this regard have tended to be superficial. However, broadcast audio media differs—its advancement always closely follows practice. Taking the Broadcasting Professional Committee of the China Association of Film and Television Education as an example, its annual conferences have been co-hosted by industry rather than solely by universities. Deconstructing this integration may reveal the development direction of the audio community. First, *industry*: cultivating high-capacity talent to drive high-quality program output. Second, *academia*: introducing dual-qualification teachers is a common proposal, but implementation effectiveness remains to be observed. Third, *research*: on one hand, it should maintain theoretical orientation toward knowledge increment, as purely theoretical research has its own significance; on the other hand, it can diverge into policy-oriented research to provide intelligent and reliable solutions for the industry.

Looking back at China's online audio in 2020, development inevitably faced various problems, including both the enigma of business models that are difficult to tackle yet require breakthroughs, and concerns about audio's place in an intelligent future world. In fact, audio media in 2020 also had a moving story. On March 20, the spring equinox, Chutian Music Radio in the heart of the pandemic battle received an unexpected gift—a WeChat public platform article titled "@Chutian Music Radio, Clear Skies After Rain, Spring Equinox Weather! Please Accept These Good Wishes," initiated by Zhejiang Music FM and jointly produced by 31 music radio stations nationwide [9]. Chutian Music Radio had

been unaware beforehand. In the article, 31 peer music radio stations offered their blessings, allowing all audio professionals to feel the care from the audio community.

Perhaps it is precisely this spirit of mutual warmth that gives us reason to believe future audio media will move forward lightly yet with profound affection, forging ahead without hesitation.

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