

Publishing Culture and Editorial Role Transformation in the Big Data Era: Post-print

Authors: Yang Xi

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

Abstract

In the era of big data, advancements in digital information technology have precipitated significant transformations in both the publishing processes and modalities of traditional publishing, thereby positioning publishing activities as cultural endeavors underpinned by a “humanistic” foundation and mediated through digital technological means. As a “carrier of culture,” publishing exhibits comprehensive characteristics of diversity and multi-layeredness, necessitating a more pronounced manifestation of humanistic warmth and concern. Big data technology has catalyzed the reconstruction and integration of the publishing industry chain, endowing publishing activities with new cultural responsibilities. Editors must adapt to the transformation of their professional roles, moving beyond the confines of traditional publishing workflows to integrate a grand vision with humanistic spirit, thereby becoming navigators and lamplighters of culture.

Full Text

Publishing Culture and the Transformation of Editorial Roles in the Era of Big Data

ChinaXiv Cooperative Journal

(Hohai University Press, Nanjing, Jiangsu 210098)

Abstract: In the era of big data, advances in digital information technology have brought about significant transformations in the publishing processes and methods of traditional publishing. Publishing activities should become a form of cultural activity with a “humanized” foundation and digital technology as its means. As a “carrier of culture,” publishing presents comprehensive characteristics of diversity and multi-layered complexity, making it all the more necessary to demonstrate warm concern for humanistic dimensions. Big data technology has triggered the reconstruction and integration of the publishing industry

chain, endowing publishing activities with new cultural responsibilities. Editors need to adapt to the transformation of their own roles, not limiting themselves to traditional publishing workflows, but rather combining broad vision with humanistic spirit to become navigators and lamplighters of culture.

Keywords: big data; digitalization; publishing industry chain; editorial role; digital publishing; humanistic care; publishing integration

Chinese Library Classification: G230.7

Document Code: A

Article ID: 1671-0134(2021)01-071-03

DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2021.01.020

Citation Format: Yang Xi. Publishing Culture and the Transformation of Editorial Roles in the Era of Big Data [J]. China Media Technology, 2021(01): 71-73.

In recent years, with the development of mobile terminals and digital technology, the digitalization of publishing has become a crucial issue in the strategic development of the publishing industry. In September 2020, the China Digital Publishing Innovation Forum was held in Beijing, which further emphasized the new empowerment of digital publishing for the traditional publishing industry. The “new publishing format” constituted by the integrated development of the digital economy and the publishing industry has become the theme of the publishing industry for the foreseeable future, and how to effectively integrate and apply technology with tradition has become an urgent issue for the publishing industry to analyze.

Current relevant research has mostly focused on the reshaping of the publishing industry by big data and digital technology, while neglecting the consistent humanistic attributes within it. Shi Cengzhi stated in *Modern Publishing Studies* that “publishing plays a guiding role in social development and promotes the development and progress of human civilization” [1]. This demonstrates that even as digital publishing becomes a new proposition for the industry, the “human role” and the cultural care it embodies still have an irreplaceable importance. In the current era of rapid digital technological development, the humanistic care of the publishing industry has not lost its original luster; rather, it has become even more radiant. Therefore, this article attempts to analyze publishing culture in the era of big data, as only against this background can we more profoundly understand the important role of editors as “human” actors, and further explore the transformation of editorial roles in the process of publishing digitalization.

1. Data Core: Digital Transformation of Traditional Publishing

From a relatively authoritative consensus, the American technology consulting firm Gartner summarized the main characteristics of big data as 3V in 2001, emphasizing the high velocity (Velocity) of large volumes (Volume) of diverse (Variety) data. In 2012, it further proposed that big data with 3V characteristics “requires new processing methods to achieve better decision-making, insight, and optimal processing,” which precisely emphasizes the crucial aspect of big data being used for human purposes.

From the perspective of the publishing industry, some scholars define big data publishing as “in the advancement of digital upgrading of traditional publishing, through networked development, innovatively utilizing, analyzing, mining, predicting, and sharing massive data, taking data as assets, optimizing the integration of publishing resources and reconstructing publishing processes, forming a new integrated online and offline publishing model” [2]. In this model, massive “data” plays a guiding role in publishing activities, assuming a directing function. It emphasizes the shift of publishing from being “perceptual” to “scientific” and “structured” [3], leveraging the popularization of digital reading to exert influence.

The wave of publishing digitalization is sweeping in. According to the *2019 China Digital Reading White Paper* and the 17th National Survey on National Reading, China’s total digital reading user base reached 470 million, and in 2019, the contact rate of digital reading methods (online reading, mobile reading, e-reader reading, Pad reading, etc.) among adult nationals in China was 79.3%, objectively providing a foundation for the mining and further integration of big data in publishing. The advancement of digital information technology has brought about a tremendous butterfly effect, causing major transformations in the publishing processes and methods of traditional publishing: the central position of editors and publishing houses in publishing activities has been diluted, and massive data seems to already be able to conduct precise analysis of reader groups, marketing strategies, and other aspects in the most “scientific” way, thereby guiding publishing activities. Cross-system media platforms have enabled the publishing industry to present an unprecedented “mega-publishing” ecological model through “media convergence.” For example, as Schönberger mentioned in *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*, Amazon once hired a group of book reviewers to write reviews, judge, and classify publications to recommend books to readers. However, from a marketing effectiveness perspective, these professional scholars’ judgments of publications were far less effective than results obtained through algorithms analyzing users’ social networks—big data can accurately profile users from their daily online activities and use this as a basis to provide personalized book list recommendations, directly influencing consumers’ purchasing activities, making “everything quantifiable” [4]. Obviously, such applications of big data have undoubtedly reshaped the entire publishing industry chain. For instance, in terms

of topic planning, big data can provide scientific guidance for market research activities in multiple aspects, including author information, market analysis, reader group analysis, and analysis of related similar topics, with efficiency far higher than traditional market research models. On the other hand, big data can also cover and track the entire operational status of publishing business, including readers' consumption information, feedback, and related behavioral data, which is an aspect that traditional publishing business processes cannot reach.

So, when the importance of “data” becomes increasingly prominent and “rationality” and “science” seem to be able to dominate many aspects of publishing business, we need to pay even more attention to the humanistic dimension while witnessing the exhilarating progress brought by rapid technological development; otherwise, we will fall into the trap of “technological determinism.” Erich Fromm, in *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*, compares this mechanized society dedicated to “maximum material production and consumption” to a “dangerous ghost” [5], arguing that “human beings” are the most important factor in the social system, which requires that the data core must be premised on “humanized technology.” Publishing activities have cultural attributes, which means that the influence of social consciousness and cultural context runs through publishing activities. As a spiritual and cultural product, publications play the role of a “cultural sanctuary for the soul.” Therefore, in the era of big data, the cultural characteristics of publishing need even more to demonstrate warm concern for humanistic dimensions.

2. Technological Humanism: Cultural Characteristics of Publishing

From a traditional definition, the most basic elements of publishing activities include editing, copying, and distribution. Therefore, publications take “dissemination” as their main purpose, and their cultural role is mainly reflected in the fact that publications have dual attributes as both material products and cultural products. They themselves are an intermediary for information storage with media attributes. On the other hand, from a macro perspective, the publishing system itself is an indispensable component of the social and cultural system with far-reaching influence. Traditional publishing culture generally emphasizes cultural pursuit and responsibility in a perceptual sense, but today's social background, marked by the reconstruction of the publishing industry chain by big data technology and the digital transformation of traditional publishing institutions, has endowed publishing's cultural role with new composite characteristics.

First, publishing activities should become a form of cultural activity with a “humanized” foundation and digital technology as its means. Just as Fromm worried about and criticized technological rationality, today's publishing activities present “data core” and market-oriented characteristics, which on the one hand indeed improve efficiency, integrate multiple media platforms, and demon-

strate more personalized features. However, along with this come some less harmonious phenomena: for example, while “self-publishing” platforms lower the publishing threshold, they may no longer pursue content quality value due to the absence of a “gatekeeper,” constantly downwardly compatible to cater to the huge sinking market. Once commercial interests override cultural significance, the humanistic core of publishing activities will be dissolved. Max Weber’s concern about the “rationalization process” precisely describes this scenario in the process of modern society where “instrumental rationality” continues to expand while “value rationality” increasingly declines. In Weber’s words, if the meaning of “human” is dissolved and trapped by this iron cage of instrumental rationality, human society will become “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, and nothing is any longer sacred” [6]. Hao Zhensheng summarizes this “humanized” foundation of publishing as “publishing cultural rationality,” emphasizing that publishing activities must be “king of ideas” and that the publishing industry “ultimately relies on ideas to attract people” [7]. Let us temporarily set aside the debate about what the publishing industry should take as its “king” —as a cultural activity, the foundation of publishing should be “humanistic care,” and this “publishing cultural rationality” is crucial. Big data and rapidly advancing technology should be regarded as means that enable publishing activities to unfold in more effective and richly diverse forms. Only when technology itself becomes a “humanistic technology” can we maintain the cultural attributes of publishing.

Second, in the era of big data, as a “carrier of culture,” publishing carries more complex and colorful internal thoughts and external forms, presenting comprehensive characteristics of diversity and multi-layered complexity. Publications are no longer limited to traditional media carriers such as paper publishing and audio-visual publishing. On the one hand, online publishing and digital publishing possess more powerful and vigorous expressive power; on the other hand, they also demonstrate boundless dissemination power. The pseudo-environment brought by media seems worrisome, as the “real” world and the “technologically constructed” world present a binary opposition. Conversely, the humanistic attribute of publishing is a natural value load. Publishing activities store and disseminate information through multiple means as a form of cultural symbol and have a certain value guidance function. Against this background, publishing has become a bridge connecting technology and culture, further highlighting the importance of humanism. For example, the “noise” in big data technology processing may be the voice expression of some marginalized minority group. In the model construction and processing of massive data, if this is treated as “noise” based on some crude instrumental rationality value, it will cause this group to fall further into a spiral of silence, bringing about digital divide and information islands. However, conversely, if we can capture and value the voices of these minority groups, it can objectively further reflect the conflict and collision of diversified values and preserve the essence of information within them.

Third, as a cultural activity, publishing has a profound influence on the social and cultural system. Big data technology has brought about the reconstruction

and integration of the publishing industry chain, endowing publishing activities with new cultural responsibilities. Functions such as information integration and retrieval, which were beyond the reach of traditional publishing, have emerged in new composite publishing structures through big data and digital platforms in the form of media convergence. From an internal structural perspective, this change is the common result of interactions among multiple factors including readers, editors, publishing institutions, and technology platforms. Digital reading has not only changed the way individuals read but also the culture of reading. Harold Innis proposed in *The Bias of Communication* that our understanding of a civilization in fact depends on the medium used by that civilization, and the long-term use of a medium may determine the characteristics of the knowledge it disseminates [8]. Therefore, both our communication and civilization inevitably carry biases. Conversely, cultural inheritance is undoubtedly influenced by its carrier. For example, the emergence of new reading methods has made reading present a “social” trend, where readers share reading content through social platforms, which on the one hand may promote the collision of ideas and enable everyone to engage in a more flattened manner of cultural exchange; on the other hand, this reading method also exhibits a fast-food, foam-like, pan-entertainment cultural characteristic. The fragmented reading and hyperlinked reading trends shown by individual readers can objectively be seen as a microcosm of today’s “fragmented” cultural landscape.

From a macro perspective, China’s publishing activities bear the responsibility of socialist spiritual and cultural construction, are the inheritors of the Chinese national culture, and also shoulder the heavy responsibility of Chinese culture “going global.” The development of big data technology provides new historical opportunities and driving forces for publishing activities. As an important component of digital cultural production line construction, publishing activities also assume the responsibility of a “cultural gene bank.”

3. Navigators and Lamplighters: Editorial Roles in the Big Data Era

Although big data and technological development have brought many changes to the publishing industry and its cultural role has also presented new characteristics, as analyzed above, publishing is not a cultural activity where “data is king” can integrate everything. The source and foundation of its activities remain “human.” When implemented in specific publishing processes, this highlights the importance of the editorial role even more. Hao Zhensheng believes that “editors and publishers are actually the brewers, builders, and constructors of a nation and ethnicity’s rationality” [9]. In the era of big data, editors on the one hand need to adapt to the transformation of their own roles, not limiting themselves to traditional publishing workflows, but more importantly, combining broad vision with humanistic spirit, understanding, mastering, and even harnessing technology so that massive data can be “used for our purposes.” Only in this way can they become navigators and lamplighters of culture in the

publishing wave of the big data era.

On the one hand, from the perspective of inheriting traditional editorial roles, editors still have their responsibility as “gatekeepers.” Publishing is an activity of storing, copying, and disseminating information. Although the industry chain and production model of publishing may change in the big data era, its gatekeeping function for content information should not be dissolved. On the contrary, the current massive data seems to cover everything, information technology development simultaneously brings noise, and fast-food culture makes reading fragments and foam increasingly obvious. Against this background, editors’ selection, acquisition, and processing are in fact endowed with pivotal significance.

However, if editors only limit their role to “gatekeepers,” they would appear too passive in the big data era. Readers face an information explosion society where various digital, three-dimensional, interactive, and cross-media communication methods emerge endlessly. This requires editors to be able to understand and master the new characteristics brought by technology, not blindly believing in various indicators brought by big data, and being able to distinguish and clarify data standards. On this basis, they must further improve themselves to become planners and organizers of content. From this perspective, editors, as navigators of publishing activities in the big data era, must themselves become “tide riders” with high-level perspectives. They must achieve a certain understanding of digital technology while also possessing composite capabilities in information integration and other aspects.

On the other hand, editors should also become “lamp-lighters” of culture. Dong Qiao, in *Fine Weather Today*, reminisces about the warm atmosphere of bookstores and paper books, saying that “a bookstore, no matter how small, is still a bookstore—a long pavilion in the wind and rain of the internet age, gazing at the weary ancient road of humanities, reluctant to part with the ten thousand volumes of sunset after the catastrophe” [10]. What he expresses is a kind of cultural impact brought by technological progress and the digital transformation of publishing, affecting those who are psychologically nostalgic.

In fact, regardless of the production model, publishing bears the responsibility of cultural inheritance. Editors must be able to act as planners and preservers of culture, on the one hand improving their own cultural literacy while representing society in cultural selection; on the other hand, editors also need to become advocates of multiculturalism, making coordination and balance among complex and changing social voices, and using a warm, humanistic approach to emit light to guide the forward direction of culture.

Big data has undoubtedly penetrated every aspect of our lives. While technology has brought various benefits, it has also inevitably weakened humanistic values. The cultural attribute is an important attribute of publishing. In the era of big data, the meaning of “human” is particularly prominent for publishing. Publishing is the carrier of culture, bearing the responsibility of socialist

spiritual and cultural construction and serving as the inheritor of the Chinese national culture; editors, moreover, are the navigators and lamplighters of publishing activities in this era. Today, technology develops with each passing day, but whether cultural development has kept pace with this rhythm, and how to further implement the transformation exploration of publishing houses and the role reshaping of editors to better meet current social needs, remain issues we need to continuously explore.

References:

- [1] Shi Cengzhi. Modern Publishing Studies [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006: 33.
- [2] Li Detuan, Lei Xiaoyan. Big Data Publishing: Connotation and Practical Application [J]. Publishing Friends, 2016, 236(4): 24-28.
- [3] Wu Yun. Publishing and Reading in the Era of Industrial Reconstruction—Five Key Propositions Publishing Industry Should Deeply Consider Under the Background of Big Data [J]. Publishing Wide Angle, 2013(23): 6-9.
- [4] Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, Kenneth Cukier. Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think [M]. Translated by Sheng Yangyan, Zhou Tao. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 2013: 97.
- [5] Erich Fromm, The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology[M]. New York: Harper & Row, 1968: 1.
- [6] Max Weber. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism [M]. Translated by Huang Xiaojing, Peng Qiang. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1986: 173.
- [7] [9] Hao Zhensheng. On Publishing Cultural Rationality [J]. Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 2017(19): 84-85.
- [8] Harold Innis. The Bias of Communication [M]. Translated by He Daokuan. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2003: 28.
- [10] Dong Qiao. Fine Weather Today [M]. Beijing: Writers Publishing House, 2008: 114.

Author Introduction: Yang Xi (1982-), female, from Yangzhou, Jiangsu, editor. Research direction: Editorial publishing business and review management.

(Responsible Editor: Yang Hu)

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

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.