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Top Ten Media Trends of 2020 Redefining Post-Print Media

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Abstract

By analyzing the top ten media hotspots of 2020, the author examines the flow of social capital in socialized communication and further investigates the various power games underlying it, thereby enabling us to reconceptualize media: from human society to the material world, media exists within the spatiotemporal traversal of intelligent communication.

Full Text

2020 Top Ten Media Hotspots Redefining Media

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Abstract: By analyzing the ten major media hotspots of 2020, this article examines the flow of social capital in socialized communication and further explores the underlying power struggles, allowing us to rediscover media: from human society to the material world, media exists within the spatiotemporal traversal of intelligent communication.

Keywords: media hotspots; socialized communication; social capital; media as being; 2020 major events

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The year 2020 was an extraordinary one, witnessing numerous major media events and communication hotspots that compel us to re-examine what communication means and redefine what constitutes media. Since McLuhan proposed

“the medium is the message,” academic contemplation of media has never ceased: media as relationship, media as data, media as environment...culminating in “media as being.” As Peters observed: “Media are not just various information terminals; they are also various kinds of agents, each representing different orders” [1]. What form did media take in 2020? Let us select ten media hotspots for investigation.

1. Pandemic Cloud Burst

The pandemic was undoubtedly the most significant influence of the past year, thrusting media into an era where everything could be “cloud-based.” People experienced the longest Spring Festival holiday in history. On the first day of working from home, DingTalk and WeChat Work collectively crashed, while Tencent Meeting seized the opportunity. Homebound lifestyles spawned a homebody economy. On February 8, livestream videos flooded social media, with Douyin and Bilibili sparking a “cloud disco” craze. “Cloud house selling,” “cloud car selling,” “cloud product launches,” “cloud concerts,” and “cloud spring outings” began to emerge in droves.

The pandemic represented a major test for online public opinion, examining not only media’s communication capacity but also mainstream media’s social mobilization power. On February 4, multiple new media platforms and offline display screens under People’s Daily published an “Urgent Call! Nationwide Collection of COVID-19 Assistance Information!” Meanwhile, Dr. Li Wenliang, the whistleblower, used his sacrifice to demonstrate that private and public spaces can be connected on the internet. This also illustrates that communication depends not only on relationships between people but also on the specific social environments in which they exist.

2. Bilibili’s Repeated “Breaking Circles”

Bilibili’s New Year’s Eve broadcast broke circles, representing a successful cultural convergence between emerging and traditional media. It revealed how subcultures and mainstream cultures can merge and innovate on the internet. In this ecosystem and process, new online cultures form on one hand, while new media surpass themselves on the other. On the evening of May 3, Bilibili released the speech “The Wave” dedicated to the new generation, which “created a thousand waves” of online discussion and caused Bilibili’s market value to surge by 3.4 billion yuan.

We recognize that the internet is stratified into circles, and cultural convergence is the most difficult aspect of media convergence. Bilibili’s successful “circle-breaking” offers inspiration to traditional mainstream media, making “breaking circles” a breakthrough point for media convergence, while linking circles becomes key to rebuilding user relationships for traditional mainstream media. Building new mainstream media requires occupying the C-position in online public opinion, which first requires capturing the C-end (consumer end), and

capturing the C-end requires “breaking circles.”

How can media reshape themselves? On one hand, it depends on the media itself. “People create new linguistic expressions and social cues in mediated interactions, creating new social contexts and cultures based on the above, and reshaping new media itself” [3]. On the other hand, it depends on citizens, users, and consumers. “In convergence culture, consumers will have greater power—but only when they recognize and utilize this power both as consumers and as citizens, as full participants in our culture, will such results occur” [4]. Media reconstruction also endows media with new connotations and extensions. “Breaking circles” embodies both connection and disconnection in the internet world.

3. Live Streaming: More Than Just Sales

Livestream e-commerce erupted comprehensively, with veteran and new influencers like Li Jiaqi, Viya, Luo Yonghao, and Dong Mingzhu taking the stage. On April 1, “China’s first-generation internet celebrity” Luo Yonghao made his Douyin livestream sales debut, achieving 110 million yuan in transaction volume. Meanwhile, corporate presidents like Dong Mingzhu, Zhang Chaoyang, and Li Yanhong “went to sea” (entered the fray). Simultaneously, livestreaming empowered media, with media e-commerce entering through public welfare e-commerce and brand e-commerce.

People’s Daily New Media and the People’s Daily Smart Media Research Institute initiated the establishment of a livestream e-commerce research base. Foshan Television in Guangdong established the Foshan Influencer Business School and Foshan Short Video Industry-Academia-Research Base. The “National Livestream E-commerce Complaint Platform” launched on the People’s Daily client, with traditional mainstream media entering the livestream e-commerce field in its own unique way, becoming a clear stream in the industry.

However, the booming livestream e-commerce gradually turned from a red ocean to a black one by September, with problems like fake traffic and high influencer slotting fees with poor sales gradually exposed. As the livestream e-commerce bubble burst, the industry entered a period of rectification and standardized development. On July 1, China’s first livestream e-commerce regulation, the “Code of Conduct for Online Livestream Marketing Activities,” formally took effect. Livestreaming involves more than just sales—it prompts further reflection: How should converged media integrate? How should “internet plus” industries operate? Where are the boundaries of converged media, or rather, where are the boundaries of media? We must carefully examine the advantages and disadvantages that livestream e-commerce brings to media and communication.

4. ByteDance’s Overseas Setback

In 2020, Douyin’s daily active users exceeded 400 million. Nearly 30% of Chinese people opened Douyin on their phones every day, making it a truly national

application. In May 2020, Douyin and its overseas version TikTok's cumulative downloads surpassed 2 billion, officially topping the global charts and leaving numerous American social media giants behind. India was the largest market, and the United States the third-largest. On the evening of June 29, the Indian government announced a ban on 59 Chinese apps, including WeChat, TikTok, and Meitu. On August 7, Trump issued an executive order banning WeChat in the U.S. after 45 days, causing an uproar.

As *The New York Times* wrote in one article, "TikTok has a genuine creative culture and is deeply loved by millions of American youth." However, this also threatened the cheese of internet powers. TikTok's installations exceeded Facebook in one fell swoop, jumping to first place in the U.S. market. After amassing a huge user base, algorithm-driven platforms are no longer just media platforms or social platforms but political entities with powerful influence. Consequently, Trump gave TikTok an ultimatum: either close down or be sold.

TikTok's ban in the U.S. illustrates at least three points: First, the globalization logic of the U.S. and China reflects a conflict between two completely different modes of thinking. In cross-cultural international communication, globalization and anti-globalization coexist. Second, Chinese tech companies targeting global markets must prepare "anti-containment" plans for scenarios where the "America First" principle is violated. Third, judging from current international resistance to TikTok, we must recognize both ideological and cultural resistance and carefully examine and study the impact of technological ethics.

6. Algorithms Under Fire

On September 8, the article "Takeout Riders, Trapped in the System" went viral, triggering nationwide questioning of Meituan and Ele.me's algorithm systems. This represented another criticism of algorithms running rampant online and manipulating netizens' lives, with the most criticized being algorithm originator ByteDance and its Douyin platform. The "2020 China Online Audiovisual Development Research Report" shows that as of June 2020, China's online audiovisual user base reached 901 million, with over 60% of users watching comprehensive videos for more than one hour. Driven by algorithms, short videos on platforms like Douyin became the biggest winners. People spent an average of 110 minutes daily watching short videos. Have online video applications become time-absorbing profit machines? Where does the time go? And who holds the hidden benefits and rights within that time? Platforms and merchants are undoubtedly the biggest beneficiaries, but will netizens pulled into the algorithmic vortex fall into traps laid by the commercial internet? Will netizens who become "algorithm prisoners" become stupid? Will they lose more than they gain? Admittedly, algorithms are not the root of all evil, but they must be optimized!

In early September, the renowned American publication *Harper's Magazine* released a report titled "The Manipulation Traps of Tech Giants: How Google,

Amazon, and Facebook Control Our Lives.” The author detailed how America’s three tech giants manipulate markets through algorithmic technology and further control human desires and thoughts—a situation also occurring in China. As we enter the era of intelligent communication, machines are becoming a new species. Will humans control machines, or will machines control humans? This is an ethical issue worthy of attention and research.

5. Accelerated Media Convergence

On September 26, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Accelerating the In-Depth Development of Media Convergence,” calling for the main force to fully advance onto the main battlefield and deepening reforms to the systems and mechanisms of mainstream media. Consequently, converged media construction accelerated again. Over the past year, county-level converged media centers achieved considerable success. With strong local government support, various county-level media centers were inaugurated and passed inspections, with technical platforms for county-level converged media essentially established.

The next task is enabling and increasing efficiency, shifting from hardware construction to software development, and from traditional business to mobile-first strategies. Facing increasingly severe media competition and mounting survival pressure, traditional mainstream media actively leveraged market mechanisms to enhance market competitiveness and awareness, continuously exploring and creating various operational models of “news + lifestyle services + government affairs + commerce.” Pioneering and effective county-level converged media units like Changxing Converged Media Center emerged, experimenting not only with short videos and livestream e-commerce but also advancing into smart cities. Meanwhile, central and provincial media convergence accelerated, and prefecture-level media promoted reforms through mergers and transformations. Although in-depth media convergence, all-media communication, and county-level converged media center construction have been written into the 14th Five-Year Plan, building new mainstream media remains a complex and arduous systematic project. Progress is difficult, constrained by both the inertia and baggage of traditional media itself and current systemic and environmental factors. Current innovations mostly represent local breakthroughs and occasional circle-breaking; deeper convergence still requires clarifying the path ahead, organizing thoughts, and pioneering new approaches. In the new year, traditional mainstream media must continue fighting to reach their destination.

9. Rectifying the Online Ecosystem

On March 1, the “Regulations on the Governance of Online Information Content Ecology” issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China formally took effect, ushering in the strictest “military regulations” for new media practitioners. On April 24, the CAC launched a special rectification campaign against malicious marketing accounts, naming Tencent, Sina, Toutiao, NetEase, Qutoutiao, and

other platforms for self-inspection and correction, with local CACs swiftly following suit. On June 10, the CAC summoned Sina's responsible person, and the Weibo hot search list was suspended for one week for rectification. One week later, the National Copyright Administration, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Public Security, and CAC jointly launched the "Sword Net 2020" special operation, cracking down on copyright infringement in short videos.

On November 16, Baidu acquired YY Live for \$3.6 billion, but a spoiler emerged when renowned short-selling firm Muddy Waters Research published a report claiming approximately 90% of YY Live's data was fabricated. Almost simultaneously, the WeChat public platform strengthened governance over illegal use of account names, malicious marketing accounts, and illegal activities through account trading, with large numbers of illegally operating public accounts being shut down. In mid-November, videos of a man named Ma Baoguo, self-proclaimed "master of Hunyuan Xingyi Tai Chi," flooded Bilibili, spawning popular phrases like "young people don't follow martial ethics" and "hao zi wei zhi" (a mispronunciation of "haozi weizhi" meaning "good self-restraint"). But joy turned to sorrow on November 28 when *People's Daily* called the Ma Baoguo incident a farce that should end immediately. That evening, Bilibili immediately restricted Ma Baoguo video dissemination, and Weibo dissolved related fan groups.

On November 10, the State Administration for Market Regulation issued the "Anti-Monopoly Guidelines for the Platform Economy (Draft for Comment)" nationwide. Under anti-monopoly law enforcement, Ant Group's IPO was suspended, and Jack Ma, the internet mogul most skilled at communication, was summoned for talks. *People's Daily* stated directly: there is no so-called Jack Ma era, only the era's Jack Ma. The complacent internet moguls should wake up, and profit-blinded internet giants should consider the social responsibilities they should bear. Governing the online ecosystem is essentially a game among national interests, public power, and commercial capital.

Tsinghua Journalism Undergraduate Reform Sparks Heated Debate

Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication will stop recruiting undergraduate students from high school graduates starting in 2020. This caused a sensation, with "Tsinghua Stops Journalism Undergraduate Recruitment" going viral. Have requirements for journalism talent changed? Undoubtedly, changes in communication forms have led to changes in media industry structures and talent demands—how can journalism education remain unchanged? The question is how to change to meet media development needs.

On one hand, journalism departments should operate at multiple levels and in multiple models based on their own realities and social needs. On the other hand, journalism and communication discipline construction faces enormous challenges, with interdisciplinary research becoming the path to reconstructing journalism and communication studies. Academic circles have launched exten-

sive discussions on how to cultivate media talent capable of adapting to the internet era. Meanwhile, some journalism departments have created experimental classes that break professional barriers, such as the Converged Media Innovation Excellence Talent Experimental Class at Central South University. However, innovation in media talent cultivation remains constrained by China's higher education system. Driven by an evaluation system that blindly pursues paper quantity, journalism education and academic research drift further from media frontlines, with academic research levels hovering at low levels. Without correction, journalism education will remain all talk and little action. How to cultivate qualified talent for new media? How to research real questions for new communication? These become the biggest challenges facing journalism schools and media scholars. Media education faces unprecedented crises and challenges, but we must view them as opportunities.

8. Ding Zhen's Meteoric Rise

In November, Weibo's hot search list was dominated by Ding Zhen. A less-than-10-second smiling video swept Douyin and Weibo, and overnight, the 20-year-old Khampa man Ding Zhen rapidly became famous. Subsequently, "Ding Zhen's World"—a promotional video for his hometown Litang—received widespread acclaim, and the "Ding Zhen Effect" took hold. The battle among regional cultural tourism official accounts triggered by him delighted netizens. Ding Zhen's popularity not only triggered communication fission but also prompted collective media action. Connecting everything reflects both the nature of the internet ecosystem and the consciousness of new media marketing.

Ding Zhen's sudden emergence shares similarities with Bilibili's New Year's Eve broadcast, while also demonstrating the power of body-based communication. This is a new era where the wave pushes forward, a nationwide carnival conspired by traditional mainstream media, self-media, and internet platforms. This phenomenon offers an insight: grassroots individuals have traffic but no resources, while local official media have resources but cannot grasp mass traffic. The perfect combination of the two can produce an effect where one plus one exceeds two. Ding Zhen's popularity offers at least these points for traditional mainstream media to consider: First, network empowerment endows the ability to grasp new media communication—mainstream media should be mobile-first and connect everything. Second, under the influencer economy, mainstream media should take the initiative: if they cannot create momentum, they should ride existing momentum; what they don't own can still be used. Third, deep convergence means "what's yours is mine, and what's mine is yours." Mainstream media should be adept at cooperating with influencers and self-media, breaking through geographical limitations to integrate nationwide resources. Fourth, mainstream media must lower their stance and develop unique insight—finding scarce resources and creating cultural IPs is crucial, discovering the bright spots of the era and creating value demand. Behind every phenomenon-level influencer lies the flow and aggregation of social capital.

10. Technology Empowering Transformation

In the coverage of the 2020 Two Sessions, Xinhua News Agency employed new technologies like 5G and AI, launching communication methods including 5G holographic interviews with NPC deputies and 5G HD livestreaming. CCTV News conducted “5G+4K” live broadcasts and applied “5G+VR” to improve user viewing experience. On May 20, under the advocacy and preparation of Hubei Radio and Television’s Converged Media News Center, the nation’s first blockchain news editorial department was established, with 12 provincial-level mainstream new media as founding members. On July 6, China Media Group and related institutions jointly released the “China Media Group 5G Media Application White Paper (2020 Edition).”

Regrettably, current technology applications in traditional mainstream media remain at the operational level, with insufficient effect on industrial management and organizational transformation, and inadequate progress. We must consider this question: what exactly does technology empowerment empower? Of course, technology + service is the way forward, but the biggest difficulty facing traditional mainstream media remains the inability to effectively occupy the C-end closest to ordinary people—only by occupying the C-end can they occupy the C-position in online public opinion.

Internet enterprises invest faster and more heavily in new technology and product R&D. Tencent Meeting rose to prominence due to the pandemic, demonstrating great power. Wu Zurong, Vice President of Tencent Cloud and head of Tencent Meeting, stated that facing challenges requires calm reflection and the courage to make subtractions: “Rather than three 60-point projects, better to have one 90-point project.” After more than 20 years of development, China’s internet has reached an important historical juncture. What will be the next killer application? Who will be the terminator of BAT? Current technology empowerment often focuses only on trends rather than intersections—what short video empowerment, what livestreaming empowerment...What is the next intersection for the internet? Where is the key point for media innovation? All media people must seriously consider these questions.

Hopefully, technology empowerment can 撬动 media industry innovation and organizational transformation. Looking ahead, as intelligent communication and smart media era arrive, we need to redefine media: from human society to the material world, media exists within the spatiotemporal traversal of intelligent communication. Our cognition and behavior face the biggest question: how to break through old cognitions, disciplinary limitations, theoretical frameworks, and mental models in this new spatiotemporal context? Facing the future, only through learning, deep learning, and lifelong learning can we confront the increasingly complex and changeable internet world.

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

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