

## Traditional Publishing' s Transformation Path to Knowledge Services: Postprint

**Authors:** Zhou Kun, Bai Huarui

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### Abstract

An increasing number of domestic publishing houses are exploring the transition to “knowledge services” . While successful cases of professional knowledge services exist both domestically and internationally, current analyses of these cases remain contingent. This paper attempts to formulate a practical, low-cost path for transitioning to knowledge services by analyzing the characteristics of publishing houses and knowledge services.

### Full Text

#### Abstract

An increasing number of domestic publishing institutions have embarked on explorations to transform toward “knowledge services.”While there are successful cases of professional knowledge services both domestically and internationally, current analyses of these cases remain largely anecdotal. This paper attempts to develop a practical and cost-effective transformation path by examining the characteristics of publishing houses and knowledge services.

**Keywords:** traditional publishing transformation; knowledge services; digital publishing; domestic publishing houses; knowledge products

### Introduction

With the development of the internet and mobile internet, people' s habits and methods of acquiring knowledge have undergone tremendous changes. In response, a growing number of domestic publishing institutions have initiated explorations into transforming toward “knowledge services.” However, a series of questions have emerged: What should be the target of this transformation for traditional publishers? What mature experiences can be drawn upon? How can they “avoid detours” and prevent economic losses from “trial and error” ?

Today's readers are no longer satisfied with merely obtaining knowledge products; they also hope to receive more targeted knowledge services. Therefore, as readers change, demands change, and markets change, all these transformations are “forcing” publishing institutions to initiate transformation and shift toward becoming “knowledge service” providers.

## 2.1 Path A: Product Digitization

This knowledge service transformation path does not involve reforming the publisher's main production processes. Instead, it leverages IT and internet technologies to digitize products. While the publisher's primary products remain paper books, a digital publishing department is established independent of traditional operations. This department is responsible for converting paper products into digital formats such as book databases and USB e-books, which are then delivered to readers through original channels like book QR codes and library distribution networks. Representative cases of this path include the “Education Science Library” established by Education Science Press in 2016 and the “China Police Knowledge Database” launched by People's Public Security Press in 2017.

The characteristics of this transformation path are: (1) Products primarily involve changes in reading format from paper books or splitting paper books into components, with paper books serving as the starting point for product planning. (2) The approach minimizes impact on existing publishing operations and production processes, making changes while maintaining the status quo as much as possible.

## 2.2 Path B: Product and Operation Internetization

Under this knowledge service transformation path, publishers establish not only product planning and production departments but also build product promotion and operations teams. The product planning and production departments transform paper products into formats suitable for the internet era, supplementing them with industry resources and providing customized services according to users' scenario-based needs. This approach offers functionalities such as intelligent search and knowledge point queries that paper books cannot provide, significantly enhancing product service capabilities. Simultaneously, publishers strategically abandon traditional library distribution channels in favor of internet-based product operation models for promotion, starting with institutional users in specific industries and gradually expanding to individual user groups.

Representative cases of this path include “FaXin” from People's Court Press and “Clinical Assistant” from People's Health Press. In recent years, many publishers have produced numerous digital products such as digital reading products, databases, book value-added services, and mobile applications, yet few have achieved significant market impact. Why is this the case? The three traditional pillars of content products— “abundant resources,” “high content quality,” and

“cutting-edge content” —do not necessarily apply to publishers. Compared to large database vendors, Chinese publishers have limited total content volume and cannot establish quantitative advantages, even within vertical industries. In terms of updating speed for cutting-edge knowledge, journal publishers hold the advantage. Regarding content quality, most publishers lack competitive advantages except for a few leading ones.

What kind of content services should publishers then provide? There remains only one viable path: delivering content services that best meet user needs in the most optimal manner. In other words, publishers should provide trustworthy knowledge content based on user needs and thorough analysis of user reading scenarios. In terms of content provision types, they should closely focus on user demand scenarios, providing literature, entries, or special knowledge items such as concepts, theorems, and definitions.

Although “content service” represents the first step in the transformation from “content provision” to “knowledge service,” it has inherent limitations. In today’s era of information explosion, users can obtain vast amounts of content at low cost daily. Why should they use content provided by publishers? Only two arguments can persuade users: the content provided by publishers is the most professional, and the content provided by publishers is the most systematic. These two advantages are difficult for internet companies to catch up with in the short term, yet they are precisely the strengths of publishers. Therefore, to excel in “content service,” publishers must maximize these two advantages to generate user scale.

### 2.3 Path C: Full Platformization

Under this path, publishers’ responsibilities no longer target paper books or digital products as construction goals. Instead, they use the internet to connect upstream and downstream knowledge production and usage. From the publisher’s perspective, the platform is responsible for online knowledge demand acquisition, online knowledge product creation, and online knowledge demand fulfillment. Readers propose knowledge needs, publishers organize knowledge producers (authors, editors) to plan and create knowledge products that meet these needs, readers obtain these products online and enjoy the services, and subsequently evaluate the products and services. Through certain business strategies, publishers establish business models for knowledge production and usage (PGC, UGC), thereby maintaining ecological balance from knowledge production to consumption.

Representative cases of this path include Zhihu and Baidu Knows. The characteristics of this transformation path are: (1) Products are no longer fixed-form paper books, papers, or databases but knowledge products and services carried by the internet. This represents a return to the original purpose of publishing (knowledge dissemination), shifting from knowledge carriers (paper books) to knowledge dissemination itself. (2) The production process undergoes funda-

mental changes. Publishers are no longer publishing units centered on “paper books” but planning, management, and operation units centered on “knowledge.” Traditional publishing workflows are replaced by new production processes.

These three paths represent increasing difficulty for publishers, as they require progressively more factors to change. In Path A, publishers can change only the product form while leveraging all other traditional publishing advantages. In Path B, they must consider not only product form but also user scenarios and internet operations. By Path C, almost all existing work methods and objectives are overturned. However, Path C most closely approaches the essence of knowledge services, representing a major challenge in the transformation of traditional publishing houses.

### 3. The “Four-Step” Natural Evolution Route

Despite the difficulties of transformation, solutions do exist. Based on years of industry experience and in-depth analysis of industry cases, the authors recommend that traditional publishers follow the following “four-step” route for knowledge service transformation.

#### 3.1 Step One: Content Service

Content digitization and the formation of content products correspond to Path A. In fact, many publishers have produced numerous content service products in recent years, such as digital reading products, databases, and mobile applications. However, truly successful cases are rare. Why? The three traditional content product advantages—“abundant resources,” “high content quality,” and “cutting-edge content”—do not apply to publishers. Compared to large database vendors, Chinese publishers have limited total content volume and cannot establish quantitative advantages. In terms of updating speed for cutting-edge knowledge, journal publishers hold the advantage. Regarding content quality, most publishers lack competitive advantages except for a few leading ones.

What content services should publishers provide then? Only one path remains: delivering content services that best meet user needs in the most optimal manner. In other words, publishers should provide trustworthy knowledge content based on user needs and thorough analysis of user reading scenarios. From the perspective of content provision types, they should closely focus on user demand scenarios, providing literature, entries, or special knowledge items such as concepts, theorems, and definitions.

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the short term, yet they are precisely the strengths of publishers. Therefore, to excel in “content service,” publishers must maximize these two advantages to generate user scale.

### 3.2 Step Two: Scenario Service

For publishers, content service offers the benefits of low operational difficulty and easily visible results, but it also has drawbacks: it cannot solve users’ rigid needs or generate user stickiness. How can users’ rigid needs be addressed? The authors suggest embedding content deeply into scenarios to provide services that solve specific problems.

Consider several examples: Almost every publisher’s editor has reference books like *Cihai* and *Modern Chinese Dictionary* on their desk to verify whether authors’ usage of specialized vocabulary is correct. According to the content service provision model, editors should be provided with entry retrieval from these dictionaries—editors search for entries, read them, and then verify. However, according to the scenario service provision model, “we can create a manuscript review tool based on the content of *Cihai* that solves editors’ doubts about specialized vocabulary with one click. Wouldn’t such a service be highly attractive to editors?”

Another example: If publishers could create an essay polishing tool for primary and secondary school students based on the content of *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, “when a student writes a phrase like ‘feeling anxious,’ we could tell them they could instead write ‘burning with anxiety,’ ‘on pins and needles,’ ‘feeling prickles down their back,’ or ‘sitting on a cushion of needles.’ Wouldn’t such a service be highly attractive, even indispensable, to these students?” This is scenario service. At this stage, everything in knowledge service revolves around providing problem-solving services to users based on scenarios. This stage represents the most important step in knowledge service transformation.

### 3.3 Step Three: Platform Service

When basic scenario services reach a certain level of development, individual users’ personalized scenarios also become a basis for delivery. At this point, user stratification will form, enabling the provision of different levels of services to different users. This user stratification creates two user groups: those with knowledge consumption tendencies and those with knowledge production tendencies. The different guidance strategies for these two groups provide the foundational demand and construction basis for platform services. Publishers can reclassify users and activate knowledge demand expression from knowledge consumers and production desire from knowledge producers through incentive measures and professional matching strategies. Publishers are responsible for supervising and maintaining the matching degree between demand and knowledge, as well as the rigor of knowledge production, continuously eliminating low-quality demands and improving knowledge production quality to establish

platform brand.

Although platform service poses considerable challenges for publishers, after successfully implementing “content service” and “scenario service,” entering the third stage of “platform service” becomes almost logical and natural.

### 3.4 Step Four: Ecosystem Construction

After providing the first three services, publishers must focus on establishing an ecological environment, including business models, upstream and downstream coordination, and transformation of traditional publishing models. By targeting end-user demand fulfillment as the goal, publishers can transform internal knowledge production methods and organizational coordination mechanisms, thereby comprehensively evolving into knowledge service providers.

The authors do not recommend “leapfrog development” because the primary rationale for recommending this four-step route is “risk control.” The gradual approach can fully utilize and exploit publishers’ advantages: in the early stages, it leverages traditional product distribution channels, construction methods, resources, and industry understanding advantages to minimize risk. Simultaneously, it avoids disadvantages: in the early stages, it actively avoids the user acquisition model of burning money that internet companies excel at, starting from controllable industry product models.

At each stage, publishers can achieve 阶段性成果 and profitability. Most importantly, this construction route represents a comprehensive natural evolution for publishers’ knowledge service transformation. As each stage deepens, products, platforms, talent reserves, and operational strategies advance steadily in a coordinated manner, rather than relying on “hormone-fueled” rapid growth in one aspect while other aspects lag behind.

Entering 2019, an increasing number of internet companies have also begun to “seize the beachhead of knowledge services.” For publishers, traditional paper book content represents their “treasure trove” and their content advantage over internet companies. Through natural evolution, gradually refining advantageous content, gathering upstream authors and downstream users, and ultimately building a platform ecosystem is a path that every publisher can attempt.

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

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