

Transformation of Traditional Journals: Leveraging Core Competencies and Highlighting Distinctive Postprints

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Abstract

Traditional journals once enjoyed a rather long period of glory, during which they developed relatively stable and widely recognized value judgment standards, editorial approaches, and operational models through long-term practice. However, all of this has been completely transformed with the arrival of the integrated media era. Traditional journals must embrace “Internet+”, reposition themselves, and adjust their focus to achieve specificity, feasibility, and innovation, so that they can leverage their strengths, avoid their weaknesses, and accomplish something meaningful.

Full Text

Preamble

Traditional Journal Transformation: Leveraging Core Competencies and Highlighting Distinctive Features

Abstract: Traditional journals once enjoyed a long period of prosperity, establishing relatively stable and widely recognized value criteria, editorial philosophies, and operational models through decades of practice. However, the advent of the media convergence era has fundamentally changed this landscape. To leverage their strengths and achieve meaningful impact, traditional journals must embrace “Internet Plus,” reposition themselves, and adjust their strategic focus in targeted, feasible, and innovative ways.

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Most contemporary journals have publishing histories spanning decades, which superficially demonstrates remarkable vitality and social value. However, closer examination of their content reveals severe homogenization—“parroted others without original voice”—with most failing to establish clear content positioning or build core competencies. This redundancy was tolerable in the 1990s when information was scarce, market competition was limited, and institutional subscriptions supplemented distribution, yielding considerable circulation figures. After 2000, rapid internet development placed information at vast, overwhelming portals. Following 2010, the commercialization of 3G and 4G technologies triggered an information explosion, accompanied by increasingly segmented readerships, diversified market demands, and accelerated information cycles. Combined with new media impact, even influential traditional journals with substantial market shares—such as *Reader* (读者), *Zhiyin* (知音), *Story Magazine* (故事会), and *Youth Digest* (青年文摘)—experienced varying degrees of circulation decline.

In this age of information overload, young people increasingly rely on mobile phones for news, placing traditional publications at risk of obsolescence. The era when traditional journals could dominate segmented markets and specialized readerships has definitively ended.

While the internet provides users with massive information, it also inundates them with uneven, redundant content. Mobile-based “shallow reading” and “extensive reading” behaviors correspond to high-density, high-frequency information access but result in inefficient, low-quality fragmented reading. The pressing question is how traditional journals can escape the 困境 of relying on past glory, struggling to survive, or facing continuous decline. How can they re-enter readers’ hearts and preserve market share and relevance? As a journal editor, I offer this analysis of development pathways for traditional journals in the all-media era.

1. Finding Positioning, Deepening Strategy, and Preserving the “Content is King” Advantage

Traditional journal editors are knowledgeable generalists with broad vision who possess greater sensitivity and precision than average in identifying social hotspots, public concerns, and reader psychology. In the all-media era, profound changes in media development have awakened forward-thinking editors to undertake new explorations and self-revolution—revising formats, repositioning, and refreshing content. This proactive transformation cannot come soon enough. In an era that celebrates individuality where “everyone is a self-media,” it is unrealistic for journals to cater to a generic “mass audience.” Rehashing outdated content lacking planning, foresight, and readability makes it difficult to stand out, and editorial work struggles to gain market feedback and reader recognition.

Consider the case of *Time Youth* (时代青年), which recently celebrated its 70th anniversary. As a youth league publication, it once achieved precise positioning with accessible yet refined content and distinctive design, reaching peak circulation exceeding 400,000 copies and earning consecutive “Henan Excellent (First-Class) Journal” honors, delivering both economic and social benefits. After 2000, internet impact caused dramatic circulation declines similar to other youth journals. Necessity bred innovation, prompting bold reforms that shifted focus from youth “family and career” themes to reader-preferred “pleasure reading”—interpreting wisdom, appreciating ordinary life, and emphasizing fast, entertaining consumption. The journal adopted two-color and color printing, abandoning its previous comprehensive approach to highlight information diversity, contemporary relevance, rich thoughtfulness, and broad appeal.

Through deep market research and clear reader positioning, with breakthrough column designs, this refreshing intellectual offering, after a brief market testing period, not only avoided circulation decline but demonstrated steady growth.

Content embodies a journal’s core value. Each issue’s topic planning should reflect reader concerns and contemporary relevance, enable timely reader participation, and create ideological resonance—this constitutes a publication’s unique identity and attraction. Deep strategic cultivation maintains freshness in column content while ensuring continuity and comprehensiveness in overall planning, offering greater depth than blindly chasing hotspots. The “Internet Plus” challenge demands evolving forms and diverse media. For traditional journals, all-media is not a catastrophe. While actively embracing change and new formats, they must unwaveringly serve readers through “content is king.” Once readers develop habits and recognition, regardless of carrier changes, content remains paramount, and loyalty persists.

2. Advancing with the Times, Highlighting Features, and Attracting New “Diners”

Technically proficient new media excels at platform building to maximize audience awareness, reputation, and influence but lacks content control, while journal brands possess deeper, more profound influence. Through strategic alliances and multi-channel cooperation, traditional journals can achieve new growth and transformative development in the all-media era.

Youth Digest (青年文摘) pioneered digital transformation, attracting industry attention. In 2002, it established an independent website and partnered with digital platforms to expand product promotion. In 2007, it launched a new media department and entered e-magazines. In 2009, it introduced a “mobile newspaper.” In 2011, it created a unique mobile magazine cluster and digital product matrix. Content and form were developed specifically for reading terminals, directly targeting transmission carriers. This rapid, incremental model made products 更符合 digital transmission characteristics and reader needs. For example, mobile newspapers used MMS with exquisite images and concise text,

while e-magazines emphasized rich illustrations, deep content processing, and immersive reading. These effective measures generated strong market response and substantial economic returns.

Content first, brand second. In the commodity economy era, brand effect is equally significant. The journal industry's "three-tier sales model" suggests: the first sale is content (foundation for circulation revenue); the second sale is readership (foundation for advertising revenue); the third sale is brand resources (foundation for commercial extension). Traditional journal brands, cultivated over years, have established influence among readers, markets, and society, yet most remain underdeveloped.

Story Magazine (故事会), selling stories, leverages its vast readership and influence in the "Internet Plus" era to explore broader platforms. Since 2012, cooperation with Sohu News client attracted over 7 million subscribers, surpassing print monthly circulation. Collaborations include Sina Weibo's "Micro-Story Contest," Phoenix Net's "Original Literature Contest," Beijing Film Academy's "Nine-Minute Original Microfilm Championship," Sinopec's 2018 "Telling Good Central Enterprise Stories," and Qingting FM's "story listening" —extending from eyeball market to ear market, expanding the magazine brand into new media fields, attracting different user groups, and 开拓 new markets.

Traditional journals, whether monthly, semi-monthly, or weekly, cannot update content instantly or interact effectively with readers, creating disadvantages in timeliness and interactivity compared to new media. Therefore, leveraging new technology and carriers to deliver unique core content through multiple channels and forms, directing readers to their websites or APPs, enhancing user stickiness, consolidating and expanding markets, and improving reputation and influence are essential paths for traditional media transformation. While objective shocks, market marginalization, and reader alienation significantly affect development, rational, responsible editors will not wait passively but must turn crisis into opportunity, achieve new breakthroughs through comprehensive planning, and realize "double benefits" (economic and social).

3. From Scratch, From Small to Large, Innovation as the Enduring Driving Force

Traditional journals, as spiritual sustenance satisfying increasingly diverse needs, possess both social and commodity attributes. Their products and services must align with reader market demands. Traditional journals' flaws in editing, publishing, management mechanisms, information content, presentation forms, and business models are fully exposed, making it urgent to explore new development and profit models.

From blogs, Weibo, WeChat public accounts, APPs, and e-journals to new media departments and digital publishing centers, traditional journals have kept pace with the times, growing from scratch. Small teams have evolved into new forces that plan and promote alongside traditional journals, gradually enhancing

participation, scale, status, and competitiveness in the new situation, actively claiming market share in media transformation.

Traditional journal transformation cannot succeed without innovation as its driving force. In operational management, publishers must break original constraints in top-level design, digital management, editing, and R&D teams, establishing new planning goals, team structures, assessment mechanisms, and management models.

In content creativity, focusing on market pain points and reader hotspots, using advanced technology, novel forms, diverse perspectives, and convenient interaction creates instant audio-visual feasts. Quality content won't sink; its fragrance spreads. Sharing between users is node-less and infinitely 循环, creating viral 100,000+ articles.

In advertising, provide multi-form services: soft article 植入 advertising brands or links, using resources to guide advertisers in function, creativity, and design, or through project promotion via investment cooperation and title sponsorship. Additionally, revenue can derive from online content extension: organizing off-line activities, software upgrade fees, transaction commissions, and customized special service fees.

Regarding traditional journal transformation and media integration development, thinking must occur within the "Internet Plus" environment and against the backdrop of tremendous reader market changes. New media represents not merely carrier or form change but an entirely new way to provide better experiences and more services for readers and users. Traditional journals should leverage their advantages to develop more marketable new products, focus on breaking traditions, establishing new items, and cross-media, cross-business cooperation, achieve data and platform sharing through customized content, create multiple operation models, and realize multi-win, mutual benefits.

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