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Postprint: Research on the Construction of Communication Capacity of County-Level Converged Media

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Abstract

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee has attached great importance to news and public opinion work. In August 2018, President Xi Jinping clearly stated at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work: “We must solidly advance the construction of county-level converged media centers to better guide and serve the masses.” Since then, county-level converged media construction has become a focus of widespread attention for the first time. Currently, the national layout of county-level converged media is undergoing comprehensive development with multiple initiatives flourishing across the country. This paper aims to explore three aspects: reviewing the current development status of county-level media, constructing the communication capacity of county-level converged media centers, and providing prospects, hoping to prove beneficial for the construction of county-level converged media centers.

Full Text

Abstract

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee has attached great importance to news and public opinion work. In August 2018, President Xi Jinping explicitly stated at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work: “We must solidly grasp the construction of county-level converged media centers to better guide and serve the masses.” Since then, county-level converged media construction has become a focal point of national attention for the first time. Currently, the national layout of county-level converged media is “launching comprehensive efforts and blossoming at multiple points.” This paper aims to examine three aspects: the

current development status of county-level media, the construction of communication capacity in county-level converged media centers, and future prospects, hoping to provide beneficial insights for the construction of county-level converged media centers.

Keywords: County-Level Converged Media Center; Communication Capacity; Construction Approach

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Introduction

With the advancement and widespread application of artificial intelligence and other technologies, the pace of media convergence is accelerating rapidly. The gradual integration of media with different attributes is dissolving barriers between them, and media with disparate functions no longer have fixed boundaries, quietly transforming the media ecosystem. Amid this dissolution and reshaping, new and old media have undergone monumental changes in a short period. Key dimensions of this transformation include user platforms, news production systems, news distribution platforms, and information terminals. Intelligence will become the core logic for future communication model innovation, shaping not only the entire media industry' s landscape but also reshaping its operational chain at the micro level.

Society has now entered a brand-new era of converged media. Traditional media represented by newspaper offices and radio and television groups, along with new media represented by “two micros and one terminal” (Weibo, WeChat, and news clients), are deeply exploring convergence mechanisms. Faced with the irreversible tide of media convergence, county-level media, as the most grassroots level of traditional media, must seriously consider how to respond and how to enhance their communication power and influence.

1.1 Current State of County-Level Media

Since the reform and opening up, county-level media has undergone multiple transformations. However, due to uneven economic development and market regulation of media resources, county-level media has been marginalized in almost every respect. Many newspaper offices and radio stations have fallen into operational difficulties, with their influence and public attention continuously declining. From an internal perspective, county-level media face several key issues:

Rigid Systems and Mechanisms. Currently, traditional county-level media units generally suffer from redundant departments, inefficient operational

mechanisms, and poor management. Although some grassroots media have previously conducted converged media pilot projects, many have exhibited “mechanical convergence”—merging media departments for co-location without achieving deeper organizational integration. On the other hand, the “public institution with enterprise management” model has led to obvious profit-seeking behavior in journalism. Under this mechanism, converged media construction is highly likely to degenerate into a “face project” or “slogan project,” lacking the possibility of long-term development.

Uninspiring Content Production. County-level media generally suffer from a shortage of frontline editorial staff, barely able to meet the daily publication and broadcasting needs of newspapers and television, making it difficult to guarantee the quality of reports and programs. Furthermore, their textual reports and news programs focus primarily on news about leaders, with some daily activities of leaders and meetings that have no communication value whatsoever occupying newspaper space and television screen time, causing strong public resentment.

Talent Scarcity. The compensation systems in county-level media are mostly ill-adapted to market development needs, with the phenomenon of “different pay for the same work, and better to do less than more” being widespread. In this labor environment, internal staff lack work enthusiasm, innovative consciousness among journalists cannot be stimulated, and external talent cannot be attracted, creating a dilemma both internally and externally.

On October 18, 2017, the General Secretary proposed the “Rural Revitalization” strategy in his report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. This strategy aims to take the “three rural issues” (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) as the starting point, focusing on developing industry, commerce, and services in vast rural areas, with policy preferences in investment attraction and infrastructure construction. This has largely attracted the return of migrant workers and the reallocation of various social resources within county territories. The Rural Revitalization strategy undoubtedly provides county-level converged media layout with a larger user base and broader creative space. Since the 18th National Congress, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has attached great importance to news and public opinion work, making a series of major decisions and deployments. At the August 2018 National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work, the General Secretary explicitly stated: “We must solidly grasp the construction of county-level converged media centers to better guide and serve the masses.” In a sense, the communication capacity building of county-level media has been formally incorporated into national strategic development. For grassroots media, national policy support is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to comprehensively enhance their guidance power, credibility, and communication capacity.

2.1.1 System and Mechanism Reform as the Essential Task

The traditional vertical organizational structure of county-level media is no longer suitable for today's grassroots media ecosystem. Newly established converged media centers must strive to achieve resource integration and unified public opinion guidance, consolidating previously dispersed media resources under unified command and scheduling.

In terms of news production and advertising departments, converged media centers must separate the two, ensuring that news production is not influenced by advertisers. Placing news information production at the core of converged media development is conducive to guiding healthy development. Research shows that whether audience or user, readers' primary focus remains on content. Content is the foremost factor determining converged media communication capacity. Therefore, in reforming the profit model of converged media, we must not put the cart before the horse.

2.1.2 Cultivating and Mining the Audience/User Market

To cultivate and mine the audience or user market, the first problem to solve is channel deployment for county-level converged media. Currently, WeChat users in vast county territories are numerous and increasing. County-level converged media construction should carefully consider whether to build independent apps. The research, development, and operational maintenance costs of apps are expensive for county-level converged media, and if an app cannot address rigid needs, its viability is concerning. Based on this, county-level converged media can rely on the WeChat platform for channel deployment, developing WeChat mini-programs to integrate the large user base within the county territory. Of course, independent app development is not without merit; counties with technical and financial support can develop independent apps as proprietary platforms, which have unique advantages in aggregating users and integrating resources.

Second, mining the market requires grasping the cultural value identity of China's vast county-level user groups. A characteristic of Chinese rural society is that "people in this society grow up among acquaintances. In sociology, we call this a Face-To-Face Group." When producing content or providing services for user groups, converged media must fully consider this characteristic of the "face-to-face community." In an era of diverse choices for audiences or users, this allows discerning readers to find a sense of belonging in the depth of content.

Due to imbalanced social development, the potential user markets that county-level converged media can mine include large groups of migrant workers. According to the "China Migrant Population Development Report 2018" released by the National Health Commission, China's migrant population reached 244 million in 2017, accounting for approximately 17.6% of the total population. The nostalgia of these wanderers is the social root for county-level converged media to tap into migrant worker groups. As an important platform for the vast floating population to understand developments in their hometowns, county-level converged

media should fully consider this group in their target audience positioning.

2.1.3 The “PGC+UGC+MGC” Integrated Content Creation Model

2.1.3.1 PGC as the Foundation of Content Creation

For local governments, converged media center construction primarily aims to enhance grassroots public opinion guidance, strengthen grassroots information disclosure, improve government and livelihood service levels, gather social forces, stabilize social order, and achieve both top-down and bottom-up communication. The main theme of converged media creation determines that its content creation model should be primarily PGC. Moreover, professionally generated content is the traditional strong suit of radio and television media, and using PGC as the foundation of converged media content creation helps maximize advantages.

2.1.3.2 Highlighting the Application of UGC Mode

The concept of users did not exist in traditional media, let alone user-generated content, but the internet encourages the UGC model. With the explosive growth of self-media and new media platforms like Weibo, traditional communication models have been broken, and everyone now has a “microphone.” Since then, user-generated content has become an important supplement to new media information production. Highlighting the UGC model in county-level converged media creation not only helps reduce platform content production costs but also satisfies the spiritual needs of audiences or users for self-expression.

The year 2018 is known in the industry as the “first year of short videos.” That year, short videos performed remarkably, creating a craze on the internet. Short video platforms represented by Douyin have had a significant impact on young people, even leading social trends and becoming the main content position on mobile terminals. With its original intention of “recording a beautiful life,” Douyin has attracted a large number of users. In the Douyin world, people freely browse others’ beautiful lives through short videos while also allowing others to share their joys and sorrows. In a sense, this is the information right granted to audiences or users by media. This decentralization of rights undoubtedly benefits users in vast county territories to obtain the right to self-expression and value identification. Of course, due to users’ lack of professional training in information production and platforms’ lack of effective management of user-generated content, the proliferation of “information rumors” and “information garbage” requires great attention.

2.1.3.3 MGC Mode as a Necessary Supplement to Content Production

With the deepening development of the internet, artificial intelligence has begun to sweep through the media industry. At present, numerous internet en-

terprises are actively laying out plans in the AI field. For traditional media, artificial intelligence technology is inevitably an unavoidable topic. Intelligent tools represented by robot writing have gradually spread across the entire news industry chain of planning, gathering, editing, and distribution, becoming a new force driving media transformation and development under new circumstances and forming a new model of “Media + AI.” This new model has created a new ecology in the journalism industry. In this new environment, technologies such as robot writing, AI anchors, and intelligent editing and review will be further applied, ultimately forming a “PGC+UGC+MGC” news production model.

2.1.4 Talent Introduction and Cultivation as the Top Priority

Currently, the media talent market faces a supply shortage. Many government departments, enterprises, institutions, and private companies are competing for journalism and communication talents due to their needs for information dissemination, corporate publicity, and brand promotion. Media organizations are no longer the only destination for journalism and communication graduates. However, this situation is more severe for county-level media due to their regional limitations.

Facing such severe pressure to attract talent, county-level converged media centers must address both external talent attraction and internal talent cultivation. First, they should base themselves on salary reform. Attracting young people to county-level converged media requires adopting a model of “setting salaries based on positions and equal pay for equal work.” This salary reform model can enhance talent performance, stimulate the creativity of converged media practitioners, promote product innovation, and maximize the value of county-level converged media centers. Second, they should improve training mechanisms. In the converged media era, cross-boundary talent cultivation is crucial. As media boundaries are broken, the communication capacity of converged media presents itself as an all-media matrix. In this regard, county-level converged media centers should advocate for cross-position training methods to meet the requirements of media practitioners being “specialized in one field and capable in multiple fields” under the all-media landscape. To avoid “working behind closed doors,” converged media centers must look to other excellent platforms for talent training, such as visiting and investigating “model” platforms in neighboring counties and converged media centers at higher levels, and exchanging talent for learning and communication to absorb their essence.

2.2.1 Unified Leadership and Command: The Fenyi County Case

The converged media development in Fenyi County, Xinyu City, Jiangxi Province, is at the forefront nationally. Fenyi’s ability to “stride forward” first benefits from reforms to its superstructure, namely the unified deployment of

its leadership team. As the saying goes, “a train runs fast depending on its locomotive.” Before the establishment of Fenyi Converged Media, the county party committee started with system and mechanism reform.

The Fenyi County Party Committee listed promoting media convergence development as a key breakthrough project in comprehensive reform, establishing a special reform leading group with the deputy county party secretary as the head, the executive deputy county magistrate, organization minister, and deputy county magistrate in charge as deputy heads, and the propaganda minister as the executive deputy head.

Fenyi County issued the “Fenyi County County-Owned News Media Convergence Development Reform Work Plan,” clarifying the responsibilities of member units, with county party committee leaders in charge making detailed arrangements for various organizational departments of the converged media. Since then, Fenyi Converged Media has completed its “top-down” organizational creation [?].

3.2.1 Avoiding “Wearing New Shoes but Walking the Old Path”

The communication network constructed by Fenyi Converged Media demonstrates strong real-time interactivity, satisfying not only “top-down communication” but also “bottom-up communication.” This “one reach, one passage” highlights the completeness of channel construction and the efficiency of information sharing.

On the one hand, Fenyi Converged Media actively opens up communication channels upward, achieving interconnectivity with the Jiangxi Provincial Converged Media Platform— “Ganpo Cloud,” the Xinyu City Converged Media Platform—Xinyu City Converged Media Center, and the Xinyu City Radio Station Converged Media Center, forming a news industry chain connecting province, city, and county, and actively “feeding material” to higher-level media to let Fenyi news go out. On the other hand, it aggregates with new media platforms such as WeChat public accounts of county, township, and village-level units to build a new media communication matrix, achieving simultaneous resonance and amplifying communication effects (as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

Figure 1: Interactive Communication Path Diagram of Fenyi County Converged Media Center

2.3 Building a Multi-Service Platform

The platform created by Fenyi Converged Media Center ultimately meets the public through an independent client (“Huaping Fenyi”). The richness of its content, distinctiveness of its features, convenience of accessing government information, and soundness of its interactive mechanism make it a model for county-level converged media clients.

The creation of county-level converged media platforms aims to integrate dispersed media forces within the county territory, such as newspapers, radio and television, and new media platforms, focusing on solving the problems of wasted media resources and fragmented platforms operating independently, and strengthening guidance and services for grassroots masses. National and local finances are willing to invest heavily in county-level converged media platform construction to achieve a “bird gun for cannon” transformation in grassroots media, which is definitely not “just hanging a converged media sign, purchasing equipment with money, and having everyone work together in one office.” To truly maximize the role of converged media, there must be unified command in leadership, optimized combination of resources, extensive channels in distribution, and creative innovation in content.

3.2.2 Avoiding “Copying Cat and Drawing Tiger, Imitating Gourd”

Under the guidance of Party and state policies, the construction of county-level converged media platforms across the nation is in full swing, with a batch of “model” platforms emerging, such as the Yunnan Dagan County News Center and the Jiangxi Fenyi Converged Media Center. These so-called “model” platforms have attracted many county-level media colleagues to “seek experience.” This situation has inevitably fostered the phenomenon of “copying cat and drawing tiger, imitating gourd” in some counties, especially neighboring counties of these “models.”

The layout of county-level converged media center construction must firmly grasp the “bull nose” of development: “based locally, guiding the masses, serving the masses.” Based on the local county territory, they should excavate regional characteristics and adapt measures to local conditions. When drawing on “model” platform patterns, they should treat them cautiously, absorb their essence, and use them for their own purposes, following their own path.

Media convergence is both an inevitable trend of the times and an endless examination. On the path of exploring media convergence, each county-level converged media must meet the challenges of media convergence development with solid work styles and practical innovative measures, based locally, keeping pace with the times, shouldering the mission of holding up the banner, gathering people’s hearts, establishing new trends, and promoting culture, opening up a new situation in grassroots propaganda work, and truly achieving “guiding the masses, serving the masses.”

3.1 Development Prospects of County-Level Converged Media

The contradiction between grassroots masses’ need for information and services within their county territory and the current inability of county-level media to satisfy these needs is the root of the prospects for county-level converged media

center construction. Before the construction of county-level converged media, the dispersed media had homogenous content production, rarely focusing on local masses as the core for guidance and service provision, while also causing resource waste.

In the future, the core task of county-level converged media will focus on resource integration. All resources within the entire county territory—all government resources and all resources essential to people's livelihoods, all service-related and life-related resources—can be integrated through this large platform of county-level converged media. When all this data converges on the converged media platform, user management can be achieved through technical means, ultimately solving user needs.

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

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