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County-Level Media Convergence: Challenges and Development Pathways (Postprint)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes five problems confronting county-level media convergence development and proposes five corresponding paths to effectively guide this development, promote the construction of county-level converged media centers, and build new mainstream media at the county level.

Full Text

A Brief Discussion on Problems Facing County-Level Media Convergence and Paths for Convergent Development

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Abstract: This paper analyzes five major problems confronting the convergent development of county-level media in China and proposes five corresponding developmental paths. These recommendations aim to effectively guide the convergent transformation of county-level media, facilitate the construction of county-level converged media centers, and foster the development of new-type mainstream media at the county level.

Keywords: county-level media, convergence, problems, paths

In recent years, promoting media convergence has emerged as a critical task for the new era, attaining unprecedented strategic importance, with the Party Central Committee attaching great significance to this endeavor. In November 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee proposed integrating news media resources and advancing the convergent development of traditional and emerging media. In August 2014, the fourth meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform reviewed and approved the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Convergent Development of Traditional and Emerging Media,” emphasizing that the key to convergence lies in achieving genuine integration and unity, and that the transition from the

“addition” phase to the “fusion” phase should be accelerated to cultivate a batch of new-type mainstream media [1]. From August 21 to 22, 2018, the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work further stressed the importance of solidly advancing the construction of county-level converged media centers to better guide and serve the masses [2]. These important statements have charted the course and mapped out pathways for deepening media convergence. Media convergence represents a development concept for media in the information age, based on the rapid growth of the internet, involving the organic integration of traditional media. It constitutes a strategic measure to consolidate positions in propaganda and ideological culture and to strengthen mainstream public opinion. Consequently, media convergence has become an irreversible trend. How, then, should China’s most grassroots media entities—county-level media—pursue convergent development? By examining the problems facing county-level media convergence, this paper proposes developmental paths forward.

1. Problems Facing County-Level Media Convergence

Unsound Systems and Mechanisms. Most county-level media convergence initiatives have been launched in response to policy mandates rather than as proactive adaptations to the reform and development needs of the new era. The majority of these convergences have been hastily implemented, forcing county-level media to continue using the systems and mechanisms of traditional media. The organizational structures, personnel mechanisms, management systems, distribution systems, and news production processes of traditional media are only suited for conventional operations and can even be described as hidebound. After convergence, the newly established county-level converged media centers have attempted to modify and improve these traditional systems, resulting in congenital deficiencies that remain unsound and incomplete, thereby hindering the convergent development of media.

Rigid Thinking and Outdated Concepts. Many county-level media institutions understand media convergence merely as the additive combination of several media outlets, handling post-convergence affairs using previous modes of thinking. This reflects rigid thinking, outdated concepts, and low awareness, with severe deficiencies in market consciousness, competitive spirit, innovative mindset, and user awareness. They fail to study the communication patterns of new media or operate according to these patterns, continuing to focus solely on news production while neglecting news dissemination and innovation, unable to keep pace with converged media development. Compounded by unsound systems and mechanisms, this rigid thinking and outdated conceptualization have led many county-level media institutions to operate in silos after convergence, with each medium only attending to its own affairs—a phenomenon of “sweeping snow only from one’s own doorstep.” Remaining at the stage of internal resource integration, they fail to meet the requirements for integrating traditional and new media, much less achieve comprehensive and effective convergence according to converged media standards. Traditional media operations and new media

operations remain “two separate skins” (两张皮), mutually incompatible, without processing and transmission based on the respective communication characteristics and audience needs of each medium. This fails to achieve convergence effects or realize convergence objectives.

Lack of Technical and Talent Support. Technology serves as a crucial driving force for media development, and media convergence cannot proceed without advanced technology and talent proficient in new technologies. However, most county-level media practitioners are career-changers, with non-journalism professionals comprising the majority, resulting in overall quality and comprehensive competence that require improvement. Meanwhile, talent currently mastering new technologies and converged media technology is in short supply, with a large market gap making recruitment difficult. Constrained by mechanisms, concepts, funding, technology, talent, and compensation, county-level media face considerable difficulties in acquiring both technology and personnel. This lack of technical and talent support has slowed the convergent development of county-level media, yielding unsatisfactory results.

Low Work Initiative and Enthusiasm. County-level media convergence demands enhanced learning—keeping pace with the times, mastering new technologies, applying new technologies, transforming concepts and modes of thinking, and improving comprehensive competence to adapt to new work requirements. Consequently, some practitioners have developed apprehension. Combined with unsound systems and mechanisms and incomplete compensation systems, this has resulted in low work initiative and enthusiasm, with many simply muddling through. This prevents them from devoting full energy to producing news products that audiences appreciate and from disseminating news works at the fastest possible speed, ultimately failing to leverage the advantages and effects of county-level media convergence.

2. Paths for County-Level Media Convergence Development

Strengthen Organizational Leadership and Elevate Strategic Positioning. County-level media convergence must strengthen organizational leadership and seek recognition from county-level Party committees and governments. It should be elevated to a county-level strategic priority and top-level development strategy, listed as a key project in the county’s comprehensive deepening of reforms. Only then can official documents such as implementation plans and development schemes for county-level media convergence be issued, clarifying the direction, objectives, principles, specific requirements, and pathways for convergent development. This enables the rationalization of mechanisms and clarification of systems, achieving personnel integration, institutional integration, and media integration, ensuring smooth reform progress and pioneering new paths for county-level media convergence. This approach allows mainstream media to play its primary role and occupy its main position, demonstrating credibility, enhancing communication capacity, expanding influence, amplifying the main-

stream melody, projecting a positive voice, and gathering positive energy to forge new-type mainstream media.

Enhance Training and Guidance to Transform Mindsets. After convergence, the new media and converged media landscape presents many novel aspects that require practitioners to learn, research, analyze, and explore content, technology, communication channels, user habits, and other elements—a lengthy process. The most efficient approach involves “sending people out” and “bringing experts in,” inviting scholars and specialists to strengthen training and guidance for all practitioners, arming them with new thinking. This enables them to keep pace with the times, emancipate their minds, transform concepts, and adopt a “de-media-centralization” mindset, remembering that users are the protagonists and cultivating user thinking and service consciousness with emphasis on communication effects. Concepts determine thinking, and thinking determines solutions. Only by genuinely establishing user thinking and service consciousness can concepts be transformed and understanding enhanced to meet the requirements of media convergence development. This leads to greater emphasis on news product production and dissemination, attention to market competition and innovation, continuous satisfaction of user needs and positive experiences, and the cultivation of good reputations among users, thereby better guiding and serving the masses and keeping pace with converged media development to achieve continuous growth.

Integrate Traditional and New Media Resources to Form Synergy. County-level media belong to different departments and institutions. Ideally, convergence should involve separating all traditional and new media from their original units and departments to establish a county-level converged media center, breaking down barriers between media and integrating them into a unified whole. This involves not only integrating all county-level media resources but also achieving institutional and personnel integration, stimulating the role of various talents, leveraging the advantages of different media, solving the “two separate skins” problem between traditional and new media operations, addressing media shortcomings, and building a media matrix to ultimately form synergy and achieve a “1+1>2” effect. Through convergence, news propaganda can achieve unified planning and resource sharing, including shared news leads, complementary planning and interviewing, and shared vehicles, maximizing savings in human, material, and financial resources. Simultaneously, the communication model shifts from exclusive reporting to multiple productions by the media matrix with integrated launches, achieving multi-platform dissemination across multimedia to meet the needs of different audiences, enhancing communication capacity and expanding influence.

Increase Investment and Formulate Talent Introduction Methods. Promoting media convergence must be supported by advanced technology, using new technologies to enhance editorial capabilities and broaden communication channels. This requires county-level media to increase investment, introduce new technologies during convergent transformation and upgrading, apply new

technologies, plan for future layouts, and seize opportunities in emerging technologies. Simultaneously, based on the development needs of new media and converged media technology, talent introduction methods should be formulated to meet personnel requirements for media convergence. However, relying entirely on external recruitment is unrealistic and not optimal for county-level media convergence. Instead, operational training should be strengthened through hierarchical and specialized training by scholars, specialists, and recruited talent, including dispatching staff for shadowing studies, temporary position exercises, professional seminars, and observation exchanges. These measures promote the transformation and upgrading of existing personnel, guiding them to transition toward converged media reporters, converged media editors, and converged media management talent, cultivating a cohort of composite talents who understand journalism, master technology, and excel in management.

Strengthen Journalism Education and Establish Evaluation Mechanisms. The process of county-level media convergence inevitably brings new situations and problems, requiring enhanced professional ethics and competence among journalists, strengthened journalism education, and steadfast adherence to the Marxist view of journalism. Practitioners must establish correct guidance of public opinion, strengthen moral cultivation, and maintain integrity, following the emphasis of the Party’s News and Public Opinion Work Symposium on February 19, 2016: “We must accelerate the cultivation of a news and public opinion workforce that is politically firm, professionally proficient, has a fine work style, and can be trusted by the Party and the people” [3]. Simultaneously, more scientific and rational evaluation systems, rank promotion systems, and compensation distribution systems should be explored and established, implementing “same position, same responsibility; same work, same compensation; more work, more pay; better work, better pay” to stimulate and mobilize the internal motivation of all practitioners. This fully leverages their initiative and enthusiasm, encouraging them to study diligently and exercise more to improve professional capabilities, producing thoughtful, warm, and high-quality works and striving to become expert talent. Moreover, effective mechanisms and methods suitable for media convergence development conditions should be explored to attract, retain, and properly utilize talent, creating a favorable environment and atmosphere for entrepreneurship, accelerating the pace of media convergence development, forging new-type mainstream media after county-level media convergence, and creating a grand propaganda landscape.

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

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