

From Readers to Users: Yangcheng Evening News's Core Business Media Convergence Initiatives in the Post-Print Era

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Abstract

New media technologies, represented by computer, digital, and mobile communication technologies, have transformed media from a historically “scarce” resource into a ubiquitous presence. In an era where “everyone holds a microphone” and “everyone is a journalist,” the entire population participates in information production and dissemination, ushering humanity into a true information explosion society. Today, major newspapers both internationally and domestically are actively exploring transforma...

Full Text

Introduction

New media technologies, represented by computer, digital, and mobile communication technologies, have transformed media from a historically “scarce” resource into a ubiquitous presence. In an era where “everyone holds a microphone” and “everyone is a journalist,” the entire population participates in information production and dissemination, ushering humanity into a true information explosion society. Today, major newspapers both internationally and domestically are actively exploring transformation and upgrading through media convergence. Yangcheng Evening News Group (hereinafter referred to as “Yangcheng”), one of China’s renowned newspaper groups, has undertaken noteworthy efforts by upgrading its philosophy from “reader-oriented” to “user-oriented” to advance its core business convergence, even while its main newspaper has not faced the same dire circumstances as many peers.

1. The Journey and Current State of Yangcheng’s Media Convergence

Yangcheng was among the earliest newspaper groups in Guangdong Province to embark on the digital transformation of traditional media. At the beginning of

this century, its flagship publication, *Yangcheng Evening News*, pioneered the establishment of electronic newspapers, news websites, and news portals among local newspaper groups nationwide. In 2006, with the emergence of new media platforms, the group ventured into social media. After 2010, it accelerated the development of multi-media formats, laying a solid foundation for integrated development. Subsequently, Yangcheng Evening News' official Weibo and WeChat accounts were launched successively. In March 2014, Yangcheng Evening News was selected as a "National Digital Composite Publishing System Engineering Application Pilot Unit." In July of the same year, the group was designated a "National Digital Publishing Transformation Demonstration Unit" by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. In 2016, the Yangcheng Pai app was launched, reaching over ten million users within a single year.

Yangcheng's "dual micro-platforms and one client" (Weibo, WeChat, and app) have demonstrated strong audience attraction capabilities. As of July 2017, the official Weibo account had surpassed 10 million followers, with an average readership of over 250,000 per post. The WeChat official account, "Yangcheng Evening News," started later but caught up through dedicated efforts, showing positive metrics across multiple indicators: it currently has approximately 1.3 million followers and consistently ranks among the top 20 comprehensive print media official accounts nationwide (out of more than 180), reaching as high as 6th place, placing it in the first tier. Although the Yangcheng Pai app has been operational for only one year, it has already amassed tens of millions of users and was ranked 7th in the "National App Communication Power List for the Second Half of 2016" by *Network Communication Magazine* (sponsored by the Cyberspace Administration of China). Currently, Yangcheng Pai is transitioning from version 1.0 to 2.0, continuously optimizing its news section while strengthening its flagship product, the "Reporter Help" platform, to achieve a more efficient full-process processing chain. In media convergence, Yangcheng's new media projects, despite their relatively short launch times, have demonstrated strong market competitiveness.

2. From "Reader-Oriented" to "User-Oriented": The Strategic Direction of Yangcheng's Core Business Convergence Upgrade

Yangcheng once proposed "running a newspaper that readers love," making it one of the earliest newspapers to advocate a "reader-oriented" philosophy. In today's media convergence development, Yangcheng has further elevated the concept of "reading material" from the print era to a "product" philosophy, upgrading "reader-oriented" to "user-oriented" as its direction for media convergence development. As Sun Xuan, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Yangcheng Evening News Group, explained: "By examining the characteristics of successful internet products, we can see that recording and disseminating information is just one major function. Beyond that, they tend to incorporate functions closely related to people's daily work and life needs, such as communication, gaming,

consulting, ticketing, shopping, finance, transportation, and medical services. Inspired by this, we wondered whether our philosophy could also be upgraded. Could we look beyond ‘media’ to see media itself, view ‘media’ through the lens of ‘product,’ upgrade ‘reading material’ to ‘product,’ and transform our originally served ‘god’—the reader—into a ‘user?’”

Yangcheng’s official app, “Yangcheng Pai,” is a typical representative of a user-centric platform. This is a local “news + social + service” app that aims to attract not just “readers” but loyal “users” of the product. The app’s real flagship product is “Reporter Help,” which inherits the attributes of Yangcheng Evening News as a “people’s livelihood newspaper” and “citizen’s newspaper.” From the user’s perspective, it focuses on consumer rights protection, public service coordination, and government communication. It increases user stickiness through a model of “user tip-offs—reporter and editor assistance—professional user suggestions from netizens” and by connecting public services. The core positioning of the entire client reflects the characteristics of “Reporter Help”: focusing on consumer rights protection and helping citizens solve life pain points. When people feel powerless facing various practical problems, “Reporter Help” can provide solutions and advice.

This approach originates from the tip-off platform that Yangcheng Evening News has operated for decades. “Reporter Help” strives to become a beneficial component of “social governance,” helping users solve difficulties while objectively assisting government agencies, enterprises, and public service institutions in addressing the “last mile” problem of connecting with and serving the masses as proposed by Party committees and governments. It fulfills public communication functions in social governance, establishes a civil chain for social governance, and achieves the effect of promptly solving public problems and channeling social contradictions. Problem resolution not only satisfies the public but also functions as a social “pressure relief valve,” objectively assisting enterprises and government in managing public opinion and releasing gatekeeping pressure. Today, “Reporter Help” resolves more than five difficult cases for users daily, earning an excellent reputation.

Other Yangcheng convergence media products also embody a “user-first” functionality. For instance, subscription accounts such as “Lingnan Traditional Chinese Medicine Hall,” “Greedy Society,” “Little Sheep Film Review Room” (video), and “Yangcheng Evening News Micro-Life” target segmented groups including housewives, middle school students, travel enthusiasts, film viewing groups, food lovers, car owners, and cat owners, launching products better suited to their needs. These products not only provide users with precise, detailed, professional, and high-quality media information but, more importantly, supply urgently needed services for users’ work, life, and studies. For example, “Lingnan Traditional Chinese Medicine Hall” becomes a good assistant for users seeking medical advice, while “Foodie” serves as an excellent guide for users’ dining, accommodation, and transportation in Guangzhou.

3. Three Approaches to Implementing the “User-Oriented” Strategy: Local Focus, Sideline Businesses Supporting Core Operations, and Market-Driven Spirit

Media has always been the core backbone of Yangcheng’s main business. The establishment of the “user-oriented” strategy represents a crucial component of the core business’s transformation and upgrading. This is termed an upgrade because, during Yangcheng’s convergence process, the nature of its main business remains unchanged—it is still media—but its level has been elevated through the excavation of derivative or added value around media operations. As Sun Xuan stated, after convergence, Yangcheng does not become a pure internet enterprise, an online gaming company, or a computer network company; it remains a media organization and continues to serve as the eyes, ears, and voice of the Party and the people. To achieve this goal, Yangcheng implements the following three approaches.

(1) Focusing on Local Content: Leveraging Cantonese Cultural Advantages Since the 1980s, the flagship *Yangcheng Evening News* has been a national newspaper with deep Lingnan cultural characteristics, with a cultural positioning of being rooted in Guangdong’s Cantonese-speaking region while influencing the entire country. During the convergence process, Yangcheng has maintained this positioning, with “local focus” and leveraging “Lingnan” cultural advantages becoming the core philosophy of its convergence strategy. This is manifested in three “local” dimensions: focusing on local events, serving local readers, and expanding into local markets.

First, focusing on local events. Yangcheng’s convergence media products uniformly follow regional characteristics, intentionally targeting the Pearl River Delta area to cultivate high-stickiness users from a “niche audience.” In the news domain, from “Yangcheng Pai” to its official accounts, the focus is on local people’s livelihood news. Although Yangcheng has not produced national-level accounts emphasizing depth like “Boiling” (*The Beijing News*) or “Phoenix Commentator” (Phoenix Network), it has remained steadfast and stable, winning audiences with more accessible and service-oriented news. Due to its continuous focus on local events, user stickiness remains relatively high.

Second, serving local readers. *Yangcheng Evening News* has long focused on Lingnan culture in its reporting, earning it years of affection from Guangdong citizens. Compared to other print media, Yangcheng’s local cultural genes are more pronounced. Therefore, in its new media construction, Yangcheng’s “dual micro-platforms and one client” also bear the imprint of Cantonese cultural products, with greater emphasis on meeting the needs of vertical domain Guangdong users. Particularly, the flagship product “Reporter Help” on its “Yangcheng Pai” app is an internet product that facilitates communication from online to offline. While this function could theoretically cover the entire country, it achieves optimal effectiveness primarily within the province (and city).

Third, serving the local market. The ability to maintain good cooperative relationships with enterprises concerns the rise and fall of media enterprises. Yangcheng has operated in the Pearl River Delta market for many years, establishing a solid foundation for cooperation with local enterprises. Due to its long-term deep cultivation in southern Guangdong, it has developed corresponding understanding of local consumption patterns and behavioral habits. Local Guangdong enterprises also recognize that Yangcheng can provide the most cutting-edge market information and the most authoritative user data. This mutually beneficial relationship has become a traditional advantage that Yangcheng strives to maintain, and this advantage continues in its convergence media products. In interviews, they repeatedly emphasized “service consciousness,” aiming to think what enterprises think and meet their needs, while shedding the stereotype of “system-internal new media” being too “self-centered.”

(2) Industry Promoting Convergence: Value Reengineering in Newspaper Transformation Guided by the “user-oriented” philosophy, media convergence transformation represents both exploration and experimentation for Yangcheng, accompanied by considerable challenges. While transforming its newspaper business, vigorously developing diversified industries and promoting “convergence” through “industry” has become a major path for Yangcheng’s convergence development.

During research at Yangcheng, the “Yangcheng Creative Industry Park” left a strong impression. According to reports, the park was established in 2007 and is managed by the group’s wholly-owned subsidiary, Guangdong Yangcheng Evening News Creative Park Investment Management Co., Ltd. Located in the Chebei area of Tianhe District, Guangzhou, it covers a total land area of 171,000 square meters with a total construction area of 108,000 square meters.

Since its establishment, the park has transformed the former Guangzhou Chemical Fiber Plant’s old factory buildings into a new concept internet industry center, comprehensively constructing a cutting-edge brand matrix. Currently, more than 100 information technology, art design, and cultural media enterprises have settled in, including the Yangcheng Evening News Media Center, Kugou Music, Kingsoft Xishanju, Lychee FM, Two Trees Cross-border E-commerce, Liangce Finance, Huaduo Technology (1931), Youfei Intelligence, Haili Information, Dark Horse Club, and Innovation Valley Incubator. The park’s 入驻企业产值 has achieved rapid development, exceeding 700 million yuan in 2010, surpassing 5 billion yuan in 2013, and exceeding 10 billion yuan in 2016.

On one hand, creative enterprises bring stable financial benefits to Yangcheng; on the other hand, the dense concentration of internet companies creates an excellent soft and hard environment for Yangcheng’s media convergence. For instance, cutting-edge internet platforms like Lychee FM and Dark Horse Club can assist Yangcheng Evening News with content distribution, forming a mutually beneficial cooperative relationship.

(3) Market Mechanism as the Core: The Central Logic of Convergence Development Emerging media, the target of traditional media convergence, inherently emphasizes a “market gene” development philosophy. Both theory and practice demonstrate that the dominant development logic of successful new media enterprises and products is market logic. Research reveals that market logic is prominently displayed throughout Yangcheng’s convergence development process. Unlike some newspaper media that develop a mentality of “seeking institutional support” when facing industry downturns, Yangcheng Evening News adheres to a user-oriented approach and follows a market-based path. Sun Xuan noted that while striving for government cooperation, equal importance must be placed on establishing a market foothold. This market orientation stems from *Yangcheng Evening News*’s historical popularity as a “citizen’s newspaper” and is based on its judgment of internet development trends.

First, pragmatic and low-key “third entrepreneurship.” Yangcheng is known in Guangdong media for its low-key pragmatism, often described as the media most aligned with the Cantonese entrepreneurial spirit of “making a fortune quietly.” In its media convergence transformation, it continues this tradition with modesty, caution, and steady progress. Simultaneously, Yangcheng has demonstrated the daring entrepreneurial spirit of Cantonese people in this transformation, starting everything from scratch and launching its “third entrepreneurship” in 2015 (the first being its founding in 1957, the second its resumption in 1980). The group relocated from its central Guangzhou location on Dongfeng East Road to the relatively remote Chebei South, partnering with Tencent and others to transform its old building into an innovation and entrepreneurship incubator—preparing to settle in and fight a turnaround battle. For this convergence transformation, Yangcheng fully anticipated potential difficulties and explicitly proposed the slogan of “third entrepreneurship,” embracing transformation with a lowered profile and light baggage. Low-key pragmatism combined with courageous innovation precisely constitutes the good market temperament of excellent enterprises.

Second, modern enterprise system as the basic management system. Yangcheng has always possessed market characteristics. As a Category III public institution under the management of the Guangdong Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Guangdong Provincial Government, with the Propaganda Department exercising oversight, adopting the modern enterprise system as its basic management system has become Yangcheng’s fundamental management philosophy. In the convergence process, this management approach has also been inherited, with flexible incentive mechanisms. As Sun Xuan noted: “In the development of convergence media business, we must continue to emphasize those effective management systems from modern enterprise management that are suitable for convergence media development, such as equity incentives and equity diversification. We have been paying attention to these and hope to actively introduce them when conditions are appropriate.”

Third, intensive operation using existing resources. Yangcheng maintains stable and high-quality output in targeted vertical fields, attracting followers through professional content. Even the Yangcheng Pai client is based on the convergence transformation of Yangcheng Evening News's existing editorial team. In content production and distribution, the app project team functions like a traditional Chinese medicine pharmacist—as a new media platform, when it needs certain “medicinal ingredients,” it requests them from existing editorial departments. For major news planning, it flexibly integrates relevant colleagues from multiple departments to form temporary teams, creating new media product packages for Yangcheng Pai. The app project team does not force an entire department to transform under slogans but instead issues new media product “orders,” guiding natural departmental transformation through performance incentives.

Fourth, creating a new model of digital marketing. One core aspect of the traditional media crisis is the unsustainability of existing advertising models. In convergence development, Yangcheng has deeply expanded to develop digital integrated marketing services, leveraging third-party technology and data to mine the value behind digital communication, transforming from traditional one-way advertising to interaction between products and consumers, and creating an entirely new digital marketing model. Through this marketing model, Yangcheng has significantly expanded the depth of its advertising business. A successful case: during the 2015 May Day and National Day Guangzhou Car Purchase Festivals, using precision marketing methods, it achieved over 100,000 visitors in three days and sales of more than 3,000 vehicles.

4. Lessons and Reflections

Having grown from its newspaper origins, Yangcheng's news media is its main business. However, under the major trend of traditional media actively integrating and developing, how to ensure the main business is not lost or hollowed out during industrial upgrading offers at least three major insights for peers.

First, jump beyond the role of merely being a “news content” provider and consider whether the media services provided can bring tangible help to users' lives, studies, and work. In an era of information explosion, using news content to retain audiences is becoming increasingly difficult, yet high stickiness is precisely an essential characteristic of successful new media products. How can traditional media, which excels at producing news content, launch such convergence media products? Yangcheng provides an approach: find breakthroughs from the urgent daily needs of the people. Taking “Reporter Help” as an example, while many news reports expose various social problems, these often reflect surface-level issues that may not address individual concerns and may not be quickly resolved even after exposure. However, “Reporter Help” reflects individual practical problems through its tip-off platform and can assist relevant departments in helping to solve them promptly. Such services identify the pain points of the public, gain their welcome, and consequently generate stickiness.

Second, leverage existing characteristics and strengths. Traditional media have developed certain features or advantages over time, whether possessing strong local characteristics, being very familiar with local conditions, having brand influence, or maintaining close government relationships. In the convergence development process, these characteristics and advantages can be inventoried to see which can be adapted and utilized. Yangcheng is a media organization with strong “Cantonese culture” characteristics, and local residents have a strong sense of identification with it. Therefore, its convergence media products strive to reflect this characteristic, achieving positive results.

Third, recognize the risks of main business convergence transformation and form risk control through diversified operations. There is no ready-made experience to follow for traditional media convergence development, and both domestic and international efforts remain in the exploratory stage, with few successful cases. For an enterprise, sufficient risk awareness of such main business transformation is necessary—there should be no gambling mentality of putting all eggs in one basket. Necessary risk control measures must be adopted, including developing diversified operations. Compared with other domestic newspaper groups, Yangcheng’s relatively calm performance in main business convergence is inseparable from the support of its diversified industrial development sidelines.

Finally, the market mechanism is the core element of successful convergence development. Yangcheng’s emphasis on the core role of market mechanisms in its convergence development has grasped one of the fundamental laws of convergence development. The rise and growth of emerging media is essentially driven by the market economy, and the “free communication” spirit that underpins new media aligns with the temperament of market economy emphasizing “free competition.” Numerous cases also demonstrate that the key constraint on the integration of traditional Chinese media and emerging media lies in outdated systems, and increasing marketization is precisely one of the most worthwhile options for eliminating these institutional obstacles.

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

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