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From Medium Convergence to Media Convergence: Conceptual Evolution and Conceptual Analysis Postprint

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Abstract

As media integration has risen to a national strategy, it has once again sparked a research upsurge. This paper examines the cognitive evolution from media convergence to media integration, focusing on tracing the conceptual origins of media integration. It further provides a conceptual distinction and analysis between media convergence and media integration, thereby furnishing fundamental theoretical support for advancing media integration research in greater depth.

Full Text

Preamble

Title: The Cognitive Evolution from Media Convergence to Media Convergence and Conceptual Analysis

Abstract: As media convergence has risen to a national strategy, it has once again sparked a research boom. This paper traces the cognitive evolution from media convergence to media convergence, focuses on exploring the origins of the media convergence concept, and provides a conceptual analysis between media convergence and media convergence, thereby offering foundational theoretical support for advancing media convergence research.

Keywords: Convergence; Media Convergence; Media Convergence; Concept

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Introduction

On August 18, 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the fourth meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform. The meeting reviewed and approved the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Integrated Development of Traditional and Emerging Media,” elevating media convergence to a national strategy. Media convergence consequently became a hot topic again in both industry and academia, making the tracing of its conceptual origins and evolution an urgent issue to be addressed for advancing media convergence research.

Media convergence is a term imported from the West, translated from the English “Media Convergence.” A widely recognized view holds that around 2005, researcher Cai Wen from Renmin University of China first introduced it to China, sparking a research boom. However, the concept had already been mentioned by Cui Baoguo in his 1999 article “Technological Innovation and Media Transformation,” though with less impact than Cai Wen’s work. The usage of the concepts of media convergence (meijie ronghe) and media convergence (meiti ronghe) has been rather chaotic, with most scholars using the former term, a minority using the latter, and some using them interchangeably, believing they mean the same thing. Since 2014, as media convergence became a national strategy, an increasing number of scholars and practitioners have begun using the concept of meiti ronghe. The shift from meijie ronghe to meiti ronghe reflects both the development process of media convergence itself and the deepening understanding of this concept among scholars.

1. Cognitive Evolution from Media Convergence to Media Convergence

Media convergence is the product of scientific and technological development, particularly modern communication technology, since the mid-20th century. With the birth of computers and the rapid development of information and network technologies, media convergence has gradually deepened, and its concept and connotation have become increasingly clear.

1.1 Brief History of Cognitive Evolution

Convergence is a shared term in both meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe. According to Baidu Encyclopedia, fusion refers to melting into or merging into one body like melting. The Chinese term “融合” has existed since ancient times; Chang Qu of the Eastern Jin Dynasty once wrote in “Chronicles of Huayang”: “The Chan River emerges from Chan Mountain, its source being gold and silver mines; when washed and fused by fire, they become gold and silver.” However, the “convergence” in media convergence is translated from the English word “Convergence.” According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, “Convergence” first originated in scientific fields, such as when British scientist William Derham in 1713 discussed the convergence and divergence

of light rays. Subsequently, the term was gradually applied to meteorology, mathematics, evolutionary biology, political science, economics, and other disciplines. Scholar Chen Ying believes that in different fields, Convergence gradually formed a roughly similar definition—describing the process where things increasingly gather and continuously tend toward similarity [1].

Media convergence originated in the West in the 1970s. Some scholars believe that the idea of media convergence can be traced back to Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s [2]. McLuhan's important viewpoint "the medium is the message" posits that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph" [3]. In 1978, Nicholas Negroponte of MIT demonstrated the convergence process of three intersecting circles gradually overlapping—these circles representing computing, publishing, and broadcasting industries. His vision of different industries converging won favor from business leaders, securing millions of dollars in sponsorship to establish the renowned Media Lab in 1985 [4]. This is considered by some scholars as the embryonic form of the media convergence concept. In 1983, Professor Ithiel de Sola Pool proposed "the Convergence of Modes," pointing out that electronic information technology would fundamentally change the isolated communication patterns of traditional media, evolving toward a new integrated model [5]. Some Western scholars consider this the first proposal of the convergence concept. In 1994, when the San Jose Mercury News and America Online jointly launched the electronic newspaper service "Mercury Center News," they used the subtitle: "A Media Convergence." By the turn of the century, when AOL and Time Warner announced their historic merger, "Convergence" had become a common term in electronic information communication [6].

Domestic scholars generally believe that from 2004 to 2005, when researcher Cai Wen from Renmin University of China's Journalism and Social Development Research Center conducted Fulbright research in the United States, she published the article "Converged Media and Converged Journalism—Discussing from Changes in American Journalism," which first introduced the concept of meijie ronghe to China. However, Cui Baoguo had already mentioned the concept in his 1999 article "Technological Innovation and Media Transformation," though with less influence than Cai Wen's work. Along with China's media industry practice of deep convergence development, media convergence became a hot research topic for more than a decade thereafter, but most scholars used the concepts of meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe interchangeably. On August 18, 2014, the fourth plenary session of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform elevated media convergence to a national strategy. The professional term meiti ronghe (once again) became a hot topic in the industry and all sectors of society [7]. In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have begun using the concept of meiti ronghe.

1.2 Two Turns in Cognitive Evolution

Practice is the source and driver of knowledge [8]; people's understanding of the world always relies on practice. Guo Yi and Yu Cuiling believe that meiti ronghe is a diachronic concept. The understanding and grasp of this concept are first based on the development and practice of media itself [9]. By combing through and analyzing the practical process and cognitive history of media convergence, it is not difficult to find that the cognitive evolution of media convergence has experienced "two turns."

The first turn is from a technology-dominated research perspective to a multi-perspective research orientation encompassing technology, industry, economy, culture, and society. Media convergence is the product of scientific and technological development. In the embryonic stage of the media convergence concept, the technological research perspective dominated, emphasizing the technical foundation and driving role of media convergence. As media practice and understanding gradually deepened, related research rapidly radiated from technology to perspectives of technology, industry, economy, culture, society, and others. Early technology-focused research perspectives, such as that of Nicholas Negroponte of MIT, understood media convergence as "all kinds of technologies and media forms converging together." Although the technology-focused perspective continues to this day and remains a very important and indispensable research angle, its dominant position has clearly been lost compared with the increasingly broad research perspectives on media convergence, and a multi-perspective pattern has become increasingly evident.

The second turn is from the theoretical level to the practical level. In the early stage, whether from a technology-dominated perspective or a multi-perspective orientation focusing on technology, industry, economy, culture, and society, theoretical research predominated. As media convergence practice developed, research gradually turned toward the practical level, driven by three main factors. First, previous theoretical research had accumulated to a certain extent, reaching a "threshold," making the turn to the practical level a natural progression. Second, although media convergence practice has never stopped since the advent of the mass communication era, the current round of media convergence practice initiated by the rapid development of the Internet has just begun. Questions such as how should media converge, who are the main actors, what is the direction, where does the motivation come from, and what are the methods and pathways—all these practical issues hindering media convergence development—urgently need to be answered and resolved by the media industry and scholars. Driven by social demand and capital pursuit, it has become inevitable for related research to shift from multi-theoretical perspectives to focus on practical operation. Third, with media convergence elevated to a national strategy, driven by political power, traditional media centered on newspapers, television, and radio began actively reflecting on the future of traditional media, how to absorb and learn from positive factors of new media, and how to achieve corner overtaking through integrated development. This is the third factor.

2. Conceptual Analysis of Media Convergence and Media Convergence

Although media convergence evolved from media convergence, and the usage frequency of the meiti ronghe concept is increasing, the interchangeable use of meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe will continue to exist. Undoubtedly, the fundamental difference between the two concepts lies in the distinction between meijie and meiti. Since both meijie and meiti originate from the English word “Medium” (plural form “Media”), their basic definitions are not significantly different. However, since they are translated into different Chinese terms, and meijie and meiti have different meanings in Chinese, meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe still have distinctions that require careful attention in usage.

2.1 Medium and Media

Both medium and media have two meanings: first, channels, carriers, or intermediaries for information dissemination; second, institutions for information collection, production, and dissemination. Analyzing the literal meanings, meiti refers to institutions that are carriers of information dissemination, emphasizing not only the intermediary meaning but also its materiality, mainly referring to organizations engaged in news communication activities such as newspaper offices, radio stations, websites, and news agencies. Thus, although meiti has both meanings, it emphasizes more the second meaning—institutions for information collection, production, and dissemination. While meijie in a broad sense also includes the meaning of information dissemination institutions, it emphasizes more the first meaning—channels, carriers, or intermediaries for information dissemination.

2.2 Media Convergence and Media Convergence

Clarifying the difference between meijie and meiti makes the distinction between meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe clear. Convergence mainly contains two meanings: first, the convergence of channels, carriers, or mediums; second, the convergence of organizations or institutions. Professor Cai Wen once defined meiti ronghe as: “Media convergence refers not only to cooperation models among various media (organizations) but also to a news production model where different types of media truly achieve aggregation and integration through new mediums, operating independently with complete processes and standardized operations” [11]. Thus, meiti ronghe has both meanings but focuses more on organizational convergence. Meijie ronghe also has both meanings but focuses more on channel, carrier, or medium convergence. Overall, the scope of meiti ronghe is not as broad as that of meijie ronghe. As Professor Ding Baiquan of Nanjing University stated, meijie is a concept with a broader scope than meiti, so meiti is included within meijie [12]. Professor Ding Baiquan also believes that meijie ronghe focuses more on communication intermediaries, while meiti ronghe focuses more on news institutions. This should be the main difference between the two. However, in actual usage, it is often not so simple.

For example, meiti ronghe elevated to a national strategy mainly studies the integrated development between traditional media and new media—a convergence between organizations or institutions—but it also includes technological convergence, terminal convergence, etc., which belong to the category of meijie ronghe. In actual research, specific analysis should be conducted according to particular circumstances, paying attention to differentiated usage.

3. Conclusion

This paper has combed through the cognitive evolution from meijie ronghe to meiti ronghe, explored the origins of the media convergence concept, and provided a conceptual analysis between meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe. As an imported term, the industry usage of meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe has been rather chaotic. From the cognitive evolution process from meijie ronghe to meiti ronghe and the practice of meiti ronghe, an increasing number of scholars have begun using the concept of meiti ronghe, driven by political considerations of meiti ronghe being elevated to a national strategy, objective reasons that meiti ronghe more accurately describes current practical situations, and subjective factors of scholars' research perspective shifts following practice. The connotations and extensions of meijie ronghe and meiti ronghe are extremely rich, and the industry has not yet formed a consensus on the concepts. Although the difference between the two is subtle, careful discrimination and distinction should be made in usage. Only by clarifying basic concepts can deeper research be conducted.

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