

An Analysis of the Convergent Development of Web Original Series and Traditional Television Dramas (Postprint)

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Abstract

In the era of new media, domestic online self-produced dramas have experienced rapid development, exhibiting a tendency to surpass traditional television dramas in terms of production quality and commercial revenue. Grounded in their respective interests, traditional television media and new media companies have engaged in network-station collaboration across investment, production, marketing, and broadcasting, thereby presenting a novel ecosystem for television drama dissemination. Based on the current state of online self-produced dramas being reverse-output to television platforms, this paper investigates the integration and development strategies for online self-produced dramas and traditional television dramas.

Full Text

An Analysis of the Integration and Development of Online Self-produced Dramas and Traditional TV Dramas

Abstract: In the new media era, domestic online self-produced dramas have experienced rapid development, demonstrating a trend of surpassing traditional TV dramas in both production standards and commercial revenue. Driven by respective interests, traditional TV media and new media companies have launched network-TV collaboration in investment, production, marketing, and broadcasting, creating a new ecosystem for TV drama dissemination. This paper examines the integration and development strategies of online self-produced dramas and traditional TV dramas based on the current phenomenon of reverse output from online platforms to television.

Keywords: self-produced dramas; TV dramas; network-TV collaboration; reverse output

Online self-produced dramas are self-produced serial dramas distributed by internet companies, broadcast on new media platforms, conforming to traditional TV drama narrative patterns and national policies and regulations, targeting online audiences, and utilizing a pay-per-view revenue-sharing model. Video websites began experimenting with self-produced dramas in 2009, but these early attempts were limited in quantity and generated little response, primarily focusing on parody and 搞怪 content. In 2012, iQiyi's self-produced drama *Strange Family* aired on Jiangxi Satellite TV, becoming one of the first online dramas to be reverse-output to traditional television. Constrained by the high cost of online broadcasting rights for TV dramas and deeply influenced by the American self-produced drama *House of Cards*, domestic video websites launched a wave of self-produced drama creation, with 2014 being hailed as the "first year of self-produced dramas."

1.1 Production Units, Content Duration, and Audience Demographics

Traditional TV dramas are primarily produced by specialized cultural industry companies engaged in TV drama investment and production, provincial TV stations, or media groups, either independently or through cooperation. Online self-produced dramas are mainly produced by video websites and new media companies, which collaborate with production companies through new media company funding and pay-per-view revenue sharing. TV drama episode duration is constrained by television programming blocks, with each episode typically running 40-45 minutes and series generally comprising 30-50 episodes. Online self-produced dramas enjoy greater flexibility in duration, ranging from 10 to 45 minutes per episode, with episode counts determined by market feedback and typically structured as seasonal series of 10-30 episodes per season. Traditional TV dramas target television audiences of all ages, while online self-produced dramas primarily target internet users, concentrated among young people aged 15-35 who are avid consumers of online video content.

1.2 Production Approval and Risk Control

The production and distribution process for traditional TV dramas is cumbersome, involving multiple departments with fixed, assembly-line steps where each stage is indispensable. First, production companies must apply to the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) for a *Radio and Television Program Production License*. They then submit story outlines and scripts to SARFT for review; upon approval, they receive a shooting permit. TV drama producers then seek investors and organize production teams. After filming is completed, the drama must be submitted to SARFT for final review and approval before obtaining a *Domestic TV Drama Distribution License*, which is required for copyright sales. In contrast, online self-produced dramas eliminate the project application and content review processes, essentially integrating production and broadcasting. Their distribution environment is currently more relaxed, with online distribution being faster and more flexible. In terms of risk

control, traditional TV dramas must undergo three uncontrollable stages: script review, final content review, and sales. Scripts being rejected or substantially revised, finished products being rejected or heavily edited, and scheduling obstacles can all cause immeasurable losses. Online self-produced dramas, however, have diversified revenue channels, and their integrated production-broadcasting model makes risk control more manageable.

1.3 Advertising Placement

Traditional TV dramas and online self-produced dramas differ significantly in advertising bidding, product placement, delivery formats, and effectiveness. TV drama advertising is influenced by multiple parties including producers and distributors, with brand or product exclusive exposure being the dominant model. Self-produced dramas feature highly integrated production and distribution with numerous advertisements, achieving deep integration between product placement and brand narrative that minimizes audience aversion. TV drama advertising requires high investment and employs single-format delivery, whereas self-produced drama advertising involves lower investment and offers diversified advertising products using the three-dimensional interactive promotion of online platforms. TV drama advertising effectiveness is limited by ratings and channel influence, while self-produced drama advertising benefits from specific dynamic data tracking that ensures value for advertising investment.

2. Current Development Status of Online Self-produced Dramas

In 2016, the online drama market matured, with multiple series exceeding 2 billion views and the phenomenon-level work *Old Nine Gates* surpassing 10 billion views. Approximately 755 online dramas were launched in 2016, a year-over-year increase of 60.6%. While this growth rate slowed significantly compared to previous years, total online drama views reached approximately 89.2 billion, a 225.5% increase from 2015, demonstrating that more high-quality online dramas are emerging and individual series influence is rising.

2.1 Increasing Polarization and Platform Dominance

In 2016, both view counts and drama quality improved substantially across major platforms. The three major video platforms backed by BAT—iQiyi, Tencent Video, and Youku Tudou—performed most prominently, each possessing 4, 3, and 2 dramas respectively with over 2 billion views, followed by LeTV Video and Sohu Video, each with one quality online drama exceeding 1 billion views. These high-view dramas were all produced through collaboration between video websites and content companies, leveraging the internet DNA of video platforms and their powerful distribution capabilities. For example, iQiyi's self-produced *Old Nine Gates* achieved over 10 billion views, accounting for more than half of iQiyi's total views. With strong financial support from internet giants behind

major video websites, investment in platform self-produced dramas continues to increase. As funding flows in, production quality of top-tier online dramas has become increasingly sophisticated, eliminating the previous negative impression of “50-cent special effects” and catching up to or even surpassing traditional TV drama standards. These dramas have achieved massive traffic while also winning strong reputations, with works such as *Candle in the Tomb* and *Yu Zui* receiving excellent scores on Gudu Red List and Douban.

2.2 IP Adaptation as Core Competitiveness

IP-adapted dramas possess a natural fan base that enables rapid accumulation of viewership and success, holding advantages in both top-tier quantity and view counts. Among the top 25 online dramas by view count in 2016, 12 were adapted from well-known IPs, 8 were related to known IPs, and only 5 were completely original, demonstrating that top-tier online dramas remain dominated by IP adaptations. Furthermore, while 55 IP dramas aired in 2016, accounting for approximately 16% of total online dramas, their total view count reached 49.046 billion, representing about 55% of total online drama views, highlighting the enormous viewership advantage of IP dramas.

Examining specific productions, novel IPs held relative advantages among highly-rated 2016 dramas, though IP sources showed a trend toward diversification. iQiyi’s *Old Nine Gates* and *Yu Zui*, Tencent Video’s *My Amazing Boyfriend* and *Love Me If You Dare*, Youku Tudou’s *Top Family Servant*, LeTV Video’s *Meet Miss Anxiety*, and Sohu Video’s *Medical Examiner Dr. Qin* were all adapted from novel IPs. *Painting Rivers and Lakes* was a live-action adaptation of a domestic anime, while year-end release *Infernal Affairs* was a classic film derivative drama. The rising costs of online self-produced dramas, beyond increased production and filming expenses, stem primarily from casting star actors, with *The Lost Tomb* starring Li Yifeng, Tiffany Tang, and Yang Yang, and *Old Nine Gates* featuring Zhanilia Zhao and William Chan, setting investment records for 2015 and 2016 respectively.

2.3 Genre Trends and Evolution

Urban, fantasy, and historical costume themes remain the most popular in traditional TV dramas and are similarly favored in online dramas. In 2016, total views for these genres reached 15.1 billion, 14.2 billion, and 6.6 billion respectively, all ranking in the top five. Additionally, suspense and 推理 themes, which traditional TV dramas rarely explore, have become new popular genres in online dramas. In 2016, these genres achieved 16 billion and 14.4 billion total views respectively, ranking first and third, and are poised to become signature genres unique to online dramas.

3.1 The “Reverse Output” Trajectory

Video websites have long operated in a legal gray area regarding video resources. As copyright protection regulations have gradually improved, they have been forced to cooperate with TV stations to purchase online broadcasting rights for TV dramas. With scarce resources of popular TV dramas and rising production costs, online broadcasting rights fees for TV dramas have exceeded the acceptable range for video websites. In an environment of internet capital influx, online self-produced dramas, previously in an “underground” state, have moved onto legitimate tracks. Video websites have begun to surpass traditional TV dramas in financial strength, production teams, and production-broadcasting-marketing systems. In 2012, iQiyi’s sci-fi sitcom *Strange Family* was purchased by Jiangxi Satellite TV, firing the first shot in the “reverse output” of self-produced dramas. Subsequently, Sohu Video’s *He is Here, Please Close Your Eyes*, iQiyi’s *Legend of Zu Mountain*, Tencent Video’s *Candle in the Tomb*, and others have entered the prestigious realm of television. In 2017 alone, over nine Tencent self-produced dramas were scheduled for reverse output to TV media, marking the entry of self-produced dramas into the “reverse output” fast lane.

3.2 Smoother Network-TV Integration Channels

The reverse output of online self-produced dramas to TV media represents the further deepening of triple-network convergence and the achievement of TV program production-broadcasting separation system reform. As traditional media, TV stations covet the sticky audiences of video websites, while as emerging new media, video websites admire the authority and influence of traditional TV media. Under their respective interest demands, the “strong alliance” between TV stations and video websites has made network-TV integration channels smoother. Video website companies utilize effective fundraising models to efficiently manage drama marketing and production. From Tencent Video’s perspective, over 30 large-scale self-produced dramas were planned for 2017, and TV stations have diversified their introduction methods for online self-produced dramas, moving beyond copyright purchase to include “investment instead of purchase” models.

3.3 Capital Influx and Industry Migration

While 2014 was called the “first year of online dramas,” the increasing cost of purchasing dramas under the “foreign content restriction order” and “one drama two stars” policy led many internet video industry leaders to focus on online self-produced dramas with relatively lower barriers to entry, turning 2015 into a boom year for self-produced dramas. According to incomplete statistics, nearly 20 online dramas received investments exceeding 20 million RMB last year, with five super online dramas receiving investments ranging from 50 million to over 100 million RMB. This capital influx has brought a large number of traditional producers to the online space. *He is Here, Please Close Your Eyes* represented the trial work of Hou Hongliang’s team, while *Legend of Zu Mountain* was

backed by producer-turned-executive Wu Qilong. The emergence of these super online dramas has helped platforms achieve both reputational and economic gains. *The Lost Tomb*, broadcast on iQiyi, made the paid viewing model a reality, developing far faster than anticipated.

Constrained by drama purchasing costs, distribution outlets, and IP growth speed, creating pure online dramas is naturally not the ultimate goal of video websites—network-TV co-broadcasting is the future, while pure online dramas are better suited for a refined, paid niche model. After all, internet capital-backed online dramas have gradually surpassed general satellite TV in financial strength and production systems. With the arrival of the “super online drama first year,” especially with several “big dramas” costing hundreds of millions and produced by traditional TV professionals, content will certainly become more exciting, and “reverse output” will become increasingly common.

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

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