

The Dynamic Mechanism of Rapid Development of Self-Media (Post-print)

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Abstract

The driving mechanism, in short, is the source of momentum. In recent years, self-media has burst onto the scene and developed vigorously. What, then, is the source of the driving force behind its rapid development? This paper argues that there are three main aspects: First, the rapid development of new technologies provides enormous potential for self-media development; Second, under contemporary social network relationships, self-media communication models possess inherent advantages; Third, “connection” is becoming a new way of life for people.

Full Text

The Dynamic Mechanism of Rapid Self-Media Development

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Self-media encompasses blogs, microblogs, WeChat, Baidu Tieba, forums/BBS, and other online communities. In recent years, self-media has flourished. Take WeChat as an example: since its launch in August 2012, nearly 10,000 new official WeChat accounts have been certified daily, and establishing a WeChat public account has become standard practice for enterprises, creating an excellent ecosystem of individual users plus official accounts. By June 2016, the number of WeChat public platform accounts had reached nearly 20 million, with over 2.8 million active accounts, and WeChat's active user base exceeded 762 million. Daily article readings on WeChat reached 3 billion—equivalent to the traffic of five to six Youku official websites. With such a massive user base and traffic volume, every enterprise hopes to mine gold from it, and the scale of self-media participants has expanded dramatically. This paper attempts to see through the phenomena to the essence and explore the dynamic mechanisms behind the rapid development of self-media.

1. Rapid Development of New Technology Provides Conditions and External Impetus for Self-Media Development

Marshall McLuhan proposed in the 20th century that “the medium is the message,” arguing that “any medium (that is, any extension of man) affects both the individual and society by introducing a new scale into human affairs; any extension of ourselves, or any new technology, introduces a new pattern of organization.” Therefore, we can analyze the developmental trends of media in different eras by examining how media technology evolution leads to media transformation and how humans make corresponding scale choices.

Let us review the development of television in China as an example. Initially, China had only about 50 black-and-white television sets and a single television station—Beijing Television Station—which broadcast only four times per week, making information relatively scarce for the general public. Since its inception, Chinese television has served as the government's “mouthpiece,” with early programming characterized by strong uniformity and propagandistic content. Even television audiences were in a passive position regarding information reception, and Chinese viewers had no right to choose program content. With the development of color television technology, the invention of wireless remote controls with multiple function adjustments, and the gradual increase in the number of television stations, the cost for viewers to switch channels decreased, thereby granting them the right to select channels according to personal preferences. The increase in viewer rights was reflected not only in channel selection but also, more importantly, in the ability to exercise autonomous choice over whether to watch commercial advertisements when multiple channels became available. Particularly after the reform and opening up, as local television stations gradually rose to prominence, each station was forced to make corresponding changes in both program content and advertising production as viewers' 选择权 increased. For instance, Hunan Satellite TV and Dragon TV have won audiences' pursuit and affection through their rich and colorful program content.

By the end of the 20th century, Dave Winer rewrote a program called Frontier, which was one of the early programs enabling novices to create blogs. This coincided with the original vision of World Wide Web founder Tim Berners-Lee: to establish a read-write web. With the rise of blogs in 2003, the internet truly achieved a transformation from read-only to read-write, meaning ordinary netizens gained the right to disseminate and share information. Self-media was born against this backdrop. At this time, the authority of portal websites also began to be dismantled.

Entering the internet era, a batch of websites represented by Yahoo, which provided search services, became “gateways” for netizens to enter the internet—that is, portal websites. Gradually, portal websites were no longer limited to traditional search engine-style portals but evolved both toward comprehensive development and derived into portals divided by region, industry, and specialty. Portal websites provided people with convenient access to information they needed on the internet, further reducing dependence on traditional media. Stimulated by the internet wave, traditional media began to establish their own online versions, such as internet television stations, digital newspapers, and digital magazines. Correspondingly, according to annual reports on China’s television viewing market released by CSM Media Research, per capita television viewing time has basically shown a year-by-year decline since 2010. In 2014, this figure dropped to 162 minutes, a five-year low, while the average reach rate of television audiences also fell from 72.4% in 2010 to 64.3% in 2014. This demonstrates that when audiences have access to more diverse and convenient channels for obtaining information than traditional media, they gain the right not to use services provided by traditional media, leading to a further decline in per capita television viewing time.

With the popularization of mobile terminals represented by smartphones and increasingly simplified operating systems, people can not only conveniently obtain information and services from the internet anytime and anywhere while on the move, but mobile terminal applications have also become increasingly rich, satisfying various needs such as search and reading, leisure and entertainment, and business and finance. The widespread use of social media clients such as Weibo, WeChat, Baidu Tieba, and Renren has profoundly influenced ordinary netizens’ daily lives, not only enabling mobile social networking but also gradually becoming one of the top ten business models in the mobile internet. Self-media based on these social platforms has allowed more people to gain experiences beyond previous PC-side blogs and forums. Due to their small unit information capacity, Weibo, WeChat, and other self-media products enable users to conveniently incorporate their nodes into their own information networks.

Against this background, technological development has caused the number of options available to users to explode. Previously, users’ media touchpoints might have been limited to several dozen newspapers on the market, several dozen television stations that could receive signals, or several dozen portals or specialized websites with content output capabilities. Now, however, users can

freely choose whether to use traditional media or internet media and can select media that align with their personal preferences to obtain information and services. The emergence of self-media has posed new challenges to traditional media and even to some internet media.

2. New Social Network Relationships Provide Internal Impetus for Rapid Self-Media Development

The term “connection” originates from social network relationship research. A social network is a form of social organization based on “networks” rather than “groups.” Viewing individual social members as numerous nodes, the interactions between nodes that generate various social relationships are called “connections,” and this system of social relationships constitutes a social network.

Based on social network relationships, especially self-media existing on social media platforms exhibits unique communication models. According to Dai Yumei’s interpretation in *A Communication Studies Reading of Self-Media*, in an information dissemination network, each communication individual can be regarded as a communication node, which can be divided into “core nodes,” “bridge nodes,” and “long-tail nodes.” Core nodes are “the source of certain information generation”; bridge nodes are “diffusers of information spread by core users, playing a bridging role”; and long-tail nodes are “those who only access core nodes’ information through the intermediary role of bridge nodes, belonging to the long tail far from core nodes but of massive scale.” The communication model of self-media possessing these three types of nodes can be summarized as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

As shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper], users as bridge nodes establish personal information networks by incorporating multiple core nodes, while users as core nodes are more likely to occupy key positions in information dissemination if they possess more bridge nodes. Therefore, if a self-media node wishes to occupy a key position in information dissemination, it needs to incorporate more bridge nodes, and to make other nodes become its bridge nodes, it must achieve this through interaction with them—that is, by establishing “connections.” Behind all nodes are real individuals, so how to establish “connections” with each individual has become an issue of increasing concern for self-media. In social media platforms, the establishment of “connections” between ordinary users and a particular self-media can manifest as behaviors such as “following,” “favoriting,” and “forwarding.”

In the new media era, when audiences have more diverse and differentiated choices, the long tail at the demand curve also begins to be noticed and selected by niche groups with shared interests. The attention received by *Luo Ji Thinking* and *Xiao Shuo* demonstrates with facts that some small individuals or teams are challenging the “hegemonic” status of traditional media with strong vitality, and this new force is developing vigorously in an unstoppable manner.

3. “Connection” as a New Lifestyle Provides Accelerating Impetus for Rapid Self-Media Development

In the mobile internet era, the continuous development and widespread application of mobile internet technology have profoundly changed people’s lifestyles. For example, Alipay’s functions such as “mobile recharge,” “credit card repayment,” and “utilities payment” have moved operators, banks, and utility payment offices to mobile online platforms; ride-hailing apps like Uber and Didi provide travel solutions for users; and mobile Taobao and WeChat shops connect various merchants with users. Some social websites have even cooperated with other enterprises to encompass multiple connection services. For instance, WeChat provides functions such as WeChat shops, WeChat Pay, and “Didi Taxi,” and has introduced a public platform system that connects merchants, services, and media with users. The emergence of WeChat subscription accounts provides new channels for self-media to connect with WeChat users. In other words, with modern mobile internet technology, extensive “connections” can be formed between people, between people and objects, and between people and information.

Not long ago, the functions of mobile phones, which had only recently emerged, have quietly undergone tremendous changes. From being primarily used for making calls and sending text messages, they have now become multi-functional, multi-frequency workstations combining computer terminals, television terminals, payment platforms, and social networking sites. Even the posture of making phone calls has changed—from holding the phone to one’s ear to holding it in front of one’s mouth to speak. Some surveys have shown that people now check their phones every eight minutes on average, and the first thing they do upon waking up is open their phones to check WeChat Moments. Mobile phones have truly become people’s indispensable number one “life partner,” and “connection” is becoming a new lifestyle for people.

Meanwhile, we will also discover that with the continuous development of digital technology, the upgrading of internet technology, and the convenient evolution of VR/AR technology, connections between people through smart wearable devices such as mobile phones and watches will develop toward trends of being detectable, quantifiable, and applicable. Self-media video programs will inevitably spring up like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. Coupled with the openness of online platforms, this provides everyone with numerous opportunities for full self-expression and realization of personal value. Pictures taken on a whim, passages of text written when moved, and videos produced spontaneously—all these represent the democratization of content creation in the connected era.

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

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