

Another Possibility for the “Paywall”? — Implications and Warnings of the “Fenda” Paid Voice Q&A Platform for Traditional Media’s Transformation to New Media (Postprint)

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Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Under the unprecedented impact of mobile internet, traditional media faces immense pressure. In this challenging environment, media organizations have embarked on explorations to transform into new media, continuously experimenting with new technologies and models, yet the path has been arduous. The “paywall” model implemented by some traditional media websites exemplifies this difficulty. Since its inception, the paywall has been controversial, and by the end of 2015, The Sun—owned by Murdoch’s...

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Preamble

ChinaXiv Cooperative Journal

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Classification Code: G203

Document Code: A

Article Number: 1671-0134(2017)12-053-02

DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2017.01.006

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Introduction

Under the unprecedented impact of mobile internet, traditional media faces immense pressure. In this challenging environment, media organizations have

embarked on explorations to transform into new media, continuously experimenting with new technologies and models, yet the path has been arduous. The “paywall” model implemented by some traditional media websites exemplifies this difficulty. Since its inception, the paywall has been controversial, and by the end of 2015, *The Sun*—owned by Murdoch’s News Group—abandoned its two-year paywall experiment, making its online news freely accessible. Combined with numerous other websites that had previously abandoned similar trials, many commentators concluded that paywalls had proven increasingly unsuccessful in the market.

However, in 2016, the emergence of “Fenda,” a paid voice Q&A platform in China’s mobile internet sector, appears to offer a successful alternative to the paywall model. Fenda enables self-media influencers to instantly discover “revenue streams.” Compared to other self-media platforms, Fenda functions more as a monetization venue for these influencers—where they build popularity on platforms like Weibo and WeChat, then convert that influence into revenue on Fenda. In other words, Fenda’s rapid success stems from creating a viable monetization model for self-media influencers. The Q&A format on Fenda is more professional, and personalized responses facilitate precise information dissemination. The “eavesdropping” feature satisfies individual user needs while providing compensation to both askers and respondents. This design cleverly motivates all three parties—questioners, respondents, and eavesdroppers—creating a “win-win-win” scenario.

Nevertheless, Fenda’s paid voice Q&A service model objectively creates new “information dissemination barriers,” imposing certain restrictions on information sharing and posing obstacles to information flow. Whether this business model aligns with the sharing economy ethos of the internet age, and how to address its limitations (through mechanisms like “time-limited free listening”), remain subjects worthy of further exploration and experimentation.

1. Model Innovation, Rapid Monetization, and Full Exploitation of Self-Media Value: Fenda’s Success Provides Enlightenment for Traditional Media’s Transformation

Fenda, launched in 2016 by Guokr.com’s “Zaihang” platform, allows anyone to register as a respondent and accept paid questions, with voice replies limited to 60 seconds. Other users can pay one yuan to secretly listen to answers, with both questioners and respondents receiving equal revenue shares. According to reports, within just 42 days of launch, Fenda surpassed 10 million authorized users, with over 1 million paying users, 330,000 registered respondents, 500,000 voice Q&A entries, total transaction volume exceeding 18 million yuan, and a repurchase rate of 43%. The platform processes over 190,000 payment transactions daily.

Fenda’s success raises important questions for the media industry: Can traditional media organizations, like the State-owned Assets Supervision and Ad-

ministration Commission's news center ("Guozi Xin"), successfully establish a presence on Fenda to enrich their new media brands and channels? While this may be an option worth exploring, the broader question for the entire media sector is why this "60-second voice direct monetization" business model has succeeded, what successful insights it offers for traditional media's new media transformation, and whether we can develop our own paid content platforms. These discussions likely hold greater appeal for media decision-makers.

2. Risk Avoidance and Hidden Danger Elimination: Fenda's Problems and Hidden Risks Provide Important Warnings for Traditional Media's Transformation

As an emerging paid voice Q&A platform, Fenda has faced numerous problems and hidden risks since its inception, even as it rapidly expanded its commercial operations. For traditional media, understanding these issues in advance should prove beneficial for risk avoidance and hazard elimination when encountering similar situations during their own transformations.

On August 10, 2016, just as Fenda's official team was leveraging Olympic fever to promote the platform's recruitment of renowned CCTV host Bai Yansong, the platform suddenly suspended operations. Users were informed that "Fenda is undergoing technical upgrades and temporarily inaccessible" and that "Fenda is working hard on a mysterious new feature—stay tuned." Only after 48 days, on the evening of September 27 at 8 PM, did Fenda officially resume service.

Based on current developments, Fenda faces at least the following problems and hidden risks:

2.1 Sustaining User Activity

All phenomenally successful applications face the similar challenge of sustaining momentum after initial user acceptance. For Fenda, following the initial excitement, the update frequency from self-media respondents has slowed considerably, with some ceasing updates altogether. How to continuously maintain user activity should be the primary consideration.

2.2 Deviation Between Product Positioning and Actual Effects

Upon entering the Fenda app, users are greeted with the slogan: "Your Questions, Answered by Experts." This indicates that Fenda's intended positioning emphasizes professionalism and knowledge. However, the popularity of various internet celebrities has seemingly blurred this professional and knowledge-based positioning. While Fenda actively promotes and displays more professional and knowledge-intensive content, the "eavesdropping" model objectively encourages voyeuristic tendencies and creates space for influencers to disseminate gossip lacking in professionalism or knowledge value. How to rectify the deviation between product positioning and actual effects appears to be a practical problem

Fenda must address.

2.3 Moral and Legal Risks

With celebrities, influencers, and online personalities flocking to the platform, there exists a risk that some may engage in malicious hype or spread rumors to attract attention and obtain financial benefits. This represents a significant risk requiring preventive measures.

2.4 Intellectual Property Concerns

The one-question-one-answer model, where “eavesdropping” profits are split between both parties, raises questions about compliance with existing intellectual property laws and regulations. When third-party research or works are involved in answers, how should this be handled? Compared to completely free, public welfare-oriented Q&A knowledge communities, Fenda, with its economic interests and property rights implications, appears to face greater intellectual property risks.

2.5 Information Supervision Risks

How to supervise information in this paid listening model, whether there are operational issues in specific implementation, and how to establish effective information supervision mechanisms while protecting legitimate user rights represent potential risks in Fenda’s development process.

Conclusion

Innovation has become the primary task for traditional media transformation. Just as Fenda’s popularity demonstrates, traditional media with substantive resources and content advantages can, through appropriate methods and timing, leverage technological and model innovations to create powerful new products and channels, gradually transforming into more influential and authoritative media institutions in the internet age.

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

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