

Exploring the Evolutionary Pathways of Mainstream Media in the Perspective of Fusion Media: A Case Study of Cover News

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Abstract: *With the rapid development and expansion of China's online video industry, short videos have become the mainstream way of content dissemination, reshaping the entire media ecology and posing significant challenges to the development of mainstream media. As one of the mainstream media, Cover News has always been committed to using cutting-edge technology as its core driver. By constructing an "Intelligent + Wisdom + Think Tank" smart media platform, it provides a holistic user experience integrating "viewing, listening, reading, and chatting", opening up a path of media convergence led by technology. In addition, Cover News has also established deep connections with the young generations, leveraging the capabilities of metaverse technology to achieve immersive interactive communication and further enhance interaction and communication with users. Although many mainstream media, like Cover News, have taken numerous measures to transform, there are still issues in their transformation, such as weak emotional connections and the sacrifice of content for form. Looking ahead, mainstream media should adhere to the principle of "content is king", supported by technological innovation, to continuously present more high-quality and innovative content. At the same time, mainstream media should actively establish close relationships with users based on "co-creation of content" and "co-creation of value" to better play their leading role in public opinion and jointly create a favorable field for news dissemination.*

Keywords: *Mainstream Media, Cover News, Smart Media*

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's online video industry has experienced rapid and extensive development. This, along with the emergence of self-media platforms, has spurred continuous innovation and evolution across the industry. By August 2023, the number of short-video users in China had reached 1.026 billion, accounting for 95.2% of all netizens. It is evident that short videos have become one of the primary modes for content dissemination, fundamentally reshaping the entire media ecosystem.

The mainstream media is also actively exploring innovative ways to engage young users by utilizing emerging media technologies through the integration of smart technology, the modifications in production methods, the establishment of the communication system, and the innovations in the discourse system^[1].

2. The Transformative and Sustainable Development of Cover News

2.1. Cover News: Transforming Urban Journalism with Technological Innovations

Cover News emerged as a result of transforming China's first urban newspaper, "Huaxi Dushi Bao", officially launching on May 4th, 2016. Since its inception, Cover News has been dedicated to technological advancement, upholding the principle of making technology the core driver and relying on original, senior news reporting. It focuses on data organization, intelligent writing and algorithm-based recommendation systems, emphasizing the guidance of mainstream values and positive energy while being committed to multi-platform development.

2.2. Focusing User Experience: The Construction of Intelligent and Youth-Oriented Media

2.2.1. “Viewing, Listening, Reading, and Chatting”: Panoramic Communication in All Scenarios

Cover News actively established an “Intelligent + Wisdom + Think Tank” smart media, making efforts to provide a comprehensive user experience integrating viewing, listening, reading, and chatting, opening up a path of media integration led by technology^[2].

In terms of “viewing and listening”, Cover News has embraced the news production concept of “Full-scene Visualization”, catering to the video-hungry audience of the younger generation. It has emphasized the development of news videos and live broadcasts, and actively adopted the “short video + live broadcast” mode of news reporting. This mode provides companion-style short video dissemination throughout the entire process of news events, from occurrence to editing, and incorporates storytelling techniques to give users a sense of “being on the scene”, and thus evoking emotional resonance. At the same time, Cover News has carried out audio content creation. The launch of the “Listen to Cover” channel has effectively alleviated the limitations of video in certain communication spaces.

In terms of “reading and chatting”, Cover News has keenly observed the social needs of the younger generation, launching the “Green Banana Podcast” and carrying out the “C Governance” plan. It also launched a variety of themed audio collection activities such as “I Have a Date with My Motherland”, encouraging users to record high-quality, youthful original content that exudes positivity. This not only enhanced the dissemination and influence of mainstream public opinion but also provided a platform for young people to showcase their talents, fostering the integration of individuality and community. The addition of Avatar Framework “Xiaobing” in July 2017 has upgraded traditional passive reading to AI-empowered interactive reading, increasing interactivity and fun in the reading process.

2.2.2. The Differentiated Communication of the New Media Matrix: In-depth Connection with the Youth Group

With the advancement of network communication technology, many mainstream media have opened up the “Internet +” development model, integrating newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet^[3]. Currently, Cover News has already integrated a variety of product forms including the client, website, Weibo, WeChat, games, and Bilibili, with a user base of over 105 million across approximately 20 third-party platforms.

In order to effectively expand the influence and dissemination of news, Cover News has customized high-quality news products according to the different tones of different platforms, creating a collaborative and complementary communication matrix. For instance, the Cover News WeChat public account mainly focused on authoritative news information, while its Douyin and Kwai accounts primarily highlight livelihood issues, which were closely related to the lives of the masses. Besides, its Xiaohongshu account conveyed a good attitude towards life with relaxed, interesting videos of cute babies, pets, and “life hacks”, while Zhihu account focuses on professional knowledge and popular science content. Moreover, its Bilibili account previously uploaded 15-second short videos but has recently shifted to 2-5 minute promotional videos and vlogs. At the same time, Cover News innovates its discourse system to cater to the “surfing” habits of young people, appropriately using online language for main theme reporting and delivering more approachable mainstream values.

Additionally, Cover News has integrated creativity and technology to produce original MVs, interactive H5s, 3D animations, and other creative products for dissemination across various platforms. Prior to the triumphant convening of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Cover News launched a 3D interactive game “National Projects: I’m Building It!”, allowing users to build models of the Seven Great Country Projects through online Lego assembly, experiencing the span, precision, height, depth, effort, and speed of China in a more intuitive way while enjoying a casual game. This truly established an emotional connection with young users in large-scale theme reporting such as paying tribute to the great country project.

2.3. The Empowerment of Metaverse Technology: Immersive Interactive Communication

2.3.1. As Digital Human Took the lead, Digital Collections Expanded Boundaries

Before the concept of the metaverse became popular, digital humans had already infiltrated into our daily lives in the forms of “skin suits” and AI robots. For mainstream media, the birth of digital humans has broken the constraints of time and space, filling the gaps in the dissemination of information such as text, images, and audio, while enhancing users' immersive experiences in acquiring information.

In 2017, the addition of robot “Xiao Feng” and Avatar Framework “Xiao Bing” not only improved the quantity and efficiency of news production, but also enhanced user interaction and improved the experience of interactive modules such as news comments. In 2020, Cover News independently developed and launched the virtual rumor refutation host “Sister Xiao Qing”, who can publish more than 2,000 pieces of rumor refutation content and nearly 500 original works of rumor refutation each year. Its accuracy, dissemination, and influence are quite considerable.

As the Year of the Tiger approached in 2022, Cover News collaborated with the Northeast Tiger and Leopard National Park to launch a series of exclusive reports. At the same time, they released the “National Park, Northeast Tiger” digital collections, with a limited quantity of 2022 pieces. The rise of concepts such as blockchain and digital collections strengthened users’ interest and understanding of the metaverse. Cover News’ attempt further broadened its application of technology in the metaverse, laying a foundation for the use of XR, VR, virtual digital beings, and other technologies in the content production of mainstream media.

2.3.2. The Construction of Virtual Space: Immersive "Browsing" of News

The continuous supply and comprehensive dissemination of “immersive” audio-visual content will become an important criterion and primary representation for the transition of the “metaverse” from “conceptual exploration” to “practical implementation”^[4]. Since the opening of the National Two Sessions, Cover News has leveraged its advantages in smart media to focus on the grand occasion of the National Two Sessions. In March 2023, Cover News launched the “Yuanli” immersive interactive experience space, which gathered featured content, series reports, and integrated media products during the National Two Sessions. Users can embody virtual digital figures and easily access the latest and most comprehensive information with one click. In terms of digital cultural and museum communication, Cover News has also successively launched interactive spaces such as the “World Games Cloud Expo” and “Beauty of Biodiversity - Cloud Exhibition Hall”, providing practical value for the transformation of the digital era cultural tourism and museum industries.

In May, Cover News released version 9.0, broadening technologies such as AIGC, XR, and large language models. The digital figure “Xiao Feng” has become more mature in video production and drawing capabilities. Additionally, users can create their own digital avatars, possessing exclusive dynamic digital images, and can even invite others to interact in their virtual spaces, which highly enhanced the experience of interaction and socialization within the app.

3. The Impediment of Innovative Transformation of Mainstream Media at the Current Stage

3.1. "Breaking the circle" Obstacle: Weak Emotional Connection

In recent years, Chinese netizens have exhibited a diversified and younger demographic profile, with the younger generation emerging as the dominant force in the digital era. By delving into the younger demographic, mainstream media can gain a better understanding of the younger generation's ideological trends and value orientations, thereby better guiding public opinion and disseminating positive energy. Against this backdrop, mainstream media are undergoing a youth-oriented transformation, adapting their narrative styles and approaches to engage younger users. However, despite the efforts of mainstream media to cater to the tastes of young people, there still exist some challenges and difficulties.

Taking Cover News as an example, in the interactive section of the app, the combination of new technology and creative animation has disrupted the traditional flat and one-dimensional communication model of news media, bringing young users a completely new experience. However, in the open and interconnected environment of the internet, along with the attractiveness of content, social interaction is also an important factor for users to consider when selecting a platform. The existing interactive programs mostly adopt a single-player exploration mode, lacking the companionship of other users or digital characters. Moreover, they mostly take the form of disposable mini-games that are unable to provide long-term emotional value for users, resulting in a relatively short lifespan.

Furthermore, from the perspective of young users, they tend to have a strong desire for “community” interaction and focus on personalized information needs. Although many mainstream media have been making efforts to shorten content length, enrich content topics, adopt a humorous language style, and produce user-friendly content, they still find themselves in an awkward situation of “changing language style but not the core of mainstream culture”, and the willingness of the younger generation to actively browse mainstream media works remains insufficient. Therefore, in order to better attract young users,

mainstream media need to further explore how to ensure content quality while enhancing social interaction and meeting the demands for personalized information.

3.2. Content Giving Way to Form

In the context of media convergence, intelligent technology not only provides powerful hardware support for the innovative reporting formats of mainstream media, but also promotes their deep integration of media and technology. However, although immersive reporting can enhance the audience's sensory experience and perceptual understanding, it may also lead to deviations in the audience's cognition of news content. Overemphasis on sensory experience may drown out the key information of the news, thus weakening the effectiveness of its dissemination. Taking Cover News' coverage of the Two Sessions as an example, the use of immersive interactive spaces to some extent diminishes the seriousness of the topics. This highly interactive reporting style may cause the audience to excessively focus on the form and neglect the content, leading to a decreased understanding and concern for the important topics of the Two Sessions. Therefore, while utilizing new technology to innovate reporting formats, Cover News also needs to maintain attention and control over the quality of news content, ensuring that it effectively conveys the core information of the news while providing rich sensory experiences, and avoids falling into the fallacy of "form over substance".

4. Strategies for Deep Integration and Transformation of Mainstream Media

4.1. The Journalism Industry Driven by Technology: Adhering to Content as King

In the wave of digital technology, the journalism industry has undergone unprecedented changes. From early days of printing technology to the internet and social media today, every technological advancement has reshaped the production, distribution, and consumption patterns of news. However, amidst this flood of change, the core of journalism - "recording, restoring, and disseminating recently occurred facts" - has remained unchanged. We are now in an era where "everyone has a microphone", and the production and dissemination of information have become more rapid and widespread than ever before. With the emergence of diverse content forms such as social media, short video platforms, and blogs, the journalism industry faces unprecedented competition and challenges. If mainstream media want to stand out in such an environment, they must segment the market and refine their content.

Mainstream media should fully utilize technological advantages such as big data analysis, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality to deepen the quality and impact of their content. These technologies can help media better understand audience needs and provide more personalized news products. At the same time, they can also enhance user engagement and immersion through innovative forms of expression, such as virtual reality news and interactive reporting. However, technology is only a means, and content is fundamental. In the face of stories that are warm, bright, and powerful, even the most advanced technology can often appear dull. Mainstream media should adhere to the principle of "content is king", use interactive modules as supplements, closely connect with news content, and provide users with deeper and more comprehensive news reports. With the help of technology, mainstream media can better assist users in understanding news, guide them to form the right values, and truly achieve the value of assisting content output. The journalism industry driven by technology has brought both new opportunities and challenges. Only by continuously innovating, producing high-quality news content, and fully utilizing technological advantages can mainstream media remain invincible in this era of constant change.

4.2. Identity Shift: From "Co-Creation of Content" to "Co-Creation of Value"

Against the backdrop of the new media era, the complexity of data and information, coupled with diverse information platforms and user needs have posed significant challenges to the sustainable development of mainstream media. Mainstream media should first transform its identity from a single content producer to a collection of diverse content and a dissemination platform, truly forming an information ecosystem that co-creates content and value with users.

In terms of "co-creation of content", mainstream media, with their robust capabilities in information gathering, publication, and influence, guide the direction of public opinion and shape societal consensus. With their professional news editing teams, mainstream media can produce high-quality contents, which are then distributed across multiple channels and platforms to ensure the widespread dissemination of

information. However, with the popularization of the internet and the rise of new media, there has been a significant change in the pattern of information dissemination. Users are no longer just receivers of information, they have become producers and disseminators of information. In this context, mainstream media should grasp the diverse resources provided by different users, actively engaging with them to involve them in the creation and dissemination of content, co-creating content and shaping public opinion with them.

As for “co-creation of value”, mainstream media should no longer limit themselves to being platforms for information provision. Instead, they should interact with users to understand their needs and interests, providing more targeted and personalized information services. Simultaneously, mainstream media should collaborate with users to create value and achieve mutual benefit. Taking Cover News as an example, it should adhere to mainstream values in guiding its algorithms, adhering to a real, authoritative, mainstream, and professional editorial approach. It should capture events that truly merit news coverage, while enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of its algorithms to ensure that users are presented with the information they need and prefer upon opening the app.

5. Conclusion

In the era of integrated media, the development and transformation of mainstream media is a long-term and arduous task. Under the background that the country attaches great importance to the leading value of mainstream media and promotes its transformation and upgrading, the leading value of mainstream media ought to shoulder the mission of condensing ideological consensus and constructing mainstream values. It must be based on high-quality content, guided by leading values, and deeply integrated into the user community, and bringing them a richer and better media experience.

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