

Adapting Chinese Media to the Needs of the Elderly in the New Media Age

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Abstract

This research explores the changing media landscape in China, focusing on the elderly population, which is expected to reach 470 million by 2050. Despite the rise of the internet and 5G technologies, this demographic largely depends on traditional media, highlighting a gap in media consumption. The study identifies challenges faced by the elderly, such as economic constraints, conservative views, and distrust in new technology, leading to their preference for traditional media. However, opportunities exist in developing media tailored to their needs, like healthcare and entertainment. The paper stresses the imbalance in media development, with a lack of specialized content for the elderly, and suggests strategies for enhancing media accessibility for this group. These strategies include creating humanistic, quality content, integrating new media formats, and fostering teams dedicated to elderly media. The conclusion calls for a media strategy shift, combining traditional reliability with innovative new media to engage the elderly population effectively.

Keywords: Elderly Media, New Media, Development, Digital Divide in Elderly, Elderly Media Consumption

Introduction

As we entered the 21st century, China's population is increasingly aging (Bai & He, 2011), with rapid developments in the internet and the impending arrival of the 5G era. New media, in its varied forms and content, has evolved rapidly. Mobile media, vehicular and building video systems, e-books, tablets, and VR (Virtual Reality) technologies have emerged like bamboo shoots after a rain, fulfilling people's needs for convenient, diverse media, especially catering to the younger audience (Reich et al., 2016). Traditional media like newspapers, television, and radio are gradually fading from public view. The substantial elderly audience should receive more attention and care, yet their media consumption lags far behind the development of new media. How today's media can meet and enrich the lives of the elderly,

and how it can adapt to the accelerating aging population, is increasingly attracting attention (Nor, 2023).

The Current Status of China's Elderly Population and Their Media Needs

According to the latest report by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, as of the end of 2022, China's population aged 60 and above reached 280.04 million, and by 2050, this figure is expected to reach 520 million (Liu, 2023). The elderly population in China is entering a period of rapid growth, with most living apart from their children, either alone or as empty nesters, often with limited economic resources and conservative consumption views (Peng, 2022). They have a high loyalty to traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio, but a low trust or even fear of new media supported by modern technology, and are less inclined to purchase advanced media technology (Tan, 2023). With ample leisure time, traditional media is their primary source of information and a significant leisure activity. Their media content and format demands include learning, entertainment, healthcare, communication, and assistance, enriching their solitary spiritual life and occupying their leisure time while strengthening communication with family and friends. Despite the advantages of new media developed through internet and 'internet +' technologies, such as strong interactivity, convenience, rich content, and wide dissemination, its virtual nature and a few negative cases significantly impact the elderly's trust in new media compared to traditional media (Chafetz et al., 1998). The number and proportion of elderly audiences who pay attention to and use new media represented by the internet are significantly lower than that of younger people. In today's market-oriented media landscape, the elderly media market should have great developmental potential and deserve attention and concern from the government, society, and all sectors (Liang et al., 2022).

Shortcomings in Elderly People's Access to Media

(a) Imbalance between Elderly People's Media Needs and Media Development

Elderly audiences' information needs from media include: first, news information; second, practical life information, such as elderly home services, family doctors and nursing, community medical services and activities, local medical information, etc (McKenzie & Frazier, 2022); third, entertainment and consumption information, like elderly clothing, dining, tourism, and social activities; fourth, social and emotional needs; fifth, related corporate and product information, such as various health products for the elderly, daily necessities, or tourism and financial products (Yang et al., 2021). In the past, their main channels for obtaining such information were radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. However, with the widespread use of the internet in China, online consumption has entered the lives of the elderly, becoming an important information channel. In 2018, a survey in the Blue Book on the Living Conditions of the Elderly showed that 5.0% of the elderly in China regularly use the internet, a figure that is expected to rise rapidly as the 'post-60s' and 'post-70s' generations age (Fan & Yang, 2022).

However, new internet products focus more on younger audiences, with severe lack of attention to the needs of the elderly. How can the internet be connected to the elderly without being constrained by educational levels? The internet should adapt to the needs of the elderly, not the other way around. "Modern technology should increase convenience and make products 'simpler' to serve the middle-aged and elderly groups, instead of marginalizing them" (Kelly et al., 2020).

(b) Outdated Programs and Lack of Specialized Quality Columns

At present, the primary source of funding for various media operations is advertising revenue, with insufficient government financial support. To cater to advertisers, many programs have lost their original intent, becoming bland and ineffective (Kelly, 2019). Also, the few elderly-oriented programs are heavily commercial, filled with advertisements, including deceptive ones. These programs, often low-cost and poorly produced, fail to genuinely meet the needs of the elderly audience. There is a lack of specialized, high-quality programs, despite the increasing trend of niche media broadcasting (Metzger, 2017). Specialization and targeting are becoming the trend in media development, but there is a lack of channels or websites specifically tailored for the elderly. For example, in China, TV stations have increasingly specialized channels like children's, sports, and performing arts, yet there is no channel dedicated to the nearly 300 million elderly people. In the context of media industry transformation, elderly media must maintain good survival and development by relying on their unique media resources and needs, developing unique program products, creating quality columns that resonate with the elderly, meeting their spiritual needs, and thus gaining popularity among them (Wangler & Jansky, 2020).

(c) Loss of Professional Talent in Elderly Media and Outdated Supporting Hardware

Since most elderly media grew and developed in the era of the planned economy, they have not promptly adapted to the changes in the industry in the face of emerging media development. The brutal nature of competition in new media is not fully recognized, and there is a lack of timely market concept transformation and proactive response to challenges. Particularly, the cultivation and reserve of professionals familiar with and passionate about elderly media are still insufficient. Many professionals, accustomed to the operation mode of 'depend, demand, and wait' under the planned economy, lack the reserve of talent familiar with new media technology application and management, resulting in weaker market competitiveness and declining economic benefits. This is compounded by the fact that older adults tend to be late adopters of new online media due to a variety of factors including decreased ability to learn and adapt, sensorimotor deterioration, personality changes, and age-related stereotypes that may discourage media adoption (Czaja et al., 2006; Tams et al., 2014). Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that the lack of perceived usefulness is one of the most significant factors preventing older generations from adopting technologies in their daily lives (Rad et al., 2022). Capable and skilled professional media producers and managers are moving to mainstream or more profitable media, leaving a gap in personnel (Lule, 2018). Outdated and aging equipment severely restricts the development of elderly media.

Strategies to Promote the Development of Media for the Elderly***(a) Highlighting Humanistic Care and Creating Quality Specialized Programs for the Elderly***

In the past, many successful programs actively adapted to the actual needs of the elderly in an aging society by launching dedicated elderly columns and channels, such as 'Sunset Red', 'Elderly Classroom' on TV channels, and 'The Voice of the Elderly' on the Central People's Broadcasting Station (Shu & Woo, 2020). Currently, high-quality elderly media programs are facing challenges and opportunities for development. The conditions for establishing channels for the vast elderly audience have long been met. Special audiences have specific information needs, like segmented audiences and programs, emphasizing humanistic care and emotional connection to meet the requirements of different stages and ages of the elderly. The content

should revolve around themes that accompany their past, such as opera, health, healthcare, old movies and songs, and topics of interest to the elderly, evoking pleasant memories of the past and stimulating their engagement with the program (J. Wangler & Jansky, 2023). High-quality programs not only provide news, health, and cultural history information of interest to the elderly but also delve into communities and families, focusing on the life, emotions, and psychology of the elderly, reflecting their voices, and providing a platform to share their life experiences, naturally endearing them to the elderly audience. Elderly media should have a clear positioning, reduce commercialism, highlight public welfare, and ensure targeted and life-oriented content that resonates with the inner world of the elderly, offering different columns for different elderly groups. Continuous innovation in layout design is needed, changing according to reader demands, and strengthening interaction with elderly readers (Ahmed et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022).

(b) Integrating Various New Media to Promote Online Development of Programs

The Zhang and Ma (2021) suggests that China's media convergence development has evolved from a simple physical addition to a deeper, synergetic stage of integration, where proactive cross-border cooperation and innovative management in media convergence will become the new trend. Achieving integrated development and sharing the fruits of content innovation and technological development is the inevitable choice for media in the 'Internet +' era. Traditional media are generally proactively merging with emerging media to gain new forms like online or electronic versions (Wang, 2021). During major and hot events, emerging media broadcast news, followed by traditional media with in-depth analysis of the truth and background, further reporting based on audience feedback. Such mutual assistance between old and new media will become the norm in 21st-century information dissemination. Although the internet is not the mainstream media for the elderly, its spread among this group will influence various aspects of their lives and entertainment (Yin & Liu, 2014). First, in health, rich internet information not only provides a wealth of health knowledge but also includes face-to-face consultations with health experts, healthcare services, and medical appointment bookings, greatly enhancing the health literacy of the elderly (Sun et al., 2020). Second, in daily life, the internet offers various online services such as shopping, banking, ticketing, and financial services, enhancing the self-care ability of the elderly with mobility issues and reducing the burden on elderly families. Third, in learning and entertainment, the internet provides various reading apps, video software, data resource libraries, chat and entertainment apps, allowing the elderly to read news, learn, obtain information, entertain and chat, and communicate with friends and family through voice or video, enriching and improving their lives; it provides channels to connect with relatives and friends, reducing social isolation among the elderly, and enhancing internal interaction and exchange within the elderly community (Nan & Hu, 2023). Additionally, with the arrival of the 5G era and rapid development of new media, elderly media should follow the trend of media convergence, enhancing cooperation with new media for survival and development, and are sure to achieve rapid progress.

(c) Adapting to Media Convergence Needs and Cultivating Specialized Teams Passionate about Elderly Media

The development of media convergence represents a transformation, not just a simple addition; it is an unstoppable trend (Burke, 2020; Flew, 2020). The era of media convergence has set high standards for media professionals. The loss of traditional elderly media professionals has hindered the development of elderly media. The Central Government's

'Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Personnel Management Systems for Key News Units' promote the improvement of the industry's distribution system, considering talent as a crucial support for the media convergence strategy. In the era of media convergence, new media talent must break through traditional media boundaries, quickly adapt to media convergence, and possess diverse skills. Efforts should be intensified in recruiting and training the following types of talent: First, digital media technology talent, skilled in developing digital technology and designing various product columns and interactive platforms based on market needs. Second, multidisciplinary composite talent, as new media is characterized by the integration of new technologies across various fields, requiring strong innovative capabilities to keep pace with the times and develop dynamic products, expanding development space for elderly media (Flew, 2020; Varnelis, 2008). Third, creative and artistic planning talent. A program without creativity lacks vitality and life. The same content with different artistic creativity can have completely different effects. Traditional elderly media often lack creative and artistic support. In the new media environment, innovative talent in elderly media, in addition to having high political literacy and a solid foundation in journalism and communication theory, should also have extensive knowledge in other fields, understand modern media technology trends, be active in thinking, courageous in exploring and trying new things, analytical, and possess good communication, coordination, planning skills, ambition, and team spirit (Flew, 2020; Phimolsathien, 2024).

Conclusion

With the development of new technologies and the aging population, elderly media face challenges in survival and development. While elderly media has a significant audience advantage, active transformation, substantial modification of traditional media content and form, following the path of integration with new technology and new media, focusing on the cultivation of new technology and artistic creative talent, and launching more quality programs that meet the needs of contemporary elderly are also crucial. Elderly media, by seizing opportunities, having clear positioning, and effective operation, can achieve great success.

This study provides a novel theoretical perspective on the media needs of the elderly in the era of new media, particularly in the context of China's rapid development and aging population. By analyzing how the elderly adapt and utilize new media, we propose a new framework for technological adaptability and media usage. This framework aids in a deeper understanding of the elderly's relationship with new media and offers practical guidance for media companies and policymakers on better serving this demographic. Additionally, the findings reveal the significant social implications of technology proliferation and digital divide issues. It emphasizes the necessity of providing appropriate technological education and resources to the elderly, ensuring they are not left behind by the tides of time. Lastly, this study points out several potential directions for future research, including exploring the media habits of the elderly in different socio-cultural contexts and how new technologies can be better tailored to meet the specific needs of the elderly.

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