

Grassroots Communication: County-Level Media Convergence and the Practice of Civilization in the New Era

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, China has made substantial strides in the establishment of county-level media convergence centers, which have become instrumental in advancing grassroots governance and promoting civic culture in the New Era. Despite notable achievements, a range of structural and operational challenges remain. This paper draws upon field investigations and empirical data collected from multiple county-level media convergence centers in Shaanxi Province to critically examine current limitations and explore potential solutions. The analysis identifies rural towns and villages as the "last mile" in the implementation of New Era Civilization Practice Centers. It further investigates how publicity and communication systems can be effectively extended to the grassroots level and how the construction of spiritual civilization can be enhanced through the digital capacities of county-level media platforms. The study ultimately demonstrates that the integration of digital media into local governance not only facilitates more effective grassroots management but also embodies a people-centered approach to governance in contemporary China.

KEYWORDS

County-level media convergence centers; Media integration; Social governance

1 Introduction

On September 17, 2020, during a symposium with grassroots representatives, national leaders emphasized that during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, "greater efforts should be made to strengthen grassroots infrastructure and improve grassroots governance capabilities." This statement underscores the growing strategic significance of the grassroots level in China's broader trajectory of reform and development. As the core implementing bodies of our country, grassroots organizations serve as a cornerstone of the national governance system.

Since the National Conference on August 19, 2013, where the foundational principles of media convergence were formally articulated, China has made rapid progress in the development of integrated media systems. By the end of 2020, county-level media convergence centers had been comprehensively established across the country. In response to this evolving landscape, the "Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035," explicitly called for "advancing deep media convergence and strengthening new mainstream media."

These top-level strategic frameworks, along with the tangible achievements of media convergence, reflect the dual advancement of media integration and the modernization of social governance. County-level media convergence centers are no longer merely grassroots communication entities; they have emerged as essential platforms supporting the modernization of China's national governance system (Deng, Y. X., & Zhu, C. Y., 2022, August 12).

2 Understanding county-level media convergence: three dimensions

County-level media convergence can be analyzed through three interrelated dimensions that reflect both its functional positioning and structural transformation in the digital era.

From the perspective of practical information dissemination in grassroots settings, county-level media convergence is primarily a top-down ideological initiative shaped by decentralized structures and technologically enhanced communication capacities. It plays a central role in promoting public discourse, guiding societal values, and serving local communities. This is embodied in its threefold functional orientation: acting as a platform for mainstream ideological communication, an integrated service provider, and a localized information hub. The successful implementation of these roles hinges on strong service capabilities. While the goal of shaping public opinion is conceptually straightforward, translating this into practice requires sustained, detailed, and context-sensitive efforts. Only by offering meaningful and accessible services can county-level media centers gain public trust and foster deep-rooted acceptance of their messaging, ultimately enhancing their ability to influence public discourse.

In addition to its ideological function, county-level media convergence supports digital governance by reshaping local social relations and fostering renewed community identification. Against the backdrop of evolving information demands in the digital era, these centers serve as a grassroots response to the pressure for transformation. Unlike national or provincial media outlets, county-level institutions often face significant constraints in talent and production resources.

Their limited capacity to generate news content—particularly in online and mobile formats—has made it increasingly difficult to attract users and maintain influence. Traditional dissemination models are no longer sufficient to sustain audience engagement or support viable business models, necessitating the adoption of innovative digital strategies.

At the same time, the expansion of capital into grassroots media markets has been accelerated by the saturation of urban markets and the search for new growth areas. The ongoing development of China's market economy has intensified the tension between growing cultural consumption needs and underdeveloped media infrastructure in rural areas. Rural residents also seek access to high-quality cultural content and services. Leveraging internet technologies, media organizations are increasingly engaging with grassroots audiences, contributing to shifts in local social structures. As rural internet use expands, the potential of these previously underserved markets becomes more apparent. Media enterprises are breaking through regional consumption boundaries, cultivating new habits such as online shopping in rural communities, and fostering a new model of urban-rural interaction facilitated by digital media.

3 The operational logic of grassroots media participation in social governance

The conference identified the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity as the important goal of deepening reforms. As part of this agenda, modernizing governance structures and capabilities at the county level has become a key focus. The realization of this goal depends largely on the coordinated development of intelligent media, smart governance, and smart city operations. Intelligent media strengthens the state's capacity for communication and public opinion guidance, smart governance enhances digital government services, and smart city initiatives facilitate comprehensive digital service and governance capabilities at the local level (Guo, Q. Z., & Liu, J. N., 2021).

Extending the Functionality of County-Level Media: From News Production to Integrated Information Services

"the modernization of a country's governance system and capacity is largely reflected at the grassroots level. If the grassroots is unstable, the entire foundation will be shaken (Zhang, M. Y., 2020)." The grassroots represents both the frontline of policy implementation and the focal point of social tensions. As the internet continues to penetrate rural areas, county-level media convergence centers are not only fulfilling their traditional media functions of disseminating information but are also actively reconstructing their commercial and revenue models to provide comprehensive services to local residents. By embedding themselves in local daily life, these centers attract users and expand influence. For example, data-driven grid governance allows local authorities to detect and address issues proactively, thereby embodying the people-centered development philosophy outlined.

4 Normative application of county-level media in social governance

In the context of internet-based capital operations and disorderly competition in lower-tier markets, the lack of social responsibility among certain platforms has become increasingly apparent. While government regulation remains essential, it is equally important for county-level media centers to assume a proactive role in organizing communities and shaping new governance frameworks. Rather than pursuing profit as their ultimate goal, these platforms should prioritize public service and civic engagement (ChinaCivilization Network., 2019, April 15). Rooted in local contexts, county-level media possess a unique capacity to mediate between citizens and government, facilitating both top-down communication and bottom-up feedback. Economically, such platforms capitalize on user engagement and traffic, operating as integrated hubs that combine local broadcasting, print, digital, governance, and value-added services—all centered around community service delivery (Zhang, H. B., Liu, W., Wang, J. Q., & Zhang, J. J., 2020).

These centers are distinguished by their deep integration into grassroots life and their focus on hyperlocal information services. As noted by scholars, "county-level media convergence centers, which combine information collection, processing, and dissemination, are entrusted with multiple governance functions such as grassroots information assistance and digital poverty alleviation" Moreover, the implementation of the Standards for County-Level Media Convergence Center Construction has encouraged innovative models such as "media + Party building." This model reinforces ideological leadership through people-centered service practices. For instance, the Fuping County Media Convergence Center in Shaanxi Province launched the "Red Storytelling in Villages" campaign—transforming official narratives about revolutionary figures into vernacular language that resonates with local audiences, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of theoretical communication.

5 Active engagement between county-level media and rural revitalization

Following the successful completion of China's targeted poverty alleviation campaign in 2020 and the launch of the 14th Five-Year Plan, rural revitalization has become the central task in the "agriculture, rural areas, and farmers" agenda (Lü, X. Y., 2019, December 10). County-level media convergence centers are now expected to go beyond traditional media

functions and actively participate in e-commerce initiatives, promoting local agricultural products and artisanal crafts. These efforts support poverty alleviation and contribute to the broader strategy of rural revitalization.

According to data released by Shaanxi Broadcasting and Television Network, as of July 2020, 91 county-level media convergence platforms had been launched, with 108 expected to be fully operational by the end of the year (Sha, Y., & Xu, N., 2021). These multi-level and cross-regional platforms integrate media resources at the provincial, municipal, and county levels, ensuring seamless communication and information sharing. By adopting a “six-in-one” communication model—newspaper, TV, website, microblog, mobile app, and public screen—these platforms enhance communication power, guidance capacity, influence, and public credibility, thereby providing robust infrastructure for rural development.

County-level platforms in Shaanxi have also launched innovative service models under the “media + N” framework. One notable example is the “media + livestreaming” model, which utilizes local advantages to break traditional market barriers and support rural industries through public-interest livestreaming campaigns. In 2019 alone, livestreamed sales of Shaanxi apples exceeded RMB 400 million, while kiwifruit sales reached over RMB 200 million. Other products—such as carrots from Dali, tomatoes from Jingyang, and grains from Mizhi—have also experienced significant market growth, transforming once-obscure rural goods into popular online commodities. In total, livestream sales of Shaanxi agricultural products reached 1.7 million tons in 2019, demonstrating the model’s effectiveness in alleviating logistical bottlenecks during the post-pandemic period and overcoming the limitations of traditional offline sales channels.

Among digital empowerment models, “Tencent for Village” stands out as a representative case. Developed by Tencent, this smart village information service platform aims to “connect information, wealth, and community” by leveraging digital tools to promote rural prosperity and quality of life. The platform empowers rural communities through both technological and organizational innovation, expanding communication channels between villagers and higher-level administrative departments. Functions such as “village affairs disclosure,” “financial transparency,” and “targeted poverty alleviation” allow local governments to disseminate policies and service guides directly to residents, who can access real-time information via their smartphones and resolve concerns through online interaction. Features like “village committee elections” facilitate democratic participation, while the platform overall enhances rural governance efficiency, supports cultural development, and optimizes local resource allocation.

6 New approaches to building county-level media convergence and new era civilization practice centers

County-level media convergence centers are deeply embedded within grassroots society, rooted in local communities, and structurally connected to governance frameworks at multiple levels. They function as vertical conduits for communication with county-level Party committees and governments, as horizontal linkages with county agencies and township administrations, and as downward extensions that reach into communities, villages, and frontline public life. Politically, these centers are not mere symbolic instruments or top-down ideological impositions; rather, they are actively integrated into the production and dissemination of local political culture. They enable not only top-down dissemination of official discourse but also facilitate bottom-up feedback and public participation in governance.

7 Advancing civilization practices in rural communities

The construction of New Era Civilization Practice Centers is a major strategic decision made by the state. It represents a key institutional vehicle for strengthening socialist ideology and promoting spiritual civilization with both vitality and creative capacity. The “last mile” in both spatial and psychological terms lies not at the county level but in rural villages. Reaching the grassroots is fundamental to fulfilling the Party’s people-centered governance philosophy and is a concrete embodiment of the principle of “serving the people wholeheartedly.”

8 Leveraging new media to extend publicity into villages

With the development of digital technologies, modes of information dissemination in rural China are undergoing rapid transformation. Cultural activities such as public square dancing have become more than recreational exercises—they are also indicators of grassroots organizational vitality. These activities, along with rural speech competitions and flag-raising ceremonies, have become integral parts of everyday cultural life, revitalizing rural communities. Young people in small towns are increasingly capturing attention through digital storytelling on large screens, while livestreaming and short video platforms are gaining popularity among villagers, who are not only consumers of content but also active producers sharing rural life and showcasing the development of modern agriculture and village culture.

Although smartphones are inherently individualized media devices, platforms like WeChat and group sharing mechanisms have restructured a sense of virtual community solidarity. When supported by physical space, community atmosphere, and coordinated publicity efforts, these digital networks serve as organizational tools for civilization

promotion. This digital infrastructure, extended into village life, becomes a critical lever for engaging cultural dissemination in grassroots governance.

9 Enhancing volunteer engagement for civilizational practice

To promote high-quality development of New Era Civilization Practices, it is essential to explore innovative models of cooperative engagement—such as “paired assistance” and mutual support mechanisms. These approaches are particularly important for addressing regional disparities and the uneven development between rural and urban areas. In under-resourced regions, such as central and western China, impoverished rural areas, and underserved urban communities, the lack of funding, talent, and project infrastructure necessitates the development of more inclusive support systems. Paired cooperation and mutual aid initiatives can inject new energy and perspectives into civilization practice work, expanding its reach nationwide.

For example, strengthening the role of New Era Civilization Practice Centers in urban areas should not rely solely on community-based implementation or administrative directives. Instead, local governments, public institutions, schools, and enterprises should be mobilized to support and co-develop civilization initiatives. Public and private sector collaboration can create a joint platform—what might be called a “civilization practice consortium”—to ensure more robust and sustainable service delivery.

In response to the specific challenges of staffing in aging urban neighborhoods, cities should leverage their resource advantages by recruiting vocational colleges, cultural organizations, and art troupes to form dedicated volunteer service teams. Through “one-to-one” and “point-to-point” support models, these teams can match with targeted communities. This model not only utilizes volunteers’ expertise in ideological education and cultural programming but also offers a reliable source of human capital to sustain long-term initiatives. In doing so, the vitality and effectiveness of volunteerism are enhanced, and the metaphorical “last mile” of civilization practice and volunteer service is meaningfully bridged.

10 Conclusion: integrating the people to unlock collaborative governance at the grassroots level

County-level media convergence centers play a vital role in the reconstruction and governance of grassroots society, adhering to a logic centered on integrating and organizing the people. This model emphasizes participatory governance—where collective affairs are deliberated and decided collectively. These centers function as extensions of both national and social governance structures, fulfilling their core mission of guiding and serving the public. While at times they may exhibit an eagerness for audience engagement and user conversion, this orientation should not be mistaken for platform capitalism driven by the exploitation of user surplus value. Rather, such pursuits are rooted in a desire to reconstruct public discourse platforms that enhance the social influence and communicative power of county-level media.

As governance platforms embedded within grassroots communities, county-level media convergence centers facilitate localized services through organizational innovation and digital infrastructure. In doing so, they foster coordination among diverse and dispersed actors involved in local governance. This not only responds to the demand for effective governance at the grassroots level but also offers a form of resistance to the dominance of profit-driven digital platforms. Ultimately, by prioritizing collective engagement and public interest, these centers exemplify a people-centered governance approach that reinforces the legitimacy, responsiveness, and resilience of China’s evolving media and governance systems.

Funding

Xi'an international University “Research on cross-cultural communication strategy of Xi'an international city image” (NO: 21JK0318)

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