

Literary publishing in a Connected Digital World

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In the early years of digital publishing, there was a widespread saying that, the publishing industry used the technology of the 17th century and the business model of the 19th century to survive in the 21st century. Some may disagree, saying that the technologies and business models of publishing industry do evolve in many aspects. However, it makes sense by pointing out the vulnerability of publishing, as the world's oldest media industry, to digital disruption today. From rich media, to big data, virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and blockchain, the technologies being applied in the publishing world are changing more rapidly than traditional publishers could possibly understand and handle. Empowered by emergent technologies, the business models of digital content are evolving dramatically as well, constantly bringing new concepts and practices to the market. All these challenges and threatens traditional publishing business. It is thus understandable that the topics such as the death of publishers are constantly put at the centre of academic and industry discourses. A typical question that has been repeatedly asked for decades, and will still be asked in a foreseeable future is: Can publishers survive this wave of giant digital disruption?

Instead of a simple answer of Yes or No, what's fascinating to me in the publishing world today, however, is the complex interplay between the print and the digital, between the traditional and the emergent, and between the established and the disruptive, as well as their co-evolution in the digital transformation. The term "convergence" is widely used to describe the merging of previously distinct media technologies and media forms in the process of digitisation today, as well as the business strategies for surviving the convergent new media environment. Some publishing scholars in Australia employ the term 'post-digital', referring to 'a state of constant flux, shifting between old and new media practices in paradoxical ways that simultaneously reinforce and undermine aspects of traditional print culture'.

In this talk, I will offer a relevant but different perspective to understand the complex interplay between the new and the old in digital publishing, through the particular lens of connectedness. I will mostly draw on the innovative practices in China's digital publishing sector, which is one of the world's largest and most dynamic digital innovation ecosystems, but the discussion is about the issues facing literary publishing globally.

As we know, publishing is by nature a business that connects authors, content and readers. For centuries, connecting the right people with right content has been crucial value proposition of publishers. Today, we live in a digital world characterised by ubiquitous connectedness, where everyone and everything are being connected everywhere and every time, based on the connectivity offered by Internet platforms, networked technologies, social media, and data-driven algorithms. While ubiquitous connectedness empowers and enhances publishers' traditional role of

connecting people with content, digital connectivity also disrupts traditional models of publishing and bypasses traditional publishers as intermediaries and gatekeepers. In this talk, I will focus on three major aspects of connectedness in literary publishing and discuss what they mean for publishers. The three interrelated aspects include connected content, connected platforms, and connected communities.

By **connected content**, I mean two things: Firstly, literary content no longer exists in a single media form such as physical book or eBook; Rather, literary content and its adaptations appear in multiple forms across the entire media spectrum. Secondly, transmedia content does not exist in isolation, but is highly connected with each other through integrated platforms and content discovery algorithms. Such connected transmedia content offers audience consistent storytelling experience whereby readers can easily access the imagined story world across media forms. This is redefining the pleasure of 'reading' literature.

Audiobook is one of the most noticeable examples of transmedia expansion of literary content. Since 2016, digital audiobooks show an average of over 20% increase in most important markets in the world. In 2018, the economic scale of Chinese audiobook market was over 4.6 billion RMB Yuan (roughly AU \$1 Billion) almost as large as its eBook market; Further, 60% of audiobook users were below 30 years old, which suggests huge potential for future growth. Audiobooks have existed for decades, but digital audiobooks thrived only in recent years. Empowered by mobile Internet and smart phones, digital audiobooks make the access to literary content extremely convenient for people in mobility and in their fragmented time. Digital audiobooks also expand the narrative of storytelling, either by professional narrators, or A.I. powered text-to-speech technologies.

Like audiobooks, emergent technologies and connected transmedia content have also changed the adaptation of fictions. The scope and scale of adaptation become extremely broad, spanning across the entire media spectrum. Many Chinese popular fictions, particularly online literature titles, are not only adapted into TV series or films, but also comics, animations, video games, audio dramas, mobile phone games, online games, interactive reading apps, and virtual reality experiences. As mentioned earlier, transmedia content is highly connected in the platform environment. The user interfaces in digital content platforms and mobile phone apps are carefully designed enabling users to seamlessly shift from one media form to another. As such, a viewer watching a TV drama in an online video platform may be navigated to an eBook store or an online bookstore to buy the book; Likewise, a game player might be introduced to an animation platform to continue his or her adventure in the same imagined story-world. Such industrialised and cross-platform transmedia storytelling is increasingly prevalent in China's digital publishing system. In western practices, it usually takes decades for the adaptations of a popular fiction to fulfil the entire transmedia spectrum, but it takes a much shorter period of time in China. Transmedia storytelling is even planned in advance in some online fiction projects. In the field of popular literature, connected transmedia content is of value for literary publishing, particularly in the age of transmedia competition where a book's competitor is not another book, but anything that attracts people's time and attention. Connected transmedia content enriches readerly experience, increases the pleasure of literature consumption, and widens the access to the literature world. This is especially valuable for turning fragmented and dead time into reading time and converting those who don't read into literature consumers.

While the rise of connected transmedia content helps literary publishing, it starts to deeply shape publishing business in China. This relates to my second aspect, **connected platforms**. Internet platforms are enabling digital infrastructure for connected transmedia content, and the connection

between literary publishing and platform economy tend to complicate publishing models. For example, China Literature, the largest online literature company, had nearly 30% of its revenue generated from various cross-platform online business, and about 10% from IP operation in 2018; the free model of digital literature is thriving in many platforms, which totally relies on revenues generated from IP franchising, online advertising, or cross-subsidies from e-commerce.

The new business models help publishers monetise popular content through multiple channels and increases the financial sustainability of literary publishing based on broader digital creative economy. However, the changing publishing economy in the platform age raises significant issues for literary publishers: What is the role of publishers in the extended value chain of digital literary publishing? And what are publishers' key value propositions in the platform economy? There are some worrisome trends in China and beyond, where Internet platforms are marginalising publishers' roles as intermediaries, gatekeepers, and taste-makers, as a result of which, traditional literary publishing is at risk of becoming simply intellectual property source material for transmedia adaptation.

This has profound impact on literary publishing as platforms understand the value of literature differently, more from the technological and economic perspectives than cultural and aesthetic. To platforms, literature is nothing but another instrument for attracting Internet traffic and generating user/usage data. Moreover, the platformised digital publishing world is built upon algorithms that determine the discoverability, visibility and popularity of content, resulting in uniformity of online literature. With the widespread awareness of algorithms, in China and other countries, it is even becoming a surviving skill for content creators and an emergent business to optimise literary content for searching and content recommending engines, for instance, intentionally using specific styles or vocabularies that the algorithms favour. A data-driven future in literary publishing might be worrisome. Just like sociologists questioning whether sociality should be engineered and quantified by platforms like Facebook, literature people have more reasons to question whether literary communication should be datafied and literary taste 'algorithmised'.

What should we do? This brings me to my last point, **connected communities**. In the digital world of ubiquitous connectedness, authors, readers, fans, interested publics, and like-minded people are connected more closely than ever before, across media forms and distribution channels, and increasingly across the boundaries of cultures, languages and nations. In other words, the shared imagined story-world, ideas or literary tastes, bring together people despite their locations, identities and backgrounds. While Internet platforms and algorithm try to quantify and datafy human connections in inhuman ways, we should not ignore that, many online literature platforms, such as Wattpad and Qidian, started out as community initiatives, and their powerful algorithms are by nature only the partial quantification and datafication of people connections and their collective intelligence.

Literary theorist Gayatri Spivak believes literature is an antidote to data-based digital neoliberal capitalism. I would argue that, connected communities (or people) are a powerful force against dataism in the literary publishing world. While there is a plethora of big data cliché, it is time for publishers to rethink their unique value propositions, i.e. what they could offer while platforms couldn't. In my view, there are opportunities in connecting people beyond the data-driven and algorithm-based paradigm. Despite platform dominance, it is still necessary and important to ask about alternatives underpinned by different values like diversity, independence and humanism, as well as the possibility for a different literary sphere in the connected digital world.

面对数字化世界的文学出版业

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在出版数字化初级阶段，有种广泛的说法，说出版业用十七世纪的技术十九世纪的经营模式在二十一世纪打拼。有人可能不同意这种说法，认为出版业的技术与经营模式在很多方面都进步了。然而必须指出，作为世界上最古老的媒介方式，出版业还是斗不过今天的数字化。如今的媒体运作日新月异，多媒体，虚拟现实，实景增强技术，人工智能以及区块链技术等；变化之快，传统保守的出版人恐怕只能望其项背吧。借着新兴的科技手段，数字化文学作品的经营模式得到了突飞猛进的发展，不断给市场带来新观念新方法。所有这些都给传统的出版业带来挑战甚至威胁。这也不难理解为什么出版界内的研究人员和经营者们总是把出版业的消亡挂在嘴边。多少年来人们反复在问一个问题，而且这个问题至今没有答案，那就是：出版商们能躲过这场数字化的狂风巨浪吗？

与其简单地回答能或者不能，我更感兴趣的是当今的出版业已经卷入一场多维度的相互作用机制当中了：印刷术与数字化，传统方式与新兴方式，建制体与反建制体；数字化使其共同进步。“融合”这个词被广泛用来形容原有的传媒技术与形式逐渐并入今天的数字环境，并且改变营销战略适应新式的传媒运作。澳大利亚一些研究出版的学者用“后-数字化”一词说明“媒体运作的新旧方式不断交互影响，不分伯仲，其结果既加强也薄弱了传统的印刷文化。”

我今天的演讲是想提供一个不会偏离本意的新视角，通过关键词“连通性”来了解数字化出版界的新旧交替。我主要以中国的数字化出版业为依据，因为中国具备一个世界最大规模的数字生态系统，而且这个系统仍在不断创新。但是我要讨论的问题却是全球都在面对的文学出版困境。

我们都知道出版的宗旨在于联通作者，作品与读者。几百年来找对人找对作品一向是出版商至关重要的前提条件。如今我们生活在一个数字化的世界，连通性无处不在，人人事事都无时无刻地被联系在一起：网络平台，联网技术，社交媒体，数据驱动程序等。然而在出版人显然受益于这种连通性的同时，也不免看到了传统的出版模式受到打击，而且他们已经习惯了的中介以及把关的角色也被忽略了。我在这里想重点讨论连通性的三个方面，及其对文学出版与出版人的意义。这三个方面分别为作品连通，平台连通，及大众连通。

关于作品连通，我的意思包括两个要点：第一，文学作品已经不止体现于纸书媒介或电子书媒介了。文学作品及其改编作品可以以多种形式出现在各种媒介中。第二，网络作品不会孤立存在，而是在网络平台上处处开花，用计算搜索就可以找到。这种在网络上传输的作品可以给受众一种连贯的听故事体验。读者可以通过多媒体接触到同一个故事。这样的“阅读”快感怕是要重新定义了。

有声读物就是一个明显的例子，它通过网络连通扩张了文学作品的影响。自从2016年，数字化有声读物在全球重要的市场平均增长20%。2018年，中国有声读物的经营规模超过4.6亿人民币（大约一亿澳元），几乎与电子书市场平级。另外，有声读物60%的读者为三十岁以下年轻人。2 这意味着未来的市场大有潜力。有声读物已经有几十年的历史，而数字有声读物则近几年才兴旺起来。有了移动网络或者智能手机，那些流动性大没有整块时间的人就可以轻而易举地接触有声读物，欣赏文学作品。有声读物也扩大了专业故事叙述人的听众群，也普及了人工智能驱动的文转声技术。

跟有声读物一样，连通性网络作品的出现也借着数字化丰富了故事的叙述形式。一个作品可以在网络上得到极宽泛的改编。很多中国流行小说，尤其是网络小说，不但被改编成电视剧或者电影，而且还被改编成连环画，动画，电子游戏，广播剧，手机游戏，网络游戏，互动式阅读软件，以及虚拟现实体验。不管是数字作品平台还是手机软件，用户界面都精心设计过。用户可以轻而易举地从一个平台换到另一个平台。比如，一个在网上看电视剧的用户可以转换到一家电子书书店买他想要的书。同样，一个玩电子游戏的用户可以转换到动画平台继续享受他的游戏世界。如此工业化了的垮平台网络在当今的中国数字出版系统变得越来越普遍。

西方国家往往要用几十年的时间才能把一本流行小说改编成多媒体作品。而中国却要快得多。有些网络小说刚出来就已经有多媒体叙述的规划了。对流行作品出版业来说，连通性网络能提供很大的帮助。在这个网络时代，与一本书竞争的未必是另一本书，而是如何吸引受众的注意力。连通性网络作品能够丰富读者的阅读体验，增加读者文学欣赏的快感，拓宽读者接触文学的渠道。就能使读者插空阅读，甚至不看书的也开始看书而言，网络出版不失为有价值的运作。

除了帮助文学出版，连通性网络作品还深度影响了中国的出版营销。这也就是我要谈的第二点，即平台连通。网络平台为连通性网络作品提供了数字化环境。而把文学出版与网络平台连接的经济运作又会使出版模式复杂化。比如，“中国文学社”是一家最大的网络文学出版公司，2018年有30%的净利润来自网络跨平台营销，约10%来自IP操作；而很多平台却只能免费提供网络文学作品，同时靠出卖IP 连销权，网络广告和交叉补贴来获取利润。

新的营销模式帮助出版人通过多渠道把流行文学作品变成钱，也为出版业能在不断创新的数字经济环境中生存下来助了一把力。但是网络时代出版经济的变化也给出版人出了不少难题。在数字化文学出版的价值链上，出版人的位置在哪？出版人在平台经济运作中的关键价值是什么？中国有些趋势令人担心：出版人作为中介人，把关人以及品味鉴定者的身份正在被网络平台边缘化。这样做的结果必然使传统的文学出版业沦为单纯的知识产权源头，只剩下给网络平台提供改编权的份儿了。

这对文学出版业具有深远的影响。因为网络平台理解的文学价值完全不一样，更多的是从技术角度和经济利益出发，而很少顾及文化的以及美学的因素。对网络平台而言，文学只是吸引网络用户加大用户数据的工具而已。平台化了的网络数字出版只关心由大数据运算而得来的结果：即作品的搜索量和关注度，从而使网络文学趋于一体性。随着数据运算的普及，在中国以及其他一些国家，越来越多的文学创作者和新兴的企业把它当作生存的技巧，力争让作品的搜索量最大化。一些搜索软件应运而生，通过某一特定风格或词汇计算出受众的喜好。所以说数据驱动的文学出版业令人担忧。正像一些社会学家质疑的那样，人的社会性是否应该在像“脸书”这样的网络平台上被操纵，被量化。尤其是作文学创作的人更有理由质问文学是否应该被数据化，文学品味被程序化。

我们应该怎么办？这就是我想讨论的最后一点，大众连通。数字化的世界被普遍连通。作者，读者，粉丝，对文学感兴趣的大众，再加上品味相似的人们都被网络联系到了一起，前所未有。各种媒体以及传播渠道甚至使人们跨越文化，语言和国家的界限相互交流。换句话说，尽管来自不同的区域，有着不同的身份和背景，但是共同的幻想，情感以及品味却把人们聚拢到了一起。尽管网络平台与数据运算冷面无私地量化数据化人们之间的联系，但我们不能否认，很多网络平台，比如“Wattpad”和“起点”的初衷都是为大众服务，他们所谓的数据运算也只是部分量化与数据化，想了解的只是人们的交往频率以及智力水平。

文学评论学者盖亚特-斯宾瓦克相信文学是数字化新自由资本主义的解毒药。我以为，被网络连通在一起的大众是反对将文学欣赏变成数据的强大力量。说数据过剩固然有陈词滥调之嫌，但出版人是时候重新考虑他们的独特价值了，那就是他们能做到的网络平台做不到。以我看，超越数据驱动和程序化倾向的标准，仍大有可能连通文学爱好者。网络平台确实占优势，但是我们有必要另辟蹊径，表述我们自己的价值观：自主，自立，人文。同时，在这个连通性数字世界开辟一隅不同的文学角落。