

Current Situation of Academic Popular Science Publishing from the Perspective of Mass Communication

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Abstract

With the construction of a learning society and the increasing intensity of social competition, more and more readers wish to acquire specialized and systematic knowledge to deal with real-world problems. However, many readers find academic works obscure and difficult to understand, thus turning to popular science books. These books combine specialized knowledge with public-oriented value, bridging academic knowledge and general readers. At present, multiple publishing houses have launched "light academic" books and even established relevant brands. This paper draws upon some academic works directly related to the research theme as well as the latest online literature and policy documents to summarize the current situation of the popular science academic book publishing market in China.

Keywords

Publishing industry; Academic popular science; Mass communication.

1. Introduction

In the digital era, digital reading has become the choice for more and more people. The trend of "shallow reading" makes it difficult for specialized academic books to enter the lives of readers, which, in the long run, hinders the improvement of the cultural quality of the nation's citizens. At the same time, with the construction of a learning society and increasing social competition, more readers are eager to learn specialized and systematic knowledge to address real issues. However, many find academic works too obscure, prompting them to switch to reading "light academic" books. These books, while retaining their academic rigor, offer popularized value, thereby linking academic knowledge to the general reader. In fact, the publication of popular academic books is quite common abroad. In 2022, Cambridge University Press listed the most recommended "light academic" books of the year, including "On Jazz" and "The Joy of Abstraction"; Princeton University Press also published the "Mellon Lecture Series," which embodies "light academic" features in both content and design. However, some "light academic" books struggle to balance academic content with popular appeal, do not adequately update readers' understanding, suffer from weak publicity, and face difficulties in digital transformation. Therefore, investigating the current development status of this field is indeed necessary.

2. New Trends in the Development of Popular Academic Publishing for the Masses

2.1. During the Period of Social Transformation: The Popularization of Academic Publishing

The shift from an elite society to a mass society is a crucial turning point in the progress of human society. At present, China is in a period of social transformation, and with the

popularization of higher education and the construction of a learning society, the demand for academic knowledge among the masses is steadily increasing. This requires a better response from China's academic publishing sector, and both academic publishers and scholars cannot ignore the demand for the popularization of academic knowledge. Academic publishing is generally contrasted with educational and mass publishing, and mainly includes two levels: the publishing of academic monographs and the publication of popular academic books. The number of popular academic books published has increased year by year, as evidenced by the establishment of awards such as the National Wenjin Book Award and the East China Ancient Book Excellent Popular Book Award, highlighting the importance of academic popularization.

2.2. The Diversification of Academic Publishing in the Digital Age

With the deepening of the digital age, academic publishing has undergone changes in both content and form, gradually transitioning to digital publishing. Publishing platforms have diversified, and reading methods are no longer limited to printed books. Digital versions have significant advantages, particularly in the acquisition and utilization of academic resources. In the digital era, the development of digital technology has led academic publishing to form a multi-channel and multi-medium mode, combining traditional print books, e-books, audio publishing, and internet publishing. In a diversified publishing ecosystem, the public's demand for academic knowledge is increasing, and the forms of reading have changed. Academic publishing serves the social elite of every era, carrying the function of spreading ideas and passing on civilization, meeting people's demand for original and innovative knowledge consumption. This necessitates that academic publishing adapts to the new digital landscape and identifies suitable focal points for further development.

2.3. Market Trends: The New Trend in "Light Academic" Book Publishing

Academic publishing possesses both public interest and commercial attributes. With the rising cultural level of the public, the in-depth demand for academic books has also increased. The "2023 First Half China Book Retail Market Report" showed that academic and cultural books achieved a year-on-year growth in retail value, with an increase of 0.91% in the share of academic and cultural retail value. Undoubtedly, marketization is ultimately about expanding the market; without the masses, there is no market. With the development of a commodity economy and the prosperity of cultural industries, "light academic" books, as an important branch of academic books, represent a key path for academic publishing to survive and win in the market. Based on readers' needs and the necessity of cultural dissemination, many domestic publishers have launched high-quality humanities and social science books under their "light academic" branding as part of a high-quality publishing strategy. Examples include the "Oracle Series" by Social Sciences Academic Press and the "Hanqing Hall" series by Houlang Press. These "light academic" book series have developed into scalable and clustered brands, promoting, incubating, and stimulating a broader market for popular academic publishing. Segmenting the market and expanding the consumer base are fundamental tasks in the marketization process, and "light academic" books provide potential growth space for the academic publishing market, representing one of the most important directions for the reform of academic publishing in China. How "light academic" books can enhance their appeal and achieve a balance between effectiveness and efficiency requires academic publishing institutions to maintain a dynamic and sustainable balance based on publication content and services, involving deep transformations in the structure of academic book publishing processes, marketing models, and channel development.

3. Current Research on Academic Popular Science Publishing

Recent years have seen active research on academic publishing in the domestic academic community. However, it must be noted that systematic theoretical frameworks on popular academic publishing strategies have not yet been formed in China. Therefore, this paper retrieves related literature using keywords like "academic popularization," "popular academic books," "popular publishing," and "publishing strategy" in databases such as CNKI and Wanfang Data, and further screens and analyzes the current situation of academic popular science publishing.

3.1. Research on Academic Popularization and Dissemination

From relevant literature, it can be summarized that current research in China mainly focuses on the background and causes, connotations, and paths of academic popularization. Scholar Chen Jia believes that academic books should not be overly formal or complex but should emphasize accessibility and popular appeal. Yan Guangcai points out that we are in an era of diminishing traditional authority and popular political engagement, which academic professionals must confront. Scholar Guo Jiezhong analyzed the paths to academic popularization, stating that academic knowledge must be accessible and the role of modern media must be utilized. Mo Jinlian analyzed the three waves of historical book publication since the 20th century, discussing the methods and trends of integrating academic and popular culture in the field of historiography. Kang Hua emphasized that in planning popular readings of Chinese classics, at least five relationships must be carefully handled: fast and slow, high and low, main and secondary, new and old, thick and thin, in order to achieve social and economic benefits as well as unify the promotion of excellent culture with meeting societal needs. Scholar Zhao Fengyue summarized the concept and characteristics of academic popularization and analyzed its background and primary causes, pointing out that academic popularization is a necessary result and requirement of China's economic and cultural progress. Additionally, researcher Xia Dengwu argued that, in the context of media convergence, traditional academic journals need to expand their science communication function to bring scientific knowledge into everyday life. Scholars Sun Bufan and Zhou Xiangwei examined the context and connotations of academic popularization, proposing that academic popularization is both the popularization of academic culture to the masses and the promotion of mass engagement with academic discourse. Scholar Xie Hui analyzed the trends and prospects of mass academic publishing in the "Internet+" era, noting that academic publishing is breaking away from the traditional exclusive "pure academic" barrier, gradually moving from the "ivory tower" to the masses, diverging into professional academic and mass academic publishing. In summary, relevant research themes have a certain depth but lack specific analysis from the perspective of the publishing market regarding the audience transformation of academic popular science books and how to achieve creative development in the digital age.

3.2. Research on Publishing Strategies for Popular Academic Books

Publishing strategies involve empirical summaries and systematic analyses of certain publishing behaviors, and comprehensive research on publishing strategies helps optimize the ecology of the publishing industry. Currently, researchers mainly focus on aspects such as the content, layout design, and promotion of popular academic books. Scholar Hong Qiong argues that, in the "shallow reading" era, it is essential to launch popular academic books that meet the tastes and new needs of readers, and has researched strategies for achieving this. Scholar Liu Yu proposed a method for the editing and planning of popular academic books, emphasizing that these books need to be expressed in an accurate, popular, and vivid manner without sacrificing academic integrity. Yi Tuqiang, He Min, and others, in "The Road to Breakthrough in Academic Publishing: Expert Perspective and Popular Expression," analyzed the significance of

striking a balance between elegance and popularity in academic books, indicating that such balance needs to focus on reader needs, language style, and the format. Scholar Luo Qiuxiang concentrated on editing "light academic" books, highlighting that they are entry-level academic books for the public, created by renowned experts to elevate readers' cultural understanding, and provided insights from aspects like topic planning, book features, and promotion. Zhao Zhenyi argued that in the age of fragmentation, publishing academic books for the masses is crucial for enhancing deep reading abilities, and explored the diversification, popularization, and high-quality development of popular academic books. Scholar Wang Yuan reviewed the current state and future trends of popular academic books, discussing the dilemmas and prospects of humanities and social science academic publishing. Liu Jiazhao, considering the changes in technology under the current internet context and shifting reading habits, provided development strategies for the popularization of Chinese classics and ancient texts.

As competition in the academic book market becomes increasingly fierce, popular academic books have developed at scale based on branding. Scholar Yu Mei used the example of the "Oxford Short Introductions" to explore the hierarchical brand strategy of popular academic book publishing. Hua Zhirui researched the "Oracle" series by Social Sciences Academic Press, pointing out that "light academic" book branding needs to cater to the new media era's reader needs in aspects ranging from topic selection to design and marketing. Scholar Jiang Yanbing analyzed the "Everyone's Little Book" series from publishing positioning, content, and marketing to determine its success factors. Yu Huiping focused on emerging humanities and social science book brands such as "Unicorn" and "Mint Lab," studying their construction as new book brands in Shanghai.

3.3. Research on Popular Academic Books Publishing Abroad

According to research, overseas studies on popular academic books focus on popular science reading. Bentley Peter et al. studied the publication of popular science books by researchers in 13 countries and regions, aiming to quantify the relationship between popular science publishing and academic publishing. The results showed that researchers who had published popular science works exhibited higher levels of scientific publication and academic achievement. Von Roten et al. pointed out that current universities and higher education institutions have begun to take on a third mission, which is public engagement. Their paper mainly explored the relationship between institutional culture, management models, and academic popularization. Penders Bart focused on popular science books about healthy eating written by three famous Dutch nutritionists, analyzing their different creative strategies from standard academic books. Keiser Barbie E studied SocArXiv, noting that it collaborates with scholars, research libraries, and publishers to develop a more comprehensive publishing platform, including post-publication peer review, evaluation, and open-access e-journals. Zucala Alesia A explored academic books in the social sciences and humanities and their contexts for evaluation, hoping that the research community continues to evaluate the recognition of academic books and informs stakeholders when and where they resonate most with scholars and the public.

4. The Significance of Research on the Development Trend of Academic Popular Science Publishing

4.1. The Theoretical Research Value of Industry Development

From a theoretical perspective, the publication of popular science academic books has become a phenomenon in the publishing industry. However, theoretical research lags behind industry development, and research on academic popularization publishing in China has not yet formed a comprehensive system. Therefore, based on the perspective of academic popularization, this

paper analyzes the needs and experiences of readers, investigates the academic publishing transformation and development of several publishing houses, and explores the implications of constructing publishing strategies for popular science academic books based on the "Three Circles Theory" in management. This contributes significantly to enriching research on academic publishing and innovating academic publishing models.

4.2. The Practical Value of Market Implementation and Value Transformation

From a practical perspective, since 2014, nationwide reading has been included in the government work report for ten consecutive years. With the construction of a learning society and the impact of digital reading, people's reading needs have tended towards both ends: deep reading and shallow reading. Content that traditionally supports deep reading has mostly circulated in academic circles in the form of monographs and academic papers. How to make these studies accessible to the general public is the responsibility of popular academic books. As competition in the book market intensifies, academic books have a narrow audience. How to balance economic and social benefits, and how to make academic books available to the general public, will become questions that the industry will focus on in the future.

With the development of a commodity economy and the prosperity of cultural industries, popular science academic books, as an important branch of academic publishing, represent a new measure to promote deep reading in the digital era and serve as a bridge for the public to approach academic knowledge. They have now developed into an important path for transformation, upgrading, and survival of academic publishing, winning market success. Therefore, exploring the current strategies for publishing popular science academic books, comparing the similarities and differences between traditional academic publishers and comprehensive publishers, and analyzing the challenges encountered in the popularization of academic books during the mass development process, from content selection, marketing models, and digital construction, will provide valuable references for the development of academic publishing in the new situation.

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