

County-level Integrated Media Center: Research on Media Embedding and Social Impact in The Construction of Digital Rural Society

Keling Cai

School of China Agricultural University, Beijing 100010, China

Abstract

At present, the role of county-level integrated media centers in rural social governance is becoming increasingly prominent, but there are still significant blind spots in academic research. These deficiencies directly affect the full play and optimization of the role of county-level integrated media center reporters in rural social governance. Based on case analysis and discussion, this study believes that the breakthrough direction of county-level integrated media center construction in future research mainly revolves around the content of digital rural social construction, which is actually the key to optimizing the role of county-level integrated media center reporters in rural social governance.

Keywords

County-level integrated media center; digital village; media embedding; social impact.

1. Introduction

With the popularization of technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and big data, the integration of traditional media and emerging media has moved from physical integration to the chemical reaction stage. As the nerve endings connecting the national governance system and grassroots society, the construction of county-level integrated media centers is not only a transformation of media forms but also an important carrier for the modernization of grassroots governance capabilities. General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly put forward the requirement of "solidly grasping the construction of county-level integrated media centers to better guide and serve the people" at the National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference in 2018, marking that the construction of county-level integrated media centers has become a national strategy. By 2025, 2,843 county-level administrative regions across the country have fully completed the construction of integrated media centers, forming a multi-functional pattern of "media + government affairs + services". This process not only responds to the fragmentation and segmentation trend of grassroots information dissemination in the digital age but also provides important support for the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

The emergence of social media has provided villagers with a convenient participation platform, with the help of which they can express their demands and show many phenomena in rural society. The construction of county-level integrated media centers is essentially a reconfiguration of grassroots communication power. In the era of traditional media, county-level information dissemination showed the characteristics of "one-way indoctrination", while the development of digital technology has given rise to the rise of multiple communication subjects. The county-level integrated media center has built a modern communication system of "one-time collection, multiple generation, and multi-channel dissemination" by integrating newspapers, radio, television, websites, new media, and other resources in the county, effectively breaking the "island effect" of grassroots communication. The effective connection

between poverty alleviation and rural revitalization constitutes an important policy context for the construction of county-level integrated media centers. As an organic part of the national strategy, the county-level integrated media center plays an irreplaceable role in consolidating the results of poverty alleviation and promoting rural revitalization.

This study believes that the county-level integrated media center has become an important force in poverty alleviation through multiple paths such as information poverty alleviation, industrial poverty alleviation, and cultural poverty alleviation. Entering the stage of rural revitalization, the functions of the county-level integrated media center have been further expanded. With the popularization of technologies such as the metaverse, 5G, and AI, journalists may assume the new mission of coordinating the governance of virtual and real spaces, but their core value still lies in adhering to the professional spirit of "mud under the feet and light in the heart", which is an indispensable media force in the process of Chinese-style modernization. This process not only reflects the expansion of media functions in China's modernization process but also reflects the reshaping of journalistic professionalism by technological empowerment and changing social governance needs.

2. Literature Review

The county-level converged media center (English name: county-level converged media center) is not an economic product formed by the free merger and integration of media units under market rules, but a new type of media unit. At the city and county (district) levels, it is a new type of county-level media unit established under the national system and unified reform pattern. It is a converged media platform that integrates county-level radio and television, newspapers and periodicals, new media, and other resources to carry out media services, party-building services, government services, public services, value-added services, and other businesses. The construction of county-level converged media centers will open up the "last mile" of media convergence, the "last mile" connecting the masses, and the "last mile" of grassroots governance. China's county-level converged media center is a media organization led by the government and supervised by the propaganda department. It has obvious official mouthpieces and propaganda functions while taking into account some livelihood services and social governance functions. There is no such "government-led media" mechanism in the West, but it can be loosely compared to: official media channels of local governments; some local branches of the public broadcasting system or NPR have local stations in certain states or cities, which are funded by certain public funds and also disseminate public information; local newspapers or television stations; but these are usually commercial organizations, independent of the government.

In Western countries, although there is no institution that is completely equivalent to China's "county-level integrated media center", the grassroots media organizations in various countries have formed distinctive systems in terms of name, structure, and function, reflecting the basic principles of "separation of government and media" and press freedom. Taking the United States as an example, its grassroots media are mainly composed of "Local Newspapers", "Community Media", "Local TV/Radio Stations" and the "Hyperlocal News Sites" that have emerged in recent years. Most of these organizations are private or non-profit organizations with a high degree of editorial autonomy. The content focuses on community life, people's livelihood, and local governance. The main sources of funding include advertising, subscriptions, community donations, or public welfare foundation funding. In the UK, grassroots media organizations are represented by "BBC Local Radio" and "Community Radio Stations". The former belongs to the national public broadcasting system BBC, is funded by television license fees, and has strong public service and educational attributes; the latter is a non-profit local broadcasting organization authorized by Ofcom, which is managed

independently by community residents and emphasizes citizen participation and local cultural expression. In addition, the local newspaper system in the UK is also quite developed, operated by media groups such as Reach PLC, covering news needs from large cities to towns. The main components of German grassroots media include "Lokale Zeitungen" (local newspapers), "Regionale Rundfunkanstalten" (regional public broadcasting organizations) and "Bürgermedien" (citizen media). Among them, local newspapers are mostly privately operated, and news reports focus on local affairs; public broadcasting is composed of state broadcasters (such as BR, NDR, etc.) forming a national ARD alliance, funded by the national unified radio and television fee (Rundfunkbeitrag); and citizen media is a typical community participation platform, aimed at promoting media education and democratic participation, and partially funded by local governments or educational institutions.

From the perspective of the United States, Abernathy (2018) believes that in the era of digital media, the concept of "local news" is facing definitional ambiguity and reconstruction. Traditionally, "serving the community" is regarded as the core function of local news, but as technological innovation profoundly changes the space and mode of human communication, the original concept of "community" based on geographical boundaries is becoming increasingly ineffective. Contemporary communities are increasingly showing diversified, mobile, and even virtual characteristics, making the service objects and content scope of local news more complex and difficult to define. Napoli, Philip M. (2017) and others stated in their book: "Local news in the United States is structurally fragmented and highly dependent on market viability, which often limits its ability to meet citizens' information needs." [1] For the grassroots media agency Ofcom (2020) in the UK, "community radio stations provide valuable social benefits, give voice to underrepresented groups, and provide unique content for hyperlocal audiences." The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) local radio plays a central role in informing, educating, and connecting communities across England, especially the elderly and rural audiences. As Internet technology continues to develop, the grassroots traditional media in the UK has also been impacted. It is proposed that "the decline of traditional local newspapers in the UK has led to the rise of alternative media models, including community radio and online hyperlocal news." Looking at the grassroots media in Germany again, we can understand the actual situation. Germany's Bürgermedien model allows citizens to access and produce content on community channels, representing participatory democratic elements in local communication. "The German agency (ARD ZDF also proposed to recognize the contribution of German broadcasting (Rundfunkbeitrag) because it ensured a stable financial basis for regional public broadcasters and achieved a decentralized but coordinated media landscape.

In general, grassroots media in Western countries reflect the characteristics of decentralization, high public participation, and independent operation in their names and institutional designs. These media organizations are oriented towards serving local communities, highlighting news transparency and diverse expressions, and their functions focus on information dissemination, public supervision, and community cohesion, rather than government propaganda or public opinion guidance. This model is in sharp contrast to the "party media + government affairs + service" trinity functional design of China's county-level integrated media centers, highlighting the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Western media systems in terms of power structure, function distribution, and social role cognition. Chinese scholars have deeply analyzed the strategic significance and practical application of county-level integrated media centers from different angles in the process of rural governance modernization. Practice path. Guo Quanzhong (2020) pointed out that this systematic project needs to break through the shackles of traditional media thinking and reconstruct the logic of county-level resource integration with Internet thinking - by breaking through the barriers of government affairs, people's livelihood, and cultural services, the integrated media center will be built into a rural

governance center that integrates policy communication, conflict mediation, and agricultural technical consultation. [2]

Especially in the connection period between poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, its comprehensive service function can effectively solve the problem of grassroots information islands, but it is currently still constrained by a lack of talent and rigid mechanisms, and it is urgent to establish a professional and compound team.

Hu Zhengrong (2020) proposed from the perspective of technical empowerment that the county-level integrated media 2.0 version should become the nerve center of the smart village: on the one hand, an autonomous platform with three levels of provincial-municipal-county linkage is constructed, and data such as farmland soil moisture and river water level are collected in real-time through IoT sensors; on the other hand, vertical service modules (such as "one-click disaster warning" and "agricultural subsidy inquiry") are used to promote precise governance.[3]The key to localization is to transform data flow into decision-making power, such as adjusting planting guidance strategies based on agricultural product price fluctuation data. Teng Peng (2020) critically studied and revealed the governance transformation path from the perspective of communication. He emphasized that if the "communicator-oriented" propaganda model is adhered to, the integrated media will become the "township loudspeaker" of the digital age. [4]The truly effective path is to build a participatory governance network: using dialect short videos to interpret village rules and regulations, conducting "cloud discussion halls" through live broadcasts to negotiate collective forest land contracting plans, and even using the Douyin topic "Talents in Our Village" to tap into the resources of local sages. This kind of deeply localized communication not only activates the vitality of autonomy but also makes integrated media a testing ground for innovation in county social governance. In response to the chronic diseases exposed in practice, Chen Guoquan (2020) pointed out that the "one-size-fits-all" construction has caused some county-level integrated media to fall into the trap of "focusing on hardware and neglecting services". [5]The cure lies in the surgical reform of the system and mechanism: merging propaganda and publicity. The functions of the media office and the integrated media center should be integrated to establish an editing and compiling process of "one-time collection and multi-terminal distribution"; a performance appraisal system should be designed with villagers' satisfaction as the core indicator, for example, the service efficiency should be evaluated based on the "success rate of online medical insurance processing"; at the same time, special provincial financial support should be sought to prevent poor counties from falling into the dilemma of "being able to build but not able to support".

Zhu Chunyang et al. (2020) started from the evolution law of media integration and emphasized that county-level integrated media should find a balance between "sinking" and "upward linkage". [6]The so-called "sinking" is to use WeChat applets and lightweight APPs as carriers to directly deliver high-frequency services such as social security annual review and specialty pre-sale to the fingertips of villagers; while "upward linkage" is to leverage the technical support and traffic pool of provincial platforms, such as the "rural service zone" embedded in the "Zheliban" to enable small villages to obtain digital empowerment from large platforms. However, it is important not to copy the "big and complete" model of provincial media groups, but to develop a "small and beautiful" localized survival strategy. Zhang Shouxin (2021) With the "technical starting point" as the operational path, the national top-level design has started the construction of county-level integrated media centers, and it has become the focus of local work in various counties in recent years. [7]However, the grassroots integrated media system has the complexity of existing stocks. Using a single technical element as the logical starting point cannot promote the effective integration of traditional media and emerging media in the country. Only when all factors flow in a balanced manner can we provide new perspectives and basic references for theoretical research and practical practices related to county-level

integrated media centers? The county-level integrated media center is the grassroots hub for rural revitalization and must play the triple roles of the main ideological battlefield, social governance tool, and comprehensive service platform. At present, the county-level integrated media center has been given the mission of "serving rural revitalization", but under the existing system it is more like an "extension tool of e-government." Li Ming (2022) discovered problems such as "gaps in employment services for farmers" and insufficient attention to rural customs and farmers' needs during his research. Only by truly localizing, Only then can the standardization myth of digital governance be solved. [8]Xie Xinzhou (2019) and others understand the media from the perspective of "connection". [9]The integrated media center should not only produce and disseminate news, but also enhance its social service attributes, collect and integrate the core data generated by urban operations, and then redistribute it so that it can flow fully to the most suitable place, breaking the fragmented status quo of the "single reporter role". By combining integrated media business with social management business, the county-level integrated media center can better serve the local people.

Scholars generally emphasize that the county-level integrated media center needs to go beyond the traditional propaganda function and transform into a rural governance center to break the grassroots information island by integrating government affairs, people's livelihood, and cultural services. Its core value lies in the triple reconstruction: in terms of function, it has shifted from a policy megaphone to a governance service complex; in terms of technology, it is necessary to drive decision-making with data, but be vigilant about the misalignment between technology and villagers' digital literacy; in terms of communication logic, it is necessary to break the "communicator-centered" and activate participatory governance. Autonomous vitality. However, the practice faces deep contradictions: the vertical control of provincial platforms suppresses county innovation, departmental data barriers lead to integration without integration, and the one-size-fits-all construction leads to the chronic disease of focusing on hardware and neglecting services. Breaking the deadlock requires differentiated paths: developed counties explore "smart platform + industry empowerment", underdeveloped counties focus on basic services and financial support; at the same time, promote institutional flexibility reforms-establish assessments oriented towards villagers' satisfaction, allow operating income to feed back public services, and design digital interfaces suitable for the elderly. The ultimate goal is to transform the integrated media center from an e-government extension tool to a digital foundation for rural revitalization through the "governance as a service" integration paradigm and establish a dynamic balance between the unity of top-level design and the local nature of the village.

Existing research has basically focused on two aspects: the governance of county-level integrated media centers in digital villages and related research on the role of journalists. First, in the study of digital rural governance, related research emphasizes the impact of technological intervention The importance of digital technology to rural governance is emphasized, and the technology is dominated by the state in the process of rural social development. Tang Jinghua (2022) regards the innovation and popularization of digital technology as the core driving force of rural governance transformation, emphasizing the subversive impact of technological change on political, economic, and social development. [10]However, the governance transformation of digital rural society is essentially a systematic project driven by the synergy of multiple forces; technology is an enabling means rather than an end, and its effectiveness depends on the deep integration of institutional guarantees and humanistic care. Technological application must be embedded in the framework of national governance modernization, and always take rural subjectivity needs and environmental adaptability as the fundamental foothold to effectively improve rural governance capabilities. Han Ruibo (2021) emphasized the duality of rural technology governance and believed that the essence of digital rural construction is the systematic transformation of rural society by the state through

bureaucratization and information technology.[11] This transformation needs to be combined with the idea of adapting measures to local conditions and cannot be mechanically applied.

3. Methodology

This study mainly focuses on the practical path and role positioning of county-level integrated media journalists in the rural revitalization strategy and comprehensively uses literature analysis, field investigation, and in-depth interview methods to strive to achieve the unity of empirical and theoretical methods. First, in the early stage of the study, the existing research results on county-level integrated media, rural communication mechanisms, and news practice under the background of rural revitalization were systematically sorted out through the literature method, library index journals, academic databases, and Internet search tools were fully utilized to form a relatively complete knowledge map and theoretical framework.

Secondly, the study takes the field investigation method as the core selects representative counties as research samples, observes the daily news production process of the integrated media center in the actual investigation, and deeply contacts journalists and rural grassroots cadres to restore their real practices in rural topic selection, reporting strategies, and government service integration. At the same time, supplemented by in-depth interviews, structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with key actors such as integrated media practitioners, village-level information officers, and agricultural project leaders to obtain their experience, cognition, professional dilemmas, and value judgments in the communication process, and extract first-hand information from them.

Based on interviews and field investigations, the study also introduces role logic analysis, analyzes the operating mechanism, communication focus, and organizational structure of the county-level integrated media center from a horizontal dimension, and tracks the evolution of the newswork of county-level journalists in different stages of rural revitalization from a vertical dimension, revealing its development context and stage characteristics. Through comprehensive comparison and case control, the mechanism and effect of the interweaving of system, technology, and discourse in the news practice of county-level integrated media journalists are analyzed, and then a theoretical explanatory framework is constructed.

4. Findings

The construction of digital villages requires the establishment of a balance mechanism between administratively-led overall technical governance and socially-led local grassroots governance to ensure the optimization of government behavior norms, the introduction of market-based technical support, and the construction of a new model of rural social governance based on data application scenarios centered on local villagers. At the same time, Yang Rongjun and Cao Ruifan(2021) believe that the "digital divide" problem also needs to be paid attention to. [12]As a part of grassroots rural governance, rural digital empowerment can stimulate rural endogenous motivation through digital technology, bridge the urban-rural gap, and thus break through the endogenous constraints such as the "digital divide" and even "digital poverty" caused by weak infrastructure, lack of application scenarios, and insufficient digital literacy of farmers, which lead to unequal access to urban and rural information resources.

While using technology practice, it is also necessary to pay attention to the "critical minority" role of media roles, and give play to their organizational leadership and resource integration functions such as reporters and cadres; the core of digital rural social governance is to respect rural subjectivity and activate endogenous development momentum through technology and humanities, rather than simply copying the urban model. In the rural social scenario, the intervention of the county-level integrated media center actually solves specific rural problems, such as "the gap in employment services for farmers". The localization process of the county-

level media integration center's involvement in rural governance is also an example, which can further help solve the standardization problem of farmers' digital governance. In fact, rural society or county society is composed of traditional media and emerging media, so the county-level media integration center needs to blend the two and play its due social governance function.

The research and discussion on the role of journalists and rural governance is also a focus. Chinese studies have long been grafted with Western theories, and have not fully responded to the dilemma of socialist transformation, that is, how can the county-level media integration center balance market benefits and publicness while fulfilling its political propaganda function? Dai Yuanguang and You You (2007) proposed that only by transferring the connotation of the media role and the role of journalists from the Western discourse space to the unique context of China during the social transformation period, [13] and from the simple function and effect theory of the West to the colorful Chinese social scene, can we restore the intricate true face of the media role itself, construct the localization and practicality of the media role in rural governance in the digital age, and correctly present the positive relationship between media communication and society. In the digital age, the suspension of the role of journalists is also a new problem, which urgently needs to use sociological analysis methods to correct it. Yue Lu (2007) started with some emergencies and emphasized that the county-level integrated media center faces role conflicts: it must perform the function of government information release channels to maintain stability, and integrated media reporters must also assume the responsibility of supervising social public instruments. [14] However, the imbalance of the power structure of journalists leads to reports that are biased towards official narratives, and the root cause of the lack of discourse power of vulnerable groups lies in the dilemma of the media system. Relatively speaking, Zhong Xin and Chen Ting (2022) concluded through research that the rural mobilization of villagers in the rural social context requires the guidance of media and journalists. [15] Some journalists choose their profession mainly driven by the social responsibility of "expressing the voice of the people" rather than personal reputation. This traditional value of "taking the world as one's own responsibility" constitutes the ideological basis of public opinion supervision. In this regard, linked the ideal media of journalists, Southern Weekend, and believed that highly identifying with the professional standards of accurate and objective reporting is the key to promoting journalists to gain support from ordinary people such as villagers. Zhou Yuqiong (2008) pointed out in the Internet's rural governance that the role of journalists needs to be reconstructed. It is no longer just a "single journalist role", but plays a more diverse social identity. [16]

5. Conclusion

At the regional development level, existing research focuses on cases in developed regions such as the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta, but pays little attention to underdeveloped counties in the central and western regions. Guo Quanzhong mentioned that county-level integrated media in Xinjiang, Yunnan, and other places are restricted by full fiscal funding, and industrial expansion is almost stagnant. However, this regional development difference lacks systematic comparison in the research, making it difficult to clarify the objective conditions for reporters in county-level integrated media centers in different regions to play their roles in rural social governance, affecting role positioning and strategy formulation. Secondly, in terms of institutional mechanisms, most studies only describe the binary structural dilemma of "corporate operation of public institutions", and lack exploration of the path of "market-oriented breakthrough of public welfare units". There is a tendency to "focus on hardware and neglect utility" in technology empowerment research. Chen Guoquan pointed out that current technology investment is mostly in client development, but ignores the "scenario-based

combination of smart radio and television and grassroots governance". This makes it difficult for journalists to deeply integrate technology with actual scenarios when using technology to participate in rural social governance, and they cannot give full play to the empowering role of technology in their roles. The in-depth construction of county-level integrated media centers is a key practice to open up the "last mile" of the national communication system. Its effectiveness at the grassroots level directly affects the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy in the vast county areas. Especially in ethnic minority areas, integrated media journalists cannot be limited to traditional propaganda functions, but should become policy transformers, cultural guardians, and governance collaborators. On the one hand, the Party's policies and guidelines must be transformed into short videos in ethnic languages, folk song broadcasts, and other forms of communication that are suitable for the local area; on the other hand, practical actions such as live broadcasts to help farmers and reports on ecological protection must be taken to stimulate the endogenous development momentum of rural areas.

References

- [1] Napoli, P. M., Stonbely, S., McCollough, K., & Renninger, B. (2017). Local journalism and the information needs of local communities: Toward a scalable assessment approach. *Journalism Practice*, 11(4), 373–395.
- [2] Guo, Q. (2019). Progress, difficulties, and countermeasures in the construction of county-level integrated media centers. *News Enthusiasts*, (07), 14–19. (in Chinese)
- [3] Hu, Z. (2020). Building a 2.0 version of the county-level integrated media center. *Journalism*, (01), 25–29. (in Chinese)
- [4] Teng, P. (2019). Social governance, communication space, and the construction path of the county-level integrated media center. *Contemporary Communication*, (02), 48–50. (in Chinese)
- [5] Chen, G., & Fu, S. (2018). The last mile of communication power construction – The construction path of the county-level integrated media center. *News and Writing*, (11), 24–27. (in Chinese)
- [6] Zhu, C., & Zeng, P. (2018). "Individual diffusion" and "cloud connection": A comparative analysis of the basic paths of county-level integrated media center construction. *News and Writing*, (12), 25–31. (in Chinese)
- [7] Zhang, S. (2021). Research on the influencing factors of the construction of county-level integrated media centers. *Journalism University*, 2, 103–120. (in Chinese)
- [8] Li, M. (2022). How can county-level integrated media centers serve rural revitalization? *News Lovers*, 3, 97–99. (in Chinese)
- [9] Xie, X., Zhu, Y., & Song, Z. (2019). Research on the current situation, path, and problems of county-level media integration – Based on a national questionnaire survey and field research on four county-integrated media centers. *Journalist*, (3), 56–71. (in Chinese)
- [10] Tang, J. (2022). The operation logic and promotion strategy of digital rural governance – Based on the investigation of the "Longyoutong" platform. *Hubei Social Sciences*, 3, 52–58. (in Chinese)
- [11] Han, R. (2021). Digital rural construction is driven by technology governance and its effectiveness analysis. *Inner Mongolia Social Sciences*, 3, 16–23. (in Chinese)
- [12] Yang, R. & Cao, R. (2012) On the tension between rural digital empowerment and the digital divide and its dissolution. *Journal of Nanjing Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 21(05), 31–40. (in Chinese)
- [13] Dai, Y. & You, Y. (2007) Sociological Analysis of Media Role Research, *Journal of Shanghai University (Social Sciences)*, 2007, (06), 63–67. (in Chinese)
- [14] Yue, L. (2007). Research on the role of media in public emergencies – Take mining accident reporting as an example. *Journal of Social Sciences of Hunan Normal University*, 36(2), 139–142. (in Chinese)

- [15] Zhong, X. & Chen, T. (2022). State presence and rural mobilization in the context of a public health crisis: A survey of the COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control communication system in Shuangxi Village, Hunan Province. *International Journalism*, 44(04), 6–29. (in Chinese)
- [16] Zhou, Y. (2008). The impact of Internet use on Chinese journalists' Media Role cognition. *Journalism University*, (1), 90–97. (in Chinese)
- [17] Abernathy, P. M. (2018). *The expanding news desert*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- [18] Ofcom. (2020). Small-scale radio multiplex license awards. Office of Communications (Ofcom).