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Adapting and Innovating TV News Programs in the Digital Media Era

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Abstract: Digital media is reshaping China's media landscape faster than anticipated. Television news, once the primary information source, now struggles to maintain relevance among younger audiences who prefer short-form video platforms. This paper examines how broadcasters are responding through four adaptive strategies: entertainment-influenced storytelling, short-video platform distribution, comment-driven agenda setting, and online-offline integration. Through case study analysis of representative Chinese television stations, including Hunan TV and regional broadcasters, combined with industry reports and observational data, the research reveals both opportunities and contradictions in television's digital transformation. The findings suggest that successful adaptation requires television to find new ways to engage audiences while maintaining journalistic credibility, rather than simply copying digital platforms.

Keywords: digital media; television news; audience engagement; platform convergence; media adaptation



1. Introduction

Television news faces a serious challenge. In a recent household observation, a typical scene emerged: the television played news broadcasts clearly, yet everyone in the room stared at their smartphones (Newman, 2024). This moment captures a fundamental shift—television has become background noise rather than a primary information source.

The numbers confirm this trend. According to CNNIC (2024), China has 1.092 billion internet users, with approximately 95% actively using short-form video platforms. Young people no longer wait for scheduled news broadcasts. They get information through Douyin, Kuaishou, and Weibo whenever they want. This represents more than just a technology change—it's a fundamental shift in how audiences relate to news.

The key question is: Can television news adapt while keeping its public service role? As algorithms increasingly control what people see, television must rethink its place in the information ecosystem. This paper explores how Chinese television stations are navigating these challenges, examining both successful adaptations and failed experiments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 International perspectives

Participatory journalism has gained significant attention globally. Jenkins (2006) introduced “participatory culture,” describing how audiences become co-creators of media content. This idea has influenced many news organizations worldwide. However, reality is more complex than theory suggests.

Major international broadcasters like CNN and BBC have integrated social media into their programming. They display tweets, read comments on air, and create hashtags for audience engagement. Yet evidence shows that broadcasters filter most online feedback before editors see it. This filtered engagement maintains institutional control while creating an appearance of openness. The power dynamics remain



largely unchanged, with broadcasters determining which voices get heard (Singer et al., 2011).

2.2 Domestic perspectives

Chinese scholarship on media convergence tends to emphasize technological and institutional dimensions. The concept of “all-media chain” appears frequently in policy documents and academic papers. The New Media Blue Book (2024) presents convergence as “inevitable,” but this inevitability seems more prescriptive than descriptive.

A revealing incident occurred during a graduate student focus group. A participant described posting critical comments on Douyin that disappeared within minutes. This small example illuminates larger issues about algorithmic control and censorship. What appears as participatory engagement often masks sophisticated systems of control. The language of empowerment conceals mechanisms of containment (Lang & Jing-Schmidt, 2024).

Chinese television’s response to digital disruption reflects broader tensions between market pressures and political imperatives. Stations must attract audiences while maintaining their role as state communication channels. This dual mandate creates unique challenges not faced by purely commercial or public service broadcasters elsewhere (Jia & Lu, 2024).

3. Research Approach

This study uses case study methodology to examine how Chinese television stations are adapting to digital media challenges. Cases were selected based on market visibility, innovation level, and documentation availability. Primary cases include Hunan TV, a national broadcaster known for entertainment innovation, along with regional stations experimenting with digital integration and failed adaptation attempts for comparison.

Data collection draws from multiple sources. Industry reports from CNNIC (2024) and the National Radio and Television Administration (2024) provide statistical context about viewership trends. Published materials about television



programs, including social media presence and news coverage, offer insights into adaptation strategies. Observational data comes from program viewing and platform monitoring on Douyin. Preliminary feedback was gathered through classroom discussions with university students and informal conversations with media practitioners.

The analysis examines four adaptation approaches: entertainment-influenced storytelling, short-video distribution, comment-driven agenda setting, and online-offline integration. Each case is evaluated based on audience engagement, platform performance, and sustainability.

Several limitations should be noted. This research relies on publicly available information and preliminary observations rather than large-scale systematic data collection. The cases represent illustrative examples rather than comprehensive coverage of all Chinese television stations. These limitations mean findings should be understood as exploratory insights rather than definitive conclusions about the entire industry.

4. Current Challenges

4.1. Audience loss

A classroom experiment revealed the problem's depth. When students were asked about the previous night's news, several said they had watched but couldn't recall any specific stories. This suggests the issue goes beyond ratings—television news has lost its power to hold attention. People leave the TV on but don't actively watch.

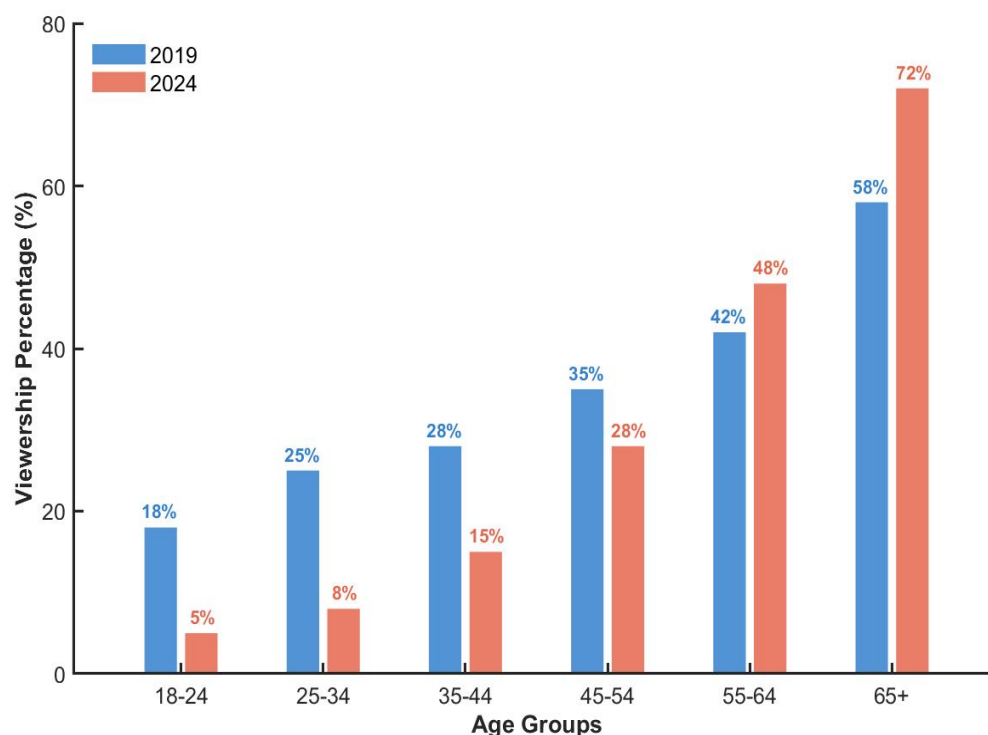
This creates a bigger problem. When news becomes background noise, it loses its power to set agendas. Television news once determined what topics people discussed. Now it struggles to remain relevant in today's fragmented media environment. The National Radio and Television Administration (2024) reports that viewers under 35 have largely abandoned traditional TV news, while those over 60 make up most remaining viewers. This creates a negative cycle where programming for older viewers pushes young people further away.

The financial implications are severe. Advertisers follow audiences, shifting budgets from television to digital platforms. Local stations face budget cuts, staff

reductions, and equipment aging. Some smaller stations have essentially become content suppliers for larger networks, losing their independence and local identity. The financial crisis reinforces the relevance crisis, creating a downward spiral that's difficult to escape (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). **Figure 1** depicts the age distribution shift in TV news viewership.

Figure 1

Television news viewership distribution by age group: Comparative analysis 2019-2024



Note: Adapted from CNNIC (2024) and National Radio and Television Administration (2024).

4.2. Limited Platform Reach

Local stations typically follow a simple model: broadcast first, then upload clips online. This approach misunderstands how platforms work. An experiment uploading a 15-minute news segment to Douyin showed average viewing time of only eight seconds. This isn't about short attention spans—platform algorithms favor content designed for mobile viewing (Chen, 2024). Traditional news formats clash with platform styles. Simply putting broadcast content online guarantees failure.



The circulation problem compounds audience erosion. When content doesn't travel through social networks, it doesn't reach potential viewers. Television news becomes invisible to audiences who don't actively seek it out. The medium loses its presence in daily life, which once came naturally through scheduled broadcasting and family viewing rituals.

4.3. Weak interaction

Television news remains one-directional. A focus group participant said it clearly: "On Douyin, someone might see my comment. On TV, nobody listens." This feeling of being unheard pushes audiences toward more responsive platforms. Audiences expect dialogue, not lectures. They want to contribute views and shape discussions. Television's inability to provide real interaction weakens bonds with viewers.

Some stations experiment with call-in segments or social media integration, but these efforts often feel superficial. Reading selected tweets on air doesn't constitute genuine interaction. Without authentic dialogue, television news cannot rebuild lost connections with audiences. The gap between television's broadcast model and digital platforms' interactive nature grows wider each year.

5. Strategies

5.1. Entertainment-influenced narration

News doesn't always need to be serious. Some producers experiment with lighter approaches. A local food festival report presented with humor and personality got much higher engagement than traditional political coverage. The shift toward entertainment reflects deeper changes in how audiences consume information. People want stories that feel relevant to their lives, told in ways that don't feel like lectures.

Entertainment-influenced storytelling works because it humanizes news. Viewers connect with personalities, not institutions. Informal presentation styles make complex issues accessible (Chen, 2024). A weather reporter who jokes about umbrellas gets remembered more than one who simply reads temperature data. However, this raises concerns about credibility. Can news maintain authority while embracing entertainment values? The balance is delicate—too much entertainment



undermines authority, while too little fails to engage. Successful examples blend serious journalism with engaging presentation, respecting audience intelligence while acknowledging changed consumption habits.

5.2. Short-video circulation

Adapting to platforms seems essential. Stations increasingly edit news into short clips for social media. These fragments travel further than full broadcasts, reaching audiences who would never watch traditional news. A 30-second clip about local traffic can reach hundreds of thousands on Douyin, while the full evening broadcast reaches only tens of thousands.

Yet fragmentation creates problems. In one experiment, 45-second clips generated views but comments focused on superficial elements—the reporter’s appearance—rather than content. Information becomes secondary to performance. Short-form distribution also challenges complexity. Important stories resist compression into viral clips. How do you explain policy changes or economic trends in 30 seconds? Nuance disappears in the rush for engagement. Television news risks sacrificing depth for reach, substance for metrics (Hendrickx, 2024).

5.3. Comment-driven agendas

Some programs let audience comments influence coverage. A popular comment about street food safety became a full segment. This promises democratic agenda-setting where public interest drives decisions. The appeal is obvious—giving audiences what they actually want to know about seems like good journalism.

Reality proves more complicated. When contacted for follow-up, the commenter admitted his post was largely humorous, not a serious concern. This reveals the instability of comment-driven journalism. Online engagement doesn’t necessarily reflect genuine public interest. Furthermore, comment sections don’t represent populations proportionally. Certain demographics dominate online discussions while others remain silent. Agenda-setting through comments risks amplifying already loud voices while further marginalizing the unheard.

5.4. Online–offline mergings

Connecting online activity with real participation shows promise. Some stations invite commenters to join studio discussions. This attempts to transform digital engagement into actual participation. The idea bridges the gap between keyboard activism and real-world involvement.

Reality shows this is harder than expected. Many invited participants decline because they fear being on camera. Online bravery doesn't translate to offline action. Speaking behind a username feels different from appearing on television. One station reported that of twenty people invited to participate in studio discussions, only three actually showed up. Making this work requires careful planning—producers must create comfortable environments while maintaining production quality. The challenge is preserving the spontaneous feel of online conversation within television's more structured format. **Table 1** presents the comparative success rates of digital adaptation strategies.

Table 1

Comparison of Digital Transformation Strategies

Strategy	Effectiveness	Key Benefits	Main Challenges
Entertainment Narration	Moderate-High	Higher engagement, younger appeal	Credibility concerns
Short-Video Distribution	High	Wider reach, platform friendly	Loss of depth
Comment-Driven Agendas	Moderate-Low	Audience participation	Quality control
Online-Offline Integration	Low	Bridges digital-physical gap	Resource intensive

Note: Effectiveness assessment based on case study analysis and industry observations.

6. Case Studies

6.1. Hunan TV's Success



Hunan TV's "Truth or Fallacy" program mixes news with entertainment. The show checks if viral stories are true using comedy skits and expert interviews. Each episode examines three to five rumors, from health myths to celebrity gossip. It feels like a variety show, not traditional news.

The results look impressive. Episodes average 5 million Douyin views, far more than regular news programs. Engagement hits 15%, compared to under 2% for traditional broadcasts. People share clips and discuss episodes online.

But there's a catch. When asked about facts from episodes they watched, viewers couldn't remember details. They remembered jokes but forgot the information. One viewer said, "I remember the funny part, but not what the rumor was." This raises a key question: If people are entertained but not informed, does it work? Hunan TV shows entertainment attracts viewers, but the news message gets lost.

6.2. Local experiments

Regional stations try various approaches with mixed results. Jiangsu Television experimented with live Q&A sessions where hosts answer viewer questions in real-time. The format initially generated excitement, with thousands of questions submitted per episode. However, producers soon discovered that most questions were either too trivial for broadcast or required research beyond live capabilities.

One station in Guangdong tried citizen journalism segments featuring user-generated content. Viewers could submit videos about local issues, with the best ones featured in evening broadcasts. The initiative promised greater community involvement and more diverse perspectives. Early submissions were enthusiastic—residents filmed everything from potholes to park beautification projects.

Behind-the-scenes realities complicate these promises. Producers acknowledge filtering the vast majority of submitted questions and content. Technical quality issues eliminate many submissions immediately. Content appropriateness concerns remove others. What remains gets further screened for editorial fit and time constraints. What appears spontaneous is actually carefully managed. One producer admitted that less than 5% of submitted material ever reaches broadcast. The performance of participation matters more than genuine engagement. Audiences see their questions answered or videos featured, not realizing how heavily curated the process is (Cao, 2024).



6.3. Failed Attempts

Not all adaptations succeed. A small city station in Anhui Province tried replicating Hunan TV's style without adequate resources. The station lacked experienced entertainment producers, modern editing equipment, and budget for elaborate productions. The result was awkward imitation—poorly timed jokes, cheap graphics, and uncomfortable hosts trying to be funny. Viewers mocked the attempt online, with clips going viral for the wrong reasons.

These failures offer important lessons. Successful adaptation cannot simply copy others. It requires understanding local context, audience needs, and institutional capabilities. What works in major cities with substantial resources may fail in smaller markets with limited budgets. A provincial capital station might successfully adopt entertainment approaches, while a county-level station might better focus on hyperlocal community coverage that platforms ignore.

Failed experiments also show the danger of abandoning core strengths. When chasing viral success, some stations neglect solid journalism. They lose credibility without gaining audiences. The county station in Anhui would have served viewers better with straightforward local reporting than with poor imitations of entertainment news. The lesson is clear: innovation must build on existing strengths rather than replacing them with borrowed approaches.

7. Conclusion

Chinese television news is in trouble. Fewer people watch, algorithms control attention, and influence keeps dropping. This study looked at four ways TV stations are trying to adapt: making news more entertaining, using short videos, following online comments, and connecting online audiences with offline programs. Each approach helps a little but creates new problems.

Television cannot return to the past or simply copy platforms. The solution is focusing on unique strengths—professional journalism, production quality, and institutional trust. Television should do what platforms cannot: produce serious investigations that take time, check facts when misinformation spreads, and cover



local communities that algorithms ignore. Success means being different, not competing on platform terms.

These lessons apply globally as television worldwide loses young audiences to social media. The strategies here—engaging storytelling, short clips, audience feedback—could work anywhere with local adjustments. The future isn't about defeating digital platforms. It's about finding television's unique value in the transformed media world. That's how TV stays relevant.

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