The Current Situation, Dilemma and Way Out of the Auditory Transmission of Online Novels—The Example of Himalaya FM

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Abstract. In recent years, as the audiobook industry continues to innovate, more people have become willing to pay for quality audiobooks. The explosion in market demand has provided a wide scope for the production and broadcast of audiobooks. However, along with the huge business opportunities, audiobooks have also encountered many difficulties, such as widespread piracy, worrying content quality, high production costs and insufficient promotion efforts. Taking Himalaya FM as an example, this paper proposes countermeasures to address these difficulties, such as improving the copyright mechanism and increasing promotion efforts, using artificial intelligence voice technology to reduce production costs, and looking into the future development trend of audiobooks.

Keywords: audiobooks · Himalayan FM · audiobook industry

1 Introduction

In recent years, as technology continues to advance, the rapid development of China's audio communication media, represented by Himalaya FM, Dragonfly FM and Lazy Listening, has led to a more diversified distribution of publications. In this context, it is believed that, with the formation of listeners' paying habits, the audio publishing industry chain has taken shape, from copyright output to anchor economy, and then to IP incubation by MCN agencies. And as the source of copyright output, online literary works have become the most important source of content for audio publishing [1], and the aural distribution of online novels has seen an unprecedented boom. With its unique accompaniment, audio explores the fragmented scenarios of listeners, extending the "listening" scenario to all times of life and providing listeners with a "silent" companionship. However, while there are opportunities for the auditory distribution of online novels, there are also some difficulties. Taking Himalaya FM as an example, this article further analyses the characteristics and difficulties of the auditory communication of online novels based on the current situation of the booming development of auditory communication of online novels, and proposes corresponding countermeasures to look forward to the development trend of auditory communication of online novels.

2 Analysis of the Current State of Auditory Communication of Online Novels

2.1 The Communication Subject of Auditory Communication of Online Novels

At present, on the Himalayan FM platform, the common communication subjects can be divided into the following four categories: traditional media, mass users, professional content production users and professional dubbing studios. Among them, traditional media is the most basic and mature type of communication subject. However, as the audiovisual industry gradually blurs the boundaries between elite and popular culture, there are more and more professional content production users and popular users who perform various live broadcasts and dubbing with the help of self-media platforms. The former are mostly radio and television broadcasters or presenters, while the latter are mostly professional or non-professional voice-over workers.

Compared to traditional media distribution, audio production is easier and more convenient for PGC (Professional Generated Content) users as well as for mass users. Communicators can record their own audio through audiobook platforms or other forms of recording software, and add some special sound effects to enrich the scenario of the audiobook. By participating in the recording, the disseminator can upload it to different audiovisual platforms to share with the audience, and while sharing, further interaction and communication can be enhanced. Audience-driven content production has become a driving factor that cannot be ignored on audiobook platforms.

2.2 Communication Content of Auditory Communication of Online Novels

Himalaya FM is a platform that is deeply involved in auditory culture, with more than 30 kinds of content: audio books, radio dramas, live broadcasts and music. The content of the audiobooks is rich enough to meet the needs of different groups of people, covering not only the hot-blooded military and historical suspense that male users like, but also various romance and film originals that female users like.

The majority of Himalayan FM's audiobook scripts come from adaptations of online novels, and most of the output methods are obtained from the network platform to create the rights to other people's online literature platforms, and then contracted to the network platform's contracted anchors and other people's voiceover studios. As a result, Himalaya FM has also formed copyright licensing partnerships with as many as one hundred and forty book publishers, gaining the rights to 70% of the audio adaptations of best-selling books and 85% of the audio adaptations of online literature, thus ensuring the intellectual property rights of the audiobooks. The platform has also signed exclusivity agreements with Readers Group and self-publishers to ensure the uniqueness of the content [2]. The platform has also formed good partnerships with hundreds of voice-over studios.

2.3 Communication Channels of Auditory Communication of Online Novels

The data shows that: as of January 2022, Himalaya FM officially released its annual radio list for 2021, with the total number of Himalaya FM radio listens for the year exceeding 316 million; the average monthly active users of Lychee Mobile reached 54.1

million. Related list data also shows that audio platforms such as Dragonfly FM, Lazy Listening and Penguin FM also have millions of monthly active users.

Audiobooks are likeable, commentable, forwardable on multiple platforms and instantly interactive, with strong social attributes, which to a certain extent increases the reach of information dissemination. In terms of current top charts, contracted anchors and professional dubbing studios for self-published audio language communication have a very high level of attention. As the recording form of audio books can be complicated or simple, platform users can independently adopt the form of live or recorded mobile phones to carry out audio communication.

2.4 The Communication Audience for Auditory Communication of Online Novels

Himalaya FM is a comprehensive audio platform whose audience can be analysed from three perspectives.

In terms of gender distribution, the proportion of men and women in the user group is very close, and the diversity of its content can meet the needs of different genders. Most of them are not lacking in loyal readers of original novels, and the more well-known the original works are, the more attention their audiobooks receive.

In terms of age composition, young and middle-aged users are the most dominant user group and are at the core. Most of them are on the rise in their careers, have some free time but lack the means to read, and are therefore more willing to spend money on high-quality audio content.

In terms of regional distribution, users in first and second-tier cities are the main users of the platform. Firstly, they have a certain economic base and have the purchasing power to match. Secondly, they are more advanced than users in third and fourth tier cities, and are more willing to accept and try new things. Finally, during peak traffic periods, many cities experience traffic jams, and the number of both private car owners and public transport passengers is very large, making them potential consumers of audiobooks in the market.

2.5 Communication Effects of Auditory Communication of Online Novels

Himalaya FM was the first platform in the audiovisual industry to enter knowledge payment, pioneering a new era of audio knowledge payment, and the total content consumption of the "123 Knowledge Carnival" in 2018 exceeded $435 million, demonstrating the promising future of the audio knowledge payment market [2]. Moreover, the flexibility of mobile phones allows users to make the most of their time at all times, making the most of fragmented, disjointed, time-consuming and space-consuming switching between scenes.

According to researchers, "listening to a book saves more than half the time compared to reading a book", listening to a book reduces the time spent pausing to think and ask questions, and audiobook platforms now offer a speed multiplier function, making readers even more efficient. In recent years, people have become more exposed to audiobooks, spending time on public transport, relaxing before going to sleep, etc. Audiobooks have become a new pastime for people.

3   The Dilemma of Auditory Transmission of Online Novels

In recent years, benefiting from the support of national policies and regulations, China's audiovisual industry has been able to develop rapidly, but due to a relatively late start, the development cycle is in its infancy, the industrial system is not yet mature, which inevitably has many development difficulties, mainly in the following aspects.

3.1   Excessive Cost of Audiobook Production

Audiobooks are a type of reading material that is distinguished from electronic and printed books. In recent years, the demand for audio products in China has been on the rise, with not only a significant increase in the number of users, but also an increase in the average time spent by users. As a result, the audio industry needs to produce more high quality content in order to meet the growing consumer demand. In contrast to traditional text-based books, audiobooks require the screening of book content as well as recording. If they are recorded manually, they must be dubbed, edited and proofread by a dedicated voiceover staff before being uploaded to the audiobook platform. The process of producing high-quality content by professional voiceover staff is more cumbersome and requires significant royalties and other fees, thus leading to higher costs of production.

In terms of recording costs, the packaging and distribution of audiobooks requires the conversion of a professional broadcaster before they can be released. Based on the current national standard price of 50 yuan per minute, it costs approximately 80,000 yuan to convert a 100,000-word book into an audio product [3]. Compared to the high production costs, platform users do not have a strong desire to purchase audiobooks, and their consumption behaviour has yet to be cultivated in the long term. Therefore, the issue of how to reduce production costs has become a major issue for the audiobook industry.

3.2   The Quality of Audiobook Content Varies

High quality online literature can be inspiring, however, there are issues such as varying quality in its creation, and the same can be said for audiobooks as a medium of cultural communication. The key to producing a high quality audiobook is whether the content of the book chosen is sufficiently appealing to the platform's users and whether the voiceover inclusion is of good quality. Audiobooks published by publishers and cultural companies usually have both of these characteristics, but the audiobook platform is extremely open, and its main content is produced by the users of the platform, who are of varying standards and produce a wide range of content.

Along with the growing number of audiobook platform users, especially with the addition of web hosts, the amount of original content on the platform is also proliferating. Because they are not specifically equipped and housed for recording, the quality of the audiobooks produced is mediocre, and the platform staff are dulled by the backstage audits, making the proliferation of poor quality content even more serious. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, that the audio production industry for audiobooks in China does not yet have unified regulations and standards, there are fewer high-level

performances, and the production technology is flawed; on the other hand, China's regulatory authorities are relatively weak in regulating the Internet [3].

3.3 Digital Copyright Protection for Audiobooks Needs to Be Strengthened

Audiobooks incorporate a great deal of creative thinking in the production process and are the result of intellectual labour [4]. Article 40 of the Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates: "A producer of audio and video recordings shall obtain permission from the copyright owner to use the works of others to make audio and video recordings, and shall pay remuneration. A producer of sound recordings and videos shall obtain permission from the copyright owner of the adapted, translated, annotated or collated work and the copyright owner of the original work, and pay remuneration for the use of the work resulting from the adaptation, translation, annotation or collation of the existing work." The copyright law stipulates that a work can only be created audibly by a licensee or group. However, Maraia FM has been repeatedly pushed into the limelight by copyright disputes. Some webcasters and users of the platform have read their works live or recorded without the author's permission in order to gain followers and traffic, and put them on the audio platform for profit.

Currently, the investigation and disposal of secondary uploading, piracy and modification of audiobooks in China is not yet sound, and piracy has seriously affected the healthy development of the audiobook industry.

3.4 Inadequate Promotion of Audiovisual Platforms and Low Psychological Acceptance by Audiences

In the book market, one can see many book reviews and reader recommendations for newly released paper books, but book reviews and promotions for audiobooks are rarely seen. Even the leading audio sharing platform in the domestic audio industry, such as Himalaya FM, rarely promotes audiobooks. This has resulted in the platform having a strong presence in the industry, but a lack of influence outside the industry.

At present, the Chinese still lack the habit of obtaining information through the hearing of both ears, and people still focus more on their own visual reading when reading books. Sitting quietly under a lamp with a cup of tea and an ink book, reading and thinking is the most orthodox way of reading in China [5]. Most people's understanding of audiobooks is still at the stage of serving young minors and the visually impaired, and they are unable to truly appreciate the different reading experience that audiobooks bring. It is also due to this traditional reading style and immature understanding of audiobooks that people are less likely to pay attention to the new format and rich content of audiobooks, and this has caused some problems in the promotion of the audiobook industry.

4 Strategies for Coping with the Auditory Communication Dilemma of Online Novels

As technology continues to develop, big data, mobile internet and artificial intelligence are all set to enter a period of rapid development. In order to get out of the dilemma,

the audiovisual industry has to find a place that fits with technology to gain more space for development. In response to the four dilemmas raised above, the following strategic analysis is made.

4.1 Improving Technology and Reducing the Cost of Audiobook Production

With the development of artificial intelligence technology, artificial intelligence voice technology is also becoming more and more mature, and its unique sound processing technology is reflected in the relevant industries. For audiobooks, the combination with intelligent voice technology will help to get rid of the current dilemma and further realise intelligent upgrades.

The use of audio replication technology can not only reduce the production cost of audiobooks, but also enrich the variety of audiobooks. Firstly, the user traffic, feedback comments and sales of audiobooks are analysed in conjunction with big data; secondly, the data is handed over to artificial intelligence for learning and understanding to establish a link between the characteristics of audiobooks, audio features, and user feedback, and then build an audiobook model [4]. While the development of new technologies has facilitated the accelerated output of more high-quality audiobooks, it has also greatly reduced the cost of producing audiobooks.

In addition, by expanding the voice library and enriching the types of speech, the shortcomings associated with using artificial intelligence to produce audiobooks can be effectively addressed. For example, with current speech synthesis technology able to support a variety of foreign languages and distinctive local dialects, an audiobook can be reproduced in a variety of versions, adding interest to the content while also better meeting the individual needs of the user.

4.2 Enhancement to Improve the Quality of Audiobook Content and Ensure Sound Quality

Whether it is an audiobook or a paper book, the quality of the content has to be a priority. The content of audiobooks comes mainly from the original works that are popular on the major online reading platforms, and the question is whether the audiobooks are produced in such a way that the meaning of the original work is fully explained. In addition, it is also crucial that the voices of the characters in an audiobook meet the expectations of the audience. If the voice of the narrator or anchor does not match the character's personality in the original work, it is likely that the listener will stop listening to the chapter or simply stop listening to the work. Therefore, audiobook platforms should work on interpreting the spiritual connotations of the original work, improve the voice performance of the original work, stick to its originality, and develop its characteristics in order to win more users [6].

While there are many excellent anchors in the UGC (User Generated Content) model, they may be disturbed in the process of live or recorded broadcasting due to circumstances, technology and timing, thus reducing the listening experience of listeners. Therefore, the audiovisual platform can identify some promising anchors and give them complete recording conditions for focused training.

4.3 Improve Audiobook Copyright Mechanism to Promote Healthy Development of the Industry

With the rapid development of Internet technology and an increasingly complex online environment, intellectual copyright is facing enormous challenges. For audiovisual platforms, the interests of copyright owners, distributors and users must be adequately reconciled.

First, build a sound copyright protection mechanism for audiovisual platforms. In the face of copyright infringement, audiovisual platforms can set up relevant industry organizations, put forward standard requirements for the standardized operation of the whole industry, and communicate strongly with other industries and the government on behalf of the industry to balance disputes over rights [5], and even need to use legal means to protect their interests when necessary.

Secondly, the relevant authorities need to further improve the decrees and regulations governing the management of audiobook copyrights, and constantly increase the supervision of audiobook platforms and the penalties for infringement. And while strengthening the acquisition of copyrights, there is also a need to promptly take down pirated audiovisuals in order to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of copyright holders.

Finally, platforms should spread a certain amount of copyright knowledge to their users, so that they themselves will resist pirated works and actively report the production and trafficking of pirated works and other acts of copyright infringement. Strengthening users' awareness of copyright protection is of great importance to the development of audiovisual platforms and the healthy development of the audiovisual industry.

4.4 Enhanced Promotion of Audiobooks to Increase Audience Acceptance

Audiobooks were imported into China. In the 1990s, audiobooks began to appear in China one after another. With the rapid development of the Internet and the emergence of various smart devices, there are more and more opportunities for people to gain knowledge and find entertainment in audiobooks.

In order to increase social acceptance of the audio industry in this day and age, we not only need to focus on developing and changing the reading habits of our listeners, but we can also learn from European and American countries. For example, the British Government's Audio Book Awards, established in 1995, have provided a huge boost to the promotion and popularity of audiobooks. The UK Spoken Word Publishing Association, an industry association for the audiobook industry, has made great efforts to develop the audiobook industry [5]. According to data, the increase in time spent at home during the Newcastle Pneumonia epidemic has led to a social fission of audiobook users [7], and the number of users listening to audiobooks on audiobook platforms such as Himalaya FM and Lazy Reader has increased exponentially, which has to a certain extent increased the social awareness of audiobooks. Therefore, the Audiobooks Professional Committee of the China Audio and Digital Publishing Association, as the authoritative organisation in the domestic audiobook industry, needs to continue to strengthen the promotion of audiobooks.

Alternatively, audiobooks can be promoted by celebrity anchors or dubbers who can insert information about new audiobooks as advertisements into the audiobooks being broadcast, or by original authors, other well-known authors, dubbers and well-known platform anchors posting on social apps such as Sina Weibo.

Finally, audiobooks can also be promoted through WeChat by publicising the specific content of the audiobooks on public and video numbers, carrying out dual promotion of text and short videos, and publishing links in them that connect directly to the audiobook platform, grasping the psychological characteristics of the audience and accurately attracting audiobook listeners.

With the rapid development of integrated media in recent years, technology companies have capitalised on the momentum of integrated media by launching many new audio reading applications. And along with the constant innovation of smartphones, audiobooks are becoming more and more popular and increasingly integrated into people's daily lives.

5   Conclusions

Due to the continuous development of new media such as the Internet and smartphones, online novels have also become popular due to their popularity and openness, and are gradually becoming the most active form of literature. Compared with traditional novels, online novels have a distinctive style and wildness, making them rapidly become an independent literary genre. It has broken the traditional style and writing style of novels, and is rapidly emerging as a "late comer".

In summary, with the gradual maturation of mobile networks and smart terminals, audiobooks are also undergoing continuous innovation and development, and are gradually being accepted by the majority of audiences. Therefore, the audiobook industry should seize the great opportunity to make clear the development direction of audiobooks in the tide of social development; and while continuously improving the quality of audiobook content, it should also actively explore service and promotion methods, so that the audiobook industry can continue to progress and create more masterpieces of excellence, bringing more diverse choices to people's lives, in order to achieve the purpose of increasing audience recognition.

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