Content Crowdsourcing and Digital Publishing

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Abstract: Zhihu that it is the most well-known knowledge-based Q&A community in China, it gathers the most creative people in the fields of science, technology, culture and culture on the Chinese Internet. This article discusses how the team relies on Zhihu the community and using content crowdsourcing for digital publishing. Content crowdsourcing needs to go through topic selection, editorial, crowdfunding publishing, digital publishing = content crowdsourcing + publishing crowdfunding. The socialized Q&A community knows that using the content crowdsourcing model to transform into publishing has provided new inspiration for the development of the digital publishing industry.

1. Introduction

Hown introduced the concept of crowdsourcing in 2006. He defines crowdsourcing as "the outsourcing of internal tasks of a company or institution to an unspecified public network, where members of the network accept the tasks voluntarily." Examples of crowdsourcing include the Lego Ideas Competition hosted by The Lego Group (which calls on people to design their favorite models) and L'Oréal allowing its users to participate in advertisement design. With the advent of the digital era, the crowdsourcing model is also applied to public service fields such as publishing. One of the forms of the crowdsourcing model in the publishing industry is content crowdsourcing. Content crowdsourcing (CC) is the result of crowdsourcing in the publishing industry. It refers to the outsourcing of writing assignments to different potential writers in specific networking platforms during the editing and publishing processes of a book. The publishing agency then screens, edits, and processes the content provided by the authors to create publications suitable for mass consumption. This process forms a unique publishing model.

2. What Zhihu is

Zhihu is the most influential vertical knowledge-based social platform in China. It is comparable to Quora in that they are both online knowledge-based Q&A social communities. Zhihu was launched in January 2011, and adopted an invitation system at the beginning. In 2013, we became aware of the opening of user registration. In December 2017, the number of registered users reached 120 million. As of January 2019, the number of users has reached 220 million. These users have contributed more than 28 million questions and 130 million answers, covering almost every aspect of life. The energy of the organization cannot be ignored. In September 2017, it was known that it was fully open for institutional registration, and the institutions that can be registered are classified into profitable and non-profit. The openness of the registration of the organization number means that the cost of the establishment of the company and the organization is reduced, and the cost of obtaining more comprehensive and effective content becomes lower when the user searches for relevant problems in the station. At present, there are over 30,000 users who know about the number of organizations, covering hundreds of industries such as Internet, technology, medicine, psychology, culture and entertainment, tourism, lifestyle consumption, and sports. The addition of

institutional users, on the one hand, enriched the community content of the platform, on the other hand, it also gained extensive attention and improved the influence of the organization.

3. Digital Publishing by the Zhihu Community

An introduction posted by an early member of the Zhihu team states, "Over 20,000 answers with one hundred or more characters are produced by the Zhihu community daily. Those receiving three or more votes account for a quarter to a third of the answers. These figures show that Zhihu produces a large amount of content, which does not include partial content such as comments."

In September 2013, Zhihu began expanding into digital publishing with the launch of its first e-book *Zhihu Weekly*. Later, brands such as *Salt Club*, *One Hour*, and *Zhihu Weekly Plus* were introduced. These publications compiled quality knowledge into e-book products (Table 1). Zhihu's Director of Publishing, Ying Mei, explained, "The Publishing Department at Zhihu comprises a team of five members and handles four e-book brands. The editorial team is involved in all aspects of publication, including theme selection, planning, author communication, content consolidation, proofreading, sharpening details, formatting, and cover designing. In an ideal situation where the authors' content does not require heavy editing, the editorial is able to complete the entire publishing process (i.e., editing, proofreading, and release) in two weeks. Zhihu chooses e-books as the primary medium for content distribution because they not only have extremely low trial-and-error costs but also have shorter market cycles and generate user feedback more quickly than conventional paper books. "Currently, Amazon sells roughly 110 e-books for every 100 paper books sold, showing that e-books have achieved equal footing with paper books," says Yu-Quan Qin of the Amazon Kindle Department. And Amazon announced that from July 1st, Amazon China will no longer sell self-operated paper books. From July 18th, it will stop providing seller services for third-party sellers. It will be difficult for consumers to purchase paper books in Amazon China. Amazon China will focus on the e-book market.

Table 1 Statistics of Zhihu's major digital publications

Brand	Focus	Date of launch	Rate of publication	Characters/ book	Price/book
Zhihu Weekly	Each issue has a core theme and contains ten to twenty articles from the Zhihu community (generally on current events or technology)	2013.09- Until now	Once a week	6,000-- 8,000	Free
Salt Club	A high-end e-book brand that contains articles from top subscribers in the Zhihu community	2014.04- Until now	Three-six issues per month	2,000-- 10,000	¥1.99-- ¥14.99
One Hour	A compilation of in-depth short articles by industry professionals	2015.12- Until now	Five to fifteen issues per month	20,000-- 50,000	¥1.99-- ¥9.99
Zhihu Weekly Plus	A summarized and revised version of Zhihu's immense Q&A content (generally on industry and practical skills)	2016.01	One to four issues per month	30,000-- 60,000	¥1.99-- ¥5.99

Beyond e-books, Zhihu also collaborates with external publishing agencies to transform high-quality e-books into paper books. In January 2014, Zhihu launched its first paper book *What We Talked About When Starting a Business*. Today, three paper books have been published, all of which became bestsellers.

Table 2 Statistics of Zhihu's paper books

Brand	Focus	Date of launch	Characters/ book	Price/book
What We Talked About When Starting a Business	A compilation of the best Q&As on starting a business (chosen by one million Zhihu users)	2014.01	150,000	¥42
Money Talks	Sharing the experience, knowledge, and professional opinion of Zhihu users specializing in finance (chosen by one million Zhihu users)	2015.01	136,000	¥42
Lady Justice is Blindfolded	A popular book on general legal knowledge written by dozens of active Zhihu users specializing in law (chosen by one million Zhihu users)	2016.01	160,000	¥45
Staff Awakening	Interpretation of all questions about career entry, promotion, and job hopping in the workplace by 53 people	2017.09	130,000	¥48

4. Content Generation Model

Professor Clay Shirky introduced the concept of "cognitive surplus" in 2011. He believes that people not only use their free time to consume content but also to share and create content. All social Q&A websites, including Wikipedia, Quora, and Zhihu, rely on people's cognitive surplus. To create an online knowledge community for user-generated content (UGC) and professionally generated content (PGC), Zhihu created a content generation system in which UGC and PGC models are able to co-exist. All content on the Zhihu social platform is generated by its users. For example, *Zhihu Weekly* selects quality content from the vast amount of UGC on Zhihu. The content is then organized, edited, reviewed, and finally consolidated into an e-magazine. After registering a Zhihu account, users can freely answer questions raised by other users and publish messages and content according to their personal preferences. Site administrators select popular, high-reach articles for editing and publishing. Furthermore, Zhihu also has an "elite class" of users. Over half of the articles compiled in *One Hour* are written by higher education workers and learners and industry elites. The higher education authors include professors at renowned domestic and international institutions such as the University of Toronto, Tsinghua University, and Beijing University, and the industry elites comprise composers, doctors, judges, financial executives, and enterprise founders, many of whom have already published works in their respective fields. The PGC generation model is the primary reason why Zhihu is able to maintain the readability, professionalism, and even prestige of its digital publications. It is also a key reason why Zhihu's digital publications are able to top most major bestseller lists.

5. How to Crowdsource Content

5.1. Topic Selection.

Zhihu CEO, Yuan Zhou, states, "Zhihu will provide topic selection strategies and marketing tools for content publishing." "Each Zhihu editor is required to submit at least two topics each week. Excluding the topics that are discarded, each editor provides five new and ten ongoing topics every month," asserts Zhihu's Director of Publishing, Ying Mei. During topic selection, Zhihu serves as a platform for accumulating quality content and sharing users' knowledge online. Therefore, it is a

source of user-approved e-book topics. Subsequently, Zhihu users interact with and provide feedback by liking, voting on, forwarding, archiving, and commenting on relevant content as they read, which highlights quality content. This social screening mechanism adopted in the topic selection strategy of Zhihu e-books is a new approach for digital publishing.

5.2. Crowd-Editing.

Crowd-editing is a practical application for the CC of digital publications introduced by Professor Liang-Fang Wu. It refers to the outsourcing of content editing tasks of digital publications to public networks. Content editing and processing tasks crowdsourced by Zhihu for its digital publications can be observed in two stages.

The first stage is before content is compiled into an e-book. Zhihu offers a "public editing" function for question refinement. Zhihu's director of e-Book affairs, Ma Hu, explains, "Before questions are posted on Zhihu, they are edited by volunteers and general users. They correct typos and revise wording. After several rounds of revision, a bland, unattractive question becomes a great question that people are willing to take the time to answer. The answering process is also the discussion process. After several answers are provided for a question in a specific specialization, users begin to comment on and discuss these answers, which can lead to vigorous debates. This process allows the problem to be fully discussed, and eventually achieve consensus. Only after this stage will publishing tasks commence." Based on the social media characteristics of the Zhihu community, much of the editing tasks commence or are completed before fragmented content are compiled into articles.

The second stage is after the topic and content of the publication are essentially set. These tasks are jointly executed by the platform administrators, authors, and third parties (digital publishing agencies). For *Zhihu Weekly*, the article selection, content formatting, and cover image selection are first completed by Zhihu users. Then, the content is reviewed, re-edited, and processed by the platform operators. Finally, the content is delivered to the digital publishing agency for approval and publishing. Although this editing and publishing model has yet to be adopted by the digital publishing industry en masse, the success of Zhihu validates the feasibility of this group-intelligence crowd-editing model. The model also promotes large-scale user involvement in digital publishing activities.

5.3. Crowd-Publishing.

Zhihu crowdsourced the publishing affairs of *What We Talked About When Starting a Business*. "An American website once crowdsourced 1000 investors to fund a publication. Each investor was required to invest USD $99. In return, their names were printed on the formal publication." The CEO of Zhihu, Yuan Zhou, coins this model "classic crowdsourcing."

Although Zhihu made little preparation before the activity (only a notice was posted in the "Intellectual Youth" column), this seemingly experimental attempt highlighted the power of the Zhihu fan base. The limited 1000 copies were sold out to fans within 10 minutes of launch. In addition, the paper version of *What We Talked About When Starting a Business* immediately rocketed to first place on the Amazon China bestsellers list on launch.

The marketing and promotion of conventional publications largely rely on celebrity endorsements and media promotion. This method of conveying publishers' messages to the public is unilateral. Bilateral marketing was achieved with the introduction of the crowd-publishing model. Once the crowdsourcing items are disclosed, relevant information is delivered to all users of the crowdsourcing platform. The marketing value of convening crowdsourcing is far greater than actual fundraising. Once crowdsourcing commences, fans share their experiences and views of the activity on social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. The coverage breadth and depth of this marketing model are far greater than those of conventional marketing models.

6. Summary

Zhihu, which is a social Q&A community, is shifting towards publishing. It can be said that

Zhihu conducted an unprecedented digital publishing experiment to merge the Internet and conventional publishing together. The source of content derived from users' sharing of knowledge on social media, and all aspects of publishing, including topic selection, preliminary editing, cover designing, publishing, and marketing, were completed with user participation. This CC model based on social media content, reader demands, and user involvement in publishing creates a new opportunity for the globalization of content in the digital publishing industry. We can use the following formula to explain what digital publishing is: digital publishing = content crowdsourcing + publishing crowdfunding.

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