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Your Discourse or Mine?

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By Silvia Lindtner

As scholars we speak frequently in public and are confronted with various interpretations of our work by others who at times do not share our own viewpoints. Though this often brings with it excitement at the opportunity to form bridges between academic and other discourses, reaching audiences beyond our own disciplines and engaging a wider public still remains a challenge for many of us. We look at these conversations as opportunities for further debate, for mutual learning, and for being introduced to different perspectives on our work. At times, how one's work finds resonance elsewhere surprises, illuminating the scholar's responsibility to engage with institutional and political actors that might appropriate our work to accomplish their own goals. Being a young scholar, my first encounter with such an experience came in late April of this year, when *China Daily* correspondent Kelly Chung Dawson [reported about a conference panel on Internet technology in China](#) that I participated in.

The panel was entitled "Changing Social Configurations and New Media Technologies in China" and took place at the Annual Association for Asian Studies conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. My co-panelists Randy Kluver, Steven Balla, Cara Wallis, Marcella Szablewicz, and I spoke from various perspectives on the role new media and Internet technologies play in relation to cultural, social, and political re-configurations in China. Our underlying goal was to position the role of Internet technology against more common deterministic views that either render technology as an opportunity space to solve larger societal problems or as a means to increase the reach of government control.

Ironically, what Kelly Chung Dawson took away from our panel was in many ways exactly that: an inherently deterministic take on technological change in China in line with the national discourse that portrays political intervention into cyberspace as a largely productive one. We had attempted to provide a nuanced account of policy change in regards to the changing IT landscape in China and we expressed the importance of moving beyond binary and overly simplistic accounts that focus on IT regulation alone, as is so often the case in Western mass media outlets. Taking Dawson's article seriously, we did not succeed in communicating the importance of understanding technological shifts in China as working in dialogue with (rather than determining or being determined by) social, political, and economic change.

And so perhaps, for the responsible scholar, this encounter with a particular kind of media uptake should provide the opportunity to reflect on her role as a knowledge producer beyond the academic publication: How does one engage diverse audiences and members of different disciplines? How does one find a language that communicates clearly, yet still allows for a complex argument? How can we engage others through dialogue instead of quick assessments, especially in times when decreases in funding resources and pressures within one's own institution often don't allow for more in-depth engagement?

From an academic perspective, this encounter has made me think of what Nigel Thrift entitled "soft capitalism," the up-take of theoretical work and knowledge productions in circles beyond the academy – the provocation that knowledge production within academia does not deserve (anymore) a privileged position in our society today. The latter seems appealing to me, as I am intrigued by the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and passionate about approaching my ethnographic encounters in part as forms of collaboration and encounters in distributed knowledge systems (Marcus 2009). What alternate modes of collaboration could we envision for the academic scholar – for example with policy makers, state officials, and media? To what degree can and should a scholar be held accountable for the ways in which her research finds resonance elsewhere?

What the medium of the blog allows me to do here is respond to the media report by crafting my own story. And so I want to share with you what I thought were some of the exciting issues raised at the panel that didn't end up in the *China Daily* article:

The different talks brought to the fore political interests that stimulate technological and policy change, issues of class and practices of distinction-making that flourish despite the increase in people who have access to Internet technology, as well as transnational collaborations between the local IT scene and centers of technological innovation elsewhere. Wallis, for example, explored forms of governmentality that emerge in training programs for young migrant women, who are encouraged to “govern themselves” as technology-savvy, self-reliant citizens in order to become “good citizens.” Szablewicz and I spoke to the creative Internet practices among young Chinese, but also to the ways in which technology comes to function as indicator of social status, class distinction, and as an expression of the quality citizen. We illustrated how Internet and new media practice in China is not just a bounded local phenomenon, but evolves in relation to translocal IT narratives around new forms of innovation and creativity. Balla reported on citizen engagement in the policy process and illustrated how much of the engagement remains restricted to elite users and members of the wealthier upper-middle or educated classes. Kluver spoke to the ways in which political culture in China is expanded through technology and e-governance investment, but also explained linkages to the larger political project for China’s position in a global market.

What these various findings on technological shifts tell us is that technological change in China is not the story of technology as an enabler of a linear path towards modernity, but rather of a complex entanglement of particular material affordances, China’s changing role in global markets and politics, new institutional collaborations and transnational engagements of the local IT industry, and development in other areas such as urban redesign and NGO work. We explored how these changes unfold on the ground, for a diverse set of people such as youth, young entrepreneurs, migrant women, policy makers, and designers.

Passionate to push forward cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary engagements and learning, I position my encounter with this particular media uptake with a hopeful outlook. Media and new media (like the one this response will be published in) converge in interesting ways (Jenkins 2006), providing opportunity for experimentation with expression and playful encounters with others who might be difficult to reach otherwise. So, perhaps one day, a *China Daily* correspondent will not only attend our panel at some future AAS meeting, but also engage us in a discussion so that we, as scholars, can learn from her own experiences and the multiple disciplinary and discursive landscapes she had to learn to navigate, just as we did, in order to do her job well.

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Silvia Lindtner is a PhD candidate in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine.