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Lightness, Wildness, and Ambivalence: China and New Media Studies

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

China was linked to the internet in 1994. In 1997, there were only about 670,000 users. By June 2011, China had over 485 million internet users, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the population. The rapid diffusion of the internet has had profound influences on all aspects of Chinese life. Scholars both in China and outside have responded to these new developments by producing a large amount of research. Not surprisingly, due to the internet's connections with broad fields of social life, scholarly research on the topic is interdisciplinary, or rather, multi-disciplinary. Anthropologists (Zhou 2006), political scientists (Zheng 2008; Zhang and Zheng 2009), communication scholars (Hu 2008; Qiu 2009), sociologists (Yang 2009) have all contributed book-length studies. Their topics range from internet use among intellectuals (Zhou 2006), migrant workers (Qiu 2009), the impact of the internet on state-society relations (Zheng 2008), internet governance and expression (Hu 2009), to online activism (Yang 2009). In addition, there are numerous journal articles and book chapters, as well as frequent international conferences.

Disciplines
Communication

Comments
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Forthcoming in *New Media & Society*

Lightness, Wildness, and Ambivalence: China and New Media Studies
Guobin Yang[1]

Fengshu Liu, *Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self*. Routledge, 2010).

Helen Sun, *Internet Policy in China: A Field Study of Internet Cafes*. Lexington Books, 2010.

Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities.* London: Routledge 2010.

David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, eds., *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival.* London: Routledge, 2011.

Yu Hong, *Labor, Class Formation, and China's Informationized Policy of Economic Development*. Lexington Books, 2011.

   China was linked to the internet in 1994. In 1997, there were only about 670,000 users. By June 2011, China had over 485 million internet users, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the population. The rapid diffusion of the internet has had profound influences on all aspects of Chinese life. Scholars both in China and outside have responded to these new developments by producing a large amount of research. Not surprisingly, due to the internet's connections with broad fields of social life, scholarly research on the topic is interdisciplinary, or rather, multi-disciplinary. Anthropologists (Zhou 2006), political scientists (Zheng 2008; Zhang and Zheng 2009), communication scholars (Hu 2008; Qiu 2009), sociologists (Yang 2009) have all contributed book-length studies. Their topics range from internet use among intellectuals (Zhou 2006), migrant workers (Qiu 2009), the impact of the internet on state-society relations (Zheng 2008), internet governance and expression (Hu 2009), to online activism (Yang 2009). In addition, there are numerous journal articles and book chapters, as well as frequent international conferences.
   The five books under review represent the most recent additions to this lively field. All published since 2010, they cover some new issues and phenomena. Liu's book on internet experiences among urban youth and Voci's on digital videos, for example, are both notable as the first systematic study of their respective subject matter. The authors of the five books come from different disciplinary backgrounds (film studies, education, as well as communication) and do not necessarily share the same theoretical concerns. Despite some noticeable omissions (e.g. there are no studies of microblogs and little about online activism), they provide a useful starting point for discussing the state of the field. I will first critically review the arguments in these books and then discuss what lessons they have for new media studies in general.

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China's Net Generation

     Fengshu Liu's ***Urban Youth in China*** is the first systematic study of internet experiences among China's urban youth. Liu studies the internet in its socio-cultural context, with special focus on the interconnectedness of young people's online and offline lives. She does not view youth as mere internet *users*, but rather treats them as people whose lives are embedded in social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts. The result is a fine work of ethnography on internet, youth culture, and social change in contemporary China.

     Besides an Introduction and a Conclusion, Liu's book consists of eight chapters. Chapters 1-3 cover contextual factors and general background. Chapter 1 offers a succinct overview of the social transformation in China from 1979 to 2010. It describes two main features of the Chinese reform – economic liberalism and political authoritarianism, which Liu argues constitutes China's dual modernity. This dual modernity "presupposes a double subjectification regime" with two sets of subjectification technologies and conflicting values – one enjoins the independent and enterprising individual, the other instills the values of the loyal subjects to the party state. These features are reflected in youth's experiences with the internet. In Chapter 2, Liu argues that the Chinese internet has three distinct features – 1) rapid and sustained growth, 2) strict political control, and 3) a dynamic and lively online culture despite control. These features result from the ideology of China's dual modernity. Chapter 3 discusses the lived experiences of urban Chinese youth. Here again, Liu focuses on the paradoxes and contradictions resulting from China's dual modernity, arguing that "Chinese urban youth appear to be both radicals eager for individual self-expressions *and* dismal pragmatists bent on the goal of the 'middle-class dream' based on material achievement" (p.76)

     The main empirical analyses are in Chapters 4-8. Chapter 4 studies China's net-generation's narratives about the internet. These narratives reveal youth's predominantly expressive (rather than instrumental) relationship with the new technology. They tend to think of the internet "as a place and a way of being rather than a tool." (p. 99) Continuing this line of analysis, Chapter 5 examines public discourse about the norm of internet use and how this moralistic environment exacerbates youth's anxiety about their relationship to the internet. The moral discourse, for example, makes youth feel guilty about spending time online playing rather than studying. Chapter 6 uses Foucault's notion of heterotopia to shed light on youth's internet bar experience. It argues that internet bars are spaces of heterotopia or a third place, where youth find something they cannot found elsewhere -- fun, freedom, equality, relaxation and sociability. The reason why youth cannot find these experiences elsewhere is that they constantly live under the pressures of school and family. This leads to the interesting phenomenon that the closer the youth are to exams, when their parents and teachers would expect them to be studying harder, the more often they visit internet bars.

     A sympathetic and understanding observer, Liu continues in Chapters 7 and 8 to show that China's net generation, the cohort born since the 1980s, is not apolitical or narcissistic. Chapter 7 studies how youth attempt to construct a generational identity in an online forum. In 2008, for example, they launched a campaign to challenge the popular

notion of their generation as a "collapsed generation" by celebrating the high achievers of their generation. To counter the negative image of their generation as hedonistic and materialistic, they try to project the image of a "multi-faceted self" who is both materialistic and idealistic, hedonistic and puritanical. They spend much time online reminiscing about childhood experiences as a way of building a sense of group cohesiveness.

What Liu does not point out, however, is that these efforts may just as well indicate an identity crisis for a cohort which lacks the powerful shaping historical experiences of, say, the Cultural Revolution generation. Liu comes close to making such an argument in Chapter 8, where she discusses youth's vehement cyber-nationalistic sentiments. Yet the chapter's narrow focus on cyber-nationalism does not convince this reader that this net generation is politically engaged. Liu finds that most of her respondents showed no interest in politics except when it comes to participating in nationalism. If this is true, then perhaps it is more fitting to view the generation as a nationalistic generation than as politically engaged. I suspect Liu's finding is limited by her data (interviews with 38 university students), because works by others and by Paola Voci and David Herold (discussed below) show that some members of the generation are indeed engaged in social issues other than nationalism. This is only a minor quibble over a fine and nuanced study. In eight chapters, Liu examines in more depth than anyone else how contemporary urban youth experience the internet and orient their lifeworld and identities in relation to it. The book deserves wide attention.

Internet Bars

In comparison, Helen Sun's *Internet Policy in China* is an odd book. The first half of the book basically offers a history of statism and communication policy in modern China going all the way back to the Qing dynasty. This historical background is informative for readers unfamiliar with Chinese history, but it is at most tangentially linked to the thesis of the book. Only half way through the book does the reader find anything related to the internet.

The second part of the book studies internet cafes in China. Here, the author devotes one chapter, titled "Theories about the Public Sphere and the Regulability of Cyberspace," to a rehash of familiar concepts and sterile theoretical debates about the Habermasian public sphere. Another chapter describes the social and political environment of internet cafes in China and offers some useful information about the settings, services, activities in internet bars, information about media rhetoric and parental attitudes, as well as government regulations. Sun asks whether Chinese internet bars may count as an "e-public sphere." She measures them rather mechanically with such criteria as "autonomy from state and economic power," "reflexivity," "sincerity," and "discursive equality and inclusion." Her conclusion is in the positive, but she warns that this e-public sphere may not be a "fully functioning public sphere."

The most interesting part of the book is a very short section in Chapter 8, where Sun discusses internet bar owners' complaints and the cat-and-mouse game they play with government regulators. For example, after the 2001 fire in a net bar in Beijing, the Chinese government shortened the hours and requested internet bars to close by midnight. Sun finds that many owners simply ignored this regulation and kept their businesses open till after midnight. Another regulation was that owners should check the IDs of their

customers, but in many cases they did not, at least in the city where Sun conducted her field work. On the extreme end of the spectrum, many bars that operated illegally, known as "black bars," ignored all regulations.

Sun provides some hilarious examples to illustrate the inconsistencies and capricious practices of the regulators. One example is that for security reasons, public security authorities require internet bars to install metal burglar-proof windows and doors. Bar owners would be subject to penalty and fines if they did not install these facilities. Yet at the same time, the local fire department required net bars to uninstall the metal burglar-proof windows and doors for safety reasons. Utterly confused and helpless, net bar owners had to install the burglar-proof windows and doors before public security authorities came for inspection and then uninstall them for fire inspection (p. 275).

As a study of internet cafes, *Internet Policy in China* could utilize more of the recent scholarly literature and better engage current debates. Many of its sources are badly out-dated. For example, on p. 145, commenting on the restricted nature of internet access in China, the author writes that most Chinese families "cannot afford to buy personal computers when prices range from $2500 for an Apple II to $30,000 for an IBM PC when the annual income of a Chinese worker is less than 1000 Yuan RMB." The source of this citation was published in 1989, when China was not even connected to the internet!

Digital Videos

China on Video by Paola Voci is a rich and sophisticated study of digital videos, or what she calls "smaller screen realities." "Smaller screen realities" are so named in comparison with the big screens of the traditional cinema. These are *realities*, not just media, in the sense that they are both "textual" and "contextualized" practices. (p.12) The book covers a diverse range of phenomena, technological forms, and genres, including animations, portable movies on cell phones, spoofing videos known in Chinese as *egao*, light political documentaries, and subaltern digital documentary films.

An important contribution of this book is the concept of "lightness." Among all the digital visual forms she studies, Voci finds a distinct common feature – lightness. They are light, or insignificant in weight, "in terms of production costs, distribution size, profit gains, intellectual or artistic ambitions." (p. 13). Evoking Milan Kundera's notion of the unbearable lightness of being, Voci writes that "Even though smaller-screen realities do not have the weight of either dominant or counter-culture, they produce an unbearably light – that is profoundly meaningful – vision of the world." (p.13).

Voci argues perceptively that light culture is not the same as counter-culture. Marginal to the dominant culture, it nevertheless maintains an ambivalent distance from counter-culture. Smaller-screen realities are thus "genre-defying, category-resistant, media-crossing." (p.4) These awkward traits make them an illusive subject of study and partly explain the lack of academic research on them. Voci offers a rich and nuanced account of this illusive subject grounded in theories of film and visual culture.

The book has an Introduction and nine chapters. Chapter 1 is a critique of film theory's neglect of smaller-screen realities. Chapter 2 studies China's "new documentary movement," which started in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Voci argues that because of the "light" traits of its products, this movement provides a bridge to contemporary digital videos. Chapters 3 through 7 each focus on a major digital visual

form and offer both detailed textual analyses and overviews of historical context. For example, Chapter 3 on animations surveys the longer history of officially-sponsored productions of animation films in China before turning to the contemporary light types. Officially-sponsored animation films try to develop a national style by drawing on both traditional culture and contemporary political values. "Light" animations, however, are individualistic expressions, though they still offer commentaries on contemporary social issues, often in humorous tones.

Of the many fascinating examples given in this chapter, the animation series Xiaoxiao provides a good illustration. Literally meaning Little Small, Xiaoxiao is a little man drawn as a match-stick figure, who is the protagonist of a series of martial arts fight scenes. His enemies in these battle scenes are mirror-images of his stick-figure and recognizable because of their different colors. Xiaoxiao wins all the fights, until the ninth and last episode, when he becomes a character in an interactive video game. The interactive character of the video game opens up the possibility of defeat. If the viewer does not play well, Xiaoxiao will lose to his enemies. Voci notes that the open-ended nature of this animation is its lightest trait:

> "Even though Xiaoxiao is the master who eventually wins his fights, it is totally irrelevant what makes him stronger than his opponents and why he is fighting them to begin with…. Xiaoxiao is hardly a recognizable heroic figure in either traditional or postsocialist terms. He is as distant from mainstream national rhetoric as he is from a more clearly defined counter-culture, dissenting stance. He is the symbolic embodiment of a *light* human being, shrunk to its basic components and deprived of any additional social, moral, or political attribute."(p.56)

What counts as light and what not, however, is not always so straightforward. Chapters 6 and 7 study light political documentaries and subaltern smaller-screens respectively. Voci notes that light political documentaries are not deliberately produced as political commentaries, but are "constructed, circulated, and interpreted as having a political perspective." (p.129). She discusses one-person activism and accidental video journalism. Her main example of one-person activism is the well-known human rights activist Hu Jia. Aware of the importance of keeping open communication with the outside world, Hu Jia meticulously used digital technologies to document his activities. While under house arrest in his Beijing apartment, he produced a video diary of his and his wife's daily life, titled *Prisoners in Freedom City*. The video was posted on several Chinese web sites and on Youtube and attracted some international attention. This video is indeed about one-person activism and "light" as an artistically crude digital video project. Yet because of Hu Jia's profile as an internationally known human rights activist and his open oppositional stance, his video project is nothing but light in its politics. Thus the lightness of political documentaries may differ somewhat from that of non-political products like the animation Xiaoxiao mentioned above.

ICT Labor

Yu Hong's ***Labor, Class Formation, and China's Informationized Policy of Economic Development*** is a political economy of the information and communications technology (ICT) industry and class formation in China. Unlike the other four books, it has little to say about new media or the internet per se. The word internet does not even

appear in the index. Hong's concern is the impact of the ICT industry on the labor force and its implications for class formation.

Hong argues that in the past three decades, China has adopted neoliberal policies and has pursued "a globally integrated, market-based, ICT-driven mode of economic development" (p. 31). In this model of development, the ICT industry heavily favors transnational capital. As a result, foreign firms came to dominate this sector while domestic firms were disadvantaged from the beginning. Hong finds that this model of development does not contribute to labor justice or employment sustainability, but rather has been the source of the problem.

The book consists of eight chapters, including an Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the political economy of China's ICT development, arguing that China's foreign-direct-investment-driven and export-led mode of ICT development is premised on cheap production costs and cheap labor. Chapter 3 describes the ICT workforce, composed mainly of cheap and semiskilled rural migrants employed by foreign-invested and other nonstate manufacturers. This structure has contributed to "massive layoffs, rising labor opposition, and the formation of huge numbers of temporary low-wage workers." (p. 97)

More interesting are Chapters 4 and 5 on management and workers' experiences. The analysis is based on three case studies -- a privately owned, medium-sized, local enterprise; a Singapore-funded electronics-manufacturing provider; and a large, state-owned corporation. Chapter 4 discusses employers' strategies of hiring and disciplining workers. The author finds that although there are some variations of internal managerial practices (e.g., state-owned enterprises are more benevolent due to their socialist legacy), the general trend is "relentlessly subjecting labor to corporate leverage." (p.149). This is done by making informal employment the dominant practice and by creating a new supply of stable, trainable, and flexibly organized industrial workers. Interestingly, the surveillance and disciplining of the labor force relies on traditional methods of propaganda, such as inventing corporate slogans to instill market-oriented corporate values and the posting of big-character posters, a common practice in official propaganda. Both transnational capital and the state play central roles in these practices. In discussing the role of the official labor union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), Hong notes that despite the expansion of ACFTU's power, it is still subservient to the state's neoliberal developmental strategies and is not an autonomous and effective defender of workers' interests.

Chapter 5 discusses the experiences and identities of migrant workers. In conceptualization and argument, this chapter is heavily dependent on the works of sociologists Ching Kwan Lee (2007) and Pun Ngai (2005). Her argument is that migrant workers as a social group are the "most vulnerable, traumatized, and unstable working-class stratum" (p.184). While veteran state workers in state-owned firms may benefit from the lingering socialist ideologies, migrant workers in private firms live with a generally negative "peasant-worker" identity. This chapter is based on interviews with workers in the three factories, but its use of ethnographic data is rather thin. For this reason, readers interested in worker experiences may want to turn to Lee (2007) and Ngai (2005).

A short Chapter 6 estimates the prospects of labor activism. Hong suggests that some recent institutional developments, such as ACFTU's promotion of law-based

notions of rights protection and the Labor Contract Law that came into effect in 2008, have planted the seeds for grassroots labor activism. Another new development is the transnational network of labor activism that was mobilized in Taiwan and Hong Kong to support labor protests, which achieved some concrete results. Yet overall, the author concludes that the prospects for labor activism are unclear and uncertain because of the state's efforts to contain it.

Hong's book is informative and sometimes quite impressive in its marshaling of data on the ICT sector to make her political economy argument. It is weak in the analysis of worker experience and activism. Its repetitive and sometimes awkward prose further hampers its appeal.

Carnival

Online Society in China is a collection of ten essays on multiple aspects of Chinese internet culture, all, according to the editors, falling under the rubric of online carnival. In his interesting introduction to the volume, one of the editors, David Herold, highlights four characteristics unique to the Chinese internet: It is controlled by the government; it is partially separated from the rest of the world as a result of control; its users are relatively young; and there is a great deal of "wildness," meaning online behavior is much less regulated than offline. Herold argues that to understand these features, it is necessary to treat online society as separate from and independent of what he calls offline society, writing that "Online China itself constitutes an independent space for entertainment, political, social, etc. discourse, or simply for meeting others." (p.9) This emphasis on separation somewhat contradicts his characterization of the government-controlled feature of the internet, because control leads to the political penetration of the internet rather than separation.

Despite this ambivalence, Herold has his point in emphasizing the analysis of online society, and he is perfectly right to argue that observers should take seriously what happens online, instead of viewing online discourse as a mere reflection of offline society. Seeing online carnival more than anything else in Chinese cyberspace, he uses Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival as a general framing device for understanding online society. He argues that offline society represents the rule-bound "normal" life, to which online society is the antithesis. This is true to some extent (as shown by Liu's study of youth behavior in internet cafes). Yet if the metaphor of an online carnival is stretched to imply that the entire online society is a wild, lawless carnival, it may lose its analytical purchase, because it creates a sharp dichotomy between overlapping and mutually embedded forms of sociality. After all, "normal" life has its carnivalesque moments and spaces, just as online society is by no means immune from regulation.

Notwithstanding Herold's provocative discussion of online carnival, the volume contains some very interesting chapters. Herold's own chapter offers some good examples of the Chinese carnivalesque culture. His co-editor Peter Marold's chapter on "Rethinking Internet Control in China" shows the wide variety of strategies Chinese netizens use to counter internet control and why it is inappropriate to adopt sharply dichotomized views of control vs. resistance in studying the Chinese internet. A chapter on in-game marriage and weddings among Chinese massively multiplayer online gamers (MMOG) offers tantalizing glances into the adventurous and rebellious world of young gamers seeking to build new, virtual matrimonial forms. Another chapter on gaming, by

Silvia Lindtner and Marcella Szablewicz, uses the Bourdieusian notion of "distinction work" to understand the status- and identity-building behavior of online gamers. Nicolai Volland's chapter studies an urban conservation web site and how civic action groups, a virtual equivalent of traditional NGOs, emerge out of online interaction.

Lessons for New Media Studies

The five books reviewed here are not without significant omissions. The political dimensions of the internet, such as online activism and citizen participation, are somewhat sidelined. Yet this may be for a good reason. The political aspects have probably attracted the most academic interest from early on (Yang 2003, 2009; Jiang 2010; Esarey and Xiao 2011; Lei 2011; Qiu and Chan 2011) and there may be a felt need to move into new territories. Another missing piece is the analysis of the commercial penetration and manipulation of online discourse. So far, little work has appeared on this topic (but see Weber 2007). Because commercial penetration is a growing trend that may affect user confidence in online information in the long run, it calls for systematic future research. The last missing piece concerns microblogs. Like the popular Twitter, microblogs are the most recent buzz in the Chinese blogosphere. As of June 2011, microblog users in China had reached close to 200 million. Almost every major online protest event that has happened since the rise of microblogs in China has happened on the popular microblog platforms. Yet unlike Twitter, which has already generated many scholarly publications (Marwick and boyd 2011; Hargittai and Litt 2011), there is as yet little research on microblogging behavior in China. This will be another important new area of research. No five, or ten, books can cover everything and I point to these omissions not as a critique but to indicate where some of the exciting future work might lie.

Turning to a summary of the contributions of these five books, I will emphasize three points. First, the broad range of empirical phenomena covered in these books suggests that contrary to some conventional understanding, a rich and lively internet culture has appeared in China, despite political control. This is a simple point, but merits emphasis because of the tendency to underestimate it.

Second, these studies capture some important features of Chinese internet culture. These are lightness (Voci), wildness (Herold and Marolt), ambivalence (Sun), liveliness (Liu), entertainment (Liu; Sun; Herold and Marold), participation (Herold and Marolt), and control (Liu; Sun). *Contention* is the only other word I would add (Yang 2009) to round out the picture. Together, these key words of the Chinese internet convey a good sense of what it is like. Furthermore, these features are interconnected. As several authors point out, some of the features, such as its lightness and ambivalence, have appeared in the process of netizens creatively responding to the political control of the internet. Others (e.g., contention), however, reflect the broader conditions of Chinese modernity, a point that Fengshu Liu makes very forcefully in her book.

Third, in their different ways, these studies offer useful perspectives for understanding the Chinese internet. David Herold's over-emphasis on the independence of online society notwithstanding, his point that "understanding online China involves listening to the voices of Chinese netizens online" is worth heeding, because it gives credit to a kind of human experience that is often considered "virtual" and therefore "less real." More important perhaps are the theoretical perspectives guiding Voci's and Liu's

books. Voci offers rich textual analyses of digital video films but is just as attentive to the social and historical context of production and consumption. In her book, Liu offers a well-grounded account of the internet experiences of a young generation in relation to family, school, job market, and the state. By linking, not separating, their online experiences from other aspects of their lives, Liu's analysis gives new meaning to online entertainment, a phenomenon that is not well studied in the literature.

These contributions offer at least three memorable lessons for new media studies. Theoretically, they show the fruitfulness of an analytical approach that treats the internet not as a technology or phenomenon that affects society from the outside, but rather views human encounters with technology as an integral part of broader social processes. Integrating the internet into these social processes, not separating it, adds nuance and richness to the analysis.

Related to the above point, these works implicitly or explicitly develop or support the proposition that new media, and technologies in general, take on culturally-specific meanings depending on their social and historical contexts. The Chinese internet takes on its specific features, and thus becomes different from, say, the American internet, because people experience it differently in China. This is not to overstate cultural differences and ignore common features across societies, but to highlight the centrality of history and culture. Studying new media without history and culture is the easiest route to technological determinism.

 A final lesson concerns the notion of ambivalence. Voci's book in particular, but Liu's as well, demonstrates the virtue of embracing ambivalence in the study of new media. This applies to both new media forms and effects. Voci shows convincingly that digital videos and animations are "genre-defying, category-resistant, media-crossing." These ambivalent qualities make these forms hard to categorize and grasp. Yet as Voci shows, the significance and value of the new forms lies precisely in their boundary-breaking feature, because such boundary-breaking effectively challenges "not just disciplinary divides but also cultural hierarchies, social classifications and political polarizations." (p. 2)

In highlighting the value of ambivalence, I am not opting for ambiguity as a substitute for analytical clarity. Ambivalence is a way of resisting binary thinking, that tendency to see only black or white and not grey in a world of complexity. An approach that welcomes ambivalence and rejects binarism, together with a sensitivity to history, culture, and the integration of media and society, may help to avoid the kind of sterile debates that have been waged on questions like whether the internet will lead to democratization in China, or whether Twitter or Facebook caused the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. For these lessons clearly caution against the assumptions of technological determinism and linear causation underlying these debates.

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