

Handle with Care: Digital Methods, Sociological Imagination, and the Chinese Dream

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Digital data have generated great expectation and concerns, challenging conventional modes of social and knowledge production. Digital technologies in China reflect many contradictions and complexity of the society: wide access but persistent digital divide, significant economic development and tightening political control, new forms of civic engagement and pervasive surveillance and manipulation. Yet, the Chinese regime seems to have solved “the Dictator’s Dilemma” and set Internet+ as top national strategy to achieve the Chinese dream.

A contextualized understanding of the production, distribution and use of digital methods beyond Eurocentric, liberal democracies will facilitate innovative, rigorous, yet affordable methods that benefit the less privileged in the glocalized mediascape. I call for a producer’s perspective to highlight digital methods as control mechanism, business model, activism strategy in negotiated processes involving a web of social actors. The accumulation process of data capitalism, especially privacy practices, has generated less attention in China than in the U.S or Europe. Transnational and cross-platform approaches are needed to capture the divides, dilemmas, and dividends of digital methods.