SPECIAL ISSUE   Revisiting Networked China: Challenges for the study of digital media and civic engagement
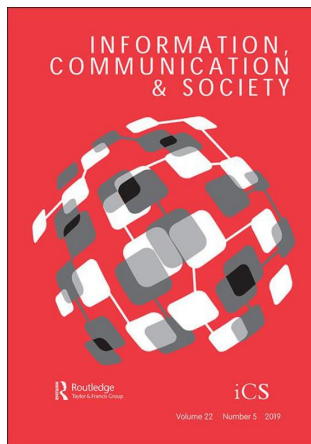
Issue guest editors:
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The communication landscape in China includes many contradictions, with a government bent on controlling that communication while promoting its supporting digital infrastructure. Despite political surveillance and periodic warnings from party leadership about the dangers of civil society, these digital platforms—so necessary for participation in the global economy—afford the potential for new forms of civic engagement, public deliberation, and cultural production. Chen and Reese's 2015 edited collection *Networked China* (Routledge) explored these issues (with some degree of optimism), as reflected in the subtitle: "global dynamics of digital media and civic engagement." Even at that time, however, the political environment was changing in the Xi era, broadening and deepening a rift with the U.S., exacerbated by Trump administration policy, but also between the models of authoritarianism and liberal democracy more generally. These intellectual concerns now need revisiting.

The case of China challenges familiar Western conceptions of the *citizen*, *civil society*, and now even *public*, which are politically sensitive and therefore a moving target. But how can we best address the ideas they represent as we seek to better understand how new digitally-mediated spaces are promoted? What kind of governance and social problem-solving do these spaces make possible, and what vision of society is being revealed as China promotes its own global alternative to liberal democracy? How do digital media interact with civic engagement? What mediated adaptations are taking place to new forms of state control? We propose to focus on China, but more aptly China as an intersection of technology, norms, and socio-cultural structures, leading to complex theoretical questions of "what" and "where" is China?"

Beyond the challenge of theorizing, further methodological and logistical challenges have been added, especially for researchers contemplating fieldwork in mainland China involving ethnography or in-depth interviews. This kind of work challenges even the most experienced investigators, and the time and energy required is not realistic for most academics, much less for their students. Such challenges have been intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as deteriorating US-China relations. Thus, to political sensitivities have been added public health concerns, constraining the kinds of empirical studies that are viable and leading

researchers, especially in communication, to rely even more on the abundant digital trace data now widely available.

We recognize that the platforms and other digital media are in a dual role of shaping social practices while also providing the means for knowing about them through these digital traces. Considering the question of "how we know China," investigations into creative methodological opportunities are needed, especially to the extent they connect with larger epistemological concerns about what they both reveal and conceal. Scholars often have to settle for studies where data are easier to access and analyze, shaping their research questions accordingly. These data, for example, make broad comparisons of media content between China and other national systems appealing but are not as likely to afford deeper sociological explanations that depend on more contextualized local knowledge. We need to be aware of the larger theoretical implications of certain strategies for data archaeology.

We believe there must be creative paths to explore these new and pressing questions. For example, China participates in a host of international networks at different levels--state, professional, and civil society, which falling largely outside China are more available for investigation--and involve participants less affected by political sensitivities. To address policy questions, document research and interviews with stakeholders are still accessible and open to analysis. In addition, the influence of China has been expanding in a number of other geo-political spaces, including Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other places related to the government's "Belt and Road" initiatives. These may be investigated with fewer state restrictions on research.

Deteriorating Sino-U.S. relations, fueled by economic competition and xenophobia, have had a chilling effect on academic exchanges, collaborations, and even long-established initiatives. For social science research to advance, however, we must find ways to encourage creative partnerships, navigate through the ideological fault lines, and find innovative ways of tackling the important questions for research in communication and media. Mindful of the special constraints identified above, we want to move forward in considering how to surmount these many challenges, by exploring the most fruitful theoretical concepts coupled with the most promising research methods. As the world begins to emerge from the global pandemic, we hope to lay the groundwork for rebooting new intellectual opportunities.

As a follow-up to the *Networked China* project, we propose to continue our global perspective on issues, both inside and out of China, via this proposed special issue. The process was begun by distributing an invitation in early 2021 to an array of interdisciplinary scholars to submit abstracts of their work and share an online, two-day conversation around these issues, which was held in late March and early April of 2021, led by the conveners (Profs. Chen, Reese, and Pan). From this conversation we were able to test the interest in our theme and sharpen our focus, as we aimed to develop this special issue proposal. Participants from media studies, communication studies, journalism, area studies, and related disciplines (such as sociology and political science) are welcome to respond to this call for abstracts,

speaking to the concerns above and exploring strategic, creative, and pragmatic approaches to one or more of the following questions:

- Beyond the nation-state container, what kinds of less well-defined sub- and transnational spaces may be identified as productive sites for research?
- What normative frameworks can best be applied to the Chinese context, especially given the usually implicit Western democratic assumptions embedded in much of the social sciences?
- What are the challenges of field work in and about China, and how can they be ameliorated?
- What methods can be best employed (survey, experiment, case study, content and discourse analysis), and what are the particular challenges involved?
- What kinds of "guerilla" research methods may help explore less well-defined "third places," such as gaming communities, where social connections are formed--and with what political implications?
- What are conventional and creative sources of and approaches to digital trace data for research? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this form of evidence?
- Beyond traditional news organizations, how are "me media"-enabled individual information entrepreneurs performing journalistic practices that contribute to civic sense-making and broader questions?
- What are the policy issues that present important communication questions (e.g., tech, media, environment, public health), and how can they best be examined?

We welcome (1) conceptual essays aimed at not only critical reflection but also innovative constructions and (2) empirical research papers with special attention to broader theoretical and/or epistemological implications for understanding China.

Submission instructions and timeline

December 1, 2021	800-word Abstract due
January 19, 2022	Notification of Accepted Abstracts
February 28, 2022	Full manuscript Due
December 31, 2022	Final Revisions Due
March 31, 2023	Date of publication

The special issue will follow iCS submission and review guidelines (See Instructions for Authors). The guest editors will make the final decision on selecting the allotted 6 to 8 articles of 6,000 to 8,000 words each. For inquiries please contact steve.reese@utexas.edu, wenhong.chen@austin.utexas.edu, or zhongdangpan@wisc.edu. Please use the form provided to submit your abstract: https://forms.gle/YFLSAmGxt7nu1w4u6