Abstract

This dissertation examines how people in China make use of and make sense of the Internet in their everyday activities. It is based on the data collected in 7-month ethnographic fieldwork in China in the second half of 2017. In this people-centric ethnography, individual people are considered as contextualized entities whose Internet uses are conditioned in the cultural, political, and technological contexts. In this light, this dissertation presents four self-contained articles that are tied together by a shared framework, and this framework consists of three thematic chapters, covering the cultural traditions, political regulation, and technological infrastructure that condition Chinese people’s everyday uses of the Internet.

The findings of this dissertation are presented in four articles: The first article, “Tracing Communicative Patterns. A Comparative Ethnography across Platforms, Media, and Contexts”, outlines an innovative methodological design applied in this study to capture individuals' mundane everyday uses of the Internet that move across platforms, media, and social contexts. The second article, "Middletown 2.0: Exploring Everyday Uses of the Internet in Tibet", explores Tibetan people’s everyday uses of the Internet in transforming Tibetan society by employing a combined theoretical framework of Middletown studies and activity theory. The third article, “Managing Communication with Strong, Weak, and Latent Ties via WeChat: Availability, Visibility, and Reciprocal Engagement”, specifically examines how Chinese people manage different types of social ties through WeChat, the leading social media platform in China. The last article, “A Good Way to Talk. A Comparative Social Ties Analysis of Communication Patterns in China, Denmark, and the US”, takes the discussion on social ties under a comparative framework, studying the criteria people have when considering how to communicate with social ties.

This dissertation makes several empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions. Empirically, this dissertation advances our knowledge concerning Chinese people’s localized usages of the Internet across various everyday contexts. The main methodological contribution of the dissertation is the coupling of diaries and interviews in studying intermediality, the interconnection and intersection of people’s daily uses of the Internet with other types of communications. Theoretically, the three analytical articles in the dissertation contribute to the existing body of literature on Middletown studies, activity theory, and social ties theory. Collectively, this dissertation also extends the triangular model proposed in The Peoples’ Internet project to a people-centric model. The new model is built around the notion of "multiplexity of roles": Individual people acts as a practitioner of the cultural traditions of a community, as a citizen participating in a regulatory process, and as a user of various Internet technologies offered by a given market. Here, the conception of “multiplexity” refers to the overlap of roles, motives, or activities in people’s everyday uses of the Internet.