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Abstract

This article presents an overview of 1,705 academic publications on Internet and ICTs (information and communication technologies) in China, published from 1989 to 2012, in Chinese and English. The Chinese entries include 1,204 articles from four top journalism and communication studies journals published in Beijing and Shanghai (i.e., those in the J&C database). The English publications are drawn from the Chinese Internet research bibliography (i.e., the CIR bibliography).

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updated in May 2013, consisting of 501 entries, including mostly peer-reviewed journal articles, while 89 books, chapters, and reports published within or outside of China are also included. By ICTs we indicate not only the Internet but also a broad range of electronic media from email to mobile phone services. By China ICT studies we refer to a multidisciplinary field built on scholarly traditions of social sciences and humanities to understand ICTs in China. From a social development perspective, we compare the Chinese and English literatures for a comprehensive picture of the field: how research in China differs from overseas studies, how they share similar strengths or weaknesses, and how both have evolved over time. Special emphasis is placed on the themes of the literature, as well as researchers’ perspectives, theoretical frameworks, research objectives, subjectivity, and methods. The meta-analytical framework developed by Qiu and Chan is deployed to examine two sets of issues that structure the field, including (1) the levels of analysis (i.e., macro/global/national, meso/regional/organizational, or micro/individual) and (2) the agents of ICT-related action being analyzed, their operational processes, and the roles of ICTs in media and social transformation. The comparative overview informs future China ICT research by identifying past research trends, recognizing long-term progress as well as systemic deficiencies, and raising new questions. Broader implications and limitations of this review of the field are also addressed.

1. Introduction: Change Is in the Air for the Media Industry: Ditto for the Academy?

In the inaugural issue of Global Media and Communication, Dan Schiller maintains that China and ICTs (information and communication technologies) represent two “poles of growth” for transnational capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century.¹ This may be a rare, disruptive moment for global media industry due to the apparent de-Westernizing shift toward China and the relative decrease of traditional mass media as the centerpiece of our planetary communication system. Combined, the two emerging trends may indeed pose the most serious challenge in decades to “Anglo-American dominance” in international communication,² although Schiller argues using a comprehensive analysis of Chinese IT industry initiatives that the nature of this new China-and-ICTs-oriented transformation remains unclear, and its consequences unpredictable.³

Since 2005, there has been evidence of the growing centrality of both China and ICTs from arenas of international relations (e.g., G20 being