GOING ONLINE AT THE MARGINS: HOW TO BECOME (AND REMAIN) AN INTERNET USER

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The debate over the digital divide has moved on from the binary distinction between the haves and the have-nots of its early days to a more nuanced discourse on issues of unequal access (Gunkel, 2003), digital divides and social capital (Chen, 2013), skills and usage (Dijk & Hacker, 2003; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010), and on gradations of digital inclusion (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Despite a general agreement that 'digital continuum' rather than 'digital divide' is a more fruitful way to understand different uses (or lack of use) of ICT, not much attention has been paid to how, concretely, people at the margins of the digital world go from being non-users to being stable users of Information and Communication Technologies.

This paper draws from a year-long ethnography of ICT use in rural China to argue that people at the margins of Chinese modernization and of ICT use—farmers and older rural residents, in particular women—need the time and opportunities to build an image of themselves as ICT users. In particular, there must be three elements in place for this kind of users to incorporate ICT in their daily lives. The first is exposure (which is here considered as separate from access) to the technological artifact. The second is access to people who facilitate learning not only how to use ICT, but also what can it be used for. The third is a direct connection with daily lives and interests. To illuminate these three elements and show how they all need to be preset at once in order for unlikely users of ICT to incorporate ICT in their lives, I focus on three types of non-users: those who are excluded from access for a variety of reasons, and have to rely on intermediaries; those who learn how to use ICT, but lose their primary reasons for being engaged with it, and stop using it; and those who explicitly refuse ICT (or specific tools/applications) because they contradict strongly held beliefs.

I look particularly at the role that gender plays in the use of ICT: older rural women, and sometimes even young female migrants living in Beijing, often dismiss computers as something for males, or anyway educated and "technically-minded" people. In the countryside "Going online" was widely considered an activity for either educated people "finding information" or students at school who should have also been "looking for sources" but instead squandered their time playing games and watching movies. But in

reality, many of these women do use the Internet, directly or through intermediaries. What they do on computers is often described in terms of activities that resembled their daily, familiar life: "I play cards, except that I do so on a screen with people I don't know;" "I click on the screen as my son taught me and can watch television programs when I want rather than when they are shown;" "I can see my grandson on the screen and talk to him, it's like a television except that there is my family instead of actors," etc. When asked directly, many of these people deny being Internet users, or using their mobile phone differently than the landline, i.e. doing anything other than making and receiving calls. Close observation reveals that they are keen users of the Internet, but are not always aware of being so, or have a different take on what the Internet and ICT are for than mainstream users.

Understanding these different perspective on ICT through the lens of mediated and dependent use, interrupted use, and non-use at the margins, can help recast the discourse on the digital divide in a way that takes more into consideration how marginalized populations (the have-nots, in the traditional framing of the debate) see the Internet, how they understand its potential, and what they want from it. Even nuanced discussions of the digital divide often imply a goal to reach—the access and the skills to use ICT as the haves do. Expressions such as "information have-less" (a term originally coined by Cartier, Castells, and Qiu to describe Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers, urban laid-off workers, retired people and youth who use low-end ICT such as cheap mobile phones and Internet cafés (Cartier, Castells, & Qiu, 2005; Qiu, 2007) provide a memorable metaphor that draws attention to understudied users who do not fully participate in the information society because of their low income and sometimes low education, but who have agency and adapt the tools they can afford to their needs. While catchy, the term "information have-less" conflates the ICT object with the information that can be accessed through it, and hides both the differences that exist among marginalized populations in their ability to use ICT, not only to access it, and the specificity of use by those who might all be at the margins of the urban, developed, and educated world, but who live in diverse circumstances and have diverse goals. Ultimately, the term blackboxes the dynamics of information-seeking and ICT use among elite and marginalized populations, because it considers the latter to have the same, but simply downgraded, information and ICT needs as urban people. The locus of knowledge is always elsewhere, the term still implies comparison with the "information have-more" and *their* use of ICT, and *their* information-seeking activities.

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