

John Alekna. *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society.* 374 pp., figs., notes, bibl., index. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2024. \$35 (paper); ISBN 9781503638570. Cloth and e-book available.

John Alekna's *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society* is an innovative, informative, and insightful historical study of the technopolitical developments of the radio-centered information infrastructure in modern China, focusing on its critical roles in state building and the emergence of mass society. Spanning the period of 1919 to 1968, the book touches on several milestones in modern Chinese history by examining shifts in what Alekna calls the "newscape," a theoretical construct that promises to provide a deeper understanding of interactions of technology and society in East Asia.

Building on the flourishing field of soundscape studies, Alekna defines a newscape as a communications ecosystem characterized by "interlocking technological practices and social patterns, natural geography and built infrastructure" (9). He demonstrates how the newscape functioned in early twentieth-century China by tracking how information moved in China during the famous 1919 May Fourth movement, as the news of nationalist student protests in Beijing spread to the rest of the country. New technologies such as telegraphy clearly increased the speed and scale of information diffusion, but traditional means, including speeches, letters, and newspapers, mattered in the process. The introduction of radio broadcasting in China in 1923 drew prominent Chinese leaders such as Sun Yat-sen to envision a new newscape that would help reunify China. Indeed, Sun's efforts at reorganizing and centralizing the Nationalist party along Leninist lines in this period would go hand in hand with the formation of a national communications system around radio.

In a fascinating case study, the book details how the father-son warlords Zhang Zuolin and Zhang Xueliang built a robust, far-reaching radio-centered information system in northeast China that helped them to gain influence and control over the national government in the late 1920s. The book then shifts to social history of how ordinary Chinese experienced this radio-driven revolution in broadcasting during the Nanjing Decade (1927–1937), when China was under the rule of the Nationalists. It highlights the integration of the social and the technical as embodied in "radio monitors," those who took notes from radio broadcasts and spread the information through prints and speeches in rural areas where radio receivers were still rare.

The war of resistance against Japan (1937–1945) had profound, sometimes unexpected, implications for the evolution of the newscape in China. For example, the Japanese military and the collaborationist regime vastly expanded radio broadcasting and listening in occupied China in their propaganda campaign of "the occupation of the mind." This infrastructural legacy would play an important role after the Communists, under Mao Zedong, won the civil war against the Nationalists in 1949 and endeavored to build a mass society controlled by the party-state.

Alekna traces the early stage of Communist newscape back to its stronghold Yanan during the pre-1949 period, where, in contrast to the international norm, women dominated radio broadcasting. While not ignoring the coercive dimensions of the post-1949 developments, the author paints a fairly positive portrait of the massive efforts to popularize radio broadcasting and listening, especially in the rural areas through wired loudspeakers, in the early Mao era. He characterizes the resultant newscape as "socialized and participatory" (194). However, with a warning about how "a highly developed newscape can, under the right conditions, result in political fragmentation and even chaos," the book takes a turn toward the dark as it gives us a valuable account of the crucial and pervasive roles played by radio broadcasting during the early years of the destructive Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Richly documented with Chinese, American, and Japanese primary sources, elegantly written, and argued with cogency and nuance, the book is a major scholarly achievement in revealing, among other things, the often-hidden workings of information technology in modern China and beyond. It opens new avenues for questions and research. For example, what roles have Chinese scientists, in contrast to engineers and other professionals featured in the book, played in the evolution of the Chinese newscape? How have their experiences, as scientists, science communicators, and citizens, been affected by the shifts in the information/communications infrastructure? One hopes that further explorations in this field will both enrich our

historical understanding and help society deal with the many challenges deriving from advances in information technology.

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Recent

Douglas Maynard; Jason Turowetz. *Autistic Intelligence: Interaction, Individuality, and the Challenges of Diagnosis.* 280 pp., illus., tables, notes, bibl., index. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022. \$30 (paper); ISBN 9780226816005. Cloth and e-book available.

Over the past thirty years, autism has become one of the main diagnostic categories of child psychiatry. Its spectacular and controversial spread has also made it one of the most studied disorders in the social sciences. In particular, landmark works have documented the historical and conceptual emergence of the contemporary category of “autism spectrum disorders” and of the “networks of expertise” that became associated with it (Gil Eyal et al., *The Autism Matrix* [Polity, 2010]; Bonnie Evans, *The Metamorphosis of Autism: A History of Child Development in Britain* [Manchester, 2017]). *Autistic Intelligence: Interaction, Individuality, and the Challenges of Diagnosis* complements this work with a meticulous micro-sociological analysis of the way autism diagnoses are produced today and of the implications of diagnostic practices for the understanding of the people concerned.

The work of American sociologists Douglas Maynard and Jason Turowetz have been presented in part in previous articles. The book elaborates on this work and makes it accessible to readers unfamiliar with autism studies. This research was carried out in a clinical center entirely devoted to the diagnosis of autism, the practices of which are fairly representative of most comparable facilities around the world. From 2011 to 2015, the researchers directly observed the diagnostic assessment of 49 children, from the first consultation to the diagnosis, via the taking of tests and discussions between professionals. The main steps of these trajectories were also video recorded and transcribed according to the standards of conversational analysis. In addition, a comparison was made between contemporary practices and those that Maynard had observed in the same clinic in 1985.

In the wake of Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology and Goffman’s studies of interaction, Maynard and Turowetz seek to highlight what they call “the interaction order of the clinic.” Putting the diagnostic activity under the microscope, they aim at identifying the “common sense” that constitutes its implicit background. The diagnostic process involves not only the children, their parents, and the clinicians but also nonhuman actants such as nosographic criteria and standardized tests. In particular, the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) is an assessment tool considered to be the gold standard in contemporary autism diagnosis, which, like all psychiatric diagnoses, lacks biomarkers that can establish it with certainty. The diagnostic process is thus based on the standardized objectification and abstraction of behavioral characteristics corresponding to the disorder’s nosographic criteria.

In accordance with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which is the leading classification in psychiatry, diagnosticians identify autism as a deficit in social competence and thus focus on the child’s failure to conform to the expectations of a “normal” social interaction. However, the setting of the clinical assessment is organized in such a way as to ignore the interactional and interactive dimensions of the child’s behavior and the specific context in which it is grounded. The involvement of the clinicians’ own actions and attitudes in the child’s reactions seems not only neglected but downright erased,