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EACS AT FIFTY: SPOTLIGHT

Conditional Access and Epistemic Resilience in European China Studies

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This article argues that European China Studies is moving from an era in which access to the People's Republic of China was widely treated as "normal" to a "post-access" condition in which field sites, archives, databases, and partnerships are increasingly governed as revocable permissions. Rather than treating access constraints as episodic misfortunes, I conceptualise them as a mode of governance that produces patterned missingness, redistributes risk onto interlocutors and early-career scholars, and shapes what kinds of claims can be made responsibly. The post-access condition is compounded by Europe's own turn towards research security and by a synthetic information environment that shifts the burden from finding data to verifying provenance. Against this background, the essay develops the notion of epistemic resilience: the capacity of a research community to sustain critical, empirically grounded knowledge under uncertainty without confusing duty of care with intellectual timidity. Epistemic resilience requires plural data ecologies for triangulation, transparent "access-and-constraint statements" that render absences comparable, and verification routines for digital evidence, including provenance and authenticity checks appropriate to generative media.

本文指出，歐洲漢學正由“常態准入”時代轉向“後准入”境況，田野調查、檔案使用、資料庫訪問及學術合作日益被當作可隨時收回的許可加以管控。作者強調，准入限制不應被視為偶發困境，而應理解為一種系統性治理機制：它不僅造成結構性的資料缺失，也使學者更難提出穩健而有據的學術論斷。更兼歐洲對科研安全日益強化，研究重心亦從“獲取資料”轉向“驗證來源”，凡此皆使困局愈趨嚴峻。有鑑於此，本文提出“認知論韌性”概念，主張構建多元數據生態以實現三角互證，推行透明的“准入與限制說明”機制，並建立適用於生成式媒介的數位證據溯源與真偽核查常規，以在不確定中維繫嚴謹而具批判性的知識生產。

Keywords: access governance, data ecologies, epistemic resilience, research security, verification

關鍵詞： 准入治理，資料生態，認識論韌性，研究安全，證據核驗

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Introduction: An Anniversary in the Shadow of Conditionality

Anniversary moments invite retrospection, but they also sharpen a discipline's sense of vulnerability. As the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) approaches its half-century, European China Studies confronts a paradox: the field is institutionally visible in public debate, yet the conditions of producing robust knowledge about the People's Republic of China (PRC) are becoming more unstable. For decades, European scholarship could treat "access" as a negotiable background condition—uneven and politically shaped, but often imagined as gradually improvable through exchange, language training, and sustained presence. That viewpoint was never naive: access was always stratified by topic and gatekeeping, and it was always entangled with power. Still, the default horizon was forward-looking: whatever today's restrictions, tomorrow might permit better access.

That horizon has fractured. Since the early 2020s, European scholars have faced a growing combination of mobility uncertainty, legal ambiguity around what counts as "sensitive" information, and infrastructural disruptions to the digital services that mediate access to Chinese-language sources. A concrete example of this transformation is found in a telling episode from April 2023, when the California Digital Library announced that select resources of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (Zhongguo zhiwang 中國知網; hereafter CNKI) would be temporarily suspended, citing a government audit of the platform (California Digital Library 2023). Access was reported to have been restored by April 2024 (California Digital Library 2024). The point, however, is not CNKI as such. It is that access to repositories and interfaces can be reclassified, audited, withdrawn, and returned through governance, making the means by which evidence is obtained part of the evidence itself.

I call this setting a condition of "post-access": access persists but is selective, revocable, and bounded by opaque lines. The epistemic consequence is not only fewer data but the politicised production of availability itself, which demands collective transparency and verification.

This contribution therefore treats access not as a technical precondition but as a governance modality that structures epistemic possibilities. In the PRC context, access governance is connected to the management of visibility and uncertainty and to a broader project of shaping external narratives and international discourse power, reiterated in state media reporting on Xi Jinping's Politburo study session on international communication (Reuters 2021). Against this background, I propose epistemic resilience as a collective capacity to sustain critical, empirically grounded knowledge amid uncertainty without confusing duty of care with intellectual timidity. Resilience, I argue, requires plural data ecologies for triangulation, transparent reporting of constraints through access-and-constraint statements, and verification routines for digital evidence in an era of synthetic media. The sections that follow trace how law, data governance, and platforms produce patterned missingness; then turn to

verification and provenance; and finally sketch institutional and ethical design choices that can turn vulnerability into a collectively managed condition rather than an individual improvisation.

Access as Governance: Law, Data, and the Production of Missingness

To speak of post-access conditions is to name a patterned configuration, not an episodic crisis. Access has always been governed: by host institutions, by political campaigns, by bureaucratic discretion, and by scholars' own positionality. What has changed is the salience of conditionality and the opacity of its boundaries. Post-access therefore does not describe an end-state but a shift in the default assumptions under which research is planned. Fieldwork, archives, platforms, and collaborations increasingly resemble revocable permissions embedded in security and compliance regimes rather than stable infrastructures for inquiry. In such a setting, routine access is not a baseline; it is a contingent arrangement whose fragility must be made analytically visible.

Three governance channels are particularly consequential: security and secrecy law, data governance, and infrastructural control through platforms and information services. They interact, and their interaction matters because it produces uncertainty as a resource of governance. Uncertainty is not only a by-product of complexity; it can also be a mechanism through which actors discipline themselves. When legal categories are broad and enforcement is discretionary, risk management shifts onto those least able to absorb it: interlocutors, local partners, and early-career researchers.

The expansion of security and secrecy regimes into everyday informational domains is the first channel. China's revised Counter-Espionage Law (*Fan jiandie fa* 反間諜法), which took effect on 1 July 2023, broadened the legal framing of what may count as espionage-related conduct, including acts involving the illicit provision of documents, data, materials, or items related to national security and interests (National People's Congress 2023). The revised Law on Guarding State Secrets *(Baoshou guojia mimi fa* 保守國家秘密法), effective 1 May 2024, reinforced the centrality of secrecy by updating a legal framework whose definitions are expansive and whose interpretive authority lies with state organs (National People's Congress 2024). Reporting on the revision highlighted stricter expectations for compliance and the additional category of "work secrets" (Al Jazeera 2024). For scholarship, the precise distribution of categories matters less than their epistemic effect: they make the boundary of "sensitive information" harder to map in advance and easier to retroactively contest.

Such legal uncertainty intersects with an economy of enforcement signals. The 2023 raid on the office of the US due-diligence firm Mintz Group and the detention of staff were not about

academia, but were widely read as messages being sent about the gathering of information and its potential reclassification as suspect activity (Reuters 2023a). These events contribute to a climate in which researchers and institutions must anticipate legal and reputational risk, often without clear guidance on what will trigger scrutiny. In a post-access condition, "security" thus becomes a diffuse background variable that structures practical decision-making.

The second channel is data governance. The Data Security Law (*Shuju anquan fa* 數據安全法) and the Personal Information Protection Law (*Geren xinxi baohu fa* 個人信息保護法), embed national security and public interest considerations into the regulation of data processing and, crucially, into the cross-border provision of data (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2021a; 2021b). These frameworks matter for scholarship even when the research topic is not politically contentious in the ordinary sense. Research increasingly relies on digital traces, administrative datasets, and platform-mediated corpora. In such a setting, data transfer, storage, and publication become compliance problems as well as methodological choices. The social effect is not simply restriction; it is risk redistribution. Responsibilities for "proper" data handling are shifted from the state and from platforms onto individuals and institutions with limited interpretive capacity, including university administrators and doctoral students.

The third channel is infrastructural governance through platforms and information services. In a datafied research environment, access often means access to mediated interfaces—databases, archives, digital repositories, and commercially curated corpora—rather than merely to physical places. These infrastructures are vulnerable to audit, discontinuity, deletion, and selective reconfiguration. The CNKI episode is illustrative: the 2023 suspension was framed as a consequence of a government audit (California Digital Library 2023), and the platform itself was later fined following a cybersecurity investigation (Reuters 2023b). For scholars, the immediate issue is access to journals and theses; the deeper issue is that the infrastructures of evidence are themselves objects of regulation, audit, and political economy.

Infrastructural governance also includes the selective withdrawal or reconfiguration of state-produced information. In August 2023, China's National Bureau of Statistics suspended publication of the youth unemployment rate, stating that it needed to review its methodology (Reuters 2023c). Whatever the methodological arguments, the suspension functioned as a reminder that official statistics are not only measurements; they are political artefacts embedded in governance priorities. Similarly, the manipulation of legal information illustrates how access can be reversed after publication. Liebman and co-authors document how court decisions previously available on China's online database have been deleted, producing both analytical challenges and substantive insight into the governance of transparency (Liebman et al. 2023, 2417–2418). Such cases show that even when information is currently visible, its continued visibility cannot be assumed.

Taken together, these channels produce a core epistemic problem: "missingness". In the language of causal inference, the post-access condition increases the prevalence of *non-ignorable missingness* (often termed "missing not at random" in later typologies), where the likelihood of absence is correlated with politically relevant attributes of the information itself (Rubin 1976, 581–583; Little and Rubin 2002, 5–7). When missingness is patterned, it cannot be treated as random noise; it becomes part of the object of analysis. Brussee's analysis of policy document availability provides a concrete illustration: he finds that only about 80% of links remain available in two years' time and that variation in transparency tracks whether policies relate to citizens' daily lives versus national security (2025, 241, 244). The methodological implication is that scholars must be more explicit about what their datasets exclude, how exclusion is produced, and what forms of inference remain warranted.

A second epistemic problem is behavioural: anticipatory compliance and its chilling effects. Chestnut Greitens and Truex show that repressive experiences among China scholars—ranging from visa problems to intimidation—are "rare but real" and can generate subtle shifts in research behaviour (2020, 370). Truex's later reflection on researching China in hard times underscores that even low-incidence events can be consequential because scholars adapt under uncertainty (2024, 146). The post-access condition amplifies these dynamics because uncertainty encourages risk-averse adaptation. Researchers internalise gatekeepers' expectations; institutions translate reputational anxieties into partnership restrictions; and the safest questions begin to crowd out the most illuminating ones. These are not simply individual choices. They are emergent properties of a governance regime in which the costs of inquiry are unevenly distributed.

The politics of access also extends into publication and dissemination. European China scholars have long debated the role of commercial publishers in enforcing or anticipating Chinese censorship demands. Loubere traces how access to the Chinese market can create incentives for international publishers to remove or restrict content, producing forms of self-censorship that are difficult to detect ex post (Loubere 2020, 240–241). Here, too, access operates as governance: access to readers, distribution channels, and markets shapes what becomes legible as legitimate scholarship. From the perspective of epistemic resilience, the question is not only how to obtain evidence, but also how to preserve the conditions under which evidence-based arguments can be publicly articulated without pre-emptive distortions.

European China Studies has experienced access as governance through episodes of interference and signalling. The 2014 "Braga incident", in which pages referring to Taiwanese institutions were removed from EACS conference materials, remains a reminder that informational artefacts mediating scholarly exchange can become targets (Greatrex 2014). China's 2021 counter-sanctions in response to EU measures over Xinjiang, which also affected the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), illustrate that access can be withdrawn through political targeting as well as through visas and permits (Ministry of Foreign

Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021; MERICS 2021). Such episodes underline that conditionality operates through travel, platforms, markets, and reputational pressure, and that treating disruptions as isolated inconveniences misdiagnoses their structural character.

These dynamics invite two unhelpful responses. The first is nostalgia: the belief that "normal access" will return if scholars are patient, quiet, or politically "pragmatic". The second is "substitution illusion": the idea that an abundance of digital resources can simply replace fieldwork and language-based engagement. Both misread the problem. The post-access condition is not the disappearance of data; it is a reorganisation of the politics of evidence. Methodological innovation is necessary, but it must be organised around transparency and verification rather than around the promise of frictionless substitution.

Data Ecologies: Triangulation, Provenance, and the Verification Turn

If access is conditional, the strategic task is not to defend any single channel of evidence but to cultivate plural data ecologies. A data ecology is the ensemble of sources, methods, and infrastructures through which a community produces knowledge, including the standards by which it evaluates what counts as evidence. Such ecologies are never neutral: they are shaped by classification systems, platform architectures, and the institutional incentives that govern what is recorded and preserved (Bowker and Star 1999, 33–40). In a post-access scenario, the goal is redundancy without naivety: the capacity to crosscheck claims across different modalities so that the collapse or manipulation of one source does not force a retreat either into speculation or silence.

This is not to suggest that triangulation is a panacea or a post hoc label for rigour. Triangulation is a design principle with costs. It demands time, language competence, and methodological pluralism. It also demands ethical attention, because crosschecking can increase traceability and can expose interlocutors to risk if data are combined in ways that allow identification. Konken and Howlett's discussion of ethical considerations in digital and remote fieldwork captures a broader lesson for the post-pandemic era: remote methods can broaden access but also introduce new vulnerabilities and obscure the boundaries between public and private contexts (2023, 852–855, 858–859). Epistemic resilience therefore requires a reflexive stance towards the tools through which "distance" is operationalised as knowledge.

Practically, plural data ecologies often entail mixing in-person observation, remote interviews, archival work, and digital trace analysis. They also entail cross-validating official claims with external indicators where appropriate. China Studies has a long tradition of reading "official"

texts against the grain; the post-access conditions of today extend that tradition towards the infrastructures of data. When statistical series are paused, when court decisions are deleted, or when databases are audited, the change itself is analytically meaningful. Change signals shifting priorities and reclassifications within the state's informational order. The point is not to infer intent too quickly, but to treat temporal discontinuities as data that can be systematically archived and compared (Liebman et al. 2023, 2425–2427; Brussee 2025, 242–244).

Because platforms and archives can be altered, resilience also depends on time-sensitive archiving and on treating discontinuities as evidence. When a dataset disappears, when an interface changes, or when a corpus is retroactively edited, those events should not be treated only as nuisances; they can be tracked systematically as indicators of shifting governance priorities. Brussee's study of policy document disappearance shows how the fragility of availability can be measured and modelled rather than merely lamented (Brussee 2025, 241–244). Such work suggests a practical research ethic: preserve what you can, record when you obtained it, and treat absence as a variable instead of as a void.

The advent of post-access conditions has coincided with a "verification turn" that changes the epistemic labour of research. In many domains, the problem is no longer the scarcity of information, but rather the abundance of uncertain provenance. Synthetic media and generative AI sharpen this challenge by enabling rapid fabrication across text, image, audio, and video. This is not China-specific, but the PRC context matters for two reasons. First, China has rapidly developed a regulatory architecture for deep synthesis and generative AI linking content governance to national security, exemplified by Deep Synthesis Provisions (*Shendu hecheng guiding* 深度合成規定) and Interim Measures for Generative AI Services (*Shengchengshi rengong zhineng fuwu guanli zanxing banfa* 生成式人工智能服務管理暫行辦法) (Cyberspace Administration of China 2022; 2023). Second, China is a central arena for narrative contestation and for efforts to strengthen its international communication capacity (Reuters 2021). Verification is therefore a condition of credible public scholarship, not a technical afterthought.

Verification, in this sense, is an epistemological posture. It demands attention to metadata, publication pipelines, and the incentives of intermediaries. It also invites the adoption of emerging provenance standards. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA 2024, 7–8), for example, is developing specifications for attaching tamper-evident provenance information to digital media. Such standards are not a panacea; they depend on adoption and on trustworthy attestations. Still, they illustrate a direction of travel: credibility increasingly depends on showing how an artefact was produced, modified, and transmitted, not only on what it depicts.

Policy frameworks outside China likewise underscore the salience of provenance and risk management. UNESCO's guidance on generative AI in education and research warns that

these systems complicate the validation of knowledge and calls for institutional capacities to distinguish reliable information from fabrication (UNESCO 2023, 20). The EU AI Act also introduces transparency obligations for certain AI-generated or manipulated content, signalling that provenance is becoming a regulatory expectation (European Union 2024, Art. 50). For China Studies, the point is less their prescriptions than the horizon they articulate: responsible scholarship increasingly demands explicit workflows with regard to authenticity and provenance when digital evidence is central to claims.

What might such workflows look like in a scholarly register? At minimum, they require the systematic preservation of source artefacts and their contextual metadata: timestamps, access pathways, and, where possible, snapshots that can be audited later. They also require routine crosschecks against independent sources, including internal consistency checks across documents and comparisons across platforms. In digital research on the PRC, where platforms can be selectively edited or retrospectively altered, timestamped archiving becomes a methodological necessity, not a luxury. Verification routines also imply a willingness to treat uncertainty as part of analysis rather than as an embarrassment to be hidden. If a claim rests on an artefact whose provenance cannot be established, that limitation should be stated and weighed, not glossed over.

The verification turn is also a response to "information disorder": the entanglement of mis-, dis-, and mal-information in polarised digital environments (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 20–23). In China-related scholarship, information disorder is twofold. One layer is external: fabricated or context-stripped content that circulates internationally. The other is internal to research practice: the difficulty of distinguishing genuine documents from altered artefacts once materials move across platforms and languages. Verification routines mitigate both by making provenance and evidentiary status explicit instead of assumed.

Brussee's work on missingness suggests what this might mean in a China-focused context. His analysis of policy document disappearance does not just diagnose fragility; it also points to mitigation practices, such as systematic archiving and explicit modelling of missingness mechanisms (Brussee 2025, 244–247). Translated into a broader methodological sensibility, this implies that scholars should treat "absence" as something to be tracked over time, compared across domains, and incorporated into inference rather than treated as an embarrassment. Tracking disappearance rates of documents, monitoring changes in platform interfaces, and documenting when and how sources were obtained can turn vulnerability into analysable variation.

China's regulatory guidelines on synthetic content are instructive for method. The Deep Synthesis Provisions require measures such as content labelling and record-keeping and frame these duties as safeguarding national security and social order (Cyberspace Administration of China 2022). The Interim Measures for Generative AI Services likewise place responsibility on providers for preventing false information and for aligning outputs

with legal requirements (Cyberspace Administration of China 2023). Regardless of one's assessment of these regulations, they underscore a simple fact: the production and circulation of synthetic content is already being governed as a political and security issue. For researchers, this means that verification cannot be an afterthought. It must be built into the design of projects that rely on digital artefacts, and it must be communicated as part of the evidentiary status of claims.

Institutional Design and the Ethics of Staying Engaged

Epistemic resilience is easier to describe than to build because post-access conditions distribute risks unevenly. Senior scholars often have reputational capital that can absorb access disruption; well-funded institutions can purchase data substitutes; citizens and residents of the PRC bear far greater risk when they participate in research; and early-career scholars face career incentives that reward decisive claims while discouraging explicit expressions of uncertainty. If access is governance, then the governance of risk becomes part of the field's internal moral economy: whose safety is prioritised, whose careers are exposed, and whose labour of verification becomes invisible. Resilience therefore requires institutional design rather than heroic adaptation on the individual level.

Two ethical principles are central. The first is duty of care towards interlocutors and partners. In contexts where surveillance is plausible and boundaries of "sensitive information" are elastic, researchers must anticipate how the production, storage, and circulation of knowledge could expose others. Digital methods can inadvertently increase traceability, and cross-border data transfer can become a compliance risk for partners under China's data governance laws (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2021a; 2021b). The second principle is intellectual integrity. Duty of care must not collapse into a logic of de facto censorship in which entire domains are abandoned because they are difficult, or in which access itself becomes a reward for analytical compliance. Ethical care and critical ambition are not opposites; they require explicit design trade-offs.

Europe's policy environment lends an acuteness to this balancing act. A Commission staff working document on foreign interference in research and innovation maps risks such as undesirable knowledge transfer and covert influence and outlines mitigation practices (European Commission 2022, 4–8). The Council Recommendation of 23 May 2024 on enhancing research security asks member states to support organisations in addressing risks in international cooperation while preserving openness and academic freedom (Council of the European Union 2024, 1, 6–7). Together, these initiatives signal that research security is becoming an institutional expectation.

For European China Studies, there are dual dangers. One danger is complacency: the assumption that research security is irrelevant to work in the humanities and social sciences because it was initially articulated in relation to STEM and dual-use technologies. The other danger is overreaction: a security posture that treats collaboration, language acquisition, and empirical engagement as liabilities rather than as prerequisites of serious scholarship. A resilient field requires a third stance: institutionalised care without securitised epistemology. That stance begins with recognising that many China-related research risks are not "foreign interference" in the narrow sense but ordinary consequences of working with an authoritarian information order and with polarised domestic politics in Europe. Research security frameworks can provide tools, but they must be interpreted through the ethics and epistemology of China scholarship rather than imposed as external compliance checklists.

One practical implication is the need for shared infrastructures. Training on data governance, digital security, and ethical remote methods should be treated as a standard component of doctoral education, not as ad hoc advice transmitted through informal networks. Collective repositories for time-sensitive documents, including archived versions of policies, regulations, and platform interfaces, can reduce duplication and make disappearance itself observable. Shared expertise is particularly important because legal uncertainty encourages improvisation, and improvisation tends to reproduce inequalities of risk exposure. Resilience, by contrast, distributes learning: it makes the field less dependent on individual gatekeepers and more capable of collective adaptation.

A second implication concerns publication conventions. If missingness is patterned and constraints are consequential, then readers need a disciplined way to interpret the evidentiary status of claims. European China Studies should adopt access-and-constraint statements as a light-touch reporting norm, analogous to data availability statements in other fields but adapted to the ethical realities of China research. Such statements would briefly describe which forms of access were available, which were not, and how constraints shaped the evidentiary base: for example, whether certain archives were closed, whether key databases were intermittently unavailable, whether interviews were conducted remotely and under what protection measures, and whether certain quotations or identifying details were withheld in the name of safety. The goal is not exhaustive disclosure, which would often be unethical. Rather, it is relative transparency: to make it possible for readers and reviewers to understand why the evidentiary base looks as it does, and for future scholars to distinguish between the absence of evidence and evidence of absence when assessing research findings.

This proposal is not purely procedural. It speaks to the politics of credibility in a polarised public sphere. When access becomes conditional, accusations of bias proliferate: scholars are suspected of being co-opted if they have access, and suspected of being ideologically driven if they do not. Transparent constraint reporting can reduce the space for such insinuations by shifting attention from presumed motives to observable research conditions.

It can also protect researchers by making the costs of access visible. If access is granted under conditions that constrain inquiry, these restrictions should be part of the evaluation of the resulting scholarship. Conversely, if access is denied, the field should not quietly reward those who respond by lowering ambition; it should reward those who maintain analytic rigour through diversified evidence and explicit uncertainty.

A third implication concerns Europe's relative advantage. European China Studies is structurally multi-lingual and multi-institutional; it spans different archival traditions, funding regimes, and political contexts. That diversity can be converted into resilience if the field treats methodological variation as coordinated redundancy rather than as fragmentation. Collaborative projects that combine expertise across languages and regions can reduce dependence on any single access channel and can mitigate the risks of platform discontinuities. Resilience, in this sense, is a property of networks, not of individuals, and Europe's institutional plurality can be an epistemic resource if organised as such.

Finally, institutional design must keep sight of a basic normative orientation: the purpose of China Studies is not only to interpret the PRC but also to sustain a space for critical inquiry that is not reducible to geopolitical contestation. The PRC's pursuit of international discourse power intersects with European debates about de-risking and economic security. In such a landscape, scholarship risks becoming legible primarily as a position within strategic narratives. Epistemic resilience cannot depoliticise the field, but it can protect its intellectual sovereignty by making methods and evidentiary standards visible, by insisting on complexity against simplification, and by treating uncertainty as an analytical problem instead of as a rhetorical weakness.

Conclusion: Post-Access, Not Post-Knowledge

The post-access condition we see today is not a temporary disruption but rather an emergent norm of knowledge production about the PRC. Treating access as governance has the power to clarify why the challenge is structural and why responses must be collective. Conditionality is produced through law and secrecy regimes, through data governance, and through platform infrastructures that mediate digital evidence. These mechanisms generate patterned missingness, redistribute risk, and shape what counts as responsible inquiry. They also coincide with a verification turn in which information abundance cannot substitute for epistemic discipline, especially in an era of synthetic media in increasingly contested information spaces.

European China Studies can respond by reinventing its infrastructure rather than lamenting the loss of an earlier horizon. Epistemic resilience names that task. It calls for plural data

ecologies that enable triangulation across methods and sources; for disciplined transparency about constraints through access-and-constraint statements that render absences comparable; and for verification routines suited to volatile digital artefacts. It also calls for institutional design that protects interlocutors and early-career scholars while preserving critical ambition. With these commitments, conditional access constrains the field but need not shrink it; a discipline that treats constraints as data and verification as an ethic can remain engaged, rigorous, and publicly useful.

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