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BOOK REVIEW

Digital technologies in global cities: the entanglement of inequalities, opportunities and social mobilizations.

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Digital technologies are influencing the lives of an increasing number of individuals around the world. Even the concept of the digital divide, understood as (non)ownership of digital devices and connection to the Internet (Marques, Massuchin and Mitozo, 2020), needs to be reshaped to meet the new technological challenges faced by individuals (Marangi, Pasta and Rivoltella, 2023). Although the digital divide represents a major source of inequality in our century (Van Dijk, 2020), digital technologies are increasingly accessible, at least in terms of device ownership and connection (Korovkin, Park and Kaganer, 2022). Several authors speak of a three-level digital divide (Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015): the first level is related to deprivation of devices and network access, the second concerns digital skills, and the third refers to possession of sufficient literacy to analyse and enjoy digital content. In cities, digital technologies spread faster and earlier, even reaching those people who are usually marginalised (Nijman and Wei, 2020). Nonetheless, access remains challenging for some groups even in cities and, moreover, these technologies tend to reproduce inequalities, stigma and racist behaviours (Knight et al., 2021). Research on these issues is plentiful and widespread, but the book 'Digital Lives in the Global City' has the merit of addressing the intersection of digital technologies, humans, cities and inequalities from multiple sides and in multiple contexts, showing what it means to live in global cities and with ubiquitous digital technologies. In other terms, it addresses the challenges of digital technologies through a contextualised approach (Morelli and Sampson, 2020) by adopting a peculiar point of view, namely that of the vulnerable. Moreover, it approaches technologies in a non-obvious way; that is, it does not treat them as positive or negative per se, but as tools that can increase or counteract inequalities.

This book shows how the lives of people living in global suburbs are being shaped by digital infrastructure, with a focus on individuals living in high-rise projects. It is an eclectic book, difficult to categorise in terms of intended audience: it offers subjects of reflection for academic scholars, social movements and institutional and private-sector actors. It offers an important and multifaceted description and analysis of digital influences in many aspects of current social life, particularly of the inequalities of people living on the peripheries of global cities. At the same time, it shows how digital technologies can create digital and physical coalitions

which work against these inequalities and how convergences can be formed between people who live far from each other but are subject to the same challenges due to global mechanisms. In this review I highlight what major advances this book offers to social research. I found these contributions very stimulating for a wide variety of disciplines, from sociology to digital technologies and from economics and criminology. That is one of the great merits of this book: it has an interdisciplinary or, in the authors' words, a cross-disciplinary approach. However, for this reason, it is also easily accessible to a non-academic audience.

The book originates from a National Film Award of Canada documentary project, 'Highrise', a seven-year experiment in documentary research employing community engagement and including nonfiction story co-creation processes using emerging technologies. This project was funded by the research project Digital Citizenship in the Global Suburbs, later Universe Within, through a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The book focuses on three global cities, Toronto, Mumbai and Singapore. Its editors are Deborah Cowen and Emily Paradis, of University of Toronto; Alexis Mitchell, artist and SSHRC postdoctoral researcher at New York University; and Brett Story, filmmaker, geographer and assistant professor at Ryerson University. These features should already make it clear why the entire book is clearly interdisciplinary and suitable for a wide variety of audiences.

In addition, the choice of contributors aligns with interdisciplinarity, dissemination and community-engaged research. The authors are researchers, photographers, documentary filmmakers, artists, activists, journalists, community organisers and sometimes more than one of these at the same time. This diversity contributes to the broad and differentiated scope of different subchapters, which makes the book accessible and multi-perspective, allowing different angles of the topic to be put forward. It should also caution readers to bear in mind when approaching the book that the reflections expressed can be due to the particular perspective taken by people who are directly involved in the topic of study, rather than the result of objective scientific research.

While the different origins of the contributions are clear, their structure can confuse the reader. Although the book is mainly focused on Toronto, Mumbai and Singapore, two chapters are devoted to 'Security and Surveillance' and 'Shifting and Scripting Urban Lives' and reflect on the emotional and experiential influence of digital technologies. While these are obviously two very fascinating topics, their connection to the three in-depth studies is not very clear. All the other contributions reflect on the topics of surveillance, security, emotions and experiences, and as it is not immediately obvious why two specific chapters needed to be added, their connection with the rest of the book seems somewhat tenuous. These two chapters contribute to the general aim of the book, but it might have been preferrable to allow more space for the in-depth studies rather than adding other arguments. In fact, these two chapters, addressing different contexts and aspects but without pinning them to precise in-depth context analysis, seem a little detached from the clear merit of the book, which is to give a wide and precise territorial understanding of digital technologies in global cities. Territory, space and socio-political history are all subjects that matter in sociological understanding (Le Galès and Vitale, 2013), and sometimes these elements are sacrificed in the book.

The editors have also done well to treat digital technologies as a tool with no intrinsic positive or negative values. The book shows how technologies can exacerbate inequalities, discriminatory practices and ubiquitous surveillance but at the same time are used to combat inequalities, abuses and misconduct. This is an important contribution to a scholarly and popular debate that usually focuses on understanding the essential values of digital technologies without considering who uses them and for what purpose. In other words, this book helps focus the debate on what people do with technologies rather than what technologies do to people, bringing the focus back to people and the relationships between them and technologies. This is not to say that technologies do not impact human lives – for example, one subchapter shows how workers feel stressed by being monitored on Facebook by employers both on and off the clock – but the heart of the reflection is what people can do with digital technologies. In addition, the book reflects on the links between digital and urban contexts, showing what connects these two dimensions. This is crucial, as the discussion in the public sphere, and

sometimes even in academia, focuses on how digital technologies have dissolved urban communities (Hampton and Wellman, 2020). The book clearly shows how digital technologies can also improve urban communities, create new ones and connect people living in similar urban conditions in different parts of the world. This description is well analysed in the interesting preface by Saskia Sassen, who recalls the focus on the link between digital technologies and social movements (Sassen, 2012) and how digital technologies are adaptable to meso contexts (Mosco, 2019) and thus particularly effective in empowering communities. It analyses how digital technologies enable the construction of new forms of belonging: one local and one global (Sassen, 2004). In other words, digital technologies could be a new tool for influencing the meso level and, at the same time, shaping both top-down and bottom-up global processes. This does not mean that digital technologies are the solution to weakening social ties, but it is shown that technologies do not only have a (supposedly) negative effect on communities.

The book is organised around the analysis of three main study contexts. The first to be presented is Toronto. Findings, and especially photos, show how a new theory and the implications of digital poverty need to be reconceptualised. Researchers Emily Paradis and Heather Frise mapped how people living in Toronto's suburbs, in extremely difficult conditions, make great sacrifices to have and maintain digital connections with their loved ones, often far away, to gain access to job offers and social bonuses and bureaucratic processes, but also to remain attached to their culture of origin, with its rituals and sources of information. It is fascinating how this contribution, in the authors' words, 'stands in contrast to much of the standard research on digital divides, which holds that low income and low access are inevitably coupled' (p. 8).

As the findings in this chapter clearly demonstrate, the digital divide is not a question of availability of digital tools or connections, but what people give up having the ability to be digitally connected. People prefer to have digital connections over furniture and even beds. The need to stay connected has paved the way for growing inequalities. As fixed monthly fees are unaffordable for some people, communication companies have created rates that seem very affordable. If users exceed the limits, however, they are automatically charged extra costs that have damaging impacts on their budgets, and they can find themselves inadvertently forced into huge digital debt.

Within the presentation of digital inequalities, there is room for an interesting contribution by Krystle Maki on discriminatory social control of the poor. The example given is that of digital surveillance of welfare recipients in Ontario, where a gender- and ethnicity-focused social control is perpetrated. This situation recalls the moral regulation of the urban poor (Wacquant, 2016). The last two subchapters, by Judy Duncan and Nehal El-Hadi, show how social movements are mobilising to create campaigns for affordable Internet access and how women activists of colour are using online activities to claim their right to the city. Again, we can see how digital technologies can be used both to increase inequalities and to fight them in innovative ways.

Next, a chapter on security and surveillance is presented. Among the possible uses of digital technologies, the field of security is among the most developed (Laufs, Borrion and Bradford, 2020). Contributions range from the United States to Palestine, and all reflect on the pervasiveness of digital technologies in the field of security and the impact they have on urban life. In particular, digital technologies tend to be used in contexts of socioeconomic marginalisation that evoke a 'racialised urban social control' (p. 11). This type of control is shown in the case presented by R. Josch Scannell of closed-circuit television equipment in African-American urban neighbourhoods, the Domain Awareness System, a real-time digital analysis of potential security threats and risk prediction as part of the so-called predictive policing programme.

Technical innovations have been used to legitimise discriminatory behaviour towards the most vulnerable social groups in a technocratic rhetoric (Lageson, 2022). However, this rhetoric ignores how previous outcomes are often the result of entrenched racial and ethnic prejudices that have led to a misreading of the crime phenomenon (Vincent and Viljoen, 2020). In other words, current discriminatory practices in

surveillance are the result of something that was already present in different forms in the non-digital era. These contributions reflect important aspects of academic debate. Research has shown how technologies in the field of security currently tend to reproduce inequalities and stereotypical views of poverty (Parra Saiani, 2020). Predictive studies, based on previous data, tend to reproduce the view of certain neighbourhoods as unsafe or certain segments of the population as potentially more dangerous (ibid.). As an example, consider the trends of mass incarceration of the African-American population in US cities which have occurred in recent decades (Sampson, 2019) and are now strongly criticised by the Black Lives Matter movement. Moreover, these innovations tend to exacerbate a distorted perception of possible dangers in the urban context. A specific subchapter written by a non-profit collective, Visualizing Impact, is dedicated to the topic of power and digital technologies in the context of Palestine, showing how Israel controls the Palestinian telecommunications sector, resulting in slow internet, limited frequencies and higher prices.

All these sub-chapters, of great scientific and social interest, reflect on how control apparatuses have strong responsibilities in the use of digital technologies and how a purely technical reading must be abandoned in the analysis of such technologies. In other words, we should focus more on what people legitimise with technologies rather than what technologies show of social processes. At the same time, the presentation of several sub-chapters without a focus on a specific territory tends to leave in the background the meso-contexts that could better situate why several practices are spreading in specific contexts.

The second context analysed is Mumbai, where the intersection of financial capital, global real estate, urban planning, evictions and protests is closely linked. Several sub-chapters analyse new trends in urban planning in an ever-expanding global city, both physical and digital, and how this is shaping new inequalities and social movements. The authors show how the growth of financialization in Mumbai has led to huge investments in city building, supported not only by the local but also the global real estate market, which is helping to raze existing high-rise buildings, resulting in mass evictions, to build new flats for the emerging middle and upper classes. If digitisation-supported financialization is the cause of these housing upheavals, it is also an opportunity for residents to mobilise efficiently. Indeed, evicted residents have used digital technologies to fight these displacements, to create coalitions among dispersed residents, to hold the community together, to create awareness on social media and to find external support. Housing companies have also realised the importance of this 'digital' coalition and sought to interact with residents online, while also trying to fragment the unity of residents. Digital technologies in this case have both maintained and created a community, as many of were not used to interacting with each other.

The analysis offered by the authors of this book of the effectiveness of these mobilisations is interesting: they show how neighbourhoods with a more affluent population were able to meet, through digital media, a wider audience and attract the interest of journalists and politicians. They thus gained greater acceptance and attention, which, in some cases, led to the demolition of buildings being blocked. Although all neighbourhoods under eviction mobilised through digital media, the social campaign was more successful in terms of blocking evictions in middle-class contexts. This should remind us of the influence of the echo-chamber (Boutlyline and Willer, 2017): the inhabitants of middle-class neighbourhoods were closer to the leaders of public opinion, whose attention could more easily be drawn to the mobilisation campaign, while those who did not have this kind of contact remained unheard. Thus, although it can be said that while the digital divide is less pervasive than it used to be, the effectiveness of social digital campaigns still reflects social class imbalances.

Before moving on to Singapore, the book addresses the issue of how digital technologies are shaping people's everyday lives, physically, practically and emotionally. In this review, I would like to focus on three spheres discussed by the authors: digital technologies among protesters in Korea, resilience strategies of taxi drivers in India towards digital platforms and the physical dimension of digital technologies. In Korea, Ju Hui Judy Han shows how digital technologies enable protesters in high-altitude structures to maintain contact with the rest of the world and achieve a broad representation of their symbolic protest. While physically isolated from

the rest of the world, they remain closely connected on digital channels. An interesting sub-chapter by Indu Vaschist is dedicated to the discussion of digital platforms in the work environment and, in particular, apps for taxi drivers in India. Here again, digital technologies are shown to increase inequalities while at the same time offering more opportunities. On the one hand, apps for taxi drivers pay less than the Indian law, charge additional fees to call the customer and allow workers to drive for up to 10 hours. On the other hand, they provide taxi drivers with a bank account and charge a fixed fee to the customer, thus not subjecting them to bargaining, which is perceived as stressful by both customer and taxi drivers, and the assurance of always having customers. Taxi drivers have found their own way of adapting digital technologies to their needs: when they are in an area of the city with few customers, they turn on the app to quickly find another one so the taxi is always full. When they arrive in an area with more customers, they use the traditional method, which is more convenient and profitable for them. Important research has focused on inequalities spread by digital platforms (Arcidiacono, Borghi, Ciarini, 2019; Demirel, Nemkova and Taylor, 2021; Rodríguez-Modroño, Pesole, and López-Igual, 2022) and protests against them (Chesta, Zamponi and Caciagli, 2019; Cini, Maccarrone and Tassinari, 2022; Marrone and Finotto, 2019), but few studies have paid attention to the resilience strategies of digital platform workers.

Finally, the sub-chapter 'Network dislocations' by Nicole Starosielski offers an interesting reflection on the physical dimension of digital technologies, showing, through maps and photos, how cables, tunnels and buildings have an impact on our cities and territories. The infrastructural side of modern technologies is an aspect that is usually relegated to the background; recently, however, with the tensions between Russia and Europe, it has come to the fore because of oil pipe connections and how these infrastructures have become the focus of acts of war. Attacks on the Nord Stream oil pipe in the Baltic Sea have increased reflections on the interconnectivity of our world but, at the same time, on the fact that a country's exposure to unforeseen attacks could have serious consequences for its stability.

The chapter on Singapore is of primary interest for sociological debate and presents fascinating sub-chapters. It shows how digital technologies, commodities, urbanisation and a migrant workforce are contributing to the rise of one of the most digitised cities in the world. Digital technologies are omnipresent and among the main pillars of the governmental agenda. Several sub-chapters show how these technologies range from surveillance, education, dating, the labour market and more. Until recently, digital technologies were not easily accessible for migrants, with internet fees and the costs of digital devices being the main causes of the digital divide. However, some companies have found a new market in migrants and thus created affordable tariffs. The ambivalence of digital technologies also clearly emerges in this chapter. While on the one hand the government uses digital technologies to monitor migrants, in particular, from urban surveillance to the labour market (e.g., employers equip employees with digital technologies to monitor their work activities), at the same time migrants use these technologies to maintain contact with their families abroad, create solidarity between migrant communities, forge new sentimental relationships and combat labour inequalities (e.g., by recording employers who ask them to work in dangerous situations).

The government has implemented a series of interventions that clearly highlight some ethical issues, such as the ubiquitous surveillance of CCTV cameras and the use of fingerprinting to allow access to certain neighbourhoods to check who is there in case there are security problems. Here again, however, migrants are creating new practices to combat these inequalities. Thanks to digital technologies, migrants keep family members and acquaintances who would like to migrate to Singapore informed, telling them what real working and living conditions are like. Interviews show that this kind of digital protest by migrants has already had interesting results in reducing the flows of migrants from India and Bangladesh, forcing the government to find new migrants from Myanmar. In addition, migrants create new solidarity networks, promoting language lessons and union meetings through digital technologies, as well as creating social relationships and organising

themselves, finding in remote meetings the opportunity to participate despite the limited free time given to them by their employers. These digital solidarities are effective for the purpose of establishing counter practices to resist and combat the inequalities they face daily. However, it also emerges that the pervasiveness of digital technologies represents a source of stress: employers can monitor workers at any time, including by checking time spent on Facebook during working hours. Families can also use this platform to talk to and check on workers, and some women have expressed how, with digital technologies, care tasks have even followed them abroad.

Picking up the threads of the contributions summarised here, this book offers important advances in sociological understanding. First, it shows the urgent need to define, for research and policy purposes, a theory of the digital divide. A growing part of the world's population, including the most vulnerable, is better able to access digital technologies that connect them to the rest of the world. While in the 1990s a computer was needed to connect to the Internet, today cheap fares and low-cost mobile phones make it possible to talk across borders, stay connected and be updated on what is happening in the world. However, new inequalities are emerging: digital innovations are so fast that users have to be constantly updated in order not to be excluded. Elders and the self-educated are at serious risk of being left on the margins of these innovations and having less access to services and policies. Scholars have suggested re-articulating the digital divide debate by adding digital competences and digital literacy to properly measure the divide (ibidem). However, these two levels imply the need to understand what the right skills and literacy are and for what purposes they are used. This relates to a second point of relevance of this book, namely the rapidity of digital transformations and their social consequences. The chapter on Mumbai showed how inhabitants of what used to be middle-class areas twenty years ago are being pushed out of their neighbourhoods, which will be completely renovated for the new urban upper-middle classes. This also raises a clear warning for the future: what is upper class now could easily collapse in a short time with these rapid innovations, with the risk that social fractures will continue to emerge in new and unexpected ways, presenting a real problem for local and national governments facing multiple crises. Moreover, skills and literacy that are valuable today could be obsolete in a few years, with socioeconomic consequences.

Third, the physical aspects of digital technologies are fascinating, including their space requirements and the rise and fall of buildings that must adapt to digital technologies. How many of today's cities are dotted with digital infrastructure, from telecommunication towers to underground cables and from underwater wires to buildings with servers? These physical aspects are ubiquitous, but little considered, and their social consequences are equally neglected. The related chapter in this book left me wondering how much can be said about the dislocation of these infrastructures in cities: is it homogeneous? Are there social disparities? We know from other research that the Not In My Back Yard syndrome exists in relation to some digital infrastructures (Shwanen and Nixon, 2019), but it might be interesting to explore these aspects further.

Finally, the most promising aspect of the book, in my opinion, is its discussion of the ambivalence of digital technologies. This book sees technology as a tool which is not inherently positive or negative. It clearly emerges that technologies can be used by social actors with the power to create surveillance, foster discriminatory practices and increase inequalities. However, their use depends on the purposes and inclusiveness in the minds of stakeholders implementing policy through digital technologies, not on the digital technologies themselves. It also emerges that vulnerable actors are organising themselves through digital technologies to create new coalitions and solidarity without borders, forms of resistance and adaptation to inequalities which do not remain only in the digital sphere but have concrete consequences (Morelli, 2019; Introini, Morelli and Pasqualini, 2021). At the same time, the book shows that the visibility of protest provided by digital technologies does not have the same effect on public opinion: people with better social capital, who can more easily reach those responsible for information, have more opportunities to have an impact on the public debate and influence political and private decisions.

For those interested in these aspects, the book is stimulating and multifaceted, presenting multiple perspectives. Its main limitation is that few pages and pictures are dedicated to many dimensions which deserved to be given much more space. However, this shortcoming may well stimulate researchers' imagination and lead them to delve further into the aspects touched on by the authors.

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