



Deborah Cowen, Alexis Mitchell, Emily Paradis and Brett Story (eds), *Digital Lives in the Global City: Contesting Infrastructures*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780774862387 (paper); ISBN: 9780774862394 (ebook)

Digital Lives in the Global City is the product of an “experiment in documentary, community-engaged research and cocreation in nonfiction storytelling using emergent technologies” (p.ix). The collaborative project, sponsored by the National Film Board of Canada, aimed at understanding how the lives of suburban high-rise residents in global cities are increasingly entangled in digital systems. The resulting edited collection includes contributions from academics, artists, filmmakers, activists, and organisers reflecting on diverse experiences from Toronto, Mumbai, and Singapore, and presented in a variety of creative formats and writing styles. Reflections on each of the three case sites are organised into their own sections, with two thematic sections in between – one on “Security and Surveillance” and another on “Shifting and Scripting Urban Lives”. The result is a highly engaging and thought provoking read and an important contribution to both academic and activist discussions around housing rights, debt, migration, policing, race and gender inequalities, and myriad other topics. Indeed, the far-ranging significance of this text as a whole and its individual contributions would be impossible to fully account for here. Rather, in this review, I outline two important takeaways from this text for scholars interested in digital geographies – focusing on the entanglement of digital systems with a range of other infrastructures, and on the uneven, everyday, and contested nature of digital agency and subjectivities.

Across many of the contributions to the edited collection, the internet is presented as a vital infrastructure for everyday life, but one for which access is shaped by various physical, social, and economic divides. In this sense, Judy Duncan’s explanation of ACORN’s campaign for affordable access, and Emily Paradis, Brett Story and Deborah Cowen’s account of the uneven access to digital networks among poor and middle-class housing activists in Mumbai,

highlight the continued importance of reflecting on the “digital divide” and its diverse manifestations across space (Gilbert 2010). Other contributions, like Nicole Starosielski’s focus on the undersea cables or Heather Frise’s account of DIY wifi projects build on work highlighting the role of material infrastructures and their politics in determining control over and access to digital connection (Lynch 2021). In this way, several contributions to the volume make important contributions to long-running conversations about the varied and shifting geographies of inequality in the digital age.

Yet, perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this collection is the way the digital tends to fade into the background and then reappear in the various accounts and analyses of urban life offered. The digital is not always the primary focus, but manifests through its entanglements in a variety of other infrastructures and systems, including finance, housing, security, borders, and land. Across chapters, authors trace how the digital inflects these systems in new and sometimes subtle ways. For instance, Alexis Mitchell and Deborah Cowen examine questions of housing and labour in Singapore. Digital technologies are highlighted for their roles in representing national narratives around housing, in facilitating international networks of migrant workers, and in controlling migrant workers’ access to space in the city. Yet, the technology is not privileged in the authors’ analysis as the primary site of explanation. Rather the authors trace how these technologies materialise in complex and uneven ways within the messiness of everyday life, shaped by and reshaping longer histories of migration, labour, and nation-building. In a similar way, the contributions around security and surveillance highlight evolving forms of high-tech and data-driven policing. Yet, Simone Browne’s chapter connects these practices to longer histories, including the pre-digital FBI surveillance of Audre Lorde and the complicated desires for security as articulated by June Jordan’s architectural re-imagining of Harlem. Digitalisation leads to new manifestations of surveillance and new ways of imagining and experiencing in/security, but the logics that undergird these are not in themselves new.

In line with the book’s nuanced and varied treatment of “the digital”, the contributions to

this collection highlight the contested, undetermined, and evolving forms of (post)human agency in the digitally mediated city. Geographer Gillian Rose (2017) offers an important critique of the ways much scholarship on digital urbanism highlights the agential capacities of digital technologies while undifferentiated “humans” are presented as either conforming to the logics of digital control or actively resisting them. Rather, Rose calls for an understanding of human and machine agencies as co-constituted, opening opportunities for constrained but creative “reinvention” with digital systems. This echoes philosopher Bernard Stiegler’s (2013: 4) insistence that technology be understood as a *pharmakon*, which he explains “is at once what enables care to be taken and that of which care must be taken ... its power is curative to the immeasurable extent that is it also destructive”.

Across chapters, the treatment of digital technologies and the roles they come to play reflect such an approach to digitalisation of everyday life, resisting either a purely techno-pessimistic or techno-optimistic reading. For instance, Krystle Maki examines the digitalisation of Ontario, Canada’s social assistance programmes and the normalisation of “monitoring, surveillance, and regulation of welfare recipients” (p.62), reflecting important research into the myriad ways digital technologies enable new forms of control (Franklin 2015). Yet, many other chapters explore the limits of this control and explore the varied forms of agency enacted by marginalised individuals and communities. While Paradis et al. consider how digitalisation helped make possible the forms of housing financialisation and speculation examined in the case of Mumbai, it also created new ways for residents to organise and resist displacement. While digital technology creates new forms of precarity and debt in the case of many Toronto high-rise residents, it also enables important forms of connection and belonging that are vital to migrants’ social and familial relationships. Recognising such complex and nuanced effects of digitalisation allows for the imagining of small but concrete steps toward more just digital futures, as the ACORN campaign or DIY wifi examples illustrate. As such, this volume as a whole makes a significant contribution to the development of what Sarah Elwood and Agnieszka Leszczynski



(2018: 640) describe as feminist digital geographies: “attending to and unpacking how people make sense and meaning of data and technologies in the spaces and practices of their everyday lives, how they grapple with the effects and consequences of a digital society, and how these effects and consequences manifest differently across spaces and subjectivities”.

Finally, in addition to the book’s important contributions to scholarly conversations around the digitalisation of everyday life, it should be celebrated for the creativity of its form. Beyond traditional academic essays, the volume includes a range of creative contributions. This includes Nehal El-Hadi’s “Transmutations”, a “textual assemblage” (p.79) composed of extracted quotations from interviews with women of colour social justice activists in Toronto, texts from public archives, and academic theory. These quotations are put together to produce a new and fascinating narrative about activist uses of the internet. In another contribution, a nonprofit collective, Visualizing Impact, offers three infographics to call attention to the highly unequal access to affordable high-speed internet among Israelis and Palestinians. More broadly, chapters throughout the book make use of myriad maps, photographs, and other visuals that help the reader make sense of the varied sites and experiences described.

Overall, this is a fascinating and wide-ranging text. While many of the individual chapters can likely stand alone as important contributions to research in urban, digital, political, and social geographies, I highly recommend that readers engage with the totality of the collection. Taken together, *Digital Lives in the Global City* offers a creative and thought-provoking account of the evolving role of digital technologies in everyday life across diverse geographic contexts and the ways individuals and communities navigate and remake their relationships to these technologies.

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