



***Digital (in)justice in the smart city*, edited by Debra Mackinnon, Ryan Burns, and Victoria Fast**

Toronto, ON, University of Toronto Press, 2023

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BOOK REVIEW

Digital (in)justice in the smart city, edited by Debra Mackinnon, Ryan Burns, and Victoria Fast, Toronto, ON, University of Toronto Press, 2023

As the title implies, this book takes a critical—if not skeptical—view of digital transformation of the urban environment, insofar as it approaches social justice as a largely overlooked, unobtained, and frequently unprioritized consideration in the adoption of smart technologies by cities. The book's authors attribute this principally to the evolution of the neo-liberal economic and political agenda driving industrial profiteering and the commercialization of public goods and services with little regard for the resulting impact on communities or individuals. This topic is explored throughout the book's essays, spanning issues ranging from corporate monopolization of the tech industry to the dangers of unmediated adoption of facial recognition software and artificial intelligence, and the distribution of social media that exploits and enhances anti-democratic messaging.

The book is an anthology of 24 essays (plus an introductory essay by the editors) on a spectrum of topics related to the integration of digital technologies in the urban environment, and the concept of “digital justice” as a largely unexplored dimension in the evolution of the “smart city.” The book is divided into five sections, each containing 4–5 individual essays, which provide both context and research perspective on aspects of digital justice and its application (or absence) as a goal of smart city development. The five sections include: Challenging the Foundations of Smart, Data Decisioning and Data Justice, Infrastructures of Injustice, Complicated and Complicating Digital Divides, and Urban Citizenship and Participation. Each section opens with a “dialogue” between the editors and a noted authority on the intersections of social science, digital technologies, sustainability, and global urbanism (Ayona Datta, Stephen Graham, Rob Kitchin, Vincent Mosco, and Alison Powell). These dialogues offer perspectives that help to illuminate much of the discussion and value that the book achieves. The book is highly multi-disciplinary and international in its approach, with 46 contributing authors (including the editors) representing 14 nations. All the authors are academic professionals based at universities. The book is not technical in nature, and focuses on the social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions of smart cities and technologies rather than on the sensors, IoT systems, data management platforms, or ones and zeros that mobilize and enable smart cities at the foundation level.

Setting aside the debate about origins of the current societal problems addressed, the book—which was published in 2023—is likely the most comprehensive treatment to date of the challenges and shortcomings in achieving social justice and equity through digital transformation of the urban environment. The opening essay by the editors provides a useful introduction to the complex evolution of “smartness” as urban nomenclature, noting that “*smart cities* have become the dominant paradigm for urban planning and administration around the world” (p. 3; italics in the original). However, while acknowledging the global adoption of the concept—if not the actual term—the editors make the somewhat curious pronouncement that “the qualifier *smart*, when applied to cities is an empty signifier It contains no inherent meaning on its own, but remains . . . a useful theoretical and analytical tool to illuminate the uneven, contingent, and contested implications for the ambivalent meanings of terms and ideas that actors use to characterize smart cities” (p. 4). This is in contrast to the concept of social justice, which the editors contend “can mean multiple things to different people, [although] it does not warrant treatment as an empty signifier, since it is grounded in the concrete material and symbolic realities of those experiencing injustice” (p. 4). The succeeding essays and dialogs then offer specific examples where both “smart cities” and “social justice” have been problematic and often contentious goals for city and community development. For example, Burns notes in his essay that “social justice itself has long been debated, contested, and (re)worked—it does not have

a singular meaning, and is not self-evident” (p. 54). Regardless, Vincent Mosco’s dialogue in Part Three offers a simple, straightforward clarification of this paradox, which reflects a theme of the book’s other chapters:


I would challenge fundamentally any discussion of how to make a city a better place solely through the use of technology. . . . It is not a question of how to get people to accept smart technology. Rather, it means remaking the concept of smart itself, in terms of what we want to achieve. That’s part of the process of critiquing and debunking technological determinism: a recognition that technology short-circuits all of the major questions we’ve ever asked about communities. (p. 180)

Outside the academic exercise of signifiers, empty and otherwise, the question to be asked is not whether digital transformation toward the “smart city” is a good or bad thing, but rather how to achieve it so that public good can be realized and equitable outcomes for residents and society attained. This is as much a question of policy decisions and prioritization as it is of technology integration and implementation, and is where the compilation of viewpoints and research in this book makes a significant contribution. It is often difficult within the smart city enterprise or “community” to find objective analysis of the failures to achieve societal ends through technology integration; to learn from cities of their unsuccessful or unsustainable attempts to solve complex city challenges through data and information management; or to gain insights from the technology firms themselves as to why their R&D investments failed to achieve at the city or community level the outcomes originally envisioned (and sold to the city).

Digital (In)justice in the Smart City opens that dialogue by providing a compendium of examples of city attempts to achieve social justice through technology, with emphasis on the degree to which this is yet a largely unattained vision. While the approach offers more of a philosophical investigation appropriate for academic researchers and students than a guidebook for city leadership, civil engineers or planners, the essays provide a broad spectrum of examples, case-studies, and real-world examples. Consequently, the book would be of particular value to academics whose work trends toward applied research in collaboration with city officials, private sector developers, and community leaders. Such collaborative outreach and real-world experience may be a common endeavor among the book’s numerous contributors, but the short bio-sketches don’t reflect that perspective, and much of the language and analysis is clearly directed at academic audiences. The essay by Nina David (p. 350) and the case study of the city of Milton-Keynes, UK, by Miguel Valdez, Matthew Cook, and Helen Roby (p. 146) are notable exceptions.

The greatest contribution this volume offers is its compilation of the history, evolution, and current shortcomings of the “smart city” movement to define or achieve social justice as a fundamental goal. In this regard, the initial assertion in the introductory essay that the concept of the “smart city” represents an “empty signifier,” while the concept of “social justice” does not, perhaps reflects the fact that social justice has been a sought-after societal goal since at least the 1960s, whereas our understanding of what actually constitutes “smart” in a smart city or community, has been a field of research, debate, and trial-and-error only since the early 2000s. The fundamental challenge for the academic community is to ensure that the theory, analyses, and principles, as well as the results of empirical field research are made accessible and presented in such a way that civil authorities, community leaders, environmentalists, and city planners and developers are enlightened, motivated, and empowered to prioritize social justice and equity among the targeted outcomes of digital transformation and the integration of smart technologies in the urban ecosystem.

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