

BOOK REVIEW

Inequity in the Technopolis – Race, Class, Gender, and the Digital Divide in Austin

Joseph Straubhaar, Jeremiah Spence, Zeynep Tufekci and Roberta G. Lentz

Editors

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This book analyses the main factors that have had an effect on the use of the Internet in the city of Austin. Even though, in recent decades, Austin has made a tremendous effort to become a technopolis, that is, a place that attracts high-tech centres, start-ups and leading technological companies, some sectors of the population have not benefited from the resulting economic prosperity. The book is based on a 10-year study that analyses the digital divide in Austin.

The volume is divided into ten chapters written by different authors. The 22 authors who contributed to the book are researchers affiliated to universities, most of which are in Texas. The theoretical framework employed is solid and the sequence of the chapters is clear and logical.

Chapter 1, the introduction to the book, is written by Joseph Straubhaar, Zeynep Tufekci, Jeremiah Spence and Viviana Rojas. The authors explain that the analysis carried out in the book is based on the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and on the contributions made by Bertaux, Thompson and González, who expanded and applied Bourdieu's theories. Bourdieu's theoretical framework consists of the concepts of capital, field and habitus, which help to explain how technology is used by individuals and groups. Bourdieu identifies three different kinds of capital: economic, cultural and social. A field is defined by the specific type of capital employed and by the way people as agents try to obtain and maintain

this capital. Habitus is the set of dispositions that lead members of the same class or group to have common perceptions and practises.

In Chapter 2 Jeremiah Spence, Joseph Straubhaar, Zeynep Tufekci, Alexander Cho and Dean Graber present the historical effect of racial segregation on the geography of Austin. The authors show the strong influence of racial segregation over the past 90 years on the current structure of the city. Lisa Hartenberger, Zeynep Tufekci and Stuart Davis describe in Chapter 3 the evolution of the technopolis in Austin. The initiatives taken by the city of Austin to become a technology based and focused town, thereby reducing its reliance on oil jobs, and the importance of the private-public partnership model are both described in this chapter.

Social mobility, the labour market and the digital divide during the technology boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s are addressed in Chapter 4 by Zeynep Tufekci. The author determines, among other points, that to receive information technology training in Austin does not necessarily mean it will be possible to find a job.

Chapter 5, authored by Ed Lenert, Miyase Christensen, Zeynep Tufekci and Karen Gustafson, examines the national debate on the digital divide and the federal- and state-level programmes that have been administered in Austin. The authors describe how universal service policies have been applied to allocate funds to provide access to the Internet. The effectiveness of the governmental intervention to enable access to the Internet for all the citizens of Austin is discussed in this chapter.

The local initiatives adopted in Austin to reduce the digital divide are explained in Chapter 6 by Carolyn Cunningham, Holly Custard, Joseph Straubhaar, Jeremiah Spence, Dean Graber and Bethany Letalien. The authors examine the contribution of multiple stakeholders – scholars, the city government through the Austin Free-Net and the training foundation, the city's public libraries, local businesses and national corporations, community networks, non-profit organisations, public schools and local initiatives – to reducing the digital inequality present within the city.

In Chapter 7 the role played by Austin's public access centres to provide Internet access is examined by Roberta Lentz, Joseph Straubhaar, Laura Dixon, Dean Graber, Jeremiah Spence, Bethany Letalien and Antonio Lapastina. They discover, quite surprisingly, the predominantly male use of public access centres. In the authors' assessment, the community centres and libraries offer a good service that fulfils the Internet access needs of part of the underserved population in Austin. It is also shown that between 1999 and 2009, the quality of the Internet-access service provided in libraries improved significantly.

In the following chapter, Martha Fuentes-Bautista and Nobuya Inagaki examine the utilisation of public Wi-Fi venues in Austin. The authors found that public Wi-Fi networks exist for the most part in the commercial areas of the city, and that there are still no clear solutions for providing Wi-Fi connectivity to the underserved population in other parts of Austin.

In Chapter 9 Viviana Rojas, Joseph Straubhaar, Jeremiah Spence, Debasmita Roychowdhury, Ozlem Okur, Juan Piñon and Martha Fuentes-Bautista describe the social and cultural barriers that still exist, even though conventional remedies – such as Internet-connected libraries and schools, information technology training and public access centres – are available. The authors use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to describe a set of dispositions and tendencies that affect Internet use.

Finally, the conclusions are presented by Joseph Straubhaar in Chapter 10. Straubhaar explains the main lessons drawn from every chapter and the findings of the book.

Although some chapters can be read independently, others require an understanding of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, which is provided in the introductory chapter. Moreover, the conclusions addressed in the final section of every chapter invite the reader to proceed onto the next chapter. In general, the book offers two main contributions. Firstly, the conclusions drawn by the authors explain the effect on the use of the Internet and on the digital divide in Austin of different factors such as, for example, the racial and social segregation, public funding, the public policies taken by the city planners, the contribution of the industry, the use of Wi-Fi and the importance of public access centres. Secondly, a

reader has the impression that the type of methodology presented in the book can be applied to other areas and cities. Through this, the book in effect becomes a guide that highlights several 'best practices' that can be employed by other researchers applying Bourdieu's theories elsewhere.

One key feature of the book is that it is centred on the question of whether users in Austin are able to access the Internet or not. In all probability, this is a question that was relevant at the beginning of the 2000s, but nowadays, with the widespread use of smartphones and 3G cellular networks in Austin, people obtain ubiquitous access to the Internet. What the book does not widely address is the broadband gap in terms of broadband capacity between different segments of Austin's population. However, this was not the purpose of the book.

To sum up: this is a useful book for city planners and policymakers at the city, regional or national level who are interested in promoting technological centres that could improve the local economy and help narrow the digital divide. Social scientists in general and those researchers interested in information and communication technologies in particular, will find in this volume a valuable resource. The information that it contains and the effective methodology that it outlines can be applied to the understanding of different implications of the use of technology in cities that aim to become a technopolis.

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