

Greene, D. (2021). *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope*. The MIT Press.

In *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope*, Daniel Greene questions our nation's institutional focus on technology as the savior to the pervasive social problem of poverty. By highlighting the change occurring in libraries and schools from a Keynesian public service model that centers on helping individuals to a neoliberal private sector model focused on producing human capital, the book illustrates how society has been slowly shifting from the right to live towards the right to work.

This book details the author's ethnographic research occurring from 2012-2015 in Washington DC. Greene introduces individuals from three distinct institutions: a tech startup, the Washington DC main library branch, and a technology focused charter school, as they navigate the promises of technology. These stories are interwoven with contextual insights and comprise the three main chapters of the book. These are preceded by a chapter grounding the research in the economic and political history that caused the current structural layout. The last section of the book is an in-depth discussion of Bootstrapping, a term used by Greene to understand the aspirational attempted transformation of these public institutions to center new technologies and with it are pushed into a startup mindset. The book is finally wrapped up with a chapter chronicling the closing of the main DC library branch for renovation and a thoughtful conclusion considering how the current system is failing those struggling the most.

During his research, Greene sees firsthand how faculty of both the library and schools adjust to the pressures of upgrading their institutions. By providing access to the correct materials, they help their users become technologically savvy and hopefully become more productive according to society's current needs. This idea of a "political common sense that... poverty can be solved with the right digital tools and skills" Greene defines as the access doctrine (2021, p. 30). Thus, these learning institutions are told they must provide these tools and skills but are ultimately punished when this isn't enough. A repetitive cycle of bootstrapping starts to occur when the institution attempts to upgrade again and again in the face of failure, each time with less resources and more pressure to perform. With each pivot the institution is trying to mimic a business model that does not fit with its values, after all, a traditional business creates goods or services in an attempt to create profits. Libraries and schools do not typically exist to create profits. Businesses can change direction in search of new clientele when they are not making enough profits. Greene points out how libraries and schools do not have the same luxury of searching for new customers if they are truly trying to serve their communities. When they do, someone is bound to be left behind. And yet, library as business is at this point kind of the standard point of view. For an example of this model see Grover, Greer, & Agada (2010).

Furthermore, individuals who don't take advantage of said services are seen as essentially bringing poverty upon themselves. Greene argues that seeing this issue as an individualistic shortcoming is an unspoken truth present in contemporary digital divide theory (Leaning & Averweg, 2021). Of course, the issue being that poverty is a structural problem that is often

caused and perpetuated by multiple complex factors. Additionally, Greene touches on how these factors are conveniently linked to cultural minorities, echoing a newer wave of research showing how this treatment is just another form of white supremacy (Benjamin, 2019; O’Neil, 2016; Leung & Lopez, 2021; Overall, 2009).

Greene finds that these core institutions do not simply shift with the political and economic trends but reproduce the message of productivity to their patrons. These institutions reinforce the access doctrine often ignoring the practical limitations these individuals are facing through institutional structure and the individual interactions.

Greene’s *The Promise of Access* is an essential read for understanding how current politics are shaping underserved citizens’ access to materials and what is being deemed as essential in today’s society. Part of the beauty of this research is its potential reach. Librarians and school administrators will, of course, be able to find the most use as the text speaks to core issues they face on a daily basis. However, scholars in adjacent fields looking for information pertaining to tech ethics, social welfare, and systemic racial inequality may also find it to be informative. While the book shows the critical shift happening in libraries on the front of poverty and social justice issues, it can be hard to remember that this is only a section of patrons that libraries serve. The book does not, nor should it, be responsible for dealing with how libraries are engaging with all their patrons; instead, this book provides a way for the reader to understand how unintentional injustices are occurring when these underserved citizens are not fully taken into consideration.

References

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Addendum

The Promise of Access hits hard on ethical issues dealing with minority groups therefore reflecting on core competencies A and C is a natural fit. The book allows readers to reflect on how the core values of librarianship are currently changing due to political pressures. It is a window into the realities of how impoverished and homeless individuals in Washington D.C. are being subjected to unequal treatment. In an attempt to help, the library is making choices that unintentionally create more barriers for this population.

There are some key issues that need to be addressed. The biggest of which is fully understanding what these patrons actually need. Greene talks about how they are punished for falling asleep or not using the computers the way they should be used (2021). While these behaviors aren't what the librarians understand this space is for, it is what some of their patrons need. When reviewing the ALA's code of ethics, a dissonance between values and actions becomes apparent. Principle 9 states:

“We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.”

However, having police roam the building does not affirm dignity. Waking someone up who hasn't had a restful night's sleep in weeks or months because “it looks bad” isn't confronting biases. And upholding a one size fits all fix to a complex problem certainly doesn't confront inequity and oppression.

The problem is, there isn't really a good model on how to deal with these issues when the library is being funded by governments that don't want to spend money on the core issues this population faces. If they did, the homeless would have private spaces and places where they could sleep without being harassed. I don't know what the solution is, but by understanding individuals on their own terms, by incorporating this part of our communities in the formation of services and creation of spaces, institutions may be able to start accurately advocating and providing for their patrons' needs.

References

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Note

This is my first attempt at writing a professional book review. If I'm being honest, it pushed me well out of my comfort zone and I may have gotten too hung up on sounding academic. I also wasn't sure how to fully tackle the technology focus as a white supremacy issue which is honestly a significant take away I got from the book. If you have any suggestions on these fronts, or others, I'd appreciate the feedback.

Keywords

technology, digital divide, poverty, diversity, library policy