

## Book Review

# Focusing Mobile Communication Research

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Jonathan Donner, *After Access: Inclusion, Development, and a More Mobile Internet*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015, 312 pages, \$38.00 (hardcover), \$27.00 (ebook), ISBN-10: 0262029928; ISBN-13: 978-0262029926.

*After Access* is essential reading for those laboring in the academic fields of ICT4D and mobile-communication studies. Like the author's review of research on mobile telephone use in the developing world (Donner, 2008), it is an invaluable survey of recent work in these fields. The rich endnotes comprise one-third of the book. The even-larger online bibliography at <http://jonathandonner.com/afteraccessreferences> is a great resource.

Beyond a dry summation, Jonathan Donner presents several heuristics said to have potential for guiding theorization, policy, and practice. Prominent among them is the *after access lens*, presented as a focusing device, not as a theory or model. Another is the *digital-repertoire lens*, defined as making possible a focus on "technologies and accompanying skills rather than on the broader contexts around them" (p. 108). It is explicitly narrower than a concept such as information ecology.

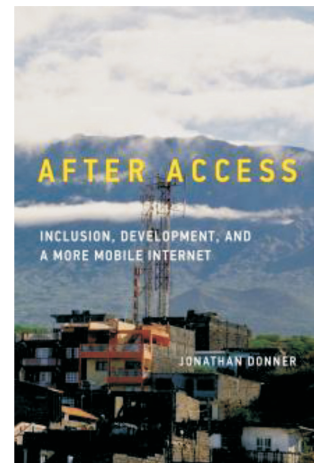
*After Access* is a big tent that seeks to accommodate all. Differences of theoretical perspective and assumptions are, at most, described as tensions that create fertile arenas for exploration (p. 78). What others may describe as fundamental oppositions are here *divergences*. *Erroneous*, *fallacious*, and their synonyms common in academic debate are absent. The word *wrong* had been used in relation to ideas and interpretation in one place, but not by the author: He had quoted me debating Linnet Taylor.

The big-tent approach is understandable. No one's feelings are hurt. The likelihood of classroom adoption is higher. But what is lost is the author's distinctive voice and perspective; the frisson of debate. We know a lot of work has been done. But are our understandings sharper because of the book? Does this academic endeavor significantly advance knowledge?

To address these questions, I will counterpose the original contribution of this book, the *after access lens*, to a quoted comment by the sainted Steve Jobs who had

offered a powerful vision of a post-PC era by contrasting it to an earlier agrarian era when all cars (on the farm) were trucks: In the near future, "PCs are going to be like trucks. . . . They are still going to be around." However . . . only "one of x people will need them." (p. 185)

Jobs' metaphor is generative (Schon, 1979). It tells much with little. Not everyone needs to use the Internet to produce code and content, even though the pioneers did. Not everyone needs to know how to fix an interface device any more than automobile drivers need to know how to repair malfunctioning carburetors. The metaphor is of a truck used for farm work, but it is generative in leaving open possibilities: the emergence of a wide variety of other vehicles serving different functions. The metaphor is not technology-specific. The truck and the alternatives can be powered by different kinds of energy; they can be rudimentary or extremely



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complex with embedded algorithms (even those that are rigged). The metaphor does not specify the market structure of the truck or auto industries, but neither does it obscure it as some metaphors do. Trucks used in peacetime do not differ fundamentally from those used in war. It is possible that military contracts advance truck technology. The metaphor can generate many new questions about the Internet and associated devices.

Unlike some scholars who postulate a binary divide between those who use the Internet the way they do and those who use it differently, the author correctly recognizes a continuum of Internet experiences. He offers the *after access lens*, comprising six aspects of present-day Internet experience as a way to raise questions of costs, affordances, and political economy that may otherwise be neglected in the analysis of this continuum. Inexpensive devices, usage-based pricing, wireless connections, personal-form factors, universal needs, and task-supportive are the six elements. The justification for the lens containing six elements—not less or not more—is weak. No particular rationale is offered for their ordering.

Lens is itself a metaphor. Another metaphor that could have been used is that of a laundry list. But lens does sound better than laundry list. But that is not enough. The chosen lens metaphor must do more than what a laundry list does. It has a higher bar.

Not all elements of the *after access lens* are equal. Usage-based pricing is given a chapter of its own. An unfamiliar reader may be forgiven for thinking that all mobile services are, have been, and will always be metered, or usage-based. But bucket pricing has been available for SMS for many years. These instances are admittedly fewer for data services because they are still immature. The only truth about pricing strategies in competitive markets is that they change. At this time, usage-based pricing is predominant, and it is good that attention is paid. But snapshots of present-day pricing strategies do not constitute a solid foundation for theories or lenses that require a long shelf life.

*Task-supportive* is a non-self-explanatory and clumsy term that describes apps that make certain activities easier for the user. It is said to be applicable only to smartphones or data-enabled feature phones. But one wonders whether enough thought has been given. For example, predictive text, found even in the most rudimentary mobile phones, is task-supportive. When all design is, by definition, task-supportive, one wonders why this element has been included.

As a result, it is not clear that the lens goes beyond being a laundry list. And I am not fully persuaded about its elements. To me, the non-academic Steve Jobs' generative metaphor of the truck sheds more light.

This is not to suggest in any way that the *after access lens* is specious. Even a laundry list has value in the classroom. The enumeration provides a framework for critical engagement.

The *digital repertoire* is another useful lens that Donner explicates. It builds on other repertoires in the literature, but differs by including devices incapable of independently accessing the Internet. The choice of a narrow, instrumental repertoire concept is said to be necessary to “emphasize technologies and skills over broader ecologies of technologies, infrastructures, norms, and contexts” (pp. 108–109). If skills and capabilities are consistently included in its application, the digital-repertoire lens would be even more useful.

The author recognizes the tensions “between bottom-up, chaotic appropriation and top-down intentional 4D services and interventions” (p. 78) and describes them as “fertile arenas for the exploration of subtle forms of personal, social, institutional, and economic transformation” (p. 78). The book is understandably biased toward top-down interventions because it emerges from, and has as its prime audience, the field of ICT4D, where the 4D signifies intervention.

One form of intervention, privileged in this book, is initiated by an external actor who knows what effective use is, for the benefit of the subjects who do not. The other form seeks to remove barriers to innovation by users of ICT and by those who seek to supply ICT goods and services to such users. This generally takes the form of legal or policy reform to enable certain actions (e.g., market entry) or constrain others (e.g., anti-competitive practices). The decentralized innovation that emerges once the barriers have been removed may appear chaotic at a point of time to a well-meaning ICT4D researcher or practitioner. But over time, robust outcomes emerge that have more impact than hundreds of ICT4D projects (e.g., Jensen, 2009).

The former kind of intervention is, on the face, paternalistic. However, by defining *effective use* as “directionally progressive and developmental, but broad, contextually dependent, and open to negotiations among

stakeholders, observers, policymakers, and especially users” (p. 117), the author distances himself from its inherent paternalism.

To be fair, the author admits to “progressive, technologically optimistic interventionism” (p. 5). Top-down intentional interventions for development are privileged, but all views and approaches are represented in this encyclopedic endeavor. All perspectives within the relevant fields are represented and all will find something to agree with and little to object to. But one result is that the book, while a must-have compendium for ICT4D researchers, is limited in the new insights it provides. ■

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