

## BOOK REVIEW

# Digital Cities: The Internet and the Geography of Opportunity

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*Digital Cities: The Internet and the Geography of Opportunity*

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This book, the outcome of several years of research, is an important addition to the literature on digital cities. The approach, the arguments, the methodology, and the outcomes, some of which challenge long held simplistic views, make this a book to be commended to researchers, students, urban planners, and policy makers working in the multidisciplinary field of Urban e-Planning. The book has 9 chapters, an extended list of references, and 6 pages of end notes with useful details, including references and web links for further exploration. The book includes three appendixes, useful for all those interested to develop similar studies, in particular students in the field of e-government or e-planning. Appendix A (pp. 205-293) publishes data and the results of the statistical analysis, Appendix B describes the variables and the

coding process (pp. 295-308), and Appendix C (pp. 309-222) includes the questionnaire used in 2008 to collect data for this research project.

In the first chapter (*Cities and Digital Society*) the authors offer an overview of the role cities can play in the digital society, discuss the role of the US federal broadband policy and how it has addressed rural and urban areas, and argue in favor of a stronger intervention in urban and metropolitan areas, since “the market alone will not produce anything close to universal access and adoption” (pp. 9), a perspective policy-makers should consider in the design of projects in the field of urban e-planning. The chapter ends with a description of the book and includes also a few words on methods. This is followed in chapter 2 (*The Need for Urban Broadband Policy*) by a general overview of the US federal policy on broadband policy and by the discussion of the role of cities and metropolitan areas for achieving national goals. The authors offer a discussion of the US federal policy for broadband, as well as a discussion of the role cities and metropolitan areas can play to achieve policy goals defined in this field

(e.g., economic development and economic opportunity; health and education; energy, environment, and safety in densely populated areas; government services, civic engagement, and community organizing). Readers will find here substantial empirical evidence on the history of municipal broadband policies across the US, both initiatives funded by federal government and those that were the result of individual initiatives of each municipality or city. The findings suggest that despite the recognition that cities are important for achieving national purposes for broadband, the current federal policy fails to recognize the opportunities in urban broadband.

A more specific exploration of the different levels or dimensions of this policy is provided in chapter 3 (*Place and Inequality: Urban, Suburban, and Rural America*), with the analysis being focused on the use of technology, home access and home broadband adoptions, at multiple scale of analysis (e.g., nation, urban, suburban and rural areas, etc.). The impact of social inequalities in broadband adoption and the existence of similarities but also differences between urban and rural areas are some of the issues addressed in this chapter, leading to the conclusion that universal broadband access will require more than infrastructure, especially if mainly focused in rural areas, as is the case of the federal policy in the US. It is necessary to consider the effects of barriers other than availability; in other words, it is essential to pay attention to the effects of poverty, education, discrimination, and immigrants needs, a conclusion that those working in the field of e-Planning should consider and certainly not only in the US.

A similar analysis is carried out in chapter 4 (*Mobile Access and the Less-Connected*) this time comparing broadband users with mobile-phones-only-internet-users, as well as other less connected, in different types of geographic areas, urban, suburban and rural areas. The findings presented in this chapter challenge the conventional argument that smart-phones and mobile access alone will erase disparities and close the existing gap, a point those working

in e-Planning should take into consideration, in particular in African countries where conventional wisdom among governments and international aid agencies seems to suggest that mobile technology is the solution for the current digital divide between Africa and other regions of the world. Among the findings, the authors highlight the fact that mobile phone use is rising among low-income African-Americans and Latinos, raising the question of whether new technology is filling up the digital gap. The evidence collected and examined reveals in the words of the authors that no other mode of access (e.g., smart-phones, etc.) offers anything that can rival the capacity enabled by home broadband. In a time when some hope is put on mobile technology to help fill the digital divide, these findings need to be taken into consideration by e-planning, in particular in countries and cities at the lower end of the e-government development rankings as those produced regularly by the United Nations.

In chapter 5 (*Ranking Cities and Suburbs*) the book offers a comparison at a much lower scale than has been made before (e.g., comparison only at state level). In this case, the authors examine the differences across cities and suburban areas concluding that context matters for technology opportunities, a finding that those engaged in e-Planning need to be aware of. The chapter shows variation across cities and suburban regions, with the most disadvantaged social groups doing better in cities and suburbs where there is extensive technology use, which in the point of view of the authors supports the idea that context matters for opportunity. A case study (Chicago) is analyzed in chapter 6 (*Mapping Opportunity in Chicago Neighborhoods*) using neighborhood-level data from a large sample survey conducted in 2008 (questionnaire form in Appendix C). By doing so, the authors were able to examine the relationship between technology use and place factors, such as concentration of poverty and social segregation. They also found that low and high broadband use neighborhoods can be differentiated in terms of the activities their inhabitants are engaged in. Through this detailed analysis, the authors

are able to show how technology inequality impact on poor neighborhoods affecting the geography of opportunity in the city.

If from chapter 3 to chapter 6 the book describes policies, uses and online activities that residents are engaged in, in chapter 7 (*The Geography of Barriers to Broadband Adoption*) the book examines and discusses the reasons why people are offline or less connected (e.g., barriers to technology use) being affordability the main barrier identified for home broadband adoption, although availability, in rural areas mainly, is also an important barrier. Continuing in chapter 8 (*Barriers to Adoption in Chicago Neighborhoods*) with the search for the reasons behind the differences found in the city of Chicago, the authors conclude that when place of residence is a segregated and poor neighborhood the barriers to technology use are magnified.

The book ends in chapter 9 (*From Neighborhoods to Washington: Conclusions and Policy*) with information to policy-makers, in particular in the field of broadband policy. As is shown in the book, the geography of digital citizenship suggests the existence of variation in technology use by place, although, as the authors argue, this picture is much more complex than the simplistic view of rural disadvantage versus urban online affluence. As the evidence provided by the authors show the broadband policy problem is a matter of adoption and use,

not just affordability. For that reason, without policies able to deal with the barriers to adoption, namely those barriers identified in this study, numerous citizens in urban, and in rural areas as well, will continue to be marginalized. As the evidence suggests universal access is necessary for continued economic growth and prosperity. For the authors this requires a federal policy able to address the potential for urban innovation and urban inequalities in Internet access and use.

Although focused on the US and in Chicago, the lessons these findings can teach us will certainly be useful also for those cities or countries that are at the bottom of e-government and e-planning development, as is the case, in general, of African countries and cities. In synthesis, the authors argue that 'broadband investment and technology should be focused on cities and urban areas' (p. 189), due to the fact that 'cities must adapt themselves to an age of information in order to survive, and addressing inequalities in access and use are critical for continued innovation and economic growth' (p. 190). These are critical issues for the success of urban e-Planning. For that reason, urban planners, policy makers, researchers and students in the field of urban e-Planning ought not to ignore these findings, insights and policy proposals when designing e-Planning projects.

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