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Design Justice

Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need

By: Sasha Costanza-Chock

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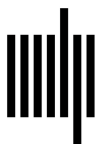
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Series Editor's Introduction

Sandra Braman

It is a truism that in a democracy, every citizen should have the opportunity to take part in decision making about what we do, how we operate, how we structure the world in which we live. As theories, practices, and the organizational forms and processes of democracy developed over the past several hundred years, that was how we structured the social world within which we live. Elections, legislative processes, judicial interpretations of law and evidence have been and all remain parts of how we go about policy-making for humans.

Now, though, we recognize that the world for which we are making decisions is not just social. It is *sociotechnical*, and in the digital environment, as the saw says, “code is law,” responsible for providing an infrastructure of constraints and affordances that affect what we do, how we operate, and how we structure the social world within which we live. The social side of decision making remains in place (however troubled), and it will be to everyone’s advantage should we learn how to bring the two sides—the social and the technical—into a common conversation and decision making in concert. But what are the processes through which individuals might take part in the design of technologies hard and soft and of network architectures that are analogous to the processes we use to shape our social world? The better developed, the more sophisticated and nuanced, and the more widespread the practices and commitments of those who use technologies to participate in their creation, the more likely it is that communal efforts will effectively become a part of decision-making conversations and affect outcomes.

This is the problem to which Sasha Costanza-Chock’s *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* devotes itself. Using

illustrative cases involving a range of specific technologies, from airport body scanners to Twitter and more, the book moves systematically through the question of who it is who historically and typically participates in design processes—and who could; the sites, both physical and processual, where or during which communal participation in design processes can take place; and the limits to what even those individuals most avid about participating in such processes can do given all the pressures of their daily lives, on the one hand, and the multiple literacies needed on the other. The book is beautifully written, the cases inherently interesting in their own right, as well as importantly illustrative, and the author brings deep knowledge of several scholarly literatures to the work.

In all that it brings together, this book is a terrific contribution that should be widely read. University curricula that include degree programs in this domain are beginning to pop up all over; for these, *Design Justice* provides an exceptionally rich introductory overview of the field. Practitioners—both on the technology design side and on the social/political advocacy side—will find the work useful as well. But in my view the chapter that is the most interesting, original, and important is the third, on the ways in which social movements have themselves been responsible for much technological innovation. The other inadequately appreciated and studied social source of and motivation for technological invention and innovation, of course, is poverty; I thank the community of Guatemalan refugees in Minneapolis-St. Paul in the 1980s for teaching me this lesson so profoundly. There is literature in these two areas, but it is sporadic, often epiphenomenal. Christine Ogan, for example, is to be honored for research on the then-unexpected political uses of the videocassette recorder in Turkey, also in the 1980s, that was supported by grant funds received to study what were expected to be the Hollywood-intended purposes of increasing the distribution of films. The best of the work is strong in the thickness of case-driven analyses, frequently enriched by the personal experiences of authors who were participant-observers and/or who produced autoethnographies, but a full and systematic history of information and communication technologies from these interrelated perspectives has yet to be appear and would be incredibly valuable for many reasons.

And here the circle comes around. In today's sociotechnical environment, Costanza-Chock argues, the way to effectively ensure that there is design justice when it comes to technologies is to innovate on the social side with the development of new communal formations and processes. The book offers positive recommendations of multiple kinds, from practice to policy to research, throughout, and provides a good foundation from which to continue to develop and engage in research, theory, and praxis.

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