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Universal Access and Its Asymmetries

The Untold Story of the Last 200 Years

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SERIES EDITOR INTRODUCTION

Sandra Braman

In the final work of his life, Edward Said wrote about “late style,” addressing the question of what it is that great artists do towards the end of their lives that is different from what they did before. That question is one that should be asked of scholars as well. *Universal Access and Its Asymmetries: The Untold Story of the Last 200 Years* is an unusual and highly original book by two strong and well-published senior scholars that takes up, perhaps without knowing it, Said’s challenge by asking quite new questions about a subject on which much has already been written including, notably, by the first author. In doing so, Harmeet Sawhney and Hamid Ekbia offer multiple contributions. In addition to significantly expanding the dimensions through which we should think about universal access in any domain, they provide insights into the nature of infrastructure, offer new methods for policy analysis, and provide insights into major sociological transformations.

The book examines the histories of seven systems for which universal access has become a policy goal in the United States over the last two hundred years—the postal service, education, libraries, electricity, telephony, broadcasting, and the internet. The authors start from the simple but stunning observation that analysis of this issue up to now, with its familiar focus on difficulties for systems and advantages for individuals, leaves out half the story: there are also gains for systems and travails for

individuals and communities when service is extended. Filling in these missing quadrants turns network analysis on its head, for it requires looking not only at relations generated by links, but also at what happens, often very intimately, within the nodes. Both through explicit comment and by model, Sawhney and Ekbia also provide a critique of what are best understood as research industries, the transformation of social issues into jobs and institutional programs that become self-perpetuating in their inertia, regardless of effective productivity or utility.

The authors are unusually well read—at last, H. L. Mencken and Joan Didion come to information policy! Their use of historical materials from one and two centuries ago, whether news items, scholarly writing, or government documents, are valuable not only as support for their arguments, but also, often, as revelatory treats. Contemporary community-based voluntary efforts to build mesh networks to extend Internet access have predecessors in early-twentieth-century telephony, when farmers used barbwire fences for transmission and ran networks out of household kitchens. Today's concerns about what happens to local businesses when stores like Walmart show up in small communities replay what the realities were for stores in isolated, small towns when the postal service arrived, carrying catalogs from stores like Montgomery Ward and, literally, delivering the goods. Over and over again, efforts that it was believed would strengthen rural communities actually undermined them; electricity did, as was projected, make farm life easier, but because it also reduced the amount of labor needed, jobs were lost, causing young people to leave for urban opportunities.

These authors provide multiple examples of policy precession, interactions among the effects of various types of policy typically thought of only in siloed terms. Before the post office offered rural free delivery to homes, for example, some had their mail read to them over the telephone by the post office. A mandate for “post roads” is in the US Constitution, but to provide support for the extension of service to rural areas, those in many rural communities pooled their resources to build the roads that the postal service needed for rural free delivery. Policy proposals for government support of professional news organizations to help ensure their survival are in play today; Sawhney and Ekbia note that once rural postal service was in place, local newspapers flourished, new papers being

founded where none had existed before and those that had been weeklies or biweeklies becoming dailies.

Sawhney and Ekbia introduce an analytical approach that they call “recentering-on-reversal,” a technique that starts by thinking about what is happening at the margins, what they refer to as “the difficult bits,” to understand the dynamics in play as they are experienced by those for whom the margins are the center. Because this approach by definition leads to an expansion of the range of perspectives taken into account, it will be useful for any type of policy analysis.

The book necessarily focuses on a single country, the US, for its case studies comparing the treatment of diverse types of systems within one political and legal system, but the approach can be used anywhere. Internationally comparative work would be valuable, for there are both historical and contemporary examples of quite different national approaches to universal service in particular sectors, and there have been reversals. For a very long time, telephony was managed by governments everywhere but in the US, where it was private from the start except for a brief period of nationalization during World War I. In the last decades of the twentieth century, though, countries around the world moved, one way or another, toward the US position, making analysis of this case more useful now than it would have been a few decades ago. Where the US is, as Sawhney and Ekbia note, increasingly considering, and in some states offering, universal access to higher (tertiary) education by making it free, Germany has long provided that, but the UK gave up on it in the 1990s.

Universal service discussions most often focus on individuals, but system nodes can also include households and communities. This complicates our understanding of universal access as a key information policy concept. It is not binary; it can come in different flavors. For those who study infrastructure, the book is a must-read, with its elucidation of commonalities and differences across sociotechnical systems and its literal doubling of the kinds of questions that should be asked of any such system. For a course on sociotechnical systems, the book could valuably be paired with Carolyn Marvin’s *When Old Technologies Were New*.

The question of what difference it would make to a community if it had better communication connectivity, asked in recent decades regarding the telephone and the Internet in developing societies, is evergreen.

In every instance discussed here, the answer has been that the extension of universal access has brought economic benefits to both systems and individuals, though not necessarily to communities, and the conclusions are not simple ones. Importantly, though, Sawhney and Ekbia prefer not to use the terms “costs” and “benefits,” for more than economics is involved. What does it mean to create an education system devoted to training labor rather than the flourishing of the child? What happens to the distinct pleasures of rural life when it becomes more and more like living in a city?

Over and over again, this book shows how the recruitment of the particular, the idiosyncratic, the genuine local into national, corporate, and industrial systems that is accomplished through universal access can also be experienced as diminishment. In this sense, it can also be read as a paean to “the difficult bits.” Hear, hear. This may or may not be the final book from these two authors, but either way, it is great late style.

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