Book reviews/Discussions

Pérez de la Fuente Oscar, and Skrzypczak Jędrzej (eds.), *Bridging the Digital Divide: Perspectives on Inequality and Discrimination in the Digital Age*, **Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2025, 299 pp.**

In recent decades, profound socioeconomic, political, and technological transformations have completely reshaped the world we inhabit. During this process, the notion has emerged that strengthening our liberal democracies has become increasingly challenging. This sense of the loss of the liberal model of justice emanates from the fact that, well into the twenty-first century, promised pillars such as freedom, non-domination, and self-determination stay largely unfulfilled. As a consequence, the liberal paradigm has faced sustained criticism regarding its capacity to provide a valid and effective normative framework, both nationally and globally. These criticisms are grounded in its notable inability to address persistent inequalities, as well as in the ineffectiveness of some of its classical instruments to confront them adequately.

One of the most pressing inequalities of our time is the digital divide. This divide may be understood not only as the absence or insufficiency of access to technology but also – and inseparably – as the lack of skills, of informed and ethical uses, and of meaningful outcomes derived from its application. This problem acquires relevance when examined through its multiple dimensions, such as the access gap (infrastructure, devices, and connectivity); the skills gap (literacy, critical thinking, and safety); the usage gap (what technology is actually used for); and the outcome gap (tangible and intangible benefits). These gaps are not an exhaustive list but rather an illustration of the complex nature of these inequalities. As Llamosas and Lariguet (2020) describe it, inequality can be seen as a "polyhedron" where exclusions are neither flat nor homogeneous but overlap in complexity. Thus, one person may face disadvantages in terms of access to technology while enjoying privileges in other respects, whereas another may experience oppression across multiple dimensions simultaneously. This polyhedral character compels us to seek equally complex and context-sensitive solutions.

In this regard, the book *Bridging the Digital Divide: Perspectives on Inequality and Discrimination in the Digital Age*, edited by Oscar Pérez de la Fuente and Jędrzej Skrzypczak, perfectly illustrates this premise. The volume brings together contributions from leading international scholars who analyze the digital divide and its effects on inequality and discrimination in contemporary societies from a polyhedral perspective. It departs from the thesis that such inequalities are not accidental, but rather, in many cases, structurally generated by governmental and policy decisions. From my perspective, the chapters can be grouped into three broad strands that underscore the complexity of the problem: emerging technologies, algorithms and public policy; structural inequalities in access and digital skills across social groups; and digital inequalities in specific contexts.

The first strand includes contributions aimed at establishing general conceptual frameworks regarding *emerging technologies, algorithms, and public policy*. Oscar Pérez de la Fuente begins by laying out essential concepts that frame the entire book, under the premise that unequal access to these technologies creates new forms of discrimination and inequity and exacerbates preexisting inequalities, underscoring the need for collective efforts such as those advanced in the volume. Rosa Ricoy, in her chapter "The Inequalities of Some Disruptive Technologies," warns that the use of artificial intelligence and algorithms in the justice system can deepen inequalities, biases, and violations of fundamental rights due to the opacity of how these technologies operate. At the

same time, she stresses that emerging environments, such as the metaverse, expand the risks of surveillance, manipulation, and commodification of digital life, with profound implications for democracy. Her arguments reflect the growing demand among experts for extensive public discussion and the creation of regulatory frameworks and "sandboxes" prior to the widespread deployment and adoption of these technologies.

Similarly, Jesús Mora, in "Efficiency, Fairness, and Discrimination: Algorithms in Public Policy and Their Impact on Social Hierarchies," emphasizes that the use of algorithms in public welfare systems, even under hypothetical frameworks of luck egalitarian justice, can produce discrimination when attempting to classify individuals for redistributive purposes, ultimately undermining respect and self-esteem. He points out that algorithms, often perceived as neutral, objective, and accurate, in fact, reinforce social hierarchies by reducing individuals to scores that determine their social worth. Consequently, Mora argues, the pursuit of efficiency – characteristic of such technologies – must be balanced against the value of social relationships and human dignity in our societies.

Roland Kelemen and Ádám Farkas express a significant concern in their work, "The Connections Between Social Media Platforms and Hybridity," noting that technology impacts everyone, either directly or indirectly. They argue that social media platforms have transformed societies and the nature of conflicts. Today, non-military factors such as disinformation, psychological manipulation, and economic or diplomatic pressure hold considerable strategic importance. They show that digital platforms have become crucial spaces for influence operations, allowing both state and non-state actors to weaken social cohesion and undermine democratic institutions. They conclude that the lack of oversight and self-regulation multiplies state vulnerability, compelling governments to reconsider resilience without sacrificing fundamental values. In this same vein, Jędrzej Skrzypczak, in "The Digital Divide from the Human Rights Perspective: Case of Poland on the European Union Background," compares the digital revolution to the Industrial Revolution, as it has radically transformed social, economic, and legal life, giving rise to the notion of digital human rights.

The second strand focuses on *structural inequalities in access and digital skills across social groups*. From this perspective, Teresa Corbella Doménech, in "The Gender Digital Divide: Some Elements to Consider," explores what it means to live digital exclusion through the lens of gender. Using current data, she highlights the disproportionate representation of women in digital exclusion, particularly in countries in Africa and the Middle East. For his part, Oscar Pérez de la Fuente addresses cybercrime and hate speech directed at persons with disabilities in his chapter "Clicks That Hurt: Persons with Disabilities and the Challenge of Online Hate Speech." He shows that the digital divide disproportionately affects people with disabilities, limiting access to education, employment, and social life, and explains how ableism and prevailing models of normality reinforce exclusion and hate speech both offline and online. These group-based inequalities cannot be explained solely by accessibility to technologies, but also by the adequacy of their adoption. In this respect, Monika Jabłońska and Piotr Jabłoński, in "Technological Determinism of Generation 'C' and Digital Inequality. The Case of Polish High School Students," examine the case of a generation that, despite being digital natives – born into constant contact with technology – tends to overestimate its media literacy, particularly in recognizing *fake news* and critically assessing messages. This exposes a broader tension across the book: while many assume that mere access to technology is inherently beneficial, this chapter demonstrates that intensive use of technology does not guarantee media literacy and, in fact, may reinforce group vulnerabilities.

The third strand examines *digital inequalities in specific contexts*. Bartosz Hordecki, in "In Search of Digital Linguistic Justice? Ukrainian Language in the Polish New Media Sphere After February 24, 2022," discusses the challenges faced by linguistic minorities in wartime contexts such as Poland following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Polish digital media incorporated Ukrainian as a gesture of solidarity and humanitarian support toward refugees an experience that opens

the door to rethinking digital linguistic justice in humanitarian crises. By contrast, Zuhal Unlap Cepel, in "Does the Nationality of Refugees Matter? Inequality in the EU Digital Public Sphere," argues that solidarity in the digital realm is mediated by refugee nationality: while Ukrainians are presented as "real refugees," Syrians are stigmatized. In both cases, the digital dimension plays a crucial role, but whereas in Poland it operated as an instrument of symbolic and practical solidarity, in other EU countries the digital-linguistic realm has become a space of reproduced inequalities.

Two additional chapters address contexts beyond the EU. Cristina Lourenço and Monique Falcão, in "COVID-19: Right to Education in Brazil for All Children and Adolescents?", revisit an issue that may seem resolved yet whose effects persist years after the pandemic. They argue that digital inequalities undermine human dignity in both distributive and relational terms, reinforcing existing intersectionalities in Brazil's complex society. Similarly, Ravindra Satish Babu, in "The Digital Divide in Education & Judiciary in India: A Case study of Marginal Communities in Kurnool District, Andhra Pradesh," analyzes the digital divide in India, showing how caste, class, and territorial inequalities affect access to digital justice. Based on a study in Kurnool, he demonstrates that despite various educational and judicial reforms supported by technologies such as artificial intelligence, e-courts, and digital classrooms, infrastructure remains unevenly distributed, curtailing fundamental rights. He concludes that digitalization, beyond providing access to technology, entails an ethical, cultural, and linguistic responsibility to adapt for marginalized groups.

This overview confirms the polyhedral nature of the digital divide. It suggests that the real turning point for achieving the social benefits of technology lies not in the scientific or technical domain, but in the normative and cultural one. I propose a *counter-reading* of the book, one that challenges the conventional solution of large-scale device distribution or connectivity rollouts and instead asks: to what extent does each innovation reduce social respect, and to what extent does it enhance the agency of those who have historically borne the costs of others' efficiency? This principle of *computable dignity* rests on the premise that no technological deployment is legitimate unless it can demonstrate a net contribution to dignity, autonomy, and equality.

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Bibliographhy

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