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Book Review: The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope, Daniel Greene

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Abstract

In *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope*, Daniel Greene provides a comprehensive, approachable evaluation and critique of the concept of the "access doctrine" and how it has permeated American policy and organizations.

Keywords

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In *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope*, Daniel Greene draws on his experience as an Assistant Professor of Information Studies at the University of Maryland and ethnographic and technological researcher. He provides a comprehensive, approachable evaluation and critique of the concept of the "access doctrine" and how it has permeated American policy and organizations. The access doctrine, as defined by Greene, functions as an explanation of how poverty can be overcome by the individual's study of technology and development of technical skills as well as the emphasis of these values by educators and public servants, including librarians and teachers. Greene explores the access doctrine, its rise to prominence, and its impact on society through his ethnographic studies of three Washington, DC institutions: a tech startup, a public library, and a charter school. These studies provide both a broad perspective on the structural impacts of the access doctrine and the individual experiences of the professionals, patrons, and students who experience, perpetuate, and resist these changes. Greene's combined exploration of these studies and political theory such as neoliberalism and Marxism offers a valuable perspective on the current state of libraries and schools, how the access doctrine has both contributed to inequality in public service spaces and been utilized to keep them funded and functional, and how it can be subverted to return service and support to the forefront of the library and education professions.

Greene establishes the context of the access doctrine through his exploration of United States politics beginning in the 1970s, but mainly focusing on the 1990s and 2000s. He explores the shifting realities of class inequalities, as welfare programs were rolled back in favor of support for the access doctrine: "the internet, as the story goes, unlocks the fetters of geography and identity" (Greene, 2021, p. 32). Through this exploration, Greene confronts popular academic consensus on the topic and how it fits in to the larger, capitalist structure of the United States, particularly in major cities. He explores the subsummation of poverty policy by a technology policy that presumes if the individual gains skills in technology, they can pull themselves out of poverty and find opportunity and economic success. By furthering this narrative, Greene argues, political figures can avoid responsibility for job creation and welfare by stating that the jobs are out there, the American people just have to work for them by gaining relevant technological skills. It falls on public librarians and teachers, then, to push their patrons and students towards success and teach them the technological skills that will get them there.

Chapters 3 and 4 of *The Promise of Access* are particularly relevant to the librarian and LIS scholar. Chapter 3 addresses the public library as it is affected by and participates in the access doctrine, particularly through Greene's study of the DC Public Library system and particularly the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, the central DCPL branch. Greene is not unsympathetic to the public library's struggles. He expresses the conflict between what a library's goals are and what its patrons need, as well as what the library must do to stay funded when low on both political and financial support. These factors, Greene explains,

contributed to the access doctrine's prominence in the library field; major donors and political figures supported the access doctrine, so by doing the same, public libraries were able to get support for programs and resources. However, the access doctrine was often at odds with the public library's mission of service, expressed by Greene as "an uneasy gap between two libraries: a professionalizing space full of future entrepreneurs and a public space full of citizens to be served" (Greene, 2021, p. 97). Librarians and library patrons alike must work to preserve spaces of rest, play, and diversity alongside the new dogma of professionalization and uniformity.

Chapter 4 furthers the discussion of the access doctrine by exploring its role in the school system, particularly through the lens of one particular charter school, the W. E. B. Du Bois Public Charter High School, which adopted the access doctrine as a way to improve test scores and support students' futures, alongside a code of racial justice and empowerment. The chapter focuses on the purpose of technology in a student's life, and how that intersects with the politics of race, class, and the at-times vague concept of hope. In what ways is technology a support for the student's academic career, and in what ways is it a distraction? How do the teachers manage these conflicts, and does technology have a proven impact on their students? There are no easy answers to these questions, Greene eventually notes, leading to a particularly ambiguous relationship between the access doctrine and the school environment. As much as technology supports these students, particularly through a successful video game design class, it also widens the inequality they experience, Greene argues, as teachers are required to model Whiteness for their students of color, rather than embracing their differences and arriving at a more diverse form of success. While many of the teachers at the charter school made efforts to empower their students both academically and culturally, they were often held back by the technology and the administration. While on the surface it appeared supportive, the administration pushed for high performance at all costs, discarding the previously key mission of social justice.

While Greene offers an in-depth critique of the access doctrine as it was created, grew, and impacted service professions, there are several gaps that must be addressed. Greene's perspective throughout the book is clearly tied to social justice, as he discusses race, class, and privilege as an integral part of the topic, but his discussion of policing, particularly police presence in the library but also in schools, is cursory and fails to reflect the full relationship policing has to the American political state and the politics of control. This subject is discussed in depth in other LIS scholarship, such as Fry and Austin's (2021) work on patron safety with regards to police presence at the public library and how it excludes both patrons and librarians and library staff of color. Additionally, the academic experience of young and future library professionals and teachers is touched on but never fully covered, despite the relevance of the topics of technology and inequality to current teachings and academic literature in both fields. This may, in part, be due to Greene's role as an assistant professor, revealing a conflict of interest and potential bias preventing him from discussing the academic angle.

 The Promise of Access branches off from current LIS scholarship, explaining the current trends while also confronting them and expressing the possibility of a complete reimagining of the field. This is seen in his citation of Agosto (2008): just as Agosto explores the need for, and trends in, alternative funding for public libraries, Greene furthers this discussion by exploring why this need happened and how these new sources have impacted the culture of the public library. Greene's conclusions, however, are in conversation with other current LIS works, including Stevenson and Domsy's (2016) discussion of similar changes in Canadian libraries regarding the increased focus on technology and the digital divide. Greene's call to action for librarians and library patrons to use the access doctrine for their own gains and, when possible, subvert it, is clearly inspired by Brock (2020) in his discussion of Black technology culture, particularly surrounding Black communities forming their own spaces and changing culture within "culture-neutral" or default-White online spaces.

 For public librarians, school librarians, and library students, *The Promise of Access* offers a valuable exploration of the status of librarianship, education, and technology through the access doctrine. Greene provides a historical and political explanation of where this concept originated, what its impacts have been, and what the next steps are for any information professional who must work within its constraints and, potentially, build a new form of access and innovation that truly strives for equality and service alongside technological advancement. These calls to action include subverting the access doctrine and taking part in collective action to support every visitor of the library, whether they seek to learn or rest.

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