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S. Craig Watkins, Andres Lombana-Bermudez, Alexander Cho, Jacqueline Ryan Vickery, Vivian Shaw, and Lauren Weinzimmer, **The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality**, New York: New York University Press, 2018, 310 pp., $22.00 (paperback).

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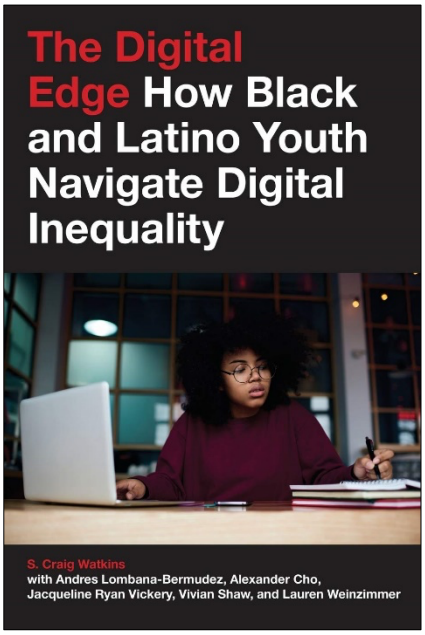

The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality explains why what we believe about the digital divide is wrong, and in 2020, it could not be more relevant. Thanks to the rapid spread of COVID-19, more children than ever are in online school. According to the U.S. Census, almost 93% of households reported some level of "distance learning" (McElrath, 2020). But it's no secret that the resources necessary to succeed aren't accessible to all—Black and Latino youths generally have more limited access to broadband Internet at home than their White and Asian counterparts, and Pew Research Center reported that low-income students are considerably more likely to encounter digital obstacles in their online schooling during the pandemic (Vogels, 2020). But in *The Digital Edge*, the authors presciently outline why it is time to rethink the old conception of the digital divide. This book is a must for educators, and an important read for anyone interested in the convoluted present and future of the digital divide in America.

The authors aim to understand not only the technology deficits that Black and Latino youth face, but also the "skills, assets, and dispositions" they bring to the technology table (p. 9). How is their Internet and media use different from that of their peers? "As recently as the early 2000s," Watkins writes, "young blacks and Latinos barely figured in the conversation about technology adoption and use" (p. 8). But this has changed—now, they are early adopters of mobile Internet (chapter 2) and heavier users of social media than their White peers. The authors seek to complicate the idea that students of color and low-income students are working solely in a "context of deficits" (p. 10).

This book builds on Watkins' earlier work (see Watkins, 2009, 2011), in which he put forth the idea that the digital divide has become more complex than we previously understood. It is not merely a question of whether one has access to technology, but instead a multifaceted issue of the *type* of access, level of participation, and digital literacy skills. In this book, Watkins addresses these questions from a new angle—an ethnography of a large, racially diverse high school in Austin, Texas. The authors detail the ways in which Black and Latino youths at Freeway High School use and change technology both for entertainment and learning. The year-long ethnography introduces characters who flip the narrative that Black and Latino kids are fundamentally technologically disadvantaged and lacking media literacy. Instead, these teenagers

creatively engage with technology and media in and out of school to gain access to, consume, and create media (chapter 1).

Watkins introduces the concept of the digital edge thusly: "The digital edge is a reference to the institutions, practices, and social relations that make up the daily and mediated lives of black, Latino, and lower-income youth" (p. 2). The digital edge, as conceived by Watkins, recognizes both the "marginalized position" and the "innovative position" that Black and Latino youths occupy (pp. 2–3). The authors do not argue that Black, Latino, and lower-income youths do not face challenges, but instead that the story of their engagement with technology and media is more complex. Watkins highlights difficulties such as mobile-only Internet access, for example, but emphasizes that Black and Latino youths have become early adopters of mobile Internet, and use their phones to further their interests in photography, video production, and even writing (chapter 2).

It becomes clear while reading *The Digital Edge* that high school does not necessarily foster media and technology engagement for these kids. The authors do acknowledge the ways in which Freeway has succeeded in addressing the needs of its students: in chapter 6, Watkins, Lombana-Bermudez, and Weinzimmer detail the experiences of several students in after-school programs at Freeway that center student interests, increase students' social standing in the school with teachers and peers, and work to shrink the enrichment opportunity gap that lower-income children often face. But the authors don't pull any punches when outlining the ways in which Freeway could improve. They highlight notable struggles at Freeway that are no doubt shared by other high schools. For one, Freeway's technology policies were in some ways found to be more damaging than protective of students. In chapter 3, Vickery and Shaw illustrate the ways in which policies that discourage and/or block the use of certain media and technology actually limit academic achievement.

In chapter 4, Watkins further addresses how noble efforts can come up short. Despite impressive attempts to further the STEM programs at the school through classes like game design (outfitted with 25 iMacs and various other devices) the authors described the class as "curriculum-poor" and "technology-rich" (p. 133). The class lacked curriculum, a plan, assignments, and a trained teacher, and the consequences were disengaged students who used the class for isolated Internet browsing. Technology provisions alone were not enough to build STEM skills. That said, there were students who thrived in the class by engaging in a small group project with the UT researchers (detailed in chapter 5). This experience highlights the importance of active engagement and instruction in fostering student learning. Of course, it raises the question of what experience these kids would have had without the researchers present.

The final chapter and the conclusion to this book are somewhat disheartening, to say the least. After chapter 6, which showcased the talents and successes of students in after-school programs, it's crushing to see these students ill-prepared for college and careers, despite clear intelligence and aspirations. It is no surprise to learn that Freeway, like many Texas schools, is hyperfocused on high school graduation to the detriment of students—they end up unclear on what they need to do to prepare for college, despite having both interest and ability. It is clear that the authors are not just superior researchers but also talented storytellers, as you feel as if you have gotten to know these kids, and it hurts to realize that the majority of them will struggle to succeed academically and professionally.

That being said, Watkins and his team did find that in the absence of challenging curriculum or adequate institutional support, these kids are resourceful. If the students of Freeway are any indication, Black and Latino youths will work and problem solve creatively to continue shrinking the digital divide. It is evident, though, that they need institutional support to succeed, and high schools might not be taking the right steps:

> Building a technology-rich space, it turns out, is only part of the challenge. Designing a carefully coordinated curriculum that promotes engagement with complex cognitive tasks and problem-solving skills is, without question, the more substantial challenge in building better learning futures. (p. 135)

Ultimately, this book puts forth transformative suggestions for schools that want to encourage the closure of the digital divide. Watkins argues that schools need to focus on strengthening students' "future-ready skills" over ensuring access to technology (p. 227). These skills are those "that are not simply focused on getting a job today but rather cultivating the competencies and dispositions to effectively navigate the world of tomorrow" (p. 227). Following Levy and Murnane (2004), Watkins suggests "expert thinking" (basically advanced problem solving) and "complex communication" (turning data and information into narrative, i.e., meaning making) (p. 226). Finally, Watkins suggests several questions educators should ask themselves when creating curriculum for students. These range from fairly abstract questions like: "Are we preparing our students to perform tasks in which humans maintain a distinct advantage over intelligent machines?" to practical questions such as, "Are our students being taught to work with data, analyze data, recognize patterns, and interpret them in particular ways?" (p. 234). Finally, Watkins asks the following question, which exemplifies the issues at Freeway and perhaps nationwide: "Does our school understand that technology is a tool for solving problems and not the solution?" (p. 234).

The Digital Edge is followed by Watkins' 2019 release, *Don't Knock the Hustle: Young Creatives, Tech Ingenuity, and the Making of a New Innovation Economy*, in which he continues to chronicle the stories of innovative young people as they navigate our increasingly digital world.

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