

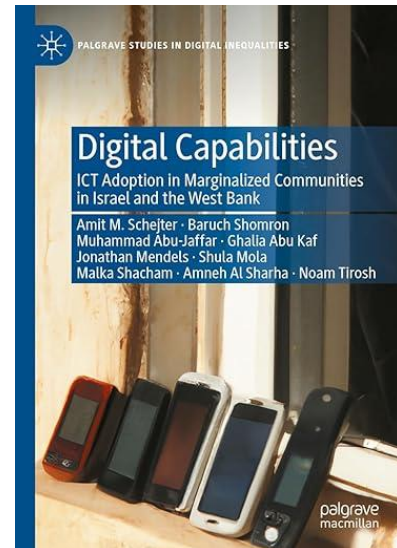
Amit M. Schejter, Baruch Shomron, Muhammad Abu-Jaffar, Ghalia Abu-Kaf, Jonathan Mendels, Shula Mola, Malka Shacham, Amneh Al Sharha, and Noam Tirosh, **Digital Capabilities: ICT Adoption in Marginalized Communities in Israel and the West Bank**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 254 pp., \$139.99 (softcover/hardcover).

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If there is one thing media scholars of Israel quickly realize, it is that no simple framework survives contact with Israeli reality—a state established by immigrants while still absorbing immigrants, built on land already populated by other communities, and governed through overlapping regimes of citizenship, religion, ethnicity, and occupation. If there are two things, the second is that whatever framework does survive will promptly be accused of being banal, naïve, or insufficiently attentive to Israel’s complexity.

***Digital Capabilities: ICT Adoption in Marginalized Communities in Israel and the West Bank***, authored by Amit M. Schejter, Baruch Shomron, Muhammad Abu-Jaffar, Ghalia Abu-Kaf, Jonathan Mendels, Shula Mola, Malka Shacham, Amneh Al Sharha, and Noam Tirosh, enters this contentious terrain with an ambitious promise: to rethink digital inequality through Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach, and to do so across some of the most politically, culturally, and institutionally complex communities imaginable—Arab Israelis, Bedouins, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) women, Ethiopian immigrants, members of the Bnei Menashe community, and African asylum seekers.

As the authors make clear, Sen’s capabilities framework shifts attention away from resources, access, or formal rights and toward people’s substantive freedoms—their opportunities to do and to be what they value. In contrast to utilitarian models that prioritize aggregate outcomes, or distributive models that focus on the allocation of goods, the capabilities approach foregrounds agency, choice, and conversion: the ways social, cultural, political, and technological conditions enable or constrain peoples’ ability to translate resources into desired action. At first glance, applying this framework to media appropriation might seem reminiscent of the familiar “uses and gratifications” approach—an expansive framework that, like an empty vessel, can accommodate almost any content. While this is also true of the capabilities approach, the authors emphasize a crucial distinction: the capabilities approach does not ask how individuals use media to satisfy existing needs, but how they mobilize media and ICTs to realize the lives they have reason to value. For the study of media inequality, this perspective is particularly productive. It allows communication to be understood not merely as infrastructure, content, or skill, but as a condition of freedom—central to participation, recognition, identity formation, and security. In the Israeli and West Bank context, where formal access to ICTs often coexists with profound inequalities in voice, visibility, and political power, the capabilities approach offers a way to capture these discrepancies without reducing them to crude binaries of inclusion and exclusion. In his early formulation of the capabilities approach, Sen cautioned against



establishing a fixed list of capabilities. The authors, however, opt for a defined set, arguing that such specification facilitates empirical operationalization and policy discussion. They focus on several core communication-related capabilities: to be free, to be informed, to be secure, to voice, and to reason. The book's reliance on mixed methods follows directly from this theoretical commitment. Across the volume, the authors combine quantitative content analysis, qualitative interviews, participatory action research, and textual analysis to trace capabilities at multiple levels—institutional, technological, and experiential.

The book is structured in three parts. Part I establishes the theoretical and contextual foundations, presenting the capabilities approach as an alternative to the utilitarian and access-based frameworks that have long dominated digital divide research. Parts II and III present the empirical studies. Part II examines media technologies and institutions, including broadcast media, journalism, social network sites, mobile applications, and digital role-playing games. The chapters in Part II demonstrate how specific technological configurations enable—or constrain—capabilities such as voicing, participation, security, and identity formation. Part III shifts the analytical focus to communities. Each empirical chapter sheds light on how members of a particular marginalized community—including Bedouin villagers, ultra-Orthodox Haredi women, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants, the Bnei Menashe community, and African asylum seekers—perceive and appropriate the media under investigation. Although the authors draw connections between the chapters at the end of each one and consistently return to a shared theoretical framework, these linkages sometimes feel somewhat artificial. For example, it is not entirely clear why journalists were chosen in the context of Arab citizens of Israel, or teachers in other cases, as the primary focal groups. Despite this limitation, the chapters convincingly demonstrate that ICT use is embedded in distinct social, cultural, and regulatory environments, and that patterns of marginalization are far from uniform. This contribution becomes especially salient in the concluding chapter, which synthesizes the cases by proposing clusters of communication-related capabilities and advancing a policy agenda grounded in the recognition of communication as a fundamental human right. In this sense, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Yet the book's ambition is also a source of tension. While the capabilities approach is praised for its openness and flexibility, the empirical chapters vary considerably in how clearly specific capabilities are defined, operationalized, and compared. At times, "capabilities" function as a precise analytical lens; at others, they risk becoming a normative vocabulary that retroactively frames diverse findings. This unevenness raises the question—left largely implicit—of whether the capabilities framework performs explanatory work, or whether it primarily serves as an ethical orientation layered onto established critiques of marginalization, representation, and exclusion. This vagueness is particularly salient in the empirical sections. The book's treatment of "Israel and the West Bank" as a shared empirical field, while productive, sometimes risks smoothing over asymmetries of sovereignty, coercion, and legal status. For example, while marginalized communities such as Bedouins and asylum seekers are often prevented from accessing ICTs, poorly represented in mainstream media, and denied opportunities for self-representation, ultra-Orthodox communities frequently engage in voluntary resistance to mainstream media and may actively prefer mediated separation. Arguably, the capabilities framework flattens these differences by translating them into comparable constraints or conversion factors. Readers attuned to critical political economy or colonial theory may find this move limiting, as it places radically unequal political conditions on a shared plane without fully theorizing the sources of inequality—particularly whether constraints are imposed or voluntarily embraced. A related limitation concerns power—both political (the state of Israel) and commercial (digital

platforms such as Facebook). While the book is strong on community-level agency, it engages less deeply with the role of the state and platform governance in shaping contemporary communication capabilities. Given the dominance of state regulation and concentrated media ownership in several of the case studies, this relative absence feels like a missed opportunity—especially for a book that seeks to influence policy thinking in the digital age.

Despite these criticisms, *Digital Capabilities* is a significant and timely contribution. Its insistence on treating communication as a matter of justice rather than efficiency is both politically and intellectually valuable. The book does not offer easy solutions—appropriate, perhaps, given its context—but it does provide a rigorous vocabulary for asking better questions about media inequality and agency. More broadly, it serves as a reminder that in places where inequality is overdetermined by history, identity, religion, and violent conflict—such as Israel and the West Bank—media technologies can neither save nor doom society. What matters, as the book persuasively argues, is whether they expand people’s freedoms to voice themselves, belong, and participate—or merely reproduce existing hierarchies.