Article 9

Digital Dead End: Fighting for Social Justice in the Information Age by Virginia Eubanks

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Digital Dead End: Fighting for Social Justice in the Information Age

Virginia Eubanks

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One of the longest and most enduring tropes of those who are interested in the intersection of community literacy and technology is the concept of the "digital divide." Going back for at least the last fifteen years and in a variety of contexts, the idea that certain US citizens are systematically denied economic and literate "opportunity" by being denied access to networked writing technology has influenced education policy makers as well as critical theorists. And while there has been quite a bit of research into both the cause and nature of this divide as well as how community is experienced differently in online networked settings, there has been relatively little research on how communities are affected by networked technologies and the impact of those technologies in people's off-line lives.

Enter Virginia Eubanks's *Digital Dead End*, a book that problematizes the notion that technological distribution or skills are the fundamental issues of the digital divide. Eubanks questions the very assumption that those who are on the "have not" end of the divide do not experience information technology daily in their lives. Eubanks's project arises from her work in community organizing and adult education at a YWCA in Troy, New York. Her project brought her into contact with a diverse population of working poor women in efforts to address experiences with larger social-justice issues that involved information technology. These women's interactions with technology revolve around everything from classes in PC repair to the role that information technology plays in high-stakes social-service benefits monitoring.

Chapter 1 starts the project off from four points of departure. Eubanks begins the book in a manner similar to other ethnographic research projects with some quick background and reference for herself and a slice of personal background. The section moves quickly to the main point of the book, that poor and working-class women have a tremendous amount of interaction with information technology as participants in low-wage data-entry workforces and as participants in social-service systems. Such women, Eubanks argues, actually live in a sea of technological ubiquity that seeks to monitor and police their behavior in some way, a view very different

from the skills or material "deficiency" model that dominates digital-divide conversations. Eubanks ends the chapter by grounding the technological in her research subjects' lives as "ambivalence not absence" (10). She recalls participant stories of engaging in IT training optimistically but with cynicism about the training's likeliness to improve their economic situation.

Both chapters 2 and 3 begin by joining a recent chorus of academic voices that critique the premise of a digital divide itself. Eubanks positions her project in terms of technology citizenship and social justice, spending most of the chapter explaining what her project is not. Most useful here is when Eubanks introduces her conceptual model for "Popular Technology" (32), positioning technology not as deficit in either skills or technology but an issue of influence, power, and ubiquity. Most interesting in these two chapters is Eubanks's presentation of her participants' construction of the problem of the digital divide through visualization. Eubanks creates a small cartoon of the digital divide and then asks her participants to revise the image based on their experiences. She prints many of these revisions and they are particularly interesting both in terms of how participants decide to label groups (one participant in particular labels technological "have nots" as "survivors") and in terms of how the participants locate and draw the divide as a social rather than technological problem.

Chapter 4 takes on the familiar economic argument that technological or IT jobs are new economies that can replace the loss of manufacturing for towns like Troy, New York. Eubanks is at her best here when focused on providing proof that information-based economies are often volatile and transitory. Perhaps less successful are the many pages of economic argument and tables that stand in stark contrast to all the work she has done in the book to include her participants' voices; here the book moves too quickly between local and global arguments about economies.

Chapter 5, though, is particularly interesting. Here Eubanks covers conversations in regard to technologies of citizenship. In addition to her own framing and location of technologies and citizenship, Eubanks makes an interesting argument about technologies of the state. There are many conversations about information technology and privacy, but what is compelling about her argument is the way that the conversation is framed through the lives of her participants. Conversations about technological surveillance and privacy are rarely located through the ways people on public assistance experience those issues. Eubanks suggests that the tracking and monitoring of behaviors as well as information sharing abuse on the part of the state are particularly problematic, especially as those technologies are directed toward women on public assistance.

In Chapter 6 Eubanks spells out in a fuller manner what she means by the concept of "Popular Technology." Here she positions popular technology as a response to digital-divide situations. Drawing on liberatory pedagogy theorists like Paulo Freire, her notion of popular technology is positioned in three strong problem-posing traditions: popular education, participatory action research, and participatory design. Rather than spending a great deal of space explaining in detail how each of these traditions contributes to her theory of popular technology, Eubanks quickly operationalizes each contribution by describing how each way of thinking influenced one of her YWCA projects. Chapter 7 ends the main part of the book with what is by now a familiar recounting of the virtues of participatory approaches to community building and research.

Particular note should be given to the almost fifty pages of appendices Eubanks includes at the end of the book. These appendices give specific details about her data-collection methodology, samples of the types of documents that became meaningful for the community she worked with, and exercises meant to ground popular technology for communities. The pragmatic nature of these appendices makes their value threefold. First, they are useful in terms of deployment in either classrooms or communities to examine similar issues. Second, they provide an operational insight into Eubanks's project by grounding much of her writing in concrete activities. Third, they describe in detail her methodological approach to gathering data, a move always appreciated but especially important in novel work like this.

There are, sadly, elements of *Digital Dead End* that are bound to trouble the community literacy researcher. Mildly irritating is our field's lack of influence on the project. For example, Eubanks makes claims about the regrettable lack of scholarship on the relationship between citizenship and technology, something that has been considered frequently in rhetoric and composition, as several articles in this volume demonstrate. Particularly vexing is the lack of patience Eubanks has with explaining popular technology as a theoretical concept. The idea is a powerful one and well worth the time to explore, especially for communities that are often unproblematically located on the far side of the digital divide such as working class women or people of color. Eubanks's rushed claims about universality and experience can be troubling. In fact, there are many moments in the book that feel intellectually rushed. Ultimately, Eubanks seems much more comfortable explaining projects of which she was a part rather than mapping out the theoretical underpinning that allowed those projects to succeed.

On the whole, though, there is a great deal of interesting and quality work here for the community researcher to mine. First, Eubanks's engagement and commitment to understanding her participants' relationship with digital practices and lived experience is insightful. While research that locates "community" in online spaces is useful, too often research in this vein does not concern itself with off-line communities'

experiences with information technology. That is to say, frequently community literacy research looks just at online practices or just at off-line practices and not at the relationship between the two. Eubanks's understanding that community practices and experiences bridge online and off-line spaces could be of real value to the community interested in literacy research. Her positioning of the digital divide in the context of other economic and social divides is a strong move and one that should be supported. The move from a deficit model to a ubiquitous model of understanding the role, and points of intervention, for technology and literacy practices is a welcome one and one that I hope we will all choose to integrate into our own research.