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Book Reviews

Davis, Jenny L. *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2020. Pp. 208. ISBN: 9780262044110 (cloth) $30.00

How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things, a groundbreaking text, delves into affordance theory, providing a much-needed update of the theory's underpinnings historically, conceptually, politically, and methodologically. Davis draws connections about affordances across fields and disciplines, continuously weaving in the ideology that technological artifacts are both powerful and political. The book elo-

quently pieces together work from multiple scholars and perspectives to bring clarity and salience to the term affordance. Introducing the mechanisms and conditions framework, Davis uses it to show the relationship that takes place between technology, affordances, and society. She argues the mechanisms and conditions framework shifts affordance analysis to ask *how* artifacts afford, rather than what artifacts afford. Applying a critical lens throughout the book, she successfully communicates her goals and thesis by a strategic organization and a meaningful, exciting writing style that makes it easy to comprehend her examples and vocabulary.

How Artifacts Afford has seven chapters. Most can be read either all together or independently of the others (minus Chapters 4 and 5, which should be read as a unit). Chapter 1, "Introduction," provides a great overview to the whole book. Chapter 2, "A Brief History of Affordances," provides a linear deep dive into the intellectual history and lineage of affordances and transitions from the historical to the theoretical. Chapter 3, "Politics and Power," draws the distinction between actor-network theory (ANT) and affordance analysis while focusing on both the political and theoretical foundation of the mechanisms and conditions framework. After this foundation, Chapters 4 and 5, "Mechanisms of Affordance" and "Conditions of Affordance" (to be read as a unit), paint the full in-depth picture of the mechanisms and conditions framework. Turning to methodology, Chapter 6, "Affordances in Practice," fleshes out how to use the mechanisms and conditions framework analytically. This chapter does a wonderful job of laying out other theoretical approaches that would pair well with the mechanisms and conditions framework. To close, Chapter 7, "Conclusion," leaves readers with big questions about affordances, specifically focusing on being critical, taking action, and research needed for moving forward.

Affordance theory and affordances have a long interdisciplinary history. The concept originated in the 1960s and '70s in the field of ecological psychology. Since then, affordance thought has penetrated fields such as science and technology studies (STS), design studies, engineering, sociology, communication studies, and education, among others. James J. Gibson first defined affordance as "a way to approach the mutual constitution between people and environments" (p. 6). Around 10 years later, design studies saw an uptick in the concept due to Donald A. Norman's desire to understand human-machine interactions. Davis writes specifically about technological affordances and how they are formed through interactions with humans. Davis explains that,

"affordances are how objects shape action for socially situated subjects" (p. 6), while also arguing that researchers and practitioners need to critically think about and interrogate affordances. She focuses on asking the questions of how, for whom, and under what circumstances technologies afford. Her work, specifically the application and use of the mechanisms and conditions framework, falls at the intersection of design studies and the social sciences, showing both practical and analytical approaches. She references and builds upon the work of Virginia Eubanks and Safiya Umoja from a social science perspective and the work of Batya Friedman, Mary Flanagan, and Helen Nissenbaum from a design studies lens. Each piece in this foundational corpus focuses on the relationships between ethical technology, intentional design, and the relationship between technology and society.

How Artifacts Afford's strengths are its organization, clear and concise academic writing, and richness rooted in the historical, conceptual, political, and methodological. The vocabulary, explanations, and real-life examples throughout the text enable readers with little to no knowledge of affordance theory to comprehend the arguments and discussion. The critical approach to this work is seminal, thought-provoking, relevant, and vital to the mediated world we live in today. The book left me wanting to know more about affordances and how to implement change in regard to technological design and development.

Areas that could have been more developed are adding practical action items for designers and people working outside of academia and the conversation around what objects are deemed able to afford. I appreciated the conversation about the critical approach and uncovering how technologies harm those who are marginalized. In the same realm, the sections about intentional design were extremely useful, but I was left with more questions. How can we start to move the needle forward in the world of design? For example, how can we ensure intentional design is actually taking place when we function in a capitalistic society and most technologies are created for some type of financial gain? Who builds all of these technologies? Are there protocols, regulations, and/or policies for how technologies are designed and built? Who has access to apply to design jobs in the first place? What training and education should designers be required to have? Should there be a requirement that a design team have an array of members with vastly different life experiences and world views? With all this information at our fingertips, how can we bridge this work from academia to the design world in practical ways?

Various strategies for change were touched on, but I would have loved to hear case studies where this critical approach was implemented and the results. In addition, a conversation about what specific types of objects afford would be enriching. I was left wondering, do any and all objects afford, or are only objects deemed technological fall into this category?

In general, Davis's text is comprehensive, logical, and fairly easy to read, giving the concept of affordance the update it needed. The book delivers in doing what it says it is going to do and meets expectations laid out by Davis. The work expands and contributes to the field of affordance theory. With everything taking place in our current climate, our critical eye and attention is needed on affordances, intentional design, ethical technology, and the relationship between technology and society. This book would be beneficial not only to students taking a college course in one or more of the disciplines mentioned earlier, but also to those working in technology design and those consuming and using technologies daily. All in all, this formative book is applicable to anyone and everyone with a smartphone or computer who is inspired to be more critical of their media use.

—Krysten Stein
University of Illinois at Chicago

O'Mara, Margaret. *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America*. New York: Penguin Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 496. ISBN 978-0399562181 (cloth) $30.00; 978-0399562204 (paper) $20.00; 978-0399562198 (E-Book) no price listed.

Reviewing this book suggests a question: What does Silicon Valley history have to do with communication research? I would argue that it has a lot to do with the kinds of questions we ask in our profession as researchers and people generally ask about how we communicate in our present context of global communication and social media. The question is partly about how the technology affects how and with whom we communicate. But it is also about the ecosystem from which that technology came and how it has penetrated the everyday lives of much of the world's people. The book addresses not just stars of technology, like Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, or Jeff Bezos, whose stories are often told. Much has been written about Silicon Valley, but a look at its entire 70-plus year history has rarely been attempted. The present book is one of the best of those attempts to date. The author, Margaret O'Mara, is a historian who tells the story of the ecosystem that