Access(ing) the Coordination of Writing Networks

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Abstract

In this article, I engage the discussion of access within the field of computers and writing and revisit the issue of the digital divide. My discussion of access focuses on operationalizing access as what Annette Powell calls "access(ing)" (2007), a process of enacting and coordination between humans and nonhumans. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory and digital literacy narrative methodology, I present the story of Diana as a problematic case study through which I ask scholars to think about accessing in deeply ecological and newly traceable ways. I end by noting that stories like Diana's challenge researchers to think of accessing as enacted, distributed, and traceable across networks.
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1. Introduction

Technological access has been a core concern in the field of computers and writing (Berry, Hawisher, & Selfe, 2012; Goode, 2010; Porter, 2009; Ratliff, 2010; Selfe, 1999). As James E. Porter (2009) claimed, many scholars in computers and writing have addressed access both within the university setting and beyond. More complicated than the mere costs of equipment and broadband connectivity, access exists as an issue of materiality but also one of literacy and social practices. Understanding access as embedded in a complex relationship between social and technological material practices has allowed conversations about access to remain productive as a useful research concept despite changes in technology. Access has been kept in the forefront as a field concern while new composing technologies like social media and mobile phones have complicated the issues of access. Yet new writing technologies and the composing practices they demand challenge our ways of theorizing about access. Highly networked writing technologies, like social media platforms, collapse distinctions between private and public texts. Nonhuman writing technologies take up more and more decision making about when our writing is viewed and by whom, which requires new theoretical approaches.

In this article, I argue that the practices of accessing are coordinated across humans and nonhumans in new and complex ways that span multiple social, professional, and technological contexts. Texts are distributed across different kinds of social worlds by coordinating writing technologies like social media platforms. These are social worlds that both humans and nonhumans engage in. Both grant and deny access to authors, texts, and different audiences at different times for different reasons. Annette Powell (2007) has called the process of access, "access(ing)". I support Powell's

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work by locating accessing within Bruno Latour's (2005) Actor-Network Theory, or ANT. I then present the case study of Diana, a young woman of color pursuing a PhD who tells the story of her first publication; ANT offers readers an understanding of her digital literacy story as a case of the accessing of networks through nonhuman coordination. Finally, I conclude with implications for further research into access and accessing.

2. The Practices of Access

Access in computers and writing can be thought of as a dialogue between two major problems: technological materiality and ideology. When located in "Digital Divide" conversations, access usually involves discussions of availability of hardware, software, and networking infrastructures as well as the policies that govern those discussions. Scholars like Charles Moran (1999) and Cynthia L. Selfe (1999) have explored how underlying ideological assumptions drive national educational and organizational policy decisions about technological access. Smaller-scale ideological access discussions center around material, institutional, and systemic disparities but frame those discussions explicitly along lines of race (Banks, 2006; Blackmon, 2007; Powell, 2007), gender (Aschauer, 1999; Tulley & Blair, 2002), and class (Grabill, 2003). Conversations about access that are related to race, gender, and class serve useful explanatory functions in understanding user practices in digitally mediated writing environments.

Issues of access both generally and in specific contexts, like education, need to be complicated by social elements of literacy; research related to race, gender, and class attempts to do so. For example, Joanna Goode (2010) has found that educational scholarship that locates the digital divide in terms of surveys and other large-scale forms of research is often too superficial in its analysis of access. Although such work might point to educational inequity and opportunity, it also frequently theorizes access within a deficit model, which paints particular populations as lacking either in skills or material technology. Rather than attempt to tackle our conception of the digital divide itself—a concept that many have reexamined (Goode, 2010)—I instead join a chorus of scholarship (Jung, Qiu, & Kim, 2001; Light, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Selwyn, 2004; Valadez & Duran, 2007; Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004; Warschauer, 2003a, 2003b) that asks digital literacy researchers to move beyond views of access constructed in terms of the possession (or lack) of technology or technological skill sets. Powell's (2007) call for research that investigates the process of "access(ing)" situates digital literacy as a series of practices located within the "other Divides" (p. 33) that are part of people's lives.

Echoing other critical literacy theorists (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cushman, 1996, 1998; Kucer, 2005), Powell (2007) asks researchers and educators to trouble divide narratives that only see marginalized groups as lacking in both material and technological skills. As Krista Bryson (2012) reminds us, the "literacy myth," the idea that literacy is a precursor to economic and social justice, remains powerful and present even in digital literacy narratives. Indeed, static narratives about access can be dangerous. These myths can limit the view of the problems involved in access by predetermining what problems are important. Predetermining the nature of the problem runs the risk of missing people's adaptations to technologically mediated environments and how networks, both human and technological, constantly adapt to practices of other actors. As Powell (2007) has stated, "We need empirical and longitudinal studies that examine actual practice in technologized contexts, to both measure the varied effects of differential access and to develop a template for African-American technology use that is not based solely on deficit" (p. 33). In other words, there are any number of other divides that can, at any given moment, shape the practices of access especially in the "broader world" (p. 33).

To take up Powell's charge, I ask: how do we locate the practices of access? Attempts have been made to provide more complex views of the roles that access, technology, and other factors have played in people's lives (Berry et al., 2012; Hawisher, Selfe, Moraski, & Pearson, 2004; Hawisher et al., 2004). Work like this produces "digital narratives" as the primary unit of analysis in an attempt to create an ecological view of a participant's digital literacy history. While these narratives include moments of accessing, these projects exist at the level of biography. Indeed, their strength is that they tell the life stories of their participants by gathering detailed histories. Digital literacy narratives, like the ones gathered by The Ohio State University's Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, produce stories of peoples' literate lives but biography is not a tale of process. Biographies provide rich detail of large life issues but few very specific details about process. To find processes, the researcher must look closer. I propose the value of a much more fine-grained analysis of the processes of accessing, one that relies on Actor-Network Theory to account for broader networks and moments of accessing within small moments of participants' lives rather than biographies.