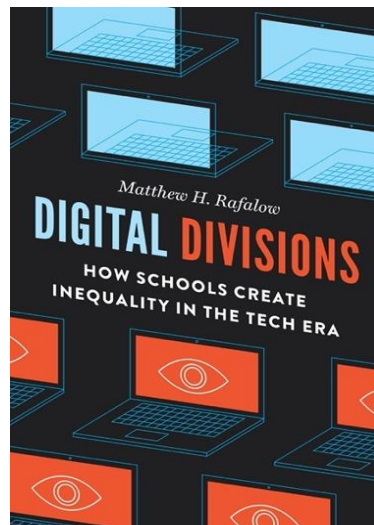Rafalow, M. H. (2020). *Digital divisions: How schools create inequality in the tech era.* **The University of Chicago Press.**

Reviewed by J. Scott Biola
University of Virginia
United States

Matthew Rafalow's findings in *Digital Divisions* suggest that White middle-class teachers regularly devalue the digital interests of minoritized groups and allow students from elite pedigrees to leverage "their digital knowledge *as currency*" (p. 154). In making this case, Rafalow reboots social reproduction theory, a Marxist framework commonly used in the 1970s, to expose ways in which schools perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities. The author substantiates his claims with empirical examples collected through extensive ethnographic research with students and teachers in three California middle schools. The book can be repetitive in describing these encounters but is generally worthy of critical examination by the author's target audience of "teachers, including curriculum designers, teacher professional development administrators, parents and caregivers, and educational technologists" (p. 149).

The overarching thesis of the book owes much to Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital. The theory suggests that predominantly White middle-class faculties are more likely to embrace the values and behaviors of upper-echelon students at Heathcliff Academy (the book uses pseudonyms) than those of non-White pupils at César Chávez Middle School or Sheldon Middle School. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Rafalow describes specific ways Heathcliff's teachers incorporate online games, social media, and digital creations into the learning process for students born into privilege. Chávez's teachers, conversely, use digital tools primarily for sharpening students' basic skills. The author links this teaching approach to the Chávez faculty's perception that their pupils are destined to become 21st

century laborers. Faculty prejudices also stifle student opportunities to learn with technology at Sheldon, where teachers use digital tools primarily for surveillance. Rafalow reasons that the Sheldon faculty limits student access to digital play as a response to fears that Asian pupils are "cutthroat hackers."

The author confides that he uncovered these findings because his status as a "White, geeky male" (p. 176) gave him unearned access to teacher candor. Similarly, his theoretical framework may make him an ideal candidate to shepherd Big Tech's agenda past progressive educational gatekeepers. Rafalow references a litany of theories that combine the ideals of both liberal-progressives and modernist-vocationalists. Carr (1998) describes the former as champions of egalitarian classrooms and the latter as preparing students for future careers. With appeals to adherents from both paradigms, readers can easily be lulled into forgetting the author's positionality.

It is ironic that Rafalow, as a Google employee, does not look more inwardly at surveillance norms that Big Tech is continually reshaping (Foer, 2017). For a self-proclaimed Bourdieuian, Rafalow's failure to acknowledge potential conflicts of interest associated with his employment at Google falls short of Bourdieu's standard. For example, in an interview with Wacquant (1989), Bourdieu explained that reflexivity is necessary to maintain objectivity and establish the scientific legitimacy of sociological fieldwork.

Rather than expressing concern about Big Tech's commercial ventures in schools, Rafalow describes fears about what smaller "education technology companies will do with the data they collect on students" (p. 162). This seems comparable to chasing baitfish whilst being swallowed by a whale. To quote Bourdieu: "When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as fish in water,' it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted" (Wacquant, 1989, p. 43). With $100 billion flowing from President Biden's proposed infrastructural investments into public schools, and technological improvements being a high priority (The White House, 2021), it is naïve to overlook Big Tech's profits from securing large contracts in the education sector and from familiarizing a new generation of consumers with specific product lines (Molnar & Boninger, 2020; Teräs et al., 2020).

The tenuous position in which Rafalow's benefactor places him – as a researcher – causes the author's warnings about technological determinism to seem hollow. Technological determinism involves the belief that technology will play an ever-expanding role in schools as a panacea for educational woes (Oliver, 2011). Rafalow briefly cautions against unnecessary technology uses but conveys a more consistent message that the "digital youth" require more opportunities to mix leisure and schoolwork while plugged into devices. The author grounds his advocacy for digital play as a means of informally cultivating technology skills with frequent references to the works of Mizuko Ito and colleagues (2009, 2013).

Although educators might be inclined to embrace such innovative uses of technology to avoid being perceived as Luddites, that is, opposed to technological change (Polly & Hannafin, 2011; Shifflet & Weilbacher, 2015), it may not be prudent to enact all of Rafalow's recommendations. Specifically, the author champions student curation of social media accounts to curry the favor of college admissions staffs. This practice is not entirely congruent with standards established by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2021a). ISTE, a nonprofit regarded as "the peak global body" (Bower, 2017, p. 4) in educational technology, is a worthy counterbalance to Rafalow, who works for the world's 13th largest corporation (Murphy et al., 2021). Unlike Rafalow, ISTE stops short of advocacy for oversharing data that can be mined for profit (Molnar & Boninger, 2020). Instead, ISTE (2021a) takes a more measured tone by encouraging students to develop constructive online digital identities while also supporting the protection of "digital privacy and security" (1.2.d). Whether deliberately or not, by prompting teachers and students to increase their interactions with Big Tech's profitable algorithms (Foer, 2017), Rafalow may be doing his master's bidding.

Nevertheless, with over 600 hours of fieldwork, including numerous observations and interviews with students and teachers, readers get the sense Rafalow's research produced a saturation of data. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that saturation is the point at which a qualitative researcher's findings become redundant and indicate a logical terminus for data collection. Unfortunately, the author's writing style throughout *Digital Divisions* makes readers feel quickly saturated by overly broad characterizations of each teaching staff and repetitive mentions of "cutthroat hacker" Asian students at Sheldon Middle, "benevolent immigrant" Latinx students at Chávez Middle, and "elite" White students at Heathcliff Academy.

Given the redundancy of Rafalow's accounts, it would be prudent for prospective readers who are pressed for time to thoroughly digest the Introduction, then skim or skip over Chapters 1, 3, and 4. Those who want to preview the research without purchasing the book will be interested to know that Chapter 2 is nearly identical to an earlier iteration of the same study Rafalow (2018) submitted to the *American Journal of Sociology*. The author thanks the publisher in the Acknowledgements section for allowing this shortcut. Because it is best to approach *Digital Divisions* by focusing on its highlights, excerpts from the book would be a useful addition to the reading lists of graduate or upper-level undergraduate education courses. Readers interested in curricular theory will appreciate the framework Rafalow braids together from several Marxist commentaries on education in the 30-page Conclusion.

To summarize, Rafalow's research, firsthand accounts, and nuanced theoretical framework make a persuasive case that *all* students need opportunities to mix learning with digital play. This student-centered pedagogical approach generally aligns with best practices for technology

integration in K-12 environments (ISTEb, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Unfortunately, the credibility of this research is jeopardized by Rafalow's laissez-faire treatment of modern monopolists. His lack of reflexivity is either an enormous oversight or a poorly hidden covert agenda.

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About the Reviewer

J. Scott Biola is pursuing an Ed.D. at the University of Virginia in Curriculum & Instruction. He is a former high school social studies teacher and is now involved in teacher preparation. Much of his current research centers on expanding the digital competencies of preservice teachers.

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