

Chapter 1

What Does Digital Media Allow Us to “Do” to One Another?

Economic Significance of Content and Connection

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this integrative review of theory and research is to assess the economic impact of digital media in ways that are unreached by instrumental means of measuring economic activity. Specifically, we use three overarching arguments identified from a review of the literature that broadly defines the economic force of digital media content in contemporary society. We contextualize those arguments in terms of current issues in the field and gaps in the research base before concluding with a discussion of the implications of what we learned for education, civic engagement, social practice, and policy.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the economic significance of digital media through three general arguments about digital communication in contemporary society. Understanding linkages between digital media and social networks enables a view of economic significance driven by digital

media’s potential to shape human life. In the rapidly shifting digital world, moving beyond explicitly financial or monetary measures of economic activity shifts emphasis away from reactive analysis of completed sales toward proactive understanding of change and exchange as a core feature of human culture. Such a view helps interpret tensions in education surrounding literacy. It affords analysis

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8310-5.ch001

of changes in human communication readily, but not yet fully, commodified economically. Such a perspective, we argue, is necessary for productive thinking about literacy as a social practice, literacy education, civic engagement, and policy.

SUCCINCT OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

We begin with an integrative review of theory and research on the role of digital media in contemporary society’s global economy. Definitions of *digital media*, *contemporary society*, and *global economy* are best formulated as systems within systems. For example, in Nick Couldry’s (2012) *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Practice*, he lays the foundation for a new sociology of digital media as a means of dealing with the complexities of living in a 21st century media-saturated world that extends beyond the social to include the economics of production and consumption. Amid unceasing calls for education, policy, social practice, and civic engagement to “keep up” with digital media, Couldry asks a moral question that holds a key, we argue, to understanding the nested economic impact of systems within systems. What does digital media allow us to “do” to one another?

The term *digital media* defies attempts to reach consensus on its meaning. We review literature on the construction of digital media as content (print and nonprint) that has been digitized and thus potentially ready for dissemination on the Internet. We echo the insistence from various fields of research on digital media that digital media content is a kind of tip of the iceberg for the ways digital media is reorganizing and managing our actual and metaphorical households and villages. Starting with content serves as a starting point for discussing digital media’s broader impact on our lives in the broad sense that Couldry intends.

Below, we pursue three arguments we identified from a review of the literature that broadly define the economic force of digital media content in contemporary society. We then contextualize the arguments about digital media content in terms of relevant social, political, and economic factors that mediate the production of digital content. This approach makes it possible to assess economic impact of digital media in ways that are unreached by instrumental means of measuring economic activity (e.g., Boggs, this volume; Chambers, 2013). We seek to capture the essence of how digital media affects the “management of the household or village” (Author C’s interpretation of etymology of *Greek oikonomia*).

Argument #1

Digital media in a contemporary society—one that requires a global marketplace to satisfy daily needs—is multimodal (i.e., composed of images, sounds, and bodily performances, as well as oral and written language).

One result of the breakdown between formal and informal learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sterpont, 2013) is the opening up of spaces in which users explore new online ways of participating and communicating specifically in multimodal ways—ways that require collaboration, production, and dissemination of one’s own digital texts as opposed to mere consumption of such. Media production has always been multimodal, but digital media makes multimodality a core feature of interactions with economic potential.

However, digital media *content* and digital media *space* suggest quite different economic possibilities. On the Internet, digital content generated by users, such as a Facebook post, could change nothing or everything, and it seems impossible to predict. However, the social *space* created via

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