Digital Documents in Home and Family Life

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How does the context of home and family life define digital documents? First, it is important to recognize that digital documents in the home are unlikely to be compared to printed documents, as they are in work and educational settings. Rather they will be compared to the media which saturate the home with mass culture: primarily television, but also radio, newspapers and home entertainment products. And nearly all are experienced within the context of entertainment, not work; entertainment requires a sense of play and fun, and often generates a sense of shared culture and sociability. While these kinds of documents involve multimedia in some sense, and frequently have production quality far above digital documents thus far produced, they are mass media and place family members in a passive role. Several of the papers demonstrate the way that mass media are adopting the image of digital documents in order to protect home markets.

At this point a second important question arises: If digital documents require participation, not spectatorship, how might they redefine home and family life? Ultimately a sense of belonging to a family, or being at home, is a matter of shared culture and solidarity which does not always and necessarily involve being biologically related. Thus it is very possible for participants in digital environments (such as MOOs) to think of themselves as family. How will digital documents redefine family membership?

Each of the papers begins to explore the nature of digital documents in the home and family by contrasting them with other kinds of important documents and activities. Charles Tashiro notes that the “aura” of cinema comes from the theater, but is radically different in the context of home video; and he shows that “digital decoration” allows the consumer to customize and redefine both the context and content of mass media. Tara McPherson describes how new technologies are “domesticated” for the home, serving traditional family values, relationships and activities; while our culture “sees itself as science fiction,” in reality technology is used to reinforce traditional values rather than transforming them. Marsha Kinder notes the source of the power of family entertainment technologies, which shape children’s perception and cognitive development from earliest infancy; she then describes how children’s television shows like the “Power Rangers” give animated superheros the powers of computers (morphing, active technological choices) while keeping superheros the role of passive spectators of the culture. Michael Carter designed a computer game to teach children the art of story telling, noting that digital documents resemble family conversation more than mass media documents do, and can help to create a different kind of family sociability.

Each paper gives a clue to the emerging nature of digital documents in the home and family. In requiring participation and empowering the customization of culture, digital documents may organize resistance to the products of mass culture. But this possibility endangers mass market for entertainment commodities, thus the home has become the focal point of national policy struggles concerning intellectual property rights and network access technologies.