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.COMMUNICATION

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digital power squared

Power is squared by the searching spirit that connects us to the network

KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 9 Sekunden

Digital power derives not from the latest display technology but from the ability to customize networked sounds, words, and human associations, starting with the inquiring "user," and involving the social matrix of human interests and engagements facilitated by digital linkage. Power pours into the system from the individual's point of view and then linkage squares that power.

Hollywood is worried because the silver screen is losing its mojo. Millions of smaller screens now compete against that oversize hypnotic intensity inherited from the dream-like dramaturgy of Wagnerian opera houses. Cell phones provide tiny video screens. iPods store TV episodes of "Lost," or "Desperate Housewives." Portable DVD players shrink movie viewing, making it more convenient but also more individualistic. Movies are released on DVD shortly after or simultaneous with the local Cineplex. In the 1950s, TV screens made a frontal attack on cinema; then in the 1980s computer screens brought multi-functionality in office work and game-playing. Now the latest flat-screen computers project high-resolution clarity from high-definition plasma displays. Even the fish-tank screen-savers on these latest flat-screen monitors seem so alluringly beautiful that you want to hang them on the wall as vibrantly animated art works – if only they did not dominate the environment with functionality, like a soup spoon hanging on a kitchen wall. How can the cinema maintain its magic when gasoline stations and shopping malls install flat-screen panels? Where's the magical event of shared viewing?

While the movie industry wrings its hands over the influx of diminutive screens, the real power of digital media is hiding behind the screen. It's not about display technology, it's about customization. The power of digital media resides not in the type of displays but in the pliability of content. We have seen this soft power evolve in three stages: The first stage was the standalone computer. International Business Machines (IBM) replaced the typewriter with static software for desktops. Soon the second phase plugged standalone computers into telephone lines so that data could be transmitted and exchanged. The modem's high-pitched squeal was the typical sound of that era. The networked infrastructure was an arena for commercial speculation in the 1990s. Investment in broadband marked the dawn of public virtual spaces with potential connections to reality (although grocery and furniture stores were premature candidates for digitizing). Digital media became public real estate.

The unfolding power of digital media has entered its third stage. It is the input and re-construction of personal experience. The fungible uniformity of data allows whole areas of human experience to be entered and then recombined in fresh ways. Web logs and discussion groups customize opi-

nion-making. Buying books on Amazon becomes a database of personal taste. Similar recombinant experience can be found in countless areas of human interest, not limited to visual aesthetics. Even handicraft skills are now personalized and re-constituted by digital media.

Consider, for instance, the adult who wishes to learn jazz improvisation on the piano or electronic keyboard. Learn jazz improvisation over the Internet? The student of yore might have had the chance to hang out every evening with players after late-night jam sessions in a club or bar. Such a daily social context for jazz is rare today even in cities like New York or Los Angeles. Instead, today's student draws on Internet resources that support accelerated learning.

Buy a DVD such as Dave Frank's "Breakthrough to Improv" and you can begin graduated lessons at your own pace. You then visit the author's website where you can purchase two year's worth of similar lessons in the series "The Joy of Improv." You contact the teacher through email and soon you have the opportunity to take a year of correspondence lessons during which you exchange mp3s or cassette recordings and receive individual feedback from Dave Frank at his studio in New York City. Similar lessons are available from many great jazz performers like Noah Baerman, David Bennet Cohen, David Sudnow (author of "The Way of the Hand"), or Scott Houston, who is Public Television's "Piano Guy." As you engage in such online education, you tailor your practice sessions to your own schedule and lifestyle. You become acquainted with fellow students of the piano. You find yourself creating spontaneous music that you can share with friends and relatives.

This is only one example of the third stage of digital power. This power derives not from the latest display technology but from the ability to customize networked sounds, words, and human associations, starting with the inquiring "user," and involving the social matrix of human interests and engagements facilitated by digital linkage. Power pours into the system from the individual's point of view and then linkage squares that power. Power is squared by the searching spirit that connects hands, eyes, heart and mind to the network. The lamentation of Hollywood should focus not on the displacement of visual attention but on the arising opportunities for new creative activities. ■

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