

Chapter 58

Diversification and Nuanced Inequities in Digital Media Use in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores access to, and engagement with, digital media by United States' (U.S.) by non-mainstream populations. Framing the issue from a sociotechnical standpoint, the authors explore how engagement with digital media is shaped by socioeconomic status (taking into account confounding factors, such as race and ethnicity, and social and geographical ecologies). The authors highlight studies that focus on the robust digital practices with which nonmainstream populations already engage, and to which they contribute. One example is how some black Twitter users engage in 'signifyin'—a culturally specific linguistic practice—as a means of performing racial identity online. The authors also problematize concepts such as the new digital divide and digital exclusion, and finally, reiterate that a universal roll-out of high speed broadband alone will not necessarily lead to further engagement with digital media for ALL populations. In fact, the authors claim that providing more or faster access is likely not enough to prevent the entrenchment of a global digital underclass.

This chapter explores the ways in which nonmainstream populations in the United States (U.S.) access and engage with ICT and digital media. For the purpose of this chapter, the term nonmainstream population refers to racial/ethnic and linguistic minority groups, who are also low-income or poor (i.e., hovering on or below the poverty line), and/or infrequent Internet users. The authors also problematize two related concepts of *digital divide* and *digital exclusion*.

Although the term digital media has been used and described across the literature for over a decade, its definition remains nebulous. Digital media cannot be defined solely as digitized content, but rather must include a discussion its salient features—namely its interactivity and ability to foster collaboration

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and “group forming” networks (Smith, 2013). Rather than explicitly defining digital media, scholars often refer to it by providing a parenthetical lists of examples, such as “blogging, digital comics, digital photography, digital videos, video game design, information visualization, etc.” (Sims, 2014, p. 673). Such lists, however, are ever-changing, as new types of digital media are constantly appearing on the scene. *The John Hopkins Guide to Digital Media* (Ryan et. al, 2014) for example, has over 150 entries, which range from the familiar (social networking sites, wikis) to the more obscure (e.g., digital installation art and machinima). Due to the dynamic nature of digital media, therefore, our definition remains broad and inclusive, encompassing most media that require a broadband connection and, at least for now, hardware such as desktops or laptops, smartphones or tablets to access it.

Currently, the most salient features of digital media include its affordance to access a global audience, providing individuals or groups the opportunity to: (1) create/produce, (2) congregate and share interests and ideas, (3) swap and sell information and goods, and (4) express one’s individual/community voice through a social platform. An important and exciting aspect of digital media (viewed as dangerous by some) is that it allows anyone with a fast broadband connection to engage actively in, and even help shape, current political, cultural, social, and economic scenes. Thus, as digital media becomes increasingly influential for all aspects of public life, its equitable access becomes ever more vital. To put it succinctly, our chapter focuses on the intersection between race/ethnicity and social economic status (SES) and with access to and engagement with ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and digital media.

Since the international exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of our chapter, we therefore restricted our search to scholarship conducted in U.S. contexts. To retrieve relevant sources across several growing bodies of literature, we searched various academic databases using keywords such as: *digital media*, *information and computer technology (ICT)*, *digital divide*, combined with terms such as *access*, *use*, and *engagement*. We then cross-referenced the sources we retrieved with keywords that relate to nonmainstream populations (i.e., *Hispanics*, *Latinas/Latinos*, *Blacks*, *African Americans*, *Native Americans*, *American Indians*, *Indigenous*, and *poor/ low-income* (including whites). This process yielded a range of sources that included academic journal articles, research reports and chapters in academic books.

WHAT IS THE SUCCINCT OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH?

Nonmainstream Populations Access to (ICT): An Incidental Predecessor to Digital Media

In the early 2000s the phrase ‘digital divide’ referred to a binary notion of access, or lack of access, that various demographic groups had to the Internet (Rubinstein-Avila, 2011). However, as access, per se, has become less of an issue, especially compared to the issue of speed, software, and advanced multiliteracies, the term ‘digital divide’ has become more nuanced. Although scholars from different disciplines have contributed to our understanding of the ways in which digital media is used across race/ethnic groups, and especially socioeconomic lines, ICT access and engagement among the most vulnerable groups (e.g., the poor, elderly, and disabled) have by no means been resolved.

Because the use of digital media is reliant upon ICT, and because such a large portion of the extant research focuses on the digital divide, we find it is essential to explore ICT use among nonmainstream populations as a foreground into a more detailed discussion about the ways in which nonmainstream

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