

Book Review: Digital Renaissance: What Data and Economics Tell Us about the Future of Popular Culture by Joel Waldfogel

Michael Tomaselli

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Joel Waldfogel. *Digital Renaissance: What Data and Economics Tell Us about the Future of Popular Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 321 pages. Paperback, \$18.95.

In 2018, Joel Waldfogel published *Digital Renaissance: What Data and Economics Tell Us about the Future of Popular Culture*. The University of Minnesota Applied Economics specialist centers his work around the conceptual debate of “quantity versus quality” when it comes to digital media. The author carefully examines how the creative industries, as he describes them, are facing a crisis through the ease of media creation and consumption. Waldfogel carefully constructs a seemingly multifaceted approach to his solution to the crisis caused by mass digitization of media. On the first level, the work is a response to the contemporary shift towards digitization as seen in his first chapter, *The Creative Industries: Risky, Expensive, and Worth Preserving* (p.1-27). On a deeper level Waldfogel argues that society should not be worried about the media companies, they will shift with society or be replaced. The center of the conversation should be the media consumers instead. *Digital Renaissance* is very much an anticipatory work, highlighting how the proverbial dominoes in the framework can fall to make changes in how media is presented. Like any speculative work, success is not guaranteed. While media has changed quickly since the work was published, the context of 2018 allows for the to be framed correctly to add to a multi-threaded understanding of cultural processes.

In order to accomplish these goals, Waldfogel sets his work into two phases. The first of which defines the perceived crisis as being caused by the overabundance of media circulating. One of the consequences of this is the threat to revenue caused by both digital piracy and the ease of the process to self-publish media (p.4). The author then elaborates on the argument by giving thorough surveys of industries from music, movies, television, books, and photography.

The work ends the first phase responding to the state of academic discourse, emphasizing the value of the media consumer in this scenario. The second part of *Digital Renaissance* focuses on how differently the rise in digitization can be perceived and potential problems that it can face, such as intellectual gatekeepers (p.243). Waldfogel ends his work by reinforcing how the rise in digitization should be perceived, either as crisis or renaissance (p.254). This allows the reader to be brought full circle, highlighting the importance of the work.

There are a few levels in which to judge Waldfogel's *Digital Renaissance*. As a definitive understanding of how economic practices motivating media production show an implicit value on specific cultural goods? No. As Waldfogel leans into his Economics knowledge, the author misses out on an opportunity to be more holistic by demonstrating that economic practices are not the only means of defining value in culture. However, Waldfogel weaves in a deeper relevance of his work by emphasizing the media consumers over the producers in cultural media. The work is best suited to bolster understanding of the subject by weaving this nuance into an established base.

From the lens of 2021, we have seen media change almost faster than we can consume it in the last 3 years since the work was published. Yet, that does not diminish the value or contributions Waldfogel made by producing *Digital Renaissance*. Time may highlight that *Digital Renaissance* should be taken as a single part of the larger being of cultural exchange and media production, but the core of Waldfogel's work is still a valid means to steer the conversation to the media consumers rather than producers.

Michael Tomaselli, MA
Adjunct History Instructor
Cape Fear Community College
Wilmington, North Carolina