Chapter 17
The Appification of Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Appification represents the rapid movement of digital tools and media from a Web-based platform to mobile apps. While appification makes the former Web-based tools and apps more accessible, and improves users’ quality of life, it also undermines traditional literacy skills and practices associated with print literacies. After defining appification and presenting examples, the chapter explores how appification impacts literacy in the broader society and critiques how schools, via standards, are adapting to the broader appification. Apps and appification play a significant role in changing globally what is meant by literacy. Yet, in the US, schools and educational policy are not keeping up with the rapid transition. Although schools are increasingly embracing the idea of apps and portable devices like tablets, there is little systematic connection between using the new technologies in schools and improving literacy required to be proficient in the app-o-verse.

There are currently about 1.2 million apps in Apple’s App Store with a total of 75 billion downloads to date, putting it neck and neck with Google Play (Perez, 2014). By the year 2016, it is estimated that over 196 million smart phones will be in use in the US, and this number should rise to 220 million by 2018 (Statista, 2014). Worldwide, there are 1.75 billion smartphone users (eMarketer, 2014). App use and downloads of apps are dramatically increasing. It is projected that app downloads by 2017 will hit between 200-270 billion—up from about 200 billion in 2013 (Salz, 2014).

App does not seem significant enough to be a word because it is only part of the word application—yet it is now such an important word that it vied for the recognition of word of the year and won that honor in the 2010 competition by the American Dialect Society (2011). Appification does not refer merely to the proliferation of apps or putting more app icons on your smartphone. Rather, it refers to a fundamental shift in how we access and use information and media, specifically how we are moving from using the Web as a vast information server by the internet as a “flow

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medium” (Kosner, 2012). The Web, rather than being the primary access interface, is increasingly becoming the back-end service for apps. Technicians and programmers have made the distinction between native apps and web apps. Native apps are programs that run on a mobile device’s operating system; they are written specifically for a device and reside on the device. All of those apps that need space in the mobile device memory and run locally on the device are native apps. Web apps, as the name states, are apps that are internet-enabled and dependent and can be accessed via a device browser. Web apps automate web sites functions. A well-known example one of these is the app for Google Maps. To users, whether appification relies on the Internet or on local programming, is not so noticeable in terms of the app interface; but the functions of some apps are entirely dependent on a Internet. A web app like Hootsuite, which manages ones social media, is clearly a web app because it is totally dependent on the Internet-based social networks. But the mobile app further automates the process.

When average users acquire apps through an app store, they do not connect the term back to applications or the more anachronistic notion of apps as little programs. People still ask, “What exactly are apps?” and are told that they are like programs, like tools; they are ways of automating practical approaches to meet a particular need or interest or just to facilitate fun. These users are not necessarily aware that some app programs are ways of consolidating existing web apps, unless they use both the web app in the browser and in a mobile app. Google maps is an example. Each app affords both positive and negative affordances in terms of traditional literacy practices.

In this chapter we examine the impact of digital media, in the form of apps, on literacy by looking applications in general, then how it is related to schooled literacy; and, finally, by bridging it with how appification is impacting literacy in the broader society. Apps, like other digital tools, are cast mostly in a positive light. But for every positive affordance, there is an equal, and usually necessary, negative affordance—what James Gibson (1986), who coined the term “affordance,” calls the “good or ill” aspect of affordances.

At the time of this writing, Apple Watch was the newest app device. The Apple Watch affords extreme portability; it also affords such a small display that it cannot communicate as much print-based information per screen as an iPhone or iPod Touch. Apple Watch is the most publicized entry in the expanding classes of wearable devices. As such, it promises to afford a unique synergy that goes with being part of one’s person; it could redefine our habitus. With it, we are not inconvenienced by actually having to reach into a pocket to pull out such a large and inconvenient device as a smartphone. A short while ago, smartphones were viewed as svelte, sleek, and shiny. With the arrival of Apple Watch smartphones may eventually become positioned as sometimes necessary but somewhat unwieldy, as large, and not so accessible compared to the Watch. Last week a smartphone was viewed as much more portable; now, with Apple Watch, an iPad mini might seem a gargantuan digital dinosaur. And so it goes with applications and their relation to mobility.

Apple Watch will introduce novel literate practices not directly linked to the traditional practices like reading words embedded in syntactic structures. Apple Watch will afford direct contact and synchronicity with everything through very small texts and pictures; Watch users will be able to send new kinds of semiotic messages. With the Watch, the reason reading texts will be downplayed in relation to other visuals, and sensors and haptic feedback, is that the Watch’s screen is—well, the size of a watch screen—because that is what we expect a watch screen to be. If Apple Watch just displayed chronometrical information with hands or digital time, it would fail to meet the life-changing expectation of previous Apple devices. But Apple Watch is much more; it is a key exemplar of appification and what to expect as the process of appification continues. Below