

Reviews

Edwin Diamond and Robert A. Silverman, *Wlzite House to Your House: Media Politics in Virtual America* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995). 168 pp.

Something terrible is happening to American society; something powerful yet essentially wrong. Electronic populism is the culprit; a style of participatory deinocracy which gives only an illusion of reality. What is real becomes "virtual reality," a *condition resembling truth but not truth itself*.

This is the premise of *Wlzite House to Your House: Media and Politics in Virtual America*. It is a pessimistic look at the unintentional consequences of new media technologies, including fiber optic cameras and portable uplinks, cellular telephones, faxes, modems and home computers linked to the Internet and coinmercial online services.

The technology itself, of course, is not the problem. At issue here is the *content* of the electronically communicated inessage. Journalism and entertainment have become confused. Polling and group-sampling techniques have gone into the service of political campaign "handlers" and "spin doctors," the professional amoral manipulators who know how to create this virtual culture by giving the participants the appearance of meeting their wants. Talk-shows on both radio and TV give the illusion of substantial dialogue, yet instead of enlightening or educating the public, the information is often inaccurate or over-simplified to the point of distortion. Accuracy and truth have become casualties in this war for peoples' attention.

This is not what we expected. Marshall McLuhan predicted a global village and we applauded the idea. Thirty years ago, we saw the new electronic technologies as a means to create commiinity and to liberate us from elitist, back room politics. "Partisans of this liberation," write Diamond and Silverman, "pictured the public as an active participant in the electoral process. Not only was the audience/ citizen receiving information, but individuals were able to respond (in some cases immediately), contributing their own concerns to the electronic dialogue and bringing politics back to the people." This was the optimistic interpretation. The actual result, however, has been just the opposite. The multiplicity of channels on cable has resulted in niche programming, "narrowcasting" to selected audiences with specific interests. More important, the blending of journalism and entertainment has resulted in misinformation and half truths. "The technological tail is wagging the editorial dog," says ABC's *Nightline* journalist, Ted Koppel.

Two examples of this are radio talk shows and entertainers such as Larry King who appear to be journalists. Talk radio has blanketed America and, as Diamond and Silverman say, "modern communications technologies have placed a bizarre form of political power in the hands of these talk show personalities and call-in hosts." Some media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh are broadcast nationally on both radio and television, covering 99 per cent of the country. The idea behind talk radio is to give access to the media by the ordinary person. The problem, however, is everyone who picks up the phone has equal status. Energy is compelling and listeners often

confuse passion with reason "In the interactive world" Diamond and Silverman say, "everyone is encouraged to sound off; but some people have little substance to communicate on some subjects" The result is partial truths, misinformation and the perpetuation of myths Talk show hosts like Larry King merely interview They do not confront

It is this concern which will interest academics, journalists and journalism teachers With ten chapters of detailed evidence, the authors worry about the future of traditional journalism "The media ranks of the 1990s," write Diamond and Silverman, "threaten to slide back down the evolutionary chain" Mainstream journalism defined itself by applying the test of truth to stories, they remind us Today journalistic standards are rapidly disappearing "Most journalists of a certain age," they write, "sense that they and their audience have entered the new territory of Virtual America The old rules they grew up with have changed and familiar markers moved" Why bother teaching the importance of a substantive follow-up question, we might ask, when people like Ross Perot will make certain that no more than one question is allowed? The really bad news, Diamond and Silverman assert, is how the advance of new-media technologies over the next few years "promises the final meltdown of standards across the board" The implications of this are obvious and terrible A democracy depends on truthful information and unless this ethic is protected and practiced, American society could experience a threat to its internal security far greater than that which she would ever experience from external sources

Diamond and Silverman guide the reader through every aspect of this Virtual America Each chapter has a theme with supporting research from the News Study Group in the department of journalism at New York University There are good interpretations of Bill Clinton's 1992 "success," corresponding all too well to the fictional account of a presidential primary campaign in *Primary Colors* by *Newsweek* journalist, Joe Klein Equally rich are interpretations of H Ross Perot's perpetual campaign, Newt Gingrich's popularity and the hatred of some (mostly white, male) Americans for Hillary Rodham Clinton We also get an introduction to the role of such *media specialists* as Roger Ailes, producer/entertainer/journalist, now head of NBC's two cable networks, the established CNBC and the new America's Talking network We get a penetrating analysis of why Clinton's health care reform failed and a dazzling description of how new digital-communication technology theoretically makes possible 100 plus channel systems by the end of this year

White House to Your House is an important and timely description of electronic populism's impact on American culture The book's principal flaw, however, is the authors' failure to address the motivations behind this phenomenon They hint at the raw commercialism of the enterprise They tell us that MTV is one long commercial for consumerism and that Rush Limbaugh earned \$2 million a year in the first years of the Clinton administration But they fail to discuss the connection conservative Americans make between the First Amendment (to the US Constitution) and the belief that an unregulated market economy is appropriate to the air waves Unlike in Europe where the tax supported public service concept has been dominant, broadcasters in America have a license to make money

There was a time when broadcasters could lose their licenses if they failed to present both sides of controversial issues The Fairness Doctrine ended with Reagan

under lobbying pressure from the National Broadcasters Association who argued that a multiplicity of channels would assure a full spectrum of opinion. Behind their high-minded talk of the empowering qualities of interactive ventures was a familiar market-driven business plan. Since *laissez-faire* capitalism has always been the ideology of the Right, the new electronic populism has no critics inside its ranks. There is nobody to point out the obvious flaw in their reasoning and the fundamental mistake in their assumptions: *a multiplicity of channels does not guarantee an informed electorate*. Put in another way, the essential details of boiling but important issues do not get addressed in electronic populism. Broadcasters motivated by capital gain cannot risk boiling their audience with essential details and critical analysis.

Secondly, the motivation behind the populists' discontent and free floating anger is worth considering. The talkers' world, as Diamond and Silverman tell us, is anti-government, anti tax and anti-*them*. Listeners can fill in their own *them*: secularists, welfare mothers, tax-and-spenders, criminals, immigrants, African-Americans, women and gays who seek "special rights." The issues of these "real Americans," the authors say, are those embraced by the conservative Right: limited government, family values, peace through strength, "growth" over "apocalyptic environmentalism." But this simply begs the question. Why is there so much anger and discontent among these "real Americans?" Why do only 50% of the electorate bother to vote? The answer is in the failure of established institutions to deliver what "real Americans" have come to expect: justice, peace, security and opportunities for economic fulfillment. Diamond and Silverman know this, of course, and this is why they dislike this "virtual America." They know that without professional information retrieval and dissemination (i.e., *journalism*), the truth about America's failed institutions will never become a part of a real, i.e., truthful dialogue.

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Ole O. Moen and Leif Magne Lervik (eds), *Frontiers and Visions: A Casebook in American Civilization Studies* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996) ISBN: 82-00-22759-5; 307 pp; NOK 248; US\$ 36.00, UK£ 26.

To read the fifteen essays in this collection is to have hope for the future because of the talents and accomplishments of the many young scholars represented, as well as to have a clearer integration of America's past and present.

Dr. Ole O. Moen of the University of Oslo was the instructor for two seminars in the previous decade that stimulated these worthy casebook essays. Those courses were: 'Frontier and Region: The American West as Fact, Fiction and Force,' and 'Rights Under the Constitution: The U.S. Supreme Court and Civil Rights and Liberties Since World War Two.' Together with Mr Lervik, Dr. Moen has put together a collection with an accurate sub-title: *a casebook*. Like any casebook, it contains the facts (and I believe you may depend upon their accuracy).

The book is a challenge, a dare to the American Studies community, especially in the Nordic countries. The editors make no extravagant claims about the quality of

these master's degree chapters. They admit to 'obvious weaknesses and limitations' to indicate that this is 'not a "polished" product for prestige purposes,' and that 'central thesis chapters have been revised and adapted but not completely rewritten.'

Surely they are too modest, but this is a casebook, which suggests strongly that the reader creates his or her own interpretation. Certainly most of the authors display their points of view, but that is part of the challenge. Do you (or your advanced students?) agree with their conclusions or not?

That is the first part of the challenge. The second is to summon graduate students and their instructors elsewhere to do better. They can improve their analytical skills as well as their knowledge by using this text precisely for the purposes the editors announce: this is a *casebook*.

Happily granting the first two challenges, I find the most pleasing dare is that here we have a useful graduate student summation of their work in *American Civilization*. May it be one of the first flowers in tomorrow's abundant AmCiv garden in the Nordic countries.

The cases are implied by the titles of the three sections of the book, each of which contains five essays. The first is 'The Pioneers: Dreams and Realities on the Far Frontier,' and then there is an understandable Olympian long jump to the other two: 'Bearing the Torch: Visions and Rights in Modern America' and 'The Guardian of the Republic: The Supreme Court and the Living Constitution,' a pair that nests neatly together.

Like a student piano recital, at the end of the program the maestros appear. Leif Magne Lervik's chapter on the fourth amendment to the Constitution (relating to unreasonable search and seizure) is clearly relevant now as the United States tries to achieve the nearly impossible balancing act between a secure society and one which protects the rights of even the most humble, disadvantaged, or even downright loathsome.

Fittingly, the professor is on stage only in the concluding act, although it is clear that his hand has guided the production since the 1980s. Here Ole Moen takes the risk of offending nearly everyone as he examines the conundrum expressed in his title, 'Equal Protection or Special Protection? The Supreme Court and Women's Rights.' In the end, his arguments are so sound that few will be offended and most will be enlightened, especially by his explanation of special protection.

So come to the table set by Messrs. Moen and Lervik, and sample what pleases you (and perhaps tell the cook later what you liked). Mormons and mountain men, California in the 1840s and the Oregon Trail, African-American problems in plentitude, the 1960s, the President and the press, and the Supreme Court on abortion, affirmative action, the death penalty, and a good deal more.

It is a most unusual banquet, fifteen American civilization scholars from Norway between the covers of one book. They offer a tasty feast.

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Elsebeth Hurup (ed), *The Lost Decade: America in the Seventies* (Aarhus: University of Aarhus Press, 1996) ISBN: 87 7288 377 4; 217 pp; DKK 148

Like the decade of the 1970s, this anthology of articles about American society in the seventies (mainly) is a composite spanning wide. The ten articles address subjects ranging from American foreign policy in the Nixon-Carter years to changing attitudes toward national parks, the rise of community-oriented television, and the prevailing trends in popular music and film. Although hardly a thoroughly unified work, it is far from fragmentary and does give the reader an almost visceral sense of the seventies.

In 'That's What I Like About the South: Changing Images of the South in the 1970s,' John G. Cawelti argues the thesis that in the 1970s the myth of the South as a repository of traditional American values sought to replace the traditional image of the South as a tragic exemplar. Cawelti shows how the reality of the emerging Sun Belt south worked to undermine this attempt to make the region a stronghold of traditional Americanism.

In 'Declension and renewal: New England's shifting Moods in the 1970s,' David E. Nye depicts a Frost Belt region in decline, caught in the aftermath of the oil embargo, and chastened in mood and expectations. Hanging on to its waning cultural and educational hegemony, the region was going through a painful period of sobering readjustment, accepting its place as a region rather than as a microcosm of the nation.

'Jimmy Carter and America: Memory/Hope versus Nostalgia/Optimism' by Charles Bussey is positive almost to the point of panegyric in its reevaluation of Carter's stature as president as well as his character and personality. However, Bussey builds a strong case for his main point – that Carter was preaching a hopeful realism which the people wanted: nostalgia and escapism – and he is persuasive in his insistence on Carter's unadulterated moral integrity.

Dale Carter perceives less of a break between the Carter and the Nixon administrations, particularly as far as foreign policy is concerned. Actually, in 'The Crooked Path: Continuity and Change in American Foreign Policy, 1968-1981,' Carter sees more continuity than change. He argues that his namesake extended rather than tried to undo his predecessor's line in foreign economic policy, leaning heavily on the proponents of Trilateralism in the upkeep of Nixon's policy in the economic field.

On the domestic scene, Robert Matej Bednar sees a fundamental change in Americans' attitude toward their natural environs as reflected in their perception of the National Parks. 'Seaching for an Old Faithful America: National Park Tourism in the 1970s,' depicts a struggle between 'tourists' and 'naturalists' – between developers and preservationists – over the meaning of the natural parks in American life. To what extent the national parks were to be inside or outside modern American society.

Robert Abzug's 'Love and Will: Rollo May and the Seventies,' represents an internalization of the same crisis. He sees the popularity of May's book in mid-decade as an illustration of the increasing poverty of reference experienced by Americans in the 1970s and of the harrowing experiences the nation was going through.

Douglas T. Miller's 'Sixties Activism in the "Me Decade"' dismisses the common assumption that there is a sharp dichotomy between 'the political sixties and the personalized seventies.' He also takes issue with many other popular notions about glaring contrasts between these two decades, seeing considerable continuity and overlap.

He argues that the 1960s left a legacy of activism which extended far beyond the 1970s, debunking the idea of a general defection from the radical agenda (the Jellie Rubin syndrome) and pointing to the continued presence of the generation of the New Left and the Counterculture in American political life

Nancy Graham Holm depicts the rise of community-oriented commercial television in the seventies, exemplified by KTVU in the San Francisco Bay Area as a vanguard model of this trend, in "Power to the People" through Television Community Access in a Commercial System. Drawing on personal experience, she shows the development of a user-oriented public service within the commercial network system which leaned heavily on the Fairness Doctrine (which was to be abolished during the Reagan eighties)

Henrik Bødker's 'Popular Music into the Seventies: From Rock to Pop to Punk' offers a theoretical analysis of the development of popular music in the decade, underscoring the distinction between performers and audience. In so doing, Bødker questions the conventional wisdom that the pop music of the 1970s was lacking in authenticity, arguing that the alleged 'waning of authenticity' that seemed to take place in the field of popular music at the time should be seen in the context of certain generational, attitudinal, and institutional changes

In her anchor article, the editor of the collection, Elsebeth Hurup, focuses on Hollywood's contribution 'Images of the Past, Present and Future: Hollywood's Portraits of Bicentennial America'. She argues that the films of the decade reflected America's severe identity crisis. Using male protagonists as cases in point, she sees John Wayne's 'The Shootist' (1969) as the end of the lone hero who has outlived his time and Clint Eastwood's 'The Outlaw Josey Wales' as a somewhat nostalgic but nonetheless 'socialized' loner hero. She extends this analytical line through 'Taxi Driver' to 'Logan's Run,' seeing the latter as a transition to the period of nostalgia and 'feel-good' science fiction of the late seventies, paving the way for the eighties of Reaganism

These sketchy comments should suffice to show that this is a volume that 'throws a wide net'. Some of the essays allow the seventies to slip out of focus at times – Cawelti's textual analysis of Faulkner's early writing being a case in point – but this is a minor point of criticism. In general, this is a volume which defends its place as a rich commentary on this supposedly bland decade, keeping those years in focus

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the book is that its content by and large belies its title. Most articles show quite convincingly that the 70s were not a mere void sandwiched between the youthful revolt of the 1960s and the patriotic gore of the 1980s. Although a decade in transition in a number of ways – an important link between the past and the future – it was nonetheless an entity in its own right with its own agenda. This collection of essays establishes that fact beyond a reasonable doubt, to use a frequently used phrase in the USA of the 90s

Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons, Michael Menser, with Jennifer Rich, *Technoscience and Cyberculture* (NY: Routledge, 1996)

This book appears tailor-made to fan the flames of physicist Alan Sokal's recently sensationalized and polarizing assault on the pretensions of postmodern cultural studies of science, which he launched by duping the editors of *Social Text* into publishing a bogus article written in pomo speak (or Routledge ese?) The Sokal affair directly concerns scholars of American Studies and cultural historians of technology – many of whom were debating the shortcomings and excesses of cultural studies long before Sokal, and just as many of whom consider themselves to be "cultural studies-types," both with good reason. The latter group no doubt will continue to follow and critically appropriate cultural studies scholarship "post Sokal," but the controversy has given many of the former an excuse to tune out what they consider the blare of cultural studies altogether. This is unfortunate, since the field is capable of producing rich methodological insights and important theoretical advances. But the majority of essays in *Technoscience and Cyberculture* do neither. Some of them are so riddled with jargon, imprecision, and namedropping that they unintentionally parody a certain kind of cultural studies approach to science and technology better than Professor Sokal ever could have on purpose.

The loosely interrelated and uneven collection of papers, originally delivered during a conference at the Center for Cultural Studies at CUNY in the spring of 1994, seeks to "implicate" the intersection of culture, science, and technology in a variety of "sites" – among them high energy physics, the new new math, the technologies of war and the environmental policies of the military industrial complex, the evolution of capitalism, bioethics, literary production, photography, and architecture. Toward this end, co-editors Stanley Aronowitz and Michael Menser offer an introductory manifesto for the study of science and technology. Actually, they spend less time talking about either than they do waxing romantic about cultural studies itself, which they define as "the transformation of social and cultural knowledge in the wake of an epochal shift in the character of life and thought whose origins and contours we only dimly perceive" [Wow! These folks are doing something REALLY IMPORTANT!] Cultural studies "has no first principles, fixed means, or established ends," the authors insist enthusiastically in terms that become too familiar and self-congratulatory to advance methodological discussions any further. "The method of cultural studies are transgressive and interventionist (as opposed to disciplinary or "com (de)part mentalized"), largely because of the space in which they are employed." That space is "the margins" because cultural studies starts "in the in-between of things," it inhabits a "borderland," which the authors also call "a space not striated (com(de)part mentalized) by fenced-in flows," or in even more grandiloquent terms, "an imperfect and impure (heterogeneous) patchwork which smooths out a space so that those who choose to forgo the pseudosacredness of the disciplinary "pieces" may come and go" [p. 17].

For all their passionately repetitive talk about cultural studies, Aronowitz and Menser offer no such lengthy definition of science or technology. On one level, this omission is justified by their discussion of how culture, science, and technology are too inextricably bound together to anesthetize and dissect. They cogently point out

the problem of establishing any critical footing outside the triad of culture/science/technology from which to construct a definition of any of the three. Indeed, one of the values of the cultural studies approach is to continually remind scholars of any disciplinary ill of this recurring methodological caveat. But Raymond Williams already covered this ground back in the 1970s in books like *Marxism and Literature* and essays like "Culture is Material." In the process he articulated a complex understanding of culture, ideology, and determination that, updated with deeper understandings of gender, ethnic identity, and difference offered by cultural studies itself, can provide the working basis for exciting radical scholarship.

Rather than define either determination or science, however, Mensor and Aronowitz seem to resent both on the basis of certain gross generalizations. In contradistinction to certain (unnamed) practitioners of the new social study of science, they maintain that the "discursive ideological role of "Big Science" is more than just one cultural practice among others," because of its "social, cultural, and politically privileged relation to what is "true" and "universal." While Big Science permeates everything and slivies false notions of universal truth down everyone's throat, they add, it *determines* nothing, since "there is no determinism anywhere, it is by determination we signify a one-to-one correspondence between the causal agent and its effects." On the basis of this simplistic caricature of determination which not even many of us still compartmentalized in traditional disciplines would care to defend, Mensor and Aronowitz reject the notion of causality altogether, and propose in its place a "theory of complexity, of complications and implications rather than determinate sequences of causes and effects." They explain further, "to complicate is to be transgressive, to "mix things up," to *ontologically* complicate things so as to break down "disciplinary" boundaries which have abstractly extracted and compartmentalized [*that word again!*] to such a degree that the objects of study have been "emptied out," and so on [p. 8].

The editors literally "inscribe" themselves as the academic equivalent of cyberspace anti-heroes in a William Gibson novel, scholarly rebels living day by day on the post-industrial lam, bucking the crypto-ideologue establishment, breaking all the rules, and forswearing the facile comforts offered by "truth," "objectivity," or established disciplines and departments within the academy (although Mensor and Aronowitz appear perfectly happy to accept that "truth" if it confirms their method, since they note that "even mathematics has accepted "inexactness" as sometimes close to *the way things really are*" [p. 9, emphasis added]). Most of the contributors to *Technoscience and Cyberculture* strike some variation of this stylish pose. This emphasis on style becomes most noticeable when contrasted with the straightforward (and therefore anomalous) contributions to the volume by Philip Boyle and Ralph Trottier, a medical ethicist and a professor of pharmacology, respectively. Trottier, for example, earnestly reveals that the state of Georgia's genetic testing program for newborns, called "Babies Can't Wait," seeks to work with families to identify potential developmental deficiencies early, but that the implementation of the program raises certain questions of distributive justice. Helpful information to some, but not very flashy compared to co-editor Michael Mensor's "Becoming Heterarch: On Technocultural Theory, Minor Science, and the Production of Space." Mensor argues that "the state" – Georgia? Burundi? Denmark? which he does not say – is what Deleuze and Guattari call "an apparatus of capture" that deploys "*assemblages*" of technology according to a particu-

lar "arché," and that the "gravitas" it thereby exerts over bodies is best understood through a new critical-political ontology that, quoting D&G again, "defines social formations by *machinic processes* and not by modes of production (*these on the contrary depend on the processes*)" (p 298]

Only a few, very gifted scholars can pull off the marriage of substantive scholarship and postmodern style in order to convey complex thoughts successfully – Andrew Ross sometimes seems like one of these, although his article in this volume, "Earth to Goie, Earth to Gore," which discusses the vice-president's repressively liberal policies on the environment and the internet, does not swagger with the clever panache of some of his other writings. Arthur Kroker also may be one, but it is difficult to tell. His neo-Baudrillardian revision of Marxist categories for the internet age, included here and entitled "Virtual Capitalism," is so densely written and so full of new jargon and portentous pronouncements that it demands to be deciphered on its own difficult terms. The problem is, this would take an enormous investment of time that might or might not turn out to be worth it. "Just when we thought that the age of European colonialism had finally come to an end," Kroker declares for example, "suddenly we are copied into the second age of virtual colonialism – a reinvigorated recolonization of planetary reality that reduces human and nonhuman matter to a spreading wake of a cosmic dust trail in the deepest space of the blazing coin of virtual capitalism" [p 178]

Other contributors experiment with style in more accessible ways. In "When Eliza Doolittle Studies 'emy 'iggins," Sharon Trawick adopts a confessional voice to talk about her ethnographic studies of high energy physicists. Her stories are fascinating, but she often lapses into cultural studies preachiness (to wit "Those who persist in the quest for pure categories, those who persist in the quest for singular generics, those who persist in building analytic Leviatans, are all living in an eighteenth-century European mind" [p 50]) In "Math Fictions," Betina Zolltwei presents her field work on the uneasy reception of the new new math by students in Spanish Harlem in the form of a series of short plays. Gems fall out of the mouths of the "subjects-supposed-to-count," as Zolkowicz calls them, but her own imagined interpolations by "voices from above" and "cultural critics" can get moralistic too.

Solkowicz concludes that using multicultural stories to seduce children into learning math "just won't do." But contributor Peter Lamborn Wilson insists that all child seduction is not necessarily so bad (I am not making this up). In his essay on "Boundary Violations" (he's a big supporter) Wilson excoriates the American Psychiatric Association for using that term to condemn child abuse in such a way as to "regard the child as an erotic blank, incapable of any authentic con-sensuality" [222]. He continues

The metaphor of AIDS has been a godsend to crypto-ideologues like the APA, who can make use of its semantic effluvia in terms like "boundary violation" to hint obliquely at the underlying agenda of their therapeutic control paradigm – that is, to erase the concept of "childhood desire," and replace it with the concept "abuse." If all sex is dirty and causes death, then everyone must be "protected." Children here serve as metaphors for "caveyone." To "protect children" is to protect the spiritual values of civilization against the threat of desire, the otherness of

the body.... Of course the APA does not believe in UFOs, but quite clearly it does believe that pleasure is evil.

Wilson certainly has a few chips on his shoulder, but regardless of the editors' professed support for transgression and diversity, they would have been wiser not to publish his libertine rant. His porno-Joseph Campbell babble about how the "Omnivorous Ogre and the Giant's Bride exercise an almost universal "archetypal" appeal because they express certain basics of the body" certainly contradicts their own animus against the evils of universals. Wilson's article is more nonsensical, and certainly more offensive and ill-considered, than Alan Sokal's article in *Social Text*. The cultural studies camp should be happy that most physicists and newspaper reporters won't bother to read it. American studies scholars need not bother either.

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