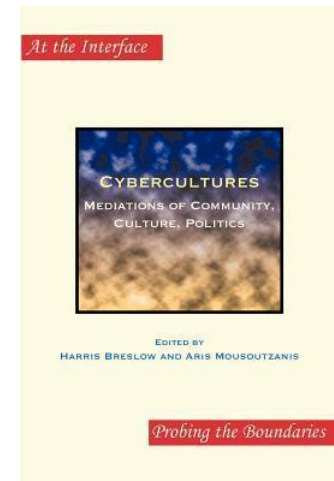


Harris Breslow and Aris Mousoutzanis, **Cybercultures: Mediations of Community, Culture, Politics**, Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2012, 188 pp., \$61.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Emmanuel Ngwainmbi
Mid-Atlantic Christian University

A reference text published by Rodopi Press—an independent academic publishing house with a multilingual title list that includes works in German, French, and Spanish—is just what publics interested in cyber-mediated communication want. This is because the 188-page work edited by Harris Breslow and Aris Mousoutzanis, **Cybercultures: Mediations of Community, Culture, Politics**, examines the impact of cybercultures on contemporary interpretations that include history, the imagination, political foreplay, community participation, creativity, rhetoric, language, meaning, and bodily experiences. The essays analyze the role of digital media and online cultures in understanding today’s society.



To contextualize the content of this volume, a working definition of cyberculture and a review of its scholarship are required. Cyberculture can be defined invariably as a set of social and business traits developed and values practiced through the continued use of computers. The habits include but are not limited to knowledge sharing, business transactions, and entertainment. New patterns of behavior emerge with innovations in information technology for different social groups thereby creating new communities. Books with similar content include *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1994); *The New Media Reader* (2003); and *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (2009). However, these titles do not analyze the relationship between cyberspace communication and cultural and political change with the same depth as the authors do in *Cybercultures*.

Knowledge of cyberculture has expanded over the last 13 years, partitioned in three stages. According to David Silver (2000),

[T]he first stage, *popular cyberculture*, is marked by its journalistic origins and characterized by its descriptive nature, limited dualism, and use of the Internet-as-frontier metaphor. The second stage, *cyberculture studies*, focuses largely on virtual communities and online identities and benefits from an influx of academic scholars. The third stage, *critical cyberculture studies*, expands the notion of cyberculture to include four areas of study—online interactions, digital discourses, access, and denial of the Internet, and interface design of cyberspace. (Silver, para. 2.)

The third stage explores the intersections and interdependencies between all domains. Silver (2000) points out that the examination of cyberculture started in the early 1990s, when cultural critics

first began writing stories about the Internet, cyberspace, and the "information superhighway" (para. 3) for major American newspapers and magazines.

Attention to the politicocultural dimensions of cyber-mediated communication gained momentum in the mid-to-late 1990s when academic and commercial presses began publishing monographs, anthologies, and edited volumes on the subject, and scholars increasingly presented more papers and panels at conferences around the world. As some groups of scholars were publishing writings on the social history of cyberculture from 1990–2000 (Gauntlet, 2000), others focused on ethnocultural aspects (Barber & Tait, 2001) and information technology's effects on community welfare and regional development (Ngwainmbi, 2001, 2004, 2005).

The authors of this volume, attached to some of the better universities in Europe, attempt to give some meaning to the increasingly puzzling nature of cyber communication by presenting cybercultures as cultures with no boundaries. The volume's editors argue that "as digital networks come into contact with various terrains (such as the text, community, body, or state) things that are situated within those terrains (subjectivity, members, subjects, signification) become increasingly fluid at the transversal point of contact" (p. xvi). That brand of logic permeates the book as each author carefully develops and supports a concept in a linear, *pro causa*, sequitur manner.

The book is divided into four parts, excluding a 14-page introduction by the editors. These are "The Nature of Cyberspace" (Part I), "Prosthetic Subjectivity" (Part 2), "Cybercultures and the Public Sphere" (Part 3), and "The Mediatization of Memory" (Part 4).

Part 1, featuring two chapters, describes the significance of cyberspace in today's world. Here the authors analyze cyberspace using well-established rhetorical concepts. Gary Thompson's chapter on electronic transcendentalism sets the tone for the rich narrative and highlights the temperament of the discourse in the book. Thompson rightly argues that "electronic discourse has largely multiplied the number of texts competing for attention" (p. 3) and points out ways in which control over such texts has shifted away from the rhetorical realm to audience application of the channel itself. He presents cyberspace as a visual, verbal, auditory, and interactive medium. The very transcendental nature of cyberspace creates a dichotomy between the notion of community as space with a real location, language, and cultural traditions and the notion of virtual space or "cloakroom community."

In Part 2, which has three chapters, the authors look at creative software and education for creativity, future media platforms for convergence journalism and the human experience with cyberspace. The third chapter by Judith Enriquez, unpretentiously captioned "Bodily Aware in Cyberspace", offers an examination of the body as a construct for understanding society, new media, and ubiquitous computing. The research in this section also focuses on cyberspace, isolated connectivity, mobile learning, capitalism, myth, worldliness, the national community, social networks, and Internet use.

Part 3 examines communities in cyberspace, revealing difficulties in the articulation of the virtual community. It also looks at the Internet as a conduit for political activism.

The last section focuses on conditions for using Internet media resources for remembrance and for achieving specific goals. Using theoretical foundations, one chapter compares Facebook and GayRomeo with less interactive Web 1.0 projects. Another chapter examines the use of video-image texting in digital storytelling, focusing on production, dissemination, and consumption of digital content. Each of the book's 10 chapters contains an abstract, introduction, analysis, conclusion, notes, and bibliography, and 80% of all chapters end with a brief author biography. This juxtaposition facilitates the ability to compare the author's background to the chapter, unlike other reference books that place contributor biographies in the appendix section.

One of the more important chapters is the one written by Daniel Riha, who explores machinima—the real-time 3D computer graphics tool used to create a cinematic production, including video games—as user-created content. While revealing that video game developers have, over the last few years, been paying more attention to machinima, Riha carries out a comparative analysis of some machinima platforms, focusing attention on the video game platform *Half Life 2*.

Some parts of the text are not properly edited, giving the impression there might have been a rush to production. For example, the word "being"—as in "e-being"—is consistently crossed out, appearing this way 36 times within a 10-page narrative (pp. 16–23), which can easily distract the reader. Even if there is some inferred rationale for crossing it out, the author or editors do not explicitly advise the reader accordingly—no justification is given in the abstract or reference section. If the author's intention is to help readers to "better understand cyber-relations, to identify the spatial and temporal configurations of cyberspace which facilitate such relations" (p. 15), the crossing out of "being" in 95% of the narrative creates an intellectual vacuum for others. Footnote 5 (on page 25) explaining the rationale for crossing out "being" should have been part of the narrative, not spatially detached from the logical flow because it is part of contextual meaning in the first half of the paragraph (p. 16). Elsewhere, there is unnecessary use of the definite article "the" on p. xvi, and misplacement of a comma when nothing is being named: "As digital networks, come into contact with various terrains. . ." Such editorial malapropos should not occur in a reference book.

Notes and bibliographies are prepared to give the reader additional information on a topic and provide options to foster inquiry, and author biographies normally serve as accolades for knowledge the authors have shared. Offering too much detail and extensive notes, however, tends to curb the desire for analytical reasoning, hence diminishing the essence of the reference text. Flipping pages back and forth when reading a chapter can impede concentration and eventually hinder the logical articulation of the message an author is aiming to convey. Readers are better served when notes are embedded in the narrative and borrowed ideas are properly paraphrased—but such is not the case with the chapters in this book. To some readers, having 56 endnotes and 47 bibliographic entries as part of a single chapter containing only 18 pages of narrative text might be a way of expanding a reader's scope of knowledge, but to others it can be seen as a sign of scholarly bravura, an overkill. There are just too many sources in the book. This gives the impression that the reader is not logical enough to think or understand the author's narrative. Simply put, it is recommended that a chapter in a reference book contain fewer footnotes and a brief works cited section to allow the reader to choose whether or when to carry out further research on the subject.

The formatting and ink quality in the book leave much to be desired. Lines within the narrative and those in the reference section are uneven, and there is too much spacing between the entries, leaving us wondering whether to question the editors or the production department for a lapse in judgment. The narratives are fraught with notes, which can easily distract the reader.

In terms of subject, the authors deserve credit for having a databank of references on cybercultures. Cyber-mediated communication has become an everyday activity for billions of people around the world; therefore the academic community has exploited intellectual resources in a bid to explain the socioeconomic and cultural significance of these new communication technologies. With more books on this topic flooding publishers' desks and fierce competition among companies to update information technology for mass consumption, as well as an ever-expanding market for such products, publishers of material on cyber communication must be mindful of the quality of research they produce.

People looking for general knowledge on how cyber-mediated communication tools and channels have influenced contemporary culture and politics around the world will not find it in this book. To a limited extent, the individual authors do the field greater service than the editors in their examination of new ways in which cyber communication systems affect community mediation and contemporary politics. The research community would be better served if this book were packaged in the form of an annotated bibliography or a bibliography on cybercultures and mediations of community and politics in contemporary Western societies.

References

- Barber, J. T., & Tait, A. (Eds.). (2001). *The information society & the black community*. Westport, CT:Greenwood Press.
- Gauntlet, D. (Ed.). (2000) *Web studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lister, M., Dovey, J., Giddings, S., Grant, I., & Kelly, K. (2009). *New media: A critical introduction*. New York, NY, Routledge.
- Ngwainmbi, E. K. (2001). Black connections and disconnections in the global information supermarket. In J. T. Barber & A. Tait (Eds.), *The Information Society & the Black Community* (pp. 237–258). Westport, CT:Greenwood Press.
- Ngwainmbi, E. K. (2004, March). Glocalization, local urban culture and change in West Africa: Toward negotiating socioeconomic understanding with foreign companies and international organizations *Columbia University International Affairs Online Journal*. Retrieved from www.ciaonet.org/wps/nge02
- Ngwainmbi, E. K. (2005). NEPAD's development perspective: Bridging the digital divide with good governance. *Journal of Black Studies*, 35(3), 284–309.
- Rheingold, H. (1994). *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Silver, D. (2000). Introducing cyberculture. Looking backwards, looking forward: Cyberculture studies 1990–2000. Retrieved from <http://rccs.usfca.edu/intro.asp>
- Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Montfort, N. (Eds.) (2003). *New media reader*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.