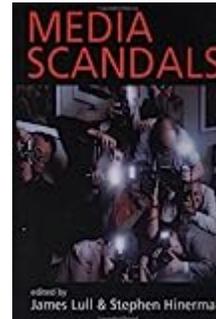


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Lull, Stephen Hinerman, eds. *Media Scandals: Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. x + 259 pp. \$20.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11165-2.



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Published on H-Pol (December, 2001)

Media Scandals is an impressive effort to analyze and describe the prevalence, production, contents, and reception of scandals in the American media. According to the editors, media scandals occur “when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change” (p. 3).

In their introductory chapter, the editors describe ten specific criteria for media scandals. In summary, these are intentional or reckless transgressions by real persons, held responsible for their actions, of social norms reflecting the dominant morality. These acts must be widely circulated and effectively narrativized into a story by the communications media and thereby inspire widespread interest and discussion (p. 13). Of course, as the editors point out, there are differences in people’s and institutions’ susceptibility to scandal; scandals are also polysemic, intertextual, and may be seen by the news media and audiences as varying in their importance (hierarchical). The editors consequently present a typology in which media scandals are listed by type (institutional, star, psychodrama), platform, and key characteristics (p. 20).

The bulk of the book examines media scandals from a diversity of perspectives. Chapters consider scandal,

variously, as a sociological concept, in a global context, analyze its popular appeal, and explore its effects on presidential politics. There are discussions of tabloid TV and press depictions of scandals by sports figures, in religious institutions, in contemporary popular music, and by Michael Jackson. Especially provocative is Herman Gray’s argument that representations of the black social and corporeal body are scandalous. Most informative is Laura Grindstaff’s detailed, ethnographically-based descriptions of how talk-shows produce their scandalous contents.

The book is instructive and entertaining. It would be even better if the editors’ criteria for and arguments about media scandals, as well as their typology, and their claims about effects, were consistently and systematically tested and applied throughout the other chapters in the book. One misses a concluding chapter by the editors summarizing the findings of the other authors and considering the possible-likely effects of media depictions of scandals on the participants, the media, public officials, and public policy. The economic imperatives driving media scandal also deserve more extended discussion than they receive: in comparison to much media content, covering scandals is relatively inexpensive, pundits are widely available to pronounce at little cost, and cable stations have lots of time to fill on their news and

talk shows.

The book was published in 1998, before the media's news and commentary devotion to the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky relationship and, later on, their obsession with Representative Gary Condit, both of which seem to confirm the editors' belief "that modern-day scandal provides a clear and compelling entry point for

criticism of contemporary media in society" (p. 2). The absence of this type of scandal in the media since the September 11, 2001 destruction by terrorists of the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan and the chastening effects of "the war on terrorism" as well as the U.S. attack on the Taliban government of Afghanistan may indicate a significant change or at least modification in media contents. We shall see.

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Citation: David L. Paletz. Review of Lull, James; Hinerman, Stephen, eds., *Media Scandals: Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. December, 2001.

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