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Popular textbooks on political communication tend to be descriptive—they describe how messages are adapted to voting audiences, how political discourses are articulated and contested in various news media, and how political actors shape their public personae. Thomas A. Hollihan takes an explicitly prescriptive approach in *Uncivil Wars: Political Campaigns in a Media Age*. The book concludes with a proposal for “reinventing politics in America” that lists “suggested political reforms” Hollihan would like to see enacted, such as campaign finance reform, free air time provided to candidates, reforms in voting processes, and a “revitalization” of public forums.

Hollihan, who teaches in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, is a former debate coach and rhetorician by training, and the argument he develops in *Uncivil Wars* is compelling, timely, and well-supported. Those who are considering the text for classroom use may find the partisan and rhetorical nature of this text problematic, but the style is a refreshing change for those of us who think that all texts are somehow partisan and rhetorical. By laying his cards on the table, Hollihan invites a lively and substantive critique of political communication and its imperfect machinations in contemporary U.S. culture.

Hollihan grounds his argument in a rhetorical perspective, with the first chapter contending that “Politics Is Communication.” The author states:

Politics is fundamentally a communicative activity. Because people and their governments organize and maintain connections to each other through communication,

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This anthology covers an expansive terrain, ranging from the ideology of the Dilbert comic strip to the treatment of the Vietnam War in recent comic books to sexualized violence in Japanese manga. Ideology, the editors acknowledge, is a notoriously slippery construct. McCallister, Sewell, and Gordon argue for a broad definition, one centered on the ways in which comics challenge or reinforce power differences in society. Issues of social power are interwoven throughout comic books and strips, they argue, even if these issues are rarely foregrounded.

The authors address the question of power in quite distinctive ways. McAllister’s chapter on the political economy of the comic book industry documents the rapid economic concentration that struck the industry in the 1990s, propelled by tightened control of the distribution channels. The result has been heightened emphasis on superhero lines, better suited to corporate synergy and licensing deals than the alternative genres that had been gaining ground. An important contribution to the field, the succeeding chapters (with the notable exception of Matton’s discussion of The ’Nam series) largely ignore the institutional context in which comics are produced and disseminated. Five chapters address the representation of gender and sexuality. Goodman’s analysis of portrayals of the women’s suffrage movement in 214 *Life* cartoons (a humor magazine published from 1833–1936) demonstrates how these cartoons largely reflected arguments prevalent in the antisuffrage movement of the day, depicting suffragists as unattractive, irresponsible, and dangerous. Gender politics are portrayed quite differently in Hong Kong’s first feminist comic, discussed by Wong and Culkanz. Published in the aftermath of the transfer of sovereignty to China, Lee-lee’s comics try to present women’s issues to a general public, challenging (often obliquely) traditional gender roles in comics steeped in Hong Kong’s historic and cultural traditions. The resulting work is sometimes ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations, but the authors argue that they are helping to open a discussion on gender roles during a vital period in Hong Kong’s history and encouraging young women in particular to reflect on their own lives and bodies.
Comic books, or manga, dominate Japanese newsstands, accounting for nearly half of all books and magazines issued. Cooper-Chen examines a weekly manga aimed at young men (in their teens through their 20s) and its portrayal of female characters in three serialized stories featuring sexualized violence, female nudity, and rigidly hierarchical social roles. A brief postscript notes the emergence of an underground manga form in which teenage women react to these misogynist images with amateur comics depicting the love affairs of gay men—an apparently popular genre that would merit further attention.

Sewell examines the portrayal of queer characters in comic strips appearing in mainstream newspapers and in the alternative press. In the mainstream press characters are queer without serious consequence or controversy; in alternative papers queer sexuality is far more central to the story lines, and characters sometimes face serious reprisals. Although mainstream portrayals are typically sympathetic, they are solidly ensconced in the dominant heterosexual experience and the characters readily assimilated.

For a more audience-centered perspective, Franklin turns to the letters columns that close many comic books (themselves constructed discourses, as he notes) to examine reader responses to a wave of comic books featuring coming-out stories of gay and lesbian characters. Several second-string characters came out in 1988, often in understated ways that nonetheless struck a chord with many readers. Most published letters were quite supportive, but reaction was far more mixed when more prominent characters began coming out and their sexuality became more central to the story lines.

Smith examines the melting pot metaphor through the lens of shifting portrayals of Wonder Woman. An immigrant, Wonder Woman nonetheless first appears in star-spangled attire—a ready-made patriot come to America to fight the Axis powers. In 1987, publisher DC Comics attempted a major shift in the Wonder Woman mythos, moving from the assimilationist perspective of the original series to create a character who consciously straddled two very different worlds. However, by 1995 this experiment in multiculturalism was over, and Wonder Woman was once again wholly American.

In other chapters, Superman is examined in Gordon’s overview of nostalgia, myth, and ideology in comic book, film, and televised portrayals of the quintessentially American superhero. Althouse offers a rereading of the British Judge Dredd series, situating it in the sharp social polarization of the Thatcher years and arguing that, despite its seemingly fantastic elements, the series engaged issues central to contemporary debates, offering rich texts open to diverse interpretations. Matton looks at Marvel’s The ‘Nam series, which initially stressed authenticity and realism before veering off (in search of younger, larger audiences) into superhero fantasies. Davis offers a rereading of Dilbert, arguing that the strip does an excellent job of exposing the ideology that keeps the working class from rebelling,
but Davis offers individualist strategies for survival rather than a broader social critique.

The chapters are abundantly illustrated (with translations, where necessary), an essential element of any work that urges a serious examination of ideology in a largely visual medium. The book’s wide range is both its strongest and weakest point. The chapters on British, Chinese, and Japanese comics, and the Australian sensibilities that inform the discussion of Superman, offer an important multicultural dimension. The multifaceted discussion of representations of gender and sexuality similarly offer a rich array of perspectives. But the case for an overarching phenomenon of “comics” is not clear. No doubt, the cartoons that appeared in Life, the comic book magazines that dominate Japanese newsstands, and the comic strips that fill the funny pages of American newspapers have much in common. Certainly the authors make a compelling case that each is drenched in ideology, which indeed (inevitably) suffuses the entire culture. But it is less clear that there is a single comic form, any more than there is a singular newspaper or magazine form. Aimed at fundamentally different audiences and read in very different ways, the comic book and the comic strip might better be understood as distinctive media forms with their own sensibilities and constraints.

In short, this is a useful anthology. Many chapters offer useful, sometimes pioneering, insight and information on material that still does not receive the scholarly attention it deserves. The chapter on the political economy of the U.S. comic book industry is an outstanding example, adding a crucial and too-often overlooked dimension. Ultimately, this reviewer fears that the parts are greater than the whole.


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Marjorie Heins, the author of Sex, Sin, and Blasphemy: A Guide to America’s Censorship Wars (1998) and two other books, has produced her most important and—without exaggeration—a unique book. The director of the Free Expression Policy Project at the National Coalition Against Censorship, Heins has documented the history of what is generically called the “harm to minors” claim—that pornography and even mere profanity or artistic nudes damage children.