



Media Critic Eyes Elections and Sees A Plague on All Our Houses

By Caroline Whalen



Suffering from election fatigue yet? This might make you feel better—or at least not alone.

Marvin Kitman, a veteran media critic at *Newsday* and now a columnist at the *Huffington Post* who has covered every presidential election since 1952, has his pulse on the current race, and finds it way offbeat. On March 12, at the invitation of the Friends of Columbia Libraries, he turned his jaundiced eye on the elections in an amusing, hour-long discussion entitled “The Making of the President 2008: A Case Study in Media Pathology.”

Speaking to a near standing-room audience, Kitman said the symbol of our electoral ineptitude is the undecided voter who, after “36 debates, 41 primaries and caucuses, the longest race in history and perhaps modern civilization, and mega-hours on radio and in the blogosphere,” still can’t make up his mind. “What a phenomenon!” he exclaimed. “These people will decide the election.”

It is television, he said, that has paved the way for today’s indecision in national elections. “Two hundred years after the Revolution we are still not ready for self-governance,” he joked.

He then listed 10 “plagues”—devastating “weapons of mass distraction”—that are emitting a mind-bending fog over the electorate.

Kitman’s top two plagues: the debates. Yes, that is actually one category, but Kitman pronounced debates worthy of two plague slots. The recent debates, he said, are akin to a Nascar race, with “everyone roaring around a track until they run out of gas.”

Earlier debates were tennis-like exchanges that “may be too elitist for the American

people,” he said, with “one man saying my worthy opponent is full of bologna and here’s why,” and his opponent volleying back the same. In today’s state of confusion, he said, the winner is the one “who looks best on TV.”

Otherculpritsderailinganinformedandmindful electorate, according to Kitman, include late-night TV shows like Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, and the vast cash spent on TV advertising. “We lean towards a candidate based on their wad,” he said. “McCain was discounted [earlier in the race] because his coffers were bare.”

Then there are the “pundits and panel” shows, where panelists show off their smarts in order to “awe by their bluster.” And of course, polls, which are inevitably wrong. “Universities would better spend their money on football programs,” he said.

Rounding out the plague list are cable news channels and their “yeller journalism” shows like *Crossfire*, and “Opinionators,” or news people who have replaced reasoned commentators like the late John Chancellor and have “opinions on everything.” And then there are the merely “exhausting” commentators like Chris Matthews, who “pioneered finding Hillary guilty of everything.”

“The electoral system is broken and needs fixing,” concluded Kitman, likening primaries and caucuses to a *Survivor* show, with Fred Thompson after South Carolina and Mike Huckabee after Ohio—“or was it Texas?”—being voted off the island.

Summing up, Kitman quipped, “I always like to end a speech on a positive note, but since I can’t think of any, I’ll give two negatives: If you think things are bad, they will get worse. And good night and good luck. We will need it.”

Tibet

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Barnett’s interest in Tibetan politics was sparked 20 years ago when he witnessed a rare demonstration while on a visit there. “We suddenly became eyewitnesses to an important event, a number of people were shot dead and the Chinese were very keen to hide this information,” he recalled. Tibetans approached members of his group, begging them to get the information to the outside world. “We became important by chance, in that strange way that sometimes happens.”

Barnett and his fellow tourists saw to it that meticulously detailed accounts of events were sent abroad. In 1988, he set up a news and research project in London that collected information from inside Tibet on the political and social conditions, and he worked as a journalist for such outlets as the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong and the BBC.

He joined Columbia in 1998 and set up, with Prof. Madeleine Zelin, the first teaching program in any western university dedicated to modern Tibetan studies.

Will the media scrutiny on Tibet affect how the Chinese handle the crisis? Such a question, Barnett said, “underestimates China and overestimates journalists.” Journalists, and likely the world’s attention, will move on, he said. Chinese authorities, however, will likely clamp down on protesters, as they almost always do. “Closing places off is not difficult, and China can do that if it chooses to,” he said, “But that doesn’t mean there won’t be serious reconsideration of China’s policies behind closed doors.”

And academics like Barnett will try to make sense of it all, as they strive to assist Tibetans themselves. “It’s not in our job descriptions, but there will be lots of human rights work to be done,” he said, “to find people who were arrested and do the back-channel work to help policy people work towards solutions.”

It Takes a (Simulated) Village: New Media Center Reshapes Teaching for the 21st Century

By John H. Tucker

Frank Moretti’s office is full of high-tech gadgetry—picture a 46-inch, High-Definition, wheel-mounted computer screen that responds to human touch. But Moretti, who boasts a Columbia doctorate in history and a 42-year teaching career, insists he’s an academic at heart.

That’s why he defines the University’s massive digital-technology organization, the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL), as an “advocacy center” for Columbia’s faculty members.

Co-directed by Moretti and Maurice Matiz, and supported by a team of 40, CCNMTL seeks to advance the use of new media within the University’s educational programs. Since its 1999 inception, the center has developed 200 Web applications and provided digital services for 3,000 Columbia professors. Computer experts call it one of the leading education-based technology centers in the United States.

“I’ve been involved in educational technology since 1989, and I don’t know of any other center at any major university that has gained the scale of [CCNMTL],” said Luyen Chou, chief product officer for the award-winning software company SchoolNet Inc.

For those poorly versed in techno-speak, the name of the center (and its resulting acronym) can sound daunting, but the term “new media,” explains Moretti, simply means computerized communications. And at CCNMTL, these communications have led to a plethora of

software packages and digital tools that are changing the face of classroom learning.

One such tool is called VITAL (Video Interactions for Teaching and Learning), which allows students to act like film editors, chopping long-running videos into short clips, then embedding them into online essays to support their arguments. In Lee Anne Bell’s teaching seminar at Barnard, students film themselves instructing class, and then embed the video clips into online essays that best highlight their performance. Bell watches the clips and offers feedback.

CCNMTL also specializes in simulations, or visual representations of economic and social situations, which let users manipulate variables and track the effectiveness of their decisions.

“Millennium Village” is a simulation used by Jeffrey Sachs, director of the University’s Earth Institute and key contributor to the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals, in his course on third-world sustainability. In class, Sachs’ students try to ensure the survival of a virtual family living in sub-Saharan Africa by answering real-world questions—“Which crops should I grow?” “Should I collect fish or wood today?” “Where should I allocate my money?” The family’s resources are represented with computer images, and students are able to watch their family survive, struggle, or in some cases die, based on their decisions.

Other CCNMTL simulations are based on time, forcing students to complete assignments on the clock. A journalism student, for example,

Information	Status	Actions
Kodjo Male, Age: 15	Health: 100 Education: 6.0 years (adult)	Set Daily Effort: 12
Fatou Female, Age: 15	Health: 100 Education: 6.0 years (adult)	Set Daily Effort: 12

“The Millennium Village simulation [pictured above] gets students learning about poverty traps and how to avoid them,” says CCNMTL Education Technologist Rob Garfield. Jeffrey Sachs uses the simulation in his course on environmental sustainability, which trains students for work in third-world villages similar to those represented virtually.

might have 30 minutes to file an accident report while being fed continuous information from a variety of virtual sources.

CCNMTL tools also have helped train relief workers, preparing them for future work with HIV/AIDS patients in Asia and Africa. “Our collaboration with CCNMTL has enhanced the quality of our research,” said Susan Witte, associate professor of social work who runs a clinical-trial study testing whether community-based HIV agencies in New York State are ready for multimedia prevention programs.

CCNMTL, which just launched a “global

classroom” with the Earth Institute (featuring weekly online lectures by professors from five continents), has been called a forerunner in what’s become a new-media arms race by top-tier universities to increase their international reach.

But despite its global endeavors, says Moretti, CCNMTL’s chief purpose is to operate as a “tribune” for Columbia’s faculty members, without whom the center could not exist. “We distinguish ourselves because we work aggressively with the faculty as partners, in addition to providing basic services,” he said.