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Social Sciences

Disconnected America: The Consequences of Mass Media in a Narcissistic World
Ed Shane
M.E. Sharpe
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The author, a broadcast adviser and founder of a media consulting firm, has written a small and effective book. Shane explains by posing a riddle: the more information that the media and advertising worlds beam at their audience the less likelihood that the information will mean anything. He calls this state of affairs a “disconnect.” Shane then presents case after case of how this disconnect has affected American society, personal relationships, and education.

Disconnected America is organized into seven chapters: The Illusion of Connectivity, The Attention Economy, The Bias Against Understanding, Seeds of Disconnect, The Community of Me, Context Free, and The End of Mass Media. Quietly and relentlessly the media, with particular attention to the influence of television, is examined for its corrupting power.

Shane’s examples are illuminating. Particularly interesting is his thesis that the continuous live nature of news stations such as CNN are a triumph of passivity over analysis. Since we are witnesses as a story unfolds are we not seeing reality? Shane suggests that the very nature of continuous unanalyzed content makes us unreceptive to analysis. More damning is his belief that television has created a model “higher reality” out of television in which people will bare their souls on talk shows and news stations in return for a chance to be part of “reality.” The illusion of intimacy with actors on television is projected onto the Internet and newer interactive forms of media. The end result, according to Shane, is a culture disconnected from human relationships and unable to relate to actual events.

The author has an expository style of writing that sometimes leads him to overload his text with examples instead of analysis. Still, this somber and thoughtful book suggests a universal cause of American culture’s current short attention span, and should be a good source of discussion and study for its probing of symptoms.

Peter Terry