

Toby Miller, **Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism and Television in a Neoliberal Age**, Temple University Press, 2006, 248 pp, \$22.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Laurie Ouellette  
University of Minnesota

Toby Miller's latest book is an impassioned plea for the ideal of informed citizenship—in theory as well as practice. He makes his case with an archive of meticulous detail, interpreted through the lens of cultural policy and political economy. Focusing on U.S. television, Miller analyzes a fetishistic system in which consumer belonging and cultural narrowcasting substitute for crucial information about “war, subsistence and the environment.” The gains in terms of “cultural citizenship,” he contends, have emerged on the coattails of neoliberal policies and unfathomable public ignorance.

Miller wants to capitalize the “p” in politics by bringing demands for “knowledge of U.S. foreign military policy and corporate/governmental conduct in areas of basic needs and the environment” to bear on theorizing about cultural citizenship. The fundamental right to “know and speak,” he contends, must be rethought in light of deregulation, U.S. militarism and the corporate media, and the “factual deficit” this trio has generated. Miller elegantly maps conceptions of “cultural citizenship” across liberalism, cultural studies, area studies, and other domains, only to demonstrate that none suffice to address commercial television's abject failure to provide adequate reporting on fundamental issues and the U.S.'s “major influences around the globe.”

Miller locates the crux of the problem in unregulated capital's inability to provide such reporting, in the limits of “consumer address for an effective politics,” and in the fallacious notion that market choice guarantees a “free” democracy. While is not an entirely new problem or an entirely new argument, as Miller himself acknowledges, it achieves complexity and a heightened sense of urgency in the hands of a leading cultural studies scholar. Through three case studies, Miller painstakingly documents the conflation of citizenship, “security” and consumption on nonfiction U.S. television, and also suggests what might be done.

Perhaps the most forceful chapter analyzes corporate media coverage of 9/11 and subsequent U.S. invasions. Assembling a remarkable range of sources, including his own experience as an expert commentator, Miller shows how television news--for a combination of institutional, economic and ideological reasons--presents terror as a nationalistic membership device “to the virtual exclusion of social inequality or state-based practices.” Because TV helps ensure a virtual black hole of knowledge, national insecurity can more readily be blamed on outside enemies such as Iraq, while the enormous risks generated by internal threats such as masculinity and local commerce go unobserved.

Unlike most Leftist critics of broadcast deregulation, Miller also takes popular nonfiction seriously as a potential site of cultural citizenship. His chapters on the history and politics of food and weather TV respectively show how potential venues for covering vital human issues such as food safety, biotechnology, labor conditions and the destruction of the environment have been turned over to a niche-

oriented consumerist address that lacks any “meaningful address of the citizen.” Instead of keeping tabs on corporate and state activities and abuses of power, specialized cable channels like the Food Network, the Weather Channel encourage us to govern ourselves through our banal lifestyle choices.

While Miller does convincingly show how this distracts us from Politics, he doesn't say much about how the process of “governing at a distance” actually works through consumerist television, and this may be a disappointment to fans of his earlier work on media citizenship. While I too would prefer to “swim with the minnows, rather than hunt with the fowlers of media regulation,” I also admit to finding his rather celebratory view of liberal cultural reformers (and staunch Cold Warriors) like Newton Minow and Edward R. Murrow a little hard to swallow. But these are minor quibbles in light of the book's major accomplishments. *Cultural Citizenship* is a thought-provoking demonstration of what cultural studies can and should be at its politicized best.