

# **Taking SIDES**

**Clashing Views on  
Controversial Issues in  
Mass Media  
and Society**

**Third Edition**

Alison Alexander  
Jarice Hanson



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Controversial Issues in  
Mass Media and  
Society



Third Edition

Edited, Selected, and with Introductions by

**Alison Alexander**

~~University of Georgia~~

and

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# PREFACE

*Comprehension without critical evaluation is impossible.*

—Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)  
German philosopher

Mass communication is one of the most popular college majors in the country, which perhaps reflects a belief in the importance of communications systems as well as a desire to work within the communications industry. This book, which contains 36 selections, presented in a pro and con format, addresses 18 different controversial issues in mass communications and society. The purpose of this volume, and indeed of any course that deals with the social impact of media, is to create a literate consumer of media—someone who can walk the fine line between a naive acceptance of all media and a cynical disregard for any positive benefits it may offer.

The media today reflect the evolution of a nation that has increasingly seized on the need and desire for more leisure time. Technological developments have increased our range of choices—from the number of broadcast or cable channels we can select to the publications we can read that cater specifically to our individual interests and needs. New and improving technologies allow us to choose when and where to see a film (through the magic of the VCR), to create our preferred acoustical environment (by stereo, CD, or portable headphones), and to communicate over distances instantly (by means of computers and electronic mail). Because these many forms of media extend our capacities to consume media content, the study of mass media and society is the investigation of some of our most common daily activities. Since many of the issues in this volume are often in the news (or even *are* the news!), you may already have opinions on them. We encourage you to read the selections and discuss the issues with an open mind. Even if you do not initially agree with a position or do not even understand how it is possible to make the opposing argument, give it a try. We believe that thinking seriously about mass media is an important goal.

**Plan of the book** This book is primarily designed for students in the introductory course in mass communication (sometimes called introduction to mass media or introduction to mass media and society). The issues are such that they can be easily incorporated into any media course regardless of how it is organized—thematically, chronologically, or by medium. The 36 selections have been taken from a variety of sources—books, journals, magazines, legal briefs, and congressional testimony—and were chosen because of their usefulness in defending a position and for their accessibility to students.

Each issue in this volume has an issue *introduction*, which sets the stage for the debate as it is argued in the YES and NO selections. Each issue concludes with a *postscript* that makes some final observations about the selections, points the way to other questions related to the issue, and offers suggestions for further reading on the issue. The introductions and postscripts do not preempt what is the reader's own task: to achieve a critical and informed view of the issues at stake. In reading an issue and forming your own opinion you should not feel confined to adopt one or the other of the positions presented. Some readers may see important points on both sides of an issue and may construct for themselves a new and creative approach. Such an approach might incorporate the best of both sides, or it might provide an entirely new vantage point for understanding. At the back of the book is a listing of all the *contributors to this volume*, which will give you additional information on the communication scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and media critics whose views are debated here.

**Changes to this edition** This third edition represents a considerable revision. There are ten completely new issues: *Does Talk Radio Provide a Forum for American Values?* (Issue 4); *Does the Mass Media Realistically Portray Images of African Americans?* (Issue 5); *Does Media Coverage of War Promote Understanding of the Issues?* (Issue 7); *Should Congress Regulate Television Violence?* (Issue 9); *Does Television News Reflect a Liberal Bias?* (Issue 12); *Do Newspaper Chains Jeopardize Local Control of Editorial Content?* (Issue 14); *Has the Music Industry Lost Its Creativity?* (Issue 15); *Is Public Television Serving the Public Interest?* (Issue 16); *Will the Information Superhighway Be Accessible to Everyone?* (Issue 17); and *Can Media Technologies Increase Citizen Participation?* (Issue 18). We have changed one issue from the previous edition so completely that we feel we should count it as brand new: *Is Television Harmful for Children?* (Issue 2). In addition, for three more issues, we have retained the issue question but have replaced one or both of the YES and NO selections in order to more sharply focus the debate or to bring the issue up to date: *Are American Values Shaped by the Mass Media?* (Issue 1); *Are Media Messages About Women Improving?* (Issue 3); and *Do Presidential TV Ads Manipulate Voters?* (Issue 11). In all, there are 25 new readings.

**A word to the instructor** An *Instructor's Manual With Test Questions* (multiple-choice and essay) is available through the publisher for the instructor using *Taking Sides* in the classroom. And a general guidebook, *Using Taking Sides in the Classroom*, which discusses methods and techniques for integrating the pro-con approach into any classroom setting, is also available.

**Acknowledgments** We wish to acknowledge the encouragement and support given to this project. We are particularly grateful to Mimi Egan, publisher for the *Taking Sides* series. We are extremely thankful for the business acumen of Rick Connelly, president of The Dushkin Publishing Group, and for the

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# INTRODUCTION

## Ways of Thinking About Mass Media and Society

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Jarice Hanson

Not long ago, "mass" media referred to messages that were created by large organizations for broad, heterogeneous audiences. This concept no longer suffices for the contemporary media environment. Yes, "mass" media still exist in the forms of radio, television, film, and general interest newspapers and magazines, but many media forms today are hybrids of "mass" and "personal" media technologies that open a new realm of understanding about how audiences process the meaning of the messages. Still, most of the new services and forms of media rely, in part, on the major mass media distribution forms and technologies of television, radio, film, and print. The challenge, then, is to understand how individuals in society use media in a variety of formats and contexts, and how they make sense of the messages they take from the content of those media forms.

The average American spends over three hours a day viewing television, which is on in the average home for over seven hours a day. Politics has emerged from the smoke-filled back room and is played out today in the media. A proliferation of television channels has resulted from the popularity of cable, but does cable offer anything different from broadcast television? Videocassettes now deliver feature-length films to the home, changing the traditional practice of viewing film in a public place. On-line systems promise to increase access to the channels of information from home, work, and school. Communications is now a multibillion-dollar industry and the sixth-fastest-growing industry in America. The third largest export in the United States is media product. From these and other simple examples, it is clear that the media have changed American society, but understanding of how and why is incomplete.

The dynamic relationship of media and society is very complex. As a result, there are no easy answers to understanding the web of relationships that ties media industries, content, production technologies, and meaning together. Furthermore, the media are not monolithic but are an enormously diverse set of messages, images, and ideas that can be said to originate *in* society and be sent back to society.

Many different groups are trying to understand the nature and impact of media systems, each from their own particular perspective. Practitioners must decide on a daily basis what the public will like, will buy, will find offensive, or will simply ignore. Critics are the informal watchdogs of the media and

are committed to careful observation and evaluation of the content, practices, and potential influence of media. Social scientists are engaged in the attempt to test theoretical explanations against the observed realities, and they all proceed from their own assumptions and goals and with their own methods. Each provides different, and often contradictory, answers to the puzzling questions that are the focus of this book. Questions of media impact often cause heated debate; some defend, others criticize the media. By including selections from all of these perspectives, we have tried to provide a balanced approach to these debates—an approach that will allow you, the reader, to make an educated evaluation of the issues discussed.

### DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION

Communication media are such integral components of our lives that it is easy to take them for granted. *Mass media* is not just a synonym for print, television, radio, or other electronic technologies. Mass media is a particular and special kind of communication that uses sophisticated secondary techniques to extend communication to situations in which face-to-face contact is impossible; that is, mass media provide indirect (or mediated) means by which the primary process of communication is carried out. In an attempt to understand the nature of the mass communication process, we seek to better comprehend both the nature of communication—such as who creates and sends the message, what is communicated, how, and with what result—and the role of the media as agents in the distribution of special types of messages, such as what changes occur as media “comes between” the sender(s) and the receiver(s) of the messages.

The United States today is rich in media technology. Government statistics report that 97.7 percent of American homes have at least one telephone; 98 percent of the homes have access to at least one television set; and 99.2 percent have at least one radio (although the average home has at least five different radio receivers!). In addition to these forms of media that have traditionally been included in types of “mass” distribution technologies, we can consider as well the growth of cable television and the videocassette recorder (VCR) market. Even satellite dishes and cellular phones are increasing in number and augmenting traditional distribution technologies.

Yet many of the questions about media and society remain the same, whatever technology is used. For example: How do audiences use a medium, and what is its influence? To answer that question, we begin by conceiving of groups of “receivers” or “users” as audiences. Audiences are involved in a dual task: receiving messages and producing meaning. The art of receiving is complex, for audiences as receivers of messages do not always perceive or comprehend messages in the exact way that the senders intend them to be received. Also, the audience *produces* meaning, and understanding the role of media in shaping the social reality of audiences (for example, the meanings they produce) is one of the key questions motivating current media research.



Surprisingly, media analysts cannot even agree on what audiences are like. There are a number of dualities in their thinking about audiences: Audiences may be conceived of as active or as passive; they may be seen as having preconceived ideas or as being totally responsive to the information provided by media. They may be seen as homogeneous or as fragmented; they may be seen as too intellectually limited to see that television could be harmful or to recognize the limitations of the medium in some cases (i.e., fantasy is entertainment) but not in others (i.e., believing that news is fact); or, on the other hand, they may be seen as critical and evaluative and not easily persuaded or influenced. You will see all these different characterizations of what audiences are in this volume.

These conceptions of audience are only part of an attempt to analyze the communication experience. We must also address the unique characteristics of how the medium is used to get a better perspective on the social character of the audience experience. For example, television is primarily a domestic medium. Much of television consumption is in the presence of others and is often discussed with others in an informal setting such as the home. In realizing the special considerations of each medium, the environment in which it is used, and the conditions surrounding it, we can better understand how media consumption is integrated with everyday life.

## NOTIONS OF MASS MEDIA AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Throughout the years, research on the relationship between media and society has changed. Early in the history of the study of media, it was believed that messages conveyed by media had tremendous power to influence peoples' attitudes and behavior. Researchers have learned that the results of media exposure to a variety of types of content are far more complex than originally felt. Today, the relationship of audiences to the institutions of media suggest that the individual plays a much larger role in determining the meaning of media content. Society at large—including role models, family structure, and social institutions that the individual experiences—all play mediating parts in influencing how and why the individual will relate to the media message.

Another dominant theme in media research has been the *mass society perspective*. This perspective examines not only the nature of the audience as groups of people but also investigates the production of messages that reflect the interests of the dominant elite and provides what senders believe the mass audience will consume or at least tolerate. The mass society perspective has long held a bleak view of large audiences, which are described as acted upon (reactive rather than active) and heterogeneous (large numbers of different people are in the audience) but becoming increasingly homogeneous (in their susceptibility to persuasion). Because of the power of the producers of media messages, the mass society paradigm was developed to understand better the political and economic implications of media that are created by few for the consumption of many. The saying "people only get what they want" is far too

simplistic to address the dimensions of what constitutes media content. Decisions about what will be funded, produced, distributed, and marketed call into play a myriad of factors—from morality to economics. If indeed “people only get what they want,” if only this one-dimensional agenda prevailed, then there would be no such phenomena as the flop, the sleeper, or the cult media. The relationship of individuals, society, media industries, and time in history all play a part in the acceptance or rejection of media content.

### PROGRESS IN MEDIA RESEARCH

Much of media research has been in search of theory. Theory is an organized, commonsense refinement of everyday thinking; it is an attempt to establish a systematic view of a phenomenon in order to better understand that phenomenon. Theory is tested against reality to establish whether or not it is a good explanation. So, for example, a researcher might notice that what is covered by news outlets is very similar to what citizens say are the important issues of the day. From such observation came agenda setting (the notion that media confers importance on the topics it covers, directing public attention to what is considered important).

Much early media research comes from the impact and effect of print media, because it has been around the longest. The ability of newspapers and books to shape and influence public opinion was regarded as necessary to the founding of new forms of governments—including the U.S. government. But the bias of the medium carried certain restrictions with it. Print media necessarily was limited to those individuals who could read. The relationships of information control and the power of these forms of communication to influence readers contributed to a belief that reporting should be objective and fair and that a multiple number of views should be available.

The principles that emerged from this relationship were addressed in an often-quoted statement attributed to Thomas Jefferson, who wrote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” But the next sentence in Jefferson’s statement is equally as important. “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

Today, media research on the relationships of media senders, the channels of communication, and the receivers of messages is not enough. Consumers must realize that “media literacy” is an important concept. People can no longer take for granted that the media exist primarily to provide news, information, and entertainment. They must be more attuned to what media content says about them as individuals and as members of a society. By integrating these various cultural components, the public can better criticize the regulations or lack of regulation that permits media industries to function the way they do. People must realize that individuals may read media content differently.

The use of social science data to explore the effects of media on audiences strongly emphasized psychological schools of thought. It did not take long to move from the "magic bullet theory"—which proposed that media had a major direct effect on the receivers of the message and that the message intended by the senders was indeed injected into the passive receiver—to theories of limited and indirect effects.

Media research has shifted from addressing specifically effects-oriented paradigms to exploring the nature of the institutions of media production themselves as well as the unique characteristics of each form of media as it contributes to what we know and how we use mediated information. Much of this research has provided knowledge about the multidimensional aspects of media that transcends traditional social and behavioral methodologies.

Applying this knowledge to policy and personal decisions has served to integrate other fields of psychology, sociology, and popular culture with the perspectives provided by communication studies.

Other levels of analysis have focused on individual, family, group, social, cultural, and societal interpretations of frames of meaning, as well as economically and structurally derived positions of power, held or exercised by specific individuals within social frameworks. These concepts of power have become increasingly important as media have become more pervasive throughout the world and various societies have experienced inequities in technologies, resources, and production skills.

Today researchers question the notions of past theories and models as well as definitions of *mass* and *society* and now place much of the emphasis of media dynamics in the perspective of global information exchange. A major controversy erupted in the early 1970s when many Third World countries disagreed with principles that sought to reify the industrialized nations' media. The New World Information Order noted the importance of media in carrying out developmental tasks within nations that have not had the economic and social benefits of industrialized countries, and it noted that emerging nations had different priorities that reflected indigenous cultures, which would sometimes be at odds with Western notions of a free press. The Third World countries' concerns dealt with power as imposed upon a nation from outside, using media as a vehicle for cultural dependency and imperialism.

Today society must also concern itself with the growing numbers of communication channels that have come about through changes in the ways various industries operate. Cable and telephone may well be viewed as the primary means of wired systems of communication. Digital broadcasting and digital information transfer may create yet other hybrids in technological systems and services. The information superhighway being developed in the United States has the potential to alter radically the former media industries and the way individuals seek and use media and information.

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

In addressing the issues in this book, it is important to consider some recurring questions:

1. Are the media unifying or fragmenting? Does media content help the socialization process or does it create anxiety or inaccurate portrayals of the world? Do people feel powerless because they have little ability to shape the messages of media?
2. Are the media a unique force for social change, or do they primarily react to social forces? Do the media merely convey information about what other social issues are important? Do the owners and controllers of these messages act in the public interest or do they have other motives? Are audiences primarily reactive to media content or do they psychologically work toward integrating media messages with their own experiences?
3. Whose interests do the media represent? How important is it for the media industries to work for profits, and does this limit the types of content they are willing to produce or the types of audiences they serve?

## SUMMARY

We live in a media-rich environment where almost everybody has access to some form of media and some choices in content. As new technologies and services are developed, are they responding to the problems that previous media researchers and the public have detected? Over time, individuals have improved their ability to unravel the complex set of interactions that ties the media and society together, but they need to continue to question past results, new practices and technologies, and their own evaluative measures. When people critically examine the world around them—a world often presented by the media—they can more fully understand and enjoy the way they relate, as individuals, as members of groups, and as members of a society.

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Prize-winning journalist, writes that the media is helping to fuel a "backlash" that is under way in American society that is against equality for women and women's rights.

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**YES: Mike Hoyt**, from "Talk Radio: Turning Up the Volume,"  
*Columbia Journalism Review* 62

**NO: Jon Meacham**, from "What Will Rogers Could Teach the Age of  
Limbaugh," *The Washington Monthly* 68

*Columbia Journalism Review* editor Mike Hoyt shows how talk radio responds to people's desire to connect with others and meets their need to vent frustrations. Jon Meacham, a journalist with *The Washington Monthly*, claims that the inflammatory style of many contemporary talk show hosts contributes to the fractiousness evident in society today.

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**ISSUE 5. Does the Mass Media Realistically Portray Images of  
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**YES: Michael Eric Dyson**, from *Reflecting Black: African-American  
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**NO: Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow**, from "Advertising," in  
Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, eds., *Split Image: African  
Americans in the Mass Media* 87

Michael Eric Dyson, a professor of communication studies, argues that media portrayals of blacks are growing more realistic, partly because more African Americans have gained access to creative control. Jannette L. Dates, a producer and writer of educational television, and writer William Barlow analyze the advertising medium and argue that African American life is not realistically represented.

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**PART 2 MEDIA ETHICS 101**

**ISSUE 6. Should the Names of Rape Victims Be Published? 102**

**YES: Michael Gartner**, from "Naming the Victim," *Columbia  
Journalism Review* 104

**NO: Katha Pollitt**, from "Naming and Blaming: Media Goes  
Wilding in Palm Beach," *The Nation* 107

President of NBC news Michael Gartner argues that identifying accusers in rape cases will destroy many of society's wrongly held impressions and

stereotypes about the crime of rape. Katha Pollitt, journalist and social critic, argues that the decision to reveal victims' identities without their consent cannot be justified.

**ISSUE 7. Does Media Coverage of War Promote Understanding of the Issues? 118**

**YES: R. E. Wildermuth**, from "The Military and the Media: They Can Both Win," *Government Information Quarterly* 120

**NO: Douglas Kellner**, from *The Persian Gulf TV War* 127

R. E. Wildermuth, a former navy captain, takes the position that the media's involvement in covering the Persian Gulf War was both necessary and important to a successful military strategy and operation. Philosophy professor Douglas Kellner writes that the media projected biased and distorted messages about the crisis and subsequent war in the Persian Gulf.

**ISSUE 8. Is Advertising Ethical? 136**

**YES: Theodore Levitt**, from "The Morality(?) of Advertising," *Harvard Business Review* 138

**NO: Douglas Kellner**, from "Advertising and Consumer Culture," in John Downing et al., eds., *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction* 145

Professor emeritus of business administration Theodore Levitt argues that embellishment of products in advertisements is expected by consumers. Professor of philosophy Douglas Kellner calls advertising a "parasitic industry" because it forces consumers to pay more for items.

**PART 3 REGULATION 155**

**ISSUE 9. Should Congress Regulate Television Violence? 156**

**YES: Ernest F. Hollings, Robert E. Gould, and Catherine A. Belter**, from "Should Congress Pass Legislation Regulating TV Violence? Pro," *Congressional Digest* 158

**NO: Jack Valenti, Howard Stringer, and Al Devaney**, from "Should Congress Pass Legislation Regulating TV Violence? Con," *Congressional Digest* 166

Senator Ernest F. Hollings (D-South Carolina) and supporters of government regulation of TV violence demand government regulation as a necessary solution to the public health hazard of violent programming. Broadcast industry



executives insist that they can effectively self-regulate television violence on their own and in their own fashion.

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**ISSUE 10. Should Pornography Be Protected as Free Speech? 174**

**YES:** Frank Easterbrook, from *American Booksellers Association, Inc. v. William H. Hudnut III*, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit 176

**NO:** James C. Dobson, from *Final Report of the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography* 184

Judge Frank Easterbrook holds that an ordinance regulating pornography is an unconstitutional infringement on freedom of speech and of the press. Psychologist James C. Dobson, a member of the 1985 U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, is convinced that pornography harms society, and he calls for new and heavily enforced legislation to control it.

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**PART 4 MASS MEDIA AND POLITICS 193**

**ISSUE 11. Do Presidential TV Ads Manipulate Voters? 194**

**YES:** Kathleen Hall Jamieson, from *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, 2d ed. 196

**NO:** Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, from *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* 205

Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications Kathleen Hall Jamieson writes that campaign ads are often so misleading that they manipulate the voters' understanding of the campaign platform. Political scientists Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure maintain that the public is better informed and better able to make decisions as a result of exposure to televised political commercials.

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**ISSUE 12. Does Television News Reflect a Liberal Bias? 214**

**YES:** H. Joachim Maitre, from "The Tilt to the News: How American Journalism Has Swerved from the Ideal of Objectivity," *The World and I* 216

**NO:** Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon, from *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* 223

Journalism professor H. Joachim Maitre argues that news reporters are liberals who allow their views to seep into their reporting. Media critics Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon argue that reporter bias is toward the conservative status quo.