


# TAKING SIDES



SECOND EDITION

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

Alison Alexander • Jarice Hanson



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

2nd edition

Edited, Selected, and with Introductions by

**Alison Alexander**

*University of Georgia*

and

**Jarice Hanson**

*University of Massachusetts - Amherst*

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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 United States, which perhaps reflects a belief in the importance of our 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** Our 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 Senate 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, policy-makers, and media critics whose views are debated here.

**Changes to this edition** This second edition represents a considerable revision. There are eight completely new issues: *Are Positive Images of African Americans Increasing in the Media?* (Issue 2); *Should the Names of Rape Victims Be Published?* (Issue 6); *Is Objectivity Still a Criterion for Journalism?* (Issue 7); *Is the Public Best Served by a Marketplace Approach to Regulation?* (Issue 8); *Do Speech Codes Suppress Freedom of Expression?* (Issue 11); *Are the Results of Polls Misleading?* (Issue 12); *Can Network News Survive?* (Issue 16); and *Does Technology Transfer by Multinational Firms Benefit the Development of Third World Nations?* (Issue 17). In addition, for several of the 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. In all, there are 21 new readings.

**Supplements** An *Instructor's Manual with Test Questions* (multiple-choice and essay) is available through the publisher. And a general guidebook, called *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, program manager of the Taking Sides series, and the wonderful staff at Dushkin. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the many professors who reviewed our first edition, and we are grateful for the advice they have provided in the preparation of this edition.

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Alison Alexander  
University of Georgia

Jarice Hanson  
University of Massachusetts–Amherst

# INTRODUCTION

## Ways of Thinking About Mass Media and Society

Alison Alexander

Jarice Hanson

Individuals in our society now spend over three hours a day viewing television, which is turned on in the average home over seven hours a day. Politics has emerged from the smoke-filled back room and is played out today in the media. Communications is now a multibillion-dollar industry. From these and other simple examples, we know that media have changed our society. We know that media have an impact, but our 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, we cannot even agree on what audiences are like. There are a number of dualities in our 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

The term *mass* implies much more than large numbers, and it has positive as well as negative connotations. A negative connotation is that of a "mob": unruly, ignorant, easily swayed, and lacking in culture, intelligence, and rationality. The Oxford English Dictionary describes a *mass* as an aggregate in which individuality is lost. On the other hand, the term also supports a concept that denotes the solidarity of people organized to achieve important goals.

Traditional definitions of *mass media* maintain that the messages were created for the consumption of a large, heterogeneous, anonymous audience. Perhaps this definition has become dated because of the nature and amount of media today. Although much of the technology is still capable of catering to a mass audience, it can also be consumed in more intimate surroundings and is often programmed for specific functions by individuals. Videocassette recorders alter the nature of mass media somewhat by allowing the user to record a program in order to view it at a time of his or her own choice. The added technology of the "fast forward" VCR button allows viewers to zap commercials or parts of a program not considered important or interesting. Where, then, does the "mass" nature of media fit?

The *mass society* 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 moral to economic. If indeed "people only got what they wanted," 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.

## HOW MEDIA HAS BEEN STUDIED: FROM THE MAGIC BULLET TO THE INDIRECT EFFECT

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 our 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).

Media researchers were faced with an initial view of the nature of humankind that was fundamental to the freedom of the press granted under the First Amendment. Libertarian theory undergirds press freedom and reflects normative and philosophical principles concerning the relation of press to society. These principles are used to evaluate how media, particularly the press, ought to operate: Media should promote a free marketplace of ideas from which rational individuals will come to know the truth. In our system, we assume that freedom of the press should follow the libertarian ideal—that is, to discover truth, check on government, and never be censored by that government. Our sense of social responsibility to that ideal suggests that media should encourage and promote a free and informed discussion of ideas.

Electronic communication challenged these notions of philosophy and individualism in decoding the content of messages. The “magic bullet” theory was an early concept stating 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. In retrospect, this model seems simplistic, but when it was formulated, society had little experience with the mass distribution of messages. The dominant modes of media at that time were print (a very individual experience from the perspective of the user), telephone (also an individual experience), film (viewed in confined environments), and radio (which was the “masses” of all media to that date but still consumed by the extension of the auditory sense rather than the more pervasive all-encompassing experience of watching television). The electronic media challenged past theories of the primacy of the written word and confused researchers seeking a linear, logical explanation for the impact of these new nonlinear, nonlogical media technologies.

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 see the limitations of the “magic bullet” theory, and researchers downshifted from this all-powerful model of direct effect to a more reasonable belief in media’s limited effects. How—and how much—*did* media messages influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of audiences? The answer seemed to be that media primarily reinforced the status quo. Researchers concluded that media was not a primary cause of human action because more fundamental factors—patterns of thought, culture, and behavior having deep social and historical roots—prevailed.

As media research has matured, the theoretical and conceptual perspectives have increased. But in reevaluating media’s influence on how an individual sees reality, one common factor is undeniable: The individuals within the “mass audience” each receive media messages subjectively. While some overarching characteristics of “mass” phenomena may be apparent, we can no longer say with certainty that every member of the audience will act, perceive, or internalize the same message in the same way.

Media research, then, 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 we 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. Their concerns dealt with power as imposed upon a nation from outside, using media as a vehicle for cultural dependency and imperialism.

## THEMES OF CURRENT MASS MEDIA THEORY

In his text *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (Sage Publications, 1987), Denis McQuail offers several themes that are currently at issue in mass media theory. Based on his list, we offer the following questions for debate about the influence of media:

1. Is media fragmenting or unifying? The central issue is whether media act as a central or unifying force for society or whether they fragment or decentralize. Beyond that are concerns as to whether these forces are positive or negative. For example, media may be seen as building national identity, political cohesion, or group solidarity. Alternatively, that centralizing force may be seen as promoting a stifling homogenization of taste and class. Fragmentation may be associated with privatization and loneliness (i.e., parasocial interaction—the substitution of mediated for real companionship), but it may also be seen as promoting diversity and a cosmopolitan perspective and providing opportunities for personal growth.

2. Is media a unique force for social change, or does it primarily react to social forces? Here the question is whether media is an independent, unique force in social change (as such technological determinists as Marshall McLuhan argue) or whether it is subordinate to evolving society and essentially reactive.

3. Whose interests do the media represent? The opposite poles of this issue can be described as concerns of dominance versus pluralism. Those who view media as an instrument in the hands of the dominant class see media as centralized, standardized, and controlled by a very few. A pluralistic position sees media as responding to demands from many diverse and fragmented groups in society, with many different voices representing audiences or publics that freely choose which messages they are to receive.

## SUMMARY

As the media have grown from infancy to maturity, we have developed numerous theories that seek to explain certain phenomena. We have improved our ability over time to unravel the complex set of interactions that ties the media and society together, but we need to continue to question past results, new practices and technologies, and our own evaluative measures. Theory helps us understand similarities, patterns, and generalizations, but we must not consider theory to be an easy answer for any of the difficult questions we encounter. All issues should be evaluated with regard to their time in history to better develop continuity in not only what we know but in how we come to know it.

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## **PART 1 MASS MEDIA'S ROLE IN SOCIETY** **1**

### **ISSUE 1. Are American Values Shaped by the Mass Media?** **2**

**YES:** Neil Postman, from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* **4**

**NO:** Edwin Diamond, from *Good News, Bad News* **9**

Professor of media studies Neil Postman argues that television promotes triviality by speaking in only one voice—the voice of entertainment. Thus, television is transforming American culture into show business, to the detriment of rational public discourse. Professor of journalism Edwin Diamond resists the dominant view of television as a reshaper of politics, manners, and society. Television is play and is treated as such by audiences.

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### **ISSUE 2. Are Positive Images of African Americans Increasing in the Media?** **16**

**YES:** J. Fred MacDonald, from *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948*, 2d ed. **18**

**NO:** Ash Corea, from "Racism and the American Way of Media," in John Downing et al., eds., *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction* **24**

According to professor J. Fred MacDonald, advertisers now realize that African Americans make up a significant target audience. As a result, images of African Americans in the media have improved. Professor Ash Corea argues that African Americans have been and still are underrepresented in the media, and she argues that news stories and the public's reactions to the way minorities are framed in the media perpetuate negative stereotypes.

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### **ISSUE 3. Is Television Harmful for Children?** **32**

**YES:** Marie Winn, from *Unplugging the Plug-In Drug* **34**

**NO:** Daniel R. Anderson, from "How TV Influences Your Kids," *TV Guide* **41**

Author and children's advocate Marie Winn argues that television has a negative influence on children and their families and worries that time spent with television displaces other activities, such as family time, reading, and play. Daniel R. Anderson, a professor of psychology, does not find evidence that television turns children into "zombies." He believes that television, used properly, can be a source of positive education and entertainment.

---

<b>ISSUE 4. Are Media Messages About Women Improving?</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>YES: Diana M. Meehan</b> , from "The Strong-Soft Woman: Manifestations of the Androgyne in Popular Media," in Stuart Oskamp, ed., <i>Television as a Social Issue</i>	<b>48</b>
<b>NO: Susan Faludi</b> , from <i>Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women</i>	<b>55</b>

Diana M. Meehan, an author and communications professor, notes that there have been some changes in the portrayal of female characters in the popular media. The image of a strong, autonomous female that combines aspects of "masculine" strength with "feminine" caring and warmth has emerged and is an encouraging sign for those who advocate more varied gender portrayals. Susan Faludi, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, writes about a "backlash" that is under way in American society against equality for women and women's rights. The media is contributing to this backlash by putting out the disturbing and insidious message that women who have attempted to pursue goals of social equality and respect, economic sufficiency, or political participation have been sold a bill of goods.

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<b>ISSUE 5. Should the Content of Records Be Censored?</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>YES: Parents Music Resource Center</b> , from Statement Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate	<b>70</b>
<b>NO: Frank Zappà</b> , from Statement Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate	<b>75</b>

The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) requests that Congress encourage the manufacturers of record albums, cassette tapes, and compact discs to place warning labels on their products that contain explicit or violent lyrics. Musician Frank Zappa advocates protecting musicians' First Amendment right to free speech and endorses the use of printed texts of music lyrics rather than a labeling system.

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<b>ISSUE 6. Should the Names of Rape Victims Be Published?</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>YES: Michael Gartner</b> , from "Naming the Victim," <i>Columbia Journalism Review</i>	<b>86</b>
<b>NO: Katha Pollitt</b> , from "Naming and Blaming: Media Goes Wilding in Palm Beach," <i>The Nation</i>	<b>89</b>

President of NBC news Michael Gartner justifies his decision to name the accuser in the William Kennedy Smith rape case, claiming that names add credibility to a story. He further argues that a policy of 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, looks at six reasons commonly cited by proponents of naming alleged rape

victims and argues that not one of them justifies the decision to reveal victims' identities without their consent.

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<b>ISSUE 7. Is Objectivity Still a Criterion for Journalism?</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>YES: William E. Rowley and William V. Grimes, from "Three-Dimensional Objectivity," <i>The Quill</i></b>	<b>102</b>
<b>NO: Theodore L. Glasser, from "Objectivity Precludes Responsibility," <i>The Quill</i></b>	<b>110</b>

William E. Rowley, who spent 17 years as a newspaper reporter and was a professor of journalism, and philosopher William V. Grimes argue that objectivity is an enduring and central value of journalism, and one that has been too simplistically portrayed. Theodore L. Glasser, the director of Stanford University's Graduate Program in Journalism, contends that objectivity has unfortunate consequences for reporters—it strips them of their creativity, engagement, and intellectual challenge.

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<b>ISSUE 8. Is the Public Best Served by a Marketplace Approach to Regulation?</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>YES: Mark S. Fowler and Daniel L. Brenner, from "A Marketplace Approach to Broadcast Regulation," <i>Texas Law Review</i></b>	<b>122</b>
<b>NO: Robert M. Entman and Steven S. Wildman, from "Reconciling Economic and Noneconomic Perspectives on Media Policy: Transcending the 'Marketplace of Ideas,' " <i>Journal of Communication</i></b>	<b>131</b>

Mark S. Fowler, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, and his legal assistant Daniel L. Brenner articulate a rationale for deregulating the communication industries and argue that the public interest would best be served by a "marketplace" approach to regulation. Professors of communication studies Robert M. Entman and Steven S. Wildman argue that most of the controversy over media regulation comes from proponents of either the "market economics" or "social values" schools of thought. They support a combination of these two approaches as the most effective form of media regulation today.

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<b>ISSUE 9. Should Pornography Be Protected as Free Speech?</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>YES: Frank Easterbrook, from <i>American Booksellers Association, Inc. v. William H. Hudnut III</i>, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>NO: James C. Dobson, from <i>Final Report of the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography</i></b>	<b>150</b>

Judge Frank Easterbrook holds that an ordinance regulating pornography is an unconstitutional infringement on freedom of speech and press. Psychologist James C. Dobson is convinced of the devastation inflicted on victims of pornography. He lists nine ways in which pornography does harm and calls for new and heavily enforced legislation to control it.

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**PART 4 MASS MEDIA AND POLITICS** **159**

**ISSUE 10. Do Presidential TV Ads Manipulate Voters?** **160**

**YES:** Joe McGinniss, from *The Selling of the President, 1968* **162**

**NO:** Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, from *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* **168**

Author and reporter Joe McGinniss is convinced that political campaigning is merely a matter of projecting the right image on the television screen to sell the politician to the public. Political scientists Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure explore the effects of political ads on television and conclude 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 11. Do Speech Codes Suppress Freedom of Expression?** **176**

**YES:** Nat Hentoff, from " 'Speech Codes' on the Campus: And Problems of Free Speech," *Dissent* **178**

**NO:** Stanley Fish, from "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing Too," *Boston Review* **184**

Columnist Nat Hentoff is concerned that speech codes on American college campuses will inhibit the discussion of important issues, and he argues that they impede the free exchange of ideas and violate First Amendment principles. Professor of English and law Stanley Fish argues that free speech in and of itself "is not an independent value but a political prize." When the aim of a form of speech is to cause harm or to perpetuate lies, it does not deserve protection under a claim of freedom of expression.

---

**ISSUE 12. Are the Results of Polls Misleading?** **194**

**YES:** Christopher Hitchens, from "Voting in the Passive Voice: What Polling Has Done to American Democracy," *Harper's Magazine* **196**

**NO:** Philip Meyer, from "Stop Pulling Punches With Polls," *Columbia Journalism Review* **207**

Editor and author Christopher Hitchens traces the origins and describes the methods of polling, and he warns of the dangers that arise from relying on this type of public opinion measurement. Professor of journalism Philip Meyer argues that polling reinforces the democratic process and warns that opponents to political polls are exercising a form of censorship.

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