THE TRIUMPH OF THE YELL

In this article, Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics, suggests that argument can sometimes result in polarized either-or thinking which does not bring us nearer to the truth, but takes us further away from it.

I put the question to a journalist who had written a vitriolic attack on a leading feminist researcher: ‘Why do you need to make others wrong for you to be right?’ Her response: ‘It’s an argument!’

That’s the problem. More and more these days, journalists, politicians and academics treat public discourse as an argument—not in the sense of making an argument, but in the sense of having one, of having a fight.

When people have arguments in private life, they’re not trying to understand what the other person is saying. They’re listening for weaknesses in logic to leap on, points they can distort to make the other look bad. We all do this when we’re angry, but is it the best model for public intellectual interchange? This breakdown of the boundary between public and private is contributing to what I have come to think of as a culture of critique.

Fights have winners and losers. If you’re fighting to win, the temptation is great to deny facts that support your opponent’s views and present only those facts that support your own.

At worst, there’s the temptation to lie. We accept this style of arguing because we believe we can tell when someone is lying. But we can’t. Paul Ekman, a psychologist at the University of California at San Francisco, has found that even when people are very sure they can tell whether or not someone is dissembling, their judgments are likely as not to be wrong.

If public discourse is a fight, every issue must have two sides—no more, no less. And it’s crucial to show ‘the other side’, even if one has to scour the margins of science or the fringes of lunacy to find it.

The culture of critique is based on the belief that opposition leads to truth: that when both sides argue the truth will emerge. And because people are presumed to enjoy watching a fight, the most extreme views are presented, since they make the best show.

But it is a myth that opposition leads to truth when truth does not reside on one side or the other but is rather a crystal of many sides. Truth is more likely to be found in the complex middle than in the simplified extremes, but the spectacles that result when extremes clash are thought to get higher ratings or larger readership.

Because the culture of critique encourages people to attack and often misrepresent others, those others must waste their creativity and time correcting the misrepresentations and defending themselves. Serious scholars have to waste years of their lives writing books proving that the Holocaust happened, because a few fanatics who claim it didn’t have been given
a public forum. Those who provide
the platform know that what these
people say is, simply put, not true,
but rationalize the dissemination of
lies as showing 'the other side.' The
determination to find another side
can spread disinformation rather
than lead to truth.

The culture of critique has given
rise to the journalistic practice of
confronting prominent people with
criticism couched as others' views.
Meanwhile, the interviewer has
planted an accusation in readers' or
viewers' minds. The theory seems to
be that when provoked, people are
spurred to eloquence and self-
revelation. Perhaps some are. But
others are unable to say what they
know because they are hurt, and
begin to sputter when their sense of
fairness is outraged, in those cases,
opposition is not the path to truth.

When people in power know that
what they say will be scrutinized for
weaknesses and probably distorted,
they become guarded. As an
acquaintance recently explained
about himself, public figures who
once gave long free-wheeling press
conferences now limit themselves to
reading brief statements. When less
information gets communicated,
opposition does not lead to truth.

Opposition also limits information
when only those who are adept at
verbal sparring take part in public
discourse, and those who cannot
handle it, or do not like it, decline to
participate. This winnowing process
is evident in graduate schools, where
many talented students drop out
because what they expected to be a
community of intellectual inquiry
turned out to be a ritual game of
attack and counter-attack...

In many university classrooms,
'critical thinking' means reading
someone's life work, then ripping it
to shreds. Though critique is surely
one form of critical thinking, so are
integrating ideas from disparate fields
and examining the context out of
which they grew. Opposition does
not lead to truth when we ask only
'What's wrong with this argument?'
and never 'What can we use from
this in building a new theory, and a
new understanding?'...

The most dangerous aspect of
modelling intellectual interchange as a
fight is that it contributes to an
atmosphere of animosity that spreads
like a fever. In a society where people
express their anger by shooting, the
result of demonizing those with whom
we disagree can be truly demonic.

I am not suggesting that
journalists stop asking tough
questions necessary to get at the
facts, even if those questions may
appear challenging. And of course it
is the responsibility of the media to
represent serious opposition when it
exists, and of intellectuals
everywhere to explore potential
weaknesses in others' arguments.

But when opposition becomes the
overwhelming avenue of inquiry,
when the lust for opposition exalts
extreme views and obscures
complexity, when our eagerness to
find weaknesses blinds us to
strengths, when the atmosphere of
animosity precludes respect and
poisons our relations with one
another, then the culture of critique
is stifling us. If we could move
beyond it, we would move closer
to the truth.