

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

pathfinder *n* 1 : one that discovers a way; *esp* : one that explores untraversed or unfrequented regions to mark out a new path TRAILBLAZER

WHY CONTROVERSY?

knowledge
power
emotion

Issues are controversial for three main reasons – emotions, power, knowledge.

Lack of knowledge — People are learning about an issue and not enough is known for certain, so there is controversy. Example: cell phones cause brain cancer.

Desire for power — People want to gain or maintain positions of power and so they make use of a controversial issue to advance their interests. Example: pollution doesn't cause global warming.

Strong emotional ties — People have feelings about an issue and use whatever arguments they can to persuade others that their position is the only correct one. Example: abortion is wrong.

The questions for a researcher of a controversial issue should be – Why is this issue controversial? What is actually known about this issue? What motivates people to advocate specific positions? What are the facts? How many different perspectives are there on this issue? What political and/or economic interests are involved in the issue? Whose position is heard most? Have acts of violence taken place because of this controversy? Who was responsible for the violence?

To begin to answer these questions you must first be aware of any emotions you have that might make it difficult for you to do your research with an open mind. An open mind is essential in researching controversial issues.

DATABASES

ProQuest <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?RQT=306&TS=1054581030>

eLibrary <http://elibrary.bigchalk.com/libweb/elib/do/search>

Grolier Online <http://go-passport.grolier.com/>

usernames and passwords for the above databases are on the print version of this pathfinder

Opposing Viewpoints <http://www.kcls.org/>

You'll need your King County library card to access this database.

REFERENCE BOOKS

specialized encyclopedias

- REF 001.9 Ste *Encyclopedia of hoaxes*, by Gordon Stein.
- REF 051.01 Alt *Alternative Press Index*. 1968-
- REF 130.3 Ste *The Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained*, by Brad Steiger.
- REF 133.03 Man *Man, myth & magic : the illustrated ency. of mythology, religion, and the unknown*.
- REF 133.4 Gui *The encyclopedia of witches and witchcraft*, Rosemary Guiley.
- REF 170 Tak *Taking sides*
- REF 174 Bio *Encyclopedia of bioethics*.
- REF 200 Que *The encyclopedia of American religious history : volume I & II*, by Edward L. Queen.
- REF 291 Wor *World religions*.
- REF 300.21 Smi *State of the World Atlas*, by Dan Smith.
- REF 301 Soc *Social issues*.
- REF 303.48 Eng *Activists, rebels, & reformers*, by Phillis Engelbert.
- REF 303.6 Com *Encyclopedia of terrorism*.
- REF 303.61 Pro *Protest, power, and change : an encyclopedia of nonviolent action...*
- REF 305.4 Cul *The encyclopedia of women's history in America*, by Kathryn Cullen-DuPont.
- REF 305.8 Gal *Gale encyclopedia of multicultural America*.
- REF 305.8 Lev *American immigrant cultures : builders of a nation*.
- REF 306 Enc *Encyclopedia of world cultures*.
- REF 323.1 Enc *Encyclopedia of civil rights in America*.
- REF 327 Enc *Encyclopedia of arms control and disarmament*.

- REF 331.8 St. *St. James Ency. of Labor History Worldwide : major events in labor history...2 vols.*
- REF 347 Cou *Courtroom drama : 120 of the world's most notable trials.*
- REF 363.1 Whe *When technology fails : significant technological disasters, accidents, and failures...*
- REF 363.3 Gun *Guns in American society : an encyclopedia of history, politics, culture, and the law.*
- REF 363.7 Gro *The Grolier library of environmental concepts and issues.*
- REF 363.702 Vit *Vital signs, 2005 : the trends that are shaping our future.*
- REF 364.3 Vio *Violence in America.*
- REF 371.8 Bur *Encyclopedia of student and youth movements, by David F. Burg.*
- REF 574.5 Atl *The atlas of endangered species.*
- REF 574.5 Gro *The Grolier student encyclopedia of endangered species.*
- REF 613.8 Dru *Drugs and controlled substances : information for students.*
- REF 615.78 Mil *The encyclopedia of addictive drugs, by Richard Lawrence Miller.*
- REF 616.97 Wat *The encyclopedia of HIV and AIDS, by Sarah Watstein.*
- REF 909.13 His *History behind the headlines: the origins of conflicts worldwide.*
- REF 909.82 Col *The cold war : first series.*
- REF 956 His *History in Dispute : The Middle East Since 1945.*
- REF 973.91 Ame *American social and political movements, 1900-1945 : pursuit of progress.*
- REF 973.92 Ame *American social and political movements, 1945-2000 : pursuit of liberty.*

WEBSITES

Wikipedia's list of controversial issues discussed among editors of this online encyclopedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_controversial_issues

ProCon.org is a not-for-profit organization that promotes an “informed citizenship by presenting controversial issues in a simple, nonpartisan pro-con format” <http://www.procon.org/>

Gallup organization for opinion polls <http://poll.gallup.com/>

Statistical Abstracts online for statistical data http://www.census.gov/prod/www/statistical-abstract-1995_2000.html

International Debate Education Association for a variety of information on controversial issues <http://www.idebate.org/debatabase/>

NOTE: if you find any websites that might be included on this list, please see the librarian

BOOK SERIES

Publishers sometimes publish several books on similar topics that get grouped together as a series. Below is a partial listing of series titles at Mount Si’s library. Each series has several books on a variety of controversial issues. Do a “Series” search on the library OPAC to find specific titles.

At Issue – 53 titles
 Contemporary Issues – 9 titles
 Contemporary Issues Companion – 11 titles
 Contemporary World Issues – 36 titles
 Crime, Justice and Punishment – 22 issues
 Current Controversies – 57 titles
 Ideas in Conflict – 16 titles
 Issues in Focus – 24 titles
 Lucent Overview Series – 74 titles
 Opposing Viewpoints – 196 titles
 Reference Shelf – 68 titles

THING TO KEEP IN MIND

Mainstream Media v Alternative Media — You should gather information from several sources. Mainstream media are easily available (for example, magazines at the grocery store), alternative media are not, you have to look for them.

Fact v Opinion — Sometimes opinions have some basis in fact, but knowledge is different from opinion; anybody can have an opinion, whether or not they know anything about the issue at hand.

Shades-of-gray — Very few issues are black-and-white, good-or-bad, right-or-wrong, your job in seeking to understand an issue is to look for nuance, depth, complexity & multiple viewpoints.

Faking It: Neutrality, Balance, Name-calling & Newspeak — Almost all reports of any controversial issue will be biased, and you need to identify the bias, compare it with the facts, and seek out other perspectives in order to get the big picture and a better grasp on the truth. Balance (taking all views into consideration) is very important, but can also be used to treat accurate information and crackpot theories as equals — this is not balance, but disinformation. Beware of name-callers. As you know from elementary school, people call other people all kinds of names, and most often the epithets are far from true. Finally, be alert to words that are used to hide or obscure what is really being talked about. If you've read George Orwell's *1984*, you know all about newspeak.

Scapegoats — Another popular tactic at times of controversy is to place blame on some low-level person, so that the high-level person who is actually responsible for a problem gets away with it. Be alert to this possibility.

Knowledge v Belief — Just because someone believes something doesn't mean it is real. Your job is to demand the facts, sort the real from the unreal, and seek the truth to the best of your ability.

