Abstract of “Truth Wars”

Knowledge and truth are sought in scientific inquiry about nature and with the adversarial method of criminal trials in justice. When errors are made, there is a process for correcting mistakes: in science replication and professional controls are gatekeepers for truth; for miscarriages of justice, there are appeals courts and innocence projects.

In politics and public affairs, and in the mass media venues for debate, social testing of information favors consensus and conventional wisdom over truth, and confirmation of prior beliefs and collective myths rather than testing hypotheses with an open mind. The result is a group committed to a truth, confronting another group equally committed to another truth, and no mechanism for resolving the contradictions.

With examples from the natural sciences, medical research, criminal trials (Norfolk Four, Guantanamo detainees), and social and economic policy (financial meltdown, health policy, welfare reform), I discuss the flaws in social testing and whether scientific inquiry and the adversarial mode of getting at truth in trials might be incorporated into controversies in public affairs and policy.