Almost everybody has been disgusted by the extremely adversarial character of political debate. And the mass media, including the press, tend to present so many issues as contests between two sides to see who wins. This fails to explain the whole range of issues involved that need to be understood and dealt with properly. Tannen recognizes the value of making differences between opposing views as clear as possible, but she has no difficulty showing the bad results that can flow from treating every issue as a “who wins” game. We suffer now from a worsening of our who-wins culture.

Not every issue with which the public should deal is reducible to two sides that must battle it out. But the press and TV operate on the assumption that enlightenment comes best from presenting a debate between two extreme polarized views on any subject. I long ago learned that a debate is an intellectually dishonest contest, because each side marshals only the evidence or the arguments that might help it win the debate. Neither side is willing to consider everything relevant to the issues involved and weigh and consider it all to see what might be the best solution, even perhaps what might appear to be a compromise. We are told about wars against cancer, wars against drugs etc., not presented questions as to what more or different to do.

Real arguments between spouses too often become contests to be won, without real attempts to understand one another and to seek creative solutions to problems. Tannen inquires also into gender differences in how we tend to handle issues.

This argument culture leads also to excessive litigation in attempts to win battles by whatever legal means can be used. The main beneficiaries are lawyers incomes.

It is not civil or good for everything to be a battleground with one side or the other winning. Most public issues over which the “fights” rage involve very complicated issues, not just a choice between two answers. Even when we must choose between two or a few candidates, they do not make clear on what they agree and what differences remain to be resolved somehow.

It does not need to be this way. Dialogues seeking consensus on the best things to do next could be ever so much more productive. Tannen shows how some countries often do better than we do in this respect. We need to learn that there are better ways than making everything a “fight” to be won.