



# Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition

*John Durham Peters*

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*Courting the Abyss* updates the philosophy of free expression for a world that is very different from the one in which it originated. The notion that a free society should allow Klansmen, neo-Nazis, sundry extremists, and pornographers to spread their doctrines as freely as everyone else has come increasingly under fire. At the same time, in the wake of 9/11, the Right and the Left continue to wage war over the utility of an absolute vision of free speech in a time of increased national security. *Courting the Abyss* revisits the tangled history of free speech, finding resolutions to these debates hidden at the very roots of the liberal tradition.

A mesmerizing account of the role of public communication in the Anglo-American world, *Courting the Abyss* shows that liberty's earliest advocates recognized its fraternal relationship with wickedness and evil. While we understand freedom of expression to mean "anything goes," John Durham Peters asks why its advocates so often celebrate a sojourn in hell and the overcoming of suffering. He directs us to such well-known sources as the prose and poetry of John Milton and the political and philosophical theory of John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., as well as lesser-known sources such as the theology of Paul of Tarsus. In various ways they all, he shows, envisioned an attitude of self-mastery or self-transcendence as a response to the inevitable dangers of free speech, a troubled legacy that continues to inform ruling norms about knowledge, ethical responsibility, and democracy today.

A world of gigabytes, undiminished religious passion, and relentless scientific discovery calls for a fresh account of liberty that recognizes its risk and its splendor. Instead of celebrating noxious doctrine as proof of society's robustness, *Courting the Abyss* invites us to rethink public communication today by looking more deeply into the unfathomable mystery of liberty and evil.

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