

Editorial Introduction: Thinking differently about ‘censorship’

This issue once again sees a great variety of essays, a sign, if nothing else, of how the fields of audience and reception research have grown in recent years – and a very encouraging one, as far as we are concerned. Here, we present six individual essays, and three Themed Sections. We are content to leave the individual essays to introduce themselves, and the three Sections have their own introductions. We note only our very real pleasure that *Participations* is once again the host of some very varied and indeed contrasting topics, fields and approaches – hopefully encouraging some degree of comparison and dialogue between these. Instead of repeating what authors and Section Editors can better say for themselves, we want to float an idea among our readers.

The issue of censorship has been looming larger and in more dangerous and anguished ways in very many countries over the last few years. Governments have always been keen to close down arguments which they find threatening; sometimes arbitrarily, sometimes with at least a superficial attempt at ‘justification’. Recently, this has taken the form (in many places) of attempts to shut down the social media which are perceived to be beyond governmental control. At the same time, rising levels of conflict around religion have pushed the issue of ‘offence’ high on the agenda while different kinds of cultural representation involving race, gender and sexuality have been defined as ‘dangerous’. The result has been such horrible moments as the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January. It is in such contexts that governments are likely to reverse their usual rhetorics, and speak out for ‘freedom of speech’ – even when they have been happy enough to stifle it themselves in various ways.

All kinds of working assumptions about how cultural and media materials are received by members of the public are embedded within these ongoing arguments and counter-arguments. On one side, when authorities are *for* censorship, there are usually claims about the ‘immaturity’ and ‘vulnerability’ of the people who need protecting, often from themselves. On the other side, when the right to ‘freedom of speech’ is paraded, then come the claims that people can ‘get the joke’, can ‘see satire for what it is’. When campaigning groups of any kind denounce ‘offensive’ materials, they usually proclaim their own emotional outrage on behalf of those whom they imagine will be harmed by the offending materials.

Many kinds of voices, including those of academic researchers, are heard in the ongoing debates about all these issues: from law, political studies, religious studies, sociology, psychology, and so on. But what might be the contribution of audience and reception studies? There are surely many questions which could be answered, and many circulating claims which could be tested, using the range of methods which have been demonstrated in submissions to this Journal. We are interested to hear from anyone who might be willing to take on the task of assembling a Themed Section on 'Censorship and Issues of Reception'. Or, if you have done research which you believe could be relevant to this issue, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

The kinds of questions we see being addressed through this Section are these:

1. How are debates about censorship conducted, and what claims are made about 'audiences' in concrete circumstances?
2. How does the concept/discourse of 'offence' work in different contexts and for different audiences?
3. How do audiences claimed to be 'immature' *actually* relate to and make sense of the materials deemed dangerous for them?
4. How do particular audiences claim challenging materials for themselves, and insist on making sense of them in particular ways?

These are intended only as examples of likely over-arching questions. There are surely many more that can be valuably be asked, with audience and reception dimensions.

For any thoughts or offers in relation to this, please contact Martin Barker:

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