

Introduction: ‘Perceptions of Censorship’

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At the end of the 20th century, it may have seemed as if the principles of free speech had triumphed and would continue to thrive as democracies emerged throughout the world after the end of the Cold War. However, the first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed the escalation of extremism across the globe. In the nations once colonies of the West, extremism has risen as outmoded geo-political lines disappeared. Elsewhere, Russia witnessed a re-emergence of authoritarianism as it tried to regain its position as a superpower. And as China opened up its economy to become a global power, it continued its heavy-handed approach to social control. Even in Western democracies, there have been significant moves toward populism and nationalism - two factors which have been historically associated with the rise of fascism (The Economist, 2014).

One product of extremism is control over speech, the press and the arts (Ewing, 2017). Authoritarian regimes try to simultaneously destroy speech through censorship while promoting their own media outlets of propaganda. The descent into censorship is often the same. First, those in power will deride those with whom they disagree. Next, they undermine the legitimacy of dissent. Finally, they silence any voices who do not seem to support those in power (Davey-Quantick, 2016).

Surprisingly, such censorship is not always perceived as dangerous, in fact, many welcome it. Some welcome it because of the comfort that order brings. Others just want voices with which they disagree to be silenced. Since the concept of censorship has such a negative connotation, such actions must be redefined to ease the cognitive dissonance (Hentoff, 1992). While others are left to simply resign themselves to the fact that they are now powerless in the wake of such control.

Digital technology, with has provided endless numbers of outlets and ease to information, was supposed to create a new era of informed citizenry and diversity in ideas. Instead, it seems that technology has created a cacophony so great it becomes increasingly

difficult to determine what is truth. Unable to decipher what is factual, we are often reduced to simple heuristics, relying on partisan filters to analyze information. Feeling the stress of information overload, we don't need to rely on authoritarian governments to censor - communication technologies allow us to censor any conflicting ideas and to reside in the information bubble in which we feel most comfortable (El-Bermawy, 2016).

Whether it is governmental, economic or social - censorship persists and with the rise of extremism, it may become more prevalent. Censorship has been studied in other fields such as law, political science and religious studies, but this special section examines the concept from an audience studies perspective. As other fields examine the issues of power and morality, we look to examine the concept itself by asking how people make meaning of censorship - the essays here are some first steps toward answering this question.

In different ways our authors give a sense of how 'texts' are talked about, how they are named and described as problematic, as in need of censorship. It is important to understand the discourses of regulation, the ways in which they lay out the effects or the dangers of the cultural forms under attack, not least because those arguments come to shape the responses of audiences.

Our first essay is a transcript of Martin Barker's interview with James Ferman one-time director of British Board of Film Classification and offers remarkable insight into the ways in which the British 'chief censor' understood his own role as the personification of a 'protective' class – that group of people with the skills, knowledges and privilege to make the decisions about what might be good for 'audiences'. Shortly before his retirement, Ferman defended David Cronenberg's film *Crash* (1996) which had been under sustained attack from the right-wing publication *Daily Mail* for its depiction of sex and violence. Amongst the very interesting insights this interview offers, is the sense that while Ferman's discussions of sexual violence are couched in quite dated language the debates have hardly moved on. Even if Barker's interview illuminates the ways in which Ferman has several interpretations and evaluations of *Crash* – just like any other audience member – what distinguishes Ferman are his personal and professional stakes in limiting others' access to film.

Mark McLelland also looks to the official discourses of protection as he examines New Zealand's refusal to give a classification to the popular anime *Puni Puni Poemy*, on the grounds that it might promote child sex abuse. McLelland explores the ways in which the various authorities involved refused to understand the texts and contexts of the anime, in particular missing its parodic elements and insisting on refusing it a rating even though it had been acceptable in other jurisdictions (and was widely available online). McLelland frames his argument within a broader understanding of panics relating to the supposedly direct causal effect between fantasy images and actual behaviours, and the increasingly constant cry that children, even fictive ones, must be protected. In examining the mismatch between the assessments of the text by the New Zealand authorities and the understandings that fans give to the text, McLelland argues that there are specific Western-

centric prejudices at work in the negative ratings given to manga, anime and other genres of Japanese popular culture and that these assessments have impacts on their audiences who are 'not conceived of as individual, discerning viewers, but as unruly subjects in need of regulation and guidance by approved bodies'. We might ask who cares about the restrictions on a few cartoons? But in an era of the criminalization of possession, the designation of a text as not suitable for rating carries further legal impacts for audiences that go beyond merely restricting what can be seen.

Thus one finding made by Gennari and Dibeltulo in their historical look at censorship in the Italian cinema during the 1950s might give us pause for thought. Using video interviews, Gennari and Dibeltulo explore the ways individuals offer a constructed self through the narration of their memories, their misrememberings and omissions, as well as evidence of the mediations - the ways in which 'official' or 'public' discourses, articulated by the State, the Church, and the press - provide 'inherited templates' for understanding censorial interventions. Their oral history of how audiences remember censorship from this era illustrates a broader perception of the immediate post-war years as a period of increased political freedom - having emerged from the Fascist regime and its totalitarian practices, Italians recognized censorship of sex and violence as appropriate for that particular historical period. The particular practices of censorship and its impacts on individuals are perhaps easily forgotten in a more generalized narrative of the 'past'.

Ideas of the 'past' are also a part of Florian Vörös's interviews with white, heterosexual males in France. Public discourses over the behavioural effects of pornography traditionally contrast 'affected' audiences with 'unaffected' experts. Vörös examines everyday self-censorship practices, and the ways in which 'third-person effect' discourses find their way into the self-reflexivity of twelve adult men who respond to the social norm of the mature and responsible viewer versus the figure of the ghetto youth 'as an encouragement to self-control, especially through the call to draw a clear line between fantasy and reality'. His exploration finds that these adult men offer their own humorous memories of discovering pornography during their adolescence but then go on to frame the problem of young audiences' access to pornography as significantly different - for *them*, age and generation equal vulnerability. Vörös argues that 'The performance of the unaffected audience thus relies on the embodiment of a hegemonic model of 'mature, responsible and reflexive' masculinity. The ability to take critical distance from one's own pornographic practices is here defined as the exclusive property of well-educated viewers'.

Our final essay in this special section returns us to anime and Samantha Close's argument that we should analyse 'censorship as a continual, on-going process responding to a tangle of economic interests, audience passions, and governmental policies rather than the fiat of any one decision maker' is an important one. Close demonstrates how producers of the anime series *Sailor Moon* self-regulated the text in order to open it up to the American market and how audiences were also forced to balance their desire for textual integrity with the producer's need for economic viability. This exploration of the ways in which fan groups disputed the best means by which *Sailor Moon* might enter Western

cultural mainstream media opens up a range of questions about the role of audiences in the regulation, and gatekeeping of individual media texts as well as the cultural and social meanings of censorship.

The essays collated in this special section illustrate a reception studies approach to censorship. They examine different eras, different genres and different players. Ultimately, our special section begins the work of demonstrating the complexities of thinking about audiences and censorship. Censorship seems straight forward – the unwanted control over information by an authority. But each of those factors is open to interpretation: What is unwanted? What is control? Who is the authority? In whose interests might censorship operate? These articles reveal that the answers to these questions are complex and varied.

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