

What is Happening to Freedom of Speech?

by Nadia Hava-Robbins, MA



"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, who poverty

and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz..."

--Allen Ginsberg, excerpted from "Howl"

In 1950, Allen Ginsberg wrote an epic poem, "Howl", which attacked the consumerism and conformity of the 1950's and proclaimed a

newly emerging American counterculture. Lawrence Ferlinghetti faced jail and a fine fifty years ago for first publishing "Howl". The poem was declared obscene and banned from schools and any public broadcasting. On October 13, 1957, Judge Clayton Horn ruled the poem not obscene. In essence, he stated that although the theme of "Howl" presents unorthodox and controversial ideas and coarse vulgar language, unless the book is entirely lacking in social importance it cannot be held obscene.

Fifty years later and in spite of the judge's ruling, "Howl" remains as controversial as ever. Good luck finding the poem in school literature, 21st century or not. People are still afraid to broadcast "Howl" because the courts may declare it obscene regardless and issue a single fine of a million dollars which would completely destroy a non-commercial station. WBAI, the Pacifica Foundation station in New York will not broadcast "Howl" for this reason but will post it online in a special, online-only program called "Howl Against Censorship". It will be posted on www.pacifica.org, the internet home of the Berkeley based Pacifica Foundation, because online sites do not fall under the FCC's purview. WBAI program director, Bernard White, admitted that they are surrounded by a lot of red ink.

The "Howl" is a prime example of government censorship of an important critique of American culture.

It is ironic that a poem of social significance will not be broadcast nor read in the schools, perhaps because of its social significance and not necessarily because of its strong language. Yet TV programming; everyday entertainment for all ages, children and adults, is full of crime, aggression, sexual situations, including strong language and state-sponsored terrorism, etc. What a great way to reinforce violence and aggression! On the other hand, encouraging critical thinking regarding current social and political issues could prove to be a dangerous proposition. Over the summer of 2007, Ken Burn's World War II documentary, "The War" was broadcast on San Francisco's KQED. It was the "clean" version if there could be such a thing, because the station feared FCC fines over four letter words. Now, consider and weigh the potential impact of four letter words compared to a 14 hour visually graphic documentary about the brutality of war. Did the removal of four letter words really "clean up" the documentary?

But one does not need to be using provocative, "bad" or strong language to be censored or penalized. Recently, a teacher was fired for sharing with her students that she attended a demonstration against the war. If the USA's governing body was a dictatorship, free speech would indeed be a dangerous weapon to be curtailed, but we are led to believe that we live in a democracy, that we have freedom of speech. Do we? To what degree? Is that good enough?

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