

CENSORING WRITERS



How each writer deals with self-censorship is their own problem. The advent of the internet, blogging, self-publishing, e-publishing and the opportunities opened up by twitter and Facebook do, on one level seem to get round the problem of censorship and the main blocks to free expression. But at the same time, we have to ask how many people read these things? And how do you get to hear about the really good stuff? And still they cannot help with the problem of self – censorship...

Carl Tighe

Ask yourself:

- Am I aware of censorship?
- In what ways am I censored?
- How does censorship affect my thoughts and feelings on responsibility?
- If I am censored, am I still responsible?
- Is confronting censorship a responsibility for me now in the UK?
- In what ways are my responsibilities as a writer defined or compromised by commercial pressures?
- Do I censor myself?

Censorship in the UK has a long and very uneven history. It has been imposed by Puritans and Royalists in wartime and in peace, by governments of both right and left. However, since 1968 there has been no censorship in theatre and since 1964 there has been no serious attempt to bring a prosecution under the Obscene Publications act: effectively there is no system of censorship in Britain.

Censorship is the expression of an opinion on other peoples' morals and conduct. A censor is a state official who has the legal power to suppress in whole or in part books, plays, films, letters, news, opinions and comment on the grounds of sedition, treason, obscenity, morality, religion or state security. A censor can delete or change sections of a work or may suppress the whole of it. Throughout modern history censorship has been practiced by most regimes – particularly in times of war. It probably reached its most developed stage under the Communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Knowledge, like the arts, has always fought a desperate battle with the status quo. There has always been controversy over criticisms of orthodoxy in the realm of the spirit, and revisionist theological developments have always been censored. At various time a great many creative authors have run up against the censor: Jonson, Chapman, Marston, Shakespeare, Daniel, Middleton, John Gay, Henry Fielding, Defoe, Thomas Paine, William Cobbett, and George Bernard Shaw, to name but a few. Galileo's *World Systems*, Bruno's *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, Martin Luther's *Ninety Five Theses*, or Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* are just a few of the books that have run into trouble. But at various times massive efforts have also been made to censor or suppress basic *The Bible* in vernacular languages, the *Koran*, the *Talmud* and Moses Maimonides' *Book of the Perplexed*.¹ Scientific knowledge has often fought a desperate battle with the status quo.

As a writer I have to wonder why people want to censor certain works of literature and what the motivation behind the effort to censor might be. Censorship, its defenders say, seeks to protect society from the disconcerting and the unsettling, the unacceptable and the damaging. At one and the same moment Censorship also prevents the free circulation of ideas and information, the formulation of ambitions and feelings that lie outside the norm. Censorship limits our sympathy and

¹ N. J. Karolides, M. Bald & D. B. Sova, *100 Banned Books: Censorship Histories of World Literature*, Checkmark: New York, 1999.

understanding of what lies outside the norm simply because it limits our access to other ways of thinking and feeling.

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In Britain Henry VIII seems to have been the original perpetrator. The secularisation of theatre and the invention of printing greatly multiplied the possibilities for the spread of sedition and heresy, threatening the life of the Church, the government, the Crown. Henry's concern that the country was being overrun by heretical and seditious publications led to the requirement in 1538 that all books and pamphlets be licensed. In 1586 Bishop Whitgift extended this control to fall within the power of the Court of the Star Chamber; he appointed a committee of twelve to license all printing, and decreed a reduction in the number of presses. In 1599 the satirical works of Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe were burnt under these laws.

In the years leading up to the English Revolution there were further extensions of Crown power over printing, publishing and the theatre. In 1641 Cromwell tightened print licensing controls and in 1644 John Milton protested at the 'licensing' of printed matter, censorship by another name, in his essay *Areopagitica* but to no effect. In 1655 Cromwell simplified matters by making all unofficial publication illegal. After the Restoration of the monarchy a series of informers assisted Parliament and the Solicitor to the Treasury in bringing before the courts libelous matter likely to cause a breach of the peace, or to bring the King, his government, Parliament, the administration or the Church into disrepute. Punishments included the pillory, imprisonment, fines and a substantial financial security against future good conduct.

In the eighteenth century the government often supplemented censorship by simply buying up opposition publications in order to close them down or by subsidising pro-government titles like *The Review* (Daniel Defoe), *The Examiner* (Jonathan Swift) and *The Briton* (Tobias Smollet). In 1703 Daniel Defoe, even though he had written in favour of the government, was arrested, imprisoned and pilloried for his ecclesiastical pamphlets. The application of legal controls also put Thomas Paine in danger of prosecution for his book *The Rights of Man* (1791-92). William Cobbett, who had denounced flogging in the armed forces, was fined £1000 and sentenced to two years in jail for his audacity.

British theatre too was subject to severe control after about 1549, when actors were classed as vagabonds and vagrants unless they could secure the patronage and protection of a powerful figure at court. After 1574 all plays had to be licensed by the Master of the Revels, who was interested primarily in state security. The powers of the Lord Chamberlain and the Master of the Revels expanded rapidly and after 1581 they could even imprison offenders. Jonson, Chapman, Marston, Shakespeare, Daniel, Middleton and many others were to tangle with them over the years, mainly for jibes at the crown.

Renaissance playwrights were also hedged about by the influence of the rising Puritan movement. They exercised considerable influence within the local government of London and regarded all stage plays as the product of the devil. Although Prynne's play *Historiomastix* (1632) was full of scathing references to the Puritans, the Court of the Star Chamber held it to be a satire on Charles I and for this Prynne was fined, imprisoned and sentenced to have his ears cut off.

It is no accident that in the Revolution of 1640 the Privy Council and its censors were one of the first instruments of the old tyranny to be broken up by the new government. However, there was to be little need for theatrical control of the theatre under the revolutionary government since the Revolutionaries were determined that there was to be no theatre to control. In place of the old tyranny the English Revolution put in place a new tyranny which in 1642 prohibited all theatre. When this ban was repeatedly ignored, the law was passed again in 1647, and this time it was rigorously enforced.

After 1660 and the Restoration of the monarchy, there followed a period of unbridled licentiousness - particularly in the English theatre. However, in 1698 the opposite reaction set in and the Master of the Revels was directed to suppress anything that was contrary to 'religion, good manners and public morals'. By the early eighteenth century effective control of the theatre had returned into the hands of the Lord Chamberlain, for whom good order took second place to squashing satires on the monarchy. John Gay and Henry Fielding both fell foul of the censor for their theatrical satires.

In 1737 an Act of Parliament revised theatrical regulation and attempted to tighten censorship, but this was widely ignored. In 1832 a Commons Select Committee revised the theatre laws and there followed a long period in which the laws remained strict and unchanged: during this period Maeterlinck, Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw were all censored. After several very trying years, when plays by John Osborne and Joe Orton tested censorship to the limit, the Lord Chamberlain's involvement in theatrical censorship was abolished in 1968.

Although the USA trumpets freedom of speech very loudly, in reality the first amendment to the constitution, guaranteeing freedom of speech, religion, conscience and opinion has been seriously compromised at every stage of its existence. Including the laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol in the 1930s, outside of communism, the USA has been one of the most Puritanical, conformist and repressive societies the world has seen.

In 1893, for example, the anarchist Emma Goldman was arrested for urging a crowd of hungry unemployed to demonstrate for poor relief. She based her defence on the right to free speech guaranteed by the constitution, lost the case and spent the next 10 months in prison. Nothing daunted, on her release Emma Goldman helped found the Free Speech League in 1903. However, these were difficult times for independent thinkers, and after the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 free speech came under further attack with long prison sentences for all those who opposed US entry into WWI. J. Edgar Hoover used the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917-18 to catch Emma Goldman. At the time it was said she had been arrested for conspiring to obstruct the military draft. However, her feminism, involvement with the International Workers of the World and struggle for labour rights were clearly the real reasons why she was stripped of her US citizenship and deported to Russia. Censorship of ideas does not always involve the suppression of a particular piece of writing.

In the 1950s the Senator Eugene McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities conducted a long witch-hunt to find communists in the arts and in politics, and succeeded in getting a great many works banned and in ruining countless lives by innuendo, by smear, and by forcing people to testify against friends and colleagues. Although it was seeking to 'out' communists, the tactics it used were very close to those of the Stalinist witch-hunts that had marked Soviet politics throughout the 1930, 40s and 50s.

The withdrawal of censorship in Eastern Europe after 1989, the freedom to think and say and do just what you like, was a dizzying and totally disorienting experience for the writers of the former Soviet bloc. For 45 years the opponents of communism had known what they were against and where their main opponents were to be found. Now they did not know the shape of their world, did not know who they were against or where their enemies were. The speed of the change after 1989, and the sudden silence of the writers in these societies made the shock of 'liberation' into democracy, the sudden proximity of the multinational, multi-ethnic west and the tantalising nearness of expensive consumer goodies on the 'free' market all very difficult to cope with. The result was not pleasant to watch. 45 years of communism had merely suppressed a lot of ideas without confronting them. It was suddenly quite common to hear openly anti-Semitic, anti-Gypsy, anti-foreigner, anti-intellectual comment.

In general censorship throughout the world has been in retreat since the mid-1960s. We no longer have official censorship in the UK. But what forms of unofficial censorship do we have now? And what does the absence of censorship mean? The printed word, theatre, film, radio and TV, were each at one time the site of an intense battle for cultural, religious, sexual and political control. But each of these has now ceased to be a threat to the establishment, has ceased to be an object of interest for the would-be controllers, and is consequently, no longer a real case for censorship.

To a great extent this change represents a successful struggle to wrest culture from the hands of a cultural and political élite. But that censorship has relaxed its grip on creativity is also an indication that these areas are no longer as powerful, innovative or exciting as they once were. In short, they are no longer a danger to established power structures. These areas no longer need defending or even policing.

The real focus of power has shifted elsewhere. If culture is no longer a site of significant conflict, the focus of change or worth controlling, then what is? And what are the issues worth arguing about? If official censorship does not tell us where the pressure points are, how do we know what is worth defending? How do we know what is worth attacking? How do we know what needs changing? Where has the conflict shifted? Where is the focal point?

Clearly the struggles around expression of sexuality and sexual preference have largely disappeared. However, issues of ethnicity, culture and identity have become more problematic. And they have become compounded or confused with religious matters. And there is a desperate confusion amounting to self-censorship when we (the host society) comes to consider elements of the religious practice of people settling in this country – even when they have been here for many years.

After 9/11 we were clearly and suddenly in the middle of a cultural shift that had in fact been going on for some time. In a secular society, religion – and increasingly fundamentalist versions of religion in Christianity, Judaism and in Islam – had become a catch-all for the politics of race, colour, class, poverty and the problems of the clash between an out-dated village tribal identity and modern urban citizenship. Religion – particularly fundamentalism – has increasingly become the ‘safe place’ and ‘home identity’ for ‘outsiders’. But our reaction to this has been uncertain: it is possible we have censored ourselves.

Events of the last few years in the UK – even if they do not signal a public willingness to return to censorship - have given all writers new cause for concern. In particular:

- the *fatwah* on Salman Rushdie
- the riot at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre over the play *Behzti*
- the attempt by the Evangelical Christian Right to get *Jerry Springer: The Opera* banned from TV
- the proposed Religious Hatred Bill,
- the arrest of Samina Malik, ‘the lyrical terrorist’

But in addition, and probably less well known:

- After her play *Bells* portrayed the life of prostitutes within South Asian communities in Britain, Yasmin Whittaker Khan was harassed for several months by male members of that community.
- In Manchester the journalist Shiv Malik, a journalist praised by politicians and police for his work against terrorism, has been hounded by the police over a book he has been researching on the subject of an ex-jihadi terrorist: police have confiscated his notes and tapes and have pursued him through the courts to gain access to his entire library of notes and contacts. His publishers have been forced to delay publication.
- In Cambridge two students were arrested and questioned after reprinting Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed in a college magazine.
- In London three men were arrested in September 2008, charged with firebombing the publishing house Gibson Square because it was about to publish Sherry Jones’ novel *The Jewel of Medina*, about the prophet Mohamed’s wife, Aisha.

There is often a conceptual confusion at work here, where people mistake a flight of fantasy, a legitimate creative criticism or a literary work for a real threat. But it is also about responsibility. In the west we sometimes need reminding that with rights come responsibilities. Responsibility is just freedom looked at from a different angle.

Over the last few years, with good reason, the least respected occupations have been bankers, journalists and politicians. The most sensitive topic at the moment is earnings – particularly bankers’ bonuses and politicians’ expenses – taxes, fees and employment. As the economy sheds jobs the bankers who caused the crisis continue to operate unchecked; politicians Cameron and Clegg (who are themselves public school educated graduates from Eton and Oxford, multi-millionaires and the

children of bankers) continue to shield and protect bankers from investigation, legislation, control and punishment.

Since 1999 the average take-home pay of the top FTSE 100 CEOs has doubled to £2.5m. That is 88 times the amount earned by the average UK employee. However, the behaviour of these top earners has caused a massive economic problem. Fred Goodwin, the CEO of Royal Bank of Scotland, left the bank with bills of £32.5bn in 2007-10 alone, the British taxpayer with a bill of £45bn, and the loss of 25,000 jobs. But he walked away with a fortune in pay, bonuses, and severance so large that so far no-one has been able to accurately estimate its size. The same can be said of the merger of HBOS and Lloyds, forced through in the final days of Gordon Brown's leadership, when 24,000 employees lost their jobs and the share value lost 85% of its worth on the Stock Exchange. However, the financial advisers who monitored the deal collected fees worth hundreds of millions. Sir Victor Blank, the architect of the deal, instead of facing criminal action, retained his job, took his share of the fees and was invited to guest edit BBC Radio 4's Christmas 2011 *Today* programme. Corporate finance, politicians and corporate media seem to be in bed together - can this be so?

Well what do we hear of this in the newspapers? What we hear is that while corporate tax evasion costs the UK somewhere between £40-120bn per year newspapers prefer to write about benefit fraud which costs a mere £1.1billion. At the same time politicians are convicted of financial malpractice over Parliamentary expenses which, compared to the sums involved in the banking crisis are piffling and press coverage out of all proportion. At the same time press coverage of the principled Occupy movement which camped outside St Paul's cathedral was extremely negative: a *Daily Mail* headline on the day the City of London started eviction proceedings read: 'Desecration, defecation and Class A drugs'.

In general, as George Monbiot has pointed out, in the face of the enormous losses made by investment bankers, the press, rather than expose the story has operated to protect its own owner-class interests and has represented the banking story 'neither fairly nor clearly'. Rather than explain and investigate they have operated to contain, baffle, foil and shut down dissent. The state of the newspapers and their ruthlessness can be gauged by the Leveson Inquiry (2011) where 3,000 witnesses queued up to give evidence about criminal behaviour in phone hacking by the sleazy editors and journalists of the Murdoch's *News of the World* and other papers. You may call this Bankocracy or crony capitalism, but free speech and democracy it is not. George Monbiot commented: 'Our political system has been corrupted by the entire corporate media. Defending ourselves from the economic elite means naming and unmasking the power of the press.'²

And it is not just our own internal politics that are affected by the power of the press. Lance Price, a Downing Street policy adviser under Tony Blair, has said in his diaries that Blair never even tried to make an argument with the party, Parliament or the electorate, for Britain to play a fuller role in the EU simply because he could never get the idea past media mogul Rupert Murdoch.³

² G. Monbiot, 'The Corporate Press', *The Guardian* (13 December 2011), 29.

³ J. Harris, 'Let's Face It', *The Guardian* (13 December 2011), 31.

Privacy (as evidenced by the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal) is a major and developing problem. The right to privacy and 'the public's right to know' are increasingly in conflict. While the freedom of the press to invade privacy through phone hacking was being debated, in the US a soldier called the Bradley Manning case was prosecuted for sending secret documents via email to Julian Assange who promptly leaked them on the internet in what became known as the Wikileaks scandal. Assange, rather than being prosecuted for the leaks was arrested and charged with a rape case in Sweden. In the UK we had the Snowden security leaks scandal about the NSA and GCHQ tapping into our data roaming information whenever we go abroad. Technology has made information a whole new issue and is very difficult for the authorities to censor or control – but is that the kind of freedom we want?

Clearly censorship has not gone away entirely. Several writers have noted an increasing tendency towards self-censorship, political correctness has a particular tendency towards censorship, and the British military during the Falklands War and again during the Gulf Wars have used censorship to try to prevent particular stories circulating. The British government can still use a 'D Notice' on matters of Defence, and use this as an effective gag. However, mobile phones and blogging have made censorship of this kind increasingly difficult.

But the will to control how others think and feel is not precise or predictable, nor is it simple in its effects. Censorship often works to its own disadvantage by making a much sought after prize out of that which it seeks to reduce to nothing. However, books and films judged by one generation to be obscene or pornographic are often judged by the next generation to be erotic and classic.

Over the last decade or so there have been numerous calls for the re-imposition of state censorship, so it should come as no surprise that in 2005, the Writers Guild of Great Britain, after a 12-year period of inaction, felt obliged to reactivate its Anti-Censorship Committee.⁴ However, there are no signs of the government re-imposing censorship. There is no real need of censorship in a country which is so polite and so unengaged. The fact is that with a passive middle-class and a corporate media controlling the flow of information, with the ruling political elite protecting the big corporations and investment bankers, we hardly perceive the need to discuss political issues and lack the detailed information to do so: we are managed very effectively without censorship.⁵

But what about the culture of entitlement? And the culture of celebrity? These cultures which insist that people are somehow entitled to pensions, benefits, special treatment, additional support, allowances, special treatment of some kind up to and including celebrity status for no discernible achievement, have begun to clash with the economic collapse. It has been suggested that this combination is a new, volatile and emerging issue which in the summer of 2011 resulted in widespread rioting in the UK.

⁴ Alan Drury, 'On the Revival of the Guild's Anti-Censorship Committee', *UK Writer*, (Autumn, 2005), 17.

⁵ J. Pilger, *Freedon Next Time* (Black Swan: London, 2007).

Education is part of the economic crisis and part of the clash with the developing culture of entitlement. Education has become an issue for those who feel entitled but lack the skills necessary to succeed, or to do as well as they would like. But as universities are obliged to change gear, to accommodate the culture of entitlement and incorporate remedial literacy as part of the curriculum, this debate is not being made public. Meanwhile politicians and the general public continue to ignore the inflation of 'A' level grades, ignore collusion between 'A' level teachers and examiners, the nose dive in basic literacy even at university entrance level, and the decline in the general competency of students arriving at university. Six years ago 30% of students admitted to university would fail a basic literacy test: now over 60% would fail a basic literacy test. For the most part the general public is not interested in what happens to universities and these changes have gone almost unobserved. What people hear is only that the universities are charging higher fees. But this is not censorship, just control of public debate by other means. Or perhaps it is just total public indifference? After all the ability to concentrate on ideas and the very notion of attention span – which is part of the human faculty of mind – are clearly shrinking under the influence of TV, video games and cheap technology.

Banking, economics, honesty, wealth and privilege - though they clearly lurk behind what is troubling us now and are likely to compound social problems around identity and religious politics - are not openly addressed in any readily accessible way, and if they are, are often dismissed as minority concerns. This does not mean that information in these areas is being censored; merely that it is being controlled.

Uncertainty about how to respond to ideas which masquerades as religious belief or cultural identity, but which compromise the cultural norms of the secular majority are increasingly problematic. Yet rather than open engagement and criticism they usually occasion self-censorship. For example, do we speak out often enough about forced marriage, honour killings, wife beating and the oppression of women? Do we have an effective way of challenging child beating in Madrasas? Do we have an effective way of insisting on female literacy? Have there been any prosecutions for female genital mutilation in the UK? We tend to pass these things off as cultural difference, something we don't mess with.

Also it is a question of how aware we actually are. Although most people in the UK are certain they do not want religious law, in fact we already have Sharia Law and Mosaic Law as part of our legal system and our courts make use of them particularly in the areas of Marriage and Divorce.

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Censorship has always been a blunt tool. Now it has gone (almost), as writers we have to ask ourselves certain questions:

- What are the limits of free speech?
- How can we defend both religious belief and secular society?
- Why shouldn't people be offended?
- Why should there be blasphemy laws?

- What is the difference between explaining the causes of terrorism and justifying the causes of terrorism?
- Are criticism, opposition, activism and dissemination of information necessarily bad?
- How can writers have an impact?
- What can writers say - should we speak out or self-censor?
- Should we be extra-paranoid that there is no obvious censorship?
- What are the other means by which writers are now controlled?

But a more insidious enemy for writers of all kinds attempting to operate in a highly commercial world where artistic endeavour of all kinds has been commoditised is that of Self-Censorship.

Self-censorship plays an increasing part in our lives, but we hardly notice it because we have internalised the process. Some writers, making the claim that they want to make a living from their work, rather than saying what they think needs to be said, make what they write more palatable, more marketable. They avoid subjects and treatments which a grants team would not like to hear about or support; they avoid certain words and kinds of language in case this offends. They do this to get their work published or broadcast. In almost all cases the appeal is 'for the greater good' – which equates with their commercial success. And often it is excused with the line that it is better that they are published rather than not, that it is better to have a kind of slow, creeping, almost invisible, acceptable radicality somewhere in the system than not at all. After all, it is said, there is no point in writing not to be read or broadcast.

How each writer deals with self-censorship is their own problem. The advent of the internet, blogging, self-publishing, e-publishing and the opportunities opened up by twitter and Facebook do, on one level seem to get round the problem of censorship and the main blocks to free expression. But at the same time, we have to ask how many people read these things? And how do you get to hear about the really good stuff? And still they cannot help with the problem of self –censorship...

So I come back to my original questions:

- Am I aware of censorship?
- In what ways am I censored?
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- If I am censored, am I still responsible?
- Is confronting censorship a responsibility for me now in the UK?
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