Presentation to Beacon for free expression

Censorship of film, broadcast and Internet

Many kinds of censorship exist in the world – depending upon the nature of the government, it's relationship with its people, the values of a society and wider international concerns. In addition, the form censorship takes can vary a great deal depending upon the media. The way censorship works in broadcasting, film and the Internet is a good illustration of this.

Censorship can be understood in one of two ways. One is to see it as a system in its own right, with its own rules and logic. Censors prefer this – they can talk about the national interest, safeguarding morals etc. and imply that the differences between different kinds of censorship is purely one of degree.

Or it can be understood as a restriction upon the fundamental human right to freedom of expression. Since the founding of the United nations, freedom of expression has been seen as one of the foundation rights of a society – something which determines the extent to which other rights and freedoms an exists. From this point of view any restriction to free expression has to be a "necessary evil". It must comply with certain principles to be consistent with international law and standards – the grounds for censorship must be defined in law, not left to the censors discretion, and the censorship must serve a public interest that outweighs the damage caused by the censorship.

From this latter perspective it is possible to make a few generalisations about censorship across all three of these media – all I have time for in the time available to me.

Broadcasting is still the most important communication medium in the world – the one through which most people get their information. Most of the world's population – even the very poor – have access to a radio.

For this reason it is important that broadcast media operate in an open, pluralist manner, and that all points of view are represented. The prior censorship of broadcasting by government censors is incompatible with this need. Some regulation of broadcasting is necessary – to allocate frequencies for example. But it is important that any regulatory authority be independent of the government and be accountable to a wider forum. The best state broadcasters are actually public broadcasters – state owned but not state controlled – and with a remit to serve all the population including specific minority and language groups. Censorship systems tend – in the broadcast world - to operate through direct government control of the media and through appointing partisans to run them. Such state-controlled media is usually abysmal in quality – unprofessional, uninteresting and crippled by people who daren't think for themselves.

On the positive side, such control requires the stations to be based in the country concerned. Increasingly international radio stations and satellite

television are transforming the media environment by providing sources of information for the people as a whole.

Film censorship is very different. As Gerry Rich, the president of marketing for MGM said recently, "the world is such a mix of values and beliefs that there is no standard formula about what would be offensive""

In the USA for example they are very tolerant of violence in film, but are wary of sex and offensive language. Europeans and Latin Americans will tolerate a much greater display of sexuality but are wary of violence. Parts of Eastern Europe – after years of soviet censorship have virtually no censorship. Asia can be very restrictive, banning films completely unless the distributors agree to wholesale cuts. In the Arab world there is a high degree of censorship – one observer said he had never seen a kiss in an Algerian film. Heavy-handed censorship leads to filmmakers internalising the values of the censors – it leads to self-censorship, which is destructive of any artist.

The censorship system applying to films is usually controlled by the state, although the system in the USA is a voluntary one exercised by the Motion Picture Association. State censorship does not always mean bad films – the Chinese cinema is a good example of one where great films have been produced despite a requirement that all films are approved by a Bureau of Censorship. But the Chinese authorities also seek to make money – to encourage the export of Chinese films. They've been keen for Chinese filmmakers to learn from Hollywood and allowed them to explore joint ventures with foreign financing. All of this has led to a substantial grey area where filmmakers can operate.

In general however, the more rigid the system of state censorship the more dire the films and the more restricted the output.

The Internet offers an interesting contrast to both broadcasting and film. It is a medium that is both open and decentralised – accessible to anyone with the minimum of technology. Through it people can gain access to alternative sources of information and ideas very cheaply. Even more usefully, any person with access to a personal computer and modem can communicate with a huge international audience at a low cost. Few of us can publish books or newspapers, make a film, or air a radio or television program but we can all post information on the Internet. It's invaluable for organisations like ARTICLE 19 – enabling us to communicate throughout the world.

If governments are willing to make computers available to the public at libraries, schools or community centers, or allow the development of private Internet cafes you don't even need a computer to go on-line. And it in is in the more repressive countries that the Internet can have the greatest impact. Wherever it is accessible, the Internet has provided dramatic new possibilities for people to obtain and exchange information locally and internationally. It is a major force for undermining censorship.

The very nature of the Internet makes it difficult to control. In countries where there is no local Internet Service Provider (ISP) people can, for the price of an international call, dial service providers in other countries. The use of mirror sites, anti-censorship proxy servers and encrypted software all help evade the censor's grasp. But censorship is possible. State's can deny the public local access to the Internet altogether, as China, Burma, Iraq, Libya, and Syria and, until recently Saudi Arabia have done. States can also develop internet specific laws to control the net, to try and filter material coming in state controlled servers and block access to certain sites (as the Chinese do over information about Tibet).

In practice I find that a higher level of toleration is accorded material on the Internet. Articles which are banned in the Arabic versions of Egyptian newspapers will appear on their English language Internet version.

The Internet is likely to be the biggest censorship battleground in years to come. As an unregulated medium it is already home to those groups who find themselves suppressed from day to day politics, such as neo-Nazi groups.

In general, the last fifteen years have seen major successes in the battle against censorship. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the ending of military dictatorships in much of Latin America, the democratization of Asia and Africa, the world has become a more open place. More and more countries are having to reduce their censorship controls, recognising that in the modern world it is neither economically advantageous or politically practical to continue to exercise them. But there is a long way to go and we have much to do before the citizens of the world have equal access to information and ideas.