
Editorial

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When we think about censorship today, vivid images of brutal governments' repression of free speech around the world might come to mind. The works of courageous artists and activists like Ai Wei Wei – an outspoken critic of China's Communist rulers – are constant reminders of the curbing of dissent perpetrated by the Chinese government. Wei Wei's criticism has put him on a collision course with the Chinese government, despite his artistic international fame. In fact, he was assaulted and beaten by the police after having investigated and documented the names of more than 5000 children who had died under shoddy school buildings in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Similarly, we cannot forget the appalling murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, 'guilty' of having unfolded horrific stories about abductions and Russian military abuses against civilians in Chechnya. Likewise, we are aware that Iran has in place one of the most extensive internet filtering systems in the world (OpenNet Initiative, 2007) that proved its strength when protests erupted over the recent disputed election victory of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Without a doubt, the entire history of communication is also a history of censorship, as different censors – in the shape of governments or dedicated individuals – strove to restrict people's rights to information, ideas or culture. As Green rightly observes:

All censorship, whether governmental or cultural, can be seen to spring from a single origin – fear. The belief that if the speech, book, play, film, state secret or whatever is permitted free exposure, then the authorities will find themselves threatened to an extent that they cannot tolerate. (Green and Karolides, 2005, xviii)

Hence, many academic studies have been focused on deliberate forms of censorship exerted throughout history by official means in totalitarian or anti-democratic regimes (Green and Karolides, 2005; Jones, 2002; Warburton, 2009).

Nevertheless, censorship has always been present in democratic countries as well, more subtle in nature and very often self-imposed. Authors like Petley (2007,2009) have provided thorough accounts of how more indirect, but nevertheless effective forms of censorship operate in countries like the USA and the UK. He illustrated how market censorship is powerful in the USA and intensifying in the UK. Additionally, he observes how:

with 9-11 and the subsequent terrorist attacks in various European countries, many of the features of the Cold War returned to haunt the European media with the spectre of Communism being replaced by the shadowy threat of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Once again civil liberties – including freedom of expression – have found themselves sacrificed to 'national security'. (Petley, 2009, 6)

Thus, this new issue of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* is specifically dedicated to an international perspective on various practices that go beyond official forms of censorship. Corporate pressures on media professionals, omissions and bias, under-reporting of controversial issues, sourcing constraints, lack of newsworthiness and self-censorship are all examples of free-speech restrictions. When we issued our Call for Papers some time ago we had expected a higher resonance from all over the world. Organizations that cover issues of censorship and related issues such as Reporters without Borders or Freedom House Index publish long lists of examples of direct censorship each year. So if these organizations highlight cases of direct censorship one wonders how many more cases of indirect censorship exist. It is these hidden and sometimes not at all obvious mechanisms that seem even more dangerous, as some of them are not even acknowledged publicly by journalists and editors who are affected by them in their daily work. It is even more difficult to look at this issue from the perspectives of readers and audience as they are often unaware of these subtleties.

In his lucid critique of media practices in Britain, Orwell (1972) was already warning about the impact of less obvious forms of censorship on the flows of information. In his preface to *Animal Farm*, first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 15 September 1972, he declared that: 'Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban.' Hence, we start our volume on '*the ambiguities of censorship*' with a reflection on the work of George Orwell by Jean Seaton, Chair and one of the Trustees of the Orwell Prize. Orwell was a founding member of organizations like Amnesty International and Pen, organizations which work to protect writers and freedom of speech. As Seaton argues, Orwell's work is incredibly useful today, because he clearly identified the most terrifying kind of censorship: the kind that you do to yourself and that you even enthusiastically embrace.

Our second contribution is from Sue Jansen, who reassesses the imperatives of market censorship. After an investigation of the ways in which the term ‘*market censorship*’ has been used during its short history, Jansen asserts that, under neoliberalism, market censorship increasingly influences the flow of information. Moreover, she argues, under neoliberalism, politics is more and more subordinated to economics. This leads to a situation where market censors and political authorities work ‘in consonance with each other’.

Foreign funding of films is perhaps not immediately associated with any form of censorship but Irit Neidhardt poignantly brings this topic to the fore, despite the difficulty of tackling it, as almost no written accounts exist. Backed up by her own experiences in the film distribution business of Middle Eastern films in Germany, Neidhardt’s article highlights the various dependencies and obstacles that can be subsumed as hidden forms of censorship. Film funding by Western partners for the production of Arab films rarely follows just a noble ideal of helping unconditionally; the funding is given under various conditions, mainly to help the Western funds to support their own film industry. Thus, the nascent Arab (art house) film industry is hardly able to shake off their dependency as film-makers do not get funding from within their own countries but have to apply for Western funding in order to implement their film projects. Often the original content of the films as envisaged by script writers and directors is changed and adapted so much in order to meet the demands of the Western funding partners that few of the original ideas remain intact.

The article by Rui Novais examines whether media in democratic societies function as a so-called fourth estate in the face of government attempts to manage the news. Novais approaches this through a case study of media coverage relating to the academic career and, it was alleged, possibly fraudulent degree of Portuguese Prime Minister José Sócrates. He examines the various strategies that the Prime Minister and his press office employed to suppress or ‘to manage’ a potentially embarrassing situation for the Prime Minister. He also shows that some media react submissively to government pressure, whereas other media organizations carry out their watchdog role.

In another case study, Cara Haberman looks at how Canadian media fail in their role as corporate media watchdog by not reporting human rights abuses on the part of Canadian mining companies in Guatemala. Whereas NGOs, church groups and individual reporters put this topic on the agenda in independent media, according to Haberman the biggest Canadian newspaper will not cover these stories about Canadian companies, as the newspaper mainly caters to business interests. Thus Haberman concludes that the likelihood of critical reporting of Canadian businesses is very limited. Despite being a democratic country that perceives itself at the forefront in supporting human rights, Canada – or rather its

major media – do not pass the test when it comes to confronting business interests.

Terje Skjerdal gives us an insight into the mechanisms of self-censorship employed by Ethiopian journalists working for state media. Despite a fairly open-minded editorial policy in Ethiopian state media, Skjerdal discovered, through numerous interviews with journalists, that they restrict their role as members of the fourth estate by practising self-censorship extensively. Although most journalists are aware of their practices they justify their actions by citing the need to be responsible and by acknowledging the existence of a critical audience. Skjerdal argues that these journalists are not forced by their editors in the state media to conform to expected outcomes in the first place, instead journalists justify their almost ‘anticipatory obedience’ by making their actions appear as a form of professional responsibility. Here the ambiguity comes not so much from strong state censors as from a sense of fear and uncertainty among journalists of making a mistake or of losing their jobs.

Propaganda is not always discussed in the same breath as censorship but both phenomena may be two sides of the same coin. In times of conflict and war, both propaganda and censorship are heavily employed by the conflicting sides. In the Second World War, news reporting by foreign radio broadcasters played an important role in winning hearts and minds for the ideology of Nazi Germany or the Allies’ cause. Nelson Ribeiro analyses the strategies employed by the BBC’s Portuguese service to ensure that Portugal would not side openly with Nazi Germany. He compares these to the rather clumsy propaganda attempts of the Reichs Rundfunk Gesellschaft. The BBC Portuguese service’s role during the Second World War was somewhat ambiguous as there were many attempts by the Foreign Office to actively use the service for British and Allied objectives. Such political demands stood in stark contrast to the official and often cited neutral role of the BBC. According to Ribeiro the BBC managed to become a respected source of information in Portugal despite these political influences.

Although censorship is not a theme that is considered a pleasant topic, and the different ambiguous forms of it are even less pleasant for those who are affected by it, we still hope that you will enjoy reading the latest issue of *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*. Hopefully this issue will also give further impetus to research on a wider array of examples and case studies of subtle censorship in different subject areas and world regions in future publications.

References

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