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Censorship, History of

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The English word “censorship” is derived from the root *cense* from the Latin *censura*: to estimate, rate, assess, judge. Censor was a title given to two magistrates in ancient Rome who were responsible for administering the census, and supervising public morals. When the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, the church assumed primary responsibility for → [censorship](#).

ECCLESIASTICAL CENSORSHIP

The early church used its censorial authority to establish orthodoxy and condemn heresy. Written scripture codified the tenets of the Christian faith and secured the church's earthly authority, but the clergy possessed a monopoly over interpretation of the sacred text. Instruction of the laity was almost exclusively oral: with few exceptions, only those entering the priesthood had advanced levels of education and access to reading materials, which were stored in monasteries during the manuscript period. The church began cataloguing forbidden texts as early as the second century; however the development of the Gutenberg press in the fifteenth century posed a profound challenge to church authority. Print facilitated the spread of heterodox ideas, especially Protestant reform. The church responded by establishing an elaborate administrative system of prior censorship, requiring a license to publish (an imprimatur), and certification that a book had been inspected by a local Ordinary, usually the bishop. The church published its first index of forbidden books, known as the Pauline index, in 1559. The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* went through 42 editions before it ceased publication in 1966.

The Index provides the most comprehensive record of censorship ever compiled. State censorship bureaucracies adapted the administrative model pioneered by the church, with its central authority and local enforcement. Where the church publicly condemned objectionable ideas, however, state censorships routinely operate covertly as well as overtly. National security, often a contentious construct with expansive boundaries, provides the justification for covert state

censorship (secrecy), especially in wartime, when all nation-states practice censorship.

RECORDED HISTORY OF CENSORSHIP

The etymology, administrative model, and much of the recorded history of censorship are of European origin, but the practice is universal. It predates the word, and continues in other forms even where religious or state censorships have been formally abolished. The written history is largely a history of western censorships because opposition to church and state censorships and advocacy for freedom of expression developed widespread support and achieved legitimacy first in Europe and America (→ [Freedom of Communication](#); [Freedom of the Press, Concept of](#)). Enfranchisement of freedom of expression in the west is not, however, a story of European superiority or linear progress, but rather a narrative of conflict and struggle. Several factors converged to produce this outcome. A synthesis of Asian, Middle Eastern, and European communication technologies took place in Europe at a propitious moment when the dominant social institution, the church, was experiencing a crisis of legitimacy in reaction to pervasive repression and corruption (→ [Information and Communication Technology, Development of](#)).

Movable clay type had been invented in China four centuries before Gutenberg refined the technology in his workshop in Mainz. A difference that made a difference in the rapid development of book publishing and distribution in the west was the Roman alphabet. Based upon the writing system developed by the ancient Phoenicians in the Middle East and adapted by the Greeks, the simple 26-character Roman alphabet could be transferred to print quicker and less expensively than the open-ended system of Chinese characters, which can require thousands of different characters to print a single text. Once books were widely available in Europe, the simplicity of the alphabet also facilitated widespread development of literacy. As literacy spread beyond clerics and aristocrats, censorship became an important administrative tool of both church and state.

The suppression of books magnified the powers of print, enhancing demand for prohibited books and the skills to read them. It galvanized opposition to censorship among those most directly affected by its enforcement: printers, book dealers, authors, intellectuals, freethinkers, artists, performers, rebels, and revolutionaries. For fifteen centuries monotheistic orthodoxy and Roman administrative practices effectively imposed a monopoly over the minds and morals of Europeans: when opposition finally gained momentum, the targets were clearly legible, visible, and as accessible as the nearest church, as Martin Luther demonstrated when he nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517.

Censorship in the west frequently involved church and state collaborations. In France, under the Ancien Régime, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris was responsible for censorship; later the king played a more prominent role; and then in the period prior to the revolution, the police served as censors. England followed the ecclesiastical model, publishing its first list of forbidden books in 1529. After 1557, the Stationers' Company, made up of printers and manuscript merchants, was granted a monopoly over the production and distribution of print by the crown; the Stationers' Company had the responsibility of suppressing all work that posed a danger to authority. With the proliferation of print, administration of prior censorship became increasingly difficult in England, and the Censorship Act was allowed to expire in 1604; but offensive expression remained subject to prosecution under criminal law.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND KNOWLEDGE

Censorship is a universal phenomenon: it casts shadows over all consequential forms of communication. It is the interdiction that empowers the dicta: sense is made by censoring nonsense. Social order is created by proscribing disorder and inclusion is defined by exclusion. Fundamental distinctions are reified and naturalized to form the categorical structures of language, culture, and knowledge. The resulting cosmology may be internalized, resisted, elaborated, or imploded, but it cannot be ignored because it defines the terrain upon which responses to censorship can be intelligibly enacted and communicated. Whether articulated in relatively benign or deeply oppressive forms, this *constitutive or sociological censorship* is what makes society possible. Because it is largely unrecognized, its influence is insidious. It casts a pall over human consciousness, and compromises the most rigorous professions of objectivity.

Constitutive censorship escaped critical scrutiny until quite recently because censorship scholarship has been narrowly conceived. Sharing the Enlightenment's conceit that liberal democracies had abolished censorship, it viewed surviving forms of *regulative censorships* as the work of unenlightened or regressive institutions: churches and repressive states. Critique of regulative censorship is essential to preservation and expansion of free expression. Reasonable levels of transparency are possible in assessing regulative censorships: indices can be identified, calibrated, and evaluated based upon legal or human rights standards such as levels of violence used to secure and enforce control, degrees of tolerance

for heterodox ideas, or the frequency and intensity of ritual purgation. Regulative censorships are amenable to reform or revolution in ways that can lower body counts, books banned, or citizens gulaged; but no revolution in human history – not even the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – has ever abolished constitutive censorship.

Constitutive censorships are elastic. Limits of permission can be expanded (or contracted), but constituent censorships can never be fully eliminated because complete escape would require fugitives to step outside of language and beyond the limits of human knowledge: the penalty would be silence or unintelligibility. Yet constitutive censorships share porous borders with regulative censorships. They provide precedents, and linguistic, conceptual, and epistemological anchors for regulative censorships. This is the fundamental conundrum of constitutive censorship: to step outside of one form involves stepping into another.

CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF THEOCRATIC CENSORSHIP

Throughout most of human history, censorship has been considered a legitimate prerogative of power: a means that authorities use to authorize normative systems. In condemning the evil and erroneous, censorship also defines and clarifies the meaning of the good, true, just, or at least the harmless. Until the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century, the power of communities to excommunicate, to silence, and to exile was nearly absolute. Freedom of expression, where it existed, was community bound and hierarchically distributed. Within these closed circles, censorship was considered a positive act: a way of ensuring morality and homogeneity.

In fundamentalist theocracies, the power is absolute, and sometimes extends beyond excommunication, even beyond communicants. This was the case when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* condemning to death the Indian-born author Salman Rushdie, who is not a practicing Muslim, for satirizing Islam in his 1989 book, *The Satanic Verses*: a sentence that the Iranian Government News Service reaffirmed in 2006. The *fatwa* obligated all faithful Muslims to carry out the sentence, forcing Rushdie into years of hiding; his Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, was murdered, and his Italian translator and Norwegian publisher suffered serious injuries when they were stabbed by assailants carrying out the orders of the *fatwa*. Others, including the Egyptian-born Nobel Prize-winning author of the *Children of Gebelawi*, Najib Mahfuz, also received death threats for defending Rushdie's right to free expression.

Resurgence and politicization of fundamentalist forms of Islam following the 1979 Iranian revolution has been accompanied by stricter enforcement of moral codes and reinstating or strengthening of censorship in Muslim majority nations. Islam is, however, a world religion composed of diverse nationalities and branches, so all generalizations have numerous exceptions. Moreover, individual imams, as divinely ordained descendents of Muhammad, can issue moral orders as well as *fatwas*. In Iran, for example, censorship moderated under a reform government in the early years of the twenty-first century, but has tightened dramatically since 2005, with new restrictions on book publishing, film, and theatrical performances, suppression of some newspapers, and crackdowns on rooftop satellite dishes. The Islamic Guidance Minister has long blocked access to many Internet news sites; and in 2006 instituted new measures to attempt to control bloggers. The government also brought charges against journalists for postings on Internet sites.

As → [satellite television](#) and the → [Internet](#) have made it increasingly possible to circumvent national censorships, transnational responses are becoming more common. Repression of offensive forms of expression has also taken on new, extra-legal forms through international protests, including violent protest as, for example, when a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published a series of cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Muhammad in late 2005, some of which were reprinted and denounced as racist in an Egyptian newspaper, *al-Fagr*. This set off worldwide protests and counter-protests over the next several months, including violent conflicts in Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Somalia that killed at least 139 people and injured 823. The editor of the Danish paper apologized for publishing the cartoons. Pope Benedict XVI triggered another wave of global protests by Muslims in 2006 when he quoted a medieval text that condemned Muslim innovations. A nun in Somalia was murdered in retaliation. The Pope also apologized for offending Muslims.

BUREAUCRATIZED STATE CENSORSHIP

State censorship, by contrast, uses law and administrative procedures to enact and enforce censorship. The most comprehensive and longest lasting form of state censorship in recent history was put into place as an emergency measure by Lenin immediately following the victory of his forces in the Russian Revolution in 1917. State censorship remained formally in force until 1989, when the Supreme Soviet eliminated newspaper censorship. *Russia* had a long tradition of censorship under the tsars, with only a brief period of liberalization (1855–1865) under Alexander II. Lenin

was acutely aware of the power of the press and arts as “collective organizers” of propaganda, and mobilized them for socialist re-education. There was some openness to ideological divergence in the immediate post-revolutionary era; however, after 1928 ideological conformity to socialist realism, which entailed viewing life as it was to become rather than as it actually was, became mandatory. Religion was suppressed, and tight controls over art and literature were imposed.

Multiple agencies had responsibilities for supervising literary affairs and the performing arts. The most visible was the Chief Administration for Literary Affairs, known as Glavit; enfranchised in 1922, its powers were expanded considerably under Stalin to include all printed materials, visual arts, broadcasts, lectures, and exhibits. According to the procedural fiction, submission of materials to Glavit for editorial and ideological criticism prior to being publicly disseminated was “voluntary.” Glavit actually exercised absolute authority over publication and the performing arts, and possessed the power to shut down any newspaper for ideological deviations. The campaign to rid Soviet culture of neo-bourgeois elements resulted in purges of well-known writers, including Isaac Babel, Osip Mandelstam, and Mikhail Kolcov; in all, it has been estimated that as many as 6,000 writers perished in Stalin's gulags. Tight controls were also imposed over foreign literature entering the Soviet Union, and over artistic and scientific contacts with the west. Stalin personally intervened in supervision of the arts in highly unpredictable ways; this made already cautious bureaucrats even more vigilant, and accelerated self-censorship in literature, the arts, and science to the point of cultural stagnation. The Soviet administration of mind was so successful that in 1952 Stalin had to moderate it because it constrained scientific discovery and produced dull, formulaic literature.

During a brief thaw in Soviet censorship in 1956, Khrushchev personally approved publication of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*, a story about life in a Stalinist labor camp. The same year Khrushchev denounced the Stalinist cult of personality at the 20th Party Congress. Although strict controls remained in effect, these two interrelated developments contributed immeasurably to the emergence of a visible dissident movement in the Soviet Union. After 1956, travel became possible for scientists and intellectuals, and Soviet participation in international conferences and performances increased substantially. Travel not only brought more exposure to western ideas, but also to Russian literature published abroad, *tamizdat*, such as Boris Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*.

Technology posed special challenges to Soviet censors. Under Stalin, the typeface of every typewriter had to be registered so that illicit manuscripts, *samizdat*, could be traced; when photocopying machines became available, access was strictly regulated and every copy had to be registered. Administering these controls proved onerous; and in order to function at all, work routines were developed that gave higher level employees access to the “not allowed but possible.” A fundamental contradiction was built into the Soviet system: the government emphasized universal literacy and provided its citizens with good educational opportunities that fostered intellectual curiosity. At the same time, however, Glavit's censorship was designed to stifle curiosity. Technology was also a factor in the demise of the Soviet system; suspicion of communication technologies along with restrictions imposed by the United States on export of high-performance computers to the Soviet Union and China left the Soviet Union lagging far behind the west in the telecommunications revolution of the 1980s. After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian media and the arts experienced a decade of unprecedented openness. However, under Vladimir Putin's leadership, the Russian Federation has reasserted centralized control, including control of media, especially television.

CENSORSHIP IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the twenty-first century, *China* is expected to be the primary site of struggles for intellectual freedom (→ [China: Media System](#)). Its imposition of controls on the Internet, with the compliance of US-based software companies Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo! has become a *cause celebre* among Internet freedom advocacy groups (→ [Advocacy Journalism](#); [Search Engines](#)). However, the Committee to Protect Journalists (<http://www.cpj.org>) listed North Korea, Burma, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Eritrea, Cuba, Uzbekistan, Syria, and Belarus as the ten most censored countries in the world in 2006. In an era of instantaneous international communication, journalists, media workers, and communication facilities have increasingly become targets in both regional and international conflicts. Since 1991, when the Committee to Protect Journalists began monitoring violent deaths of journalists, 580 deaths had been recorded by early 2006 – more than three per month, 71 percent of whom were directly targeted in retaliation for their reporting. Even in war zones, murder is the leading cause of death for journalists. By October 2006, 118 journalists and media workers had been killed in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003, making it the deadliest war for journalists in modern history, far exceeding the number of journalists who died in World War II (69) and Vietnam (63).

SEE ALSO: → [Advocacy Journalism](#) → [Censorship](#) → [China: Media System](#) → [Freedom of Communication](#)
→ [Freedom of the Press, Concept of](#) → [Information and Communication Technology, Development of](#)

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