

Media Censorship

Case Study: Elvis Presley Hits below the Pelvis, 5 June 1956

The use of censorship in the media industry has changed throughout the years. In today's society, anything deemed obscene or explicit is barred out or controlled, anything religious can be restricted, even companies turn to media censorship due to problems with their operations. The military use media censorship to protect the intelligence of the military as does the developing world, who uses their customs and cultures as their reason for restriction in the media. However, what is deemed inappropriate in one decade may be considered appropriate in the next decade. Consider, for example the 1950s. The media restricted anything that had to do with race and sexuality. The music and styles that the teenagers of this era were interested in were seen as unsuitable by parents and adults of that decade. And no celebrity caused more controversy in the 1950s than Elvis Presley. Elvis Presley was known for the dancing or gyrating he did when he performed. Very few people paid attention to this matter because the performances, both on stage and on television, were seen by a small audience. But one performance on a well known television show shocked the whole nation.

The date was June 5th 1956. Elvis Presley was the performer on The Milton Berle Show. Everything was going as planned. Then, Elvis began to perform his hit song *Hound Dog*.



His gyrations were more extreme and continued throughout the entire instrumental break and throughout the entire last half of the song, in which Elvis slowed the pace of the song and thrust his hips in time to the music.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5JALwwaASg>)

This appearance on the show led to a public outcry of parents and adults saying that Elvis was a threat to the American teenagers. They saw him as indecent and vulgar. The FBI saw his dancing as "a strip tease with clothes on" or "sexual self-gratification on stage." Newspapers even condemned Elvis' Performance. The New York Journal said that it was "A display of primitive physical movement difficult to describe in terms suitable to a family newspaper" and the Daily News said that "He gave an exhibition that was suggestive and vulgar, tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and

bordellos.” But Elvis didn’t see any problem with the way he moved on stage. In his ’68 comeback special, Elvis recalls an instance of when he was down in Florida to do a performance; “The police filmed a show one time in Florida because the PTA the YMCA or somebody they thought I was...something, and they said ‘man he’s gotta be crazy.’ So the police came out and they filmed the show. So I couldn’t move; I had to stand still. The only thing I moved was my little finger.” These protests led to creative problem solving. Elvis’ next performance, The Steve Allen Show, showed him in a suit singing the same song to a Basset Hound. But no plan worked better than the one devised for The Ed Sullivan Show, in which Sullivan allowed Elvis to perform on the show under one condition; he was to be shot on camera



from the waist up only. (http://laluna.tv/media/4204/Elvis_Presley_-_Dont_be_cruel/)

Would this be seen as inappropriate for teenagers of this generation to watch? Should the media control what our children watch, not only on television, but on websites like youtube and hulu

Exercise

Elvis’s gyrations on national television were not the only thing causing uproar for indecency. Take a look at these clips from two television shows of the 1950s and ask yourself:

- 1) If you were a parent, would you let your children watch this type of television show today? Why or why not?
 - 2) Would this cause more controversy if it was shown today?
 - 3) Why would people consider this explicit back then?
- I Love Lucy-Lucy finds out that she is having a baby (back then, Lucille Ball was not allowed to say the word “pregnant” on television. She can only say that she “was having a baby”) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yZw203tOkM>
 - The Dick Van Dyke Show (Back then, it was seen as indecent to show couples sleeping in the same bed or hint at the fact that they were having sex) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT6Y308TecQ>

Now watch this clip of the Janet Jackson 2004 Super bowl “wardrobe malfunction” and ask yourself:

- 1) Would this be something to show your children if you were a parent? Why or why not?
- 2) Would this change your mind about what children watch on television today?
- 3) Do you think the FCC took necessary measures after this incident occurred by implementing a five second delay on all publicly televised events? If so, why? If not, what measures should be taken? http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8O_IVkK2usE

Analysis criteria

- 1) In today's society, drastic measures have been taken to censor what our younger generation sees, such as content ratings (i.e. TV-Y, TV-Y7, etc), disclaimers, and delays before a televised event (i.e. the Oscars, the Grammy's, and, after the Janet Jackson incident, the Super Bowl. If a show was put on Primetime because of the content in the show, should a child have **access** to this if it was put on YouTube or HULU? Are the proper restrictions being taken online to prevent young children from seeing any explicit material from a primetime television show?
- 2) Many images on television and the internet have an ability of causing a stir with parents in regards to allowing their children to watch anything explicit or obscene. What kind of footage or images should parents be **aware** of before allowing their children to watch a program? Do you think parents of today are more concerned than parents of the 1950s? Why or why not?
- 3) Take moment and take another look at the footage of Elvis Presley from The Milton Berle Show and then watch the Janet Jackson footage again. **Asses** both video clips. Would you consider these performances obscene for the same reasons? Do you think it was obscene because of the decade they were aired in?
- 4) Do you think the censorship measurements being taken today are helping or hurting what children watch? Why? How can we help our children better **appreciate** why there are certain restrictions on what they are watching?
- 5) From a parent's perspective, do you feel that the cautious measurements being taken are working? If not, what **action** would you take to control what is put on the television for your children to watch

Resources

- Third world traveler-media censorship in America: Project Censored
http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Media/Media%20Censor_ProjCensor.html
- Modern Media Censorship in America
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=10415>
- Buzzle.com article-Why Media Censorship is good
<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/media-censorship-why-is-censorship-good.html>
- Media Awareness network
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/handouts/tobacco_advertising/censorship_in_media.cfm
- CATO institute-Censoring Violence in Media
<http://www.cato.org/tech/tk/040810-tk.html>
- Commondreams.org-Censorship of the Media Creating Insidious Chill on Free Expression on our Airwaves
<http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0217-32.htm>
- Mediaknowall.com-Violence and the media: censorship

<http://www.mediaknowall.com/violence/censorship.html>

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Credits

- Information on Elvis Presley came from the books Elvis Presley By Bobbie Ann Mason and Present Tense: Rock and Roll Culture by Anthony DeCurtis
- The video footage of Elvis Presley came from YouTube.com and Laluna.tv
- The video footage of I Love Lucy, came from YouTube.com
- The video footage of Janet Jackson's super bowl performance came from YouTube.com
- The video footage of The Dick Van Dyke Show came from YouTube.com
- The information on how the media deals with censorship came from articleswave.com(<http://www.articleswave.com/articles/reasons-for-media-censorship.html>)and museum.tv (<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/censorship/censorship.htm>)
- Image of Elvis Presley came from Laluna.tv and rockpeaks.com (http://www.rockpeaks.com/files/eggs/p/Presley_Elvis/00038/Presley_Elvis_Hound_Dog_Milton_Berle_Show_56_body.jpg)