

“Censor”: When a Word Means Everything, it Means Nothing

Some words carry emotional force such that using them creates an immediate negative reaction on the part of the listener or reader. That makes such words useful — until they get over-used and misused so much that they cease to have the effect.

Lately, the trending “creep people out to get them on my side” word of choice is “censor” or “censorship.” Most of us support free speech. None of us want to be censored ourselves, and most of us don’t want others censored either.

But what do those words mean?

To censor (verb), according to Oxford Dictionaries, is to “examine (a book, movie, etc.) officially and suppress unacceptable parts of it.”

A censor (noun) is “[a]n official who examines material ... and suppresses any parts that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.”

Implicit in both those definitions is that censorship is an act of the state, backed by force of law and if necessary the physical force of government agents.

I’ve often explained censorship this way:

If I tell you that you may not sing “Auld Lang Syne” or I will send police to break up the performance and haul you off to jail, I am censoring (or at least attempting to censor) you.

If I tell you that you may not sing “Auld Lang Syne” on my front porch at 3am and by the way get off my porch, it’s 3 in the morning, I am not censoring you. You’re still free to sing the song anywhere else and any other time, just not on my property while I’m trying to sleep.

Which maps neatly, I think, to Twitter and Facebook deciding who gets to post what on their platforms. They can’t stop you from using other platforms to say whatever it is they don’t want you to say.

It maps less neatly to Apple, Google, and Amazon colluding to destroy one of those other platforms (Parler), seemingly on behalf of government officials who think it’s their business who says what and where. Thankfully Parler survived and returned, but we’ve definitely got some “edge cases” going that certainly at least resemble censorship, and that I was admittedly somewhat asleep at the switch on until that wake-up call.

Recently, I've had to add a third example to my explanation, though. Some friends of mine — very libertarian friends, in fact — recently held that Dr. Seuss Enterprises is “censoring” books it chooses not to publish. So, explanation of censorship, part three:

If I choose not to sing “Auld Lang Syne” myself, I’m not “censoring” the song.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty tells Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

There seems to be a lot of Humpty Dumpty usage of the word “censorship” lately. If we’re not careful, abusing it to mean “anything I don’t like” may drain it of its rightful argumentative power and leave us in the grip of the real thing.