

“Tension of opposites rings true in censorship”

6/5/2008

[http://www.denverpost.com/headlines/ci\\_9477783](http://www.denverpost.com/headlines/ci_9477783)

So I was talking with my friend recently and mentioned that David Blaine had just set the world record for holding his breath (17:04.4).

Quite an accomplishment; and I would have enjoyed it had one thing not happened. Oprah Winfrey, who was hosting the event on her talk show, repeatedly instructed the studio and television audience to not try this stunt at home. A seemingly innocent and caring gesture, what statements like Winfrey's really do is highlight the very thing that needs to remain understated.

For example, with the recent success of the "Grand Theft Auto IV" video game, a barrage of protests has also followed. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, however, has raised the bar and asked that the game be raised from a "Mature" rating to "Adult." As is the case with so many other examples, the more elusive a thing is, the more desirable it becomes.

Remember last year when New York City officially banned the word "nigga" and the NAACP held a funeral for the word? Remember how effective the measures were? Remember the infamous 2004 Indiana Pacers-Detroit Pistons brawl? Remember how the camera's never cut away from the action? Remember the Super Bowl XXXVIII wardrobe malfunction? Remember how kids who hadn't seen the actual halftime show saw the footage replayed repeatedly in the following weeks? Remember the demonization of Marilyn Manson during the 1997 congressional hearings? Remember what happened to the band's career after that? Remember when the "Parental Advisory" stickers were first plastered on music albums? Remember how many children stayed away from explicit content? Remember the backlash the public gave Elvis for his pelvis during "The Ed Sullivan Show"? Remember the backlash the public gave the public when Elvis wasn't allowed to thrust his pelvis?

Opponents of Howard Stern may take pride in noting that Stern is historically the most fined radio broadcast personality. Yea, well Howard is also the highest paid American radio broadcast personality. Today, before the beginning of some primetime television shows, you'll get a disclaimer saying "intended for mature audiences." Websites such as YouTube mandate its users confirm their birth date before viewing a provocative video clip. Granted, some of these rules must be followed because the law says so. But when the parents aren't around, how many kids are going to do what their parents would want?

Grade schools allow students to say "dang," but not "damn"; "heck" but not "hell"; "Son of a gun" but not "Son of a b\*\*\*\*"; "BS" but not what it stands for; "frick" but not "&!%@#\*". Radio programs, television shows, even nightly news broadcasts will broadcast a segment with explicit language or images and will merely bleep out the curses or blur out the disturbing image. It's like comedian Jim Gaffigan said about showing footage of obese people while hiding their face — "They still know it's them."

Censorship through prevention or substitution has, and will continue to have, the exact opposite effect of what was intended. A moral zeitgeist or continuous shifting of what is morally acceptable will remain the norm. The rule of the transient will remain the rule of thumb.

Don't get me wrong, censorship has its uses. But that doesn't mean it's the panacea for all social ills. Much like Alfred Griswold commented in the New York Times in 1959, "Books won't stay banned. They won't burn. Ideas won't go to jail. In the long run of history, the censor and the inquisitor have always lost. The only weapon against bad ideas is better ideas."

We've tried parenting, religion, legislation — and it simply hasn't worked. Instead, why not do something that requires much less effort and virtually no money — leave it alone. Honestly, the pseudo-censorship we've observed for so long is a lot like having a campaign against HIV, and making Playboy Playmate Rebekka Armstrong its spokeswoman. Oh wait, they did that, too. Seriously, WTH.