



Feminists Against Censorship

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Winter 1996 Update

We'd like to be able to say that the only reason this update is late is that we were too lazy, or the computer crashed, or we all fell in love and couldn't be bothered, but the truth is that censorship has been happening all over the place. Outbreaks are so numerous lately that we've hardly had time to celebrate the good things that have happened. Well, let's get out the violins for a bit before we get to the more positive news:

We've had mad cops, mad MPs, mad judges, and more. Although none of these things would be terribly surprising on their own — after all, we're pretty used to absurd censorship by now — the fact that they all seem to have been occurring in such a flurry of activity is pretty worrying. And when it's flying this thick and fast, there is *no way* we can keep up with it all.

Let's take, for example, the **Mapplethorpe** exhibit. You may have read about this in the papers, but we were a bit disturbed to see that it's reached the point where a gallery feels a need to contact the police *before* an exhibit opens to ask if there is anything problematic in the show. This sure looks like what they mean by a "Chilling Effect". The Hayward Gallery called the police in to tell them whether any of the images in their Mapplethorpe show contravened the law. The police picked out three pictures, including "Rosie", a photo of a young girl sitting in a dress with no underwear. Esther Rantzen made a great show of decrying this foul example of child abuse. (Rosie herself, now an adult, is a lesbian who runs a café in West London with her lover and says she'd like to hang the original, which she owns, in public view in her establishment. The *Daily Mail* made it sound like she was now depraved for life when she made the mistake of giving them an interview.)

The cops later informed the Hayward that, now they think of it, they may want to come and remove more images. Suzanne Moore had a quite good article in the *Independent* decrying the sexualization of innocent pictures.

And then there is Virginia Bottomley, who just can't say enough about the importance of banning pornography. Once again, non-terrestrial television from Europe is the target, and the

French **Rendezvous** channel is the victim. Sale of decoders for the station will now be banned. Of course, ITC polls once again revealed that the vast majority of Britons believe these stations should be available to those who want them, but that makes no more difference to the Tories than it did in the case of the late Red Hot Television (Red Hot Dutch).

Of course, all of this followed the publication of the government's new proposals for what the press has misleadingly dubbed a "paedophile register" — officially, it's a **Sex Offenders Register**, and vastly more inclusive than paedophiles or child abusers. Absolutely anyone who has ever been busted for a sex offence of any kind will be on this list, and we have no assurance that it will be kept confidential to the police alone.

There are numerous sex offences in this country which do not involve children or violence/coercion, but people who have been convicted — or maybe just investigated — for such offences will be treated no differently from those who pose a genuine threat. The authorities at one point admitted that Julia Somerville might be on the register because she was investigated for taking pictures of her daughter in the bath.

Gay men who've had sex before the *gay* age of consent (apparently including those arrested before that age was reduced from 21 to 18) will also be listed, as will other minors who had sex when they themselves were below the relevant age of consent at the time. Obviously, it is impossible to duplicate such crimes once you have reached legal adulthood, but the assumption behind the register is, "Once a sex criminal, always a sex criminal."

The National Council of Liberties has actually tried to act against this register, making submissions and even circulating a letter decrying the inclusion of consensual offences. We were invited to sign that letter and did so, with a number of other groups. However, interestingly, one of the groups that claims to be in the business of "protecting children", ACHE, actually refused to sign it.

Meanwhile, **Reclaim the Streets** have had their computers impounded — just one of a number of

very odd attacks by the government in the recent past. | ♀ | A man was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for possession of a magazine that was legally on sale here in the 1970s. | ♀ | The man who was given 6.5 years in prison for having sex with bin-liners was found hanged in his cell in September.

You will probably already have heard the furore over the latest Cronenberg film, *Crash*, which was criticized in the *Telegraph* and now all the press seems determined to kill this film — sight-unseen, of course. The BBFC is keeping quiet while the usual suspects rant and rave about how we will all run out and crash our cars in order to get orgasms if this film is released. It has even been suggested that viewers may wish to have sex with disabled people (gasp!) if they see this film. Westminster council, true to form, have already announced a local ban until the BBFC makes up its mind.

This isn't strictly about censorship, but we can see how the atmosphere of "enlightened" repression is being used to justify very traditional sorts of prejudice: The CJA "equalized" the position of **homosexual rape**, but as we warned at the time, sentences are being given that are far greater than those given for rape of women. The first case of so-called "male rape" resulted in a life sentence, and recently a 15-year-old was given 15 years. As we well remember, men who rape women don't generally receive such sentences, and we believe that only homophobia can account for these high sentences.

Campaign Against Pornography announced what they consider a victory when W.H. Smith's distribution arm agreed not to send newsagents "pornography" unless it was agreed. While we don't think any distributor should have the right to force clients to take material they don't want, we note with interest that the "pornography" the newsagent in question was complaining about was *Gay Times*.

When the *Observer* printed a front-page article accusing Clive Feather of Demon Internet and Julf Helsingius, who runs an anonymous server (anon.petet.fi) of being responsible for child pornography on the net, it apparently put the fear of God (or of the British press, at least) into UK **internet** providers. The Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA) and the London Internet Exchange (LINX) have reluctantly agreed to go along with proposals for R3 (SafetyNet), a programme to rate internet posts and pages

"voluntarily". Those who don't volunteer are at higher risk of being harassed by the police.

There is some question about this, since the ratings system proposed is RSACi, although RSACi says a term of use is that it be used *only* for voluntary programmes. Would they agree that this is a voluntary situation?

Users of Demon Internet services are hopeful that the objections that have been voiced on the net will sway them against going along with the plan, although it is unclear as yet whether they are being influenced by this. Last time we looked, Demon's web pages were still saying they expected their customers to RSACi-rate their pages by the end of 1996.

But as we said, there is some good news.

Our new book, *Tales From the Clit*, edited by Cherie Matrix, is now in print (from AK Press) and is already doing fairly well (we even managed to get a review in the *Guardian*, for a change). *Fetish Times* gave us the best deal of all: they let us write the article about the book ourselves!

On the other hand, the buyer at Charing Cross Blackwell's didn't even want to hear about our book and was rude to the publisher's rep when he came by. Call Blackwell's in Charing Cross and ask if they are carrying FAC's new book, why don't you? (But buy it from a shop that is already carrying it.)

And FAC now has its own **home page on the web!** The site has background on current censorship, a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), a copy of the letter from the Metropolitan Police listing the newsgroups they wanted to ban, advice on how to write to your MP, a list of our publications, and links to other relevant sites, including essays by FAC. Check it out: <http://www.fiawol.demon.co.uk/FAC/>

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