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Regulation of Broadcast Indecency: Background and Legal Analysis

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The FCC's Indecency Regulations: Background and Legal Analysis

Summary

Two recent events have placed increased attention on the FCC and its indecency regulations. The airing of the 2003 Golden Globe Awards and the subsequent ruling by the FCC's Enforcement Bureau, coupled with the controversy surrounding the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, have brought broadcast indecency to the forefront of the congressional agenda. Bills have been introduced to increase the penalties imposed for broadcast indecency (H.R. 3717, S. 2056, and S. 2147) and to prohibit the broadcast of certain words and phrases in any grammatical form (H.R. 3687). One such bill, H.R. 3717, was passed by the House on March 11, 2004. Resolutions have been introduced to express disapproval of the FCC Enforcement Bureau's decision regarding the Golden Globe Awards broadcast: H.Res. 482, H.Res. 500, and S.Res. 283, which the Senate passed on December 9, 2003. In addition, both the House and Senate have held or scheduled hearings on broadcast indecency. This report provides background on the two events in question, discusses the legal evolution of the FCC's indecency regulations, and provides an overview of how the current regulations have been applied. The final section of the report considers whether prohibiting the broadcast of "indecent" words regardless of context would violate the First Amendment.

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Regulation of Broadcast Indecency: Background and Legal Analysis

Introduction

Two recent events have placed increased attention on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and its broadcast indecency regulations.¹ The airing of the 2003 Golden Globe Awards and the subsequent ruling of the FCC's Enforcement Bureau, coupled with the controversy surrounding the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show, have brought broadcast indecency to the forefront of the congressional agenda. Several bills have been introduced to increase the penalties imposed for broadcast indecency and prohibit the broadcast of certain words and phrases. In addition, both the House and Senate have scheduled hearings on broadcast indecency. This report provides background on the two events in question, discusses the legal evolution of the FCC's indecency regulations, and provides an overview of how the current regulations have been applied. The final section of the report considers whether prohibiting the broadcast of "indecent" words regardless of context would violate the First Amendment.²

Background

On January 19, 2003, a number of broadcast television stations in various parts of the country aired the Golden Globe Awards. During the awards, the performer Bono, in response to winning an award, uttered the phrase "this is really, really f[***]ing brilliant."³ In response to this utterance, the FCC received over 230 complaints alleging that the program was obscene or indecent, and requesting that the

¹ The FCC's indecency regulations only apply to broadcast radio and television, and not to cable television. The distinction between broadcast and cable television arises in part from the fact that the rationale for regulation of broadcast media — the dual problems of spectrum scarcity and signal interference — do not apply in the context of cable. As a result, regulation of cable television is entitled to heightened First Amendment scrutiny. *See Turner Broadcasting v. Federal Communications Commission*, 512 U.S. 622 (1994). Cable television is also distinguished from broadcast television by the fact that cable involves a voluntary act whereby a subscriber affirmatively chooses to bring the material into his or home. *See Cruz v. Ferre*, 755 F.2d 1415 (1985).

² The final section of this report ("Would prohibiting the broadcast of 'indecent' words regardless of context violate the First Amendment?") was written by Henry Cohen; the rest of the report was written by Angie A. Welborn.

³ *See In the Matter of Complaints Against Various Broadcast Licensees Regarding Their Airing of the "Golden Globe Awards" Program*, 18 F.C.C. Rcd. 19859 (2003).

Commission impose sanctions on the licensees for the broadcast of the material in question.⁴

The Enforcement Bureau of the FCC issued a Memorandum Opinion and Order on October 3, 2003, denying the complaints and finding that the broadcast of the Golden Globe Awards including Bono's utterance did not violate federal restrictions regarding the broadcast of obscene and indecent material.⁵ The Bureau dismissed the complaints primarily because the language in question did not describe or depict sexual or excretory activities or organs. The Bureau noted that while "the word 'f[***]ing' may be crude and offensive," it "did not describe sexual or excretory organs or activities. Rather, the performer used the word 'f[***]ing' as an adjective or expletive to emphasize an exclamation."⁶ The Bureau added that in similar circumstances it "found that offensive language used as an insult rather than as a description of sexual or excretory activity or organs is not within the scope of the Commission's prohibition on indecent program content."⁷

The decision of the Enforcement Bureau was met with opposition from a number of organizations and Members of Congress, and an appeal was filed for review by the full Commission. FCC Chairman Michael K. Powell has asked the full Commission to overturn the Enforcement Bureau's ruling.⁸

On March 18, 2004, the full Commission issued a *Memorandum Opinion and Order* granting the application for review and reversing the Enforcement Bureau's earlier opinion.⁹ The Commission found that the broadcasts of the Golden Globe Awards violated 18 U.S.C. 1464, but declined to impose a forfeiture on the broadcast licensees because the Order reverses Commission precedent regarding the broadcast of the "F-word." This decision is discussed in detail *infra*.

On February 1, 2004, CBS aired Super Bowl XXXVIII, with a half-time show produced by the MTV network. The show included performers singing and dancing provocatively, and ended with the exposure of the breast of one female performer. The network received numerous complaints regarding the half-time performance and FCC Chairman Michael Powell initiated a formal investigation into the incident.¹⁰

On September 22, 2004, the FCC released a *Notice of Apparent Liability for Forfeiture* finding that the airing of the Super Bowl halftime show "apparently

⁴ *Id.* at 2.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 3.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *FCC Chairman Seeks Reversal on Profanity*, Washington Post, January 14, 2004, at E01.

⁹ *In the Matter of Complaints Against Various Broadcast Licensees Regarding Their Airing of the "Golden Globe Awards" Program*, File No. EB-03-IH-0110 (March 18, 2004).

¹⁰ [http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-243435A1.pdf].

violate[d] the federal restrictions regarding the broadcast of indecent material.”¹¹ The NAL imposes a forfeiture in the aggregate amount of \$550,000 on Viacom Inc., the licensee or ultimate parent of the licensees with regard to whom the complaint was filed.¹² This decision is discussed in detail *infra*.

Evolution of the FCC’s Indecency Regulations

Under title 18 of the United States Code, it is unlawful to utter “any obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio communication.”¹³ Violators of this provision are subject to fines or imprisonment of up to two years. The Federal Communications Commission has the authority to enforce this provision by forfeiture or revocation of license.¹⁴ The Commission’s authority to regulate material that is indecent, but not obscene, was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation*.¹⁵ In *Pacifica*, the Supreme Court affirmed the Commission’s order regarding the airing of comedian George Carlin’s “Filthy Words” monologue.¹⁶ In that order, the Commission determined that the airing of the monologue, which contained certain words that “depicted sexual and excretory activities in a patently offensive manner,” at a time “when children were undoubtedly in the audience” was indecent and prohibited by 18 U.S.C. § 1464.¹⁷ Pursuant to the Court’s decision, whether any such material is “patently offensive” is determined by “contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium.”¹⁸ The Court noted that indecency is “largely a function of context — it cannot be judged in the abstract.”¹⁹

The Commission’s order in the *Pacifica* case relied partially on a spectrum scarcity argument, i.e. that there is a scarcity of spectrum space so the government must license the use of such space in the public interest, and partially on “principles

¹¹ *Complaints Against Various Television Licensees Concerning Their February 1, 2004, Broadcast of the Super Bowl XXXVIII Halftime Show*, File No. EB-04-IH-0011 (September 22, 2004).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ 18 U.S.C. § 1464. “Radio communication” includes broadcast television, as the term is “means the transmission by radio of writing, signs, signals, pictures, and sounds of all kinds.” 47 U.S.C. § 153(33).

¹⁴ 47 U.S.C. § 503(b).

¹⁵ 438 U.S. 726 (1978).

¹⁶ The United State Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit had reversed the Commission’s order. *See* 556 F.2d 9 (D.C. Cir. 1977). The Commission appealed that decision to the Supreme Court. The Court granted certiorari and reversed the lower court’s opinion.

¹⁷ 438 U.S. at 732.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 742.

analogous to those found in the law of nuisance.”²⁰ The Commission noted that public nuisance law generally aims to channel the offensive behavior rather than to prohibit it outright. For example, in the context of broadcast material, channeling would involve airing potentially offensive material at times when children are less likely to be in the audience. In 1987, the Commission rejected the spectrum scarcity argument as a sufficient basis for its regulation of broadcast indecency, but noted that it would continue to rely upon the validity of the public nuisance rationale, including channeling of potentially objectionable material.²¹ However, in its 1987 order, the Commission also stated that channeling based on a specific time of day was no longer a sufficient means to ensure that children were not in the audience when indecent material aired and warned licensees that indecent material aired after 10 p.m. would be actionable.²² The Commission further clarified its earlier *Pacifica* order, noting that indecent language was not strictly limited to the seven words at issue in the original broadcast in question, and that repeated use of those words was not necessary to find that material in question was indecent.²³

The Commission’s 1987 orders were challenged by parties alleging that the Commission had changed its indecency standard and that the new standard was unconstitutional. In *Action for Children’s Television v. Federal Communications Commission (ACT I)*, the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit upheld the standard used by the Commission to determine whether broadcast material was indecent, but it vacated the Commission’s order with respect to the channeling of indecent material for redetermination “after a full and fair hearing of the times at which indecent material may be broadcast.”²⁴

Following the court’s decision in *Action for Children’s Television (ACT I)*, a rider to the Commerce, Justice, State FY89 Appropriations Act required the FCC to promulgate regulations to ban indecent broadcasts 24 hours a day.²⁵ The Commission followed the congressional mandate and promulgated regulations prohibiting all broadcasts of indecent material.²⁶ The new regulations were challenged, and the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia

²⁰ *Id.* at 731; *see, In the Matter of a Citizen’s Complaint Against Pacifica Foundation Station WBAI (FM), New York, New York*, 56 F.C.C.2d 94 (1975).

²¹ *In the Matter of Pacifica Foundation, Inc. d/b/a Pacifica Radio Los Angeles, California*, 2 F.C.C. Rcd. 2698 (1987). Two other orders handed down the same day articulate the Commission’s clarified indecency standard. *See also In the Matter of the Regents of the University of California*, 2 F.C.C. Rcd. 2703 (1987); *In the Matter of Infinity Broadcasting Corporation of Pennsylvania*, 2 F.C.C. Rcd. 2705 (1987).

²² The Commission noted Arbitron ratings indicating that a number of children remain in the local audience well after 10 p.m. *See* 2 F.C.C. Rcd. 1698, ¶ 16.

²³ 2 F.C.C. Rcd. 2698, ¶¶ 12 and 15.

²⁴ 852 F.2d 1332, 1344 (1988).

²⁵ Pub. L. 100-459, § 608.

²⁶ *Enforcement of Prohibitions Against Broadcast Obscenity and Indecency*, 4 F.C.C. Rcd. 457 (1988).

Circuit vacated the Commission's order.²⁷ In so doing, the court noted that in *ACT I* it held that Commission "must identify some reasonable period of time during which indecent material may be broadcast," thus precluding a ban on such broadcasts at all times.²⁸

In 1992, Congress enacted the Public Telecommunications Act of 1992, which required the FCC to promulgate regulations to prohibit the broadcasting of indecent material from 6 a.m. to midnight, except for broadcasts by public radio and television stations that go off the air at or before midnight, in which case such stations may broadcast indecent material beginning at 10 p.m.²⁹ The Commission promulgated regulations as mandated in the act.³⁰ The new regulations were challenged, and a three-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit subsequently vacated the Commission's order implementing the act and held the underlying statute unconstitutional.³¹ In its order implementing the act, the FCC set forth three goals to justify the regulations: (1) ensuring that parents have an opportunity to supervise their children's listening and viewing of over-the-air broadcasts; (2) ensuring the well being of minors regardless of supervision; and (3) protecting the right of all members of the public to be free of indecent material in the privacy of their homes.³² The court rejected the third justification as "insufficient to support a restriction on the broadcasting of constitutionally protected indecent material," but accepted the first two as compelling interests.³³ Despite the finding of compelling interests in the first two, the court found that both Congress and the FCC had failed "to tailor their efforts to advance these interests in a sufficiently narrow way to meet constitutional standards."³⁴

Following the decision of the three-judge panel, the Commission requested a rehearing *en banc*.³⁵ The case was reheard on October 19, 1994, and, on June 30, 1995, the full court of appeals held the statute unconstitutional insofar as it prohibited the broadcast of indecent material between the hours of 10 p.m. and midnight on non-public stations.³⁶ In so doing, the court held that while the channeling of indecent

²⁷ *Action for Children's Television v. Federal Communications Commission (ACT II)*, 932 F.2d 1504 (1991), *cert. denied*, 503 U.S. 913 (1992).

²⁸ *Id.* at 1509.

²⁹ Pub. L. 102-356, § 16, 47 U.S.C. § 303 note.

³⁰ *In the Matter of Enforcement of Prohibitions Against Broadcast Indecency in 18 U.S.C. 1464*, 8 F.C.C. Rcd. 704 (1993).

³¹ *Action for Children's Television v. Federal Communications Commission*, 11 F.3d 170 (D.C. Cir. 1993).

³² 8 F.C.C. Rcd. at 705 - 706.

³³ 11 F.3d at 171.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Action for Children's Television v. Federal Communications Commission*, 15 F.3d 186 (1994).

³⁶ *Action for Children's Television v. Federal Communications Commission (ACT III)*, 58 (continued...)

broadcasts between midnight and 6 a.m. “would not unduly burden the First Amendment,” the distinction drawn by Congress between public and non-public broadcasters “bears no apparent relationship to the compelling government interests that [the restrictions] are intended to serve.”³⁷ The court remanded the regulations to the FCC with instructions to modify the regulations to permit the broadcast of indecent material on all stations between 10 p.m and 6 a.m.

Current Regulations and Analysis

Following the decision in *ACT III*, the Commission modified its indecency regulations to prohibit the broadcast any material which is indecent on any day between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.³⁸ The newly modified regulations became effective August 28, 1995.³⁹ These regulations have been enforced primarily with respect to radio broadcasts and thus have been applied to indecent language rather than to images.⁴⁰

To determine whether broadcast material is in fact indecent, the Commission must make two fundamental determinations: (1) that the material alleged to be indecent falls within the subject matter scope of the definition of indecency — the material in question must describe or depict sexual or excretory organs or activities; and (2) that the broadcast is patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium.⁴¹ If the material in question does not fall within the subject matter scope of the indecency definition,⁴² or if the

³⁶ (...continued)

F.3d 654 (1995), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 1043 (1996).

³⁷ 58 F.3d at 656.

³⁸ *Enforcement of Prohibitions Against Broadcast Indecency in 18 U.S.C. § 1464*, 10 F.C.C. Rcd. 10558 (1995); 47 C.F.R. 73.3999(b). Subsection (b) prohibits the broadcast of material which is obscene without any reference to time of day. Broadcast obscenity will not be discussed in this report. For more information on obscenity, see CRS Report 95-804, *Obscenity and Indecency: Constitutional Principles and Federal Statutes*, and CRS Report 98-670, *Obscenity, Child Pornography, and Indecency: Recent Developments and Pending Issues*.

³⁹ 60 FR 44439 (August 28, 1995).

⁴⁰ Enforcement actions based on televised broadcast indecency are rare. However, the Commission recently issued a *Notice of Apparent Liability* for the broadcast of indecent material during a televised morning news program. During the program, the show’s hosts interviewed performers with a production entitled “Puppetry of the Penis,” who appeared wearing capes but were otherwise nude. A performer’s penis was exposed during the broadcast. See *In the Matter of Young Broadcasting of San Francisco, Inc.*, File No. EB-02-IH-0786 (January 27, 2004).

⁴¹ See *In the Matter of Industry Guidance on the Commission’s Case Law Interpreting 18 U.S.C. § 1464 and Enforcement Policies Regarding Broadcast Indecency*, File No. EB-00-IH-0089 (April 6, 2001). [<http://www.fcc.gov/eb/Orders/2001/fcc01090.html>]

⁴² The Commission’s Enforcement Bureau initially dismissed the complaint against broadcast licensees for airing the 2003 Golden Globe Awards, in which performer Bono
(continued...)

broadcast occurred during the “safe harbor” hours (between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.), the complaint is usually dismissed.⁴³ However, if the Commission determines that the complaint meets the subject matter requirements and was aired outside the “safe harbor” hours, the broadcast in question is evaluated for patent offensiveness.⁴⁴ The Commission notes that in determining whether material is patently offensive, the full context is very important, and that such determinations are highly fact-specific.

The Commission has identified three factors that have been significant in recent decisions in determining whether broadcast material is patently offensive:

- (1) the explicitness or graphic nature of the description or depiction of sexual or excretory organs or activities;
- (2) whether the material dwells on or repeats at length descriptions of sexual or excretory organs or activities;
- (3) whether the material appears to pander or is used to titillate, or whether the material appears to have been presented for its shock value.⁴⁵

An overview and analysis of cases addressing each of these factors follows.

Explicitness or Graphic Nature of Material. Generally, the more explicit or graphic the description or depiction, the greater the likelihood that the material will be deemed patently offensive and therefore indecent. For example, the Commission imposed a forfeiture on a university radio station for airing a rap song that included a line depicting anal intercourse.⁴⁶ In that case, the Commission determined that the song described sexual activities in graphic terms that were patently offensive and therefore indecent. Since the song was broadcast in the mid-afternoon, there was a reasonable risk that children were in the audience, thus giving rise to the Commission’s action.⁴⁷

Broadcasts need not be as graphic as the song in the above case to give rise to the imposition of an FCC forfeiture. Broadcasts consisting of double entendres or innuendos may also be deemed indecent if the “sexual or excretory import is unmistakable.”⁴⁸ The FCC issued a notice of apparent liability and imposed a forfeiture on several stations for airing a song that included the following lines: “I whipped out my Whopper and whispered, Hey, Sweettart, how’d you like to Crunch on my Big Hunk for a Million Dollar Bar? Well, she immediately went down on my

⁴² (...continued)

uttered the phrase “this is really, really f[***]ing brilliant,” due primarily to the fact that the language in question did not describe or depict sexual and excretory activities or organs. 18 F.C.C. Rcd. 19859 (2003). The decision of the Enforcement Bureau has since been reversed. *See infra* regarding this case.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 5.

⁴⁶ *Notice of Apparent Liability, State University of New York*, 8 F.C.C. Rcd. 456 (1993).

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *See* note 35, *supra*.

Tootsie Roll and you know, it was like pure Almond Joy.”⁴⁹ The Commission determined that the material was indecent even though it used candy bar names to substitute for sexual activities. In one notice concerning the broadcast of the song, the Commission stated that “[w]hile the passages arguably consist of double entendre and indirect references, the language used in each passage was understandable and clearly capable of specific sexual meaning and, because of the context, the sexual import was inescapable.”⁵⁰ The nature of the lyrics, coupled with the fact that the song aired between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m., gave rise to the imposition of a forfeiture.

Dwelling or Repetition of Potentially Offensive Material. Repetition of and persistent focus on a sexual or excretory activity could “exacerbate the potential offensiveness of broadcasts.”⁵¹ For example, the FCC issued a notice of apparent liability and imposed a forfeiture on a radio station that broadcast an extensive discussion of flatulence and defecation by radio personality “Bubba, the Love Sponge.”⁵² Though the broadcast did not contain any expletives, the Commission found that the material dwelt on excretory activities and therefore was patently offensive.

While repetition can increase the likelihood that references to sexual or excretory activities are deemed indecent, where such references have been made in passing or are fleeting in nature, the Commission has found that the reference was not indecent even when profanity has been used.⁵³ For example, the Commission determined that the following phrase — “The hell I did, I drove mother-f[***]er, oh.” — uttered by an announcer during a radio morning show, was not indecent.⁵⁴ The Commission declined to take action regarding the broadcast because it contained only a “fleeting and isolated utterance . . . within the context of live and spontaneous programming.”⁵⁵ Certain fleeting references may, however, be found indecent where other factors contribute to the broadcast’s patent offensiveness. For example, the Commission has imposed forfeitures on stations for airing jokes that refer to sexual activities with children.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ *Notice of Apparent Liability, KGB Incorporated*, 7 F.C.C. Rcd. 3207 (1992). *See also Great American Television and Radio Company, Inc.*, 6 F.C.C. Rcd. 3692 (1990); *WIOD, Inc.*, 6 F.C.C. Rcd. 3704 (1989).

⁵⁰ 6 F.C.C. Rcd. 3692.

⁵¹ *See* note 35, *supra*.

⁵² *Notice of Apparent Liability, Citicasters Co.*, 13 F.C.C. Rcd. 22004 (1998).

⁵³ The Commission has recently indicated that “the mere fact that specific words or phrases are not sustained or repeated does not mandate a finding that material that is otherwise patently offensive to the broadcast medium is not indecent.” *In the Matter of Complaints Against Various Broadcast Licensees Regarding the Airing of the “Golden Globe Awards” Program*, File No. EB-03-IH-0110 (March 18, 2004). *See* section entitled Golden Globe Awards Decision *infra*.

⁵⁴ *L.M. Communications of South Carolina, Inc.*, 7 F.C.C. Rcd. 1595 (1992).

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *See Notice of Apparent Liability, Temple Radio, Inc.*, 12 F.C.C. Rcd. 21828 (1997); *Notice* (continued...)

Pandering or Titillating Nature of Material. In determining whether broadcast material is indecent, the Commission also looks to the purpose for which the material is being presented. Indecency findings generally involve material that is presented in a pandering or titillating nature, or material that is presented for the shock value of its language. For example, the Commission deemed a radio call-in survey about oral sex to be indecent based in part on the fact that the material was presented in a pandering and titillating manner.⁵⁷

Whether a broadcast is presented in a pandering or titillating manner depends on the context in which the potentially indecent material is presented. Explicit images or graphic language does not necessarily mean that the broadcast is being presented in a pandering or titillating manner. For example, the Commission declined to impose a forfeiture on a television station for airing portions of a high school sex education class that included the use of “sex organ models to demonstrate the use of various birth control devices.”⁵⁸ In dismissing the complaint, the Commission held that “[a]lthough the program dealt with sexual issues, the material presented was clinical or instructional in nature and not presented in a pandering, titillating, or vulgar manner.”⁵⁹

Golden Globe Awards Decision

As noted above, on March 18, 2004, the Federal Communications Commission overturned an earlier decision by the Commission’s Enforcement Bureau regarding the broadcast of the word “[***]ing” during the 2003 Golden Globe Awards. In the earlier decision, the Enforcement Bureau had found that the broadcast of the program including the utterance did not violate federal restrictions regarding the broadcast of obscene and indecent material.⁶⁰ The Bureau dismissed the complaints primarily because the language in question did not describe or depict sexual or excretory activities or organs.

In its March 18 *Memorandum Opinion and Order*, the full Commission concluded that the broadcast of the Golden Globe Awards did include material that violated prohibitions on the broadcast of indecent and profane material.⁶¹ In

⁵⁶ (...continued)

of Apparent Liability, EZ New Orleans, Inc., 12 F.C.C. Rcd. 4147 (1997).

⁵⁷ *Notice of Apparent Liability, Rusk Corporation, Radio Station KLOL*, 5 F.C.C. Rcd. 6332 (1990).

⁵⁸ *In the Matter of Application for Review of the Dismissal of an Indecency Complaint Against King Broadcasting Co.*, 5 F.C.C. Rcd. 2971 (1990).

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ The Commission declined to impose a forfeiture on the broadcast licensees named in the complaint because they were not “on notice” regarding the new interpretations of the Commission’s regulations regarding broadcast indecency and the newly adopted definition of profanity. The Commission also indicated that it will not use its decision in this case adversely against the licensees during the license renewal process.

reversing the Bureau, the Commission determined that the “phrase at issue is within the scope of our indecency definition because it does depict or describe sexual activities.”⁶² Although the Commission “recognize[d] NBC’s argument that the ‘F-Word’ here was used ‘as an intensifier,’” it nevertheless concluded that, “given the core meaning of the ‘F-Word,’ any use of that word or a variation, in any context, inherently has a sexual connotation, and therefore falls within the first prong of our indecency definition.”⁶³

Upon finding that the phrase in question fell within the first prong of the definition of “indecency,” the Commission turned to the question of whether the broadcast was patently offensive under contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium. The Commission determined that the broadcast was patently offensive, noting that “[t]he ‘F-Word’ is one of the most vulgar, graphic and explicit descriptions of sexual activity in the English language,” and that “[t]he use of the ‘F-Word’ here, on a nationally telecast awards ceremony, was shocking and gratuitous.”⁶⁴ The Commission also rejected “prior Commission and staff action [that] have indicated that isolated or fleeting broadcasts of the ‘F-Word’ such as that here are not indecent or would not be acted upon,” concluding “that any such interpretation is no longer good law.”⁶⁵ The Commission further clarified its position, stating “that the mere fact that specific words or phrases are not sustained or repeated does not mandate a finding that material that is otherwise patently offensive to the broadcast medium is not indecent.”⁶⁶

In addition to the determination that the utterance of the word “f[***]ing” during the Golden Globe Awards was indecent, the Commission also found, as an independent ground for its decision, that use of the word was “profane” in violation of 18 U.S.C. 1464.⁶⁷ In making this determination, the Commission cited dictionary definitions of “profanity” as “vulgar, irreverent, or coarse language,”⁶⁸ and a Seventh Circuit opinion stating that “profanity” is “construable as denoting certain

⁶² *In the Matter of Complaints Against Various Broadcast Licensees Regarding Their Airing of the “Golden Globe Awards” Program*, File No. EB-03-IH-0110 at 4 (March 18, 2004).

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 5.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 6. *See* section entitled *Dwelling or Repetition of Potentially Indecent Material supra*.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 7. It should be noted that, although in this case the Commission found that the broadcast in question was both indecent and profane, there are certain to be words that could be deemed “profane,” but do not fit the Commission’s definition of “indecent.” Under the newly adopted definition of “profanity,” many words could arguably be found “profane” because they provoke “violent resentment” or are otherwise “grossly offensive,” but not be found “indecent” because they do not refer to any sexual or excretory activity or organ or even “inherently” have a sexual connotation, as the Commission found the phrase that Bono uttered to have. Presumably, it is these words that the Commission will consider on a case-by-case basis.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 7, citing *Black’s Law Dictionary* 1210 (6th ed. 1990) and *American Heritage College Dictionary* 1112 (4th ed. 2002).

of those personally reviling epithets naturally tending to provoke violent resentment or denoting language so grossly offensive to members of the public who actually hear it as to amount to a nuisance.”⁶⁹ The Commission acknowledged that its limited case law regarding profane speech has focused on profanity in the context of blasphemy, but stated that it would no longer limit its definition of profane speech in such manner. Pursuant to its adoption of this new definition of “profane,” the Commission stated that, depending on the context, the “‘F-Word’ and those words (or variants thereof) that are as highly offensive as the ‘F-Word’” would be considered “profane” if broadcast between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.⁷⁰ The Commission noted that other words would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Super Bowl Halftime Show Decision

As noted above, on September 22, 2004, the FCC released a *Notice of Apparent Liability for Forfeiture* imposing a \$550,000 forfeiture on several Viacom-owned CBS affiliates for the broadcast of the Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime show on February 1, 2004, in which a performer’s breast was exposed.⁷¹ The Commission determined that the show, which was aired at approximately 8:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, violated its restrictions on the broadcast of indecent material.

In its analysis, the Commission determined that since the broadcast included a performance that culminated in “on-camera partial nudity,” and thus satisfied the first part of the indecency analysis, further scrutiny was warranted to determine whether the broadcast was “patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium.”⁷² The Commission found that the performance in question was “both explicit and graphic,” and rejected the licensees’ contention that since the exposure was fleeting, lasting only 19/32 of a second, it should not be deemed indecent.⁷³ In determining whether the material in question was intended to “pander to, titillate and shock the viewing audience,” the Commission noted that the performer’s breast was exposed after another performer sang, “gonna have you naked by the end of this song.”⁷⁴ The Commission found that the song lyrics, coupled with simulated sexual activities during the performance and the exposure of the breast, indicated that the purpose of the performance was to pander to, titillate and shock the audience, and the fact that the actual exposure of the breast was brief, as noted above, was not dispositive.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ *Id.*, citing *Tallman v. United States*, 465 F.2d 282, 286 (7th Cir. 1972).

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Complaints Against Various Television Licensees Concerning Their February 1, 2004, Broadcast of the Super Bowl XXXVIII Halftime Show*, File No. EB-04-IH-0011 (September 22, 2004).

⁷² *Id.* at ¶ 11.

⁷³ *Id.* at ¶ 13.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at ¶ 14.

⁷⁵ *Id.*

The Commission ordered each Viacom-owned CBS affiliate to pay the statutory maximum forfeiture of \$27,500 for the broadcast, for a total forfeiture of \$550,000. The forfeiture was imposed on the Viacom-owned affiliates because of Viacom's participation in and planning of the Super Bowl halftime show with MTV networks, another Viacom subsidiary.⁷⁶

Following the issuance of the *Notice of Apparent Liability for Forfeiture*, the affiliates are "afforded a reasonable period of time (usually 30 days from the date of the notice) to show, in writing, why a forfeiture penalty should not be imposed or should be reduced, or to pay the forfeiture."⁷⁷ The Commission may then issue an order cancelling or reducing the proposed forfeiture, or it may require that the original amount be paid in full by a certain date.⁷⁸ This order, constituting a final agency action, may subsequently be appealed in federal court.⁷⁹

Other Recent Enforcement Actions

In addition to the Commission's forfeiture proceedings discussed above, the Commission has recently imposed forfeitures on a number of radio stations for broadcast indecency.⁸⁰ We now discuss two of its recent high-profile actions.

Infinity Broadcasting. On October 2, 2003, the Commission issued a *Notice of Apparent Liability* to Infinity Broadcasting for airing portions of the "Opie & Anthony Show" during which the hosts conducted a contest entitled "Sex for Sam" which involved couples having sex in certain "risky" locations throughout New York City in an effort to win a trip.⁸¹ The couples, accompanied by a station employee, were to have sex in as many of the designated locations as possible. They were assigned points based on the nature of the location and the activities in which they engaged. The station aired discussions between the hosts of the show and the station employee accompanying the couples which consisted of descriptions of the sexual activities of the participating couples and the locations in which they engaged in sexual activities. One discussion involved an description of a couple apparently engaging in sexual activities in St. Patrick's Cathedral.

The Commission determined that the broadcast made "graphic and explicit references to sexual and excretory organs and activity" despite the fact that colloquial terms, rather than explicit or graphic terms, were used in the descriptions. The Commission found that "[t]o the extent that the colloquial terms that the participants used to describe organs and activities could be described as innuendo rather than as direct references, they are nonetheless sufficient to render the material actionably

⁷⁶ *Id* at ¶¶ 17 - 24.

⁷⁷ 47 C.F.R. 1.80(f)(3).

⁷⁸ 47 C.F.R. 1.80(f)(4).

⁷⁹ Procedures for appealing Commission orders are set forth in 47 U.S.C. 402.

⁸⁰ For a complete list of recent actions related to broadcast indecency, see [<http://www.fcc.gov/eb/broadcast/obscind.html>]

⁸¹ *In the Matter of Infinity Broadcasting, et al.*, EB-02-IH-0685 (October 2, 2003).

indecent because the ‘sexual [and] excretory import’ of those references was ‘unmistakable.’”⁸² The Commission also found that the hosts of the show “dwelled at length on and referred repeatedly to sexual or excretory activities and organs,” and that “the descriptions of sexual and excretory activity and organs were not in any way isolated and fleeting.”⁸³

Clear Channel Broadcasting. On January 27, 2004, the Commission issued a *Notice of Apparent Liability* to Clear Channel Broadcasting for repeated airings of the “Bubba, the Love Sponge” program which included indecent material.⁸⁴ The Commission found that all the broadcasts in question involved “conversations about such things as oral sex, penises, testicles, masturbation, intercourse, orgasms and breasts.”⁸⁵ The Commission determined that each of the broadcasts in question contained “sufficiently graphic and explicit references,” which were generally repeated throughout the broadcast in a pandering and titillating manner.

In one broadcast, the station aired a segment involving skits in which the voices of purported cartoon characters talk about drugs and sex.⁸⁶ The skits were inserted between advertisements for Cartoon Network’s Friday-night cartoons. The Commission determined that “the use of cartoon characters in such a sexually explicit manner during hours of the day when children are likely to be listening is shocking and makes this segment patently offensive.”⁸⁷ The Commission also cited the “calculated and callous nature of the stations’ decision to impose this predictably offensive material upon young, vulnerable listeners” as “weighing heavily” in its determination.⁸⁸

On April 8, 2004, the Commission released another *Notice of Apparent Liability* against Clear Channel Communications for airing allegedly indecent material during the “Howard Stern Show.”⁸⁹ For the first time, the Commission sought to impose separate statutory maximum forfeitures for each indecent utterance during the program in question, rather than imposing a single fine for the entire program.⁹⁰

⁸² *Id.* at 8.

⁸³ *Id.* at 9. The Commission noted that the contest portion of the broadcast in question lasted over an hour and was reproduced in a 203-page transcript.

⁸⁴ *In the Matter of Clear Channel Broadcasting Licenses, Inc., et al.*, File No. EB-02-IH-0261 (January 27, 2004).

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 4.

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 5.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 6.

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ *In the Matter of Clear Channel Broadcasting Licensees*, File No. EB-03-IH-159 (April 8, 2004).

⁹⁰ *See* Statement of Commissioner Michael J. Copps, [http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-245911A1.pdf], p. 2.

The Commission entered into a consent decree with Clear Channel on June 9, 2004. The decree requires Clear Channel to make a “voluntary contribution” of \$1.75 million to the United States Treasury and outlines “a company-wide compliance plan for the purpose of preventing the broadcast over radio or television of material violative of the indecency laws.”⁹¹ As part of the compliance plan, Clear Channel will “conduct training on obscenity and indecency for all on-air talent and employees who materially participate in programming decisions, which will include tutorials regarding material that the FCC does not permit broadcasters to air.”⁹² The plan also requires Clear Channel to suspend any employee accused of airing, or who materially participates in the decision to air, obscene or indecent material while an investigation is conducted following the issuance of a *Notice of Apparent Liability*. Such employees will be terminated without delay if the *NAL* results in enforcement action by the FCC.

Congressional Response

In response to the FCC’s initial decision regarding the Golden Globe Awards broadcast, Representative Ose introduced legislation to amend section 1464 of title 18 to define “profane,” as used in that section, to include any use of eight specific words or phrases, in any grammatical form.⁹³

Legislation has also been introduced, by Representative Upton, to increase the FCC’s penalties for broadcasting obscene, indecent, and profane language. H.R. 3717, 108th Congress, would increase the penalties to \$275,000 for each violation or each day of a continuing violation, with the total amount assessed for any continuing violation not to exceed \$3 million for any single act or failure to act. The bill specifically mentions obscene, indecent, and profane language, but does not appear to impose the increased penalties for broadcast images that are deemed indecent.

On March 3, 2004, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce held a full-committee markup of H.R. 3717. The Committee approved an amendment in the nature of a substitute and ordered the bill to be reported to the full House.⁹⁴ The amendment would increase the maximum penalty for the broadcast of indecent material to \$500,000 for each violation with no aggregate maximum. Under the

⁹¹ See *In the Matter of Clear Channel Communications, Inc.*, FCC 04-128 (June 9, 2004) at [http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-04-128A1.pdf].

⁹² *Id* at 7.

⁹³ H.R. 3687. The FCC’s indecency regulation prescribes the 10 p.m.-to-6 a.m. “safe harbor” for “indecent programming.” No comparable regulation addresses profane programming. One might argue, therefore, that the ban on profane programming under 18 U.S.C. § 1464, as it exists now and as it would be amended by H.R. 3687, would apply around the clock. This reading of the statute, however, might render it unconstitutional (*see* note 24, *supra*), and a court might reject it for that reason. *See*, *United States v. X-Citement Video, Inc.*, 513 U.S. 64, 69 (1994) (“a statute is to be construed where fairly possible so as to avoid substantial constitutional questions”).

⁹⁴ H.Rept. 108-434.

amendment, the increased forfeiture penalties could also be imposed on nonlicensees, such as individuals who utter obscene, indecent, or profane material. In determining the appropriate amount of the forfeiture, the bill directs the Commission to consider a number of factors, including whether the material in question was live or recorded, scripted or unscripted, and the size of the viewing audience. The Commission would be required to act on allegations of broadcast indecency within 180 days after the receipt of the allegation.

In addition to the increased penalties, the legislation also provides additional nonmonetary penalties for the broadcast of indecent material. If the Commission determines that a licensee has broadcast obscene, indecent, or profane material, the Commission may require the licensee to broadcast public service announcements that serve the educational and informational needs of children, and such announcements may be required to reach an audience that is up to five times the size of the audience that is estimated to have been reached by the obscene, indecent, or profane material. The legislation also directs the Commission to take into consideration whether the broadcast of obscene, indecent, or profane material demonstrates a lack of character or other qualifications to operate a station. The broadcast of such material would also be considered a serious violation for purposes of license renewal determinations. Finally, if during the term of the license, a broadcast licensee is the subject of three or more proceedings regarding violations of indecency prohibitions, the Commission would be required to commence a proceeding to consider whether the license should be revoked.

The House passed H.R. 3717 on March 11, 2004, with two additional amendments.⁹⁵ The first amendment preserves a licensee's right to appeal a forfeiture before it can be considered during a license application or renewal proceeding, or used in a license revocation proceeding initiated after the licensee's third indecency violation. The second amendment approved by the House requires the GAO to study the number of indecency complaints received by the FCC and the number of those complaints that result in final agency action by the Commission; the amount of time taken by the Commission to respond to a complaint; the mechanisms established by the Commission to receive, investigate, and respond to complaints; and whether complainants to the Commission are adequately informed by the Commission of the responses to their complaints. The amendment gives GAO one year to complete the study and report to Congress on its findings.

On February 9, 2004, Senator Brownback introduced S. 2056, which was virtually identical to H.R. 3717, as introduced. On March 9, 2004, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation held a full committee markup of the bill, and ordered the bill to be reported favorably with amendments.⁹⁶ As reported, the bill includes a number of provisions similar to those in H.R. 3717. Both bills would increase forfeiture amounts for broadcast indecency, but unlike the House bill, which included an initial increase to \$500,000 per violation, the Senate bill provides for an initial increase to \$275,000 per violation, with additional increases, up to \$500,000, for subsequent violations. Penalties could be doubled if the

⁹⁵ Roll Call No. 55, 150 Cong. Rec. H1035 (daily ed. March 11, 2004).

⁹⁶ S.Rept. 108-253.

Commission determines that certain aggravating factors are met. Like the House bill, the Senate bill includes a provision requiring the FCC to commence a license revocation hearing after if a broadcast licensee has been the subject of three proceedings regarding indecency violations. The Senate bill would also require the Commission to act on any allegations of broadcast indecency within 270 days.

Additional amendments to S. 2056 would direct the Commission to consider a broadcaster's ability to pay forfeitures based on factors such as revenues and market size when determining the amount of the forfeiture, and would invalidate the FCC's media ownership rules pending a GAO review of the relationship between horizontal and vertical consolidation of media companies and violations of indecency prohibitions.⁹⁷

Another Senate bill aimed at increasing penalties for broadcast indecency was introduced by Senator Miller on March 1, 2004. S. 2147 would allow the Commission to impose a forfeiture of "25 cents times the number of individuals who witnessed or heard the broadcast as determined by a viewership rating service selected by the Commission" for the broadcast of obscene, indecent, or profane language. The forfeiture could be imposed on broadcast licensees, any applicant for a broadcast license, or any other company or individual that has participated in the broadcast, including producers, general managers, performers, and networks.

On June 22, 2004, the Senate approved an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (S. 2400) which included provisions similar to those in S. 2056, as reported by the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee on March 9, 2004. The amendment would increase the maximum forfeiture imposed by the FCC to \$275,000 per violation, with a cap of \$3 million for a continuing violation.⁹⁸

In addition, S. 1264, 108th Congress, the FCC Reauthorization Act of 2003, as reported by the Committee on Commerce on September 3, 2003 (prior to the FCC Enforcement Bureau's decision regarding the Golden Globe Awards broadcast), would, in section 11, require that "the broadcast of obscene or indecent matter from more than 1 individual during the same program" be considered separate violations, and that the FCC, unless it determined it not to be in the public interest, revoke the station license or construction permit of any broadcast station licensee or permittee that violates 18 U.S.C. § 1464.

Finally, resolutions have been introduced to express disapproval of the FCC Enforcement Bureau's decision regarding the Golden Globe Awards broadcast: H.Res. 482, H.Res. 500, and S.Res. 283, which the Senate passed on December 9, 2003.

⁹⁷ The Senate committee also added a new title to the original bill, entitled the "Children's Protection from Violent Programming Act."

⁹⁸ S.Amdt. 3235, as amended.

Would Prohibiting the Broadcast of “Indecent” Words Regardless of Context Violate the First Amendment?

In 1978, in *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation*, the Supreme Court upheld, against a First Amendment challenge, an action that FCC took against a radio station for broadcasting a recording of George Carlin’s “Filthy Words” monologue at 2 p.m.⁹⁹ The Court has not decided a case on the issue of “indecent” speech on broadcast radio or television since then, but it did cite *Pacifica* with approval in 1997, when, in *Reno v. ACLU*, it contrasted regulation of the broadcast media with regulation of the Internet.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the Court in *Reno* did not *hold* that *Pacifica* remains good law, and arguments have been made that the proliferation of cable television channels has rendered archaic *Pacifica*’s denial of full First Amendment rights to broadcast media.

Even if *Pacifica* remains valid in this respect, *Pacifica* did not hold that the First Amendment permits the ban either of an occasional expletive on broadcast media, or of programs that would not be likely to attract youthful audiences, even if such programs contain “indecent” language. On these points, Justice Stevens wrote for the Court in *Pacifica*:

It is appropriate, in conclusion, to emphasize the narrowness of our holding. This case does not involve a two-way radio conversation between a cab driver and a dispatcher, or a telecast of an Elizabethan comedy. We have not decided that an occasional expletive in either setting would justify any sanction. . . . The time of day was emphasized by the Commission. The content of the program in which the language is used will also affect the composition of the audience. . . .¹⁰¹

In a footnote to the last sentence of this quotation, the Court added: “Even a prime-time recitation of Geoffrey Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale would not be likely to

⁹⁹ 438 U.S. 726 (1978). The FCC’s action was to issue “a declaratory order granting the complaint,” and “state that the order would be ‘associated with the station’s license file,’” which means that the FCC could consider it when it came time for the station’s license renewal. *Id.* at 730.

¹⁰⁰ 521 U.S. 844, 868 (1997) (noting that “the history of the extensive regulation of the broadcast medium” and “the scarcity of available frequencies” are factors “not present in cyberspace,” and striking down parts of the Communications Decency Act of 1996). The Court also cited *Pacifica* with approval in *United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc.*, 529 U.S. 803, 813-814 (1998), and in *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U.S. 234, 245 (2002).

¹⁰¹ *Pacifica*, *supra*, 438 U.S. at 750. A federal court of appeals subsequently held unconstitutional a federal statute that banned “indecent” broadcasts 24 hours a day, but, in a later case, the same court upheld the present statute, 47 U.S.C. § 303 note, which bans “indecent” broadcasts from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*, 932 F.2d 1504 (D.C. Cir. 1991), *cert. denied*, 503 U.S. 913 (1992); *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*, 58 F.3d 654 (D.C. Cir. 1995) (en banc), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 1043 (1996).

command the attention of many children. . . .”¹⁰² At the same time, Justice Stevens acknowledged that the Carlin monologue has political content: “The monologue does present a point of view; it attempts to show that the words it uses are ‘harmless’ and that our attitudes toward them are ‘essentially silly.’ The Commission objects, [however,] not to this point of view, but to the way in which it is expressed.”¹⁰³ The Court commented: “If there were any reason to believe that the Commission’s characterization of the Carlin monologue as offensive could be traced to its political content — or even to the fact that it satirized contemporary attitudes about four-letter words — First Amendment protection might be required.”¹⁰⁴

There appears to be some tension between this comment and the Court’s remark about Chaucer, as any attempt to censor Chaucer would presumably also be based not on its ideas but on the way its ideas are expressed. But, as noted above, the Court’s remark about Chaucer was a footnote to its comment that “[t]he content of the program in which the language is used will also affect the composition of the audience. . . .” Therefore, the difference that Justice Stevens apparently perceived between Chaucer and Carlin was that, even if both have literary, artistic, or political value, only the latter would be likely to attract a youthful audience. Arguably, then, *Pacifica* would permit the censorship, during certain hours, of the broadcast even of works of art that are likely to attract a youthful audience.¹⁰⁵

If so, this would be contrary to the Court’s opposition, in other contexts, to the censorship of works of art. The Court has held that even “materials [that] depict or describe patently offensive ‘hard core’ sexual conduct,” which would otherwise be obscene, may not be prohibited if they have “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”¹⁰⁶ In addition, the “harmful to minors” statutes of the sort that the

¹⁰² *Id.* at 750, n.29.

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 746 n.22. These two sentences and the text accompanying the next footnote, although part of Justice Stevens’ opinion, are in a part of the opinion (IV-B) joined by only two other justices. Every other quotation from *Pacifica* in this report was from a part of the opinion that a majority of the justices joined.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 746.

¹⁰⁵ There also appears to be some tension between, on the one hand, Justice Stevens’ distinction in *Pacifica* between a point of view and the way in which it is expressed, and, on the other hand, the Court’s statement in *Cohen v. California* “that much linguistic expression serves a dual communicative function: it conveys not only ideas capable of relatively precise, detached explication, but otherwise inexpressible emotions as well. In fact, words are often chosen as much for their emotive as their cognitive force. We cannot sanction the view that the Constitution, while solicitous of the cognitive content of individual speech, has little or no regard for that emotive function which, practically speaking, may often be the more important element of the overall message sought to be communicated.” 403 U.S. 15, 26 (1971) (upholding the First Amendment right, in the corridor of a courthouse, to wear a jacket bearing the words “F[***] the Draft”). Arguably, Carlin’s use of “indecent” words not only served an emotive purpose, but served to indicate the precise words to whose censorship he was objecting. Yet *Pacifica* was decided after *Cohen*, which suggests that *Cohen* does not lessen the precedential value of *Pacifica*.

¹⁰⁶ *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 27, 24 (1973). In addition, in striking down parts of
(continued...)

Supreme Court upheld in *Ginsberg v. New York* generally define “harmful to minors” to parallel the Supreme Court’s definition of “obscenity,” and thus prohibit distributing to minors only material that lacks serious value for minors.¹⁰⁷ This suggests that, if the FCC or Congress prohibited the broadcast during certain hours of “indecent” words regardless of context, the Court might be troubled by the prohibition’s application to works with serious value, even though *Pacifica* allowed the censorship of Carlin’s monologue, despite its apparently having serious value.

Yet, as noted, Justice Stevens’ expressed a distinction in *Pacifica* between a point of view and the way in which it is expressed, and, though a majority of the justices did not join the part of the opinion that drew this distinction, a majority of the justices, by concurring in *Pacifica*’s holding, indicated that the political (or literary or artistic) content of Carlin’s monologue did not prevent its censorship during certain hours on broadcast radio and television. Therefore, it appears that, in deciding the constitutionality of an FCC or a congressional action prohibiting the broadcasting, during certain hours, of material with “indecent” words, the Court might be troubled by its application to works with serious value only if those works would, like Chaucer’s, not likely attract a substantial youthful audience.

In sum, the Court did not hold that the FCC could prohibit an occasional expletive, and did not hold that the FCC could prohibit offensive words in programs — even prime-time programs — that children would be unlikely to watch or listen to. The Court did not hold that the FCC could *not* take these actions, as the question whether it could was not before the Court. But the Court’s language quoted above renders *Pacifica* of uncertain precedential value in deciding whether a ban, during certain hours, on the broadcast of “indecent” words regardless of context would be constitutional.

In the “Filthy Words” monologue, as the Supreme Court described it, George Carlin “began by referring to his thoughts about ‘the words you couldn’t say on the public, ah, airwaves, um, the ones you definitely wouldn’t say, ever.’ He proceeded to list those words and repeat them over and over in a variety of colloquialisms.” The FCC, at the time, used essentially the same standard for “indecent” that it uses today: “[T]he concept of ‘indecent’ is intimately connected with the exposure of children to language that describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary

¹⁰⁶ (...continued)

the Communications Decency Act of 1996, the Court expressed concern that the statute may “extend to discussions about prison rape or safe sexual practices, artistic images that include nude subjects, and arguably the card catalogue of the Carnegie Library.” *Reno v. ACLU*, *supra*, 521 U.S. at 878. And, in striking down a federal statute that prohibited child pornography that was produced without the use of an actual child, the Court expressed concern that the statute “prohibits speech despite its serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U.S. 234, 246 (2002). In neither of these cases, however, did the Court state that its holding turned on the statute’s application to works of serious value.

¹⁰⁷ 390 U.S. 629 (1968).

community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities and organs. . . .”¹⁰⁸

Most of Carlin’s uses of the “filthy words,” it appears from reading his monologue, which is included as an appendix to the Court’s opinion, seem designed to show the words’ multiple uses, apart from describing sexual or excretory activities or organs. Nevertheless, “the Commission concluded that certain words depicted sexual or excretory activities in a patently offensive manner. . . .”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, one might argue that, even if, under *Pacifica*, the First Amendment does not protect, during certain hours, the use on broadcast media of words that depict sexual or excretory activities in a patently offensive manner, it nevertheless might protect the use of those same words “as an adjective or expletive to emphasize an exclamation” (to quote the FCC Enforcement Bureau’s opinion in the Bono case).

A counterargument might be that, in *Pacifica*, the Court noted that “the normal definition of ‘indecent’ merely refers to nonconformance with accepted standards of morality.”¹¹⁰ This suggests the possibility that the Court would have ruled the same way in *Pacifica* if the FCC had defined “indecent” loosely enough to include the use of a patently offensive word “as an adjective or expletive to emphasize an exclamation.” But this is speculative, as the Court did not so rule. Further, as noted above, Court emphasized the narrowness of its holding, noting that it had “not decided that an occasional expletive . . . would justify any sanction. . . .”

On what basis did the Court in *Pacifica* find that the FCC’s action did not violate the First Amendment? In Part IV-C of opinion, which was joined by a majority of the justices, Justice Stevens wrote:

[O]f all forms of communication, it is broadcasting that has received the most limited First Amendment protection. Thus, although other speakers cannot be licensed except under laws that carefully define and narrow official discretion, a broadcaster may be deprived of his license and his forum if the Commission decides that such an action would serve “the public interest, convenience, and necessity.” Similarly, although the First Amendment protects newspaper publishers from being required to print the replies of those whom they criticize, *Miami Herald Publishing Co. v. Tornillo*, 418 U.S. 241, it affords no such protection to broadcasters; on the contrary, they must give free time to the victims of their criticism. *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, 395 U.S. 367.

The reasons for these distinctions are complex, but two have relevance to the present case. First, the broadcast media have established a uniquely pervasive presence in the lives of all Americans. Patently offensive, indecent material presented over the airwaves confronts the citizen, not only in public, but in the privacy of the home, where the individual’s right to be left alone plainly outweighs the First Amendment rights of an intruder. *Rowan v. Post Office Dept.*, 397 U.S. 728. . . . To say that one may avoid further offense by turning

¹⁰⁸ *Pacifica*, *supra*, 438 U.S. at 731-732.

¹⁰⁹ *Id.* at 732 (distinguishing “indecent” from “obscene” and “profane” in 18 U.S.C. § 1464).

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at 740.

off the radio when he hears indecent language is like saying that the remedy for an assault is to run away after the first blow.

Second, broadcasting is uniquely accessible to children, even those too young to read. . . . Bookstores and motion picture theaters . . . may be prohibited from making indecent material available to children. We held in *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629, that the government’s interest in the “well-being of its youth” and in supporting “parents’ claim to authority in their own household” justified the regulation of otherwise protected expression. . . .¹¹¹

In sum, the Court held that, on broadcast radio and television, during certain times of day, certain material may be prohibited because (1) it is patently offensive and indecent, and (2) it threatens the well-being of minors and their parents’ authority in their own household. This raises the question of the extent to which the Court continues to allow the government (1) to treat broadcast media differently from other media, and (2) to censor speech on the ground that it is patently offensive and indecent, or threatens the well-being of minors and their parents’ authority in their own household.

Broadcast Media. In *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, which the Court cited in the above quotation from *Pacifica*, the Court upheld the FCC’s “fairness doctrine,” which “imposed on radio and television broadcasters the requirement that discussion of public issues be presented on broadcast stations, and that each side of those issues must be given fair coverage.”¹¹² The reason that the Court upheld the imposition of the fairness doctrine on broadcast media, though it would not uphold its imposition on print media, is that “[w]here there are substantially more individuals who want to broadcast than there are frequencies to allocate, it is idle to posit an unbridgeable First Amendment right to broadcast comparable to the right of every individual to speak, write, or publish.”¹¹³ “Licenses to broadcast,” the Court added, “do not confer ownership of designated frequencies, but only the temporary privilege of using them. 47 U.S.C. § 301. Unless renewed, they expire within three years. 47 U.S.C. § 307(d). The statute mandates the issuance of licenses if the ‘public convenience, interest, or necessity will be served thereby.’ 47 U.S.C. § 307(a).”¹¹⁴

The Court in *Red Lion* then noted:

It is argued that even if at one time the lack of available frequencies for all who wished to use them justified the Government’s choice of those who would best serve the public interest . . . this condition no longer prevails so that continuing control is not justified. To this there are several answers. Scarcity is not entirely a thing of the past.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ *Id.* at 748-750.

¹¹² 395 U.S. 367, 369 (1969).

¹¹³ *Id.* at 388.

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at 394.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 396.

With the plethora of cable channels today, has spectrum scarcity now become a thing of the past? In *Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. v. FCC*, the Court held that the scarcity rationale does not apply to cable television:

[C]able television does not suffer from the inherent limitations that characterize the broadcast medium . . . [S]oon there may be no practical limitation on the number of speakers who may use the cable medium. Nor is there any danger of physical interference between two cable speakers attempting to use the same channel. In light of these fundamental technological differences between broadcast and cable transmission, application of a more relaxed standard of scrutiny adopted in *Red Lion* and the other broadcast cases is inapt when determining the First Amendment validity of cable regulation.”¹¹⁶

One might argue that, if the scarcity rationale does not apply to cable television, then it should not apply to broadcast television either, because a person who because of scarcity cannot start a broadcast channel can start a cable channel.¹¹⁷ But the Court has not ruled on the question; in *Turner* it wrote: “Although courts and commentators have criticized the scarcity rationale since its inception, we have declined to question its continuing validity as support for our broadcast jurisprudence, and see no reason to do so here.”¹¹⁸

In 1987, however, the FCC abolished the fairness doctrine, on First Amendment grounds, noting that technological developments and advancements in the telecommunications marketplace have provided a basis for the Supreme Court to reconsider its holding in *Red Lion*. The FCC’s decision was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, and the Supreme Court declined to review the case.¹¹⁹ The court of appeals did not rule on constitutional grounds, but rather concluded “that the FCC’s decision that the fairness doctrine no longer served the public interest was neither arbitrary, capricious nor an abuse of discretion, and [we] are convinced that it would have acted on that finding to terminate the doctrine even in the absence of its belief that the doctrine was no longer constitutional.”¹²⁰

Thus, *Red Lion* has not been overruled, but the advent of widespread cable television may weaken the scarcity rationale, and thus may weaken *Red Lion* as a

¹¹⁶ 512 U.S. 622, 639 (1994).

¹¹⁷ In the court of appeals decision upholding the current statute that bans “indecent” broadcasts from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., a dissenting judge wrote of “the utterly irrational distinction that Congress has created between *broadcast* and *cable* operators. No one disputes that cable exhibits more and worse indecency than does broadcast. And cable television is certainly pervasive in our country.” *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*, *supra*, 58 F.3d at 671 (emphasis in original) (Edwards, C.J., dissenting).

¹¹⁸ *Id.* at 638 (citation omitted).

¹¹⁹ *Syracuse Peace Council v. FCC*, 867 F.2d 654 (D.C. Cir. 1989), *cert. denied*, 493 U.S. 1019 (1990).

¹²⁰ *Id.* at 669. In *Arkansas AFL-CIO v. FCC*, 11 F.3d 1430 (8th Cir. 1993) (en banc), the court of appeals held that Congress had not codified the fairness doctrine and that the FCC’s decision to eliminate it was a reasonable interpretation of the statutory requirement that licensees operate in the public interest.

precedent, which in turn may weaken *Pacifica* as a precedent, as *Pacifica* relied in part on *Red Lion*. In another context, the Supreme Court, quoting *Pacifica*, noted that cable television “is as ‘accessible to children’ as over-the-air broadcasting,” has also “established a uniquely pervasive presence in the lives of all Americans,” and can also “confron[t] the citizen’ in ‘the privacy of the home,’ . . . with little or no prior warning.”¹²¹ Yet the Court has held that cable television has full First Amendment protection; i.e., content-based restrictions on cable television receive strict scrutiny.¹²²

In *Community Television v. Wilkinson*, however, a federal district court held that *Pacifica* does not apply to cable television because of several differences between cable and broadcasting.¹²³ For one, “[i]n the cable medium, the physical scarcity that justifies content regulation in broadcasting is not present.”¹²⁴ For another, as a subscriber medium, “cable TV is not an intruder but an invitee whose invitation can be carefully circumscribed.”¹²⁵ In *Pacifica*, as noted above, the Court compared broadcast media to an intruder. This rationale may still stand as a basis for applying *Pacifica* to restrictions on broadcast media. As noted, however, if the Court continues to apply *Pacifica* to restrictions on broadcast media, this does not necessarily mean that it would uphold a ban on the broadcast of “indecent” language regardless of context, as *Pacifica* did not hold “that an occasional expletive . . . would justify any sanction. . . .”

Strict Scrutiny. We now consider the analysis that the Court might apply if it chooses not to apply *Pacifica* in deciding the constitutionality of a ban on the broadcast of “indecent” language regardless of context. The Court in *Pacifica*, as noted, offered two reasons why the FCC could prohibit offensive speech on broadcast media: “First, the broadcast media have established a uniquely pervasive presence in the lives of all Americans. Patently offensive, indecent material presented over the airwaves confronts the citizen, not only in public, but in the privacy of the home. . . . Second, broadcasting is uniquely accessible to children, even those too young to

¹²¹ *Denver Area Educational Telecommunications Consortium, Inc. v. FCC*, 518 U.S. 727, 744-745 (1996) (upholding a federal statute that permits cable operators to prohibit indecent material on leased access channels).

¹²² *United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc.*, 529 U.S. 803, 813 (2000) (striking down a federal statute that required distributors to fully scramble or fully block signal bleed to non-subscribers to cable channels; “signal bleed” refers to the audio or visual portions of cable television programs that non-subscribers to a cable channel may be able to hear or see despite the fact that the programs have been scrambled to prevent the non-subscribers from hearing or seeing them).

¹²³ 611 F. Supp. 1099 (D. Utah 1985), *aff’d*, 800 F.2d 989 (10th Cir. 1986), *aff’d*, 480 U.S. 926 (1987) (striking down Utah Cable Television Programming Decency Act). The court of appeals did not discuss the constitutional issue beyond stating that it agreed with the district court’s reasons for its holding. 800 F.2d at 991. A summary affirmance by the Supreme Court, as in this case, is “an affirmance of the judgment only,” and does not indicate approval of the reasoning of the court below. *Mandel v. Bradley*, 432 U.S. 173, 176 (1977).

¹²⁴ *Id.* at 1112.

¹²⁵ *Id.* at 1113.

read,” and the government has an interest in the “well-being of its youth” and “in supporting ‘parents’ claim to authority in their own household.” The first of these reasons apparently refers to adults as well as to children.

Ordinarily, when the government restricts speech, including “indecent” speech, on the basis of its content, the restriction, if challenged, will be found constitutional only if it satisfies “strict scrutiny.”¹²⁶ This means that the government must prove that the restriction serves “to promote a compelling interest” and is “the least restrictive means to further the articulated interest.”¹²⁷ The Court in *Pacifica* did not apply this test or any weaker First Amendment test, and did not explain why it did not. Its reason presumably was that the FCC’s action restricted speech only on broadcast media. If, however, the Court were not to apply *Pacifica* in determining the constitutionality of a ban, during certain hours, on the broadcast of “indecent” language regardless of context, then it would apparently apply strict scrutiny.

If the Court were to apply strict scrutiny in making this determination, it seems unlikely that it would find the first reason cited in *Pacifica* — sparing citizens, including adults, from patently offensive or indecent words — to constitute a compelling governmental interest. The Court has held that the government may not prohibit the use of offensive words unless they “fall within [a] relatively few categories of instances,” such as obscenity, fighting words, or words “thrust upon unwilling or unsuspecting viewers.”¹²⁸

If the Court were to apply strict scrutiny in determining the constitutionality of a ban, during certain hours, on the broadcast of “indecent” language regardless of context, it also might not find the second reason cited in *Pacifica* — protecting minors from patently offensive and indecent words and “supporting ‘parents’ claim to authority in their own household” — to constitute a compelling governmental interest. When the Court considers the constitutionality of a restriction on speech, it ordinarily — even when the speech lacks full First Amendment protection and the court applies less than strict scrutiny — requires the government to “demonstrate that the recited harms are real, not merely conjectural, and that the regulation will in fact alleviate these harms in a direct and material way.”¹²⁹ With respect to restrictions

¹²⁶ *Sable Communications of California v. Federal Communications Commission*, 492 U.S. 115 (1989); *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*, *supra*, 932 F.2d at 1509.

¹²⁷ *Id.* at 126.

¹²⁸ *Cohen v. California*, *supra*, 403 U.S. at 19, 21. Under *Pacifica*, broadcast media do thrust words upon unwilling or unsuspecting viewers, but, if a court were to apply strict scrutiny to a ban on the broadcast of “indecent” language regardless of context, then it would not be following *Pacifica*.

¹²⁹ *Turner Broadcasting*, *supra*, 512 U.S. at 664 (incidental restriction on speech). *See also*, *Edenfield v. Fane*, 507 U.S. 761, 770-771 (1993) (restriction on commercial speech); *Nixon v. Shrink Missouri Government PAC*, 528 U.S. 377, 392 (2000) (restriction on campaign contributions). In all three of these cases, the government had restricted less-than-fully protected speech, so the Court did not apply strict scrutiny. Because offensive words are apparently entitled to full First Amendment protection (except under *Pacifica* and in the instances cited in *Cohen v. California*, quoted in the text above), it seems all the more likely

(continued...)

designed to deny minors access to sexually explicit material, by contrast, the courts appear to assume, without requiring evidence, that such material is harmful to minors, or to consider it “obscene as to minors,” even if it is not obscene as to adults, and therefore not entitled to First Amendment protection with respect to minors, whether it is harmful to them or not.¹³⁰ A word used as a mere adjective or expletive,

¹²⁹ (...continued)

that the Court, if it applied strict scrutiny instead of *Pacifica* to a challenge to a ban on the broadcast of “indecent” words regardless of context, would require the government to demonstrate that harms it recites are real and that the ban would alleviate these harms in a direct and material way.

¹³⁰ *Interactive Digital Software Association v. St. Louis County, Missouri*, 329 F.3d 954, 959 (8th Cir. 2003). The Supreme Court has “recognized that there is a compelling interest in protecting the physical and psychological well-being of minors. This interest extends to shielding minors from the influence of literature that is not obscene by adult standards.” *Sable, supra*, 492 U.S. at 126. The Court has also upheld a state law banning the distribution to minors of “so-called ‘girlie’ magazines” even as it acknowledged that “[i]t is very doubtful that this finding [that such magazines are “a basic factor in impairing the ethical and moral development of our youth”] expresses an accepted scientific fact.” *Ginsberg v. New York, supra*, 390 U.S. at 631, 641. “To sustain state power to exclude [such material from minors],” the Court wrote, “requires only that we be able to say that it was not irrational for the legislature to find that exposure to material condemned by the statute is harmful to minors.” *Id.* at 641. *Ginsberg* thus “invokes the much less exacting ‘rational basis’ standard of review,” rather than strict scrutiny. *Interactive Digital Software Association, supra*, 329 F.3d at 959.

A federal district court wrote:

We are troubled by the absence of evidence of harm presented both before Congress and before us that the viewing of signal bleed of sexually explicit programming causes harm to children and that the avoidance of this harm can be recognized as a compelling State interest. We recognize that the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence does not require empirical evidence. Only some minimal amount of evidence is required when sexually explicit programming and children are involved.

Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc. v. United States, 30 F. Supp.2d 702, 716 (D. Del. 1998); *aff’d*, 529 U.S. 803 (2000). The district court therefore found that the statute served a compelling governmental interest, though it held it unconstitutional because it found that the statute did not constitute the least restrictive means to advance the interest. The Supreme Court affirmed on the same ground, apparently assuming the existence of a compelling governmental interest, but finding a less restrictive means that could have been used.

In another case, a federal court of appeals, upholding the current statute that bans “indecent” broadcasts from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., noted “that the Supreme Court has recognized that the Government’s interest in protecting children extends beyond shielding them from physical and psychological harm. The statute that the Court found constitutional in *Ginsberg* sought to protect children from exposure to materials that would ‘impair[] [their] ethical and moral development. . . . Congress does not need the testimony of psychiatrists and social scientists in order to take note of the coarsening of impressionable minds that can result from a persistent exposure to sexually explicit material. . . .’” *Action for Children’s*

(continued...)

however, arguably does not constitute sexually oriented material.¹³¹ Therefore, if a court applied strict scrutiny to decide the constitutionality of a ban, during certain hours, on the broadcast of “indecent” words regardless of context, then, in determining the presence of a compelling interest, the court might require the government to “demonstrate that the recited harms are real, not merely conjectural, and that the regulation will in fact alleviate these harms in a direct and material way.” This could raise the question, not raised in *Pacifica*, of whether hearing such words is harmful to minors. More precisely, it might raise the question of whether hearing such words on broadcast radio and television is harmful to minors, even in light of the opportunities for minors to hear such words elsewhere. If the government failed to prove that hearing certain words on broadcast radio or television is harmful to minors, then a court would not find a compelling interest in censoring those words and might strike down the law.

It might still uphold the law, however, if it found that the law served the government’s interest “in supporting ‘parents’ claim to authority in their own household,” and that this is a compelling interest independent from the interest in protecting the well-being of minors. In *Ginsberg v. New York*, the Court referred to the state’s interest in the well-being of its youth as “independent” from its interest in supporting “parents’ claim to authority in their own household to direct the rearing of their children.”¹³² The holding in *Ginsberg*, however, did not turn on whether these interests are independent, and one might argue that they are not, because the government’s interest in supporting parents lies in assisting them in protecting their children from harmful influences. If “indecent” words are not a harmful influence, then, arguably, the government has no interest, sufficient to override the First Amendment, in supporting parents in their efforts to prevent their children’s access to them. It has also been argued that “a law that effectively *bans* all indecent programming . . . does not facilitate parental supervision. In my view, my right as a parent has been preempted, not facilitated, if I am told that certain programming will be banned from my . . . television. Congress cannot take away my right to decide what my children watch, absent some showing that my children are in fact at risk of harm from exposure to indecent programming.”¹³³

If the government could persuade a court that a ban, during certain hours, on the broadcast of “indecent” words regardless of context serves a compelling interest —

¹³⁰ (...continued)

Television v. FCC, *supra*, 58 F.3d at 662 (brackets and italics supplied by the court). A dissenting judge in the case noted that, “[t]here is not one iota of evidence in the record . . . to support the claim that exposure to indecency is harmful — indeed, the nature of the alleged ‘harm’ is never explained.” *Id.* at 671 (D.C. Cir. 1995) (Edwards, C.J., dissenting).

¹³¹ The full Commission’s decision in the Bono case stated that “any use of that word or a variation, in any context, inherently has a sexual connotation.” But this does not necessarily mean that it is sexually oriented enough to cause the courts to assume without evidence that it is harmful to minors.

¹³² *Ginsberg*, *supra*, 390 at 640, 639. See also, Action for Children’s Television v. FCC, *supra*, 58 F.3d at 661.

¹³³ Action for Children’s Television v. FCC, *supra*, 58 F.3d at 670 (emphasis in original) (Edwards, C.J., dissenting).

either in protecting the well-being of minors or in supporting parents' claim to authority — the government would then have to prove that the ban was the least restrictive means to advance that interest. This might raise questions such as whether it is necessary to prohibit particular words on weekdays during school hours, solely to protect pre-school children and children who are home sick some days. In response to this question, the government could note that the broadcast in *Pacifica* was at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday, but was nevertheless considered a “time[] of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience.”¹³⁴ More significantly, however, a court might find a ban too restrictive because it would prohibit the broadcast, between certain hours, of material, including works of art and other material with serious value, that would not attract substantial numbers of youthful viewers or listeners.

In conclusion, it appears that, if a court were to apply strict scrutiny to determine the constitutionality of a ban on the broadcast of “indecent” language regardless of context, then it might require the government to “demonstrate that the recited harms are real, not merely conjectural, and that the regulation will in fact alleviate these harms in a direct and material way.” This would mean that the government would have to demonstrate a compelling governmental interest, such as that hearing “indecent” words on broadcast radio and television is harmful to minors, despite the likelihood that minors hear such words elsewhere, or that banning “indecent” words is necessary to support parents' authority in their own household. If the government could not demonstrate a compelling governmental interest, then the court might find the ban unconstitutional. Even if the government could demonstrate a compelling interest, a court might find the ban unconstitutional if it applied to material with serious value, at least if such material would not attract substantial numbers of youthful viewers or listeners.

Whether a court would apply strict scrutiny would depend upon whether, in light of the proliferation of cable television, it finds *Red Lion* to continue to permit government regulation of the content of speech on broadcast radio and television. If a court does find that *Red Lion* continues to permit government regulation of the content of speech on broadcast radio and television, then the court would be faced with questions that *Pacifica* did not decide: whether, on broadcast radio and television during hours when children are likely to be in the audience, the government may prohibit an “indecent” word used as an occasional expletive, or in material that would not attract substantial numbers of youthful viewers or listeners.

¹³⁴ *Pacifica*, *supra*, 438 U.S. at 732.