Canada more lax in defining censorship line

From page 21.

"There has to be some give and take."

The careful selection of modern music and monitoring of content that makes it to air is the responsibility of the broadcaster — in this case, the student radio station, said Neil Press, communications technology teacher at Vaughan Secondary.

The setting from which RAV FM broadcasts — a public high school — raises those standards that much higher than those adhered to by mainstream stations, he said.

"From our point of view, we have to be careful about what we air and how we do it," he said.

"We have parents listening to our station. We have people around the world listening to our station.

"We remember we are a school. We have an image to portray."

It's a struggle that's as old as pop music itself.

From its earliest days, pop has challenged societal standards, preaching rebellion and resistance. It's irreverent. It's loud. It's sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

And it is a source of consternation, typically among the older generation whose time in the pop culture spotlight has come and gone.

The issue over the decades has been this: Where's the line?

Back in 1951, when Dean Martin's Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am was banned by radio stations in the United States, it was for sexually suggestive material.

A BRIEF LOOK AT MUSICAL CENSORSHIP

1951

Radio stations ban Dottie O'Brien's "Four or Five Times" and Dean Martin's "Wham Bam, Thank You Ma'am" — too suggestive.

1965

In June, radio stations across the country ban the Rolling Stones hit "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" — lyrics too sexually suggestive.

1977

The Reverend Jesse Jackson calls for bans against disco music, insisting the music promotes promiscuity and drug use.

1985

The parents of John McCullom sue Ozzy Osbourne, claiming his song "Suicide Solution" "aided, or advised, or encouraged" their son to commit suicide. The judge in the case decides overt lyrics are protected speech and evidence is insufficient to connect the song to the suicide.

1993

Wal-Mart and K-Mart refuse to stock Nirvana's second major label album, *In Utero*, because they object to the cover and one song title. Shortly after the record is the number one selling album in the country, the mass merchandisers strike a deal to carry the album. The album's back cover art is subdued and the title of the offending song is changed from "Rape Me" to "Waif Me."

Fifty-some years and a couple of cultural revolutions later, coarse language is most often the issue.

Although music is not subject to bans in Canada, the way it often has been in the United States, this country has specific guidelines relating to the acceptability of song lyrics being broadcast, according to Ron Cohen, national chairperson of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC).

"There must be at least a half-dozen songs on which we've ruled," Mr. Cohen said.

The council, which makes decisions on complaints against radio and television broadcasters, takes into account a number of factors when judging the acceptability of material.

Among the elements that make material unacceptable for broadcast in Canada are discriminatory or hateful comments; messages in contravention of the law and, of course, obscenity.

Granted, the definition of what's obscene has changed over the years — and continues to be a moving target. For Mr. Cohen, there's a distinct point of no return.

DRAW LINE ON F-WORD

"One of the things that gives us some difficulty is use of the f-word and its derivatives — and there are a few," he said.

"I would say we've been fairly flexible about some other kinds of language, but we draw the line at that word."

What separates the f-word from other oaths is its continuing ability to offend a large segment of the population, Mr. Cohen said.

Of course, the nature of complaints to the CBSC vary. Listeners and viewers decry obscenity, sexual content, violence, perceived racial slights and other material they find offensive.

When a radio or television station is found to have transgressed broadcast standards, it is required to air a report of the CBSC's ruling and apologize.

That's a far cry from what's happening right now in the United States, particularly in radio.

Last week, the Clear Channel network responded to a whopping fine, in excess of $700,000, levied after hosts on its stations were found to have breached decency laws.

Clear Channel fired Florida deejay Bubba The Love Sponge and dropped New York shock jock Howard Stern from several stations.

Mr. Cohen has watched the latest American drama with interest, remembering how Montreal and Toronto stations besieged with complaints voluntarily jettisoned the Stern program — the daily grab-bag of sexism, racism and potty-mouth gibberish.

"I would say we're not quite as rigid in Canada as they are in the United States," Mr. Cohen said.

"Which is somewhat ironic, given they are the home of the First Amendment."

Mr. Cohen looks with pride on Canada's broadcasting system, which for the most part, voluntarily adheres to standards that were created by the industry itself.

"I think they've set up an admirable system, one that works very well," he said.

"The private broadcasters create the codes. The private broadcasters created the CBSC. They fund the CBSC. Here, we don't impose fines."

That system contrasts greatly with broadcasting in America, where the federal communications commission has the power to lambaste stations that cross the line.

"A government hand is, in principle, a heavy hand," Mr. Cohen said.

Mr. Basile, the manager overseeing student operation of RAV FM, said he has been impressed by the discretion he sees exercised by the young people who take each day to the airwaves.

"I could not believe 17 and 18-year-olds could look beyond what the media was giving them and reject it," he said.

"I feel good a student at 18 years old can discern between reality and a scene that's being dictated in a rap song."

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