

Researching Music Censorship

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Edited by

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and Jonas Otterbeck

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY
OF MUSIC CENSORSHIP

ANNEMETTE KIRKEGAARD
AND JONAS OTTERBECK

Until recently, music censorship and freedom of expression for musicians have received relatively little attention in research and academic discourse. However, as a result of various forms of documentation of the numerous ways in which music and musicians have been silenced, a new awareness is currently building. Music censorship is and has been widespread, ranging from atrocities committed against musicians and composers during the 20th century to suppression of music and song under dictatorships and current censorship in many countries and communities around the world. Censorship, however, is not only related to anti-democratic regimes, past events or non-Western culture: throughout their history, Western societies have censored music for political, ideological and moral reasons. In the post-9/11 world there are numerous examples of censorship of artistic expressions, sometimes appearing in the most unlikely places. In fact, throughout the past decade it seems that conflicts over free speech have come to influence world politics in a new and more refined way. The global spread of cartoons, sounds or songs has led politicians and agencies to censor, citing concern for societal peace, with religious leaders doing much the same within their spheres.

In view of the emergence and growth of digital platforms like YouTube and Instagram the work of musicians has become available and visible to an almost unlimited extent. While the digital era has ushered in unprecedented flows of information which in principle is available to all parts of the world and all peoples, the development of worldwide distribution technology has, at the same time, increased demands for censorship. In order to regulate the seemingly untameable flows of words, images and musics, new and critical

methods are applied; methods which allegedly are meant to protect certain groups, such as children or minorities. When writers, artists and musicians who are unused to such limitations are affected, they are likely to regard the situation as censorship of their artistic freedom of expression. Against this background, too, it can be argued that censorship activities seem to be on the rise and that musicians are targeted and persecuted for their work.

As a field of research, music censorship raises a number of theoretical questions. Although several important monographs and anthologies within popular music studies, musicology and ethnomusicology have documented bans on music and silencing of musicians, definitions and theories in the field are scarce. Bruce Johnson, Martin Cloonan, Michael Drewett, John Street, Reebee Garafalo, Ian Peddie, Andrew Weintraub, Deborah Yung, Jonathan Ritter, Martin Daughtry, Steven Brown, Ulrik Volgsten, Richard Wilson, Jane Cowan, Marie-Bénédicte Dembours, Michel Foucault, Paul Gilroy and many others have made crucial contributions to the understanding of censorship in art. Furthermore, important documentation of censorship of musicians has been provided by scholars such as Krister Malm, John Baily, Veronica Doubleday, Johan Fornäs, Jeroen de Kloot, Keith Kahn-Harris and Alenka Barber-Kersovan. Publications by these authors all deal with aspects of the nexus between music, politics, and rights in specific cases as well as on a general level, developing insights and approaches which inform the various contributions to this volume. Added to this is the influence of various organisations working to document and draw attention to human rights issues, most importantly Freemuse, the World Forum on Music and Censorship. However, the ambition of this book's authors was to question and examine the agencies and procedures of censorship specifically linked to music—as a similar but somewhat different field of research compared to the study of censorship in other cultural research traditions, such as literary studies and the study of other kinds of verbal art, where semantic meaning is paramount.

In the following we intend to address some of the scholarly difficulties in the discourse of music studies and censorship. This includes questions that may be risky to pose and points that are too complicated for a simple “for-and-against-reading”. In doing so, we wish to address the conflicts between concerns for audiences/publics on the one hand and freedom for individual musicians and artists on the other—a dichotomy that is not easily aligned. The diversity of the different kinds of censorship that are documented here will assist us in discussing the perennial juxtaposition between the particularities of each individual case and the notion of universal rights for all citizens of the world.

Music censorships

A historical examination of the practice of censorship in culture reveals a certain element of censorship that has been applied as a form of protection and accordingly rated as a positive project. Thus, it has previously been argued that censorship serves to protect groups such as children, weak souls and women from unpleasant and disturbing messages or content. This is a traditional and still current way of protecting others in the public, and even more so in the private sphere. Censorship of music might further be used as a protective element in avoiding damage and danger in the public sphere at the hands of agents who aim at agitating and stirring up commotion in big crowds. The Roskilde Festival accident in 2000, in which nine young men lost their lives in the mosh pit during a Pearl Jam concert, is a relevant example: accusations in the press suggested that this was caused by the music and the reactions it created, and that precautions should be taken against such music. The Roskilde Festival organisers, however, rejected this accusation, stepping up security instead of blaming and censoring the music as such.

Other readings, drawing on a Platonic understanding, invoke censorship to protect the artwork from its potential users, who might harm it by copying it. Musicologist Lydia Goehr (1998) proposed such a reading, which might seem distant from other approaches to censorship, but implies a line of thought that clearly addresses issues of authenticity and ownership. An example could perhaps be drawn from the many calls for authenticity in music production to protect first-nations' musics from modernising practices, a process highlighted by the term “intangible cultural heritage”, coined by UNESCO.

Additionally, censorship of music may also be used as a form of protection in a seemingly more down-to-earth way—as when sound is turned down at venues to protect the audience from loud damaging sounds and consequent hearing problems such as tinnitus.¹ Under these conditions, artists who feel that a high volume is an integral part of their artistic expression will risk legal charges. Sound or noise pollution laws exist in several countries, one of the earliest being the 1972 Noise Control Act in the US. Most legislation dealing with music will set out restrictions relating to place, time and volume. Music played in the wrong place or at the wrong time becomes primarily a nuisance. Music that is too loud becomes noise (Johnson and Cloonan 2008). Nuisance and noise, then, are legal categories that take precedence over the artists' ambitions or the listeners' wishes.

¹ In Denmark, venues have for some time had visible sound-detecting devices that give audiences and sound engineers information about the loudness of the music.

A completely differently conceived kind of censorship is applied in a process—often seen as positive—that involves attempts to restrict music that represents certain ideologies, religions or power relations in an aggressively prejudiced way, and that goes against generally accepted norms and values. Here, so-called hate music and music with racist or misogynist content is targeted to stop such expressions from entering public spaces. This kind of protective censorship of music is closely connected to the maintenance or preservation of social peace, which may require putting the welfare of others before the use of music as a marker of ideology or religious or political domination. Racialised and homophobic points of view are actively avoided in the public sphere, often through the endorsement of declarations such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which makes freedom of speech conditional on “due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 29(2)). An obvious problem when approaching this kind of censorship is that what one society—or the political powers of that society—might agree is problematic to express publicly, might be considered valid and important to express in another.

Censorship of music may also occur due to more traditional aesthetic choices which follow artistic norms and rules and are intended to protect genres or musics—perhaps even following Goehr, as cited above. This process is often observed in the music business at large and can be interpreted as a kind of curating, similar to the selective processes that take place at art exhibitions and galleries. Musicians or recording companies might argue that censorship is taking place when they are not selected for a production or festival, and while it might be hard to distinguish, chances are that, in some instances, it may be both: a curating process might be a cover for political censorship, or musicians, music companies and agencies might make a censorship allegation to draw attention to their rejected product. For example, consciously vulgar music that plays a provocative—at times intellectually informed—game with established aesthetic conventions in society is often targeted and is thus marketed this way.

Aesthetics, however, are never objective or neutral. As a precaution for research that shares this position, it is important to underline that just as there are various definitions of censorship, these depend on aspects such as what the intention behind the censorship is. Accordingly, a strong focus on who the censors are and what their goals might be is needed to understand the extent to which restrictions and/or silencing can be considered censorship. Instead of finding one valid definition of censorship, we promote the value of multiple definitions, each with its own particular strengths, highlighting different parts of the complex issue of censorial practices.

As a consequence of the many varieties of music censorship, contextualisation becomes an important scholarly concern (Street 2011). It is of vital significance for researchers to be sensitive and attentive to time (history), place (location), and context (the particular arena in which the music is produced and uttered) when analysing music censorship. Curiously, these same factors are applied in Islamic writings on the permissibility of music, and are also relevant tools for analysing the limits of freedom of expression in music in general (Otterbeck 2016).

The study of music censorship further invites reflections on ethics, as it balances the difficult distinction between local norms and imagined universalism. Human rights ethics concerning cultural expressions and freedom of speech are generally claimed to be universal and interpreted as worldwide norms. In truth, however, local norms and legal structures are often promoted in both general and specific acts of censorship by powerful non-governmental agents such as companies, religious groups, or radio station censors. Indeed, their censorship may even be legitimised through references to human rights. Any researcher looking into a specific case needs to understand and contextualise local ethical traditions in order to avoid resorting to a moralistic, judgemental position based on human rights universalism (which is a completely legitimate and fair position for activists and advocates with an agenda). Still, this needs to be done without losing sight of the possibility of social change, the plurality of local norms and local political opinions and competition, or confusing politically dominant voices with national cultural practices. Closely related to this are reflections on representation and activism, as clearly politicised aspects of power and control increase the complexity of the researcher's role.

Censorship, music and semantic concerns

While interdisciplinarity and intertextuality are basic points of departure for the study of music censorship and power, attention must also be paid to sound as such. The ability of music and sound to afford complexes of meaning that reach beyond semantic levels of cultural communication is central to our understanding and, accordingly, censorship of music is not just about words even if lyrics often are some of the first victims in a war over cultural meaning. Musical sounds may be censored for their mere existence as music, often depending on the musical style, composer, instruments or particular scales used, but sometimes depending on the ethnicity, sex or phenotypic features of the performer. New genres of music are quite often described as non-music, devilish, deviant or in other ways unwanted. Different religious traditions have played, and still play, a key role regarding censorship for other reasons than lyrics.

Finally, in most cases of music censorship and limitations of artistic freedom of expression, attentiveness to the rights of others and the desire not to offend often lead to self-censorship. In a scholarly perspective, this phenomenon is highly interesting as it touches on a potential conflict between the rights and desires of the individual as opposed to respect for the sociality of others and not least for their art, culture and music.

Understanding censorial restrictions

Accordingly, the intention of this book is to demonstrate that any square, fixed and singular definition of censorship in music is likely to be either too narrow or too wide if it aims to apply a scholarly perspective. And such a definition may even be academically invalid. In our view, a plurality of working definitions, crafted to highlight different aspects of censorship, is both needed and preferred.

This academic fragmentising of the concept of music censorship might seem to contradict some of the very strict and overtly political approaches to music censorship. However, it does not diminish the importance of working with censorship as a human rights necessity. Rather, it is a way of acknowledging the very reality of censorship as an ongoing global phenomenon. With this book, and together with the researchers who have written the different chapters, we wish to emphasise that silencing sounds and music in various forms is a very serious restriction, as the use and consumption of sound and music is a vital element in the lives of many people. New insights should accordingly include references to the agency of music and musicians as well as the role of musical sound in inspiring profound social and political exchanges between human beings. As a bottom line, the analysis of how music and art join forces with power, suppression and control is therefore critically important in any study of music and censorship.

Content of the book

In continuation of the views outlined above, the following chapters present concerns and dilemmas relating to the difficult borderland between individual and collective freedoms. Human rights also include the obligations of communities at large to understand people and their music as a part of the socialities of human life (Born 2012). Music is regarded as both a social, collective activity and an extremely individual, private matter, and while this position complicates the study of music censorship, it also raises many questions and dilemmas, which research must address.

The aim of this book is therefore to encompass a broader and more critical examination of censoring in order to expose fundamental layers of social and political meaning in expressive culture. The phenomenon of music censorship needs documentation, even if a larger range of issues complicates any simple understanding of the restrictions and regulations that are the basis of music censorship. Sometimes simple children's songs are banned, and at other times gendered voices are silenced. We see this as a result of shifting social relations and the increasingly contested world situation in which the new nationalisms emerging at the end of the 20th century fundamentally and increasingly work on discursive procedures of inclusion and exclusion. Closely related to the politics of difference, censorship finds its realisation in social and cultural categories like class, race, gender, religion and ethnicity. In this light, music censorship must be understood as a dynamic and discursive phenomenon, which among other things negotiates the public and the private sphere. The disclosure by feminist and postcolonial critique of the exclusion of women, the poor, the migrants and other "inconvenient" voices from the public sphere provides another hallmark.

The network—the location of the present book

The chapters in this volume all relate to the activities of the Researching Music Censorship network, which was initiated in October 2010 and ended in 2014. The network had members from four Nordic countries—Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark—and involved the active participation of around 50 scholars during its four years of meetings and workshops. The network also prioritised contact with students, musicians and organisations working with issues relating to human rights, culture and music. In all the network's workshops, seminars and meetings, particular attention was given to the group of almost ten PhD researchers who participated in the work as part of their PhD grants.

Researching Music Censorship was supported by the NordForsk research organisation and several universities in the Nordic countries, which hosted events and provided researchers. We take this opportunity to thank the University of Copenhagen, Lund University, the University of Gothenburg, the University of Helsinki, the University of Eastern Finland, the University of Oslo, and Oslo and Akershus University College for their hospitality and support. We also acknowledge the support of King's College, London.

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CHAPTER TWO

A RIGHT DING DONG: THE DEATH OF MARGARET THATCHER AND MUSIC CENSORSHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

MARTIN CLOONAN

On Monday 8 April 2013, former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher died and Britain was engulfed in both a media frenzy and, relatedly, a somewhat polarised debate about what her life meant and how her death should be marked. This paper considers one musical reaction to that death and the fallout from it. It suggests that Thatcher's death sparked events which show the complexities of music censorship in the modern era and how the rise of the internet has further muddied the waters around matters of musical censorship.

The paper falls into six parts. It begins with some comments on the general context of Margaret Thatcher's death, before going on to look specifically at its musical context. The third part examines a campaign to celebrate the death by trying to get the track "Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead"¹ to number one in the UK's singles chart in the week of Thatcher's funeral. Fourthly, the paper looks at the controversy this campaign caused and in particular the difficulties faced by the BBC in dealing with it. The paper then argues that the BBC's subsequent actions can be considered an act of censorship, before concluding with some thoughts about the implications of these actions, both for the BBC itself and musical censorship in the digital age.

Part one: The death of Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher was the UK's Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, winning an unprecedented three general elections (1979, 1983, 1987). However, she

¹ "Ding Dong" in the title of the Chapter is used in the sense of a dispute/controversy, with "right" being used in the sense of meaning particularly intense.

was also the most divisive Prime Minister of the twentieth century. Her reign included, among other things, inner city riots in 1981, hunger strikes by—and the subsequent deaths of—Irish republican prisoners in the same year, the Falklands/Malvinas war of 1983, the bitter miners' strike of 1984–85, an IRA bomb planted at a Brighton hotel in which Thatcher and some Cabinet colleagues were staying in 1984, and riots around the so-called Poll Tax in 1989. The latter event eventually led to a rebellion within her own Conservative Party which in turn led to her resigning as Prime Minister—to be succeeded by John Major—in 1990.

The account just given merely scrapes the surface of eleven somewhat eventful years in the UK. What few commentators would dispute was that Thatcher changed the UK in profound ways. Increasingly pursuing a neoliberal economic agenda, her rule saw nationalised industries privatized and brought forth much greater input of the private sector into areas such as health, education and the provision of basic amenities. At the same time there was an attack on post-war consensus politics around the welfare state and its commitment to things such as full employment. Instead, unemployment was allowed to rise and market rather than state remedies were highlighted as solutions to the nation's economic woes. As inequality rose, public spending was cut and Britain was told, "There Is No Alternative". To those in her own party who suggested that a "U-turn" was necessary on the most divisive policies, Thatcher famously replied: "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning."²

The policies pursued by successive Thatcher governments were to prove highly divisive. In short, Thatcherism created further schisms in the UK between the public and private sectors, between the north and south, between rich and poor. For some the 1980s were years of unparalleled prosperity, for others unprecedented poverty. The latter was evidenced by, among other things, the rise of homelessness and street sleeping, as the ever-expanding ranks of the unemployed helped to keep down wages and also undermine the power of the trade unions, which was further cemented by a wave of legislation designed to curtail union power.³

Thatcher was also aided at the time by a divided opposition. The Labour Party was split in its own bitter feud between left and right, one result of which was the formation of the breakaway Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981. The subsequent initial electoral success of the SDP served only to further split parliamentary opposition to Thatcherism. In addition, the year-

² This phrase was used by Thatcher in a speech to the Conservative Party conference on 10 October 1980.

³ A series of laws passed by Thatcher's governments constrained the power of trade unions. These included the Employment Acts of 1980, 1982, 1988 and 1990 and the Trade Union Act of 1984.

long miners' strike (1984–85) further split the opposition, as the labour movement was divided between those who supported the strike and those who accepted arguments coming from the press and government that the lack of a ballot for industrial action made the strike illegitimate. Its defeat caused further turmoil on the left and overall Thatcherism gained from the fact that its opponents were divided among themselves.

Such divisions can also be seen as coming to the fore on the occasion of Thatcher's death in April 2013, some 23 years after she had fallen from power. Unsurprisingly, her supporters on the political right hailed her as Britain's most significant Prime Minister since the wartime leader, Sir Winston Churchill. They argued that not only was she significant as the UK's first woman Prime Minister, but that she had remade the UK's economy and defeated militant trade unionism at home, while also securing the Falkland Islands for the UK and being the Iron Lady who had helped to facilitate the fall of the Berlin wall and thus the defeat of USSR-style communism. She was also seen as having protected British sovereignty from European Union incursion and as being the dominant political figure of her generation. For example, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron concluded a tribute in the UK's parliament by saying that: "She made the political weather. She made history. And let this be her epitaph: that she made Britain great again."⁴ To such supporters the only suitable responses to Thatcher's death were deemed to be a celebration of her life combined with a dignified mourning of her death.

Moving towards the centre were those who, while they disagreed with much of Thatcherism politically, argued that however bitter their enmity during life, political opponents and, indeed, anyone else, deserved respect upon their death. The office of Prime Minister itself was cited as reason for respect and the UK's population was encouraged to mourn the death of a national leader. The argument here was that opponents were entitled to disagree with her in life, but morally obliged to respect her in death—if only for the sake of her surviving family. So from the social-democratic left, Labour Party MP Tom Watson said: "I hope that people on the left of politics respect a family in grief today".⁵

Allied to such sentiments were those on the left who saw any attempt to celebrate the death of a frail, 87-year-old woman who had been in ill health for many years as beneath the morality of the good leftist. In addition, others argued that the thing to be opposed was Thatcherism as an ideology, rather

⁴ Speech by Cameron to the House of Commons, available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130410/debtext/130410-0001.htm. All URLs are current as of 6 April 2017.

⁵ www.theguardian.com/commentsfree/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-death-etiquette.

than the person of Thatcher herself.⁶ But for many on the left Thatcher was the personification of everything they despised. For such people Thatcher was seen as a friend of the Chilean dictator General Pinochet, and an enemy of the freedom fighter Nelson Mandela.⁷ She was a class enemy whose defeat of the trade unions merely revealed her anti-working class bias. For some of these people, far from being a time of national mourning Thatcher's death was a reason for celebration, as a long-time enemy had finally died.

It should be noted here that because Thatcher had lived for 23 years after her leaving office, such enemies had a long time to prepare their celebrations. Following a series of strokes and other instances of ill health over a number of years, there was often speculation about how long Thatcher would live. Perhaps the most notorious manifestation of this was the website www.isthatcherdeadyet.co.uk, which was seemingly designed to antagonise the political right. On the day of her death it changed its homepage to the word "Yes" and invited readers to send in accounts of how they were celebrating the death.⁸ The anarchist band Chumbawamba had also recorded a commemoration CD—*Margaret Thatcher in Memoriam*—in 2005. This was advertised on the band's website, which allowed fans to pre-order it. The CD was dispatched to those who paid in advance on the day of the death and arrived the following day. In addition, the death was celebrated in various places, including Trafalgar Square in London, George Square in Glasgow, Brixton in London and nationalist districts of Belfast. The day of the funeral itself saw protests against public funding being used to pay for the funeral, and various celebrations, the one held in a miners' club in Danderhall near Edinburgh attracting the most attention.⁹

In sum, in early April 2013 the general context was that a highly divisive former UK Prime Minister had died, her supporters were in mourning and, as during her life, her opponents were divided, this time between those who wanted to give her respect and those who wanted only to show total disdain. There was also a musical context, to which the article now turns.

⁶ See, for example, the comments of Billy Bragg below.

⁷ Thatcher supported Pinochet in 1998 when he was arrested in Britain, at the behest of a Spanish court, for his role in atrocities committed against Spanish citizens between 1973 and 1983, and routinely opposed sanctions on apartheid South Africa.

⁸ At the time of writing (March 2014) this is still the case and the website includes a link to a Spotify list of songs to celebrate the death as well as to the campaign's Facebook page.

⁹ See, for example, www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/former-mining-communities-celebrate-death-1838661 and www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/apr/17/scottish-miners-celebrate-thatcher-funeral.

Part two: The death in its musical context

An important aspect of the musical context of Margaret Thatcher's death is that during her life she spawned perhaps more musical opposition in the UK than any other political figure of the twentieth century, Adolf Hitler included. As early as 1980, just one year after her election, The Beat were demanding "Stand Down Margaret" and in 1984 the anarchist band Crass proclaimed her as "The Mother of a Thousand Dead" for her role in the Falklands/Malvinas war. In 1988 Morrissey fantasised about putting "Margaret on the Guillotine" and a year later Elvis Costello sang of wanting to "Tramp the Dirt Down" on her grave. In addition to such personalised attacks we can add protests such as The Specials' "Ghost Town", an eerie summation of the 1981 inner-city riots, and the same band's earlier reworking of Bob Dylan's "Maggie's Farm" as an anti-Thatcherite protest.¹⁰ Continuing in this vein, the Specials' rallying cry "Free Nelson Mandela" single (1984) was a call to support the ANC's anti-apartheid struggle, something which Thatcher opposed.

There were also numerous songs and musical protests in support of the 1984–85 miners' strike, especially those by Billy Bragg. These included the Council Collective single "Soul Deep" made by members of The Style Council, Animal Nightlife and Heaven 17 and released in November 1984 on the major label Polydor. This was part of Paul Weller's determined anti-Thatcherism, which also helped to spawn the Red Wedge organisation, a short-lived grouping which is perhaps best summed up as a left-of-centre anti-Thatcher group of musicians united by their opposition to Thatcher rather than by any coherent ideology.¹¹ In short, Thatcherism and the personality of Thatcher herself witnessed forms of opposition in popular music which had not been seen before and may not be seen again.¹²

While much of this musical activity was contemporaneous to her time as Prime Minister, there were also musical attacks on Thatcher in her later days. In addition to the Chumbawamba CD just noted, two examples stand out. The first is the track "George Square Thatcher Death Party" by Glasgow-based band Mogwai. The track is from the 2011 album "Hardcore Will Never Die but You Will". As with the majority of Mogwai tracks, it is an instrumental. However, its very title can be said to represent the divide which Thatcher spawned in Scotland. By the time of the 1997 general election Thatcher and her successor, John Major, had so alienated the majority of the Scottish electorate that in this election not a single one of the country's 72 seats in the UK's Parliament was won by a Conservative and the Party has

¹⁰ The track appeared as the B-side of the single "Do Nothing" in 1980.

¹¹ For more on Red Wedge, see Cloonan and Street 1997.

¹² See <http://louderthanwar.com/top-13-anti-margaret-thatcher-songs/>.

struggled to re-establish itself as a major force in Scottish politics ever since. In this sense, Mogwai's track represented a widespread and deep-seated rejection of Thatcherism across Scotland.

Thatcher was also in power on 15 April 1989 when the Hillsborough disaster occurred. This came at an FA Cup semi-final football match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, when Liverpool fans arriving to the match were herded in to a terrace which was too small to hold them. At this point legislation required that terraces were pens with fences at the front of them, meaning that there was no escape route unless the pens were opened. The chronic overcrowding, the penning-in of fans and a failure to open the fencing combined to facilitate crushing in which 96 fans were eventually to lose their lives. In the days that followed, the right-wing press—and especially a key supporter of Thatcher, *The Sun*—blamed the antics of allegedly drunken Liverpool supporters for the deaths. In the fullness of time, police actions were shown to be the key factor in the deaths and the fans were exonerated. The public acknowledgment of these facts took 22 years, during which Thatcher remained silent and was accused of being more concerned with possible criticisms of police action than she was about the victims and their families.¹³ Liverpool had been another site of resistance to Thatcherism, and in 1985 its City Council was at the centre of a number of court cases, as it set an “illegal” budget in defiance of the Thatcher administration. Following its Hillsborough allegations, *The Sun* became subject to a consumer boycott across the Liverpool region and a song proclaiming “We’ll all be having a party when Maggie Thatcher dies” was sung regularly at Liverpool FC games.

Following the bitter miners' strike, the events of Hillsborough further alienated parts of northern England from the Tories. There were also campaigns which sought to exonerate the fans and to investigate the actions of the authorities, including the police.¹⁴ In December 2009 a group of

¹³ See for example www.independent.ie/sport/other-sports/eamonn-sweeney-silence-that-speaks-volumes-29194846.html. Those directing blame at Thatcher included former Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw. See www.theweek.co.uk/politics/hillsborough/48991/jack-straw-blames-thatcher-hillsborough-police-cover.

¹⁴ An independent enquiry published by Lord Taylor of Gosforth in 1990 blamed police lack of control for the tragedy but was widely seen by campaigners as flawed as it accepted that most of those who died were dead or braindead by 15.15, meaning that none of the authorities' actions after this time could be investigated. The battle to open up events after 15.15 and finally exonerate the fans took 22 years and followed the publication of the Hillsborough Independent Panel's report, which showed that the police had altered 160 witness statements. See www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19545126.

musicians under the title Justice Tonight toured the UK as a fundraiser for the Hillsborough Justice campaign in support of a new enquiry into the fans' deaths. This featured Liverpool musicians The Farm and Pete Wylie, along with Mick Jones from the Clash and followed a "Don't Buy The Sun" gig organised by The Farm's Pete Hooton. On the tour Pete Wylie's section of the show included a new song—"The Day That Margaret Thatcher Died". This is a withering putdown of Thatcher and an exhortation to celebrate her death. Come the day of her actual death, and the Mogwai and Wylie tracks and others were being hailed on the internet as suitable ways to celebrate. While such celebrations were rebuked by those on the right, it was to be another song which was to cause the most controversy.

Part three: The "Ding Dong" campaign

Another manifestation of the efforts to celebrate Margaret Thatcher's death was a Facebook page which called on anti-Thatcherites to buy the track "Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead" and get it to number one in the UK's singles chart in the week of her funeral. The page¹⁵ was seemingly established in 2007 by Mark Biddiss and prior to the death seems to have remained something of an internet backwater. However, publicity around the death led to wider exposure for the page, and the media soon began to report that the track was climbing the iTunes chart. It was also threatening to climb high in the official chart, announced on the Official Chart show of BBC's Radio 1 network each Sunday, which plays every track in the top forty as part of the chart rundown.

Thus a song which was being used to celebrate the death of a former Prime Minister was seemingly heading to the number one spot in the singles chart in the week of her funeral. In addition, it was due to be played by the country's public broadcaster, the BBC, on one of its most popular radio programmes. This prospect elicited somewhat predictable howls of anger in the media from Thatcher supporters, but also glee from some of her opponents. An additional contextual point here is that the funeral itself was another matter of controversy, as opponents had fiercely resisted the idea that Margaret Thatcher should receive a state funeral of the sort normally reserved for heads of state. In the end the funeral on 17 April 2013 was a *de facto* state funeral, which was simply not given that name, and instead referred to as a "ceremonial funeral". Leading politicians from the UK and beyond attended the funeral, which was also given military honours and attended by a guard of honour. Given the range of international dignitaries due to attend the funeral, some embarrassment was spared by the fact that the track only

¹⁵ www.facebook.com/groups/2807687628/photos/.

reached number two in the chart, although the regional chart revealed that it was number one in Scotland and Wales.¹⁶

Three things should be highlighted here. The first is the music itself. The song is from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. In the film itself it is doubtless a celebration of someone's death, albeit one in a fantasy world and where the death itself has a comic element. The film dates from 1939, at which point the then Margaret Roberts was 14. So it was obviously not written as a direct attack on her. However, my personal recollection is that it was used to celebrate Thatcher's resignation in 1990, although in that instance the "death" was of the "witch's" political career rather than her *actual* death. In sum, a song *not* written about Thatcher was first used to celebrate her resignation and later her death in what could be seen as an almost natural progression. At just 53 seconds long, it became possibly the shortest track to make it into the UK's singles chart.

The second thing to note is the ease with which it is now possible to manipulate the UK's singles charts. The "Ding Dong" track sold around 52,605 copies,¹⁷ a much lower total necessary to reach number two than would have been necessary in for example 1990, when Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister. Additionally, in 1990 the track would only have been available physically, in this instance as part of a film soundtrack, meaning that those wanting to buy it would have had to buy an entire album. Back in 1990, even if it had been possible to organise a campaign to buy "Ding Dong", it would have been very hard to get it into the charts. Even in the *extremely* unlikely event of being able to get people to buy an album and then to target sales in the shops which in 1990 were used to compile the charts, it would have been the *album* which would have charted, not the track. However, by 2013 it was possible to denigrate Thatcher and/or celebrate her death with a purchase of "Ding Dong" via a single click of a mouse and then watch the track climbing the charts. It was also cheap, generally around 70 pence, as opposed to around the £10 which an album would have cost in 1990.¹⁸ So part of the musical context is also the general decline in the unit price of pieces of music and tracks being bought for a negligible amount. This is not unimportant here.

Moreover, by 2013, there were precedents for mobilising protest via the charts. The most famous example of this came in 2009 when people were encouraged to buy the Rage Against the Machine track "Killing in the Name"

¹⁶ See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2308954/Ding-Dong-The-Witch-Is-Dead-fails-hit-number-BBC-plays-offending-lyrics.html>. The single was listed as number one in Scotland on <http://www.officialcharts.com/regional-charts>, but this site is updated weekly and not archived.

¹⁷ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22147701.

¹⁸ The minimum price may have been as low as 39 pence.

in order to make it the Christmas number one, thus thwarting the dominance of the top spot by artists from Simon Cowell's television shows.¹⁹ The track features the refrain "Fuck you I won't do what you tell me", which can be seen as something of a riposte to traditional Christmas songs. This campaign was successful, and "Killing in the Name" was the UK's official Christmas number one in 2009. While there is no way of telling how many of the same people bought both "Killing in the Name" in 2009 and "Ding Dong" in 2013, given Rage Against the Machine's leftist politics it is certainly plausible to argue that the sentiments expressed in each case appealed to a similar constituency which could be mobilised to support a broadly leftist campaign.

The third factor to be borne in mind is the rise of what can be called "offence" culture. I have argued before (Cloonan 1996) that the main motivations for censorship are notions of causality (allowing something to occur will cause something else to) or notions of offence in the eyes or ears of the beholder. While in reality these are intertwined, proving causality has always been difficult. By contrast, notions of offence have been less difficult to show and in recent years, as political sensitivities have intensified, so have attempts to avoid offence. For better or worse, the rise of what in some circles is called "political correctness" has led to more constraints on freedom of speech. In the UK, laws restricting incitement to racial hatred have been joined by others which outlaw the incitement to hatred of religious groups and sexual minorities. Overall, the scope for legally constraining speech on the grounds that it will offend has widened.²⁰

Within the UK one manifestation of the rise of offence culture is the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act, which makes it an offence to incite hatred against a person because of their religion. During the run-up to the passing of this legislation, opponents such as the comedian Rowan Atkinson raised concerns that the bill would hit free speech (Kelly 2005). Scotland has witnessed arrests of football fans for singing sectarian songs contrary to the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications Act, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2012.²¹ In both cases the law

¹⁹ Between 2005 and 2010 artists from the *X Factor* show occupied the number one position at Christmas on five occasions.

²⁰ See for example Johns (2011) and Moore (2012).

²¹ The Act was aimed at fans who sang sectarian songs—generally fans of Celtic (associated with Irish Republicanism) and Rangers (associated with British Unionism). However, it fell into dispute when a fan of Partick Thistle (associated with neither position) was prosecuted for singing a song mocking both sides on Scotland's sectarian divide. In court he was found guilty, but the Sheriff (the Scottish equivalent to a judge) then discharged him absolutely, meaning that no criminal record resulted. See www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/student-convicted-under-controversial-anti-sectarian-3037633 for details.

has been introduced in attempts to curb incitement to religious hatred, but both laws further muddled the already murky dividing line between speech which might incite and speech which is (merely) offensive. The fact that such speech is often associated with working-class culture has led to one academic account of the rise of offence culture being entitled *Snob's Law* (Waiton 2012). Regardless of the merits or otherwise of such legislative measures, they do provide evidence of the rise of offence culture, which seeks to suppress anything which might be deemed to be offensive. Along with the song itself and the ease of manipulating the singles' chart, it forms the background to the campaign.

Part four: “Ding Dong’s” impact

Censorship cases often revolve around the relationship between text and context. In this case reactions also showed that in an allegedly postmodern age, the old battles between the political left and right are far from dead. Reactions to Thatcher's death also meant considering her legacy, and it was here that radically different versions of what is good for Britain were articulated. In any other week the “Ding Dong” song would have meant very little. However, in the week of the death it became a litmus test for how the nation should react to both the death and to what Thatcher's life had meant. While these divisions did not reach the intensity of feeling witnessed during the miners' strike (1984–85) or the Irish hunger strikes (1981) during Thatcher's reign, it seemed clear that many people knew which side they were on in the debate on whether or not the BBC should play the song. This included this author, who was always convinced that the track should be played and that in this instance free speech should triumph over notions of offence.

Here it is necessary to note the importance of the fact that it was the BBC which was coming under pressure. This institution is perhaps uniquely British, but also uniquely controversial. Often accused of having a “liberal” bias, it is often treated with suspicion by the political right—some of whom have suggested that its initials stand for Buggers Broadcasting Communism.²² While both Conservative and Labour governments have had rows with the BBC, the (liberal) left has tended to be more sympathetic to a public broadcaster than those on the right who are generally opposed to the public provision of services. It is widely loathed by all those who would leave all broadcasting to the market.

The BBC is a public-sector, but not state, broadcaster. It is largely funded through an inequitable form of taxation, the television licence fee, through

²² A simple internet search will provide numerous examples of this.

which everyone in Britain with a television pays for the provision of the BBC's service. As the vast majority of adults in the UK live in households that pay for the BBC, the organisation is subject to almost endless political scrutiny and controversy. At the time of the "Ding Dong" campaign the BBC had also suffered a great deal of damage in the aftermath of the Savile affair where the corporation's role in failing to detect or report a serial sex offender in its employment over a period of some 30 years caused understandable uproar. In addition, the inept way in which the BBC dealt with its own coverage of the affair led to the resignation of its Director General, George Entwistle, in December 2012. Thus the context for the BBC was that it was in some political turmoil and even under more scrutiny than usual from other sections of the media.

However, despite its myriad problems, the BBC has retained its position as *de facto* national broadcaster—it is, after all, the *British* Broadcasting Corporation—and the organisation to which many people turn to for coverage of major events. It was thus routinely expected to lead television coverage of the funeral of a former Prime Minister and to represent British feeling to the rest of the world. But as its television arm prepared to cover the funeral, its pop station, Radio 1, was readying itself for its weekly chart rundown—the Official Chart Show. As the day of the funeral approached, with sales of "Ding Dong" rising, the BBC faced something of a dilemma. This was because the same organisation which was expected to lead coverage of the funeral and to show respect for the deceased was at the same time seemingly obliged to play a track calling the same person a "witch" on the weekend prior to the funeral. The question it was faced with was whether it could possibly do both without causing considerable offence.

Some guidance on what the corporation should do in such circumstances is provided by the fact that it is governed by a Royal Charter which has an accompanying agreement detailing what the broadcaster will do. This includes a requirement that the BBC must act by "generally accepted standards so as to provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion of offensive and harmful material".²³ In the run-up to the funeral, it became clear that what this actually meant was open to a great deal of interpretation. In fact, calls came from parts of the media and right-wing commentators for the BBC *not* to play the record. Such calls were often based on arguments that as the BBC was the nation's broadcaster it should show respect to one of the nation's former leaders.

Here the BBC was seemingly damned whatever it did. To play the record was to risk offence—and a potential media backlash. To not play it was to

²³ From <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines/harm-and-offence>, accessed 13 January 2017.

risk being called a censor—and a potential media backlash. As the media frenzy intensified the BBC made the decision *not* to play the track in its entirety, but include a segment of the song in a replacement news item which explained Thatcher, the song and the campaign to the station's target audience, most of whom were not even born when Thatcher resigned.²⁴ The BBC's decision seemed to please few people and appeared to be a classic fudge—a clear case of wanting to have it both ways—of trying to avoid both being accused of censorship, and of causing offence. Given the heightened tension around a somewhat beleaguered organisation, this was perhaps understandable. What is more difficult to determine is the implications of the decision.

Part five: Questions of censorship

One question which arises in this case is whether the BBC can be considered guilty of censorship. I have devoted some time to this issue²⁵ and think it is necessary to begin by defining terms. I have previously defined musical censorship as “the process by which an agent (or agents) attempts to, and/or succeeds in, significantly altering, and/or curtailing, the freedom of expression of another agent, with a view to limiting the likely audience for that expression” (Cloonan 2003, 15).

By this definition the BBC was clearly guilty of censorship. In mitigation it might be argued that even if it was censorship it was additionally an example of the BBC acting responsibly and exercising restraint. In doing so, it might also be argued, it prevented both further hurt to the family and offence to those who regarded Thatcher as a great national leader. The BBC clearly did not wish to offend and it is possible to see the validity of such arguments. However, it is also possible to argue that in this instance freedom of speech should trump offence and that the BBC should have played a track which clearly had the support of thousands of people. I take the latter view. The playing of the track would have been a recognition of a viewpoint which certainly had some validity. Ultimately the BBC's censoring of the song made little sense. Those arguing for “offence” and for the song not to be played would have been unlikely to have been listening to the BBC's pop station on a Sunday evening and could simply have ignored it. As such the offence was in simply knowing that it might be played. To seek such eradication, even at a time of some sensitivity, appears to be at the extreme end of offence culture. It is one thing to claim to be offended, but quite another to call for the cause

²⁴ The news item can be heard at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxxTNdW8CMw>.

²⁵ See, for example, Cloonan (1996, 2003) and Drewett and Cloonan (2006).

of that offence to be kept off the airwaves. Tolerance implies the acceptance of actions which we do not necessarily approve of. However, offence was clearly taken at the prospect of the track even being played. For example, the BBC's decision to play even five seconds of the song as part of a news item which put it into context upset former Minister of Defence Gerald Howarth, who said:

It is utterly disrespectful to play this song when Margaret Thatcher put her life on the line for her country and came within inches of death at Brighton in 1984 [...] Playing this song, even a part of it, will play into the hands of the politically-inspired campaign by Trots and the Socialist Worker [sic] Party who have never forgiven Margaret Thatcher for destroying socialism.²⁶

Other Conservative MPs also joined in, with Andrew Rosindell saying: "We have broadcasting rules which prevent the playing of songs which project hatred... This song is being used to project hatred at a time of national mourning—it's the same thing" and Mark Pritchard saying of the BBC: "I am surprised they are prepared to be manipulated so readily by the agenda of anarchists and the hard left."²⁷

Under pressure from such politicians, the BBC censored. But it did so in the context of the agreement which accompanies its charter and this helps to explain why it acted in the way it did. Under the agreement the BBC is meant to act by what are "generally accepted standards". The problem in the case of "Ding Dong" was that there *were* no "generally accepted standards", as the nation was deeply divided on the issue. Ben Cooper, Radio One's Controller, defended the decision to just play a clip and provide the context:

You have a track which I believe is disrespectful. It is not a political track [...] it is a personal attack on an individual who has just died... But on the other hand, if I ban the track then you have arguments about censorship and freedom of speech [...] I also took into account the very difficult scenario of the fact there's a grieving family involved here who have yet to bury a loved one [...] We should respect the dead [...] So those sort of elements were in my thinking to come up with this decision that I would play not the track in full, but a clip of the track within a journalistic environment.²⁸

²⁶ Daniel Martin "BBC fudge 'hands victory to Trots': Chart show will 'only play five seconds of Ding Dong The Witch is Dead' as row over Thatcher protest single escalates", *Daily Mail* 13 April 2013. In fact the Socialist Workers Party opposed the regimes in the Soviet bloc.

²⁷ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2307480/Ding-Dong-The-Witch-Is-Dead-Well-play-5-seconds-say-bungling-BBC-Margaret-Thatcher-protest-song.html.

²⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22126940>.

Thus Cooper sought to appease both those who accused the BBC of causing offence *and* those who thought it guilty of censorship. While this offered a short-term solution, in the longer term it left the BBC a hostage to fortune and, as will be seen, some months later it faced further pressure to practice more musical censorship. Playing the track would have alleviated such pressures.

Meanwhile, another consideration in the “Ding Dong” case is the fact that the song itself is a text, and a key part of the controversy was the way in which the meaning of the track was transformed by its context. This meant that it went from being a fun, if retrospectively somewhat tasteless, ditty to being a dedicated insult. As feminists were quick to out, the term chosen for the insult itself was also problematic, since the word “witch” has long been one which has been used to stigmatise, marginalise, harm and ultimately legitimate the murder of women whose actions have offended the authorities and/or well-connected individuals.²⁹ The history of witch trials serves to illustrate that at the very least there is an air of misogyny around the term (see Federici 2004). This is, after all, a derogatory term which is *only* used about women and which was used here to denigrate a woman who had recently died. While it might be going too far to label all those publicising the campaign or buying the track as misogynists, it remains a fact that a politically inspired campaign utilised a song with this term as its focal point to mobilise a leftist constituency.

However, the reaction to the campaign again showed that issues of freedom of speech do not translate into simple left/right divides. So while, broadly, those castigating the BBC for censorship were on the left and those supporting it were on the right, this was not clear-cut. For some on the right, Thatcher herself was seen as a defender of free speech who, as a “conviction politician”, would have supported the playing of the song and would have been appalled at the BBC’s fudging of the issue. Conservative MP for Reading, Rob Wilson, articulated this view and said the track should be played in its entirety: “I think that Margaret Thatcher would be horrified, having helped free millions of people in Eastern Europe and been the symbol of freedom around the world, that she could in any way have censorship in her own country.”³⁰ Adopting a free-market approach, fellow Conservative MP Philip Davies said: “It’s a chart programme, so if it’s top of the charts they have to play it. It’s not for the BBC to define on what basis something is in the charts.”³¹ In addition, the leader of the anti-EU UK Independence Party and well-known admirer of Thatcher Nigel Farage said:

²⁹ See <http://angrywomen.wordpress.com/2013/04/09/thatchers-demise/>.

³⁰ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22126940.

³¹ www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22120595.

“If you suppress things then you make them popular, so play the bloody thing.”³²

Meanwhile on the left those more hesitant included Billy Bragg, who saw no point in celebrating. Posting on his Facebook page he wrote:

This is not a time for celebration. The death of Margaret Thatcher is nothing more than a salient reminder of how Britain got into the mess that we are in today. Of why ordinary working people are no longer able to earn enough from one job to support a family; of why there is a shortage of decent affordable housing; of why domestic growth is driven by credit, not by real incomes; of why tax-payers are forced to top up wages; of why a spiteful government seeks to penalise the poor for having an extra bedroom;³³ of why Rupert Murdoch became so powerful; of why cynicism and greed became the hallmarks of our society. Raising a glass to the death of an infirm old lady changes none of this. The only real antidote to cynicism is activism. Don't celebrate – organise!³⁴

In fact, within the mainstream media it was mainly those on the political right who contributed to the debate (possibly as it was they who were mostly invited to), with the left mainly contributing via social media. But the battle lines drawn around freedom of speech were familiar, albeit with some novel features, to which I now turn.

Part six: Concluding thoughts

Perhaps the main lesson to be drawn here is how much the online world has changed things for broadcasters, with considerable implications for musical censorship. When I conducted research on musical censorship in the mid-1990s (Cloonan 1996), it was often assumed by those I discussed the project with that this would focus on bans by broadcasters, especially the BBC. But the online world has changed the relative power of radio broadcasters and in terms of actually being able to hear the track, the BBC ban meant very little. People could buy the track freely and hear it with an absolute minimum of effort. Today a track which is not played on the Official Chart Show can be

³² www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/04/12/ding-dong-thatcher-row-nigel-farage_n_3067496.html.

³³ Bragg is referring to the so-called “Bedroom Tax”, a policy under which people living in local-authority-owned or -controlled housing and receiving housing benefits could have those benefits cut if their residence included a bedroom which was not occupied and could be rented out. See http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/housing_benefit_and_local_housing_allowance_changes_to_housing_benefit/bedroom_tax.

³⁴ www.facebook.com/billybraggofficial/posts/10151324426542471.

accessed in myriad other places. Media coverage of the “Ding Dong” case frequently compared it to the BBC’s banning of The Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen” in 1977.³⁵ Indeed there are some parallels, especially since on both occasions one of the issues was offence to a national leader. However, in 1977 the Sex Pistols found their song not only banned from the airwaves but also boycotted by major retailers, meaning that in some parts of the country actually buying the single required quite a bit of effort. But in 2013 banning the track from shops would make no sense as it was not even available as a physical product and it seems extremely unlikely that online retailers such as iTunes or Amazon would even have entertained the idea of boycotting the track in the way that major retailers did in 1977. In effect, a retail ban of the sort that accompanied “God Save the Queen” was a relic of the past.

The track itself also emerges as a key part of the story. Outside of the context of Thatcher’s death, it is relatively innocuous. Context becomes almost all here and the track was offensive only within the political context of the death and the ways it was used as a tool of celebration. It *became* offensive for a limited period. As ever, the text is meaningless without the *context*. More precisely, the possible broadcasting of the song by the BBC *at a particular moment* in the nation’s history was deemed to be offensive. In addition, there is an industrial side to the “Ding Dong” story. The track was not a new release, but one which has long been available via numerous online retailers. Unlike a newly released track it was not being promoted by its label and the only promotional activities for “Ding Dong” came not via a record company but through a leftist online political campaign. In fact, “Ding Dong” was not really a single at all in the traditional sense, just a track which was available for sale. The implications of its censoring are primarily for broadcasters, not record companies and retailers.

It was also noticeable that it was the BBC and not any other broadcaster which came under pressure. In part this is because the right-wing press which was stoking the controversy is constantly on the lookout for opportunities to deride the Corporation. In addition, the Official Chart Show which the BBC broadcasts is exactly that—the UK’s official (i.e. record company-approved) chart—and it thus retains some kudos as the focal point for assessing weekly sales. However, it is also clear that the reason for the focus on the BBC was that it is still seen as the nation’s broadcaster in times of national crisis. As just noted, it is expected by its Agreement to take its lead from the public in deciding what is in good taste, but this becomes very problematic when, as in the case of “Ding Dong”, the public itself is deeply divided.

³⁵ See, for example, www.theweek.co.uk/uk-news/margaret-thatcher/52467/ding-dong-witch-song-bbc-censorship.