

what does **NICK HAVE** to say?!

This is a copy of the speech Nick Abbot gave to the Radio Academy at a convention at the Groucho Club in London.

I'd like to thank Jeff Graham for inviting me here tonight, and you for coming, despite the apparent threat I pose to your moral well being, labeled as I am the most disgusting person in the history of broadcasting second only to Bill Grundy. The subject is "how far did you, can you, and should you go?" I'm Nick Abbot and on a late night comedy 'phone show for Virgin I was left in no doubt that the radio authority thought I had gone too far.

I was the subject of the R.A. wielding it's big stick of outrage on two occasions. Firstly, after trying to get on a London talk show, calling them live on the air from my show and being rebuffed, I suggested that the presenter loved me really as he had a stained picture of me on his bedroom ceiling. This was followed by a letter from the Radio Authority saying it was *unhelpful* to make disparaging remarks about other presenters. Fine - £5,000.

Along the way I became the target of an obsessive who gave up looking for work and decided that the best use of her time would be to tape all of my shows and complain and complain and complain. Six months later she hit gold after a caller, re-telling an urban myth, joked that a man got so drunk that he threw up while in bed with his girlfriend who then, in a fit of pique squatted over his unconscious frame and took a dump on his chest. Hers was the only complaint. Fine - £20,000. Recently a man in North London admitted driving without due care and attention when he knocked down and killed a man, he was fined £120.

The fine was obviously a last ditch attempt to get me off the air but it didn't work because unlike other

stations faced with the wrath of the Radio Authority, Virgin didn't capitulate and under the management of the time had the balls to stand up to them. The 'phone in stopped but I was promoted to drive time. They didn't do this because they liked me, they did it because my brand of humour attracted an audience and despite the fines, made them money.

Other presenters were not as lucky. One founding member of Kiss FM was presenting a very late night phone show when a woman caller joked that she liked to rub herself with pedigree chum and have her dog lick it off. For this first time offence the station was fined £10,000 and told that bestiality was a completely forbidden topic on commercial radio. They sacked him and to my knowledge he hasn't worked in radio since. That's how far you need to go to fall prey to the wrath of the R.A. No further than comedy shows on Channel 4 or BBC 2, no further than Viz comic or any teenage or adult magazine you can buy in WH Smiths. No further in fact than any form of entertainment presided over by any reasonable regulatory body. As you know, however, we are not subject to a reasonable regulatory body.

Commercial radio has the same rules as commercial television. Vague. It says to avoid humour "which offends against good taste or decency." *That's it.* It's a green light for the enthusiastic censor. ITV and Channel 4 are bound by the same sentence but are regulated by very different people. Those people see nothing wrong in OK'ing Jo Brand and Spitting Image and Mark Thomas, Beavis & Butthead and the Girlie Show, all of which would offend my grandmother but not the millions of people who actually watch them. The Independent Television Commission states that, on the subject of language, "writers, producers and performers seek within reason to protect their freedom of expression" and the ITC obviously supports this. The Radio Authority appears to ban it. The *ITC* says, on the subject of sex, that "popular entertainment and comedy have always relied to some extent on sexual innuendo and suggestive behaviour" and they say "it would be wrong to require writers to renounce all intention to shock and disturb." The Radio Authority bans this too. *They*

say "smut, titillation and crudity must be avoided." If the same tenet was applied to television it would rule out Absolutely Fabulous, Larry Sanders, Have I Got News For You, Rab C. Nesbitt, most of Channel 4 and BBC 2 drama and almost all of late night ITV. Banned.

If the rules were applied to other media, we'd see the back of The Sun, The Mirror, The News of the World, Viz, Private Eye, Carry On, Frankie Howerd, Kenneth Williams, The whole history of British Vaudeville, teenage magazines, Cosmopolitan, Vogue, almost every film ever made, in fact almost everything we as a society accept and take for granted. We'd be left with Walt Disney, Harry Secombe and the Antiques Roadshow.

It's not just that the rules are different for print, TV and radio - they are different for BBC and commercial radio. Chris Evans' performance on Radio 1 would fall foul of the rules as would recently broadcast bawdy poetry on Radio 3 and some of Radio 4's evening plays & stories. So with a twiddle of the dial you go from freedom of speech to a unilateral denial of that freedom. This is the most curious contrast of all. If any of the above makes sense to you, surely the fact that you cannot say on 104 FM what you can say on 98 FM makes a joke of the whole system.

Not so to the people who run the system though. The Radio Authority denies, firstly, that there is any difference in what is allowed on TV and radio and deny it they do quite strenuously. Where is the proof, they say. I can only assume that either they don't watch TV or they don't listen to the radio. And anyway, they say the rules they enforce and the interpretation of them are not down to them. The Radio Authority insists it is only the servant of the Department of National Heritage. So I called the Department of National Heritage and they said - oh no, it's the Radio Authority that makes the rules and interprets them and they have a completely free hand to do so. Nothing to do with us says the ministry of fun. They helpfully explained that in the unlikely event of anyone not agreeing with the

punishment that the Radio Authority may deal out, they have the right to appeal to... the... Radio Authority. So that's all right then.

And who are these people who rule without outside hindrance over a medium they can change on a whim and mould to their liking. Just seven people, five of whom are past or approaching retirement age and two of whom are titled. Not exactly the profile of your average listener.

I suggest that somewhere along the line they have seriously misinterpreted their role, which, as they print on the inside cover of their Programme Code is to "support the development and growth of a successful UK independent radio network which offers a wide variety of listening choice." Take an objective listen. What we have by and large is a whole series of stations competing to squeeze as many Simply Red songs as they can in an hour and presenters who are bland, smiley card reading copies of each other, most sounding like they are auditioning for day time continuity for BBC1.

The talk stations are equally bland and inoffensive with presenters locked either to someone selling a book or to the day's headlines, giving over hour after endless hour to generally aged callers who will say "oh yes it is" or "oh no it isn't" to the question of the hour. No spark, no originality, just a comfort to the infirm and undemanding of mind.

The contrast with radio in America couldn't be more striking. There, radio is alive, it fizzes and above all it's funny. You could count the number of funny people in commercial radio in single digits. I bet most of you couldn't name five. The reason is obvious. The stern Victorian approach to censorship by the Radio Authority has killed innovative comedy and satire on commercial radio. All the good British comics stick with BBC radio or go to television. You need freedom of speech for comedy and that is one thing the Radio Authority will not allow. By its unfettered disapproving they have positively stifled the development of commercial to the extent that I don't believe it has changed one jot in 20

years. It has stood still, an island of purse-lipped purity.

Who do they think they are protecting? Is the assumption that people who listen to commercial radio are a particularly child like, impressionable lot who need protecting from the world as it really is? Do these people never watch television or read books or take newspapers or buy magazines? Do they not see films or go to the theatre or listen to BBC radio or go outside and hear the words of others? Are we protecting those who listen to commercial radio on the assumption that they never do anything else and have no experience of life. If not, if we can safely guess that people who listen to the radio also leave the house once in a while and behave like ordinary humans beings and consume and see and hear what the rest of us do then what possible reason can there be for such an artificially safe and insipid medium? In whose interest is it? Well, clearly the seven members of the Radio Authority, the loud voices of a tiny complaining minority - Mary Whitehouse is probably quite pleased but that's about it.

The Radio Authority need to re-evaluate its role and its interpretation of the rules. No smut, nothing that the most uptight members of society would find distasteful, nothing really that makes up the national sense of humour. And no opinions. If newspapers which dare to voice an opinion on any subject they choose are read by almost every adult in the country without the nation suffering why are we banned from doing so on radio? There is no logical argument to sustain such a bevy of restrictions.

We have recently promoted ourselves as a growing industry to advertisers. We're not the 2% medium any more we cry. But we all know that we're not much more than that. *Still* we sit below the table beg for any leftovers from advertisers spending on TV and print. We boast that now we have more listeners than the BBC. This is no cause for celebration as we didn't win them, the BBC lost them and they've made a U turn and are coming back to get them. There is no room for complacency here. Before we are much older there will be thousands of TV channels available with even greater freedom of speech. The BBC

will dominate Digital Audio Broadcasting with its relaxed views on content and newspapers from around the globe with their dangerous opinionated and sometimes smutty content will come into homes on computer.

Unless we catch up, the game will be beyond our reach. Our capitulation to the censors and the way we as an industry seem to have *embraced* those that wish to stifle our freedom of speech is not echoed by any other business or form of entertainment. It is a gutless tradition of which no self respecting medium should be proud.

This is not Nick Abbot demanding the right to swear on the radio. I never have and I never will. It is simply a call for an even playing field. Assemble a great team, bring in the crowds and make some money. That's what it's all about after all. It's us against television and BBC radio. To continue the footballing analogy we are in a fight to get in to the Premier league. The opposition fields Eric Cantona and Vinnie Jones against our Women's Institute Eleven but the referee only blows his whistle and hands out red cards to us.

