

# Lawyers For The Talent

Entertainment Law

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## First Amendment - Indecency

Just as we get comfortable with the notion that speech is either protected or unprotected under the First Amendment, and that there are certain specific categories of unprotected speech, along comes some speech, George Carlin's *Seven Dirty Words* routine, in the 1970s, that the Federal Communications Commission wishes to *regulate* but not *ban*.

The words in Carlin's routine are dirty words, but they are not "prurient" or obscene within the meaning of the *Miller* test. They are not fighting words or incitement, defamatory, or a threat. They are not so-called "crime-facilitating speech," like conspiracy or fraud. Also recall that seven years before *Pacifica*, the Supreme Court had said, in *Cohen v. California* that California could not arrest a man for wearing a jacket that said Fuck The Draft.

Please listen to [George Carlin's 7 Dirty Words routine](#), which is the subject of the litigation in *FCC v. Pacifica*. It's low comedy, but also wise about how the First Amendment works.

Never mind *why* we have tabooed words. Assume we all know we want to ban some dirty words, or some racist words, or some communist words. Carlin's performance dramatizes how difficult it is to define such word categories with precision. Meaning that any attempt to make a list of prohibited words, or a "speech code," will ultimately censor protected speech, including protected speech like Carlin's comedy routine.

Seven years before *Pacifica*, Justice Harlan wrote that the f-word was a matter of taste, not law:

How is one to distinguish this from any other offensive word? Surely the State has no right to cleanse public debate to the point where it is grammatically palatable to the most squeamish among us. Yet no readily ascertainable general principle exists for stopping short of that result were we to affirm the judgment below. For, while the particular four-letter word being litigated here is perhaps more distasteful than most others of its genre, it is nevertheless often true that one man's vulgarity is another's lyric. Indeed, we think it is largely because governmental officials cannot make principled distinctions in this area that the Constitution leaves matters of taste and style so largely to the individual.

Here in 21st century, Carlin's routine is funny. The words he uses there have lost their charge. They are barely "dirty" or tabooed here in the 2000s. But we have our own tabooed speech. Imagine a Netflix special with a white male comedian doing a routine called, "The Seven Racist Words You Can't Say On Television". Funny? I don't think so.

With that in mind, Read *Pacifica* with care. It's not too long. I would download and print the entire Westlaw decision and read it.

## ***FCC v. Pacifica Foundation***

U.S. Supreme Court (1978)

- [case at Google Scholar](#)
- [case at Westlaw](#)
- [case at Wikipedia](#)

## **Fleeting Expletives**

*Pacifica* is still with us. It's why we don't normally hear Carlin's seven dirty words on broadcast television during the hours of 6 AM to 10 PM to this day. The FCC purports to regulate [obscenity, indecency and profanity](#) and purport to know these things [when they see and hear them](#).

*Pacifica* spoke of Carlin's "barrage" of dirty words, but by the 2000s, the FCC was threatening fines for the broadcast of even a single dirty word during prime time TV.

Please just read *about Fox I* and *Fox II*, so that we are able to explain why *Pacifica* is still with us, even though it no longer makes any sense to make separate rules for cable TV and broadcast television. Don't they all arrive on the same fiber optic cable or satellite dish?

The dissents in *Fox II* spell *Pacifica's* doom, as we observed last week in class.

## ***FCC v. Fox Television Stations* (Fox I)**

- [case at Google Scholar](#)
- [case at Westlaw](#)
- [case at Wikipedia](#)

## ***FCC v. Fox Television Stations* (Fox II)**

- [case at Google Scholar](#)
- [case at Westlaw](#)
- [case at Wikipedia](#).

## Indecency On The Internet?

### 47 U.S. Code § 230

aka The Communications Decency Act (“CDA”)

The Act was Title V of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The amendment that became the Communications Decency Act (“CDA”) was added to the Telecommunications Act in the Senate by an 81–18 vote on 15 June 1995. It affected the Internet and online communications in two big ways: First, it tried to give the federal government the power to regulate both indecency (when available to children) and obscenity in cyberspace. Second, Section 230 of the CDA provided that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and other operators of Internet services are not to be construed as publishers who might be liable for the words of third parties who use their services.

In the CDA, Congress found good policy reasons for protecting ISPs:

”The Internet and other interactive computer services offer a forum for a true diversity of political discourse, unique opportunities for cultural development, and myriad avenues for intellectual activity ... and have flourished, to the benefit of all Americans, with a minimum of government regulation ...

In short, Congress found good things on the Internet and sought to protect service providers so they could continue to thrive without fear of liability for what others say. But other portions of the Act sought to criminalize “the knowing transmission of obscene or indecent messages to any recipient under 18 years of age.”

This was Congress making a regulatory land grab on the Internet, which even in 1996 was already the Wild West of content. Recall that *Pacifica* allowed the FCC to regulate, but not ban, indecent speech in broadcasting. The government no doubt expected the United States Supreme Court to give it similar authority to regulate indecency and pornography on the Internet, but the Court said no.

In the landmark case of [\*Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union\*](#) (US 1997), the United States Supreme Court struck down the anti-pornography and indecency provisions of the CDA. The Court took pains to distinguish *Pacifica* and *Ginsburg*, by observing that the Internet was more like newspapers than broadcasting stations. The Court had a long history of striking down content-based regulations of newspapers. [\*Miami Herald v. Tornillo\*](#). The Court reasoned that the Internet was much more like a print medium than a radio or a television.

The provisions were vague and overbroad:

We are persuaded that the CDA lacks the precision that the First Amendment requires when a statute regulates the content of speech. In order to deny minors access to potentially harmful speech, the CDA effectively suppresses a large amount of speech that adults have a constitutional right to receive and to address to one another. That burden on adult speech is unacceptable if less restrictive alternatives would be at least as effective in achieving the legitimate purpose that the statute was enacted to serve.

Back in those days, I was an angry younger man and not yet teaching law, when I penned the following Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times*:

[Dooling, Richard "Most Of These Guys Are Lawyers, Right?" \*New York Times\* 15 June 1996.](#)

Please advice if you hit a paywall, and I'll copy it in.