Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Automated Censorship: Don't Say, Can't Say

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, October 21st, 2010

Yesterday NPR terminated news analyst Juan Williams over comments he made on Bill O'Reilly's show. But what if there had been a way – say a piece of software – that kept those comments from being uttered in the first place?

The question isn't an idle one, as it brings up issues of censorship. A few days ago, Apple was granted a patent for a software application that can keep teens (and presumably anyone who's using it) from sending sexually-oriented text messages.

Canon just announced an office copier that can be programmed not to print documents containing certain keywords. For example, an office manager could set the machine not to print any document with the word "Ticketmaster," on the assumption that it would be a receipt for a concert that was personal, not business-related.

I'm not in favor of teens (or anyone else) sexting. It's stupid and, when it becomes public as it inevitably does, embarrassing. Nor do I favor employees using company resources for personal business.

But if we abstract these developments, they foretell a troubling trend: A growing movement to prohibit speech and acts proactively – before they occur. This is eerily like the premise of the film *Minority Report*, where a team of future-forecasting police officers prevent crimes by arresting people before they commit them.

We should be asking ourselves these two questions: Who will control the software, and how will we even know word-blocking software is being used, until we get a summons from the principal's office? And if we don't have the freedom to make mistakes – even mistakes of spoken language – will we still be able to have open debate and discussion in our society?

Image by Shelton LeBron

This entry was posted on Thursday, October 21st, 2010 at 6:07 pm and is filed under Technology
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.