



American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression Association of American Publishers, Inc. Comic Book Legal Defense Fund Entertainment Merchants Association  
Entertainment Software Association Freedom to Read Foundation Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. Recording Industry Association of America, Inc.

March 29, 2012

The Honorable Janice Brewer  
Arizona Governor  
Executive Tower  
1700 West Washington Street  
Phoenix, AZ 85007

Request for veto of House Bill 2549

Dear Governor Brewer,

The members of Media Coalition believe that Section 1 of House Bill 2549 plainly violates the First Amendment. We acknowledge that the bill passed with very little opposition despite our efforts to raise our concerns. Nonetheless, we respectfully ask you to veto H.B. 2549 and allow legislators to craft a narrower bill that addresses their concerns without infringing on the right of free speech. The trade associations that comprise Media Coalition have many members throughout the country, including Arizona: publishers, booksellers and librarians, makers and retailers of recordings, films, videos and video games.

H.B. 2549 would make it a crime to use any electronic or digital device to communicate using obscene, lewd or profane language or to suggest a lewd or lascivious act if done with intent to “annoy,” “offend,” “harass” or “terrify.” The legislation offers no definitions for “annoy,” “offend,” “harass” or “terrify.” “Electronic or digital device” is defined only as any wired or wireless communication device and multimedia storage device. “Lewd” and “profane” are not defined in the statute or by reference. “Lewd” is generally understood to mean lusty or sexual in nature and “profane” is generally defined as disrespectful or irreverent about religion or religious practices.

Government may criminalize speech that rises to the level of harassment and many states have laws that do so, but this legislation takes a law meant to address irritating phone calls and applies it to communication on web sites, blogs, listserves and other Internet communication. H.B. 2549 is not limited to a one to one conversation between two specific people. The communication does not need to be repetitive or even unwanted. There is no requirement that the recipient or subject of the speech actually feel offended, annoyed or scared. Nor does the

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legislation make clear that the communication must be intended to offend or annoy the reader, the subject or even any specific person.

Speech protected by the First Amendment is often intended to offend, annoy or scare but could be prosecuted under this law. A Danish newspaper posted pictures of Muhammad that were intended to be offensive to make a point about religious tolerance. If a Muslim in Arizona considers the images profane and is offended, the paper could be prosecuted. Some Arizona residents may consider Rush Limbaugh's recent comments about a Georgetown law student lewd. He could be prosecuted if he intended his comments to be offensive. Similarly, much general content available in the media uses racy or profane language and is intended to offend, annoy or even terrify. Bill Maher's stand up routines and Jon Stewart's nightly comedy program, Ann Coulter's books criticizing liberals and Christopher Hitchens' expressing his disdain for religion, Stephen King's novels or the *Halloween* films all could be subject to this legislation. Even common taunting about sports between rival fans done online is frequently meant to offend or annoy and is often done using salty and profane language.

While protecting people from harassment is a worthy goal, legislators cannot do so by criminalizing speech protected by the Constitution. All speech is presumptively protected by the First Amendment against content-based regulation, subject only to specific historic exceptions. *R.A.V.*, 505 U.S. 377, 382; *Simon & Shuster, Inc. v. Members of N.Y. State Crime Victims Bd.*, 502 U.S. 105, 116 (1991). As the Court recently explained:

From 1791 to the present, . . . [the First Amendment has] "permitted restrictions upon the content of speech in a few limited areas." [These] "historic and traditional categories long familiar to the bar[ ]" [ ] includ[e] obscenity, defamation, fraud, incitement, and speech integral to criminal conduct . . .

*United States v. Stevens*, 130 S. Ct. 1577, 1584 (2010). See also *R.A.V.*, 505 U.S. at 382-83; *Free Speech Coalition v. Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. 234, 245-46 (2002).

There is no historic exception to First Amendment protection for speech simply because it annoys, offends or even terrifies regardless of whether it is lewd or lascivious. As the Court said in *Texas v. Johnson*, "If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable." 491 U.S. 397, 414. See also *Street v. New York*, 394 U. S. 576, 592 (1969) ("It is firmly settled that . . . the public expression of ideas may not be prohibited merely because the ideas are themselves offensive to some of their hearers"); *R.A.V. v. St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377 (1992) (struck down a statute which limited speech which "arouses anger, alarm or resentment in others"); *Free Speech Coalition v. Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 245 (2002) ("It is also well established that speech may not be prohibited because it concerns subjects offending our sensibilities."); *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation*, 438 U. S. 726, 745 (1978) ("[T]he fact that society may find speech offensive is not a sufficient reason for suppressing it"); *Carey v. Population Services Int'l*, 431 U. S. 678, 701 (1977) ("[T]he fact that protected speech may be offensive to some does not justify its suppression").

In three recent First Amendment cases, the Court has emphasized that it is reluctant, if not unwilling, to expand the categories of unprotected speech to include different kinds of

offensive or distasteful communication beyond the historic exceptions. In *Brown v. Entertainment Merchs. Ass'n*, 131 S. Ct. 2729 (2011), the Court declined to craft an exception for the sale of patently offensive violent video games to minors. In *Snyder v. Phelps*, 131 S. Ct. 1207 (2011), the Court declined to create an exception for outrageous and upsetting speech in the vicinity of a private military funeral. And in *United States v. Stevens*, the Court declined to fashion a new First Amendment exception for depictions of actual animal cruelty. 130 S. Ct. 1577

Nor is there an exception to the First Amendment for speech that is profane or lewd or that suggests a lewd or lascivious act. Many would consider the speech of the Westboro Baptist Church at issue in *Snyder* to be profane, but the Court found it to be protected. 131 S. Ct. 1207 (2011). In *Sable Communications of California v. FCC*, 492 U.S. 119 (1989), the Court struck down a restriction on indecent but not obscene speech on commercial telephone communication. There is a historic exception for obscene speech which may be banned if it meets a specific narrow definition for obscenity enunciated by the Court in *Miller v. California*. 413 U.S. 15 (1973). In *Miller*, the Supreme Court created a three-part test that defined obscene material as descriptions or depictions of sexual conduct or lascivious nudity when, taken as a whole,

- i. Predominantly appeals to the prurient, shameful or morbid interest in sex;
- ii. Is patently offensive by prevailing community standards; and
- iii. Lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

Lewd or lascivious speech may be banned to the extent it also meets this definition of obscenity (or meets the FCC's indecency standard on television or radio). Otherwise, it is fully protected.

To the extent that harassment can be considered an existing category of unprotected speech, the bill is still unconstitutionally vague. In certain narrow, well-defined instances, speech may rise to the level of coercion, threats, intimidation, or persistent harassment and amount to a crime. H.B. 2549 does not define many of its terms adequately to distinguish between protected speech and the traditional narrow crime of harassment. This vagueness in the legislation will have a significant chilling effect on protected speech as the bill provides criminal sanctions for a single violation. As noted above, a substantial amount of speech in the media could be subject to this legislation, but speakers have little guidance to determine what speech is protected and what is subject to prosecution and must either risk a criminal prosecution or self-censor their speech. This vagueness is impermissible in a law limiting First Amendment guarantees. See *Baggett v. Bullitt*, 370 U.S. 360 (1964).

It may be that H.B. 2549 is not intended to criminalize speech in the media but only what legitimately rises to the level of harassment; however, an unconstitutional statute is not cured by a narrower intent or a promise by legislators or prosecutors that the statute will be used in such a limited fashion. As Chief Justice Roberts wrote in *United States v. Stevens*, "We would not uphold an unconstitutional statute merely because the Government promised to use it responsibly." 130 S.Ct. at 1591 (2010).

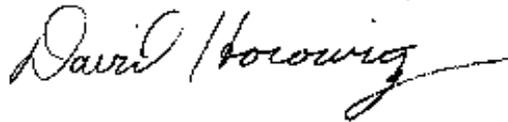
Passage of this unconstitutionally overbroad and vague bill could prove costly. If a court declares it unconstitutional, there is a good possibility that the state will be ordered to pay the

plaintiffs' attorneys' fees. In a previous case brought by members of Media Coalition the state agreed to pay fees of \$245,000.

If you would like to discuss our concerns further, I would appreciate that opportunity and can be contacted at 212-587-4025 #3 or [horowitz@mediacoalition.org](mailto:horowitz@mediacoalition.org).

Again, we ask you to protect the First Amendment rights of all the people of Arizona and please veto H.B. 2549.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Horowitz". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Horowitz  
Executive Director  
Media Coalition, Inc.

cc: Eileen Klein, Chief of Staff  
Joe Sciarrotta, General Counsel