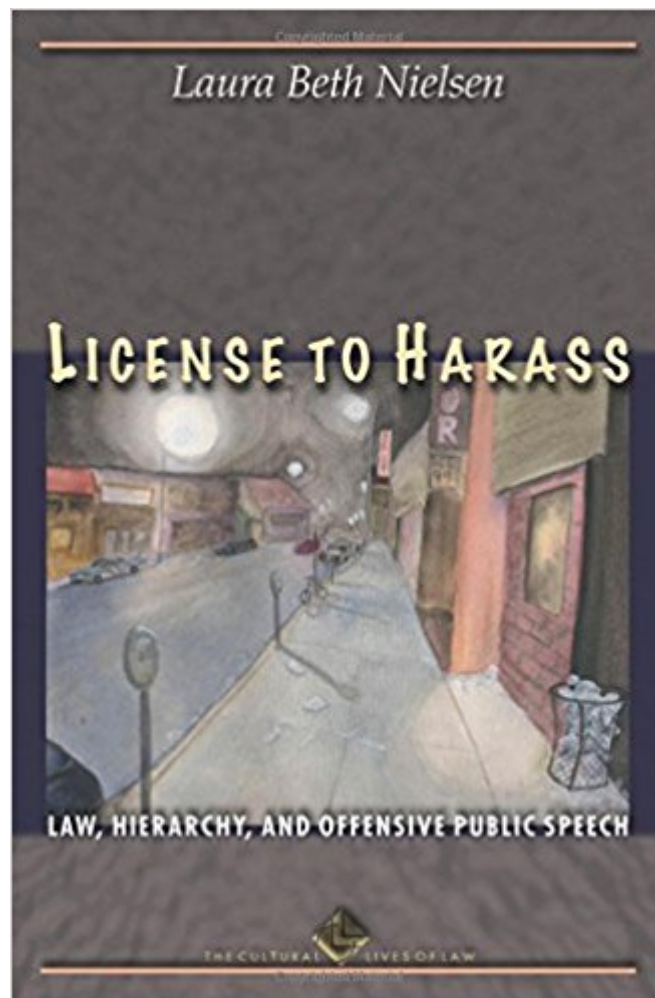




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# License To Harass: Law, Hierarchy, And Offensive Public Speech (The Cultural Lives Of Law)



## Synopsis

Offensive street speech--racist and sexist remarks that can make its targets feel both psychologically and physically threatened--is surprisingly common in our society. Many argue that this speech is so detestable that it should be banned under law. But is this an area covered by the First Amendment right to free speech? Or should it be banned? In this elegantly written book, Laura Beth Nielsen pursues the answers by probing the legal consciousness of ordinary citizens. Using a combination of field observations and in-depth, semistructured interviews, she surveys one hundred men and women, some of whom are routine targets of offensive speech, about how such speech affects their lives. Drawing on these interviews as well as an interdisciplinary body of scholarship, Nielsen argues that racist and sexist speech creates, reproduces, and reinforces existing systems of hierarchy in public places. The law works to normalize and justify offensive public interactions, she concludes, offering, in essence, a "license to harass." Nielsen relates the results of her interviews to statistical surveys that measure the impact of offensive speech on the public. Rather than arguing whether law is the appropriate remedy for offensive speech, she allows that the benefits to democracy, to community, and to society of allowing such speech may very well outweigh the burdens imposed. Nonetheless, these burdens, and the stories of the people who bear them, should not remain invisible and outside the debate.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The author has written a compelling text that not only highlights the problem of offensive public

speech experienced daily by ordinary citizens but broadens our understanding of this noxious issue."--Susan Fineran, American Journal of Sociology

"Terrific! There are many powerful ideas in this book and they are presented in an elegant way that undergraduates can read easily and that mature scholars will appreciate."--Michael McCann, University of Washington

Opening our minds to others' views is what makes a family, community or nation work effectively. This book offers an opportunity to see perceptions of the law that might be different from our own. It's a great book especially at election time!

One star for being useful as toilet paper in a pinch.

I heard Professor Nielsen on NPR last week, purchased the book, and I really enjoyed it. The quotes from real people about their experiences with offensive public speech really illuminate how it feels to be in public for people of different social groups and how it differs. Professor Nielsen's insights about legal consciousness are innovative. She convincingly demonstrates how different people have different experiences with the law which lead to different expectations about the law and its capacity to solve social problems. This book is a must read for students in sociology, women's studies, legal studies, etc. You will both enjoy it and learn from it -- a rare combination in academic writing.

An exceptional narrative that frames a critical issue in our society. Thank you for writing this book - it is an important contribution to the science of sociology.

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