

#1- Is There a Biological Purpose for Profanity?

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PSYCHOLOGY

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By Jeff Wilser



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It started with a woman giving birth. As the doctor told her to *push-push-push!* She screamed in pain and yelled a blast of obscenities.

Her husband watched, fascinated. This woman could really cuss.

“Is this normal?” he asked the midwife, half-joking.

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’s a perfectly normal part of giving birth,” the midwife told him.

Hmmmm. This got him thinking. He happened to be a scientist, Dr. Richard Stephens, and as he told me years later, “The delivery of the baby was the starting point. In this perfectly rapturous, beautiful moment of giving birth, she’s cursing like a sailor.”

Why would his wife start dropping F-bombs? And if it’s a “perfectly normal” part of going into labor, why does everyone do it? What’s the root cause? Logically, Stephens reasoned, there must be a biological purpose for profanity. “Swearing is obviously useful; if it wasn’t useful, people wouldn’t do it,” he tells me. “We only do things that give us rewards or benefits; that’s just the way the world is.”

So he dedicated his work to proving that swearing can, in fact, give us measurable benefits. In a delightfully oddball experiment, he had a group of student volunteers dunk their hands into a tub of freezing water. He measured how long they could keep their hands in the ice water. (Stephens sounds like a gentle man with a lovely British

accent, but the experiment does sound a touch sadistic.) He split the poor bastards into two groups:

Group A) While holding their hands in the freezing water, they said their favorite swear word over and over again, like a woman in labor.

Group B) While holding their hands in the freezing water, they said a neutral word over and over again, like “toothbrush” or “applesauce.”

Group A, the F-bombers, reported experiencing less pain. They were able to keep their hands under water 40 seconds longer than group B — roughly *twice* as long.

So how does this work? One theory is that taboo words are, inherently, more loaded with emotion than neutral words, and that they tap into a different chunk of the brain. “There’s indirect evidence that swearing isn’t associated with the cortex — where most language is — but instead taps into the deeper parts of the brain structure,” says Stephens. Profanity, therefore, is able to trigger our flight-or-fight mechanism, which can unleash adrenaline to help us tolerate pain or squeeze out a baby.

To buttress the theory that profanity is an emotional language, he then conducted an experiment to see whether our *fluency* with profanity changes in different emotional states. He recruited another batch of college volunteers. This time they played video games for ten minutes: One group played video golf, another played a violent first-person shooter. After the gaming, each student took a “swearing fluency test,” where you have one minute to write down as many swear words as you can. The control group (the golfers) only recorded seven, but the first-person shooters recorded eight. “That doesn’t sound like much,” admits Stephens, “but it’s statistically significant. In psychology, the difference between seven and eight is night and day.”

Of course I needed to know more about this swearing fluency test, which is clearly the best test ever. “People only got *seven*?” I ask. “That seems really low.”

“It’s harder than you think. People usually get five or six pretty easily, and then it really trails off.”

“What counts as a swear word?”

“You can say ‘fuck’ or ‘fuck-face’ or ‘fucking,’ but that’s just a variation of ‘fuck,’” says Stephens in his pleasant English accent — this was easily the highlight of my research. “So ‘fuck-face’ gets one point, but you can’t look around the room and say ‘fuck-table.’”

Afterward I took my own swearing fluency test. I was sure I could pump out at least 20, maybe 30. I am not good at very many things in life, but swearing is one of them.

My score? Ten. I was so disappointed. But Stephens was right: It really is harder when you remove variants from the equation. For example, in my mind, an *ass-clown* is a harmless buffoon, whereas an *ass-bag* is more of a dick. (Go ahead and take the swearing fluency test for yourself — it's a fun 60 seconds.)

The point is that our ability to use profanity is linked to our emotional state, an observation that squares with a 2011 experiment conducted by the University of Bristol, which found that it's the *swear words themselves*, and not their meaning, that triggers an emotional response. The study hooked up volunteers to a machine that measured sweat levels, which is a proxy for measuring stress, and then asked them to say either actual swear words or their euphemisms.

People felt more stress when they said the taboo words ... even when the meanings are identical. (In other words, your stress levels are higher when you say “fuck” than when you say “fiddlesticks.”) Taboo words have power. So while we roll our eyes at people who say “Oh, sugar!” instead of “Oh, shit!” there actually is a measurable, physiological difference in how the words are felt.

Or let's take the most provocative and controversial word you know. Yeah, that one. In his stand-up act *Chewed Up*, Louis C.K. mocks TV reporters for going on air and saying “the N-word,” because we all know what that awful word means, and instead of using the euphemism, says Louis, you might as well just man up and say the awful word, because otherwise, you're forcing *the listener* to fill in the blanks and say the actual N-word in our heads. I adore Louis, and it's a clever argument, but since the *taboo words themselves* trigger more of an emotional impact than the meaning behind that taboo, in this case he might be mistaken. If I actually printed the N-word (which I will not do) you will physically feel worse than you do this second. For good or evil, substitute words just don't pack the same punch.

Back to the benefits of swearing: It can help your career. “Profanity in the workplace can be a morale booster and inspire a sense of team spirit,” concludes a 2007 study from the University of East Anglia, as it can loosen us up and help break the ice. Then again ... one person's “loosening up” is another person's “hostile work environment.” Just ask the former CEO of Yahoo, Carol Bartz, who once grumbled to Yahoo investors that there's “nobody fucking doing anything” and once threatened her employees that she

would “drop-kick them to fucking Mars.” After an ugly split with Yahoo she later said she regretted the profanity.

Too much profanity can dilute the impact. Another one of Stephens’s experiments found that “the higher the swearing frequency, the less was the benefit for pain tolerance.” If you abuse it you lose it.

So just like with almost everything, it comes down to fucking moderation.

#2- “Unholy Shit” (by Henry Hitchings)

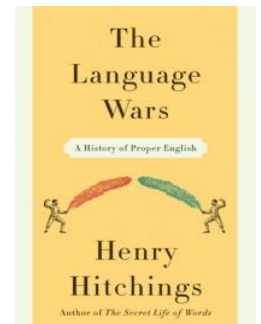
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Censorship and Obscenity

Henry Hitchings was born in 1974. He is the author of *The Secret Life of Words*, *Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen?*, and *Defining the World*. He has contributed to many newspapers and magazines and is the theater critic for the *London Evening Standard*. The following is an adapted excerpt from his book *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English*.



Political correctness is an invitation to practise self-censorship: to conform to a model of fairness. This brings us to the larger issue of what we are not permitted to say, what we are discouraged from saying, and what we elect to say only in very particular circumstances.

Censorship has a long history, and so does opposition to it. Indeed, it is the practice of policing what people are allowed to say that creates opportunities for subterfuge. The main concern of censorship is smothering ideas, yet because language is the vehicle of ideas censorship has often seemed to be above all else an attempt to muffle language or extinguish it. You can jail a person, but not an idea. There are two forms of censorship. One is interference in advance of publication – by the state or by some other authority such as the Church. The other is action after publication: lawsuits and financial penalties.

In Britain it is the Crown that has usually taken responsibility for censorship. Henry VIII published a list of banned books in 1529, and in 1545 the first permanent Master of the Revels was appointed, with responsibility for licensing playhouses and approving the works staged there. Later this role passed to the Lord Chamberlain, whose responsibility for theatrical censorship continued until 1968. There is also a tradition of self-appointed moralists: early ones included William Prynne and Jeremy Collier, who attacked the decadence of the theatre in the seventeenth century; the type is perhaps best represented by Mrs Grundy, a character mentioned in Thomas Morton’s play *Speed the Plough* (1798) who embodies the idea of bourgeois propriety and is name-checked in novels by Dickens, Thackeray and Dostoevsky.¹ The moralists’ indignation is always no more than a step away

from intolerance, and part of it stems from the conviction that the authorities should do more to repress profanity and depravity.

It is well known that whole books have been suppressed on the grounds of obscenity: for instance, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in Britain, the United States and Australia, and, less famously, a guide to euthanasia called *The Peaceful Pill Handbook* in Australia and New Zealand. Sometimes, too, a regime has outlawed literature on political grounds. A current example is North Korea, where the arts are expected to instruct people in socialism; educated North Koreans are unlikely to have read anything published outside their own language or before 1948.

More often there have been small acts of suppression. Parts of books have been cut or amended to avoid causing offence, and certain books have been kept out of schools. Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* titles have been purged of words such as *coon* and *darkey* – favorites of Dolittle's pet parrot Polynesia. Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, which has been interpreted as an indictment of censorship, was expurgated for distribution in high schools; among other things, an episode describing fluff being removed from a navel was changed to a description of ears being cleaned. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was widely banned in schools in the 1960s and '70s; in 1960 a teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was fired after assigning the book to a class of sixteen-year-olds. The American Civil Liberties Union reports that the most challenged books in the 1990s included *Huckleberry Finn* (because of its use of the word *nigger*) and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (because they allegedly teach witchcraft). Common reasons for challenges are allegations that books contain 'sexually explicit' material and 'offensive language' or are unsuited to the age group to which they are ostensibly addressed.²

Probably the most celebrated example of censorship in English is Thomas Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare* (1818). As its subtitle announced, this edition of Shakespeare's plays omitted any words that 'cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family' – stripping away anything sexual, yet retaining the violence. The edition was Bowdler's completion of work done by his sister Henrietta Maria; ungenerously, the title page omitted her name, though it did advertise his position as a Fellow of the Royal Society. Bowdler was also a member of what became the Society for the Suppression of Vice. His text, in which vice was diluted rather than completely effaced, led to his being accused in one review of having 'castrated' Shakespeare and of having 'cauterized and phlebotomized him'.³ But *The Family Shakespeare* was popular, and went through five editions in twenty years. (Less well-known is Bowdler's attempt to do the same thing with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, from which he excised 'all passages of an irreligious or immoral tendency'.) The verb *to bowdlerize* has passed into everyday English vocabulary.

By contrast, an atmosphere of the alien clings to the title of John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) – a work often claimed as a pioneering defence of free speech, although it would be more accurate to call it a wartime defence of the freedom of the press from government interference. The name of this tract is an allusion to the Areopagus, a hill where the Court

of Athens met in the fourth and fifth centuries BC. Maybe we should read something into the fact that the name Milton chose for his defence of a free press remains so obscure. We may find many acts of censorship ridiculous, especially when we reflect on them from a distance, yet the defenders of free expression are often thought of as superfluous bores or are simply forgotten.

Sometimes a single word can cause outrage. George Bernard Shaw wrote several plays that, while apparently apolitical, addressed controversial issues; of these the best-known is *Pygmalion*, in which Shaw pokes fun at the social purity movement. For a bet, Henry Higgins transforms the Covent Garden flower-seller Eliza Doolittle into a 'princess', which chiefly involves purifying her pronunciation. This is also, covertly, an attempt to ensure her moral probity. At the start of the play Eliza is mistaken for a prostitute – a matter dealt with obliquely, but not obscurely – and in learning a more refined style of speech she reduces the chances of this kind of thing happening in the future. However, the refinement is robotic, and there are moments when she escapes from it, expressing her true personality in vivid terms. One of these exercised the press. Before the first performance on the London stage of *Pygmalion*, the *Daily Sketch* warned that 'One word in Shaw's new play will cause sensation'. Its preview continued: 'It is a word . . . certainly not used in decent society. It is a word which the *Daily Sketch* cannot possibly print.' The word was *bloody*. On 11 April 1914, the first night of the run, Eliza's use of it did indeed cause a sensation: in the theatre there was a stunned silence followed by more than a minute of hysterical laughter. Newspapers responded with dramatic headlines such as 'Threats By Decency League'. Both *bloody* and *pygmalion* became catchwords of the moment. Shaw made a statement that was printed in the *Daily News*: 'I have nothing particular to say about Eliza Doolittle's language . . . I do not know anything more ridiculous than the refusal of some newspapers (at several pages' length) to print the word "bloody", which is in common use as an expletive by four-fifths of the British nation, including many highly-educated persons.'⁴ Almost a hundred years on, news media continue to play an ambivalent part in censorship, reporting events that have caused scandal, and often thereby drawing attention to acts or statements that might otherwise have gone largely unnoticed.

The practice of censorship is closely linked to the concept of taboo – behaviours that are prohibited or strongly inhibited by the belief that they are improper, and things that are considered unfit for mention because they are sordid or sacred. The first recorded use in English of the word *taboo* – usually said to be of Tongan origin – is in Captain Cook's 1777 account of his Pacific voyage. Sigmund Freud gave the word greater currency. In paying attention to the social role of taboo, he noted that we can feel guilty not just about things we have done, but also about our wishes (even subconscious ones). He identified this 'creative' kind of guilt as an important part of the machinery of our psyche, and went so far as to suggest that swearing, easily dismissed as mere catharsis, is an expression of wishes that exist below the threshold of consciousness, conveying a primal disgust.

We frequently censor ourselves. I may sweeten a salty anecdote when relating it to a friend's parents, or modify the way I talk about religion when I am with someone I know is a

believer. While there is nothing that is at all times taboo for all people, we typically restrict or suppress parts of our vocabulary for fear of violating common taboos. This may well feel not like fear, but more akin to reverence or courtesy.

The words and expressions most tabooed in English-speaking society are to do with sex, excretion, ethnicity and religion. Elsewhere there have been other prohibitions. Bandits in Republican China did not use the names of animals they considered dangerous. The linguist Leonard Bloomfield reported that a Cree Indian would not mention his sister's name. In Japan, taboo terms are known as *imi kotoba*; at a wedding, one is expected to avoid using a common verb meaning 'to repeat', because it hints at the idea of divorce and remarriage. The Zuni of New Mexico will not use the word *takka*, meaning 'frogs', on any ceremonial occasion. Traditionally, Faroese fishermen refrain from using the word for knife (*knívur*), and, in the Yakut language spoken in parts of the far north of Russia, the word for a bear is avoided.

For most readers, though, the four taboo subjects I have mentioned will be to the fore. In Britain until the 1960s the use in print of *fuck* or *cunt* could result in prosecution. Speech, of course, has been a different matter. Michel de Montaigne observed in one of his essays that the words most rarely or warily spoken are among those most readily recognized. There is justice in this, but in the English-speaking world the rarity and wariness are doubtful. William Hazlitt had it right when he remarked that the English are 'rather a foul-mouthed nation'. I don't think of myself as a heavy swearer, but elsewhere in the English-speaking world – except in Australia – I seem to pass for one, as taboo terms trickle from my lips.

The reaction these words provoke is caused more by the words themselves than by the things they denote. Far fewer people will be upset by the word *vagina* than will be appalled to hear the word *cunt*. Very few will be disconcerted by a reference to *sexual intercourse*. It's also, I think, worth briefly reflecting that swearing, besides often expressing strong feelings and relating to taboos, is not on the whole to be taken literally. Consider, for instance, the statement 'I got fucked by my boss in my annual review'. Or 'Fuck me!', which is an expression of surprise more often than an invitation. Yet the associations of sex with physical force, pain and exploitation – concentrated in the quick invasive aggression of *fuck* – are present here.

Shit is, undoubtedly, a different matter. The word does not seem to have bothered readers in the fifteenth century, when Caxton used it in a translation of *Aesop's Fables*. By the eighteenth century, attitudes had clearly changed. It seems safe to assume that English speakers by then were a little less intimately acquainted with their dung than Caxton's contemporaries had been. Some dictionaries of the period were squeamish, and others less so. In Nathan Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730) there is no entry for *shit*, but *shitten* ('beshit, fouled with Ordure') is there and so is *to shite*, which is 'to discharge the Belly; to ease Nature'. (Bailey also registers *cunt*, but evasively defines it only as '*pudendum muliebre*'.) Johnson includes none of these words. Moving forward, in the first edition of the OED *shit* does appear, labelled 'not now in decent use'.

It has been suggested, by Steven Pinker among others, that slang words for effluvia are unacceptable in precise relation to the unacceptability of emitting – or eliminating – those effluvia in public. Accordingly, *shit* is worse than *piss*, which is worse than *fart*, which is worse than *snot*. The various slang words for semen are probably somewhere between *shit* and *piss*. It is no coincidence that the substances that most disgust us are the most dangerous. Feces is a powerful vector of disease, whereas snot carries less hazardous infections. There are ways of referring to feces that infantilize or medicalize it – *doo-doo*, for instance, and *stools* – and these neutralize our disgust.

But *shit* does no such thing and is offensive because it arouses our disgust and connects us, subconsciously, to disease. It seems plausible that, the further we are (or believe ourselves to be) from shit in our daily lives, the more the word appalls us, because it insinuates something feculent back into a world we think we have made clean and safe.

Undoubtedly, too, even if on an intellectual level we accept that the connection between sounds and meanings is arbitrary, we feel otherwise. Steven Pinker explains that ‘most humans . . . treat the name for an entity as part of its essence, so that the mere act of uttering a name is seen as a way to impinge on its referent’. Confronted with a taboo word such as *shit*, the part of one’s brain known as the amygdala experiences a surge in metabolic activity: ‘The upshot is that a speaker or writer can use a taboo word to evoke an emotional response in an audience quite against their wishes.’⁵

George Orwell writes in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933):

The whole business of swearing, especially English swearing, is mysterious. Of its very nature swearing is as irrational as magic – indeed, it is a species of magic. But there is also a paradox about it, namely this: Our intention in swearing is to shock and wound, which we do by mentioning something that should be kept secret – usually something to do with the sexual functions. But the strange thing is that when a word is well established as a swear word, it seems to lose its original meaning; that is, it loses the thing that made it into a swear word.

Less than twenty years after the first London production of *Pygmalion*, Orwell notes, ‘No born Londoner . . . now says “bloody”, unless he is a man of some education. The word has, in fact, moved up in the social scale and ceased to be a swear word for the purposes of the working classes. The current London adjective, now tacked on to every noun, is —. No doubt in time —, like “bloody”, will find its way into the drawing-room and be replaced by some other word.’ No prizes for guessing what — stands for. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) Julia strikes Winston as natural and healthy because she cannot mention the Party ‘without using the kind of words that you saw chalked up in dripping alley-ways’; Orwell avoids saying which words she uses in order to shock by implication, and perhaps also to avoid committing himself to a view of what might prove shocking in the future.

Fuck is the dirty prince of English vocabulary – aggressive, flamboyant, versatile, awkward. As Jesse Sheidlower’s book *The F-Word* enjoyably illustrates, it not only has a vast number of applications, but also is prolific: here’s Robert Louis Stevenson writing in a letter about

a *fuckstress*; here's a character in a Philip Roth novel using the verb *guaranfuckinglee*; and here's Eric Partridge in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* explaining that a *Dutch fuck* is the act of lighting one cigarette from another.

Until quite recently, dictionaries have treated *fuck* with caution. In Britain, the word appeared as early as 1598 in John Florio's Italian-English dictionary, in the definition of the Italian verb *fottere* – 'to iape, to sard, to fucke, to swive, to occupy' – and in cognate forms under *fottarie* ('fuckings'), *fottitrice* ('a woman fucker'), *fottitore* ('a fucker'), *fottitura* ('a fucking') and *fottuto* ('fuckt'). The verb *to fuck* was listed in Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum* as 'a term used of a goat; also *subagitare feminam*', and found its way into John Ash's *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* (1775). But then *fuck* disappeared from lexicographic view. After the second edition of Ash in 1795, where it is labelled 'a low vulgar word' and defined as 'to perform the act of generation, to have to do with a woman', *fuck*'s next appearance in a general English dictionary was in 1965, when a definition was presented in the *Penguin English Dictionary*. No general American dictionary contained *fuck* until it appeared in *The American Heritage Dictionary* in 1969. For all its alleged permissiveness, *Webster's Third* did not include the word. Less surprisingly, neither did the original *OED*. When the entries for the letter *F* were being put together in the 1890s, it had been omitted; by the 1920s, when the editors had made it as far as *W*, the word *windfucker* – the name of a type of kestrel – was considered fit for inclusion. *Fuck* got its own entry when the *OED*'s first supplementary volume was published in 1972.

When the American scholar Allen Walker Read published an article about the word in 1934, his chosen title was 'An Obscenity Symbol', and he managed by various circumlocutions not once to use the offending term. In 1948 Norman Mailer, preparing his novel *The Naked and the Dead* for publication, amended every instance of *fuck* to *fug*, on the insistence of his publisher. The wisecracking Dorothy Parker, meeting her fellow author, allegedly joked, 'So you're the young man who can't spell *fuck*.' (In some accounts it was not Parker, but the sexually adventurous screen star Tallulah Bankhead. Mailer denied that it happened at all.) Elsewhere the word was printed with asterisks in place of its second, third and sometimes also fourth letters; the practice had begun in the early eighteenth century. It was not used in the *New York Times* until 1998, and then only in the context of the Starr Report into alleged misconduct by President Clinton. Many newspapers continue not to print the word. In other media the equivalent of this reticence is the bleep. The practice of bleeping out profanities on television began in the 1960s, and *fuck* was not heard in mainstream American cinema until around 1970.⁶ Yet in Martin Scorsese's *Casino* (1995) *fuck* is in one form or another said about four hundred times, a figure surpassed by Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth* (1997) with 428.⁷

If you suspect that *fuck* is more common than it used to be, you may well be right. The decline of religion in much of the English-speaking world may help to explain why *fuck* appears where a religious expletive would once have been effective. Unrestrained language seems to attend unrestrained behaviour. Steven Pinker notes that 'Sexual language has become far more common since the early 1960s, but so have illegitimacy, sexually

transmitted infections, rape, and the fallout of sexual competition, like anorexia in girls and swagger culture in boys. Though no one can pin down cause and effect, the changes are of a piece with the weakening of the fear and awe that used to surround thoughts about sex and that charged sexual language with taboo.⁸ Though Pinker is no conservative in matters of language, this argument, phrased more angrily, is perfectly suited to becoming a weapon in the arsenal of reactionary commentators.

There are circumstances in which saying *fuck* creates a momentary solidarity even between people who would normally be offended by the word. If I call you a ‘fucking idiot’ you will be unimpressed, but if I drop a hammer on my foot, I may well exclaim ‘Fuck’ or ‘Shit’, and very few will disapprove. Besides being cathartic, my exclamation has the effect of reassuring anyone who has just seen what has happened; it is a sign of my normality, much less disconcerting than silence, and I am acknowledging my incompetence. If I drop the hammer on the ground rather than on my foot, I am more likely to exclaim ‘Whoops’. My performance in this case is milder, and there is no need for catharsis, but the purpose of the exclamation is the same: I am still drawing attention to the fact that this mishap was unintended – and subconsciously, or semi-consciously, I am keen not to be thought of as someone who goes around dropping hammers.

Fuck, it should be emphasized, was not the only word to be deliberately omitted from the first edition of the *OED*. The absence of *cunt* is not surprising, though the issue of whether or not to include it was vigorously discussed. But the comparatively innocent *condom* did not make it either. James Dixon, a surgeon who was a valued contributor to the *OED*, was startled by the word when he came upon it in print – or rather, startled by the existence of the item itself. He told James Murray that it was ‘a contrivance used by fornicators, to save themselves from a well-deserved clap’. It was ‘too utterly obscene’ to be included in the *OED*. It seems that Murray concurred.⁹ *Clap* was labelled ‘obsolete in polite use’, despite recent evidence to the contrary.

In the opposite camp there were, and of course still are, those who think there is no such thing as an obscene word. Their strategy, usually, is to administer shock treatment. One of the prime movers in this was George Carlin, whose comedy often contained social commentary and observations about language. In Carlin’s sketch ‘Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television’ – which appeared on an album he released in 1972 and led to his arrest when he performed it in Milwaukee – the words in question are *fuck*, *cunt*, *shit*, *piss*, *cocksucker*, *motherfucker* and *tits*. These words were not in fact banned; there was simply an informal understanding that they should not be used. Carlin dubbed them the ‘heavy seven’, joking that their use will ‘curve your spine’. His real point was that there were ‘no bad words’, only ‘bad thoughts’ and ‘bad intentions’.¹⁰ Carlin’s aim was to question people’s capacity for taking offence. What made certain words more shocking than others? He later expanded the list, adding *fart*, *turd* and *twat*. Was *fart* acceptable, or was it bad? Wasn’t it, after all, just *shit* without the mess? In 1978 the Supreme Court ruled that the sketch was ‘indecent but not obscene’. Yet, as Jack Lynch notes, ‘Carlin’s list became the *de facto* standard of what really couldn’t be said on the public airwaves. It’s a strange paradox

that a foul-mouthed champion of free speech should have been instrumental in writing the law prohibiting those same words.’¹¹

In Britain, the law relating to obscenity has been in place since 1857, modified in England and Wales by two further Obscene Publications Acts in 1959 and 1964. The 1959 Act states that ‘an article shall be deemed to be obscene if its effect . . . is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it.’ (For these purposes an ‘article’ is anything ‘containing or embodying matter to be read or looked at or both, any sound record, and any film or other record of a picture or pictures’.) However, the publisher of an ‘article’ cannot be convicted if publication ‘is justified for the public good on the ground that it is in the interests of science, literature, art or learning, or of other objects of general concern’. The contradiction here is hardly inconspicuous: can things that ‘tend to deprave and corrupt’ really be ‘justified for the public good’? And how are we to assess or indeed define the experience of being depraved and corrupted?

Anxieties about obscenity lie behind a lot of humour, which tends to deal with sex, violence and society’s ritual practices. Jokes help us grapple with our distastes and mistrusts: of our bodies, our desires, our apparent superiors and people who seem to menace our lives’ equilibrium. Typically, jokes expose a gap between what we expect and how things turn out; humour is liberating because it momentarily makes the real world seem surreal and because it briefly gives us a chance to reflect on the fears implicit in our daily existence. ‘The genius of jokes,’ writes the philosopher Simon Critchley, ‘is that they light up the common features of our world.’¹² They pique our distaste, making us uncomfortable and at the same time making us question this uncomfortableness.

Lenny Bruce is an important figure here. Unusually for a comedian, Bruce did not tell jokes. His rhythm was typically that of a conventional stand-up comedian – set-up, delay, punchline – and his subject matter (despair, destruction, the truth) was of a kind that has frequently been mined by comics, but Bruce’s profanity took the form of an abstract jazz performance rather than a studious progression. Bruce wanted his audiences to be shocked by the things that were really wrong – not by four-letter words, but by the inequalities and depravities of society. Why was it unacceptable to depict sex (something most of us practise) in a film, yet acceptable to depict murder? A crucial part of his act lay in demystifying the language conventionally deemed obscene. Bruce used the phrase ‘yada yada yada’ to sum up the endless torrents of blather spouted by the moral majority.

It probably now seems bizarre that Bruce was in 1961 arrested for using the word *cocksucker* during a routine at San Francisco’s Jazz Workshop. Twenty years later Meryl Streep won an Oscar for her performance in *Sophie’s Choice*, in which she uttered this very word. We have become inured to hearing it – and to hearing what would generally be considered far worse. Still, the use of so-called bad language is likely to provoke complaint when it happens in a context where it seems especially inappropriate. When the singer

Madonna presented the Turner Prize for contemporary art in 2001, she successfully outraged many by exclaiming, on live television and before the nine o'clock 'watershed', the words 'Right on, motherfuckers!'

Although *motherfucker* is regarded as outstandingly obscene in its condensed expression of Freud's Oedipal theory, today the term most likely to cause shock is *nigger*. When first adopted in the sixteenth century – from French, Spanish or Portuguese, though ultimately its source was Latin – it was used neutrally, without obvious hostility and contempt. That changed in the late eighteenth century, and there is no mistaking the tone of Byron's 'The rest of the world – niggers and what not' (1811) or Henry Fearon's reference in *Sketches of America* (1818) to 'the bad conduct and inferior nature of niggars [*sic*]'. The word is fatally linked to white supremacy and slavery. Although it has different levels of toxicity according to who is using it, nobody can now free it from its long history of derogatory connotations. The popularization of the hip-hop endearment *nigga*, which the rapper Tupac Shakur improbably claimed was an acronym for Never Ignorant and Getting Goals Accomplished, and what might be called its neutralized and generalized use as an equivalent of *guy* or *man*, have only complicated reactions to the original word. Black people's use of *nigga* or indeed *nigger* as a form of address is not a unique example of an insult being recast as a badge of honour; the Christian movement known as the Quakers adopted that nickname – more formally called the Religious Society of Friends – in order to neutralize what was at first a term of derision.

Sensitivity about *nigger* has led to the avoidance of the unrelated adjective *niggardly*. In 1999 David Howard, who worked in the mayor's office in Washington DC, used the word during a meeting. Rumours circulated that he had used a racist epithet: Howard resigned his post, conceding, 'I should have thought, this is an arcane word, and everyone may not know it.'¹³ Because *niggardly* sounds as though it derives from *nigger*, it is tainted. Knowledge of the two words' different etymologies is no protection against those for whom their sounds are simply too close for comfort. There are other words one can use instead of *niggardly* that will cause no offence. Patricia O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman suggest that 'Somebody who uses it is in effect telling his audience: "I'm smarter than anyone who's dumb enough to get mad."' ¹⁴ Well, maybe. But I suspect most people who use *niggardly* do so without the snooty premeditation this implies.

The episode involving David Howard was not the first time that *niggardly* had caused controversy, and there have been similar rows since, as when a student at the University of Wisconsin made a formal complaint about a professor's discussion of the word's use by Chaucer. *Niggardly* is a pejorative word, and was in the fourteenth century, though of course Chaucer knew nothing of *nigger*. The negative import of *niggardly* makes its similarity to *nigger* both plausible and likely to give offence. I suspect that many people hear it as *niggerly*. I am pretty confident that *niggardly* will fall out of use. But will that be the end of it? What of *nigging* or *snigger*? Or *denigratory*?

There has been more than one campaign to have *nigger* removed from American dictionaries. Yet a dictionary that registers usage rather than policing it must include *nigger*. Called upon in 1936 to explain why the *OED* gave ‘cheat’ as one of the meanings of *Jew*, the Oxford University Press’s representative Kenneth Sisam wrote, ‘I should like to explain that our dictionaries aim at explaining actual usage and do not attempt to form moral judgements’.¹⁵ In 1972 a businessman from Salford brought an action against the *OED*’s publishers, claiming that the definition in question was defamatory. He lost the case in the High Court because he was unable to meet the law’s requirement that he show the offending words ‘referred to him personally or were capable of being understood by others as referring to him’.¹⁶ Words and disagreeable senses of words are hard to kill off, and prohibition is a form of encouragement.

Abuse moves with the times. Call a woman a *witch* and you’ll cause offence, but four hundred years ago the charge would have had graver implications. Witch-hunts do in fact still happen – notable recent examples have occurred in Kenya and the Gambia – but for most people in English-speaking countries belief in witchcraft seems archaic. Insults work by attacking our points of greatest vulnerability: the things about which we feel awkward, certainly, but also the things about which we know others feel awkward. A few years ago, when a teenage boy on a train said to me, as his mother looked on blithely, ‘Fuck off, you bald cunt’, my reactions were complex: I was amused by his brazenness but also struck by the realization that, even though I was reconciled to the fact of having lost a good deal of my hair, this was how I was seen by others – not as a man, cuntish or otherwise, but as a bald man. Typically, insults give narrow names to aspects of us we would wish to be treated in a more complex fashion. They place us in categories to which we may indeed belong, but they insist on those categories at the expense of judging us more roundly. Personally, I would sooner be called a *cunt* than a *coward* or a *thief*, because to be called either of the latter is to be an object of focused moral disapproval. That said, someone who calls me a *cunt* is more likely to want to thump me.

Coming up with an original insult demands a great surge of creativity. Swearing can be extraordinarily expressive. However, most of the time it is formulaic. For the person doing the swearing, what matters is the performance of excess; injuring the target may not be important at all. The most obvious kind of formulaic abuse consists of ritual insults – the ‘flyting’ of sixteenth-century Scottish poets, the African-American tradition of ribald trash talk (sometimes called ‘the dozens’), the orchestral banter of teenagers just about anywhere. Insults of this kind are not true – ‘Your momma drink rainwater’, ‘You got shit for brains’ – but sting because for a moment they make us part of a piece of theatre over which we have no control.

Obscenity invades every area of our lives, however much we do to try and repel it. Fear of the obscene is expressed in networks of vigilance such as campaigns for public morality. Legislation about obscenity persists, and calls for its extension are frequent. But the fascination of the forbidden is irresistible, and obscenity can seem the nucleus of English eloquence. The English were once labelled ‘*les goddams*’ by the French; since the 1960s they

have been ‘*les fuckoffs*’, and among the many benisons of English-speaking culture is that snarling expletive, a two-word anthem for the Anglosphere.

Notes:

1. Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing* (London: Penguin, 1998), 243.
2. Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), 65.
3. Quoted in Andrew Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print: A History and Chronology of Shakespeare Publishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 171.
4. Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing*, 372.
5. Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2008), 331–3.
6. Jesse Sheidlower (ed.), *The F-Word*, 3rd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxii–xxxii.
7. *Ibid.*, xxvii.
8. Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*, 370.
9. Quoted in Lynda Mugglestone, *Lost for Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 84.
10. Quoted in Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley (eds), *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 128.
11. Lynch, *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma*, 236.
12. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 87.
13. Maureen Dowd, ‘Liberties; Niggardly City’, *New York Times*, 31 January 1999.
14. Patricia O’Conner and Stewart Kellerman, *Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 2009), 135.
15. Quoted in Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 96.
16. Quoted in Robert Burchfield, ‘Dictionaries and Ethnic Sensibilities’, in Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (eds), *The State of the Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 19.

#3- **OPTIONAL-**

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/31/opinion/the-case-for-profanity-in-print.html>

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Case for Profanity in Print

By **JESSE SHEIDLOWER** MARCH 30, 2014

A four-letter
word that
rhymes with
“duck,”
“luck” and
“truck.”

LAST month, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland made some impolitic comments about the European Union during a phone call with the

ambassador to Ukraine. The phone call was leaked, leading to an embarrassing diplomatic incident that was covered in multiple articles in the media. But what, exactly, did Ms. Nuland say?

Reuters and The Guardian printed her most notable comment in full. Most major news organizations, including The Washington Post, Time magazine, The Wall Street Journal, CNN and The Associated Press, reported the actual phrase Ms. Nuland used, but replaced some letters of the particularly offending word (which began with the letter F) with dashes or asterisks. The Los Angeles Times reported that Ms. Nuland used “a blunt expletive when expressing frustration.” And this newspaper stated that she had “[profanely dismissed](#) European efforts in Ukraine as weak and inadequate.”

Our society’s comfort level with offensive language and content has drastically shifted over the past few decades, but the stance of our news media has barely changed at all. Even when certain words are necessary to the understanding of a story, the media frequently resort to euphemisms or coy acrobatics that make stories read as if they were time capsules written decades ago, forcing us all into wink-wink-nudge-nudge territory. Even in this essay, I am unable to be clear about many of my examples.

Taste is a legitimate concern. But this isn’t a matter of sprinkling salty words around to spice up the content. These circumlocutions actually deprive readers of the very thing these institutions so grandly promise: news and information. At a time when readers can simply go online to find the details from more nimble upstarts willing to be frank, the mainstream media need to accurately report language that is central to their stories.

News organizations already have a precedent for this in their **style guides**. The Associated Press stylebook warns against the use of obscenities, but says they can be printed if there is a “compelling reason” to do so and if they are a part of direct quotations. The New York Times style guide states, “readers should not be left uninformed or baffled about the nature of a significant controversy.” But all too often readers are indeed left uninformed or baffled, because leeway is rarely granted. (A Tumblr called [Fit to Print](#) exists solely to establish “a catalog of expletive avoidance” from this newspaper.)

There have been numerous cases in recent years when the use of offensive language has been the news story itself. In 1998, Representative Dan Burton referred to President Clinton with an offensive word. In 2000, a microphone picked up George W. Bush using a vulgar term to describe the New York Times reporter Adam Clymer. In 2004, Vice President Dick Cheney insulted Senator Pat Leahy on the Senate floor with yet another vulgarity. In 2007, Isaiah Washington was kicked off the television show “Grey’s Anatomy” for referring to his fellow actor T. R. Knight with a gay slur. This January, Representative Michael Grimm threatened an aggressive reporter, using an obscenity.

These stories were covered widely, but in most cases, the details were obscured. The relevant words were described variously as “an obscenity,” “a vulgarity,” “an antigay epithet”; replaced with rhyming substitutions; printed with some letters omitted; and, most absurdly, in The Washington Times (whose editor confessed this was “an attempt at a little humor”), alluded to as “a vulgar euphemism for a rectal aperture.” We learn from these stories that something important happened, but that it can’t actually be reported.

The cover story of the March issue of The Atlantic is [a critical look at fraternities](#) in which the author, Caitlin Flanagan, mentions “a particular variety of sexual torture reserved for hazing and best not described in the gentle pages of this magazine.” This jokey omission materially weakens the exact point she is making: that we should pay attention to what is going on inside fraternity houses. Scott Stossel, the magazine’s editor, acknowledged to me that “we probably should have included a description of the practice in question. The omission may well have frustrated readers.”

In other instances, the excised words are not the subject of reported news but are nonetheless integral to the story, as when artistic works have titles that can’t be printed by reviewers. Harry Frankfurt wrote a serious work of philosophy, published by Princeton University Press, which remained on the New York Times best-seller list for 27 weeks, despite a title containing what was once frequently euphemized as a “barnyard epithet”; the same word appeared in a widely praised memoir by the poet Nick Flynn. Several prominent plays have included a version or compound of the F-word in their titles, including Aaron Posner’s adaptation of Chekhov’s “The Seagull,” at the Woolly Mammoth Theater in Washington; a monologue by Mike Daisey about Ayn Rand that ran at the Public Theater in New York; and a play by Stephen Adly Guirgis that ran on Broadway.

Refusing to print the titles of works deemed important enough to review seems to confound the claim of upholding standards. Last year, The Washington Post ran an article specifically addressing the use of the F-word in the arts, asking, if a word is used in the Senate, in the White House, in songs and in movies, “Can something so ubiquitous still qualify as scandalous?” However, The Washington Post has publicly struggled with the issue itself, publishing Mr. Cheney’s 2004 insult of Senator Leahy in full but altering other quotes, as noted in a 2011 column by its ombudsman in which he reported that a “war of words is being waged in the Post newsroom” over when to print profanities.

Terms that are insulting toward a particular group of people should be handled with sensitivity. But that doesn’t mean obscuring the issue. If the N.F.L. mulls a policy of penalizing players for using racial epithets, we should be able to read what these epithets are — not just sanitized versions like “the N-word.” Discussing a word is not the same as wantonly using a word, just as reporting on racism does not make you a racist. The recent [Tampa Bay Times obituary](#) for the former Florida governor Reubin Askew mentioned a 1958

campaign incident “in which a heckler hurled a common epithet of the times and called him a ‘n----- lover.’ ” Slate deemed this “censorship-by-dashes,” a sad choice for an episode in which Askew stood up to the heckler, turned his slur against him, and won his race.

When language can play such a hot-button role in our society, what we need is more reporting, not less. Some publications have loosened the restraints. The New Yorker has noticeably done so, British and Australian newspapers often print offensive words in full, and The Economist’s style guide reads: “if you do use swear words, spell them out in full, without asterisks or other coynesses.”

But at many institutions there have been only a few exceptions to the rule. The New York Times included an uncensored F-word when it quoted Monica Lewinsky in the Starr Report in 1998. The Lewinsky episode (and to a lesser extent, the Lorena Bobbitt case) brought “penis” into many newspapers. Coverage of the activist Russian punk band Pussy Riot has made a previously banned term common, at least in this compound usage — in a triumph for the group, which reportedly chose its name specifically to challenge the conventions of American media.

In 1934, in the journal “American Speech,” the scholar Allen Walker Read published “[An Obscenity Symbol](#),” still the most important article written about the F-word. Over the course of 14 pages, he explored the word’s etymology, its history in dictionaries and, at some length, the nature of taboo itself, writing that “no sensible person would maintain that sex in itself is obscene, for it can be a wholesome, ennobling force.” Mr. Read criticized the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, referring to “the lasting shame” of their omission of this and other taboo terms. Yet in this serious essay, which appeared in an academic journal published by a well-established scholarly society, he did not once use, or even quote, the word in question. Mr. Read was writing 80 years ago. It’s time to print exactly what we mean