

Censoring the Top 40

By [Steven Porter](#)

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I was visiting friends in Ft. Wayne recently when a popular song came on the radio. I learned the lyrics from Chicago-based stations, so I was a bit shocked when Hot 107.9 censored “sex” out of the song’s hook:

Cause your se- takes me to paradise;
Yeah your se- takes me to paradise,
And it shows, yeah, yeah, yeah.
Cause you make me feel like, I’ve been locked out of heaven
For too long, for too long.

I know plenty of people in the listening area who, for the sake of public decency, would prefer to scrub the airwaves of any overt sexual reference. So perhaps the station just knows its target audience—consumers who like their media sanitized. But I’m not convinced this is a healthy reaction to popular culture, and it troubles me to think of the role Christians have played in fostering a lukewarm patronage of the arts.

Why block the clinical term and leave the sexual content in the rest of Bruno Mars’ “[Locked Out of Heaven](#)” untouched? Surely the religious metaphors for sex (and/or sexual metaphors for religion) are even more provocative than the “sex”-word:

Never had much faith in love or miracles,
Never wanna put my heart on the line.
But swimming in your water is something spiritual;
I’m born again every time you spend the night.

I’m not suggesting we censor the song altogether, nor am I saying censorship is always unproductive. I just can’t help but point to literary devices within that song that are larger, heavier and less hackneyed by modern science—these vehicles convey human experience that can transcend rational thought, and yet the gatekeepers raise no red flags because there are no graphic descriptions or expletives in these lines.

This is not to say that “Locked Out of Heaven” is actually offensive. In fact, it praises good sex as intimate rather than exploitative and places it in the context of an ongoing, presumptively monogamous relationship. This cannot be said of most Top 40 music laced in sexual motif (which, admittedly, is most Top 40 music).

But let’s imagine, hypothetically for a second, what would happen if we extrapolated Hot 107.9’s editorial decision to the rest of society. Picture with me, as hard as it may be, a world in which people are more concerned with words than with what those words mean—a world in which political figures pander to a public that is more comfortable with euphemism and innuendo than straightforward discussion about topics integral to our humanity. (If you find it difficult to conjure up such an image, then perhaps you should revisit this year’s series of faux pas regarding abortion legislation, including one particularly sexist incident involving a Michigan state legislator who was [silenced for using the term “vagina”](#) on the floor.)

Censoring a single term from poetry that is entirely sexual is like sticking a tiny bandage to a freshly severed limb—it does nothing to mask the injury, let alone treat it. Such a simplistic answer only aggravates the problem, perpetuating a dysfunctional sexual ethic. Perhaps, instead, we should embrace frank public discourse as something that does more good than harm.

Rather than making superficial edits in an attempt to redeem popular art, we could focus on reincarnating a healthy sexuality that demonstrates brokenness being made whole. No, fleshing that out is not an easy task—it’s much easier to regulate language than to wrangle ourselves—but it’s necessary if we’re to offer holistic remedies to societal ills.