

Foul words permeate pop culture lexicon, eliciting a backlash: "Freedom of speech my you-know-what"

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Rasheda Williams, 24, recently walked through the Detroit neighborhood where she grew up. She observed a girl of about 12 calling to a friend across the street. "Hey, bitch," the pre-teen said. Had Williams used such language at that age, she said, "I might have a bar of soap for lunch."

But today, foul language is common, and not just among potty-mouthed children or radio shock jocks like Howard Stern. Consider John Kerry using the f-word in describing President Bush's war effort in Iraq, rock singer Bono using similarly raw language at the Golden Globe Awards or Garrison Keillor singing a ditty that included "pissed" and "ass" on his *A Prairie Home Companion* show.

Any sailor will tell you that foul language is nothing new. Even in political settings, cussing has sometimes been part of the vocabulary, as Richard Nixon's Watergate tapes showed. Language experts concede that outside of studies of network television, it's difficult to document a societal increase in offensive words.

But what is clear, these language experts say, is that society's standards are changing, with previously taboo words finding their way into the public lexicon.

A backlash may be brewing. The Federal Communications Commission reversed itself March 18 and decided Bono's f-word was indecent whether used as a noun or adjective. It has warned broadcasters that any future use will not be tolerated. Clear Channel recently dropped Stern's radio show from its stations. CBS aired the Grammy Awards with a five-minute delay in order to edit out any offensive words.

The House of Representatives voted 391 to 22 on March 11 to increase substantially the penalties on broadcasters and performers who violate federal standards. The bill would force the FCC to act more quickly on complaints. A similar measure has been taken up in the Senate.

Anecdotes abound that standards have changed. In the 1970s, comedian George Carlin did a routine about the Seven Dirty Words you couldn't say on TV, but two of those—"piss" and "tits"—are now frequently uttered.

In the 1950s, it was common for people to say "H-E-double-toothpicks." Today it's arguable whether words like "hell" even qualify as cussing. "'Hell' and 'damn' have lost their power in our society, not through prohibition but through overuse," said Timothy Jay, a professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and author of five books on profanity. "We did an analysis, and 'hell' and 'damn' are in the newspapers all the time."

Not everyone sees cause for concern. Donna Jo Napoli, professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College, sees such change as a normal part of the evolution of language. "We're still shocked by lots of things," Napoli said. "We've just changed what we're shocked by. A racial slur, for example, knocks us flat."

According to the Parents Television Council, foul language on television has clearly increased. At its Alexandria, Virginia, headquarters the organization hires analysts to watch and listen to every hour of prime-time TV. The council compared similar four-week periods of 1989 and 1999. Among the results:

"Damn"—up 323 percent.

"Hell"—up 432 percent.

"Ass"—up 2,108 percent.

"We observed this same phenomenon for every profanity and expletive we tracked," said Melissa Caldwell, PTV's director of research.

But vulgarity is hardly confined to entertainment. In September 2000, not realizing his microphone was on while he was talking to running mate Dick Cheney at a campaign stop, George W. Bush referred to a *New York Times* reporter as a "major league ---hole."

Senator Kerry, the Democratic nominee for president, was recorded in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, saying of his vote for war with Iraq: "Did I expect George Bush to f--- it up as badly as he did? I don't think anybody did."

One problem with such language is its imprecision, said James O'Connor, founder of the Illinois-based Cuss Control Academy and author of *Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cussing*. "There are other words a presidential candidate could use," O'Connor said. "He could have said Bush bungled the war, botched the war, mishandled the war or messed up the war."

According to O'Connor's research, the most used and imprecise profanity is an expression of disgust that begins with "s." "If you're having dinner and say, 'This meat tastes like s---, what you really mean is the meat is undercooked or too salty. You're not specific at all. It's just a crass way of expressing your displeasure."

There are educators, of course, who fight the good fight. Rasheda Williams, who works for an education company that tutors young people, said she guards her speech, even avoiding the word "hate" around children. "For people to be able to use the f-word in any form or fashion is incredibly ridiculous," she said. "Freedom of speech my you-know-what. This goes beyond freedom of speech." -Mark O'Keefe, *Religion News Service*