

14. Fuck the Taboo

George Carlin famously made fun of the seven words that you couldn't say on television in the United States: shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits. For the most part, those prohibitions are still in effect. However, things may be changing somewhat up north. In March of 2018, the Canadian Broadcasting Standards Council (CBSC) decided to relent. The phrase in question was “baise-moi”, which translates into English as “fuck me.” And the CBSC ruled that the French phrase (Canada's national languages are both French and English) had become so commonplace that it did not have the same vulgar connotation as its English translation. Thus, it no longer made sense to censor it from broadcasts.⁶¹

In the United States, there are laws against obscene, indecent, and profane content and as such, the Federal Communications Commission regulates it on public broadcasts, but not subscription services.⁶² Some deride such new standards as a compromise of decency and an unfortunate new light of day for these “bad” words. Historically, censorship of obscenity and indecent material can be traced back to the Comstock Acts⁶³, passed by Congress in 1873 due to worries that the proliferation of pornographic materials after the Civil War led to premarital sex and either contraception, abortion, or children born out of wedlock.⁶⁴

Modern reasons for prohibiting obscene words hold that sexual intercourse, fecal matter, or private body parts are vulgar, and using such words bends minds to think of these things. Human minds, they argue, shouldn't be dwelling on these things as a part of daily living and the more vulgarities are used the more minds will be drawn to what these words represent. Others focus on the assumed “laziness” in using such words to express emotions, charging that where options are constrained to avoid obscenities and slang, our linguistic skills improve because of the creativity required to express emotions in a more precise manner. They also argue that vulgar words like “baise-moi” are prone to be used as “fighting words;” not to describe things but to intentionally hurt other people.⁶⁵

Shifting standards on slang have even made their way into academic work as of late with philosopher Harry Frankfurt turning an article on what counts as “bullshit” vs. “humbug” into a bestselling short book.⁶⁶ Frankfurt's book was closely followed by Aaron James' book-length analysis of what counts as an “asshole” (as opposed to just a jerk) in *Assholes: A Theory*.⁶⁷ Others reject any slippery slope to bad consequences, arguing that the words are so commonly used that they now lack their original referents. Instead, words like “shit” now more often refer to a feeling of disappointment rather than conjuring an image of fecal matter. The original

⁶¹ “Canada decides the F-word is not taboo for radio listeners' ears” The Guardian, November 8th, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/nov/09/baise-moi-canada-decides-that-the-french-f-word-is-not-taboo-for-listeners-ears>

⁶² Federal Communications Commission Consumer Guide “Obscene, Indecent and Profane Broadcasts” September 13th, 2017. <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/obscene-indecent-and-profane-broadcasts>

⁶³ The Comstock Act 17 Stat. 598

⁶⁴ Dennet, Mary Ware. *Birth Control Laws: Shall we keep them, change them, or abolish them* New York, Grafton Press, 1926. p. 9.

⁶⁵ Greenwalt, Ken. *Fighting Words: Individuals, Communities, and Liberties of Speech*. Princeton University Press. 1996.

⁶⁶ Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press. 2005

⁶⁷ James, Aaron. *Assholes: A Theory*. Doubleday Books. 2012

definitions will eventually be lost to history in the way that “scumbag” (which once was slang for a used condom) now simply means “bad person.” Still more argue that the “seven words” never really deserved their place in the doghouse to begin with since, among other things, “shit” simply means fecal matter (which is relatively common) and “fuck” simply refers to sex (which is also relatively common). The animus against mentioning these objects or activities is an outdated application of prudish norms, according to this view. And if the norms are outdated, then our prohibition of the words should also be seen as outdated.