Watch Your Mouth!: An Analysis of Profanity Uttered by Children on Prime Time Television

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A/V Request: An old-fashioned overhead projector and a television and VCR

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The Bernie Mac Show:
Conversation between Uncle Bernie and his nephew and two nieces (all under the age of 12).

Uncle Bernie: Look at the big ass donut, anyone want a big ass donut? It's the best big ass donut I've ever had in my life, damn. Sure no one wants a bite of this big ass donut? You know what I should have got - I should have got - damn - I shoulda got a big ass chocolate shake. You can have anything you want, just ask.
Niece: Can I have a big ass bite?
Uncle Bernie: Watch your mouth!

Boston Public:
High school girl complaining in class about the obscene names directed at another student.

"First it was a big dick and today it was a douche bag,"

Some television viewers are offended when they hear adults on television swearing, but the examples of profane language above were either uttered by or directed towards children and young adults under the age of 20. There may be an increased tolerance of such words on television when exclaimed by adults but many viewers are particularly shocked when these words come from the mouths of babes. Parents, legislators and other concerned viewers spend a great deal of effort fighting for family-friendly television. They are worried that their children will be exposed to off-color language and will imitate what they hear and begin using bad language on the playgrounds and elsewhere. Television personalities and characters serve as role models for children and young adults, and many parents feel that they should uphold high moral standards. Young viewers may be more influenced by on-air personalities and characters of their own age than by adults.

The use of offensive language on television has caused quite a stir over the years. In the early days of live television the few unintentional utterings of swear words were met with

complaints from shocked viewers who insisted on public apologies. With time, offensive words began creeping into scripts mostly written for adult characters. Now even children under the age of 12 are cussing on television.

While parents and activist groups are pushing for child-friendly content and protections from inadvertent exposure to adult materials, a new nemesis has appeared - young characters acting like adults. Children on television are heard swearing and seen engaging in aggressive behaviors and other activities that are unacceptable for that age group.

This study looks at the types and amount of offensive language uttered on prime time television, especially on programs rated acceptable for children and young adults and examines the types and amount of profane language said by children and young adults under the age of 20 on prime time television in 2001. Although portrayals of sexual language and behavior and violence in prime time network television have been extensively researched, profanity, which is considered a form of verbal aggression (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Jay, 2000), has received less attention, especially when spoken by young people. The present study's findings are compared to content analyses conducted in 1990, 1994, and 1997 to determine whether the use of profanity by those under the age of 20 has increased over an 11-year period.

Offensive Language: General Discourse and Children

General terms such as "swearing," "profanity," "cursing" and "cussing" are used by language scholars and others who study offensive language to describe the many words that are deemed objectionable by most people (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Arango, 1989; Jay, 1992, 2000; Montagu, 1967; Mulac, 1976; O'Connor, 2000). This paper uses similar broad terms to refer to offensive language without "focusing on a specific type of use" (Jay, 1992, p. 1). Following the lead set by Jay (2000) and others these terms are used interchangeably to avoid

repetition. Although some scholars may find these broad terms somewhat imprecise, the general public understands them as descriptors of words that are considered unacceptable in general discourse (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Arango, 1989; Jay, 1992, 2000; Montagu, 1967).

Why Children Cuss. Verbal obscenities have long been thought to be the domain of adult males, and were off limits and often culturally forbidden for women and children - not only to say but also to hear (Fine & Johnson, 1984). Taboos against women swearing are not as strong as they once were but they still exist for children, especially girls (DeKlerk, 1991). In a study of students between the ages of 12 - 17, DeKlerk (1991) found that boys more highly regard the use of expletives by other boys than by girls. Further, the use of expletives is connected to social power, especially among males, and the higher his status and power, the more likely a child is to use “high intensity” language.

Females are socialized to be less verbally aggressive and thus suppress their use of indecent words and phrases. When they do swear they tend to use milder words (Johnson & Fine, 1985, Risch, 1987; Selnow, 1985) although some claim that girls’ language is just as bad as the boys' (O’Connor, 2000; Wright, 1992). DeKlerk (1992) found that girls aged 12 - 17 were just as likely to know and use “dirty” words as boys of the same ages. However, in a study that examined first time usage of cuss words, males were more likely than females to report first using strong words such as “fuck” and “bastard” in grade school and no females used “cunt” or “suck” until junior high (Fine & Johnson, 1984).

Verbal obscenities are used for a variety of reasons: to express anger, to emphasize feelings, to discredit or provoke someone, to get attention, to express social power, to gain control over the outcome of a situation, to relieve tension and frustration and for other catharic reasons (Fine & Johnson, 1984; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rothwell, 1971; Selnow, 1985).

Additionally, children may be verbalizing anger and other emotions rather than acting them out (Brozan, 1982).

Children may spew swear words as a way of gaining acceptance (Wright, 1992) and certain social and cultural situations spark ritual insults among adolescent males where derogatory and obscene statements create individual status within the group (Bronner, 1978). Additionally, children, and especially teens, are under tremendous pressure to conform to their group and if cussing is part of their social system they are likely to follow along (O'Connor, 2000).

Where Children Learn to Cuss. Children learn to cuss from many different sources - television, movies, song lyrics, friends and even parents (Kadaba, 1999; Wright, 1992). Teachers and school officials claim that children bring to school what they hear at home (Wright, 1992), while parents insist that children bring home what they hear in school and over the airwaves (Niebuhr, 1992).

Despite social taboos it is common to hear children cussing in schools (Wilkinson, 1999). Teachers and principals across the country are reporting words that were once only suitable for taverns are now being spewed in kindergartens (Brozan, 1982; Niebuhr, 1992). Educators are employing various strategies, such as rules and sensitivity training, to curb cussing among students (White & Koorland, 1996). Further, some towns such as Raritan, N.J. are considering laws to limit public cussing and some schools are adopting zero-tolerance policies against profanity on the playgrounds (Kadaba, 1999).

Effects of Verbal Vulgarities on Children. Verbal aggression involves "attacking the self-concept" of another person or his opinion with the intent of "hurting the person psychologically" (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Verbal aggression and being called obscene and disparaging names

may have long lasting negative effects on a child's self-concept. Children may experience anger, embarrassment, and discouragement. Additionally, verbal aggression may spur physical violence (Infante & Wigley, 1986; O'Connor, 2000; Potter, 2003). "Bad language is just another piece of the pattern in a society where, increasingly, economic stress, family instability and transient lifestyles chip away at youngsters' self esteem" (Wright, 1992, p. E4).

Studies of television violence suggest that repeated exposure to aggressive behavior, including profanity, may result in a dulling of normal emotional responses (Griffiths & Shuckford, 1989; Jay 2000; Martin, Anderson & Cos, 1997; Paik & Comstock, 1994). The blunting of emotional responses due to exposure to aggressive behavior may not be limited to real life situations but extends to televised images and words. "The repetition of a word thus blunts the original offense caused by inhibition or taboo. This desensitization effect is not particular to dirty words but occurs when any word is used repeatedly" (Jay, 1992, p.14). Desensitization may lead to viewers becoming less responsive, less interested and more tolerant of broadcast images and words (Condry, 1989; Martin, Anderson & Cos, 1997; Tan, 1985) and to increased aggressiveness in real life (Condry, 1989; Griffiths & Shuckford, 1989; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Tan, 1985). Repeated exposure to "bad" words on television may normalize their usage and lead viewers, especially children, to increase their use of profane and aggressive language in everyday conversation.

Fears that children will become desensitized and imitate the unacceptable language they hear on television presumably drives parents, media watchdog groups and policymakers to lean on the broadcast industry to clean up dirty words on television. Television acts as a socializing agent, especially for young viewers. Children learn how to behave by watching the behavior of

others (Baxter & Kaplan, 1983), and it is easier to imitate verbal violence than physical violence (Potter, 2003).

While there is much evidence that supports negative consequences of exposure to verbal aggression on television, others contend that the effects are minimal or non-existent. Seventh, eighth and ninth grade boys did not become more verbally aggressive after exposure to televised verbal aggression (Wotring & Greenberg, 1973). It is doubtful that children under the age of 12 understand sexual language and innuendo, therefore it is unlikely that vulgarities have any negative effects (Donnerstein, Wilson & Linz, 1992, Jay, 1992). Further, Jay (1992) states, "Much of dirty word usage depends on learning," and there is no scientific evidence to date that supports claims of antisocial or harmful effects from such exposure (p.18).

Profanity on the Airwaves

Ironically, the first known televised usage of “fuck” occurred during the live airing of the children’s program, *The Small Fry Club*, hosted by “Big Brother” Bob Emery from 1947 -1951. A camera operator screamed the word as he accidentally backed into some blazing hot set lights. “Brother Bob” saved the day by immediately covering up the expletive with an extra loud and long laugh (Ritchie, 1994).

Profanity is on the increase in everyday conversation (Cameron, 1970, Marks, 1996; O’Connor, 2000) as well as on network television (Bednarski, 1999; Johnson, 1997b; Polskin, 1989; Potter, 2003; “The Rude and the Crude,” 1999). According to the Parents Television Council, the use of profanity has skyrocketed by more than 500 percent in the last decade (Brownback, 2000). “The words people are willing to say in public and what they are willing to watch on television have become more explicit” (Moore, 1998, p.3A).

Writers justify scripting off-color dialogue by noting that they are merely reflecting non-mediated speech (Brownback, 2000). Television programs should mirror social culture (McQuail, 1992); though on the other hand media content is more than a mere reflection, it sets social culture (Brownback, 2000).

In 1990 viewers were stunned when a six-year-old character on *Uncle Buck* exclaimed, "You suck." In the 2001 season, a five-year-old on *According to Jim* announced, "I have a vagina," though network executives claim she really said "bagina" (Friend, 2001).

Frequency of Indecent Language on Television. The Center for Media and Public Affairs counted bawdy language in television shows that aired during the 1998-99 season. "Strong profanity" (i.e., fuck) accounted for 18 percent of all expletives, "coarse language" (i.e., hardass) made up 23%, with the remaining 59% dominated by mild profanity (i.e., hell). Broadcast programs contained an average of 11 incidents per hour with most (86%) words considered "mild." The study also identified the "dirty dozen" broadcast programs that contained the most incidents of profane language; nine of the top 12 were rated TV-PG, two TV-14 and one show was not rated ("The rude and the crude," 1999).

Content analyses performed by The Media Research Center examined four weeks of "family hour" (8 - 9 p.m., EST) programming on six networks[1] in Fall, 1995 and again in early 1997 (Johnson, 1996; 1997b). In the two years under study, crude language increased from 0.62 incidents per hour in to 0.88 per hour. "Ass" (29), "bitch" (13) and "bastard" (10) were the most frequently used swear words in 1995, and "ass" (29) "bastard," (13) and bleeped forms of "fuck" (10) were most common in 1997. When examining swear words and program ratings, it was found that 52 percent of PG-rated shows contained words such as "ass", "bastard", "son of a

bitch" and "suck," and one PG-rated program even included two incidents of "fucking" (drowned out by the sound of a power drill).

Neither the Center for Media and Public Affairs or The Media Research Center examined use of expletives by children and teenagers. Further, no study could be found that specifically focuses on children's usage of verbal vulgarities on the airwaves.

Context. Offensive language is influenced by the context in which it is used (Jay, 1980, 1992, 2000; Mercury, 1995; Staley, 1978; Zelvys, 1990). Cussing is frowned on in certain circumstances, such as with one's parents and with persons of higher status. However, swearing is taken much more lightly if among friends who generally accept such behavior and in situations where offenders know their words will not be held against them (Mercury, 1995; Staley, 1978). It is generally socially unacceptable for adults to cuss in front of children (Arango, 1989; Foote & Woodward, 1973), and for children to swear in front of adults (DeKlerk, 1992).

Cussing in public and in front of children is not only frowned upon it has also been legally restrained. A canoeist was fined for swearing in front of young children after his canoe hit a rock and he fell into the river. Although the charges were later dropped on appeal, the defendant is afraid he'll "never live it down" and says "I'm a little more careful about what I say in public these days" ("Cussing Canoeist," 2002; Robinson, 1999).

With regard to television program content, there may be some contexts in which the use of offensive language accurately reflects the culture of the situation. Viewers may be more shocked if they hear a child character cussing at the family dinner table than if they hear television cops spewing profanities. Crude language may be more acceptable if said in anger because "profanity is traditionally an expression of hostility" (DeMoraes, 1999) and swear words express emotions better than any other words (Jay, 2000). However, the Center of Media and

Public Affairs found that only 42 percent of offensive language on television was exclaimed in anger, while 30 percent was contained in banter and 28 percent uttered teasingly. Additionally, only three percent of offensive language was met with criticism, 96 percent of the time there was no response to the language, and one percent of the time profanity was greeted with approval (DeMoraes, 1999; "The Rude and the Crude," 1999).

Others claim that obscenities spewed humorously and meant to amuse and entertain may be taken more lightly then those said in anger or meant to hurt (Jay, 1992; O'Connor, 2000; Zelvys, 1990). There is even speculation that "Howdy Doody" was such a big hit with children in part because kids loved the "toilet humor associated with the word 'doody'" (Ritchie, 1994, p. 210). But what is funny to one person may not be funny to another, and humor that borders on raunchy is often offensive (O'Connor, 2000).

Broadcast Regulation

The general public and language scholars often use such terms as "profanity" and "cussing" to describe offensive words (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Arango, 1989; Jay, 1992, 2000; Montagu, 1967; O'Connor, 2000). However, the Federal Communication Commission reserves the term "indecent" for a narrowly-defined concept: "Language that describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs (Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation, 1978). This definition was affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1978. In 1987 the FCC expanded its enforcement of the indecency ruling beyond the repetitive use of the so-called "seven dirty words."[2]

Criticism has long been aimed at the television industry for airing programs that glorify violence and contain instances of objectionable language. The three major networks agreed in

1975 to set aside the first hour of prime time for programming suitable for all ages. The so-called "family hour" was challenged in court and struck down in 1976. The networks have since generally observed the spirit of the family hour by airing material inappropriate for children after 9 p.m. (Johnson, 1996). Additionally, since 1978, the hours between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. have been regarded as a “safe harbor” within which to air stronger material under the assumption that children are unlikely to be watching during this time period. To further reduce children’s exposure to indecent programming, in 1987 the FCC shortened the safe harbor to midnight to 6 a.m., but a year later a U.S. Court of Appeals decision reversed the policy until further study of children's viewing behavior (Action for Children's Television v. FCC, 1988). Shortly thereafter, Congress attempted to enact a 24-hour ban against indecent speech but it was ruled unconstitutional in 1991 (Action for Children's Television v. FCC, 1991).

Age and Content Ratings. Critics continued to pressure the industry to clean up objectionable content, but attempts at self-regulation (e.g. parental advisories) and the so-called “family hour” were largely unsuccessful. Congress went on to pass The Telecommunications Act of 1996. In a section titled "Parental Choice in Television Programming,” the Act requires the "rating of video programming that contains sexual, violent or other indecent material" and calls for distributors "to transmit such rating to permit parents to block the display of video programming that they have determined is inappropriate for their children" (Telecommunications Act of 1996, p. 89).

The television industry first put into place a Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)[3] style age-based rating system but it quickly came under fire for not providing adequate information and guidance to parents. One monitoring group reported instances of sexual innuendoes, verbal vulgarities and explicit violence almost as often in PG shows as in shows

rated TV-14 (Johnson, 1997a). Bowing to pressure the television industry agreed to adopt a content-based ratings system which was implemented on October 1, 1997. The new system added to the age-based ratings a set of content warnings: "V" for violence, "S" for sexual content, "L" for coarse language and "D" for suggestive dialogue (Albiniak, 1997).

Two years after the new ratings systems were implemented only about half of parents used them as a way of controlling what their children watch and almost one-fifth had never even heard of them ("Half of U.S. Parents," 1998). It is no surprise that young viewers themselves were largely ignoring the ratings (Schneider, 1997).

Filters. Word filters are a relatively new way to protect viewers from exposure to objectionable content. ProtecTV and TVGuardian connect to a television and mute out undesirable words and phrases. The filtering devices read closed-captioning signals and replace or mute up to 400 objectionable words. For instance, "darn is substituted for "damn," "jerk" replaces "dick" and "sex" changes to "hugs," or the words are muted altogether (Palmer, 1998; Poovey, 2002; Ramstad, 1999; Sonne, 1998). The filters however do not work with non-closed captioned programs and replacing dirty words is a bit problematic. An early model of TVGuardian changed the Dick Van Dyke Show to the Jerk Van Gay Show (Palmer, 1998).

Despite mixed opinions concerning the harmful effects of verbal indecency on television, conservative organizations, parents and policymakers steadfastly insist that runaway mediated profanity is leading to the decline in moral, social and family values (e.g., Lieberman, 1996). Although a small number of viewers are causing most of the fuss concerning profane language on television, their unrelenting bid for clean airwaves led to the age and content based ratings systems. Further, Senator Joseph Lieberman and other legislators continue to pressure the

television industry to provide a protected hour during prime time in which wholesome, family oriented programs would air (Gay, 2001).

Research Questions

There is much concern that the television networks are no longer abiding by the “spirit” of the family hour and are airing just as many sexual and violent images and crude words during the earlier hour of prime time when children are more likely to be viewing as in the later hours.

RQ1a. How will the three hours of prime time compare in the frequency and strength of offensive words in 2001?

RQ1b. How will the 2001 hours of prime time compare in the frequency and strength of offensive words to the 1990, 1994, 1997 prime time hours?

Age and content ratings serve as a way to warn parents and children of objectionable content. Many critics claim that these systems do not go far enough to protect children and that profane words are included in programs that are rated for children’s viewing.

RQ2. Is there a difference in the frequency and types of crude language among programs rated "L,” “G,” "PG," and “PG-14” in fall 2001? And how has the frequency within each rating category changed since 1997?

Parents, activist groups, legislators and other are pressuring the broadcast networks to provide more wholesome and profanity-free content because of fears of the negative consequences of exposure to bad language and fears that children, teenagers and young adults will imitate such words in real life, especially if uttered by characters of the same age on television.

RQ3a. What is the frequency of offensive words uttered in 2001 by children under 12 and adolescents and teens 12 to 20 years of age?

RQ3b. How will the frequency of profane words said by younger characters in 2001 compare to 1990, 1994, and 1997?

It is generally considered unacceptable for children to cuss in front of adults and adults to cuss in front of children. Therefore the next research question asks:

RQ4. What is the frequency of indecent words in 2001 spoken by younger characters (under 12 age group and the 12-20 age group) to other young characters, young characters to adults, and adults to young characters.

RQ5. How do adults' react to young characters in both age groups cussing and how do children, adolescents and teens react when they hear peers or adults swearing?

Cussing may be more acceptable and expected when said in anger. Others, however, claim that taboos against swearing are lifted when the words are said humorously. Additionally, it is more socially acceptable for boys to cuss than for girls.

RQ6. What is the frequency of indecent words uttered in 2001 by both age groups of children in a humorous context?

RQ7. What is the frequency of profane words spoken in 2001 by boys and girls of both age groups?

Method

Sample

Programs broadcast during prime time (8 - 11 p.m., EST) on the ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, PAX, UPN and WB networks in November and December, 2001 were videotaped for content analysis. A block of three hours of prime time programming on a network was randomly assigned to a day of the week between November 11 and December 15, 2001 (no videotaping

was done between November 22 - 25). This process was continued until blocks for all seven days of the week for each of the seven networks were assigned. Thus, a total of 21 hours of programming for each network were recorded on randomly-selected evenings over a five-week period. Non-network programs airing on UPN and WB, a total of 13.5 hours, were excluded from analysis.[4] Due to videotape recorder malfunctions, several shows were replaced with later episodes. The final sample consisted of 151 programs totaling 133.5 hours.

The present research is intended, in part, to contrast offensive language in 2001 to such words occurring in shows from earlier years. Specifically, program samples from the 1990s consisted of prime time shows broadcast by the ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox networks during the weeks of January 17-23, 1990, March 9-15, 1994, and October 27-November 2, 1997. A total of 264 programs were videotaped (70 from 1990, 86 from 1994, 94 from 1997) yielding 221.5 hours of programming (70 hours from 1990, 73.5 hours from 1994, 78 from 1997).[5]

For all four program samples graduate and undergraduate students worked independently classifying and recording all incidents of profane language. To catch the offensive words and phrases, coders were trained to listen very carefully to the programs and to "talk" along with the characters by repeating the dialogue.

Coding Categories. Offensive words were classified into one of five groups: the "seven dirty words," sexual words, excretory words, mild-other words and strong-other words.

The "seven dirty words"[1] were put in their own category because the FCC has singled out these words as being too indecent to utter on broadcast television. Thus, comparisons are made between words that are legally barred from the airwaves and other profanities that are considered offensive by the general public.

Sexual words are those that describe sexual body parts (“testicles,” “boobs, ” “pecker”), or sexual behavior (“jackoff,” “oral sex”). Excretory words are direct and literal references to human waste products and processes (“poop,” “asshole”).

All remaining words are coded as either mild or strong. The book *Cursing in America* (Jay, 1992) was consulted to determine the level of tabooness of certain words for classification. Examples of mild-other words include: “hell,” “damn”, and “slut.” "Christ," "Jesus," and "God" are also included as mild words but only if uttered in vain. Such words were not classified as crudities if said in reverence; but angrily muttering “for Christ’s sake” would be considered mildly offensive. Strong-other words include “bastard,” “bitch,” “bullshit,” and others that evoke strong emotions and offense.

Offensive language was also coded as either the actual verbalization of a profanity or as implied verbalization - situations of bleeping out, whispering or mouthing but the audience can clearly make out what is said.

Coders recorded the title, hour of prime time, broadcast network, type (drama, situation comedy, movie, reality or other) and rating (age and content) of each program in the sample. For each incident of offensive language the gender and age of the speaker and the recipient, the reactions of the recipient to swearing (positive, neutral, negative), and the context (humorous; non-humorous) were noted. Intercoder agreement (Scott, 1955) for the objectionable words was 0.91, 0.86, 0.84 and 0.88 in 1990, 1994, 1997 and 2001, respectively.

Results

The content analysis of prime-time programs aired on seven broadcast networks in 2001 yielded 958 incidents of offensive language or 7.2 per hour. When limited to the four networks

examined in previous years (ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX), the 2001 program sample contained 639 instances of profanity. In contrast, there were 383, 536 and 389 incidents on these four networks in 1990, 1994 and 1997, respectively. Of the 151 programs included in the 2001 analysis, 132 (87.4%) contain at least one instance of crude language. Nearly two out of three (63%) crude words heard in prime time were mild-other. Less common were excretory (14.6%), sexual (10.4%), strong-other (7.4%) and the seven dirty (4.5%) words.

The first research question focuses on the prevalence of offensive language in the earliest hour of prime time, the so-called "family hour," compared to later hours when programs may be more appropriate for adults. Children make up a larger share of the audience during the first hour of prime time (8:00 and 9:00 p.m. E.S.T.), and thus more children are available to hear profane speech. The third hour of prime time is often considered the adult drama hour, with programs featuring more mature content (e.g., *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit; NYPD Blue*). It would be expected that offensive language is more prevalent between 10 and 11 pm. In 2001 there was a significant difference in the number of crude words spoken across the evening hours (χ^2 = 24.96 (df=2), $p < .001$). The greatest frequency of swearing occurred during the 9 - 10 time period (n = 380; refer to Table 1). Counter to expectations, there were significantly more occurrences of crude language during the first prime time hour (324) than during the 10 - 11 pm period (254). There were significantly more instances of excretory and mild-other words during each of the first two hours of prime time than during the later adult drama hour. In line with expectations, programs aired during the final hour of prime time contained twice as many supposedly banned seven dirty words (22) than the family hour (10). The appearance of strong-other or sexual words did not vary by hour.

The first research question also probes changes over time in the level of offensive language within each prime time hour. Here, for consistency, the analyses are limited to four networks (see Table 1). There were significantly more instances of vulgarity in the family hour in 2001 (n = 216) than in 1997 (n = 137) when criticism of television content unsuitable for children was a high-profile issue, giving rise to content-based ratings. Moreover, off-color language was more prominent in 2001 than in any previous year; there were more than twice as many profanities spoken in the family hour in 2001 than in 1990. Characters spoke significantly more mild-other words in the earliest hour of prime time in 2001 than in either 1997 or 1990. Sexual words spoken during the family hour were at their lowest level since 1990. Mirroring the overall increase in profanity in 2001, the 10 - 11 pm hour contained a greater number of vulgarities in 2001 than in 1997 or 1990. This was largely the result of a significant increase in mild-other words in 2001 compared to 1997's adult drama hour. There was no appreciable change in the amount of sexual or strong-other words in the last hour of prime time across the years under study. The middle hour of prime time (9 - 10 pm) in 2001 featured significantly more crudities than each of the previous three years. Increases were observed over 1997 in every category of profanity except strong-other.

The second research question asks if program ratings, both age-based and content ratings, accurately reflect the presence of coarse language. It would be expected that G-rated programs in particular would contain few if any profanities. While PG-rated programs might contain some milder forms of profanity, the bulk of strong language would be expected to appear in TV-14 programs. By the same token, prime time programs that are not rated with an "L" for language should contain little in the way of offensive words. As seen in Table 2, there is a significant difference in occurrence of offensive language in 2001 for each type of program rating (χ^2 =

483.25 (df=2), $p < .001$). TV-G programs contained few coarse words. However, counter to expectations, TV-PG programs contained significantly more vulgarities than TV-14 shows. Programs with a TV-G rating had the fewest instances of every category of crude language. Nearly all incidents in TV-G shows were mild-other words such as "damn" and "hell". TV-PG rated programs in 2001 contained significantly more excretory and mild-other words. There were no differences in TV-PG and TV-14 shows for the frequency of seven dirty, sexual and strong-other words. Because age-based ratings were initiated in 1997, a comparison is only possible between 1997 and 2001 shows (see Table 2). There was a significant increase in vulgarities in TV-PG and TV-14 programs between 1997 and 2001. The rise in such language in TV-PG and TV-14 programs occurred for both excretory and mild-other words. Strong-other words increased in 2001 only in TV-PG shows.

Content-based ratings are intended to warn parents of the presence of potentially offending behaviors and language including sex, violence, suggestive dialogue and strong language. Only one-third of the programs in the 2001 sample carried content ratings for their prime time programs. It would be expected that rated programs that do not contain an "L" rating are free of coarse language. Table 3 compares programming with various content ratings. Programs in 2001 that were not rated with an "L" contained as many coarse words (n = 116) as programs with an "L"-only rating (n = 123). Characters in shows with multiple ratings including an "L" (e.g., "S" and "D" and "L") voiced significantly more swear words (n = 269; χ^2 = 88.14 (df=2), $p < .001$) than characters in "L" only shows or shows with a rating other than "L." Within each category of offensive language, 2001 shows with multiple content ratings including an "L" presented significantly more swear words than "L" only shows or rated shows lacking an "L." Furthermore, for every category of coarse language, rated shows that were not flagged with

an "L" aired vulgarities. Notably, there were more instances of offensive language in 2001's prime time programs that were not rated (n = 450). This is to be expected: two out of three shows in 2001 did not receive a content rating. For example, characters in unrated shows used the seven dirty words 34 times, excretory words 62 times, strong-other words 31 times and sexual words 35 times. Year-to-year comparisons reveal that coarse language increased in shows containing an "L" rating but did not increase in rated shows lacking an "L" rating (refer to Table 3).

Research question three addresses the frequency with which young characters speak offensive words. As shown in Table 4, children under the age of 12 rarely utter crude language. Only 9 incidents or about 1% involve young children. Among adolescents and teens (12 to 20 years) there were 54 incidents or nearly 6% of all those observed in 2001. There was no appreciable change in the frequency of profanity use by the latter age group across all years studied. We also looked at the prevalence of offensive language spoken to young characters. The bottom half of Table 4 shows that the youngest age group again was rarely privy to swear words (n=10). Likewise, characters 12 to 20 years of age heard only about 5% of all crudities uttered in 2001. In fact, the number of such words spoken to this age group is significantly lower in 2001 than in 1990 or 1994. The networks apparently have been careful to spare young characters interactions that feature offensive language.

The fourth research question looks at interactions containing vulgar language according to the age of speakers and receivers. Due to the low number of off-color words spoken by characters 20 and younger, no statistical tests were conducted. Table 5 shows that children under twelve spoke profanities as often to other young characters as to adults. Adolescents and teens (12 to 20 years) voiced offensive words equally to others their age and to adults. Adults reserved

their strong language for other adults (94%). There were only a small number of incidents in which adults exclaimed vulgarities to characters under 21 years of age.

Research question five explores how children and adults react to cussing. Overall, characters were equally likely to react either positively or negatively upon hearing profanity. Neutral or mixed reactions were significantly less likely to occur (χ^2 = 287.38 (df=3), $p < .001$; refer to Table 6). Because of the very low number of incidents involving younger characters, no meaningful assessment of reactions to expressions of vulgarity is possible. Among adults, their reactions to off-color remarks by other adults are significantly more likely to be neutral (χ^2 = 255.45 (df=3), $p < .001$). Positive reactions to coarse language were just as common as negative reactions.

The sixth research question looks at the context in which crude language is used. Specifically, it considers the degree to which humor is present in off-color language spoken by younger characters in 2001. As can be seen in Table 7, three-fourths of the offensive language spoken by those under 20 years occurs in a humorous context. The prevalence of humor coupled with the infrequency of negative reactions to the use of vulgar language should help to lower restraints against the use of taboo words.

The final question asked if, consistent with past research, shows in 2001 would feature boys speaking profanity more than girls. Table 7 shows that, among children, males uttered nearly all cuss words. By comparison, for those 12 to 20 years, there was little difference, with female characters speaking cuss words slightly more often.

Discussion

This study focuses on the frequency of profane language on prime time television. Of special interest are the amount and types of off-color words on programs that are rated acceptable for young viewers and the profane language used by children and young adults under the age of 20. The results of this study are compared to similar studies conducted in 1990, 1994 and 1997.

Content analyses of prime time television have largely focused on violent and sexual depictions. Few studies have examined profanity, which is considered a form of verbal aggression. Limited research has been primarily conducted by media watchdog groups. Yet public outcry against profanity is in part responsible for age and content-based ratings, and concerned viewers and legislators continue to pressure the industry to clean up dirty talk on television.

In general this study found that after dipping in 1997 the frequency of coarse language jumped in 2001. Nearly nine out of ten prime time programs in 2001 contained profane words, even though most were largely benign (mild-other representing nearly two-thirds of all risqué words). Excretory, sexual, strong-other, and the seven dirty words were heard with less frequency. These results are similar to those reported by the Center for Media and Public Affairs that also found that about six out of ten words were of the mild type. The present study found that only one percent of profanities was spoken by a child twelve or younger. About five percent of offensive words were voiced by youth 12 to 20 years of age. Clearly, younger characters are responsible for only a small share of the off-color language spoken on prime-time television.

While industry supporters claim increased tolerance of off-color language in everyday life and on television, critics insist that viewers are fed up with hearing expletive-laced dialogue, especially when aired during the 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. hour of prime time.

In 2001, the earliest hour of prime time had more or the same degree of profanity as did the latest hour, the seven dirty words were the only exception – more were spoken between 10 and 11 p.m. The family hour witnessed a 42 percent increase from 1997 in mild-other words and a 58 percent increase when all categories of words are combined. The final hour of prime time also experienced a similar jump (55%) from 1997, especially in the mild-other word category. While Senator Joseph Lieberman and others continue to pressure the television industry to provide a wholesome family hour of television, the amount of offensive language aired from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. has actually increased from four years earlier. Frequent use of offensive language during the family hour should raise stronger objections from parents and media watchdogs.

Age and content-based ratings systems were initiated largely to appease parents and viewers who were concerned about inadvertently exposing their children to objectionable content, including profanity, in seemingly innocuous programs. While some viewers rely on the ratings and believe they accurately reflect content, critics claim otherwise.

TV-G rated programs in both 2001and 1997 contained few instances of offensive language. However, similar to watchdog reports, this study also found that there were the same or more instances of every category of offensive language in TV-PG rated programs as in those rated TV-14. Moreover, from 1997 to 2001 excretory and mild-other words increased in both TV-PG and TV-14 programs and strong-other words increased in TV-PG shows only.

It is generally expected that profane language is confined to shows given an “L” rating, however, this study found that only 41 percent of coarse language was in “L” rated programs, which means 59 percent of all profanity appeared in shows that had a rating other than "L" or in shows that were not rated at all. Clearly, the absence of an “L” warning does not mean that a program is free of expletives.

The findings suggest that age and content-based ratings do not accurately reflect program content. Parents who trust that age and content ratings will aid them in sheltering their children from strong language are being misled. TV-PG programs contain as much coarse language as TV-14 programs and more bawdy language could be found in programs not given an "L" warning. These findings are similar to studies conducted by watchdog groups that also found many instances of profanity in programs that are expected to be wholesome in nature. It is understandable that media critics, parents, conservative viewers and others continue to pressure legislators to force the television industry to provide profanity-free content and to more accurately rate the programs.

Even though opinions are mixed about the consequences of children's exposure to offensive words and phrases, there is special concern that children and young adults will imitate the words they hear on television and thus increase their use of off-color language in everyday conversation, especially since verbal aggression is easier to imitate than physical aggression (Potter, 2003). There is also a growing concern about the amount of offensive language on television that is uttered by young characters, who may have a great deal of influence on children's behavior. Parents and educators are taking action against what they notice is an increased usage of profanity by children in everyday conversation (Kadaba, 1999; White & Koorland, 1996). Children cuss for various reasons, such as for acceptance, to express anger and frustration, to elevate their social status, and to keep up with their peers (Brozan, 1982; Fine & Johnson, 1984; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rothwell, 1971; Selnow, 1985; Wright 1992).

Television dialogue is expected to mirror real life conversation. Thus, if children and young adults cuss more frequently in general discourse the fear is that writers will increasingly script dirty language for same-aged characters. This study, however, puts these fears to rest as

children under the age of 12 rarely speak or hear crude language on television; even 12 - 20 year olds relatively rarely use or are spoken to with off-color language. The high amount of offensive language in the family hour as well as later hours is overwhelmingly spoken by and to adults.

While it is acceptable to cuss in some circumstances, such as with friends of equal status it is generally unacceptable for children to swear in front of adults or for adults to swear in front of children. This study examined speakers and receivers of swear words by age. Nearly nine in ten vulgarities involve adult-to-adult remarks. Because of the low number of incidents involving children, it appears that children rarely speak profanities to anyone; and they rarely are spoken to in such tones. Those between the ages of 12 and 20 are only modestly more likely to speak crudities but they are, however, as likely to speak them to peers as to adults, which could signify the loosening of taboos.

Reactions to cussing in everyday conversation are varied and largely depend on the situation in which the incident occurs and the age and status of who is speaking to whom. The Center for Media and Public Affairs found that mediated swearing was most often met with no reaction and only three percent of the incidents were met with criticism. This study also found that most off-color language is spoken without consequence.

Swearing by those under the age of 21 was met typically with either a neutral or positive reaction; only one in ten incidents was reacted to negatively. Adults are also more likely to not react at all (neutral) when exposed to swearing by other adults. Only one in four adult-to-adult incidents involving a crude word were met with a negative reaction. It is just as likely that adult swearing will provoke a positive reaction. Neutral or positive reactions, especially those involving children and young adults, may encourage viewers, including young ones, to use

offensive language. The number of negative reactions and consequences are too few to overcome the notion that swearing may result in positive gain or just simply go by unnoticed.

Language scholars contend that expletives are a normal way to express anger and therefore are more acceptable if used in this context. Yet others opine that swearing is taken more lightly if said humorously. The Center of Media and Public Affairs found that most bad language was said in anger, followed by banter and said teasingly. In this study of the swear words uttered on television by those under the age of 21 just over three-quarters were said humorously. This finding could be related to the number of positive reactions to expletives spewed by children and young adults. If more words are said humorously they could draw a positive reaction – the reaction is to the context and not necessarily to the word itself. Although there are too few instances of under 21 year-olds cussing to draw meaningful conclusions, the data do suggest that swearing is most likely to be uttered humorously with the intent of drawing a laugh or positive reaction rather than as a means to hurt another person.

It is generally unacceptable for children, especially girls, to say any cuss words at all, but it is less taboo for boys over the age of 12. In this study, boys under the age of 12 uttered eight profanities but there was only one incident of a girl in this age group cussing, however, females 12-20 cussed slightly more than males**.** This finding is contrary to research that found in real-life conversation females are less likely to be verbally aggressive.

The study of prime time broadcast network television finds that child characters are rarely given lines containing profanity; they are just as infrequently spoken to with such language. Writers of prime time fare apparently recognize the storm of criticism that would result if more children spoke or heard the crudities that are common in adult-to-adult talk. While parents may take some comfort in this, their children are not sheltered from profanity by the

broadcast television ratings systems. More instances of vulgarity would be expected in shows rated TV-14 or "L", but this is not the case. Further compounding the problem of avoiding strong language is the fact that a majority of prime time shows in 2001 were not given a content rating.

In previous years (1990, 1994 and 1997), the content analysis was limited to four networks. The 2001 program sample was drawn from seven broadcast networks. Of course, children and adults do not limit their viewing to prime time, nor to only the broadcast networks. Programs on premium cable channels such as *The Sopranos* on HBO are notorious for their strong language. A number of cable programs popular with younger viewers are also known for their crude language. The animated show *South Park*, in particular, features young foul-mouthed children. Future content analyses should, at a minimum, include in the sampling frame cable channels and programs most popular with children and adults.

Table 1

Frequency of Offensive Language in the "Family Hour" vs. Later Hours[1]

Category of Word	Hour (p.m.)	Seven Networks[2] 2001	Four networks[3] 2001	1997	1994	1990	Years Combined[4]
Seven Dirty	8 - 9	10^{a}	7	3	2	0	12^{a}
	9 - 10	11^{ab}	10	2	2	3	17^{a}
	10 - 11	22^{b}	0	3	5	0	8^{a}
Sexual	8 - 9	29^{a}	19^{AB}	28^{BC}	36^{C}	15^{A}	98^{a}
	9 - 10	41^{a}	31^{B}	14^{A}	38^{B}	14^{A}	97^{a}
	10 - 11	30^{a}	27^{A}	20^{A}	17^{A}	18^{A}	82^{a}
Excretory	8 - 9	49^{b}	41	3	3	1	48^{b}
	9 - 10	64^{b}	53	5	2	0	60^{b}
	10 - 11	27^{a}	16	9	2	0	27^{a}
Mild - Other	8 - 9	217^{b}	139^{B}	98^{A}	141^{B}	80^{A}	458^{ab}
	9 - 10	236^{b}	131^{B}	100^{A}	148^{B}	128^{AB}	507^{b}
	10 - 11	151^{a}	117^{B}	71^{A}	113^{B}	102^{B}	403^{a}
Strong - Other	8 - 9	19^{a}	10	5	6	2	23^{a}
	9 - 10	28^{a}	23^{B}	18^{B}	7^{A}	8^{A}	56^{a}
	10 - 11	24^{a}	15^{A}	10^{A}	14^{A}	12^{A}	51^{a}
All Categories Combined	8 - 9	324^{b}	216^{C}	137^{B}	188^{C}	98^{A}	639^{b}
	9 - 10	380^{c}	248^{C}	139^{A}	197^{B}	153^{A}	737^{b}
	10 - 11	254^{a}	175^{C}	113^{A}	151^{BC}	132^{AB}	571^{a}

NOTE: Frequencies with different superscripts (small letters = vertical comparisons; capital letters = horizontal comparisons) differ by $p < .05$ by the chi-square test. Comparisons were not done where cells contain too few incidents.

[1] Family hour considered to be 8:00-9:00 pm EST

[2] ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PAX, UPN, WB

[3] ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX

[4] 1990 - 2001 for the four networks only

Table 2
Frequency of Offensive Language and Presence of Age-Based Ratings[1]

Category of Word	Age-Based Rating	7 Networks[2] 2001	4 Networks[3] 2001	4 Networks 1997	Years Combined[4]
Seven Dirty	TV-G[5]	0[a]	0	0	0
	TV-PG	22[b]	14	2	16
	TV-14	19[b]	1	4	5
	No rating	2	2	2	4
Sexual	TV-G	2[a]	0	2	2[a]
	TV-PG	37[b]	28[A]	29[A]	57[b]
	TV-14	52[b]	40[A]	27[A]	67[b]
	No rating	9	9	6	15
Excretory	TV-G	1[a]	1	0	1[a]
	TV-PG	94[c]	75[B]	5[A]	80[c]
	TV-14	35[b]	26[B]	10[A]	36[b]
	No rating	10	8	2	10
Mild - Other	TV-G	18[a]	15[A]	7[A]	22[a]
	TV-PG	368[c]	212[B]	162[A]	374[c]
	TV-14	179[b]	124[B]	78[A]	202[b]
	No rating	39	36	22	58
Strong - Other	TV-G	0[a]	0	0	0[a]
	TV-PG	36[b]	26[B]	11[A]	37[b]
	TV-14	32[b]	19[A]	21[A]	40[b]
	No rating	3	3	2	5
All Categories Combined	TV-G	21[a]	16[A]	9[A]	25[a]
	TV-PG	557[c]	355[B]	209[A]	564[c]
	TV-14	317[b]	210[B]	140[A]	350[b]
	No rating	63	58	34	92

NOTE: Frequencies with different superscripts (small letters = vertical comparisons; capital letters = horizontal comparisons) differ by $p < .05$ by the chi-square test. Comparisons were not done where cells contain too few incidents.

1 Age-based ratings did not exist prior to 1996. Therefore, analyses are limited to 1997 and 2001.

2 ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PAX, UPN, WB

3 ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX

4 1997 and 2001 for the four networks only

5 TV-G applies to General Audiences; TV-PG applies to Parental Guidance Suggested for Younger Children; TV-14 applies to Parents Strongly Cautioned for Children Below Age 14

Table 3
Frequency of Offensive Language and Presence of Content-Based Ratings[1]

Category of Word	Content-Based Rating	7 Networks[2] 2001	4 Networks[3] 2001	4 Networks 1997	Years Combined[4]
Seven Dirty	L only [5]	1	1	2	3
	L + other	6	3	1	4
	No L	2	1	3	4
	No rating	34	12	2	14
Sexual	L only	7^{a}	7^{A}	7^{A}	14^{a}
	L + other	46^{b}	35^{B}	8^{A}	43^{b}
	No L	12^{a}	6^{A}	8^{A}	14^{a}
	No rating	35	29	38	67
Excretory	L only	27^{b}	27	3	30^{b}
	L + other	45^{c}	36^{B}	7^{A}	43^{b}
	No L	6^{a}	4	1	5^{a}
	No rating	62	43	6	49
Mild - Other	L only	80^{a}	77^{B}	13^{A}	90^{a}
	L + other	145^{b}	81^{B}	22^{A}	103^{a}
	No L	91^{a}	48^{A}	48^{A}	96^{a}
	No rating	288	181	182	363
Strong - Other	L only	8^{a}	8	3	11^{a}
	L + other	27^{b}	18^{B}	7^{A}	25^{b}
	No L	5^{a}	3	9	12^{a}
	No rating	31	19	15	34
All Categories Combined	L only	123^{a}	120^{B}	28^{A}	148^{a}
	L + other	269^{b}	173^{B}	45^{A}	218^{b}
	No L	116^{a}	62^{A}	69^{A}	131^{a}
	No rating	450	284	243	527

NOTE: Frequencies with different superscripts (small letters = vertical comparisons; capital letters = horizontal comparisons) differ by $p < .05$ by the chi-square test. Comparisons were not done where cells contain too few incidents.

[1] Content-based ratings did not exist prior to 1997. Therefore, analyses are limited to 1997 and 2001.

[2] ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PAX, UPN, WB

[3] ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX

[4] 1997 and 2001 for the four networks only

5 "L" for Adult Language; "L + other" for programs which received an "L" warning as well as at least one other warning: "V"
(Violence), "S" (Sex), "D" (Sexual Dialogue); "No L" for programs that had a rating other than "L".

Table 4
Frequency of Offensive Language Spoken or Received by Children and Teens [1]

		Seven Networks[2]	Four networks[3]				Years
	Age	2001	2001	1997	1994	1990	Combined[4]
Speakers	Under 12	9^{a}	7	3	15	1	26^{a}
	12-20	54^{b}	22^{A}	20^{A}	37^{A}	22^{A}	101^{b}
Receivers	Under 12	10^{a}	10	5	11	1	27^{a}
	12-20	50^{b}	21^{AB}	12^{A}	28^{B}	30^{B}	91^{b}

NOTE: Frequencies with different superscripts (small letters = vertical comparisons; capital letters = horizontal comparisons) differ by $p < .05$ by the chi-square test. Comparisons were not done where cells contain too few incidents.

[1] Word categories combined due to low number of incidents involving characters 20 years and younger.

[2] ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PAX, UPN, WB

[3] ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX

[4] 1990 - 2001 for the four networks only

Table 5
Frequency of Offensive Language Spoken or Received by Various Age Groups[1]

Age of Speaker	Age of Receiver Under 12	12 - 20	21 or older
Under 12	2	1	4
12 - 20	1	24	20
21 or older	7	25	543

[1] The analysis excludes unknown or mixed-age speakers and receivers as well as unidentifiable receivers.

Table 6
Valence of Receiver's Reaction to Offensive Language According to the Age of the Speaker and Receiver

Ages of Characters		Receiver's Reaction				
Speaker	Receiver	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Mixed	Total
Under 12	Under 12	2	0	0	0	2
Under 12	12 - 20	0	0	1	0	1
Under 12	21 and older	0	2	2	0	4
12 - 20	Under 12	0	0	1	0	1
12 - 20	12 - 20	10	4	10	0	24
12 - 20	21 and older	9	4	7	0	20
21 and older	Under 12	0	3	4	0	7
21 and older	12 - 20	2	9	13	1	25
21 and older	21 and older	132	130	272	9	543
Total		155	152	310	10	627

NOTE: Only incidents in which a receiver was identifiable are included in the above analysis.

Table 7
Use of Offensive Language According to Context and Sex of Speaker

Age of Speaker	Context		Sex of Speaker	
	Humor	Non-Humor	Male	Female
Under 12	7	2	8	1
12 - 20	41	13	25	29

Footnotes

1 ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, WB

2 Seven dirty words- shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits.

3 The TV ratings implementation group, headed by Motion Picture Association of America President Jack Valenti, created six categories: TV-Y (suitable for all children), TV-Y7 (directed to older children), TV-G (general audience), TV-PG (parental guidance suggested), TV-14 (parents strongly cautioned), and TV-M (mature audiences only) (Mifflin, 1996).

4 Local news, real estate listings, and infomercials.

5 Excluded programs:

1990 and 1994 - sports, local news, home video, and off-network syndication on FOX

1997 - local news and sports.

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