

You Can't Ask That!

Researching attitudes toward bad language

By Nick Moon

While censorship remains an unpopular word in democratic societies, many governments the world over believe it is their duty to set standards for taste and decency, and to prohibit material which contravenes those standards.

In Britain, the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) regulates all forms of broadcasting output. Charged with representing the interests of the consumer, the BSC considers the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct, and matters of taste and decency in television. In the course of such work, the nature of the subject matter raises considerable research problems. In short, how do you determine whether something is likely to be offensive without showing it to people and thus running the risk of offending them?

In 1997, the BSC commissioned NOP Research to investigate public attitudes toward the use of bad language and swearing on television. The aim of the research was not to establish whether people were concerned about bad language on television (the BSC's annual monitoring report showed that bad language was usually rated as the issue of most concern or second most concern alongside the depiction of violence), but rather to investigate in more detail the context in which bad language was used, and in particular to investigate which words were considered acceptable or unacceptable.

While it was specifically not the BSC's intention to produce a "laundry list" of swear words, a list was compiled to test for respondents' attitudes towards the severity of each. This was in part to allow comparisons to be made with earlier research on similar topics, but also to establish whether a significant proportion of the population found particular words to be entirely unacceptable.

There is no simple definition of what constitutes bad language, and indeed in the research we tended to talk about "swearing and bad language" to try to give a clearer idea of what we meant. Several different types of language were involved. The most obvious were hard-core swear words, but also included were vernacular slang words and terms of abuse aimed at minority groups.

The main problem faced by the researchers at NOP—two separate teams, since both qualitative and quantitative stages were involved—was how to discuss offensiveness without offending people. The long list of words to be used for testing

rendered inevitable that almost everyone in our sample would be offended by some words and a number would be seriously offended. Both the BSC and NOP were extremely sensitive to the possibility that their own reputations might be damaged should a complaint from a respondent be seized upon by the press, and at first there were serious doubts about following such a specific and detailed approach.

However, both research teams felt it should be possible to overcome these obstacles, and a broad strategy was devised. We began with the premise that a certain proportion of people would be offended by even the mildest words on our list and decided that it would not be necessary to include such people in the survey. There was little point in submitting the entire list to someone who would find every single word in it unacceptable for broadcast at any time. Both stages of the survey were therefore designed to exclude those who were at the extreme end of the sensitivity scale.

The disadvantage to this approach, of course, was that by actively discouraging participation from one segment of the population, we would end up with an interview sample that was no longer representative of the total population. A survey based on such a sample would be especially likely to underestimate the overall level of concern about bad language on television.

However, since the BSC already had information from other surveys on levels of concern about bad language, depiction of violence, and sexual behavior on television, it was felt this would not be a significant problem. The purpose of this project was to examine which *particular* aspects of the use of bad language on television concern respondents, and to measure the relative perceived severity of different words. For both these purposes, a sample lacking those offended by even the mildest phrase would not be significantly disadvantaged.

For the qualitative stage it was necessary to gather participants in a single room and show them video clips of various examples of the use of bad language in programs. This procedure was made clear to potential respondents at the start of each session. We explained that we wanted to measure reaction to different types of language, and we stressed to respondents that they were free to leave at any time.

Respondents were then shown clips from a wide variety of television programs aired at different times of the day and aimed at different audiences. They included the use of relatively mild language in programs aimed at mass audiences, as well as the use of harder language in films intended for

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broadcast after 9 p.m.

Despite our initial concerns, group participants were able to discuss these clips sensibly and in some detail. While some respondents were not prepared to use the actual words themselves in conversation, they were able by various means to indicate what they meant, and thus discuss the relative severity of the words in their various contexts. The nature of the discussion, and the reason for conducting the survey, seemed to relax respondents. With any sensationalism removed from the proceedings, they were able to talk about the issue quite dispassionately.

What was particularly encouraging from the point of view of the BSC was that respondents were generally able to reach a consensus on the importance of context and the particular type of program in determining which words were and were not acceptable. There was general acceptance, for example, that late enough at night almost any kind of language was acceptable on the grounds that it was extremely unlikely there would be children watching.

Respondents also took part in a mapping exercise which placed the various words and phrases being discussed into a series of concentric circles, with the most offensive closest to the middle and the least offensive toward the outside. Again, without necessarily having to use the words themselves, respondents were able to discuss the relative severity of each.

For the quantitative stage we took similar precautions. First, interviewers were instructed to make clear to respondents the subject matter of the research, and to make it as easy as possible for them to refuse to take part if they were likely to be offended by the material they were going to be asked to assess. At the pilot stage interviewers were asked to keep a separate record of people who refused for this reason but who would otherwise have been prepared to take part in the research. This differentiated them from those who would have refused to take part in the survey no matter what the subject. Since the pilot revealed that no one at all refused on these grounds, no separate count was kept at the main stage, and interviewers reported no problems getting people to participate compared with any other survey.

Based on the experience of the group discussions, we made a point of stressing to respondents in the survey introduction that while they would be exposed to words they might find offensive, they would never be required actually to say any of the words themselves. When it came time to rate the long list of words for degrees of offensiveness, each was presented on a

separate shuffle card with an identifying number. This enabled respondents simply to say, for example, that they considered word number 27 to be acceptable after 11 o'clock at night but not before. The differentiation respondents achieved in assessing these various words suggests we were successful in getting them to take the task seriously and to give a considered opinion. There were very clear demarcations between words at the more severe and the less severe ends of the scale.

The survey was conducted before the widespread availability of multimedia CAPI machines, which meant that it was not possible to show respondents examples of programs containing bad language. However, because the groups had shown that context was critical, it was felt important to include some questions that approximated as closely as possible the showing of clips.

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At first we experimented with the idea of turning the clips into something like scripts that respondents could read, but this was eventually rejected as being too weak a compromise. The written approach broke the link almost entirely with the broadcast material, except in the case of the most

familiar programs where most people would be able to visualize the program on the basis of the scripts.

Instead, we opted for a purely hypothetical approach, giving very brief descriptions of ways in which swearing might occur in programs, for example, “someone getting burned by an iron and swearing in shock,” or “someone using swear words in anger against someone.” While not ideal, this approach proved reasonably successful, and respondents were again able to discriminate among the levels of acceptability in the different circumstances.

Given how concerned people are about bad language on television, and how offended many are personally by exposure to it, the prospect of having to quiz respondents about the topic in detail was daunting. In particular, there were very real concerns about how to present words that most would consider extremely offensive, without in the process offending them.

In fact, mainly by being up front with respondents about what we wanted them to do, and why we wanted them to do it, we were able to get respondents to consider the issues very seriously, and in some detail. Getting stereotypical elderly, middle class women to place words like “f***” on a scale of severity should be seen as a major research achievement. On a wider level, this project showed that it is possible to cover even taboo subjects in survey research, provided they are approached and presented in the right way. ●