

broadcasting  
standards  
*commission*

# Bad language - what are the limits

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# Bad language - what are the limits?



# Foreword

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# Executive summary

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The issue of bad language continues to exercise the Commission as both research and letters of complaint show this to be an area which causes great tension within the audience. At a recent Roadshow in East Anglia, at which the Commission met with different groups representative of public opinion, bad language was found, again, to be an area that both divided and united participants in the meetings.

The divisions were founded on differences in age. But they also depended on the participant's particular personal circumstances. For example, if the participant was a parent with a child living at home, he or she felt differently about material than did those who had little contact with children.

On the other hand, participants had similar experiences in the way they used, or heard bad language used. They reacted in similar ways to the most severe swear words and they almost all admitted to embarrassment when hearing bad language used on television if they were watching either with their children or their parents. Many also saw bad language as a signal of, or indeed provoking, aggression - too common a feature in our society.

This report reflects these differences and similarities, based on extensive qualitative and quantitative research. It indicates where the boundaries can be drawn but also illustrates the grey areas we know exist. It points to the continuing importance of the Watershed and the desire of the audience for clear, unambiguous information about a programme's content. As other research has found, there are clearly defined programme genres where bad language is not acceptable and, even after the Watershed, there are programmes where respondents felt the language could not be justified within its context.

There remains the concern that bad language on television can present a view of a society in trouble, with little regard for others. However, the respondents in this research were determined not to lay all the blame at television's door. They accepted that parents and others must take their share of the responsibility for the way in which children and other vulnerable groups view the world.

The research also points to a concern that the lazy use of language was indicative of an impoverished society and represented a disintegration of cultural values. The research notes, too, that of those respondents who said they themselves would not be offended by the use of language from a religious origin, many (47%) said they would not be concerned, either, about the offence caused to others.

The Commission sponsored this research in consultation with broadcasters who had attended a seminar on the subject in November 1996. It is hoped that the areas they wished to see explored have been addressed. As with all its research, the Commission presents this report as a contribution to the debate about the parameters which viewers and listeners set for themselves and as a positive contribution to an understanding of the audience's changing views.

Lady Howe, Chairman  
January 1998





- This research was commissioned in response to a request made by broadcasters to explore the criteria which cause bad language in a programme to move from ‘acceptable’ to ‘unacceptable’. It was commissioned also as part of the Commission’s overall research strategy measuring public attitudes to changing values - language being perceived as one of the areas where change occurs most quickly. Yet despite these shifts, it is clear - from the Commission’s postbag and research - that bad language is an issue that causes concern and offence to parts of the audience. It is hoped that this extensive qualitative examination of attitudes, backed up by a quantitative survey, will throw light on a complex area.
- Most respondents in this research could imagine circumstances in which swearing and bad language on television was acceptable, even if they themselves disliked it.
- The importance of the Watershed at 9.00pm was stressed again; it was used principally as a guide to likely programme content and allowed parents the opportunity to exercise control over their children’s viewing. In answer to a question within the research, most respondents (89%) felt that programmes shown before the Watershed should be suitable for children to watch. When the research questionnaire asked if all programmes should be able to be shown at any time (and parents should take full responsibility for their children’s viewing), two-thirds of respondents disagreed.
- Respondents rarely considered bad language acceptable if it occurred in children’s programming. Equally they disliked hearing bad language when they were watching the television with children. While respondents acknowledged that children might hear such language in daily life, it was disliked (by adults). Their feeling was that its use on television condoned or normalised what essentially was considered negative behaviour.
- For many the use of bad language and, in particular, the use of the more severe swear words, denoted aggression. For some it was a signal that actual violent behaviour might result.
- Notwithstanding the concerns about children hearing bad language, expressed above and throughout the report, the key demographic variable in terms of the acceptance of bad language was not the presence of children in the household, but the age of the respondent. Younger respondents were significantly less concerned (91%) about the use of bad language on television than the oldest group of respondents (51%) spoken to in the quantitative research (those aged 55 and over). Gender differences were also significant in many situations - with women far less tolerant of bad language than men.
- Respondents also talked about the importance they attached to pre-transmission warnings. They felt these needed to be both consistent and unambiguous. The use of language which was not clear and direct was felt to be unhelpful to the viewer who wanted to avoid certain material.



# Introduction

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- Just under three quarters (73%) of respondents in the quantitative research had carried on watching a programme which had warned of the inclusion of bad language. Just under a third (31%) of them said they had then been surprised by language they had heard; in particular these respondents referred to the repetitious use of bad language and their perception that it was not justified within its context. Some respondents felt that the warnings they had been given had not been clear enough. While a number of programme categories were referred to, over half these respondents (52%) mentioned films shown immediately after the Watershed as the category which had surprised them, despite a warning.
- Even so, the expectation among respondents was that so-called ‘action’ films and police drama series would contain more bad language than other genres. This was particularly true if the film was American in origin. But many respondents (65% of the sample) would prefer a film to be shown late at night and in its original unedited form, than edited and shown earlier in the evening.
- Notwithstanding the above expectation, when asked about the transmission of different types of programmes at varying times after the Watershed, respondents suggested it was more acceptable for a documentary to contain bad language than a film or another piece of fiction. If the documentary was about a person who might be considered a role model to the young, however, and he or she was shown to swear a lot, nearly half the respondents thought the programme should be toned down, regardless of the time of transmission (47%). Bad language was rarely considered acceptable in children’s programming or in light entertainment programmes or soap operas, which might have a significant child audience.
- Respondents agreed that bad language was a fact of life and therefore should be used in certain circumstances. However, the use of constant and repetitious swearing as a part of language was resisted (by 86% of respondents). Use of bad language as an expression of shock, however, was thought to be far more acceptable (mentioned by 89% of the sample answering the question).
- Of the individual words investigated for respondents’ attitudes towards their perceived strength or acceptability, the ranking remained unchanged from previous studies. There were words that the vast majority of respondents thought were very severe: three quarters of the sample thought the word ‘fuck’ was very severe, with a further one in

[1] In April 1997 the Broadcasting Standards Council and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission merged to form the Broadcasting Standards Commission.

[2] For full details of the methodology used and sample structure, see Appendix 1.

[3] Monitoring Report 4: 1995; Broadcasting Standards Council, 1996.

[4] Monitoring Report 5: 1996; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

[5] A Matter of Manners? The Limits of Broadcasting Language, Broadcasting Standards Council; John Libbey, 1991.

five saying it was 'fairly severe'. Again, demographic differences were noted.

- Both the qualitative and the quantitative research found the use of words that referred to the sexual reputation of women (words such as 'whore' or 'slag') were particularly disliked by younger women - a change from previous years.
- This evidence showed, as has previous research, that many respondents thought terms of abuse relating to a person's race or disability were very or fairly 'severe'. This was particularly true of younger respondents.
- Words from a religious origin used abusively were not thought of as swearing by a significant number of respondents (nearly half said 'Jesus Christ' used in that way was not swearing) but here again, age differences were key, with older respondents more likely to be offended. Nonetheless, respondents felt there were certain limits which should not be crossed. For example, respondents in the qualitative research felt the insertion of swear words within the phrase 'Jesus Christ' was not acceptable.
- Euphemisms were better tolerated, even before the Watershed, as long as they were appropriate to the programme.

[6] Regulating for Changing Values, Working Paper 1; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

In November 1996, the former Broadcasting Standards Council<sup>1</sup> held a seminar on bad language with representatives of the broadcasting industry. The seminar had a number of outcomes; one of which was an agreement that more research be undertaken, in particular to look at those variables within a programme which caused the audience to take offence.

Following a further consultation with broadcasters about their particular areas of concern and enquiry, NOP were commissioned in 1997 to conduct the fieldwork which forms the basis of this report. The findings are based on depth interviews with 24 adults and 8 children and group discussions held with a total of 90 adults. A further 753 adults were interviewed by questionnaire<sup>2</sup>.

The seminar itself had been born of the results from research commissioned by the Council, and the continuing number of complaints received about bad language.

In 1996, when the Broadcasting Standards Council published its Annual Monitoring Report<sup>3</sup>, it had noted - for the first time - that bad language was rated as the issue of most concern by as many respondents as had mentioned televisual violence. While this trend has not continued, and bad language has fallen back to rank second after violence as the issue of most concern on television<sup>4</sup>, it was still mentioned by one in five respondents.

Moreover, respondents were far more likely to consider that the use of bad language was less editorially justified than either violence or the depiction of sexual activity (36% of significant incidents of bad language noted were considered to be unjustified in comparison with 32% about sexual activity and 21% about violence).

The Council, recognising that attitudes towards bad language was one of the most rapidly shifting areas in society, had commissioned an earlier research project<sup>5</sup> which looked specifically at attitudes to bad language and swearing on television. It had found:

- much of the way in which the audience reacted to bad language on television was dependent upon the context in which viewing occurred; cross-generation viewing created significant embarrassment where bad language was concerned,
- the editorial context was an important factor; comprising a mixture of time of transmission, programme genre, storyline and characterisation,
- there were groups of words that could be ranked according to their perceived strength or severity,
- certain words, particularly those from a religious origin, could cause great offence to a minority of people,
- certain words, such as those terms of abuse based on race or disability, were significantly more offensive to most respondents than they had been in the past.

More recently, research published by the Broadcasting Standards Commission, '*Regulating for Changing Values*'<sup>6</sup> showed, to the researchers' surprise, that respondents spontaneously mentioned bad language as one of their primary areas of concern in television. On further



# 1 Social context

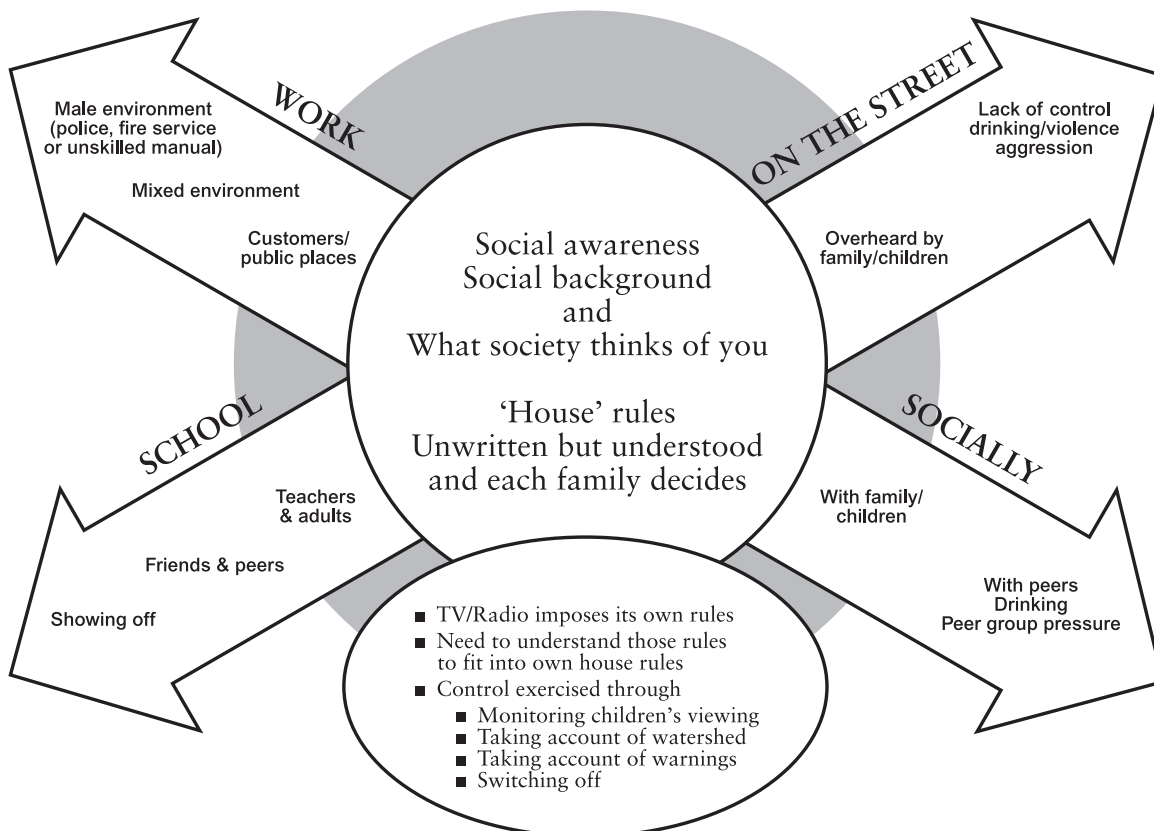
probing, it was noted that, to some respondents, the inclusion of bad language on television gave a signal to the viewer that its use was generally acceptable. The researchers concluded that swearing ‘had come to the attention of adults in circumstances they find offensive’. Swearing on television became a manifestation, then, of ‘the coarsening of everyday life’. For some respondents in that piece of research, this was an expression of unsociable behaviour. That is, behaviour which, while not anti-social in that it did not threaten society in the way that violence might, made society unpleasant. ‘*Regulating for Changing Values*’ also showed that some respondents were concerned that there may be a link between unsociable and anti-social behaviour as values and consideration for others in the community loosened or became less important.

This sentiment was echoed in the research presented here by this respondent:

*‘You don’t want the child growing up, swearing, cursing and going around the streets like a little grub.’*  
 (Parents aged 25-55 years with children 9-15 years, London, C1C2)

Besides these pieces of research, complaints about bad language have continued to account for a significant proportion of the complaints which fall within the Commission’s remit (17% of all complaints were about bad language alone in the year 1996/97).

## The Structure of the Report



As mentioned above, the current study is the result of a request by broadcasters that further research be conducted to explore the acceptable boundaries for the use of, and attitudes towards, bad language.

The project was based on two stages of research, already described, and the report draws on these, as well as other research where appropriate.

The report begins with an analysis of the way in which respondents watched television, and with whom, and their attitudes towards bad language on television. It then moves on to examine the way in which warnings and the Watershed impact upon the viewer's tolerance of bad language; whether different programme genres might be 'allowed' differing levels of bad language, and other contextual issues.

While it is not the Commission's intention to produce a 'laundry list' of words, a list was tested for respondents' attitudes toward their severity. Many of these had been examined in previous research and it is worth noting that certain words have maintained a ranking in the overall list across six years. There do seem to be a set of words considered particularly severe, another list which is less strong and then those that may be classified 'mild'. As the research shows, some respondents could envisage appropriate circumstances for the use of any of these words: context is crucial in the balance of offence that might be caused.

Finally the notion of intent is explored.

Throughout the report, reference is made to clips from transmitted material. These sequences were used as examples of the way bad language might be used and a selection was played to respondents in the qualitative groups and depth interviews. In addition, these respondents were played examples of pre-transmission warnings that had been transmitted. Lists of these clips and warnings are provided in Appendices 2 and 3.

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[7] This, and subsequent tables, exclude 'no answers' or 'don't know' unless otherwise stated.

[8] Monitoring Report 5: 1996; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.



## Television Habits

Most respondents (86%) in the quantitative sample watched television each day of the week; this proportion was even higher (90%) in homes with access to either cable or satellite channels. The heaviest viewers (watching nearly 4.5 hours of television per day) were those aged over 55 years. Those with cable or satellite television also were more likely to watch more television than the sample as a whole (4.25 hours vs. 4 hours across the sample as a whole).

Channel 5 had a 66 per cent reach at the time of this research while 29 per cent of the sample received satellite and cable services. The penetration of satellite and cable was even higher in homes with children (35%).

## The Social Context

*'I think swearing is a thing (to do) if you're comfortable - like if you are round your mate's - well, you don't swear all the time. It's just a way of explaining something.'*  
(Asian parents with children over 9 years, Aberdeen, BC1)

*'It's respectful at home if you don't swear. It's showing respect for the people who are keeping you.'*  
(Female aged 16-18, Leeds, C2DE)

### Figure 1: Bad language in the social context

Increasing tolerance away from centre

Figure 1 is an illustration of the way in which bad language was felt, by respondents in the qualitative research, to work within a social context. Television was placed within a social/cultural setting, in which the home was central. There were clear house rules, although the broadcasting media were sometimes felt to impose their own rules.

*'You can't do anything about what they hear on the street, but you can do something about it in your own home, watching telly.'*  
(Mother of children aged 9-15 years, Leeds, C2DE)

*'You're trying to bring them up in the way you want them to behave... programmes like this (a children's programme which contained the words 'slut' and 'tart') make our jobs as parents more difficult. Whatever the parents have built up is being knocked down if your kids watch programmes like that.'*  
(Fathers of children aged 2-8 years, Dawlish, C1C2)

The various outside-home milieux, such as school, work, the street and the pub, set additional contextual reference points which governed the acceptability of bad language.....

*'If you're out with adults in a pub you do use stronger language than if you're at*

[9] Empty nester - those whose children have now grown up and left home.

*home with the kids.'*

(Mother of children aged 9-15 years, Leeds, C2DE)

Respondents in the quantitative study were asked how they would feel if they were watching a programme containing bad language with various members of their family or with friends.

**Table 1<sup>7</sup>: Would you be bothered if you were watching with**

	<i>% saying they would be bothered</i>
Children	89
Mother	32
Grandparents	24
Father	22
Female friends	20
Male friends	15
Partner	15

Base: All respondents

As the data show, watching television containing bad language would cause most embarrassment to respondents if children were present. The 1996 Monitoring Report<sup>8</sup> had shown also that the point at which respondents thought bad language least easily justified was in pre-Watershed programming. The presence of children was certainly a key reason for turning the television off:

*'I think it is a personal thing. I don't like to see it on telly and I don't want my kids watching it. Now we turn it off.'*

(Mother of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

As the data also show, discomfort could be caused across generations. It was not only the parent who was uncomfortable when watching with children but the adult watching with his or her parents.

There also remained an unease about bad language being used in front of women, particularly among older respondents. As this discussant in a group said:

*'I don't like it if I'm in the pub, if I'm there with the wife.'*  
 (Male empty nester<sup>9</sup>, aged 55 years and below, Dawlish, BC1)

Or this person who said:

*'Men get away with swearing more than a woman. You expect a man to chat about the football and swear. Not a woman.'*  
 (Female empty nester, aged 55-70, Aberdeen, C2DE)

This attitude was further highlighted by the reaction of respondents in the quantified survey towards bad language used before their mothers, or their female friends. While gender differences were found (men were marginally more likely to say they would be discomfited by the use of swearing in front of their female friends, women less so), these were not statistically significant. Age was a more significant variable:

**Table 2: Would you be bothered if you were watching with**

	<i>Total</i>	<i>18-34</i>	<i>35-54</i>	<i>55+</i>
	%	%	%	%
Children	89	90	90	89
Mother	32	31	40	27
Grandparents	24	34	22	17
Father	22	19	27	20
Female friends	20	10	16	35
Male friends	15	*6	*10	30
Partner	15	*6	*8	31

Base: All respondents

(\*denotes sample size less than 25)

The data suggest it is likely that many of those in the oldest age group were projecting back to how they might have felt if they had been watching such material with their parents or grandparents; the differences in attitude towards the female gender were particularly marked. However, this group would have been made uncomfortable by swearing, whatever the environment within which they were watching.

For the youngest of the age groups, this mood was mirrored with 34 per cent saying they would not want to watch such material with their grandparents. As the data suggest, this group was the least likely to make allowances for the gender of the person they were watching with.

Parents were as likely to say they would be disturbed by swearing if they were watching with their children (88%). Much greater concern was expressed, however, by parents of younger children, aged under ten years. Ninety-three per cent of this group said they would be bothered compared with 85 per cent of those who had children aged between ten and fifteen. This is interesting in the light of the qualitative research which suggested that parents were resigned to the fact that their children heard bad language in all areas of their social environment; they presumably felt they had greater control over the younger children.

*'There's always going to be somebody watching. Like a child maybe, because if he's not going to pick it up from TV, he's going to pick it up from somewhere else.'*  
(Parents aged 25-55, with children under 9 years, Brighton, C1C2)

Many respondents said they regulated their children's viewing; others wanted more help from the broadcasters:

*'I don't like bad language at an early time, neither does my wife. But if the children are there, we say switch it off or change channels.'*  
(Father of children aged 2-8, Dawlish, C1C2)

*'There would be children in the room who would feel uncomfortable. I would feel uncomfortable personally.'*  
(Female, aged 25-55, regular Church attendee, London, C1C2)

*'You wouldn't want a lot of six year old kids (hearing an extract of bad language), I suppose, every other word they said was "fuck this" or "fuck that".'*  
(Male aged 16-20 living at home, London, C2D)

This unease was voiced time and again in the qualitative research as respondents referred to the appropriateness of time, place and environment:

*'There are places you wouldn't use it. I mean, I wouldn't come round here and talk to his Mum and Dad and like, start swearing.'*  
(Afro-Caribbean family with children aged 9-15 years, Oxford, BC1)

*'Bad language in the household is frowned upon. We always pull them (the children) up if they do. It all starts at home we think. If I do get uppity and I do swear, I always apologise after. I'm a woman now but I never ever tell my mother to f-off - she'd batter me. It's the way we were brought up.'*  
(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

Respondents were also asked if they would be bothered by a programme containing bad

language if they were watching on their own. Most respondents (73%) said they would not be. Men were more likely to say this (83% of men said this in comparison with 63% of women) but age was a clear factor here, once again. Those aged over 55 years were evenly split with half saying they would be uncomfortable by hearing bad language compared with 23 per cent of 35-54 year olds and only 9 per cent of 18-34 year olds. As one might expect, those who said they themselves hardly ever, or never, swore were more likely than average to say they would be bothered by bad language on television, even if they were on their own (32% of this group compared with 27% of the sample as a whole).

## The Use of Bad Language

Some respondents said they did not want to be faced with bad language in their home:

*'It's something you want to enjoy (a programme on television), not to hear someone swearing and cursing. You can be walking down the street and hear it all day. You don't want to hear it when you come home and sit down to watch telly.'*

(Parents aged 25-55 with children under 9 years, Brighton, C1C2)

On the other hand, the argument for realism was often made:

*'Certain programmes when they are made, they have to have bad language. If they didn't have that, then the programmes would be boring.'*

(Asian father of children aged 9-15, Birmingham, C1C2)

The term 'bad language', certainly as it is used by the Commission, has a wide definition and includes swear words as well as the use of terms derived from religious origins.

It was of interest to know whether respondents thought there was a difference between swearing and bad language. Respondents in the quantitative study were divided on this with a slightly higher proportion (55%) saying that they meant the same. There were some demographic differences, principally in socio-economic grades where respondents in the ABC1 range were more likely to note a difference (57% of ABs said there was a difference as did 52% of C1s compared with an average of 45% across the sample). Those in the C2DE groups were commensurately less likely to say they were different (37% of C2s and of DEs said there was a difference).

When respondents in the qualitative research were asked what they understood to be 'bad language' they were equally unsure. One respondent said:

*'Different for everyone, depends on what your definition of bad language is. What is bad language for some may not be for others.'*

[10] Referred to in the Chairman's Foreword.

(Male, 25-35 years, no children, Brighton, BC1)

~~On further probing, however, clear sub-divisions emerged. These were:~~

1. **Swear words:** which tended to be considered ‘stronger’ and were used generally as expletives in a variety of circumstances:

*‘A swear word doesn’t describe anything; it’s in place of a descriptive word.’*

(Afro-Caribbean family with children aged 9-15 years, Oxford, BC1)

2. **The language of the street:** bad language used as slang and often without contextual reference:

*‘It’s part of the language now.’*

(Male empty nesters, aged 55 and below, Dawlish, BC1)

*‘Nowadays it’s in normal life. You are in a queue, they use it.’*

(Asian mother of children aged 2-8, Birmingham, C1C2)

*‘It’s because of the way they have been brought up. It’s an everyday thing, but it’s also the lack of vocabulary. If you’re stuck for a word, they’ll say “Oh fuck” instead of another word.’*

(Female empty nester, aged 55-70 years, Aberdeen, C2DE)

3. **Terms of abuse:** usually aimed at minority groups :

*‘They don’t have to put these words on television, like “paki” or “nigger”. We get enough of it anyway. We don’t need it on television as well.’*

(Asian mother of children aged 2-8, Birmingham, C1C2)

Respondents accepted that bad language was used in a number of ways, sometimes unconsciously. It could be used in anger, as a sign of aggression, in frustration, shock, for comic effect or because of an inadequate vocabulary.

*‘You say “shit” when you’re really uptight and you’ve been stressed out and you do use it.’*

(Asian mother of children aged 2-8, Birmingham, C1C2)

A clear indication of this was noted in ‘Regulating for Changing Values’ which found that the use of bad language was often a sign of unsociable behaviour. The 1997 Roadshow<sup>10</sup> also demonstrates that for many of the participants the use of the most severe swear words signified a shift in mood, often leading to overt aggression.

The Monitoring Reports have shown, over the years, that bad language in comedy and in

## 2 Warnings and scheduling

films was least often thought to be justified. Respondents in the qualitative research echoed this, particularly when talking about bad language used for comic effect. For them, the acceptability of its use depended upon whether the language was intended to offend:

*‘Stand up comics swear to get cheap laughs. Comedians using bad language in a clever way can be used to enhance what their particular style of comedy is. Just because they swear it isn’t funny, only if it is incorporated into a funny sort of idea.’*  
(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

In the quantitative research most respondents (75%) thought that swearing and bad language on television were all right in certain circumstances. This was reiterated by respondents in the discussion groups. Such as this one:

*‘It depends on the situation. If I went to shop, I wouldn’t say “give me the fucking Mars bar”. If you catch a certain vibe off somebody, I might swear to send off a vibe. I don’t swear regular. If you want to make a point.’*  
(Male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

As Table 3 overleaf shows, gender, age and the presence of children in the home all have an impact on responses to the question about the acceptability of bad language on television.

**Table 3: Responses to the acceptability of swearing in certain circumstances**

	% saying OK	% saying never
<b>Total</b>	74	25
<i>Gender:</i>		
Male	80	20
Female	69	31
<i>Age:</i>		
18-34	93	7
35-54	82	18
55+	49	51
<i>Socio-economic group:</i>		
AB	77	23
C1	81	19
C2	73	28
DE	69	31

*Presence of children:*

Any	84	16
None	69	31

Base: All respondents

There was some suggestion from younger respondents in the qualitative research that the use of bad language could be an essential part of a programme's attraction, especially for programme genres such as film or drama:

*'(Re. the film, 'Born on the Fourth of July') I think that was appropriate. They were totally shocked themselves. They were panicking... I would expect to hear "motherfucker" in that clip.'*

(Couple aged 18-30, Aberdeen, C2D)

[11] A Profile of Complainants and their Complaints, Working Paper 10; Broadcasting Standards Council, 1995.

[12] Monitoring Report 5: 1996; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.



## Personal Use of Warnings

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked if they would carry on watching a programme even if they had been warned that it contained bad language. Nearly one in five (18%) respondents said they would turn over or switch off, while 9 per cent said they did not know what they would do. The majority (73%) said they would continue watching.

This interviewee said a pre-transmission warning was sufficient to let the viewer make a decision about viewing:

*.....I've got nothing wrong with warnings...The people who don't like the show are.....  
forewarned not to watch it, so they have nothing to complain about.'*  
(Male aged 18-24, living away from home, Leeds)

The quantitative data show that women and older respondents were most likely to say they would avoid such material if warned beforehand (of those who answered, 23% of women and 39% of those aged over 55 respectively). Those who said they themselves did not swear were slightly more likely than average to say they would turn off (21%), although this variable was not as significant as age or gender.

Respondents who carried on watching despite a warning were asked if they had been shocked or offended by the language in a programme, even though they had been warned. Over one in three respondents (31%) said they had. Age and gender were, again, key. While the sample size is small there was a suggestion that those in the AB socio-economic group were slightly more likely than average to agree this had happened (35% of this group). When asked why they had been shocked or offended, the reasons given varied, with three in five respondents talking about the repeated use of the language.

**Table 4: Reason language shocked or offended**

	%
Repetition	60
Not justified in context	41
Stronger than warning suggested	39
Used with violent acts	27
Watching with others	18
Other	4

Base: All who had heard a warning about bad language but watched

anyway and were then shocked.

When probed, the data showed that film (mentioned by 52% of this sample who had found themselves shocked or offended) and drama programmes (24%) were the genres mentioned most often. Most of the offending programmes were placed after the Watershed: 48 per cent of these respondents talked of programmes transmitted between 9.00pm and 10.00pm and 34 per cent mentioned those shown between 10.00pm and 11.00pm.

Although the sample size is small, those respondents with children were far more likely than average (27% of mentions compared with 18%) to talk of their shock when watching with other people. It is not known if these 'others' were children although it is likely. These respondents were also more likely than average to mention the hour immediately after the Watershed: 57 per cent mentioned the period between 9.00pm and 10.00pm. Research conducted for the former Council<sup>11</sup> had shown that 39 per cent of complaints were made on behalf of children in the audience.

This depth interviewee described the desensitising effect she felt the frequent use of bad language had:

*'I think that "fuck" and "fucking hell" and that is getting used a lot more and when you do hear it - sometimes - you don't give a thought really.'*

(Female aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

## **Programme Information**

*'I don't think the four channels have enough (warnings). I have noticed with Channel Five that they do give you good warning and there's family guidance that comes up before the film comes on.'*

(Mother of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

When respondents to the questionnaire were asked if the current system of warnings worked, most (59% ) said it did. The remainder, a significant minority at 41 per cent, said it did not.

Respondents were asked what type of programme information they would find useful: as Table 5 shows, and as previous studies<sup>12</sup> have found, most respondents found the greatest value in on-air warnings:

**Table 5: What sort of programme information would you find most useful?**

	%
Pre-transmission on-air warning	65
More information in listings	48
On-screen cinema/video categories	36
Cinema/video categories used in listings	35
Other on-screen symbols	28
Other symbols in listings	24
None	4

Base: All respondents

A significant percentage of respondents also said they would value more information in listings. This respondent in a group discussion thought:

*'You can usually tell by the script in the TV magazine what kind of film it is going to be, and what kind of language it is going to have in it.'*

(Mothers of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

A plurality of respondents mentioned the use of categories that they were familiar with from other media (such as the cinema or video). Parents in particular said they would welcome these (42% of parents mentioned the use of classification categories in comparison with 36% of the overall sample).

Respondents were asked a complementary question about those systems which they thought would work less well as a means of alerting them to a programme's content: a substantial minority (47%) said they all had a value, but the use of 'other symbols' (i.e. not those used within the film classification industry) were mentioned as being the least useful by one in four respondents (26%).

There was some evidence in the qualitative research that women, and mothers in particular, were looking to warnings to help them regulate their children's viewing, even if their children were teenagers:

[13] The Scheduling Game, Annual Review; Broadcasting Standards Council, 1995.

*‘As long as you know what to expect. I find (that in) a lot of things they tell you what kind of bad language to expect, but not violence. It seems to be round that way.’*

(Female aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

There was little in the qualitative research to support the suggestion that warnings might act as a turn-on to viewers, although some respondents admitted they may be intrigued:

*‘(Re: pre-transmission warning) I’d probably watch it to see what was going on. Obviously it’s going to be something.’*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

Respondents in the qualitative research called for clarity of warning and precise language. This respondent suggested:

*‘Just like “This is going to be based on a real life situation” so you have got to take it that it’s going to be graphic and it’s going to have swearing.’*

(Male aged 16-20, living at home, London, C2D)

Or

*‘The warning wasn’t enough. You would have to say “strong language”.’*

(Afro-Caribbean family with children aged 9-15, Oxford, BC1)

When respondents were considering the nature of warnings that they might hear - for example ‘a shower of expletives’ - the phrase was not understood nor was the use of terms such as ‘frank and revealing’. Respondents wanted a clearer indication about the bad language they were going to hear.

The standardisation of warnings was considered also to be a useful move. Some respondents wanted the warning to stand alone, considering that incorporating it into the main body of a pre-transmission announcement diluted its value.

## **The Watershed**

The qualitative research showed that most respondents expected programmes broadcast during the day or in the early part of the evening not to contain bad language. They were generally satisfied that this was the case.

*'I don't see no problem with that (9.00pm) because there's no chance of the children coming downstairs to watch it. It's at a time you can choose not to watch and half the people are not watching it anyway.'*

(Single female aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

Respondents also felt quite clearly that parents should take responsibility for what their children viewed.

*'It's the parent's choice. They must say "look, you go to bed. You are not watching this".'*

(Female aged 16-20, living at home, Dawlish, BC1)

Respondents in the quantitative study were asked a set of questions about the principle of the Watershed and whether or not they agreed:

**Table 6: Programmes of any type should be able to be shown at any time - it's the parents' responsibility to monitor what their children watch**

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly	13	13	12	10	14	13	11	14	15
Agree slightly	15	14	15	14	14	17	14	15	14
Neither	7	8	6	6	5	9	4	9	8
Disagree slightly	15	17	13	23	12	10	16	14	12
Disagree strongly	50	47	53	46	54	52	55	48	49

Base: All respondents

About two-thirds of respondents disagreed with the statement that parents should take sole responsibility for what their children viewed. This is corroborated by other research<sup>13</sup> which found that, while parents accepted they should take prime responsibility for their children's viewing, they had entered into a 'contract' with the broadcaster regarding the Watershed and expected the broadcaster to maintain his side of the bargain. It was generally felt that this was the case:

*'You get the uncut version after 10.00pm. You get the mild stuff in the morning.'*

(Mother of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

**Table 7: All programmes shown before 9.00pm should be suitable for children**

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly	71	67	76	60	77	77	71	72	68
Agree slightly	18	20	15	25	15	13	20	16	19



### 3 Programme genres

Neither	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Disagree slightly	6	8	4	9	5	4	5	7	7
Disagree strongly	2	3	2	4	1	2	2	3	4

Base: All respondents

As Table 7 shows, most respondents thought that programmes shown before the Watershed should be suitable for children to watch; women and the two older groups of respondents were slightly more likely to agree with this. Those with children were not more likely than the average to say this, however; nor were those with access to cable or satellite channels. This may be a reflection of the fact that the encrypted satellite film channels operate a different Watershed policy, with those films that would be shown at 9:00pm on terrestrial television being shown at 8:00pm on satellite.

Table 8: I am happy to stay up late to watch programmes, if that protects children

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly	51	50	52	53	56	43	58	46	49
Agree slightly	27	31	23	32	24	25	26	27	26
Neither	10	9	10	7	8	14	7	11	12
Disagree slightly	8	7	9	5	9	9	5	9	9
Disagree strongly	5	3	6	3	3	9	3	6	3

Base: All respondents

The majority of respondents said that they would be willing to stay up later to watch television programmes if that would protect children. There was a slight tendency for those with children to say this, but the overall 'agree' scores across all the classificatory groups were high for this statement.

As the data suggest, the simple fact that a programme is shown after the Watershed is not enough. Respondents recognised that television content became progressively less suitable for children across the evening, and continued to become more 'adult' from 9:00pm. Some of this was an acknowledgement that children may still be awake and watching television at 9:00pm precisely, but by 10:00pm, an hour after the Watershed, they should be in bed (particularly if they were of school age). Once again parental responsibility and the increasing range of means of access were raised:

*'At the end of the day, no matter what time you make it, you'll find parents who will let their children watch anything. Plus there are videos.'*

(Afro-Caribbean male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

Despite all the above, programmes broadcast between 9:00pm and 11:00pm were judged by respondents on an individual basis. The later hour did not automatically condone the use of

offensive language. It was still dependent on contextual issues.

*‘Some films are on too early. 11.30pm is an acceptable time (for anything).  
Bad language should be put after 10.00pm and not 8.00pm... a ‘15’ should be after  
10.00pm and ‘18’ after 11.30pm, so parents can have control.’*  
(Parents aged 25-55 with children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

[14] See Appendix 2 for full listing and detail of clips.



## Programme Genres and Expectations

The research looked at the way in which programme genres affected expectations. As this figure derived from the qualitative research shows, certain genres were expected to contain no bad language (children’s programming, for example) while action films were expected to contain the most.

**Figure 2: Programme Type**

	<i>Level of bad language expected</i>			
	<i>none</i>	<i>little</i>	<i>more</i>	<i>lots</i>
Children’s programmes				
Old movies (40s,50s)				
Family entertainment/films				
Games/quiz shows				
News				
Soap operas				
Chat shows				
Sports/sports related				
Sitcoms				
Youth TV				
Adult films				
Drama				
Stand up comedy				
Documentaries				
Action films				

**Table 9: Programme genres where bad language/swearing is acceptable**

<i>Programme types</i>	<i>Total sample</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Action films	55	63	48
Police drama	55	59	51
Serious drama	38	44	31
Alternative comedy	37	46	28
Stand-up comedy	35	45	25
Situation comedies	25	29	21

Programmes for young adults	23	29	17
Light drama	14	18	10
Soap operas	13	17	9
Not stated	18	14	21

Base: All respondents

As the quantified data show, action films and police drama series were accepted as the genres in which bad language might legitimately be found by over half the sample. Men were more likely to say they would accept bad language in an action film than women, and the data also showed clear age differences. Seventy per cent of those aged under 34 said bad language would be acceptable in such films compared with under a third (33%) of those aged 55 and over. Those in the mid-age range were also more likely than average to say that they would expect action films to contain bad language (62% said this).

While there were some age differences when police drama series were being considered, with younger respondents more likely to say that bad language was acceptable, neither these nor the gender differences were as marked as they had been for action films. However even police series were considered to be different in style and had to be judged individually:

*‘Real life, isn’t it. You see the difference between the ‘Blues and Twos’ and ‘The Bill’ sort of thing.’*  
(Female aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

Serious drama (containing serious themes, realistic) and alternative/stand-up comedy (the former designed to be anarchic and the latter often featuring comedians who performed mainly in clubs) were thought by over a third of respondents to be likely to contain bad language. As the data above showed, there were clear gender and age differences (particularly for the comedy categories). Parents seemed most likely to respond in a similar way to the younger respondents.

*‘(Re Billy Connolly) He worked in the Glasgow shipyards. You work in places like that, if you hit your finger with a hammer you aren’t going to say “Oh dear”.’*  
(Female empty nester aged 55-70, Aberdeen, C2DE)

*‘Billy Connolly’s stories are about reality. It’s a harsh Glaswegian background.’*  
(Male empty nester, aged 55 years and below, Dawlish, BC1)

In contrast, reactions to a clip of the comedian, Mark Thomas<sup>14</sup> were different. It was

thought that he used swearing in an aggressive manner and that was felt to be calculated. This did not sit well with many respondents:

*'It's done to be funny. He's trying to be offensive, putting it on for the sake of it.'*  
(Female aged 16-18, Leeds, C2DE)

Bad language was less likely to be considered suitable in the less serious or less anarchic programmes within light entertainment programming.

Again, the time of transmission was key. Respondents mentioned both soap operas and some of the situation comedies broadcast before the Watershed as causing problems because of the perceived level of bad language within them:

*'There's soaps and stuff that have swearing in. It might not be what you call high class swearing. Just like different types of language for different types of people.'*  
(Female aged 16-18, Leeds, C2DE)

*'Someone called Jim McDonald a bastard. You don't often hear it on 'Coronation Street'. I was quite surprised.'*  
(Mother of children aged 9-15, Leeds, C2DE)

Other respondents in the qualitative research, however, commented on how little bad language there was in soap operas, which made them less realistic:

*'When you are watching 'EastEnders' or something..they don't really swear enough because it's supposed to be a real life situation. And in a real life situation when you are with a group of people you know well, then you tend to swear more. They are all losing their heads constantly, but there's no swear words...In 'Neighbours' they always say things like "Oh, you rat", don't they?'*  
(Male aged 16-20, living at home, Brighton, BC1)

Children's programmes were not expected to contain any bad language. Some respondents in the qualitative research were shown a clip from a children's programme which included the words 'dirty slut' from a Roald Dahl story. Respondents reacted quite strongly to this, not because they thought children were not expected to know any bad language but because hearing it on television was felt to endorse it:

*'This was meant to be a children's programme. It's sick.'*

[15] Monitoring Report 5: 1996; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

amounts of bad language, while the remainder of the sample (6%) said they expected American programming to have less swearing or bad language. Those with cable or satellite television were slightly more likely to say that the language was the same, regardless of country of origin, than agree that American films contained more bad language. (48% said the level of bad language would be the same while 45% of this group said it would be greater in American films).

A similar question was asked about comedies and drama series. Here the data were less clear. Over half the respondents (53%) thought the language would be similar regardless of country of origin, while nearly one in three (30%) said that American programmes would still contain more bad language. Sixteen per cent of the sample thought British comedies and drama series would contain a greater amount of bad language.

## 4 Justifiability of bad language

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(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, C1C2)

*'But I was watching this children's programme and they were all saying "get out of my way, you stupid cow" and they were being, not rude, but having no respect for other people. That is much worse than bad language.'*

(Mother of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

Respondents in the group discussions also commented on the careless use of bad language. Some of them had been shown a clip from 'Noel's House Party' in which a guest said 'shit'. While this was accepted as a slip, there was some concern that live programming left itself open to such problems. However, the host was considered to have dealt with it well:

*'Noel Edmonds - I liked it when he said "I hope you won't use that language again" rather than laughing it off.'*

(Asian mother of children aged 2-8, Birmingham, C1C2)

### Programme Channels

The qualitative research found a clearly understood hierarchy in terms of the amount of bad language different channel providers could be expected to allow. The main terrestrial channels, BBC1 and Channel Three, were thought to be more careful about what they transmitted while the other channels were more risqué. Respondents were divided in their views about this, but it offered them a further layer of information for their viewing decision-making process:

*'BBC1 and Grampian usually cut out the swearing. Channel Four leaves things uncut, which is better.'*

(Couple aged 18-30, living in own accommodation, Aberdeen, C2D)

*'Watching TV programmes on Channel Four which are trying to be controversial, they don't cut out things that other channels would. Did you see 'Reservoir Dogs' the other day? If that was on BBC1, they would have cut things out.'*

(Afro-Caribbean male, aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

The cable and satellite channels were felt to be even less regulated than the terrestrial broadcasters. Respondents acknowledged that, in deciding to subscribe to satellite or cable television, they increased the risk of bad language coming into their homes. They also said that bad language was to be found on many of the channels, especially film channels. Comments were made regarding the combination of bad language with sex and violence in films (see Table 9 about 'action films' above), particularly by female respondents.

*'You expect something of the terrestrial channels. You pay your license. But for the Sky ones, I wouldn't be as shocked. I think while you pay your license, the telly*

*companies owe something to the people watching them.'*

(Mother of children aged 9-15, Leeds, C2DE)

There was also a feeling that the cable companies gave more information to the viewer, which offset the 'harder' material that was shown:

*'On Sky Movies they put much more visual display on who the film is aimed at than on the BBC. The BBC might make some sort of comment about lively language or interesting scenes, or scenes not for the faint-hearted. Which usually means there is sex or swearing or both. With satellite it is more in your face. This is an 18. If you're going to watch it, it's an 18. If you aren't going to watch it's an 18.'*

(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

As a result of this perceived access to better and more information, some of those respondents who were parents said they used the channel blocking devices offered by cable television:

## Country of Production

Among the most-viewed programme genres are films, many of which come from the US<sup>15</sup>. Drama on the other hand tends to be domestically produced. The qualitative research found that respondents made a distinction between country of origin when considering the probable levels of bad language in different programme genres, as the comments below show.

*'The level of violence is different in American films, which brings in the bad language. Along with the violence, I personally think.'*

(Female, aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

*'Americans are worse with swearing.'*

(Afro-Caribbean male, aged 18-25, London, C1C2)

*"'Motherfucker" isn't what we use in England. You'd hear that in America.'*

(Male empty nester, aged 55 and below, Dawlish, BC1)

As the quotes show, these distinctions held true, especially for film, where American product was thought to contain stronger language. In drama and comedy, British-made programmes were thought more likely to contain stronger language.

The quantitative research was designed to check how widespread these expectations were. The data show that about half the respondents (49%) agreed with a statement which suggested that they would expect to hear more bad language in American originated film than in British. Over two in five (44%) said that they expected the two to have similar

[16] Note shrinking sample sizes; data to be treated as indicative only.

## Scripted Bad Language

Respondents in the qualitative research appeared to have a variety of additional contextual variables which made the use of bad language more or less acceptable. Much of this was based on the relevance of the language to the programme or its plot. So respondents expected a film like *'Born on the Fourth of July'* (based on the Vietnam war) to contain bad language.

Due to the nature of some of the complaints received by the Commission, it was also of interest to know whether respondents felt there was any difference in the acceptability of bad language if it was uttered on the spur of the moment (as in a documentary) or if it was scripted (as in a piece of fiction). Nearly one in five respondents (18%) in the quantified sample said they had no view. Of the remainder, there was a marginal bias towards respondents saying that the scripted use of bad language was worse than spontaneous utterances. The difference between the two was not as great as might have been expected however. Forty-four per cent of respondents said that scripted language was worse while 38 per cent said the spontaneous expletive was worse. Interestingly, younger respondents were more likely to consider that bad language in a documentary was worse than bad language in fiction (45% mentioned swearing in documentaries as being worse while 34% mentioned film). Those with satellite and cable television also were more likely to mention documentaries as worse. The quality of production was obviously important to the justifiability of the use of bad language, as this interviewee suggested:

*'Sometimes it just sounds crap. Sometimes it depends on how well it is written. Sometimes they've just done it to try and make it sound realistic and it just sounds stupid sometimes.'*

(Male, aged 18-24, living away from home, Leeds)

Another respondent questioned the editing out of 'realistic' language in a piece of fiction, arguing that it would not be used if it were not thought to be relevant:

*'If swearing is meant to be true to life, you accept it in a documentary. So why shouldn't you accept it in a true to life drama? If they think it shouldn't be there, they don't write it in or they write it out.'*

(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

The 'shock value' (and appreciation) of bad language should not be ignored however. As this respondent in a depth interview said:

*'I think that swearing is real, so it should be on TV. TV should be real but then, at the same time, like I've said, one of the joys of swear words is that they are words'*

[17] Violence in Factual Television, Annual Review; Broadcasting Standards Council, 1993.

*you can use to express something you're not meant to, that's slightly offensive. And if they were used all the time, and used everywhere, then they would lose their effect.'*

(Male, aged 16-20, living at home, Brighton, BC1)

### Inter-Relationships and Justification

In the quantitative research, respondents were asked questions relating to programme genre, time of transmission and overt regulation:

- a. They were asked if they thought a drama or film which portrayed people who - in real life - would use a lot of bad language could be shown at 9.00pm or if it should be 'toned down'. If a respondent said 'toned down', they were taken through two further time slots: 10.00pm and 11.00pm or later. Table 8 shows the results of this form of questioning:

Table 10: Acceptability of bad language in a film/drama at different time slots

	Total %	Men %	Women %	18-34 %	35-54 %	55+ %	Any children %	No children %	Cable/ satellite %
<b>At 9.00pm</b>									
Shown as is	53	59	46	69	59	30	62	47	63
Toned down	47	41	54	31	42	70	38	53	37
<b>At 10.00pm (based on 'toned down' as above)</b>									
Shown as is	31	*27	34	*42	*42	*18	50	22	37
Toned down	70	73	66	*57	*57	82	50	78	63
<b>At 11.00pm (based on 'toned down' as above)</b>									
Shown as is	*19	*23	*16	*30	*22	*15	*27	*17	*26
Toned down	81	77	84	*73	*78	85	*73	*83	*76

Base: All respondents

\* Data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

As Table 10 shows, respondents were fairly evenly split at first between those who said a work of fiction, based on characters who would swear a lot in real life, should be shown intact at 9.00pm and those who thought it should be toned down. As the questioning progressed, however, taking the time at which the programme could be shown first to 10.00pm<sup>16</sup> and then to 11.00pm, there remained a core group of respondents (about one in four) who said that the programme should be toned down, whatever the time of transmission. For them there was a feeling that no work of fiction needed to reflect reality that closely.

[18] Young People and the Media, Working Paper 13; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1996.



There were gender differences but these were not as significant as the age differences. The youngest group of respondents were far more likely to say that a programme could be shown, warts and all, at the point of the Watershed and beyond. Those with children were marginally more likely to agree with them, although the data show that those with children aged ten and over were slightly more in favour of ‘toning down’ than those with younger children - the differences are not statistically significant however. Those without children (often the older respondents) were more likely to opt for toning down than the sample as a whole.

- b. The same form of questioning was repeated for a documentary depicting people who would swear in real life.

**Table 11: Acceptability of bad language in a documentary at different time slots**

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>18-34</i>	<i>35-54</i>	<i>55+</i>	<i>Any children</i>	<i>No children</i>	<i>Cable/satellite</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>At 9.00pm</b>									
Shown as is	61	65	57	80	64	39	71	55	71
Toned down	39	35	43	20	36	61	29	45	29
<b>At 10.00pm (based on ‘toned down’ as above)</b>									
Shown as is	29	*31	*28	*47	*41	*17	*50	*22	*35
Toned down	71	69	72	*53	*60	84	*50	79	*65
<b>At 11.00pm (based on ‘toned down’ as above)</b>									
Shown as is	*18	*17	*19	*23	*26	*13	*32	*14	*24
Toned down	82	83	82	*77	*74	87	*68	85	*76

Base: All respondents

\* Data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

The results of this question, looking at a documentary, showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents thought that a documentary had more licence than a work of fiction to reflect real life. This marries with findings from work looking at the factual genres in other areas. In ‘*Violence in Factual Television*’<sup>17</sup>, researchers had found that respondents thought factual

television had a responsibility to provide an accurate reflection of the subject being considered, particularly in comparison with fiction.

Age differences remained marked, however, and - as with fiction - there was a core of respondents (one in five; 22%) who felt that if a programme should be toned down, time of transmission was superfluous. There would not appear to be any key differentiating demographic variables at this stage.

- c. A final question was asked about a documentary featuring a footballer or pop star who swore - someone who might be considered a role model to young children. As the data show, the proportions of those opting for toning down the language within the programme was high. Nearly one in two respondents (47%) across the sample said that language in such a programme should be toned down, regardless of the time of transmission.

The age differential was not as marked as it had been for the other genres considered. This is in line with other findings which have shown that people often express concern for others, particularly children, even if they have no children of their own living at home. Indeed, in *'Young People and the Media'*<sup>18</sup>, it was found that the young respondents themselves (aged between eleven and seventeen) had expressed concern about the material younger children might see, and the influence it might have on them.

**Table 12: Acceptability of bad language in a documentary about a role model at different time slots**

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>At 9.00pm</b>									
Shown as is	25	34	17	34	30	11	32	21	32
Toned down	75	66	83	66	70	89	68	79	68
<b>At 10.00pm (based on 'toned down' as above)</b>									
Shown as is	21	*19	*23	*29	*26	*11	28	18	*23
Toned down	79	81	77	71	74	89	72	82	77
<b>At 11.00pm (based on 'toned down' as above)</b>									
Shown as is	15	*14	*15	*18	*17	*11	*17	*14	*14
Toned down	85	86	84	82	83	89	84	87	87

Base: All respondents

\* Data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

The qualitative research would back this finding up. The importance of role models to young people was underlined by this respondent:

*'Older children you hear swearing at the shops and you cringe. The younger ones look up to the older ones and they think it is cool to do this.'*

(Mother of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

When respondents were shown a clip from a documentary about Elton John in which he swore a lot, most thought it reflected badly on the man. They did not think, however, that it should have been edited in any way:

*'It is the truth. It is what happened. If it's a documentary showing his true life then I would expect to see it.'*

(Female, aged 25-55, regular church attendee, London, C1C2)

## **The Notion of Intent**

*'I have been known to call a gentleman friend an "arrogant bastard". That is because he is an arrogant bastard. That is exactly how I feel about him. If I said he was an "arrogant devil", then it isn't the same, is it?'*

(Female empty nester, aged 55-70, Aberdeen, C2DE)

To explore the notion of intent and justifiability, the quantitative research included questions which asked if bad language was more acceptable in some contexts rather than in others. Most respondents (63%) said that the use of bad language could be justified under certain conditions, such as in anger or hurt, or surprise. The demographic differences within the sample were slight - marginally more men, more young people and more of those with children at home were likely to agree with such a justification for bad language. The remainder felt that the circumstance did not make the use of bad language more justified than in any other context.

The data have already shown (Table 4) that some respondents who had found themselves shocked by bad language, despite a warning, said they had been offended by the frequency of the language (60% of those shocked despite a warning). This was developed further: respondents to the questionnaire were asked if the frequency of use affected their acceptance of bad language. This was considered to be the case by over two-thirds of the sample (68%) with few demographic differences. The remainder of the sample said the frequency did not make a difference. A respondent in a depth interview added her voice:



# 5 Attitudes to swear words

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*'I think... where they are "fucking", "fucking", it puts you off watching it after a while.'*

(Female, aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

To develop further the idea that the context in which bad language was placed was a relevant criterion for the viewer, the research asked respondents to consider when the use of bad language was not acceptable.

**Table 13: Lack of acceptability of bad language in a variety of situations**

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Using swear words without notice	86	85	87	86	88	85	86	86	84
Using swear words to describe someone light-heartedly	48	43	53	45	42	58	45	50	48
Using swear words to describe someone in anger	47	45	48	40	45	56	44	48	44
Swearing in surprise to something	22	23	21	*21	*19	26	21	23	*23
Physical shock at being burnt on iron	12	*13	*10	*9	*11	*15	*11	*12	*13

Base: All respondents

\* Data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

[19] Radio and Audience Attitudes, Annual Review; Broadcasting Standards Council, 1994.

As the data show, respondents did take the context into account. The use of bad language as an exclamation (in surprise or in shock) was far more acceptable either than frequent usage or the use of bad language as description.

Women in particular did not accept that bad language used jocularly to describe someone was appropriate; nor did older respondents. In most other cases the demographic differences were slight.

The qualitative research had found also that the respondents considered a word differently if it was directed at someone rather than used simply as an expletive. So that ‘You bugger!’ may be considered more offensive, in some cases, than ‘Oh bugger!’.

It is worth noting that, in the qualitative research, respondents felt words used in an aggressive or angry manner called to mind scenes of (physical) violence. The respondent’s subsequent reaction to these depended on how justified that anger or threat of violence was seen to be.

*‘Little kids... understand swear words as aggression... It’s the aggression that’s the problem and, not the slang really, isn’t it? I mean I think it’s wrong for kids to be aggressive in their homes anyway... It is the tone and the aggression (of the language) which normally is offensive.’*

(Male aged 16-20, living at home, Brighton, BC1)

## Editing

Broadcasters who had attended the seminar on bad language in November 1996 had said they were receiving an increasing number of complaints about material (especially films) which had been edited, especially if transmitted late at night. Within the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they thought it better to show cinema films late at night, uncut, or if it were better to show them cut and earlier in the evening.

**Table 14: Do you think it preferable to show films uncut later at night, or to show them cut earlier in the evening?**

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Uncut and transmitted late	65	75	56	79	71	46	75	60	76
Cut and transmitted earlier	35	25	44	21	29	54	25	40	*25

Base: All respondents

\* Data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

Most respondents would prefer the use of scheduling as the barrier to viewing rather than the use of editing. This was particularly true for film where edits appeared to be more instantly recognisable. There were age and gender differences which are to be expected given the rest of the study's results. Those who received cable or satellite television were also more likely than average to opt for scheduling restrictions as they were most used to seeing films in their original unedited form.

This dislike of editing was mentioned also in the qualitative research:

*'Put warnings on before things, rather than cutting out words.'*

(Couple aged 18-30, living together, Aberdeen, C2D)

*'I find it more offensive when they bleep out or dub over words and use a less offensive word, especially if it is after 10.00pm.'*

(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)



## Ranking of Words

As noted earlier, not all bad language or swear words were thought to carry the same weight. In a depth interview, this respondent concluded:

*'I don't really class things like blaspheming as bad language, more likely "f'ing", "bollocks", "wanker", and that sort of stuff.'*

(Male aged 16-20, living at home, London, C2D)

Another respondents said:

*'I never seem to think of "bloody" as being a swear word. I think of it as more of an everyday kind of word.'*

(Female aged 16-20, living at home, Dawlish, BC1)

In previous quantitative surveys asking respondents to rank various terms, the Commission had used a scale ranging from 'strong' through 'medium' to 'weak'. In the qualitative stage of this study, it was found that relative strength was a less good measure than severity. This has now been adopted as the scale (spanning 'very severe (bad language)' to 'not swearing'). This means that the ranking of words by respondents in this study is not directly comparable with previous years. However, the overall ranked position from this sample and the previous study will give some indication of change. The data have been shown. A full list of the words - and their scores - from the previous 1994 study<sup>19</sup> are given in Appendix 4.

The list of terms has been split into three separate tables for presentation purposes. Data on respondents attitudes to swear words, terms of minority abuse and words from a religious origin are presented separately.

**Table 15: List of swear words**

	<i>Very severe</i>	<i>Fairly severe</i>	<i>Quite mild</i>	<i>Not swearing</i>	<i>Not stated</i>	<i>Mean (4 point scale)</i>	<i>Ranking in 1994</i>
	%	%	%	%	%		
Cunt	81	13	3*	*1	*1	3.6	1
Motherfucker	82	13	4	*1	-	3.6	3
Fuck	75	19	5	*1	*1	3.4	1
Wanker	41	34	21	4	*	2.5	4
Bastard	37	34	22	6	*1	2.4	5
Twat	34	22	27	16	*1	2.1	9
Bollocks	32	32	29	6	*1	2.2	8
Prick	31	29	31	7	*1	2.2	6
Shag	31	28	31	10	*1	2.1	*n/a
Arsehole	26	36	31	6	*1	2.1	7

[20] Radio and Audience Attitudes, Broadcasting Standards Council Annual Review; John Libbey, 1994.

[21] A Matter of Manners? - The Limits of Broadcasting Language, Broadcasting Standards Council Monograph; John Libbey, 1991.



Piss off	25	31	38	6	*1	2.0	n/a
Whore	23	31	28	17	*1	1.8	n/a
Shit	18	29	44	7	*1	1.8	10
Pissed off	19	29	43	9	*1	1.8	n/a
Slag	17	33	33	17	*1	1.7	n/a
Dickhead	16	26	40	16	*1	1.6	n/a
Arse	14	25	44	16	*1	1.5	n/a
Bugger	13	24	46	16	*1	1.5	13
Balls	13	24	43	19	*1	1.4	n/a
Sodding	12	20	45	22	*1	1.3	n/a
Tits	11	19	49	19	*1	1.35	n/a
Crap	8	18	45	28	*1	1.2	14
Bloody	5	13	57	23	*1	1.1	17
Tart	6	18	43	32	*1	1.05	n/a

Base: All respondents

\* denotes fewer than 25 respondents. n/a denotes 'not asked'

As Table 15 shows the overall ranking of the words (where comparable) has not changed noticeably. The exception (and the change is slight) is the word 'fuck' which was considered less severe than the other two words ranking higher. In the previous study it had been considered the strongest word, alongside 'cunt'. It is worth noting that among young people (those aged 18-34) 'fuck' had a mean score of 3.3 compared with the overall mean of 3.4. Among the oldest group interviewed its mean score was 3.7 and it ranked second after 'motherfucker'.

For the youngest group, the term 'motherfucker' ranked third with a mean score of 3.5 (compared with 3.6 across the sample). This (albeit slight) difference could be due to the younger respondents' greater familiarity with the word from films, particularly from the US.

Women were consistently more likely than men to rate all the terms as being more severe. This meant that, in general, the ranked order of the words was the same across both samples, but the mean score for the women was higher. The only exception in terms of this ranking was for the word 'shag'. Women both ranked this higher than did men, and thought it significantly more severe - two in five women (40%) said this was a 'very severe' term

[22] Monitoring Report 5: 1996; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

compared with 22 per cent of men.

Similarly, women were almost twice as likely as men to say that the term ‘whore’ was ‘very severe’ - 30 per cent of women said this in comparison with 16 per cent of men. In fact, 22 per cent of men said the abusive use of the word was not swearing at all. A further analysis of the data showed that the oldest respondents were more likely to say it was not swearing (18% said this) than those aged 18-34 (11% said it was not swearing). The qualitative research would suggest that the use of these personal words does create more offence among the young than the older respondents and this would appear to be one of the areas in which language has changed. Similarly, women were more likely than men to say ‘slag’ was a very severe word, although the age differences were less marked.

Some regional differences were noted (see Table 16 below). Those respondents in the south were generally more likely to rate words as less severe than respondents in other parts of the country.

**Table 16: Regional differences within reactions to swear words - mean scores**

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Scotland</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>Midlands</i>	<i>South</i>
Bastard	2.4	3.0	2.4	2.5	2.2
Twat	2.1	2.1	2.8	2.2	1.4
Piss off	2.0	1.7	2.15	2.0	1.8
Bugger	1.5	2.1	1.5	1.3	1.4

Base: All respondents including not stated

*“Bugger” I don’t find at all offensive.’*  
(Male empty nester, aged 55 and below, Dawlish, BC1)

*‘The problem with “tosser” is it’s a sexual connotation and people don’t like sexual connotations in their words. “Prat” has sexual connotations and has the same sexual connotations as “cunt”.’*  
(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

### **Terms of Abuse**

In the research conducted for the Council in 1994<sup>20</sup> it had been found that the use of terms of abuse relating to a person’s race or disability had become unacceptable, particularly to the younger respondent. One respondent in the qualitative research reported on here explained it thus:

*‘Political correctness swings through different fashions, as the decades swing by. There are certain times when you can’t say one thing but can say something else.’*  
(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

[23] A Matter of Manners? - The Limits of Broadcast Language, Broadcasting Standards Council Monograph; John Libbey, 1991.

Table 17: Terms of minority abuse

	<i>Very severe</i> %	<i>Fairly severe</i> %	<i>Quite mild</i> %	<i>Not swearing</i> %	<i>Not stated</i> %	<i>Mean (4 point scale)</i>
Nigger	32	26	20	22	*1	2.0
Spastic	30	23	16	31	*1	1.8
Paki	26	23	22	28	*1	1.75
Jew	19	16	15	50	-	1.2

Base: All respondents

\* denotes fewer than 25 respondents.

As has been noted previously<sup>21</sup>, younger respondents were most sensitive to racial abuse. Whereas the youngest respondents (18-34 year olds) generally found the bad language they were asked to consider less severe than the sample as a whole, this trend was reversed for the word ‘nigger’. Sixty-three per cent of the youngest group found this very/fairly severe and gave it an average score of 2.1, compared with a mean of 1.8 for those aged over 55. Similarly, while not statistically significant, the term ‘Paki’ had a higher mean score among younger respondents (1.85 compared with 1.75 across the sample), with the oldest group of respondents giving it a mean score of 1.6. Although this respondent said:

*‘(Re: clip from ‘Cracker’) “Paki bastard” was more offensive, wasn’t it? I felt the race was more offensive than the swearing.’*

(Female empty nester, aged 55-70, Aberdeen, C2DE)

Respondents in the qualitative research accepted that there were times at which the use of such terms of abuse could be justified (to make a social point) or even as comedy, particularly if used by a person from an ethnic minority.

*‘It is all right to use it (“nigger”) within a soap if it is challenged within that soap.’*

(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

*‘When you watch those American programmes, they’re always calling each other “nigger”.’*

(Afro-Caribbean male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

Interestingly, those in Scotland were more likely than those in other regions to consider the word ‘spastic’ as ‘very severe’:

**Table 18: Regional differences - those rating 'spastic' as 'very severe'**

%	Total	Scotland	North	Midlands	South
Spastic	30	47	27	32	27
Base: All respondents					

This respondent in a group discussion explained why the use of such terms, based on a person's disability, was unacceptable.

*.....'Making words more taboo gives those words more power. Saying the word "spastic" is different from saying the word "fuck". You are putting someone down if you say "spastic" and through no fault of their own are they a spastic.'*  
(Male aged 25-35, no children, Brighton, BC1)

The content analyses<sup>22</sup> showed that in 1996 3 per cent of all bad language monitored on terrestrial television were terms of abuse relating to disability, while the equivalent proportion was about 4 per cent on satellite television.

## Words from a Religious Origin

**Table 19: Words from a religious origin used abusively**

	Very severe %	Fairly severe %	Quite mild %	Not swearing %	Not stated %	Mean (4 point scale)
Jesus Christ	14	14	25	46	*1	1.1
God	9	8	23	59	*1	0.74
Damn	4	5	42	48	*2	0.7

Base: All respondents ..... \* denotes fewer than 25 respondents.

For many of the youngest respondents in the quantitative study these words were not considered to be swear words. Over half of the 18-34 year olds (56%) said that the use of the words 'Jesus Christ' was not swearing compared with 46 per cent of the sample as a whole . The oldest of the respondents - those aged over 55 - were least likely to say these were not swear words when used as expletives (36%). A further 27 per cent of this older group thought the use of these terms in this manner was 'very severe' compared with 14 per cent of the total sample. The 35-54 year olds were ranged almost equally between the two extremes.

Parents, too, were less likely than average to consider such usage as ‘very’ or ‘fairly severe’ - 18 per cent of parents thought this compared with 28 per cent of the sample as a whole.

It is interesting to note that the combination of sexual words and words from a religious origin was generally unacceptable:

*‘(“Jesus Christ”) That isn’t as bad as putting “fucking” in the middle.’*  
 (Afro-Caribbean male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

While the use of ‘God’ as an expletive was felt by all respondents to be less severe than ‘Jesus Christ’, similar age differences were found. Sixteen per cent of those aged over 55 said it was ‘very severe’, compared with 4 per cent of the youngest group.

In a previous study<sup>23</sup> there was an indication that many respondents were not themselves offended by the use of the Christian holy names (as the data above also show) but that they did not wish to cause offence to others. This idea of avoiding offence to others was further investigated in ‘Regulating for Changing Values’. That study had found that nearly two-thirds of the respondents (63%) considered a television programme that was likely to offend people with religious beliefs should only be shown with a clear pre-transmission warning. In the study under consideration here, looking particularly at bad language, respondents to the questionnaire were asked if they were themselves offended by the use of words from a religious origin used as expletives (the specific example given was ‘Jesus Christ’). As Table 18 shows, most respondents (71%) said they were not personally offended by such language, while the remainder said they were. The oldest group of respondents (those aged over 55 years) were significantly more likely to find such language offensive (49% compared with 29% across the sample).

If respondents said they themselves were not offended by such language, they were asked if it should be avoided because of the offence it caused others. The sample is split here with uncertainty as to the appropriateness of causing offence to someone who has deep religious beliefs. Overall, there was a bias towards those saying that such language should be used in any case, although the bias was not great.

**Table 20: Attitudes towards the use of Christian holy names and the offence caused**

							<i>Any</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Cable/</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>18-34</i>	<i>35-54</i>	<i>55+</i>	<i>children</i>	<i>children</i>	<i>children</i>	<i>satellite</i>



## 6 The ethnic perspective

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	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Personal offence</b>									
Yes	29	23	35	*14	26	49	22	34	24
No	71	77	65	86	75	51	79	66	77
Base: All respondents									

<b>If not offended, because offensive to others should it be avoided?</b>									
Yes	53	47	61	53	47	65	51	55	50
No	47	53	39	47	53	*36	48	46	50

\*data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

### The Way Words are Used

Some swear words have a duality of meaning - usually as a coarse descriptor of a sexual act or a part of the body, or they are used simply to cause offence. In the past, the Commission has had complaints about the use of words in their literal (usually sexual) sense and it was of interest to know how widespread this sort of discomfort was.

Respondents were given a series of statements on a card which showed different ways of using swear words. These were:

Used literally: 'I need a wank'  
'I know she's been fucking him for months'

Used as a term of abuse: 'You wanker'  
'You fucker'

Used as general swearing: 'Oh wank!'  
'I don't fucking care'

They were asked then to state if any particular use was more or less offensive.

Table 19 shows their responses.

**Table 21: Do you think words are more or less offensive if used literally about sex, or doesn't it make any difference?**

	<i>Any</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Cable/</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>18-34</i>
	<i>35-54</i>	<i>55+</i>	<i>children</i>
	<i>children</i>	<i>children</i>	<i>satellite</i>

	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Sexual words</b>									
More offensive	34	28	39	31	37	34	35	33	32
Less offensive	9	*11	*6	*14	*9	*3	*9	*8	*8
No difference	57	61	54	55	53	64	56	59	60

Base: All respondents

\*data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

As the data show for over half of the sample using sexual swear words with their rightful, if vulgar, meaning made no difference to the word’s potential offensiveness. For over a third of the sample, the word used with its vulgar meaning was actually more offensive; this was particularly the case for women (although the differences were not significant).

Similar questions were asked of that scatological set of swear words which refer to bodily functions.

**Table 22: Do you think words are more or less offensive if used literally about bodily functions, or doesn’t it make any difference?**

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>18-34</i>	<i>35-54</i>	<i>55+</i>	<i>Any children</i>	<i>No children</i>	<i>Cable/satellite</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Bodily functions</b>									
More offensive	33	30	36	29	37	32	34	32	30
Less offensive	15	17	*12	21	*14	*9	*15	15	*14
No difference	53	53	52	51	49	59	52	53	56

Base: All respondents

\*data based on samples less than 50; should be treated as indicative only

There would appear to be a slight difference in attitudes towards the use of scatological words for their vulgar meaning in comparison with the sexual words. The use of ‘inappropriate’ scatological words was generally thought to be less offensive than the literal use of the sexual words. For over half the sample, however, there was still a feeling that the manner of use made no difference and, for a substantial proportion, using the words in their literal sense made them more offensive.

### **Euphemisms and So On**

The Commission also has received complaints about pre-Watershed comedy shows which



use sexual innuendo and euphemisms to describe sexual activity or parts of the human body.

The research wished to investigate how different groups of respondents reacted to these words and offered up the examples of ‘bonk’ for having sex and ‘tackle’ for male genitalia. The data show that euphemisms did create less unease across the sample, although for certain groups (such as older respondents) the distinction was marginally less clear.

**Table 23: Are you less bothered by euphemisms than by the stronger version, or are they just as bad?**

	Total	Men	Women	18-34	35-54	55+	Any children	No children	Cable/satellite
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Sexual words</b>									
Bothered less	69	71	67	76	74	58	75	66	71
Just as bad	30	29	32	24	26	42	25	34	29

Base: All respondents

*‘(Re. “tits”) I don’t like that. It’s very vulgar.’*  
(Female empty nester, aged 55-70, Aberdeen, C2DE)

*“Shagging” is a bit much before the Watershed.’*  
(Female empty nester, aged 55-70, Aberdeen, C2DE)

Indeed, for the younger respondent, the use of euphemisms meant that they were more likely than the average to say they were less bothered by the language, as were parents.

The qualitative research also showed that parents treated euphemisms as a less serious breach of trust by the broadcaster, even if they were in a programme broadcast before the Watershed. However, they disliked being put in the situation where they had to explain the meaning of words to their children, perhaps before they felt they were ready to. Neither were euphemisms thought to be threatening or frightening in any way. Once again, respondents in the qualitative research made a link between bad language and violence. Within the qualitative research the issue of bad language from an ethnic perspective was examined. (The sample size was not large enough in the quantitative survey to measure ethnic attitudes).

There was some mention made by the Afro-Caribbean respondents that programmes shown on television stereotyped them, particularly American films:

*'It's as if they are just taking the piss out of blacks. It would be offensive because people think that everyone would be talking in American accents and saying "motherfucker" all the time.'*

(Single male, aged 18-24, living away from home, Leeds)

*'The guy that was doing the deal from the taxi was very much more an American stereotype of a particular black person.'*

(Mother of children aged 2-8, Aberdeen, BC1)

There would appear to be some (anecdotal) evidence that this myth was indeed being perpetuated. This man in Devon, with little knowledge of ethnic groups, said:

*'You wouldn't see a white man using that language but coloured gentlemen would use that all the time.'*

(Male empty nester up to 55 years, Dawlish, BC1)

As has already been described, the quantified research had found that the use of racist terms of abuse was considered offensive by a large proportion of respondents. This was endorsed by those from ethnic minorities, interviewed in the qualitative study. Yet there was an acceptance that those from the same ethnic minorities could use the offensive language among their own group and about themselves:

*'Do you know what a nigger is? Nigger is an ignorant black person. If a black person calls me a nigger, I'd laugh at them. But if a white person called me a nigger, I'd slap them.'*

(Afro-Caribbean male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

*'I have a white friend and if we were watching one of these programmes I would tell him never to talk to me like that.'*

(Afro-Caribbean male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

The concern for racist language was not only a concern about one's own minority group. When shown the clip from 'Cracker' (in which a shopkeeper is repeatedly called a 'Paki bastard') Afro-Caribbean respondents felt it went too far:

*'I thought "Paki bastard" was said too many times. It was obvious he was Indian. He didn't know anything about his parentage.'*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

*'I don't like it. It's racism, whether you're black or Indian. It's the same.'*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

In addition to strong objections to racist language, there was a suggestion, in the research, that the young Afro-Caribbean males interviewed were particularly homophobic

## 7 Conclusions

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and objected strongly to words like ‘bugger’ and ‘sod’ and its derivatives. Euphemistic words such as ‘twat’ and ‘tackle’ were not considered so offensive because they came from a white culture. This was a key distinction that this group made: if the language was in a ‘white’ film it was less likely to be thought of as offensive (for example, Hugh Grant’s repeated use of the word ‘fuck’ at the start of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was not offensive). Bad language in a ‘black’ film meant action and was exciting, particularly for the young males.

*‘If I’m watching ‘Menace II Society’ or ‘New Jack City’ and I don’t hear any swearing, I’d wonder what was going on.’*

(Afro-Caribbean male aged 18-25, no children, London, C1C2)

Women objected strongly to words which were derogatory about women: ‘motherfucker’, ‘sisterfucker’, ‘cunt’ and ‘ole’ (a term of abuse found only in the Afro-Caribbean groups) were considered particularly offensive.

The parents among the women also were concerned with bad language coming in to their homes.

*‘My son called his sister a bitch and I asked him where he’d heard it from and he said just from the TV’.*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

Some of these mothers spoke about the problems they had with rap music (which included violent and sexist content) and swing (which was very sexual). They talked about ‘offensive videos’ on some specialist cable services and suggested that they had had to censor these:

*‘(Re rap music) It’s very demeaning; it’s very derogatory to women.’*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

*‘(Re music videos) It’s the lyrics. They are very sexual and it’s the way they are dancing.’*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

Others had been told by their children that the language was of little importance:

*‘I heard my son playing a song. F-this, F-that. I went into his room. He said it’s just a song.’*

(Afro-Caribbean mother of children aged 9-15, London, C1C2)

The above findings are based on comments made by the Afro-Caribbean groups. The researchers also interviewed those from an Asian background and found that they, too, were concerned about the influence that bad language might have on their children. Their anxieties extended further, however, to a concern about images that went against their strong sense of family values. When presented with the scene from *Cracker*, a respondent said:

*'They should show it in a different way. He should say "You people are from Pakistan, you're bad people". It's deeper what he is saying. It's about race. They're attacking the race.'*

(Asian father of children aged 9-15, Birmingham, C1C2)

Many of the respondents from an Asian background objected particularly to exposing the female members of their families to bad language, especially the stronger language, and were against the overt linking between violence and bad language (as in the clip they saw about domestic violence in *'Ladybird Ladybird'*).

There was acceptance that they sometimes swore among themselves:

*'Two friends could be talking. We use bad language in our speech and we are not meaning it. But we still use it. Everybody does it, it's a part of life. Friends are not going to take offence.'*

(Asian father of children aged 9-15, Birmingham, C1C2)

... but the concern remained for children:

*'Certain programmes have to have bad language but they are not suitable for family viewing. But otherwise they'd be boring. Certain films have to have bad language and you'll accept that there will be some bad language. In fact, if there wasn't any, you'd not want to watch it.'*

(Asian father of children aged 9-15, Birmingham, C1C2)

*'You can't be there all the time (supervising the children). We could be out. Or doing something else. I think there should be guidelines. Then they should stick to it.'*

(Asian family with children 9 or over, Aberdeen, BC1)

The use of the milder examples of words from a religious origin was not offensive to this group in general.

## Appendix 1: methodology

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Certain guidelines were suggested by the qualitative research for different categories of programming. These were all premised on an understanding that the programmes would be appropriately scheduled. If these rules were followed, respondents felt, then the viewer would have less cause to complain about material they then saw.

- For live broadcasts respondents thought it should be made clear to guests that bad language could not be tolerated. If bad language was used, the host should apologise immediately, acknowledging the error.
- For comedy, the warnings should be appropriate and clear information should be given on the type of material that the programme might contain.
- For drama and films, warnings should be clear and appropriate, containing information on all the issues raised by the programme (bad language, violence, sexual activity and so on).
- For other genres, such as light entertainment, appropriate warnings were called for or other relevant information so that the viewer could make their own choices.

Respondents thought additional programme information - including warnings - should be given in published listings and teletext.

*'I think when you look on teletext or the TV magazine and you read, you know what to expect from that.'*

(Female, aged 18-24, living away from home, Dawlish)

*'I always check on the teletext and check what kind of storyline is on. If it's OK only then I let them (children) watch it.'*

(Asian mother of children aged 2-8, Birmingham, C1C2)

Vertical dotted lines for writing.

## Qualitative

Twelve group discussions were held, with a total of 90 adults.

Respondents were recruited against the following criteria:

- Male/female
- Upper/lower socio-economic groups
- Range of lifestages/ages
- Children in household, ranging from babies to late teens
- UK white population/ethnic minorities/Christian churchgoers

In each group the following criteria were also used:

- All respondents to watch TV for at least 2-3 hours a day, at least 3-4 times a week on average
- Some to have cable/satellite at home and watch it regularly
- Some to watch the Movie Channel or Sky Movies
- A spread of viewing time from daytime through early evening, evening peak, post-Watershed to very late/early hours of morning
- A spread of attitude to the use of bad language on television (using a list of statements) from strong disapproval to strong approval

The geographical spread for the qualitative research was as follows:

- Scotland (Aberdeen)
- North (Leeds)
- Midlands (Birmingham)
- South West (Dawlish)
- London (Croydon, Walthamstow, Orpington)
- South East (Brighton)

Twelve depth interviews were also held, interviewing 24 adults and 8 children. These comprised of:

- Families, including ethnic minority professionals
- Youngsters aged 16-20, living at home
- Young people aged 18-24 in own accommodation

- Young couples aged 18-30



## Appendix 2: programme clips

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The full sample is shown in the following tables:

### Group Discussions

Group No.	Lifestage	Gender		SEC			Other quota criteria
		Male	Female	BC1	C1C2	C2DE	
1	Young singles aged 16-18		X			X	
2	Single. No children	X			X		Afro-Caribbean - all to be into American/Jamaican hip hop/rap culture
3	Partnered/married No children Aged 25-35	X		X			
4	Parents of young children aged 2-8		X	X			
5	Parents of young children aged 2-8		X		X		Asian - second generation English-speaking Muslims
6	Parents of young children aged 2-8	X			X		
7	Parents of older children aged 9-15		X			X	
8	Parents of older children aged 9-15		X		X		Afro-Caribbean - all aware all aware of American/Jamaican influences on modern culture
9	Parents of older children aged 9-15	X		X			Asian second generation English-speaking Hindus and Sikhs
10	Age range 25-55 years		X		X		Regular churchgoers/ Christians - some children to attend Sunday School/ mix of white and Afro-Caribbean
11	Empty Nesters to age 55	X		X			Include two regular church goers
12	Empty Nesters aged 55-70 (some with grandchildren)		X			X	Include two regular church goers

## Appendix 3: warnings

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### Depth Interviews

#### Families

Depth 1	Family with parents aged 25-55, with at least two children, one of whom is under 9	C1C2
Depth 2	Afro-Caribbean professional family with a least two children, one of whom is aged 9-15, living in an area where ethnic penetration is low	BC1
Depth 3	Family with parents aged 25-55, with at least two children, one of whom is aged 9-15	C1C2
Depth 4	Asian professional family with at least two children, one of whom is aged 9 or over, in an area where ethnic penetration is low	BC1

#### Young Male Friendship Pairs

Depth 5	16-20 living at home. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	BC1
Depth 6	16-20 living at home. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	C2D

#### Young Female Friendship Pairs

Depth 7	16-20 living at home. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	BC1
Depth 8	16-20 living at home. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	C2D

#### Late Teens/Early 20s Friendship Pairs

Depth 9	18-24, single, living away from home. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	Male
Depth 10	18-24, single, living away from home. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	Female

#### Late Teens/Early 20s Friendship Pairs

Depth 11	18-30, married or partnered, living in own accommodation. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	BC1
Depth 12	18-30, married or partnered, living in own accommodation. At least one to admit to using bad language frequently	

### Quantitative

Fieldwork was conducted face-to-face, in home, in 77 points across Great Britain. Interviews were conducted with adults aged 18 and over. Quotas were set from Census data based on age, social class and sex and working status interlocked. Seven hundred and fifty-three interviews were achieved. The data were weighted to be representative of the adult population of Great Britain.

A questionnaire was developed by NOP in consultation with the Broadcasting Standards Commission. Fieldwork was conducted between 8 and 12 August 1997 by fully trained NOP interviewers to the requirements of the Interviewer Quality Control Scheme. Completed questionnaire responses were entered on to the computer system by a key-to-disk method with 10 per cent verification. The data were then checked against a computer edit to isolate errors and inconsistencies. The clean data were then

used as a basis for the computer tabulations from which this report was written.

## Appendix 4: strength of swearwords (1994)

Clips of the following programmes were used in the qualitative research. Listed alongside is the swearing/bad language contained in that particular clip.

Programme Clip	Programme Type	Transmission Time	Language Used
Wham Bam Strawberry Jam	Children's Programme	3.55pm	Dirty slut
Noel's House Party	Light Entertainment	7.00pm	Bastard
Noel's House Party	Light Entertainment	7.00pm	Sack of shit
Byker Grove	Children's Programme	5.10pm	Slut, Tart
Birds of a Feather	Sit-Com	8.30pm	Crap, Oik, Tackle, God, Yobbie, Arse, Prat
This Morning	Daytime magazine programme	10.30am	Pissing you off
Kilroy	Daytime magazine programme	09.45am	Wanker (with apology)
The Bill	Drama series	8.00pm	Bastard, Dickhead
Dalziel and Pascoe	Drama series	8.05pm	Bugger, Smartarse
Holding the Baby	Sit-Com	8.30pm	Bollocks, Tits, Shagging
Waiting for God	Sit-Com	7.00pm	Bastard, Balls, Bloody, Sodding
Absolutely Fabulous	Sit-Com	9.30pm	Jesus Christ
Police, Camera, Action	Fly on the wall series	8.30pm	Bleeps (for fuck), Jesus F Christ
Cracker	Drama	9.00pm	Paki bastard
Modern Times: Skin	Documentary	9.00pm	Paki, Fucking, Bastard, Nigger, Whore
Bandit Queen	Film	10.20pm	Sisterfucker (subtitled)
Scent of a Woman	Film	8.20pm	Oh Jesus
Four Weddings and a Funeral	Film	9.00pm	Fuck (repeated), Bugger
Billy Connolly's Tour of Australia	Comedy	10.10pm	Prick, Arse, Fuck, Fucking
Mark Thomas Product Comedy	Comedy	10.30pm	Fuck
Cutting Edge: Graham Taylor	Documentary	9.00pm	Fuck me, Fucking hell, Fucking (repeated)
Flowers of the Forest	Film	9.30pm	Shit, Fucking
Common as Muck	Drama series	9.30pm	Bastard, Bloody, Bollocks
Without Walls: Battersea Bardot	Documentary	9.00pm	Fucking cunt (with apology)
Born on the Fourth of July	Film	9.50pm	Jesus F Christ, Shit Motherfucker (repeated),
Bad Boys Blue	Film	10.00pm	Motherfucker
Dr. Detroit	Film	8.00pm	Son of a bitch, Arsehole, Fuck
Shopping	Film	10.00pm	Shit, Fuck, Bollocks, Fuckers
Tantrums and Tiaras	Documentary	10.15pm	Fuck (repeated), Crap
Ladybird, Ladybird	Film	10.00pm	Fuck, Cunt

The following examples of on-air warnings were shown to and discussed with respondents in some of

## Appendix 5: researcher's credits

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the qualitative research. Some of the swearing/bad language used within the programme is also listed. These words were not shown to respondents - the moderator referred to them as appropriate.

'Now on BBC2 settle down with your can of beer and cheeseburger for an evening in with *Billy Connolly*. It's all rather complex so I'll let him do the introduction.'

(*An Evening in with Billy Connolly*, BBC2, Sunday 7.50-11.50pm - Comedy)

Language included: *Christ, Bugger, Bullshit*

'First on Four, tough-talking from our boys in blue, *Jack and Jeremy's Police 4*.'

Repeated with the following altered warning:

'On Four now - coming to the scene of a crime near you - complete with dramatic irreverence and severe bad language - *Jack and Jeremy's Police 4*'

(*Jack and Jeremy's Police 4*, Channel 4, Friday 10.00pm; repeated Sunday 10.20pm - Comedy)

Language included: *Fuck, Suck my cock*

'An extremely frank and revealing video diary of a year in the life of Elton John.'

(*Tantrums and Tiaras*, ITV, Sunday 10.15pm - Documentary/Factual)

Language included: *Fuck (and derivatives), Bugger, Bullshit, Bastard, Shitbag*

'Now on Four, the man who created many a good impression, *Rory Bremner - Who Else?* - but be forewarned: in the second half put your brollys up for a shower of expletives from a well-known weatherman.'

(*Rory Bremner - Who Else?*, Channel 4, Saturday 10.10pm - Comedy)

Language included: *Fuck*

'In the interests of realism, this dramatic account contains strong language.'

(*Fool's Gold: The Story of the Brinks-Mat Robbery*, ITV, Sunday 9.15pm - Film)

Language included: *Fuck (and derivatives), Bollocks, Bastard*

'... recalling their disturbing experiences for *Modern Times* now on BBC2, including the strong and abusive language that was used against them.'

(*Modern Times: Skin*, BBC2, Wednesday 9.00pm - Documentary/Factual)

Language included: *Paki, Fucking, Bastard, Nigger, Whore*

'Now Channel 4's Stanley Kubrick season continues with a vivid, hard-hitting Vietnam war drama that includes graphic images and language. Matthew Modine stars in '*Full Metal Jacket*.'

(*Full Metal Jacket*, Channel 4, Sunday 10.00pm - Film)

Language included: *Fuck (and derivatives)*

'Before that, on BBC2, the first of tonight's films from Director John McNorton is part-gangster movie and part bitter-sweet romance. Robert DeNiro and Uma Thurman star in '*Mad Dog and Glory*'. The film contains strong language.'

(*Mad Dog and Glory*, BBC2, Sunday 10.00pm - Film)

Language included: *Fuck (and derivatives)*

## Appendix 6: the Broadcasting Standards Commission

'Now, Film on 4 presents Mike Leigh's award-winning *'Naked'* which contains strong language and scenes that some may find disturbing.'

(*Naked*, Channel 4, Tuesday 10.00pm - Film)

*Language included: Fuck, Fucking, Shit*

'This film contains very strong language and graphic scenes of violence.'

(*Reservoir Dogs*, Channel 4 - Film)

'This film is classified as a 'G' and advises parents to exercise guidance. This film contains material that some parents may find unsuitable for younger children.'

(*The Elephant Man*, Channel 5 - Film)

'..Classifies this film as an 'A' - is unsuitable for anybody under 18 and should be watched by adults only'

(*Stay Hungry*, Channel 5 - Film)

The following table is taken from '*Radio and Audience Attitudes*', the 1994 Annual Review of the Broadcasting Standards Council. The words were ranked according to strength.

	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Weak</i>	<i>Never heard of</i>
	%	%	%	%
Fuck	92	7	1	-
Cunt	92	5	1	1
Motherfucker	90	5	1	3
Wanker	62	28	6	5
Bastard	50	35	15	-
Prick	49	35	15	1
Arsehole	48	37	15	*
Bollocks	43	39	17	*
Twat	34	28	30	8
Shit	28	43	29	-
Piss	27	42	31	-
Tosser	22	38	29	11
Bugger	17	41	42	*
Crap	12	35	51	1
Git	10	29	59	2
Pillock	9	29	59	4
Bloody	6	32	62	*
Damn	3	19	78	*

Base: All who answered (excluding Don't Know/Refused/Not asked)

**Andrea Millwood Hargrave**, the Broadcasting Standards Commission's Research Director, conducted the analysis and interpretation of the data and wrote this report. Previously Director of Planning (Marketing) for British Satellite Broadcasting, she was PREMIERE's Director of Sales and Marketing and Head of Research for Thorn EMI Cable Programmes and Grampian Television. She graduated from the University of Durham with a Degree in Psychology.

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The Broadcasting Standards Commission is the statutory body for both standards and fairness in broadcasting. It is the only organisation within the regulatory framework of UK broadcasting to cover all television and radio. This includes BBC and commercial broadcasters as well as text, cable, satellite and digital services.

As an independent organisation representing the interests of the consumer, the Broadcasting Standards Commission considers the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct and matters of taste and decency. As an alternative to a court of law, it provides redress for people who believe they have been unfairly treated or subjected to unwarranted infringement of privacy. The Commission has three main tasks which are set out in the 1996 Broadcasting Act:

- produce codes of practice relating to standards and fairness;
- consider and adjudicate on complaints;
- monitor, research and report on standards and fairness in broadcasting.

This research working paper is published as part of a programme of research into attitudes towards standards and fairness in broadcasting.

The research, which was carried out by independent experts, is not a statement of Commission policy. Its role is to offer guidance and practical information to Commissioners and broadcasters in their work.

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