

Dropping the F-Bomb

By Joel Achenbach
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The most versatile word in our language can do almost anything, other than be printed in a family newspaper. It can be a noun, a verb, a gerund, an adjective or just an expletive. It can be literal or figurative. Although it has an explicit sexual meaning, it's usually used figuratively these days, as an all-purpose intensifier.

The F-word remains taboo. But just barely. We may be entering an era in which this fabled vulgarity is on its way to becoming just another word -- its transgressive energy steadily sapped by overuse.

From hip-hop artists to bloggers to the vice president of the United States, everyone's dropping the F-bomb. Young people in particular may not grasp how special this word has been in the past. They may not realize how, like an old sourdough starter, the word has been lovingly preserved over the centuries and passed from generation to generation. For the good of human communication we must come together, as a people, to protect this word, and ensure that, years from now, it remains obscene.

Our leaders aren't helping. Before he was elected president, George W. Bush used the word repeatedly during an interview with Tucker Carlson. Dick Cheney on the Senate floor told a Democratic senator to *eff* himself. Presidential candidate John F. Kerry said of Bush and the war, "Did I expect George Bush to [mess] it up as badly as he did? I don't think anybody did." No one is shocked that these people use such language, but as statesmanship it's not exactly Lincolnesque.

More generally, the word is imperiled by the profusion of communications technologies. Everyone's talking, e-mailing, blogging and commenting on everyone else's comments. Combine that with partisan rancor and a general desperation to get one's message across, and naturally the word gets overtaxed. In Blogworld there are no idiots anymore, only [blithering] idiots. The most opportunistic move in the corporate realm may have been the decision by a retailer to call itself French Connection United Kingdom, which allowed it to put the company's initials on T-shirts everywhere. Jeepers, that's clever!

I don't want to make a federal case out of all of this -- but that's what the government is doing. The Federal Communications Commission in recent years has cracked down on "indecent" in general and this word specifically. The FCC's fines for indecency have risen steadily: a mere \$4,000 in 1995, then \$48,000 in 2000, then \$440,000 in 2003 and finally a whopping \$7.9 million in 2004. President Bush signed a bill last week increasing by tenfold the maximum fine for indecency on radio or TV, to \$325,000. Broadcasters have sued to overturn recent FCC rulings, arguing that broadcasters shouldn't have to abide by laws that don't affect cable and satellite providers (which is why HBO's "Deadwood" can clock, by one Web site's calculation, 1.48 F-words per minute). The inability to be indecent is, for broadcasters, a competitive disadvantage.

In any case, government fines for indecency are something of a rearguard action, unlikely to stem the tide. It's like trying to fight rising sea levels one sandbag at a time.

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A landmark case revolves around the word used by Bono, the rock star, at the 2003 Golden Globe Awards. He blurted out that winning an award was "[bleepin'] brilliant." The FCC first ruled that his comment wasn't indecent, because it didn't describe a sexual act. But in 2004, after the Janet Jackson breast exposure during the Super Bowl halftime show, the commission reversed the Bono ruling, saying the singer's comment was indeed profane and indecent.

The FCC's logic, however, was a stretch. It argued that any use of the word "inherently has a sexual connotation." But that's just not true. In fact, the reason it is used so often is because it has escaped the bonds of its sexual origin. It's now used as a generic intensifier. It makes plain language more colorful and emphatic.

The reason it must be suppressed in polite society is not because it's a bad word, but because, in certain circumstances, it is a very good word. It is a solidly built word of just four letters, bracketed by rock-hard consonants. It is not a mushy word, but one with sharp edges. Consider how clunky the term "the F-word" is. The authentic article, by contrast, explodes into space from a gate formed by the upper incisors and the lower lip. Then it slams to a dramatic glottal cough.

I'd even argue that it has therapeutic properties. Ponder, if you will, how critically important this word can be when you stub a toe. It serves as an instant palliative. It's like verbal morphine. You can't hop around the dining room, holding your foot, shouting "Drat!" or "Dagnabbit!" or "Heavens to Betsy!" Those words don't work.

"It's a sexual word in origin but it's not used that way very often," says Jesse Sheidlower, editor at large of the Oxford English Dictionary and editor of the 1995 book "The F-Word," a 224-page dictionary in which some of the permutations of the word are absofreakin'lutely ridiculous.

"It does not have the sting that it used to," he says. "For young people, it just doesn't have that much power for them."

The word has been around since at least the 15th century. The English word with which we are familiar is related to similar words found in the Germanic languages, such as Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish and German. These words meant "to thrust" or "to strike" or "to copulate." The first known printed appearance, Sheidlower says, comes from a text around 1475, in a poem that more or less said the monks of Cambridge did not go to heaven because of their sexual dalliances with women. For the next four centuries it was almost always used in a literal sexual sense. The figurative uses so common today didn't arise until the late 19th century, Sheidlower says.

The word was not openly printed in the United States until 1926, when it appeared once in Howard Vincent O'Brien's memoir "Wine, Women and War," according to Sheidlower's book. After World War II, writer Norman Mailer negotiated his way around the taboo by using the made-up word "fug" in the dialogue of the book "The Naked and the Dead." This spring, Andrew Crocker, a Harvard senior, turned in his thesis on the use of the word in post-World War II America, and he relates the famous story that Tallulah Bankhead (or, in some tellings, Dorothy Parker, or Mae West) said to Mailer at a cocktail party, "So you're the man who can't spell f -- ." Nice line, though Crocker says it's apocryphal.

James Jones used the word in his 1951 novel "From Here to Eternity." Like Mailer, Jones was reflecting the speech of American soldiers during the war. This point is key: The word was routinely used by real people, it just was rarely published and never broadcast. It was still taboo.

Liberating the word became a dubious triumph of the 1960s counterculture. At Woodstock, Country Joe and the Fish led a rousing cheer that began with "Give me an F!" and continued on through "K," finally asking,

"What's that spell?" Now it sounds silly. Wow. They said a bad word out loud! What revolutionaries!

Soon, the word became common in popular culture, but still retained some of its sizzle. Consider the classic line by Otter in the 1978 movie "Animal House" after the fraternity brothers have wrecked Flounder's car: "Flounder, you can't spend your whole life worrying about your mistakes! You [effed] up -- you trusted us!" Drift a few years forward to 1989, and Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing," and the word gets a real workout in the mouth of Sal, who at one point uses it six times in the space of five sentences.

Today it still has enough power to be memorable, as when Jack and Miles in the movie "Sideways" discuss the possibility of drinking merlot:

Jack: "If they want to drink merlot, we're drinking merlot."

Miles: "No, if anyone orders merlot, I'm leaving. I am NOT drinking any [expletive deleted] merlot!"

Just to clarify: This is funny not because Miles used a bad word, but because of the juxtaposition of the bad word with the one that follows. We do not expect to hear a person express such strong feelings -- to the point of vulgarity -- when discussing a particular kind of *grape* .

We must not overharvest the swear words that are part of the commons of our language. It is an adults-only commons, of course. Kids need to be told that they still can't use it. How can a 13-year-old be transgressively vulgar with the word if his 5-year-old sister already uses it? This word is supposed to be a reward of adulthood. We have to conserve it, so that our children and our children's children can use it when we're gone.

There is a wonderful scene in the 1987 movie "Hope and Glory." A gang of boys is rambling through the rubble of London during the Blitz. The new boy, Bill, wants to join. They ask if he knows any swear words. He says he does. Say them, the boys insist. He hesitates. He admits finally that he knows only one swear word. After much delay and agonizing, he says it, loudly.

The word.

The other boys are shocked into silence. "That word is special," the gang leader finally says. "That word is only for something really important."

Precisely.

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