

Chapter 39

Dealing With Profanity

Journalists, and especially editors, must regularly confront the problem of what to do about profanity in newspaper stories.

We need only listen to the conversations around us as we walk down the street to know that in the early 21st Century profanity has become a part of ordinary discourse for many people. Whether we approve or disapprove, or don't particularly care, profanity has become part of our day-to-day lives. The problem is what to do about it when profanity creeps into journalistic accounts of the news.

The copy editor must answer two questions when he is handed a story containing profanity:

- 1) Does this rude word belong in the story at all?
- 2) If it does, how should I present it to readers?

The answer to the first question on most newspapers is a question of policy, and of community standards, quite legitimately defined. A word that may be acceptable in print in the Toronto Star, for example, may not be in the St. Albert Gazette. To some degree this is a business decision about what readers of a publication in a particular community will accept — and it is right that the business leaders of the newspaper have a say in making the decision.

But editors should make a *news judgment* about profanity too.

Profanity should only be used in news stories when the profanity itself is newsworthy. Since the exercise of news judgment is more of an art than a science, there is bound to be vigorous disagreement (occasionally quite profane) about whether an obscene word belongs in a news story. What follows is a suggestion for a commonsense policy on whether or not to report profanity.

As a general rule, we can expect inexperienced reporters to be in love with the idea of being able to write strong language in their stories. As a result, reporters are often inclined to use profanity where it would be best left out. Likewise, as a general rule, business managers — concerned as they are with not offending advertisers — can be expected to want to leave out profanity where it should be included. What is suggested here is a saw off, guaranteed to irritate almost everyone — except the consumer of news, who is well served by such a policy.

In determining whether the use of profanity in a news story is appropriate, context is everything. Specifically, the context of whether the use of profane language reflects on the fitness of a person to hold an office or position.

If a robber uses profanity in the course of holding up a convenience store, or uses a racial epithet to insult the clerk he is threatening, this is not newsworthy. There is no news value whatsoever in informing readers that low-class characters who hold up stores late at night use the F-word as part of their ordinary discourse. We would simply expect such commentary from such villains. There is no language test for the suitability of a candidate for armed robbery. In this and like circumstances, the profanity should not be included in the story.

Some might argue that use of profanity in such an account is colour, or description that will paint a dramatic picture of the events. Save such colour for your novel. It's not news.

On the other hand, if the bishop of a large church, or the Prime Minister of a country, uses similar language in a sermon or a Parliamentary debate, arguably this is newsworthy. Either they have carefully pondered the implications of making such a statement, or they have not and have provided us with an unexpected glimpse into their innermost thoughts. Either way, their use of such language both emphasizes the point they are trying to make and reflects on their fitness to hold office.

In this and like circumstances, the profanity should be included in the story.

A useful yardstick in making this decision is to think of a bright child that you know, a precocious reader — perhaps a brother or sister, son or daughter. You probably don't want them reading a rude word from the newspaper in your hands. Ask yourself: Does the need to report the word or phrase outweigh your wish for the child not to see it? If you think it does, it's probably newsworthy.

Thus it was entirely proper for news reporters to write the phrase Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau used in the House of Commons and then dismissed as “fuddle-duddle.” And it was likewise the proper decision to report the words of a U.S. Secretary of Agriculture when he crudely dismissed an entire race with an insulting phrase.

Which leads us to the second point — how should an editor deal with that profanity? Essentially journalists have three options:

- 1) They can report the words forthrightly, spelled out in all their lack of glory, exactly as they were spoken.
- 2) They can use euphemism and evasion to describe the meaning of what was said, without using the actual words.
- 3) They can use words, but fudge them through the use of asterisks or dashes.

As a general rule of thumb, the best newspapers opt for the first approach in most cases where the profanity is genuinely newsworthy. This is the recommended approach if it is within the policy of the newspaper that employs you. Use profanity sparingly, but clearly

when you must. Assume, when you use it, that your readers are mature individuals who have a right to know what was said.

The second approach is acceptable too in some cases — for example, commentary on the use of profanity arising from a specific example in the news. Indeed, profanity in the news generally has a best-before date — it's only newsworthy when it's actually news. The problem, of course, is that by resorting to euphemism, we can mis-report what was actually said. Better to use the actual words and let the reader judge for herself.

The third approach is, in the opinion of this writer, too cute. It neither protects the reader's sensibilities nor fully informs her. It can make a mild profanity appear to be something much worse. Better to spell it out in the rare cases when you decide to use rude words.

It's best to use profanity very rarely. Judged critically, it is seldom newsworthy. When it is, it should be stated forthrightly.

Summary

- Editors often have to decide whether to use profanity in news stories.
- When they come across profanity, they must decide, Does this rude word belong in the story at all?
- If it does, they must also decide how to present it to readers.
- As a rule of thumb, profanity should only be reported if it is newsworthy, and that decision should be based on whether the use of the word or phrase reflects on the fitness of the user to hold office.
- Sometimes also it may be used if it has been spoken to make a particularly newsworthy point by a prominent person.
- Use of low language by low characters in the commission of low acts has no news value.
- If you use profane words in a story, you can state them right out, disguise them through the use of euphemism or obscure their spelling.
- In most cases, when the news is fresh, it is best to spell them out and let the reader know exactly when was said.
- Use profanity only rarely in news.
- When it's newsworthy, be forthright about it.

