

## Why do newspapers use asterisks? When readers read f\*\*\*\*g, I imagine they know what it f\*\*\*\*g means

Suzanne Moore

Published 16 August 1999

On every newspaper that I have worked on those in charge have been worried about fucking. The word, you understand, not the activity. At the *Independent*, Andrew Marr was always saying that there was far too much fucking, shitting and pissing going on in the paper and it had to stop. As mature journalists we could only snigger and then agree with him. Readers, we were repeatedly told, did not want this sort of thing at their breakfast table.

I must admit I have never understood the concept that newspapers should be edited according to what people want at their breakfast tables, but then what do I know? I don't even know anyone who eats their breakfast at a table.

They got worried, too, at the *Guardian* about language. Fuck was all right but the "c-word" was always a problem, although lately I have seen it appear quite regularly.

Some newspapers just won't have it at all, while others use asterisks, another strategy that I fail to understand. When a reader reads f\*\*\*\*g, I should imagine that he or she knows what it f\*\*\*\*g means.

It is surprising that fuck has retained its aura for so long and can still be considered so shocking. Now that children are demanding to see *The Spy Who Shagged Me*, the word shag, alongside screw and bonk, has become perfectly acceptable. I don't like any of these words myself - but then I don't like any words that make sex sound jolly.

My children live, as most kids do these days, suspended somewhere between a Harry Potterish, nostalgic view of a world full of rock cakes and a benign fantasy of public school, and a Tarantino movie full of niggers and bitches. The word fuck is really the least of their problems. I would on the whole prefer that my teenage daughter was not exposed to lyrics by brash young men who either promise true and everlasting love or tell her that her ultimate happiness in life will be in servicing some gangster.

It is not the language that bothers me but what is being said with it. One hopes, in that wishy-washy liberal way, that one's offspring don't swear in public, but of course they do. Surely everyone has had the experience of a sweet-looking toddler saying "fuck" in front of a stranger.

What is acceptable, however, is changing. "Fucking" is losing some of its power. It is now used in casual conversation instead of "very", as in "a fucking good night out" or "a fucking great film". The old taboos about not saying the word in front of women have virtually disappeared, too.

Fuck has also changed from a verb to a noun. The first time I remember noticing this was in *Blue Velvet* when Frank, the Dennis Hopper character, calls everyone "You fuck", or sometimes, when he is even more peeved, "You fucking fuck, fuck you".

Those who argue that this is a debasement of language would not like the dialogue of *Nil by Mouth* either. Yes, every other word is fuck, but it is a brilliant and rhythmical slice of life. Indeed, one might argue that the most unrealistic thing about contemporary soap operas that deal with Aids, child abuse, drug addiction and murder, such as *EastEnders* and *Brookside*, is that no one swears in them.

Like most regular TV viewers I am bemused by the regulations governing the use of the word. Hugh Grant can say it in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, because he's posh, I suppose. It's OK, too, if you are Irish - *Father Ted* was allowed to be full of the word "feck". Yet *The Jerry Springer Show* these days consists of little more than bleeps. Bleeps, like asterisks, are always an admission of a censor's failings. Are we less offended because we don't know what is being said, or do we in fact have a pretty good idea?

No, we have to face facts. Fuck is simply a great word, perhaps the greatest. Now it even has a whole, 272-page book to itself: *The F Word: the complete history of the word in all its robust and various uses* (Faber and Faber). It is a serious study of the old favourite. If great poets such as Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin can use the word, then it becomes legitimate to have a literary take on it - or so the argument goes.

Yet if fuck has become common parlance, what happens to other taboo words? The c-word, I note, is making a big comeback. In the new age of ironic post-political correctness, more and more men are using the word "cunt" as an insult. The feminist objection to the word is rarely heard these days. Instead, there has been a degree of reclamation of it by some women - as with the words "queer" and "nigger".

Still, this word has the power to make people flinch in a way that fuck no longer has. During the excitement of election night I drunkenly applied this word to a certain Michael Portillo, and was lectured long and hard by a righteous Blairite who told me that "there was really no need for that sort of thing". Men, it seems, still own certain words and ladies don't. Even if the word applies to what women have and men don't.

It might be argued that what we really need are some new swear words for the new millennium. Certainly we need some new insults. As someone who receives a decent amount of hate mail, I much prefer those who can at least bother to be creative with their abuse. Obviously the kind of men who write regularly to inform me that I am a lesbian who really needs a good f\*\*k could be a little more imaginative. But recently a reader decided that I had "the brains of a retarded squid". Fucking ace.

*The writer is a columnist on the "Mail on Sunday"*