

Researchers: Swear words less offensive on cable than broadcast TV

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Four letter words may offend you more depending on which television channel you watch, according to a recent study out of Florida State University and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

This study, published in the January issue of *Mass Communication and Society*, found that some [TV viewers](#) believe swearing on premium channels and cable is less offensive than vulgarity on broadcast channels. Similarly, viewers are more tolerant of swearing on the premium channels than they are on the advertiser supported [cable channels](#). This differs from previous research, which found that how swear words reach people does not effect how offensive they are.

Authors Daniel Shafer and the late Barry Sapolsky, both from Florida State University, and Barbara Kaye from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, School of Journalism and Electronic Media, also found sexually suggestive words as the most offensive and excretory language as moderately offensive, while more mild language and religious blasphemy were less offensive. This applies in general conversation or TV viewing.

The study consisted of 500 college students in the southeastern U.S. The students completed an online survey that asked them to rate the offensiveness of swear words over three types of programming: broadcast, cable, and premium channels. These students also answered questions on their political and religious views, as well as how often they swore themselves.

How offended they were by profanity was linked to the social, religious or political group they are affiliated with, the authors found. Swearing by college students, for example, was generally more accepted because it often was not taken literally: "College-age participants may be habituated to these words and do not find them as troubling as their status as indecent words banned from broadcast television would imply, indicating a connotative shift from their literal meanings to expressions of anger," according to the authors. The study also found that women tend to be more offended by swearing than men, as are conservatives compared to liberals, and regular churchgoers compared to less religious individuals.

The increased use of colorful language in recent years on TV may make vulgarity more normal as might the lack of distinction between broadcast and cable channels, the authors wrote. Fewer people are watching channels broadcast directly over the air and those who remember doing so are becoming fewer and fewer as the population ages. Nonetheless, according to the study, viewers currently are much less likely to take offense to cursing by Dexter Morgan on Showtime or Conan O'Brien on TBS than by George Stephanopoulos on ABC.

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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