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This media statement contains offensive language

BSA releases report on acceptability of swear words

A Broadcasting Standards Authority survey of swear words shows that there has been little change in what people consider to be unacceptable language to be broadcast on air.

The survey, ***What not to Swear: The acceptability of words in Broadcasting***, has been conducted four times since 1999 and is aimed at measuring any change in public attitudes.

The results of the survey indicate that the eight most unacceptable words are cunt, nigger, Jesus fucking Christ, mother fucker, cocksucker, get fucked, fuck off and fuck.

At least half the respondents found these eight expletives totally or fairly unacceptable if used in a television movie after 8.30pm.

“We are seeing a slight softening of attitudes for some of these words but they still remain high on the list of unacceptability,” said Chief Executive Susan Freeman-Greene.

Compared to 2009 there is a lower level of unacceptability of cunt, mother fucker, Jesus fucking Christ and cocksucker.

In total, 31 expletives were measured in the survey and they are ranked from the most unacceptable to the least unacceptable (Table attached).

The report notes that interestingly, there has been a slight decline in the acceptability of less offensive words like balls, bullshit and bloody since 2009.

Respondents were also asked to consider the acceptability of the 31 words in scenarios other than a television movie after 8.30pm.

There are some patterns emerging, for example the words and phrases are less acceptable when used by radio hosts in breakfast programmes and talkback, when used by real people as opposed to actors and in music videos, but more acceptable in stand-up comedy and dramas after 8.30 and in reality television where there is spontaneous content.

There has also been an increase since 2009 in the number of people who find the words retard, whore, faggot, nigger and slut unacceptable when used in all ten scenarios.

The survey also showed that males and younger people tend to be more accepting of the words and phrases, along with those who have no religious beliefs and households on high incomes. Māori were generally more accepting than those of other ethnicities, while Pacific peoples were less accepting.

Susan Freeman-Greene says the survey is one of the ways the BSA determines community norms which helps guide their deliberations when considering complaints about language.

“The extent to which people are offended by swearing varies markedly across different groups of society, and from individual to individual. This survey is a way for us to get a contemporary view on which words are taboo, and which ones are least unacceptable,” said Susan Freeman-Greene.

What Not to Swear: The acceptability of words in Broadcasting is available at www.bsa.govt.nz

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Survey Details

The online survey was carried out in March 2013 when 1500 New Zealanders took part. The sample was sourced from Survey Sampling International. The respondents were aged over 18 years and were selected at random. The survey reflected region, age, gender and ethnic differences to ensure sampling accurately represented New Zealand’s population.

Proportion rating the words and phrases as unacceptable

Words	2013 (%) n=1500	2009 (%) n=1500	2005 (%) n=500	1999 (%) n=500
1. Cunt**	70	74	70	79
2. Nigger	65	66	70	72
3. Mother fucker**	61	66	68	78
4. Jesus Fucking Christ**	61	65	-	-
5. Cocksucker**	56	60	64	-
6. Get fucked	54	55	-	-
7. Fuck	50	51	58	70
8. Fuck off	50	52	-	-
9. Faggot	48	46	-	-
10. Slut	43	43	-	-
11. Whore	43	40	46	55
12. Cock**	42	46	50	58
13. Retard	41	44	-	-
14. Wanker	39	37	38	48
15. Arsehole	37	35	41	49
16. Jesus Christ	33	31	40	41
17. Dick	32	30	33	40
18. Jesus	30	27	-	-
19. Piss	29	26	32	38
20. Bitch	28	26	38	42
21. Prick	28	27	35	43
22. Piss off	27	24	-	-
23. God	27	24	25	34
24. Bastard	26	23	33	36
25. Balls*	24	21	27	33
26. Shit	23	22	27	31
27. Bullshit*	20	17	24	28
28. Crap*	17	14	21	23
29. Bloody*	15	12	17	17
30. Bollocks	13	12	23	20
31. Bugger	13	11	16	16

* Significantly higher level of unacceptability than in 2009

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