

SWEARING ON TELEVISION

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People use swearwords because other words have failed them. There are two reasons why other words may fail them; either stress, or because they did not have that many words to start with.

Ever, highly intelligent and educated people will swear when angry, frustrated or alarmed. Never mind famous last words, it is said that two of the most frequent last words are "oh shit!" Less intelligent, less educated people will add swearwords for emphasis, where the more articulate will re-word what they have said. "Are you talking to me?" becomes "Are you fucking talking to me?" not "Am I supposed to be listening to you?"

In addition, people whose minds work slowly will add fill-in words to give their brains time to work out what words to use. "It's, like, raining again" or "Y'know, it's raining again", or "It's fucking raining again", are, for practical purposes all the same thing.

So it seems very strange that swearing on television attracts as many, if not more, calls for censorship than violence or sex. However, television programming is of two kinds, fact and fiction, and the reasons for the complaints are different.

Factual programmes—or programmes intended to be taken as fact—are, of course, never completely truthful. Only a live, unedited transmission of people who didn't know that they were being filmed can be that and that is most unlikely. The question is, how much editing should there be? Opponents of censorship will say that there should be as little as possible. Everybody who appears on the screen has the right to be represented as accurately as possible and that includes the way they talk. Pro-censorship people will say that they don't want that kind of talk in their living-rooms. What they mean, of course, is that they don't want that kind of people in their living-rooms, or that kind of event. They want the poor to be polite—especially to them—and disasters to be sanitised. They want television to show them the world as they wish it was, not as we know it to be. And they refuse to accept that unless they **keep their children locked in a cellar** sooner or later the children will hear words that their parents do not use. Quite a lot of education happens in the school playground, even in these over-protective times.

Fictional programmes—plays, drama-doc, series, soap opera, feature films, etc.—are a different case. Most of them are set in everyday places: home, street, workplace, and in the present day. It follows that they are realistic rather than stylised and that the realism includes dialogue. However, there is a problem. The real speech of inarticulate people is limited and repetitive and includes expletives. Probably the same expletive used over and over again. It is boring. And boring is the one thing that drama must not be. The problem is probably as old as theatre itself and certainly as old as the invention of commercial theatre in England in the sixteenth century. The Elizabethans solved the problem by ignoring it. Low-life characters in a Shakespeare

play are more fluent, more versatile and less vulgar than real people of their status would actually be. And English drama—English fiction—got stuck with that.

Today, any dramatists or scriptwriters who try to break with the convention and show this speech as it is will get the would-be censors down on them in a flood. The vocabulary of the complaints will be social and moral but the real grievance is aesthetic. It is not that people don't talk like that but that people in drama don't talk like that. The answer is that this is not the sixteenth century or the nineteenth, it is the twenty-first. We should no more whitewash the swearwords out of low-status speech than we should make high-status characters speak in blank verse. At least, not without a very good reason. The phoney indignation of the tabloid newspapers is not a good reason. (As though their journalists never swore.) All a writer needs to ask is: "Would this character, in this situation, swear?" If the answer to the question is yes, then he or she should do it.