Writing in the New York Times in 1996, Richard Dooling declared, “Vulgar sexual terms have become acceptable in the last two decades while all manner of racial or ethnic epithets have become unspeakable.”

In an interview in the New York Times, Tom Lehrer said something similar: “When I was in college, there were certain words you could not say in front of a girl... Now you can say them, but you can’t say ‘girl’” (Purdom 2000). Most current dictionaries label girl for ‘adult female’ either patronizing or mildly offensive.

This study aims to shed light on two questions related to the common perception expressed by Dooling: (1) Given the increasing use of taboo words for body parts and functions in the mass media, are dictionary status labels keeping up with apparent community standards regarding such words? (2) Given the political correctness movement, have dictionaries reflected the heavier taboo status of slur terms for ethnic groups?

To derive a list of taboo words, I surveyed 75 undergraduate students at the University of Iowa in 1996 for the terms that they and their friends use. Augmented by four-letter words I observed in the mass media and by ethnic terms cited by H. L. Mencken (1962), the resulting list contains a total of 67 terms—40 for body parts and functions and 27 for ethnic groups. The 20 American and British dictionaries used as sources for status labeling are listed along with their abbreviations in appendix A.

Table 1 consists of words for body parts and functions noted taboo by college students in the mid-1990s. There is ample evidence that many of these terms are common in the mass media. Appendix B contains some I collected from television and radio. A special case is the HBO series The Sopranos: in a single two-hour episode, I observed 100 uses of fuck, including two uses of motherfucker, and 9 uses of (bull)shit.

Other offensive words that occur in the mass media are the curses damn and hell, and bastard, bitch, son of a bitch, and SOB. A special report issued by the Media Research Center (“A Vanishing Haven” 1996) cited taboo words used on television during the “family hour” (8–9 p.m. EST) during four
weeks in the fall of 1995 with the following results: *ass* (29), *bastard* (10), *bitch* (13), *freaking* (1), *friggin’* (1), *piss* (2), *SOB* (2), *screw* (1), and *suck* (7).

In “What a Difference a Decade Makes” (2000), the Media Research Center compared 1989 and 1999:

The language used on network television has changed dramatically. The overall use of profane language has skyrocketed over 500 percent since 1989.

In 1989, “hell” (56 uses) and “damn” (52) were easily the most commonly used curse words, making up more than two-thirds (67.9 percent) of the total. In 1999, though each was used far more often (“hell” 298 times; “damn” 220), together they constituted under half (44.2 percent) of the total.

The use of “shit” on CBS’s Chicago Hope was a sensational, extreme example of a widespread trend. “Ass,” used only 12 times in ’89, was the second most frequently used word in ’99 (265 times). “Bitch” went from two uses to 60; “son of a bitch” from twelve to 54; “bastard” from fifteen to 43; “crap” from five to 41; “sucks” from zero to 40; and various obscured and euphemistic forms of “f**k” from one to twenty-nine. (There were about 30 percent more program hours in ’99 than in ’89, but the percentage increase in the use of each of these words easily exceeds that figure.)

Taboo words also appear in edited and printed sources. In appendix C are some I have collected from newspapers, a magazine, and a newsletter. A special case is one of the “Talk of the Town” columns from the *New Yorker* (1999). In a section titled “Ritual Humiliation Department,” a Friars Club roast was described featuring the following number of quoted items: *ass* (1), *butt* (2) *cock* (1), *cocksucker* (1), *crap* (2), *cunt* (2), *fuck* (3), *motherfucker*
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It is also interesting to note the number of times vulgar terms have been used in the magazine’s cartoons over the years: ass (8), bastard (7), bitch (6), frigging (1), piss off (1), poop (1), and suck (1), according to appearances in the magazine’s Web-based cartoon bank.

Obviously, we have come a long way since 1960, when W.C. was excised from Jack Paar’s Tonight Show. Some offensive words are even recorded in the Congressional Record. A study of congressional civility by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Jamieson 1997) shows an overall increase in usage from the 99th Congress (1985–87) to the 104th Congress (1995–97) (e.g., ass, 26 vs. 33; crap, 10 vs. 25).

Dictionaries use a variety of terms to indicate the undesirability of the words for body parts and functions. For example, fart is variously labeled as “vulgar,” “coarse slang,” “rude,” “taboo,” or “not in decent use.” Although one might think that asshole would be regarded as more offensive, the labels are not much different: In one case the label is simply “slang.” Other labels are “vulgar,” “offensive,” “very rude,” and “taboo.” One might expect cunt to fare much worse, and it does just a bit. Its labels are “vulgar,” “obscene,” “coarse slang,” “taboo,” “very rude and offensive,” and “currency is restricted in the manner of other taboo words.” If dictionaries are to reflect the usage in the media, more differentiation might be used. For example, in descending order of general acceptability, cunt could be labeled “taboo,” asshole could be labeled “offensive,” and fart could be labeled “vulgar.”

With respect to changes over time, let me cite a few words and show how they have fared in successive editions of the same dictionary. OED1 glosses cock as ‘penis’ but gives it no label. OED2 labels it “not permissible in polite speech or literature.” Cunt, fuck, and shit are labeled “vulgar” in AHD1, “obscene” in AHD3, and “vulgar slang” in AHD4. Pee is labeled “vulgar” in AHD1 but merely as “slang” in AHD3. Piss is labeled vulgar in W3 but as “sometimes considered vulgar” in W10. Finally, tit has no label in RH1 but is called “vulgar” in RH2. These are the only terms and dictionaries that show any change across time, and, obviously, there is no clear trend. I can only conclude that dictionaries do not well reflect changing usage of the 40 taboo words related to body parts and functions.

Also, 15 of the 40 words are listed in fewer than 7 of the 23 dictionaries consulted. The very common butthead is not found in any of the dictionaries examined, even though its use is not all that recent; it is listed in Slang U! (Munro 1990), and the earliest citation in J. E. Lighter’s Historical Dictionary of American Slang (1994–) is for 1973. Dingus and dink appear in only one dictionary; ca-ca, rod (listed in Slang U!), thing, and weenie appear in only two dictionaries each. Three dictionaries have dickhead, hole, and pee-pee. There are five appearances each of pooh and doo-doo and six appearances each of
dump, poop, and potty (as in to go potty). Of the 75 students I surveyed, 24% used take a dump, 28% reported using pee-pee as children, 1% use pooh, 62% use poop, 33% used go potty as children, and 1% use weenie. Despite the low percentage for weenie, it is listed in Slang U!

In looking up words in AHD1 for this study, I found an old newspaper clipping, probably dating from the appearance of the dictionary in 1969. William Morris, the editor of AHD1, is quoted as saying,

Since then [the Victorian Era] cant words have crept slowly back into use until a couple of years ago, when Random House published a “revolutionary” dictionary which broke new ground with the language of confrontation. . . . We probably hold the record on four-letter ones. I don’t know of any dictionary that carries more.

If Morris’s view is correct, we would expect to find AHD1 with the most four-letter words, followed by RH1 and W3. In fact, W3 has 27 of the words on my list, AHD1 has 18, and RH1 has 17. Perhaps quantity does not tell the whole story. For the two words I judge the most taboo, fuck and cunt, AHD1 has both, RH1 has neither, and W3 is in between, listing cunt but notfuck. The breaking of new ground claimed by Morris is actually not so new. Early dictionaries sporadically listed taboo words:

- Nathan Bailey (1721): bugger, cunt, fart, fuck, piss, prick, shit, turd
- Samuel Johnson (1785): arse, fart, piss, turd
- Noah Webster (1806): buggery, piss
- Noah Webster (1847): arse, bugger, piss

It is impossible to know what sparked the increasing use of vulgarities in public venues. Perhaps the onset was signaled by the Berkeley free speech movement or the use at about the same time of such words by the comedian Lenny Bruce.

Like obscenities, slur terms for ethnic groups are also labeled inconsistently from dictionary to dictionary as “a common appellation,” “substandard,” “colloquial,” “informal,” “not the preferred term,” “vulgar,” “offensive,” “racially offensive,” “derisive,” “contemptuous,” “derogatory,” “disparaging,” and “taboo.” Very few of the 27 slur words in table 2 for ethnic group members are typically missing, except for Slant and Slope, each of which appeared in only four or five dictionaries.

A variety of terms are used to indicate the undesirability of the words for ethnic groups. For example, Limey is variously labeled as “slang,” “colloquial and derogatory,” “patronizing or contemptuous,” and “offensive.” Polack is in one dictionary not labeled at all. In others it is considered “colloquial,” “disparaging,” “vulgar, prejudicial, and contemptuous,” “derogatory,” and “offensive.” Nigger is labeled “substandard used contemptu-
ously,” “colloquial and usually offensive,” “vulgar and derisive,” “deroga-
tory and racially offensive,” “disparaging,” and “taboo and viciously hos-
tile.” The range of labels for Redskin is greater than for the other terms. In
five dictionaries there is no label. Other dictionaries label it “not the
preferred term,” “a common appellation,” “informal,” “offensive,” “de-
rogatory and racially offensive,” “often disparaging,” and “taboo and dated.”

In contrast to words for body parts and functions, there is a much
clearer trend of heavier disapproval in more recent editions. Most of the
ethnic terms on the list are not included in OED1 or in W1. The most
disapproving label for the few ethnic terms listed in OED1 and W1 is “slang.”
The labels in subsequent editions show a clear trend, as shown in table 3.
Perhaps due to its date of publication, AHD1 labeled most of these terms
disapprovingly. The two exceptions are Redskin, labeled “informal” but in
later editions “offensive slang,” and Spick, labeled “slang” but in later
editions “offensive slang.” Only two terms show chronological variation in
the Random House series: Kraut is labeled “often disparaging” in the first
edition and “disparaging and offensive” in later editions; Limey is labeled
“slang” in the first edition but “sometimes disparaging and offensive” in
subsequent editions.

Canuck presents a rather interesting case. Most dictionaries list it with
some sort of disapproving label. Exceptions are W2, W9, W10, and NSO.
However, one of my Torontonian students claims it has no negative conno-
tations, pointing out that Vancouver Canucks is the official name of a hockey
team (Christopher Zdzienicki, pers. com., May 1997). A Canadian linguist,
Barbara Harris, confirms the claim, noting that the Gage Canadian Dictio-
nary (1973) simply labels it “informal” (pers. com., May 1997). However, I am told that when used to refer to a French Canadian, it can be highly offensive.

However, the senior reference editor at Gage Learning Corporation, Debbie Sawczak, sent the following reply to my e-mail query:

I asked the people in our FSL department about ‘Canuck’. They said it is offensive to French Canadians as used by people in New England, where there was a substantial influx of Canadians at one time for jobs. That’s where the term originated, I am told, and it referred specifically to French-Canadian immigrants and was perjorative.

English-Canadians would never use the term to target Francophones, since we consider it (now, anyway) to refer to any Canadian. If a mixed group of Canadians were abroad, and an Anglophone member of the group referred to “us Canucks” I doubt any of the French Canadians would be offended. If they would be, it would only be because they resented being identified as Canadians at all.

So that would explain why in the US the lore is that it’s offensive to French Canadians. [May 2002]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Term</th>
<th>OED1 (1933)</th>
<th>OED2 (1989)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dago</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>disparaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>jocular</td>
<td>jocular, sometimes derogatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polack</td>
<td>obsolete</td>
<td>N. Amer., usu. derogatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redskin</td>
<td>no label</td>
<td>not the preferred term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheenie</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>vulgar, abusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yid</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>usu. offensive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bohunk</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>often offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canuck</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>disparaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chink</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coon</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>colloquial</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dago</td>
<td>nickname</td>
<td>contempt</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunkie</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>disparaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jap</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>colloquial</td>
<td>disparaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polack</td>
<td>no label</td>
<td>now colloquial</td>
<td>disparaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redskin</td>
<td>common appellation</td>
<td>no label</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shine</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spick</td>
<td>not listed</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>usu. offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yid</td>
<td>slang or colloquial</td>
<td>slang</td>
<td>offensive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another interesting case has to do with the term *Limey*. British dictionaries are themselves split on its status. The Oxford series labels it either “derogatory” or “offensive,” as does *CCELD*, but *CIDE* and *LCED* simply label it “slang.”

Not all group terms are viewed equally. The most heavily condemned are those terms referring to African Americans, Jews, and Asians. These terms are labeled “racially offensive” and “viciously hostile,” among others. Next are the groups on the European continent, calling forth such terms as “vulgar,” “derogatory,” and the like. The terms *Canuck* and *Limey* get lighter treatment yet. Inexplicably, *Redskin* is given the least disapprobation.

The capitalization practices of the dictionaries consulted have some interesting patterns. Since all of the terms are names for ethnic groups, one could well argue that they are all proper nouns and that, therefore, all of them should be capitalized. On average, only about 30% either allow or require uppercase. There is not much difference between British and American dictionaries. *Hunky* is more likely to get labeled “cap” in American dictionaries, while British dictionaries more often indicate capping for *Frog*, *Limey*, and *Yid*. These patterns for *Hunky* and *Yid* I find inexplicable. The increased labeling for uppercase in British dictionaries for *Frog* and *Limey* would seem to be a matter of ethnic preference, especially when one notes that for dictionaries from both countries, *Kraut* gets an uppercase label in 7 out of 8 dictionaries. Names derived from names of countries, languages, or persons are understandably more likely to be uppercase: *Canuck*, *Chink*, *Dago* (but only in 3 out of 10, perhaps because the etymology is somewhat opaque), *Jap*, *Mick*, *Polack*, and *Yid* (but only in 4 out of 9, even though the source is transparent). Oddly, *Hunky* from *Hungarian* received preferences for capping in only 2 out of 4, and *Bohunk* from *Bohemian* is never considered for capitalization. These two cases along with *Yid* seem to illustrate an East European dispreference. The odd case in all of this is that *Wop* gets tagged for possible capping in 4 out of 10 cases even though the opaque but likely source is *Guapo*, variously glossed as ‘insipid’, ‘pimp’, or ‘dandy’.

To conclude, in the case of terms for body parts and functions, dictionaries fail to take note of their increasing use in the mass media. What really needs to be addressed by working lexicographers is the lack of entries for such common terms as *butthead, dickhead, take a dump, poop, go potty*, and *weenie*. As for ethnic slurs, it seems clear that ethnic slur terms have been getting more tabooed in dictionaries, as in our culture. Capitalization patterns of cited use seem to embody older prejudices. These practices should, of course, be extirpated.
Considering the fact that most dictionaries revise during reprintings between editions every one to four years, there is no good reason why they cannot remain up-to-date with respect to the shortcomings pointed out in this paper.

APPENDIX A

Dictionaries Consulted

AMERICAN


BRITISH


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OLDER


Johnson, Samuel. 1785. *A Dictionary of the English Language, in Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals.* London: Rivington.

Webster, Noah. 1806. *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language.* New Haven, Conn.: Sidney’s.


APPENDIX B

Observed Uses of Taboo Words on Television and Radio

ass
Would it bust his ass to... [Late Night with David Letterman, 30 June 1995]
kick in the ass [Beavis and Butthead, 10 Jan. 1997]
ass (three times) [Saturday Night Live, 11 Jan. 1997]
ass [Cybill, 13 Jan. 1997]
half-assed [NYPD Blue, 18 Feb. 1997]
haul ass [Prairie Home Companion, 5 Apr. 1997]
ass [Mother Knows Best (TV movie), 13 Apr. 1997]
ass [NYPD Blue, 22 Apr. 1997]
dumb ass; kick your ass [Beavis and Butthead, 26 Apr. 1997]
Are you saying I have a good ass? [Oscar preshow, 26 Mar. 2000]
You can kiss my black ass [Politically Incorrect, 26 Mar. 2000]
I’d like to kind your sorry ass [The View, 16 May 2000]

asshole
asshole (eight times) [NYPD Blue, Feb. 1997, 22 Mar. 1997]
asshole [Oscar preshow, 26 Mar. 2000]

balls
break my balls [NYPD Blue, 18 Feb. 1997]

butt
bite you in the butt [Prairie Home Companion, 5 Apr. 1997]
thumbs up her butt [NYPD Blue, 22 Apr. 1997]
kick butt; butthole; stick a tambourine up his butt [Beavis and Butthead, 26 Apr. 1997]
butt [Prairie Home Companion, 1 Apr. 2000]

cock
If I could turn into a bird, I’d turn into a cock; gonna show her my schlong [Beavis and Butthead, 26 Apr. 1997]
crap
  crap [Beavis and Butthead, 26 Apr. 1997]
  I just got done crapping in a ficus plant [Politically Incorrect, 26 Mar. 2000]

dick
  Nobody saw dick [NYPD Blue, rerun Nov. 1997]

fart
  fart [Prairie Home Companion, 4 Apr. 2000]

friggin’

fuck
  What the fuck was that? (ad lib in response to an error; Saturday Night Live, 12 Apr. 1997)
  fuck (explaining that prior use was accidental; Saturday Night Live, 19 Apr. 1997)
  fuck you, girl [VH1 Rock Story, 5 Apr. 2000]

leak
  take a leak [Beavis and Butthead, 10 Jan. 1997]
  Gotta leak in my sink; Go ahead [Prairie Home Companion, 5 Apr. 1997]

motherfucking
  sick motherfucking friend [VH1 Rock Story, 5 Apr. 2000]

piss
  pissed off [Late Night with David Letterman, 27 Mar. 1995]
  He’s a real pisser; pissed off; piss ant; pissing off [NYPD Blue, 18 Feb. 1997]
  pissing and moaning; pissing in the wind [NYPD Blue, 22 Apr. 1997]
  pissed on the shoe [Prairie Home Companion, 1 Apr. 2000]
  pisses off [NYPD Blue, 25 Apr. 2000]

poop
  a seagull pooped in my eye [Prairie Home Companion, 5 Apr. 1997]

prick
  prick [NYPD Blue, rerun Nov. 1998]

pussy
  pussy [NYPD Blue, Feb. 1997]

APPENDIX C
Observed Uses of Taboo Words in Newspapers

ass
  really kicked ass [William Safire column]
  the school of wise-ass commentary [Des Moines Register, 25 June 1995]
  The Cool, the Confused and the Kiss-ass [U. Magazine, Apr. 1996]

bullshit
  I believe the word was bullshit [quoted in Copy Editor, Dec. 1994/Jan. 95]
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butt
she glues her swimsuit to her butt; kick butt; butt-head [William Safire column]
and no if or and, just a great big butt [ad for Disney film, Nov. 1995]
when you moved your hands to my butt [George Will column, 25 Feb. 1996]
freezing my butt off [“Us & Them” (cartoon)]

fart
farted [Des Moines Register, 25 June 1995]
It plays back the electronic sound of farting [Iowa City Press-Citizen, 25 Mar. 1996]
Who farted? [“Rhymes with Orange” (cartoon), 19 Nov. 1996]
the old fart stage [Iowa City Press-Citizen, 20 May 1998]

pee

piss
the young, the pale and the pissed off [Ellen Goodman column, 30 Dec. 1964]
What pisses me off [USA Weekend, 22–24 Dec. 1995]
They piss each other off [TV Guide, 17 Jan. 1998]
It’s 7 a.m. and Hazel is pissed [Iowa City Press-Citizen, 26 Jan. 1998]

poop
it pooped in the precinct weight room [USA Today, 6 Jan. 1995]
so why is hog poop exempt? [Des Moines Register, 31 Mar. 1996]
I poop therefore I am [“Non Sequitur” (cartoon), 26 Feb. 1996]
giving residents the straight poop on the poop ordinance [Iowa City Press-Citizen, 15 Mar. 1997]
I pick up several of these poop piles each day [Iowa City Press-Citizen, 5 Apr. 1997]

NOTE
I hereby acknowledge the contributions to my research of my undergraduate students, who contributed words; to Professor Jon Wilcox of the University of Iowa English Department, who was my British informant; to Professor Christopher Culy of the University of Iowa Linguistics Department, who copyread part of my paper; to Frederic G. Cassidy, who pointed me to the historical information in Harold Allen’s Ph.D. thesis; and finally, to the most helpful of all, my graduate research assistant, Hang Du of the University of Iowa Linguistics Department. I also benefited from two earlier articles on dictionaries and offensive terms by John McCluskey (1989) and Reinhold Aman (1984/85, 1988/89).
REFERENCES