

Getting the Word Out: The News On “Four-Letter Threats to Authority”

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Most academics aspire to celebrity, labor in obscurity. Sometimes, fearing fame will never find them, they seek her out. So indeed we did. Our motives were acceptable if not respectable. We had written, we believed, an original and provocative article attempting to explain why obscene words threaten authority. True, it had been accepted for publication in the prestigious *Journal of Politics*, where it would be available to our professional peers and diminish our chances of perishing in academe, but we wanted our thoughts brought to the attention of a wider audience—the common reader.

What was the gist of our 8,500-word article? Briefly summarized, we were trying to explain why people in authority often react so violently to the public use of obscene words. We provided examples of such apparently untoward reactions culled from our own experiences at Duke University. Then we explained why obscene words are rightfully viewed as threatening by authority figures. We suggested, first, that such words are a disruptive threat because they disturb the aura in which authority is maintained; they challenge the solemnity and respectability associated with authority or its symbols. We suggested, second, that the words are a psychological threat evoking man's sexual conflict and causing revulsion by their reminder of the irresolution and irresolvability of this conflict. We suggested, next,

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that the words are a linguistic threat; in attacking the conventional language system, the user of obscene words assails its inherent value code, which legitimizes authority. Finally, we identified a semantic-symbolic threat; the words serve as demarcation devices for separating persons or groups with differing ideologies, life styles, or systems of morality, while coalescing others who hold compatible views.

We concluded by discussing the implications of our speculations. Foul words are the embodiment of violence to the underpinnings of public morality and rationality; they could shake the very ground upon which political authority rears its solemn-seeming turret. The public expression of four-letter words may, we argued, provide the closest thing we have to a paradigm of defiance against authority's command to obey, when otherwise we may not know how to *say* we don't want to. But there are ways in which the effective use of such words against authority is being undermined. The words are increasingly bandied about and therefore may be losing their political potency (as "jape" and "sard" have lost their vileness); their supply does not appear inexhaustible—new ones take a considerable time to develop. The working class, we said, could most effectively use the words to challenge authority but is least likely to use them politically. Finally, we pointed out that the political system may sometimes yield to the threat inherent in the use of the words, short of the use of force by those in authority and the act of rebellion by the ruled: merely saying no with four letters as some blacks have done may suffice to contravene undesired coercion by authority. Consequently, the style of disobedience grounded on the public use of four-letter words may be seen as conducive to the maintenance and resilience of the political system.

Notwithstanding our desire to publish our thesis in a scholarly journal, we had misgivings about the effect such an explication—even if limited to an academic audience—might have on the four-letter syndrome we were spelling out, since it seemed to thrive on lack of recognition. And in the article we outlined what we viewed as a no-win proposition. If the piece failed to achieve publication, we had opined in a footnote upon sending the draft out for editorial consideration, "we shall be depressed." We lamented that, on the other hand, if it were published, "it will contribute to the demystification of the obscenity-authority interaction and [to] the devaluation of the words, and make us melancholy."

The possibility of bringing our ideas to a wider audience than academics—augmenting our potential celebrity and melancholy at the same time—was spurred by the Duke University News Service. Eager to turn erudition—if not religion—to public consumption (on the dubious assumption that the dissemination of the results of any “research” by a Duke faculty member redounds to the greater glory of the University), the news service had urged us to send it copies of something, anything, we had written. And in a moment of weakness accounted for only by the enervating Durham, N.C., summer, we sent over our “Four-Letter Threats to Authority.” Shortly thereafter in late July there came an awakening telephone call, and a news release was read for our approval, three months before the article’s scheduled publication.

It was but a few days until the Associated Press and United Press International conveyed to newspapers and broadcast media across the state what they must have thought was a facsimile in minuscule of our argument. When the radio stations began to call, the realization came that, just as four-letter words once uttered reverberate beyond the control of the user, so too we had lost control of the meaning and substance of our article about them once this dissemination began. Nearly thirty newspapers in North Carolina ran a story on the four-letter threat to authority, or some such thing. Even the august CBS Evening News was reported to have carried a blurb on it, though this rumor could not be documented. We feared that the public would understand the mystical potency of the “four-letter effect” even before our estimable colleagues in political science. Curious as to how it would react, we expected more of the high-flying moral scorn that precipitated the article in the first place.

Lo and behold, did our eyes deceive us? Or what did the *Hickory Record* of July 25, 1975, say of our article? The headline read: “Scientist: 4-Letter Words Act as Useful Peacemakers.” And the lead paragraph, replicated word for word in fourteen other papers, announced simply: “DURHAM (AP)—Four-letter words may be peacemakers, says a study by a Duke University scientist.” Over the same lead, the *Shelby Daily Star* proclaimed ponderously: “Words May Prevent Violence.” And the *Lumberton Robesonian* reiterated this pronouncement of the autopsy results: “4-Letter Words Found Healthy.” More echoes of this eulogy arrived from the clipping service.

By a process of progressive transfiguration, each step screening out the previous source, our Mr. Hyde had been transmogrified into Dr. Jekyll! The press utterly missed the point, or rather, contrived its own more comfortable point and put that out as pabulum for its readers, leaving intact the four-letter syndrome we thought we had jeopardized.

An analysis of our experience with the press raises questions about the dissemination of politically relevant information and what happens to it. Is there any way serious academic research can be reported satisfactorily in the press? And it is instructive about the pitfalls of promotion and publicity, for if our intent had been to gain publicity we were successful beyond our wildest dreams; if, on the other hand, our interest was in communication, we failed miserably. More than that, in our case the failure was ironic in view of both authors' expertise in the field: Paletz teaches a political science course on politics and the media, which gave rise to "Four-Letter Threats" in the first place; and Harris, who was luckily not party to the News Service's effort at publicity, at the time was himself a newspaper reporter in Virginia.

Versions of Our Story

The 650-word Duke news release, which was the sole source of subsequent news renditions of our study, uses a featurized down-home lead: "The next time a four-letter word curls your hair, don't threaten to wash out the offender's mouth with soap." It is a humorous and catchy popularization of a complicated theme, which the writer simplifies in the next paragraphs as: "He—or she—may be simply expressing the human need for individuality in an increasingly regimented society, according to a Duke University political scientist. The implication of the public yelling of obscenity against authority is generally, 'You don't control this aspect of me yet,' says Dr. David Paltez (*sic*).'" The release subsequently spells Paletz correctly and brings up these concepts, usually in separate paragraphs:

—The words may be used as "safety valves" by people who might otherwise show their discontent through violence.

—The research ventures into uncharted territory.

—Controversies at Duke University over the use of four-letter words in student publications were used as a source of data.

—Paletz and Harris "speculate that four-letter words may be

alternatives to defiance or disobedience that have been 'socialized out of us' in the name of order, though they still represent hostility toward authority.'

—A "four-letter threat to authority" is identified (five paragraphs in the release) although basically, the authors suggest, "four-letter words are 'static' in the flow of communication between people and those who are charged with maintaining harmony in society." The words are disruptive of the aura in which authority is maintained; psychological weapons generating chaotic emotions; linguistic threats breaking up the system of language in which authority's commands are transmitted; and symbolic symbols undermining civil rationality.

—Paletz and Harris call obscenity the "magical agent of political . . . heresy."

—But the widespread use of these words may cause a loss of their potency, and their supply may not be inexhaustible. New potent words seem to take a considerable period to develop. More than 250 years ago "to jape" and "to sard" were linguistic firebrands. They are today equaled by a single four-letter word which, the author of the release claims, is "still not acceptable for newspaper or radio use."

—Contemporary four-letter words, however, retain their power in many respects. It is the blue-collar workers rather than university students who could most effectively use them as challenges to authority, but this class lacks media outlets, and obscenity violates its conventional morality.

The news release is composed in a logical sequence, not just a string of statements as in the later versions. Selections of salient quotations, condensation of the argument and occasional synthesis for purposes of a news story's compact form are sufficient to give at least token representation of about half of the article's 8,500 words of text and footnotes.

What the writer left out were the more theoretical and complicated portions and "the most significant of all the implications" of the four-letter syndrome, in providing a verbal model of benign defiance against malevolent authority. Stanley Milgram noted the absence of such a verbal model in his experiments, which revealed that ostensibly decent people in an experimental authoritarian context would obey orders progressively to increase the electrical voltage shocking a "victim" beyond a recognized endurance point. Milgram

observed that the subjects of these experiments often did not seem to be able to articulate disobedience and so continued to inflict what they thought was dangerous pain despite their apparent unwillingness to do so.

In addition, by supplying the concept of the "safety valve" to explain our argument, the writer failed to mention blacks, whose use of obscene words, we wrote, caused the political system to yield at times to the threat inherent, without the need for an act of rebellion. This "yield effect" caused us to bring up the concept of the absorption of violence in the first place. Its omission from the Duke University News Service release contributed to the subsequent distortion of our ideas by the press.

The news release appeared verbatim (including the two different spellings of Paletz), or with confusing attempts at reorganization, in five newspapers, all but one in the immediate vicinity of Duke University. It was variously identified as emanating from the Duke News Bureau, Durham, or, in one case, given no dateline at all. The News Service had headed its release "Four-Letter Words Sub For Violence?" This misleading, albeit redeemably tentative heading was transformed by two of the local papers into "Four-Letter Words Called Safety Valves for Feelings" and "Four-Letter Words Important," with the overline, "Substitute for Violence." A third, the *Raleigh News and Observer*, announced, "Cussin' Ain't What It Was," and carried an accompanying cartoon showing a sailor yelling "#@*!!MM!!," while a middle-aged woman yawns.

Because most newspapers used an Associated Press story, we focus on this wire service. Only three papers that we know of used either of the two snappy but also misleading United Press International versions, which treated the subject as an off-beat theme emphasizing the "jape-sard" phenomenon.

The AP diminished the Duke news release to 300 words and replaced the catchy lead with the sober hard-news statement: "The use of four-letter words as 'the chanting magical agent of political and social heresy' may simply be an expression of the need for individuality, an upcoming study concludes."

Of course, the study had long since been completed, but the non-word *upcoming* defies any impression of staleness. Paletz is referred to as "a scientist at Duke University." The story moves quickly to the safety valve concept. Significantly missing is the idea

of the words as alternatives to defiance, as well as much of the explanation of the four levels of threat. Four newspapers used this story, under such headlines as “4-Letter Words ‘Safety Valve?’ ” or “Four-Letter Words Called Substitute for Violence.”

A 200-word second-cycle AP story for the next morning’s newspapers was produced entirely from the first AP version; there was no return to the original Duke release. The rewrite followed the standard format of switching the lead paragraph with the penultimate lead to make it look like a different story without having to add anything new. It reduced the four-level threat, the meat of our paper, to one sentence about three “uses,” leaving about half of the news release’s concepts mentioned.

The majority of the newspapers used this version either in whole or in part. The most drastic excisions were made by the *Fayetteville Observer*. The eight paragraphs of the second-cycle AP story were a shortened version of the first-cycle AP story, which was an abbreviation of the Duke News Service release, in turn a truncated presentation of our initial study. These eight paragraphs were cut to four by the *Fayetteville Observer*. They read as follows:

Four-letter words may be peacemakers, says a study by a Duke University scientist.

Dr. David Paletz says four-letter words may be emotional safety valves for some people who might otherwise show their discontent with violence.

Paletz, in a report to be published in the *Journal of Politics* concluded that the use of obscenities as “the chanting, magical agent of political and social heresy” may be an expression of a need for individuality.

Paletz made the study with his associate William F. Harris in the Duke community. The uses of four-letter words, according to the study, include as a disruptive basis, a psychological weapon and as a linguistic threat. (July 25, 1975)

The next day, the paper vented its self-righteousness editorially, lamenting that “outspoken obscenity has gotten a kind word—or rather an understanding word—from, of all places, Duke University, a highly respectable church-affiliated institution.” This newspaper, which had reduced and confused our ideas to roughly 100 clumsily composed, banalized words for its readers, excoriated us, in an editorial of twice that length, for not saying anything everybody didn’t already know, except perhaps that four-letter words could be

used effectively by the blue-collar class. But that, the editorial concluded ominously, would be hard on unemployment statistics.

Analysis

To the casual, quick reader, the wire services seem to present Paletz and Harris as providing scientific evidence for the common-sense notion that swearing is cathartic. In contrast, our article concerns the threat posed to authority by four-letter obscenities; it is tentative, speculative, and devoid of scientific evidence. Specific events provoked our thesis, but our argument is grounded on logic, not empirical tests. We conducted no experiments, undertook no surveys, asserted no claim upon science whatsoever. Why, then, did our research receive such attention? Why was it treated as a proclamation of scientific truth? Most obviously, the wire services contributed to the illusion of scientific certainty by transforming the news release into the standard, threadbare wire service style—a style characterized by terseness and the elimination of qualifiers. One would gather, moreover, from the remarkably easy bridging of the gap between “political scientist” and “scientist” in both AP stories, achieved by the discarding of “political,” that at least in the AP office there was no consciousness of the distinction between empirical research and hypothetical thought—as long as the source appeared legitimate.

In the progress of the article from academe to newsprint, the Duke University News Service acted as broker. But it is the wire service that really legitimized the story—by accepting and transmitting it with its own imprimatur affixed. The wire service did not attribute the story to Duke’s news service (a technique of attribution some newspapers are beginning to adopt to give their readers an idea of the actual source of news content). Instead, the reader had every reason to believe that the AP and UPI talked to the Duke “scientists” themselves or at least read a copy of the article.

Despite these reasons for publication, one could reasonably question whether the news story, after it had been successively watered down to merest banality, was worthy of newsprint. Yet virtually all the daily newspapers in North Carolina judged differently. And a majority of them used the second-cycle AP, the most adulterated version of the story.

There are compelling reasons in addition to its scientific patina, its Duke University source, that made the story attractive. The press has an insatiable need for daily grist. The wire service stories were short. They were not “time-fragile” and could be used when space allowed. There was a sort of mindless entertainment value to them. They were spicy and titillating, and yet the newspapers could adroitly avoid having to be seen using four-letter words or lamely circumventing them, as they usually do, with ellipses or periphrastics. For that matter, the stories tended to justify editors’ own positions on not printing four-letter words. And of course the basic subject is something that journalists are intimately concerned with, for they are tradesmen in words.

The story in all its versions caters to one venial newspaper weakness. The journal article was written about in the press before it was actually published: it was “to appear in the *Journal of Politics*.” This characteristic makes the story automatically more delectable to the newspapers, for it indulges their penchant for the predictive (a close relative to “scoopism”). Here is an indication that scholars who want to get their work publicized in the general press should get it out to the papers in advance of actual publication. But any would-be publicist would do well to guard against having his or her work filtered and re-edited by a wire service. If there is a one-to-one relationship between the research and the news writer, however, there is a chance of ending up with a reasonable condensation—with understandable changes in emphasis that accompany the transition from academic to public print. Arguably, though, much research by academicians should remain out of the public eye in the rarefied medium of professional journals.

Yet there is an even more fundamental predilection of newspapers subtly in evidence in the treatment of our research. Community newspapers’ cherished role as the first among loyal partisans of the local order, and of the general social system, has been misleadingly obscured by recent muckraking extravaganzas put on by the major national newspapers. Some newspaper managers may take grand pride in their papers’ vocal—if sporadic and sometimes selective—criticism of holders of public office. But the limited reservoir of nonpersonal public authority, which supplies and legitimizes the officeholder’s temporary commission, is sacrosanct, for it insures the basic societal order. In fact, journalistic forays against specific of-

ficeholders are often justified in the name of defending this basic order.

The public use of four-letter words could threaten this reservoir, our thesis suggested. But it fell to the staid wire services to show that even the Big Bad Wolf has his sociable chore to do: four-letter words, we are told, are peacemakers, because they deplete the violent impulse; besides, with this increasing distasteful use—albeit to achieve a commendable end—they are losing their punch and cannot be replenished quickly enough to bother us much longer. In effect, a marvelous detoxification was attempted by the mock-daring, teasing use of the foul words “jape” and “sard” in the lead paragraph of the UPI story, with the message: look what impotence these erstwhile “linguistic firebrands” have now. The jape-sard phenomenon portends tranquility. In sum, by variously presenting our thesis in a funny light, simply ignoring it or distorting it outright, the news renditions pay homage to the conservation of authority by the use of these words.

Though the mainstay of the press may be controversy, it is generally of a rather low grade. For a variety of reasons, the press has not been able to cope very well with fundamental societal conflict. The joyful reception of often trivial “good news” stories to “balance” Page One is a sad indication of newspapers’ Janus face: still the waters against the big waves, and we can wax entertainingly prosaic with all due concern about the little ones. As the news is currently rendered, security is a primary product, collateral with information and entertainment. This or that issue, we are led to believe, can be reduced to these words—it is there, it is comprehensible, in standard English. We are commensurately assuaged or troubled, but there is a solace and a tranquil passivity from the finality of the words, from the hardness of the print or the firmness of the voice, from the well-worn simplified style. For the news is Janus-faced in a truer respect: the impulse to “break the news” with a scoop has its obverse in the desire to put the kiss of the “last word” on open questions, much like the Walter Cronkite television news benediction, “And that’s the way it is.” Open and shut—the uncertainty is all there in between, and assurance without.