THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INDECENCY ON
CLASSIC ROCK RADIO MORNING TALK SHOWS

By

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A Paper submitted
in partial fulfillment of the
Bachelor of Science degree
in Communication

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2135
The members of the Committee approve this thesis of Daniel Paul Mansen’s presented on May 4, 2014.

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Dedicated to all the WITR members that I had the honor of knowing.
You were more than just fellow hipsters and music nerds.
To me, you were, and always will be, my family.
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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INDECENCY ON
CLASSIC ROCK RADIO MORNING TALK SHOWS

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The purpose of this study was to analyze indecency on five classic rock radio morning talk shows in the United States through a content analysis. The study focused on the offensive topic themes and words spoken over a two-hour span over the course of one week. The study found that offensive language is used infrequently throughout all the morning shows, while offensive and sexually themed topics were much more common. The latter was done through clever uses of euphemisms and sexual innuendos. The results of the study back up previous research that prove the free speech laws for FM radio that are still in effect today are unfair and do not reflect the technologically progressive world we live in today.
A Content Analysis of Indecency on Classic Rock Radio Morning Talk Shows

Introduction

“There are 400,000 words in the English language, and there are seven of them you can’t say on television. What a ratio that is, 399,993 to seven. They must really be bad”. George Carlin originally said on his 1972 standup comedy album *Class Clown*. The world has changed quite a lot in the 42 year since then, but language and the laws regarding indecency and obscenity on the radio have not.

Radio personalities and believers in free speech have been fighting with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) over what can and what cannot be said for as long as radio has been around, but arguably nothing was more important to free speech rights on radio than the landmark Supreme Court case of *FCC v Pacifica Foundation*.

In 2014, traditional radio is no longer the dominant source of entertainment and news of yesteryear. The Internet allows anyone to listen to whatever they want to hear, whenever they want it. In 1973 this was not the case. Television and the radio ruled the mass media landscape, and just about everyone in the United States owned one of the two, if not both. Because of this, the government deemed it necessary to censor what could be aired, in order to protect the children. Similar to Orwell’s *1984*, if there are no bad words, maybe the US government could stop bad thoughts as well.

Of course this was not the case, and curse words have survived the test of time. Carlin’s original list of seven words include, shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits. This
Indecency On The Radio

list has continued to be taboo today, but can be overheard amongst teenagers and adults daily, on the radio however, not so often.

The discussing of taboo topics however, whether with friends, on television or over the FM radio airwaves will most likely never cease to exist. To do this without having licenses revoked by the FCC, radio stations are forced to cleverly use innuendoes, euphemisms, and self-censorship. Many stations throughout history have been fined, but this hasn’t stopped the trend. People are going to talk about what people want to hear, and that might not always be what the government would prefer.

**Thesis Statement**

The purpose of this study is to discover if there are any similarities in topics and uses of offensive or sexual language on morning talk shows in the United States on classic rock FM radio stations. Two hours worth of five morning shows on classic rock stations from uniquely different cities in the country over the course of one week have been examined. A codebook influenced by a study done by Gentile in 1999 was devised and used to discover if there are any trends or patterns regarding the language and themes of the topics being discussed.

**Background**

To understand how and why the United States’ indecency and obscenity laws have evolved into what they are now is no easy task. When people think about profanity on the radio, their first thought is George Carlin’s “Seven Dirty Words” in the 1970s. Arguably, it still stands as the most important event for free speech on the radio, but it certainly wasn’t the first. This section introduces some of the other important free speech cases, including the 1963 “Uncle” Charlie Walker case, *Miller vs. California* (1973), *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*
(1997) and an overview of where radio stands amongst the other modern forms of communication technologies in 2014.

History of indecency and obscenity on the radio

In 1963, a DJ on WDKD in Kingstree, South Carolina, by the name of Charlie Walker became the first ever broadcaster to be convicted of obscenity. The court case *U.S. v Walker* became widely controversial and gained media attention throughout the country. While what Walker was saying over the airways was not obscene for today’s standards, it offended enough people to cause a competing station to record a series of Walker’s shows to send to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Two federal proceedings came of this, one against the station’s owner, Edward G. Robinson, to revoke his license, and the second against Walker himself.

This case is extremely important for free speech rights on the radio. In “The Carnival in Kingstree: A Bakhtinian Analysis of The Charlie Walker Obscenity Case ”Armstrong (2012) takes a unique perspective on this almost forgotten case, in which he discusses how it showcases the official and “unofficial” language used in rural South Carolina in the 1960s. Like today, in differing cultures around the country, different types of language are used. People in Boston for example will use the word “wicked” to describe something more often than someone in Chicago. In most cases, when talking with friends your language will vary greatly compared to talking with your grandparents. And finally, lower class people in New York City will speak much differently with stockbrokers on Wall Street. The latter comparison is what most closely resembles what was happening in 1963 in Williamsburg County, South Carolina.

As was the case then as it is now, the FCC will not act on a radio station or DJ without being provoked by a listener’s complaint. In the case of Walker’s, it was the operations manager
at a local rival radio station who sent in the complaint. There was also a high African American population in the county, at 66.5% (Armstrong, 2012). Armstrong analyzes this case through the eyes of a 20th century Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, and his idea of the “carnival”.

“Uncle Charlie” Walker’s show was quite popular with African American population in the area. He played hillbilly music, and “gained a reputation for crude, rustic humor” (Armstrong, 2012, p.86). While the upper class White population didn’t find Walker’s style as humorous, he was still popular amongst the majority of the population of the county. The way Armstrong looks at this case through Bakhtin’s “carnival” however shows that Walker’s type of discourse can “offer a window onto the kind of disempowered, unofficial, linguistic community that might be ignored in judicial calculations about ‘community standards’” (Armstrong, 2012, p.92). The fact that the people in power, who were not the majority in this situation, were able to shut down Charlie Walker begs to ask the question of what “community” should even be defined as. In a place where the majority of the population speaks a more coarse type of language with each other, wouldn’t the “community standard” for the area in question be different than one at an Ivy League college? And if that is the case, shouldn’t the “community standard” reflect that difference? It’s important to realize:

The linguistic style of Charlie walker was more than a perversion of a correct, national language that was used by all people of good will.

Instead, Charlie Walker likely joined in a linguistic style that was shared and appreciated by his many listeners (Armstrong, 2012, p.93).

**Landmark indecency and obscenity Supreme Court cases**

Ten years later in 1973, in the landmark case Miller v. California, obscenity law was redefined to conform to a three-prong test, or the Miller Test. While the case dealt with
pornographic material, the Supreme Court later adopted the same test for the Federal Communications Commission in defining obscenity and indecency on the radio. In the Miller Test, the material in question is judged on these three aspects:

Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, (2) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (3) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value (Miller v. California, 1972).

If the material in question passed two out of the three tests, then it was considered indecent, and legal to air. However, if it failed all three aspects of the Miller Test, then it was to be deemed obscene. While the Miller test was originally devised because of an issue regarding pornographic materials, because of how many issues arose from controversial radio programs, combined with the fact that in the 1970s radio was also at its height of popularity, the Supreme Court decided they had to act (Parker, 2003). Radio was able to reach such critical masses that it made it one of the most highly scrutinized types of mass media.

On October 30, 1973, WBAI-FM, a non-commercial radio station in the New York metropolitan area, known for its strong ties to the 60s counterculture movement aired a controversial uncensored monologue by the late comedian George Carlin. The routine aired was called “Filthy Words,” and showcased a satirical stand-up performance in which Carlin discusses the seven words “you couldn’t say on the public airwaves” (Pacifica, 1978, p. 751). After receiving a complaint about the monologue, the FCC used the Miller Test to judge whether or not it was obscene. They stated “it was not obscene because it had literary value and lacked
prurient appeal; therefore, it passed the test for obscenity” (Parker, 2003, p.219). Justice Stevens of the Supreme Court, however, didn’t apply the Miller Test in his argument, and instead devised a slightly different three set of themes: (1) broadcasting is a uniquely pervasive presence; (2) the government has a legitimate interest in protecting children from exposure to indecent language; and (3) indecent speech is a nuisance” (Parker, 2003, p.223). When looked at through this way, there isn’t much of a difference between obscene and indecent when it came to radio broadcasting, which made the court’s vague decision even tougher for free speech activists and the Pacifica Foundation to handle.

Fast-forward to the year 1997, and free speech is once again on trial, this time for the Internet. Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union saw the Supreme Court unanimously striking down the anti-indecency provision of the Communications Decency Act. “Declining to apply Pacifica (1978) as a precedent, the majority held that the Internet is less invasive than radio or television” (Parker, 2003, p.304), and while this was a strikingly different decision from what the Supreme Court ruled on when it came to radio broadcasting in the past, it was a big win for free speech enthusiasts.

Indecency and obscenity in today’s world

What we can take away from these important Supreme Court cases regarding broadcasting and free speech is that throughout their short histories they have been constantly evolving. In this sense, it’s important to note that most traditional radio stations nowadays offer online streaming services. The FCC does not have control over the Internet, as we learned from Reno (1997), and because of this, online radio streams are free to broadcast online whatever they please. Internet use is constantly growing percentage wise for the United States population, and in 2009 an Arbitron and Edison Research study found that 42 million Americans listened to
online radio, which was up from 33 million in 2008 (Heine, 2009, p.6). With the availability of the Internet through the use of computers and handheld devices increasing constantly, the number of traditional radio users is fighting with Internet users.

“While radio has been able to cope with the new media environment to a much greater extent than television, it is no longer the case that radio is significantly more pervasive than other types of media” (Seaman, 2011, p.74). In addition to this, in 2009 a research study found that in the United States, radio reached 77% of the population while the Internet was not far behind at 64% (Nielsen Media Research, 2009). It has been 5 years since that study was done, and the technology world moves so fast that those numbers are most likely much closer today. Looking at the big picture of the country, we can see that “nearly half of the population, or 49 percent--a whopping 125 million--have listened to online radio at least once” (Heine, 2009).

By analyzing all these numbers, it proves that the world has changed in the 40 years since *Pacifica*. Justice Stevens, in his themes that he based his argument upon, stated that radio was uniquely pervasive, and especially available to children, so there was a need for the government to protect them. Now that the Internet is arguably more pervasive than radio to children, why do the current laws surrounding it still reflect a different world’s needs? Now that that aspect of Justice Stevens’ argument has been tackled, let us return to *U.S. v Walker*, to discuss the implications of the “Community standards” judgment by the Miller Test.

In 2014, just about every popular traditional radio station in the United States allowed free streaming from anywhere in the world on online. We live in a much more globally connected world, one in which people might listen to radio from anywhere they choose. Phillip Napoli introduces two important terms that regard to audience fragmentation: “intermedia” fragmentation and “intramedia” fragmentation. “Intermedia” fragmentation described the
expansion of how many new media technologies exist, which allows for a greater amount of media platforms. Examples of these included the Internet, radio, television, cable, and print. “Intramedia” fragmentation on the other hand deals with how many types of media can be accessed through one type of media, such as the Internet, which allows users to gain access to radio, television, movies, and print.

The FCC scrutinizes online radio stations that are simulcasts of their traditional radio counterpart in the same ways, but it brings up an issue with community standards. If someone listening to an online stream of a radio station is offended by something they heard simply because the community they belong to has a linguistic style, should the station come under fire? Like in the Charlie Walker case, if his show had been streamed across the globe, it would have reached a greater number of people who would have either been fans or hated it. To add to this, there are now online-only radio stations; many of which are also affiliated with public and private colleges and universities. If online stations have no FM or AM broadcast, they do not have to abide by the FCC’s laws, since the ruling of Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union with its implications for free speech on the Internet.

The idea that a modern community standard in part defines obscenity, under the Miller Test, is quite odd for the Pacifica (1978) case. John R. Douglas, the man that filed the complaint was a member of Morality in Media (A Christian organization whose goal was to curb obscenities and profanity in the media). He flew all the way from his home in Florida to New York City just to hear the broadcast and to send in a complaint. His “young” son traveling with him was 15-years-old, and oddly enough he was the only person to send in a complaint to the FCC for WBAI’s airing of the Carlin monologue (Demas, 1998). It begs the question that since he was the only one offended enough to send in a complaint, is it possible that the New York
City community standard was simply different from his own? And that since he wasn’t from the area, should the Supreme Court have used the Miller Test in the case to argue against Douglas over the fact that there were differences in the community standards at play?

**Literature Review**

In four different studies, Kaye and Sapolsky (2001, 2004, 2005 and 2009) analyzed the offensive language used on prime time (8 p.m. to 11 p.m.) television over the course of 15 years, between 1990 and 2005. While these studies did a lot in helping understand the trends of offensive language usage on television, since they were done on cable stations where the FCC doesn’t have the same jurisdiction as FM radio, the results don’t perfectly relate to the current study. To make matters even more complicated, cable television is viewable on the national level, meaning the FCC’s contemporary community standards test cannot apply on a local level like it can in traditional radio.

In 2001, Kaye and Sapolsky did a study titled “Offensive Language in Prime Time Television: Before and After Content Ratings” which laid the groundwork for classifying offensive language into five levels. The categories were, “the ‘seven dirty words’… sexual words, excretory words, strong-other words and mild-other words” (Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 188). While those first three categories are self-explanatory, the latter two are a little more abstract. Examples they gave of the “strong-other” words include bastard, bitch and bullshit, while “mild-other” words consisted of hell, damn, Christ, Jesus and God if spoken in vain (Fitzgerald, 2009). The study examined a week of prime time television aired on the major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox Networks), over three separate years between 1990 and 1997, in order to judge whether there was any increase in the number of offensive words said.
Of the 250 prime time television programs analyzed, the study found 1,293 instances of offensive language and behavior, 98% of them being overt, meaning only 2% (32) of them being implied (bleeped out). Over the course of the seven years, the study found that the number of offensive words spoken decreased, while sexual and excretory words said increased.

Kaye and Sapolsky conducted the same content analysis study again in 2004, to see whether or not the Telecommunications Act of 1996’s addition of an age-based rating system that was adopted in 1997 affected the frequency of offensive language usage on seven major television stations. The study found that between 1997 and 2001 the number of offensive words spoken actually increased 51% to a rate of one word per eight minutes. They came to the conclusion that the main reasons for why this happened were the, “acceptance of profanity in everyday conversation, daring programs, the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, and the drive for higher ratings” (Kaye, 2004, p.556). However, much like their previous study, the types of offensive language used were of the mild variety, and the least used were the “seven dirty words”.

In 2005, a study once again by Kaye and Sapolsky analyzing prime time television in 2001 found that offensive words on seven broadcast networks most occurred between the 9-10 p.m. hour. The study also found that vulgarities spoken towards other character were most often met with a neutral (55.3%) or positive (25%) reaction. This is important in studying offensive themed topics, since it shows how in the current day that type of language is more or less commonplace, and that people are much less easily offended by what is considered offensive language. The study also found that the use of the “seven dirty words” occurred the most often in the third hour (10 – 11 p.m.). 10 p.m. is coincidentally the beginning of the FCC’s “safe harbor” hours, that last until 6 a.m. the next morning, in which indecent content is supposed to be blocked off into, since less children would be expected to be watching, or tuning in on a radio.
Finally in 2009, Kaye and Sapolsky studied the differences between cable television and broadcast television’s use of offensive language during the prime time hours. The authors note a study done in 2007 that estimated 85% of American households paid for cable television. Now in 2014, that number has most likely increased closer to 100%. Because of how widespread cable television now is, protestors have been begging the FCC to control offensive language beyond just broadcast television. The study analyzed the seven highest-rated cable television networks (Lifetime, MTV, Nick-at-Nite, SciFi, Spike, TNT, USA) with the major broadcast networks, to see if the cable stations actually aired more offensive language than the broadcast stations under scrutiny of the FCC. The results of the study back up their hypothesis that the cable networks analyzed did in fact air more offensive words than their broadcast counterparts. “Despite the increased number of viewer complaints of profanity-laced programs, indecent language on broadcast television has increased over the last 15 years” (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2001, 2004, 2009).

In 2009, Fitzgerald, Sapolsky and McClung conducted a content analysis similar to the previous studies on television, but now specifically on the offensive language spoken during morning FM radio talk shows in the top 10 US Markets. For the study, they selected graduate students as coders to analyze 200 hours of programming. The purpose was to find out what types of offensive language were most often said, if the language differed from market to market and if the number of offensive words spoken differed across the four hours throughout the morning shows recorded. The study found the bulk of offensive language was spoken on rock and popular music formats, with the least number of incidents on Adult Contemporary, Rhythmic Oldies and Country.

Using Kaye and Sapolsky’s (2001) classification for rating offensive language, Fitzgerald’s (2009) study found that there were 872 instances of offensive language spoken
during morning radio talk shows, 776 were overt, with the rest being implied. Mild-other words accounted for the largest percentage of offensive words spoken (41.9%), then excretory (21.3%), and sexual (17.4%) (Fitzgerald, 2001). Not much of a difference was found between the different US markets and how many uses of offensive words were spoken.

Two studies that greatly influenced the approach of this content analysis study were Gentile’s 1999 “Teen-Oriented Radio and CD Sexual Content Analysis” and Heintz-Knowles’ 1996 “Sexual Activity On Daytime Soap Operas: A Content Analysis of Five Weeks of Television Programming.” The former analyzed the top radio station that at the time dominated the teen market, KDWB, along with the top 10 best selling albums in the US for a week in February 1999. This study focused on sexual innuendos and discussion of sexual intercourse in the lyrics and discourse of the on air DJs. Conducted by the National Institute on Media and the Family, this study, through content analysis, found 22 percent of segments included sexual content, of which 18 percent was through innuendos or seductive lyrics in songs, and only four percent from direct descriptions of sexual intercourse. Most importantly though only three percent of the time spent talking included sexual content. From this study, we can take away that most of the sexual content is not directly from the DJs themselves, but instead in the songs being broadcasted.

Conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Heintz-Knowles (1996) found in another study that sexual behaviors on daytime soap operas were twice as likely to be visual rather than verbal among other findings. Like in Gentile’s study, when most of the sexual content came from the songs, and not the individual DJs, this study proved that in order for the soap operas being analyzed, to adhere to the FCC’s laws, the offensive material would have to mostly be visual rather than verbal. These studies made it clear that for the FM radio morning talk shows that
wanted to discuss the more raunchy taboo subjects, well-placed euphemisms and innuendos would have to be used instead.

What I was expecting however, were a good amount of euphemisms, innuendos, and George Carlin’s penned “two-way words,” the ones with double meanings. Carlin mentions these words in both of his monologues, and even slightly different in the live version of the routine available for online viewing. The list of two-way words I have compiled include cock, balls, prick, ass and bitch. These are the types of words that won’t always be censored in songs, and DJs can often be heard saying them without penalty.

Research Questions

Based on the research conducted to date on the use of profanity on the radio and television, this research seeks to continue and expand on those studies by focusing in on just one type of radio format (classic rock) while also examining the discussion topic themes as well. To that end, the following three research questions will be explored:

1. Do the topics discussed on classic radio morning talk shows generally revolve around taboo topics?

2. Do the topics discussed vary greatly between the stations, and are there any similarities between themes talked about between the stations chosen across the United States?

3. Do the classic rock morning talk show DJs and on-air guests use language that could be found offensive? If so, in what way does it affect the conversation?

Rationale

During the Fall 2013 semester, I wrote a research paper for the Communication Law and Ethics class titled “Indecency On The Radio” in which I examined the Pacifica case as well as
some of the other important ones regarding free speech on the radio. Between that and my previous love for music and classic rock radio I was inspired to continue the research and expand it into a content analysis on indecency for this thesis.

**Personal interest**

As a communication major who wants to someday have a career in the music industry, free speech on the radio is extremely important to me. WPYX, the main classic rock station in Albany, NY is something I grew up listening to in the late 1990s and through the 2000s living in western Massachusetts. I would frequently tune into their morning talk show on the way to high school, and noticed even at a young age, the morning talk show hosts consistently talked about topics that pushed the limits of the taboo. After spending four plus years away from home in Rochester, NY, I was exposed to the morning show hosted by Brother Wease. After hearing more than a few snippets of the show over the years, it made me wonder if maybe it wasn’t just my local station that talked about topics most people would shy away from, but maybe a trend found on classic rock morning talk shows across the country? Even though I couldn’t find any evidence that stated a reason for why classic rock morning radio shows might be more inclined to focus on taboo topics, I knew it would be my best interest for the study to keep the format consistent.

When I joined the RIT on-campus student run radio station WITR as a sophomore, I had to pass a membership test. One of the questions on this exam asked what were the “seven dirty words” you could never say on air. At the time I was not familiar with Carlin’s famous monologue, but that was three years ago, and if someone were to take that test today they would not have to know them. Instead incoming members are asked to write the definitions of what constitutes indecent and obscene language. Is it better to ask incoming members of the station to
list the seven dirty words or define indecency and obscenity? I often wondered whether or not we were allowed to say absolutely anything we wanted as long as they didn’t include one of those seven words, or could I also get in trouble by discussing offensive topics as well? These were the types of questions that first got me interested in obscenity law on the radio.

Choosing the radio stations to analyze

In order to keep the show recordings as random as possible, they were recorded on different days over the course of one week. I didn’t listen to any of the chosen morning show programs beforehand, as that might have had an influence on why or why not I would have chosen certain shows. Instead, I did just a basic Internet search on the shows, to see if there was any information that might help determine which stations would be the most popular and have the largest listenership in their location. To go along with that, I checked online articles for each station to see if there was any basic information on their histories that could be of any use.

When I first started researching to figure out which stations would be the best options for analyzing, I started with 10 stations, and whittled the number down to five. Some of the big factors I took into consideration in choosing which stations would be worth listening to included, how long the station had been around, if they had a large social media presence, station wattage, and the population of the community they were located in. The final stations and their morning shows’ names I chose to analyze were:

WQBW 95.1 FM Rochester, NY: “The Wease Show” (Monday March 31st 2014)
WKBU 95.7 FM New Orleans, LA: “Walton and Johnson” (Tuesday April 1st 2014)
KQRS 92.5 FM Minneapolis, MN: “KQ Morning Show” (Wednesday April 2nd 2014)
KRFX 103.5 FM Denver, CO: “Lewis and Floorwax” (Thursday April 3rd 2014)
KSAN 107.7 FM San Francisco, CA: “Lamont and Tonelli” (Friday April 4th 2014)
The technical factor that was important in choosing stations was how much effective radiating power (ERP) the stations had. The maximum in the United States for FM Zone II (most commercial stations) is 100,000 watts. WKBU, KQRS, and KRFX were all at 100,000, which proved that they were important stations in their respective communities, as well as showing that they can be heard from very long distances. KSAN in San Francisco was 8,900 watts, which is standard for more densely populated places with many competing radio stations, which is exactly what the bay area constitutes, and finally WQBW in Rochester is in the middle at 50,000 watts. One factor that was not important in choosing the stations was which parent company owned the station; Clear Channel Communications owned two (WQBW, KRFX), two were with Cumulus Media (KQRS, KSAN) and WKBU was owned by Entercom Communications Corporation. Since I was only analyzing five stations, the sample size was too small (3 companies) to be able to draw any meaningful conclusions.

An interesting trend I noticed among classic rock radio station websites are pages that link to provocative images of women. Examples of this could be found on each and every one of the station’s websites I chose. WQBW’s main homepage has a tab titled “Babes” that links to a page of photo galleries, of which some were “Beach Booties”, “Happy MILF Day”, “Tax Dat A$$”, “Naked Sledding” among many others. As I scrolled down on their homepage, I noticed another link for the photo gallery “Country Hotties”, and after a little more investigation I found another page that included all their other galleries that featured scantily clad girls, titled “Women We Heart”. Oddly enough, I found a link to the exact same “Country Hotties” photo gallery on the website for KRFX. This surprised me at first, but upon realizing they’re both owned by Clear Channel, made me think that it must be affiliated with them, and not the individual local stations. One feature that was unique to KRFX however was their “Masters Sweet 16 Girls” competition,
in which listeners were encouraged to go onto the website and vote for who they thought was the sexiest woman of the year. “Walton & Johnson’s specific show page on the main WKBU website has links to their “Babe of The Day”, “Rate My GF” and “Local Girls” galleries. KQRS had the cleanest site of them all, as they didn’t have any permanent pages, but on the homepage I found a blog link of the stations to a not suitable for work (NSFW) photo shoot from 1998 of Sofia Vergara, a famous Colombian actress and Spanish TV hostess. KRFX’s main homepage had a link to their “country hotties” gallery, which ended up linking to the exact same page as WQBW, which I realized was not much of a coincidence, since the two stations are both owned by the same company (Clear Channel). After a little more investigation I found another page that included all their other galleries that featured scantily clad girls, titled “Women We Heart”.

Finally, under the features tab on KSAN’s homepage was a link to their “Hot Chick of The Day” page. Why all of these websites contained these types of semi-pornographic material is beyond me, and I have never come across this type of content on any other radio format’s websites other than classic rock. I believe it gives a good idea of the image these classic rock stations are trying to make for themselves, as well as giving me a good idea of the direction their conversations might be go on the morning talk shows.

WQBW in Rochester was chosen because Brother Wease and his morning show on 95.1 “The Brew” is notorious in the local community. He has had a morning radio show in the area for over 20 years, in addition to having previously hosted a show on XM satellite radio and WBUF in Buffalo, NY. Rochester is by far the smallest city in this study, and it was chosen because of how well known Brother Wease is in the western New York area, as well as the area being culturally unique from the rest of the cities chosen. I see Rochester as a big city with a much smaller feel, which set it apart from the rest of the big name cities on my list.
WKBU “Bayou 95.7” boasts being the only classic rock station in the city, and their morning show since 1983 consisting of “Walton and Johnson” is one of the more popular in the area. On the shows website, they mention numerous times awards they have won in the past in the Houston area, which means they are big enough to serve two enormous cities, located roughly five hours apart from each other. Another important statistic they listed was the fact that many of their sponsors have been with them for over 18 years, which tells me the show has been consistent for a long time.

Tom Barnard and Terri Pawelk have been hosting the award winning “KQ Morning Show” since 1987. Short for K Quality Radio Station, KQRS has been a force in the Twin Cities since 1962, and is often voted the most-listened to station the area. While I could have chosen a bigger Midwestern city like Chicago or Detroit, I preferred KQRS because of the positive reviews about their morning show I came across that greatly overshadowed the stations in the other cities I looked at.

Since 1989, KRFX in Denver, CO has been playing classic rock under the name “103.5 The Fox”. Rick Lewis and Michael Floorwax have hosted their morning show since 1991. In an article published on the Denver Post’s website from March 6th titled “Lewis and Floorwax Not What They Seem To The Ear,” staff writer Dianne Eicher tells the two DJs back stories, as well as some insight into how they haven’t gotten big fines from the FCC, “Lewis and Floorwax are ‘masters at using veiled references when they go blue.’ The two don't ever actually say words like ‘sex’ or ‘intercourse' on air, but instead have various made-up substitute terms, like ‘shtoink.' And there's no arguing that they do get raunchy, but they know ‘where not to go’” (Denver Post, 2014). KRFX is also the official broadcaster for the city’s National Football Team, the Denver Broncos.
KSAN, or “107.7 The Bone” broadcasts classic rock in the Bay Area, which include nearby cities San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. The area covers nine counties, and is home to approximately 7.5 million people. Out of all the final selected stations, KSAN has the largest social media presence with over 36 thousand “likes” on their Facebook “Lamont and Tonelli” Facebook fan page.

Methods

Using the radio recording website “Dar.fm” the shows were scheduled and recorded during the week of March 30th. The website recorded the shows in 15 minute pieces which I downloaded onto my computer. I then used the audio editing software Audacity to piece together the 15-minute clips and save the complete two-hour show as a single MP3 audio file. Next I went through each recording and deleted all of the times when commercials were playing (discussed in detail later).

The individual shows lasted differing amounts of time, so I chose to only analyze the discussions between 7 and 9 a.m. for consistency, and because the average morning commutes in the country are highest during those times, which led me to believe these would be the times the stations aired their most important morning discussions are they would be the ones most likely to attract the largest listening audience.

In Gentile’s (1999) study, a segment was defined as either a) talk, b) music, c) commercial, d) PSA, e) news, f) weather, g) sports, h) traffic or i) station imaging (promos/intros/outs). By categorizing every single part of the radio show into a segment, Gentile’s was able to analyze each part of the entire radio program. For my study however, I chose not to analyze a good portion of the broadcasts, including commercials, weather, traffic,
sports, imaging (which constitute the station promos, intros and outros) and music. The number of individual songs played was recorded to see if there was a difference between the stations.

For my study, a segment was defined as the time that the DJs have a discussion between breaks. These breaks could be commercials or songs, anything that stops the segment that isn’t part of the discussion. Segment’s lengths differed from station to station, but I do not expect this to affect my results in any way. Sometimes stations will air short, previously recorded conversations between the DJs, which are often not a part of the current discussions, and are merely used as promos for the show. Because these are played so often, if a talking segment was less than two minutes long, I chose not to keep it in my final sound files for analysis.

During each segment, the coders timed the total duration, as well as noting each topic being discussed in a few shorts words. The first two questions in the codebook asked the coder to list all the topics that are talked about during the segment, and to list them in different lists depending on whether or not they include any mention or discussion of sexual innuendos, offensive material or euphemisms that are said as a way to censor them. If “bleeps” were used to censor certain words, I did not analyze it. The stations being analyzed were running with or without a delay, which if they did, would allow them to mute profanities if they were accidentally aired. The reason for why I choose not to analyze bleeps is that context must be used to figure out what word was censored out, and this can often be difficult to achieve.

Each segment will use its own code sheet. At the top the coder numbered which segment was currently being analyzed, which kept everything organized and separate, because I figured some segments to go on for much longer than others. Since I expected many topics to keep coming up throughout multiple segments, the fact that different coding sheets were used for each segment allowed the coder to keep writing them down as many times as they kept recurring. I
chose not to have the coders time how long each topic is discussed for, since they will already be timing how long the entire segment lasts, and asking to time multiple things at once might get confusing. After I gathered all the coding sheets together, I figured out the average times for the duration of the segments, as well as totaling up the number of topics talked about, which gave me a rough estimate for the average time spoken about each separate topic.

By choosing to throw out any data I could have gotten from commercials, I focused on the actual talking of the DJs on the shows, instead of what the station owners wanted to air between discussions. For commercial radio stations, the actual commercials being aired were a mix of national and local sponsors, which should not be offensive or sexual in nature, making them useless for the purpose of my study. Similarly, DJs on commercial radio stations will often say public service announcements (PSAs). These are semi-scripted messages most often said by the on-air DJ before a commercial break. I was on the edge about keeping these in with the rest of the segments, and in the end chose to keep them. I chose to keep them because most people that aren’t in the radio industry (like myself) won’t realize they are hearing PSAs. Since the DJ is saying the message and it’s not said by a different voice during a commercial, there is a better chance the listener will keep listening to the message intently, instead of possibly changing the channel or turning the radio off completely.

One of the most difficult parts of this study was coming up with a way to define which words would constitute as offensive and sexual. Since different types of language and words offend every individual person, I decided it would be safest for the study to compile any word or phrase that could even possibly be construed as offensive. From there, I compiled the list of words and threw out the outliers if they came up much less often that others. Generally, I wanted these “possibly offensive” words to reflect the two-way words George Carlin mentions in his
standup comedy routines, these being: cock, balls, prick, ass and bitch. I didn’t expect that any of Carlin’s original seven dirty words would be said over the air, but I made a note of any heard. However, Carlin’s list of two-way words is not concrete, I just used it as a starting point, and if I heard other words or phrases I thought could be offensive to anyone I wrote them down.

I also added the message in bold at the top of the codebook “Include any innuendos or euphemisms!” This was important to add because it’s how I expect many DJs to censor themselves, allowing them to talk about whatever they want, taboo in nature or not. Euphemisms are often hard to notice, since many of them have become part of people’s common vocabulary. Because of this, I listened to each recording twice. The first time I focused on the possible and sexual words spoken, and then the second time to I focused on listening for euphemisms and innuendos, specifically because they can be difficult to notice if you aren’t listening for them.

**Results**

After editing out the commercials, music, weather and traffic reports, the final number of segments ranged from five to 10 per show, with the total average times of discussion being roughly an hour and 12 minutes per two hours, as shown in Figure 1. The number of songs played and the total amount of time talking for shows were indirectly proportional with each other, which wasn’t expected, but not surprising. KSAN and KRFX both played the most number of songs (6), while KQRS played (4), WQBW (2) and WKBU played just one song in the entire two-hour time frame.
There were 38 total segments (Figure 2) with average duration being just over 10 minutes long, as shown in Figure 3. Figure 2 also shows that the number of topics varied quite a lot between the five stations, as WQBW almost doubled the amount of topics as KSAN. The variation in topics didn’t have much of an effect on the average topic lengths, as they were all fairly close to one another. There was also no correlation between how long the station’s segments were and the amount of time they focused on each separate topic, seen from Figure 3.

The topics varied a good amount between the stations. Of the 135 total topics discussed during the 10 hours of recordings, only 35 of them were marked as possibly offensive or sexual in nature. To answer Research Question 1 regarding whether or not the morning radio show discussions focused mostly on taboo topics, only 26% of the combined show’s topics could be considered offensive, which is shown in Figure 5. There was no correlation found between the number of offensive topics and offensive words spoken. A good example of this was that KRFX discussed eight topics that were deemed possibly offensive, while not mentioning a single
offensive word, seen in Figure 4: however, their DJs aired multiple segments throughout the two hours titled “boob talk,” in which the female co-host discussed with on-air callers, topics that ranged from pregnancy to how it effects women’s bodies. Because of the sexual nature of the “boob talk” theme, it was marked as such in the code sheet, which is why in Figure 5 we see that KRFX has the highest percentage of sexual/offensive topics.

To answer Research Question 2, the topics spoken about on the code sheets were all classified into general themes. The top 10 of these general themes the segments fell into are shown in Figure 6, proving that by far the most often discussed were personal stories that didn’t fit into any of the other categories. This was the case across the board for all the stations except for one, with the average for all the stations personal stories at 30.4%. Behind that, celebrity/entertainment (15.8%) local news (13.4%), national news (12.8%) and health (12.2%) constituted the top five most talked about themes, while technology, international news and religion came up the least frequently. Since DJ’s personal stories and anecdotes varied from person to person and by geographic area, the data shows that the themes topics fell into were more often extremely different from one to the next. Since the study was only analyzing five different stations from uniquely different culturally and geographically areas of the country, no trends or patterns within the topic themes from city to city could be found. Oddly enough though, one recurring theme that came up between three of the five cities was erectile dysfunction (ED).
WQBW aired multiple PSAs about a local doctor that specialized in ED, while the hosts of WKBU discussed the idea that ED is linked with global warming and the DJs on KRFX talked about how it can be related to Smartphone use.

Through the 10 hours of programming analyzed for this study, 53 total incidents of offensive language were heard. At 5.3 words per hour, this number is a slight increase from Fitzgerald’s (2009) study of 200 hours worth of morning radio talk shows (3.9). In regards to Research Question 3, Figure 7 lists the top five offensive words and the number of times they were spoken throughout the recorded 10 hours of morning talk shows. Using Kaye and Sapolsky’s (2001) offensive word classification system, the top five fall into four of the five total categories: sexual (dick), excretory (ass and piss), mild other (damn) and strong other (bitch). The only category not to make it into the top five list was the “seven dirty words,” which is not
surprising. Only one incident where one was spoken occurred, when one of the KQRS hosts said, “you’re getting treated like everyone else, like shit.” From Figure 5 however, we can take away that the use of offensive or sexual language is not very high for any of the stations in the study, all averaging less than one incident per topic, and from zero to 3.4 per segment. However, the segments varied in length from roughly six minutes all the way up to 17 minutes. From this, we can take away that most likely, the only people that would even notice the offensive words would be minority of the stations audiences that are listening extremely intently. Because of this, and from having personally listened to all of the segments, I can confidentially answer the second part of Research Question 3, in that the amount and type of offensive words spoken during the broadcasts did not effect the discussions at all negatively.

**Discussions and Conclusion**

While the method of this study wasn’t perfect, the results still accurately back up previous research done on the subject of profanity usage on the radio, as well as expanding on it by analyzing the topic themes of discussion. From this, conclusions can be made regarding the direction of where future research might be able to go on this subject, an understanding on how DJs are able to so easily get around the FCC’s indecency laws and finally a look at radio’s indecency laws and how they should be changed in the future to accurately reflect the changing culture in 2014.

**Future studies**

Because of how long it took me to figure out that I wanted to do this study as a content analysis, I wasn’t left with enough time to use anyone other than myself as a coder. If this study could be done again in the future, it would be monumentally important to increase the number of coders. Since only one coder was used in this study, the all-important inter-coder reliability is
non-existent. Having a consensus amongst many coders is extremely important in increasing the credibility of the study. Since offensiveness is not something every person feels the same way towards, the ability to use multiple coders would make that fact less of an issue. And by doing so, we could learn which types of words, phrases and topics came up the most frequently, which would give tremendous insight into what people find offensive. The option of simply including a list of the most common offensive words to look for attached with the code sheet was considered in the making of this study, but in the end it did not make the cut. By choosing not to include it, the subjective quality of the study in a way is beneficial. To go along with that, language is something that is always changing, and what was offensive 50 or 25 years ago might be common vocabulary for people today. This idea is similar to how Kaye and Sapolsky’s (2001) study wanted to see if the types and amounts of offensive language spoken changed in the seven years between 1990 and 1997.

In addition to getting many more coders for future studies, it would help to be able to use multiple coders from each of the areas where the radio stations are located, instead of simply using whoever is closest and easiest to me at the time. By doing this, the study could make conclusions based on whether or not there are any noticeable differences between peoples’ levels of being offended by their geographic areas.

**DJ’s use of euphemisms and innuendos**

Many of the morning talk show hosts in this analysis have been working in the radio industry for well over 20 years. By now, they know what they can get away with saying, and what they should shy away from. Some shock jocks have made a living off saying what some people would prefer them not to, Howard Stern and Don Imus for example. Stern is now in
satellite radio though, where he has free reign over what he wants to share, since it’s a subscription base service that the FCC has no jurisdiction over.

To be successful on the FM airwaves and still discuss topics that are more taboo is not so easy. “Having sex” specifically was rarely mentioned during the 10 hours of programming recorded for this study; yet such phrases as, “banging,” “foolin’ with a guy,” “doin’ it, and “riding Jessica Biel” were mentioned nonchalantly. Brother Wease narrowly avoided blurting out one of the seven dirty words when he smartly replaced “shit” with “shiznit” at the last second. A KQRS DJ made an offhand comment about “rubbing something else” that drew laughter from his co-hosts. During a discussion surrounding the health problems associated with Smartphone use, a different KRFX DJ mentioned “your boys” and “the junk”.

During the Pacifica case, Justice William J. Brennan of the Supreme Court objected to the majority when he said in his dissenting opinion, “there lurks in today’s decision a potential for reducing the adult population to hearing only what is fit for children” (Pacifica, 1977, p.760). If average age of listeners for classic rock radio generally range from young teenagers to adults in their 30s and 40s, why should they be forced by the government to only hear language suitable for children? It is most likely the case that the majority of these listeners will be more than familiar with all types of euphemisms, innuendos, and the original offensive or sexual themes they are used to substitute for. Even in a 1976 survey of 3,200 elementary school kids, psychologists concluded that “children are sexual, they know about sex and this does not harm them. Their ‘innocence’ is an adult fantasy” (Levine, 2004, p.28). Not to mention the possibility that teaching that part of language to kids, “in the context of a serious study of language might be of value to some parents who want their children to understand the true meaning of such words rather than maintain for them a mysterious and potentially harmful taboo” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 31).
The future of indecency laws

From the Charlie Walker case, we are able to see that the beginnings of obscenity laws on media started not completely to protect children from offensive material, but rather to stop the competing station. The other station, Charlie Walker’s, was enormously popular in the African-American community, but the minority, white controlling group in the community disliked them, they were able to shut down WDKD and Charlie Walker on the basis that what they were airing was patently offensive to the contemporary “community” standard. When, “the Pacifica Foundation, an organization that operated several stations throughout the country and was known for its integrity and bravery” (Hilliard, 2003, p.27), aired the George Carlin monologue on their station WBAI. The educational segment they aired it on was focusing on modern language, and the public’s general view of it.

In none of the cases I came across did I ever find someone personally offended because they weren’t old enough and felt they shouldn’t be hearing adult content, it was always people complaining on behalf of their children. In the Pacifica case for example, Douglas complained on behalf of his son, not because he was personally offended, which this begs to question what the 15-year-old son personally thought upon hearing the Carlin monologue. If radio broadcasters are supposed to serve the public interest, wouldn’t it make sense that that is exactly what they were doing while they aired Carlin’s monologue if only one person out of millions cared enough to complain about it? The FCC is not legally allowed to pre-screen every television or radio show because it would go against the First Amendment’s censorship laws on free speech that the United States prides itself on.

David Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox said, “This is our fucking city!” on NESN, a local sports television station after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. Despite the numerous
complaints to the FCC, Ortiz nor the station were fined a penny. The only reply made by the FCC was, “David Ortiz spoke from the heart at today's Red Sox game. I stand with Big Papi and the people of Boston” (@FCC, 2013, April 20) in a tweet by the chairman Julius Genachowski, while Fox Networks was fined $550,000 for Janet Jackson’s split-second wardrobe malfunction during the 2003 NFL Super Bowl. Is one of these incidents really that much more offensive than the other? Or is it more of a case that the FCC decided to penalize whoever they might simply dislike at the time, like in the Charlie Walker case.

In a 2013 study, the International Telecommunications Union found that in 2012 81% of Americans were Internet users. Ten years ago, that number was 61.7%, and at the turn of the millennium, only 43.1%. In 1978, when the country was arguing over George Carlin’s monologue, the Internet as it is today wasn’t even imaginable. Radio and television were the main source of entertainment for the majority of Americans, which slightly legitimizes the FCC’s push for a cleaner and less offensive mediums for entertainment. However, the tech-centric world that is the year 2014 deserves less big brother activity from the government, especially when most of it’s citizens are exposed to the same types of images on cable television and the Internet that the FCC and moralists are wrongfully trying to protect from reaching traditional radio, even though they still do daily through silly euphemisms and unnecessary innuendos.

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doi:10.1080/19376520903277047


Appendix

Radio Program Offensive Content Coding Sheet

Station Call Letters: ______________  Rater Initials ______________
Program Date: _____________  Program Time: _____________
Segment number: _________  Total Length of Segment: _____________
Include innuendos and euphemisms!

1. List all inoffensive topics discussed:
   
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

2. List all offensive topics discussed:
   
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

3. List all offensive words spoken, along with the time when they were said, and in parenthesis how many times they were said more than once:
   
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

4. Total number of topics discussed: ___________

5. Total number of offensive words spoken: ___________