

“Dangerous Words”

ACES 2013 conference

-- Alex Cruden

This portion of the presentation concerned (A) issues related to racial and ethnic terms in the news and (B) what copy editors can and should do about dangerous words in general. This handout outlines some main points.

A. News organizations differ regarding the terms they use. What are they thinking? An example from February of this year appeared in the reporting on an airliner incident. Here are three versions:

Detroit Free Press, on www.freep.com, an AP account that included...

Jessica Bennett of Minneapolis, the mother of the 2-year-old, told the FBI that her boy began crying as the cabin pressure changed during the flight's descent into Atlanta. That's when Bennett alleges that Hundley hurled a racial slur at her child along with a command to quiet the child, according to a court affidavit posted by The Smoking Gun.

Atlanta Journal Constitution, on www.ajc.com, an AP account that included...

The boy's mother, Jessica Bennett, 33, told the FBI their flight was on final descent into Atlanta when her 19-month-old son started to cry due to the altitude change. Hundley "told her to shut that (N-word) baby up," FBI special agent Daron Cheney said.

TheSmokingGun.com, in its own account that began...

FEBRUARY 15--After demanding that the mother of a crying toddler “shut that nigger baby up,” a male passenger allegedly slapped the 19-month-old across the face as a flight prepared to land in Atlanta last Friday evening, The Smoking Gun has learned.

Smoking Gun provided a link to the FBI affidavit, which included:

According to Ms. Bennett, a male passenger seated next to her in row 28, seat A, later identified as JOE RICKEY HANDLEY, told her to shut that [‘N word’] baby up.

(Yes, the FBI had it as “Handley” throughout the document.)

How would each of these news organizations defend their choices of how to report the key racial term? How would you? More on that below. Meanwhile, another question that demonstrates the realm of danger.

In a presentation at the 2005 ACES conference, Fred Vultee, who now teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit and is a member of the ACES board, offered:

... words that by themselves are accurate and neutral but take on loaded meanings by their selection and placement. It might be entirely true that the person accused of a bank robbery is a Muslim, but “Muslim accused of bank robbery” turns religion from a background detail into a motive.

Such examples are still all too common in US journalism. Would it ever be possible to get to this point ...

The goal: to see racial differences not as a source of strife, but as a societal strength, instead of pretending race doesn't matter.

That's the view of Eric Deggans, TV/media critic of the Tampa Bay Times. Such a view requires going not only well beyond bias but colorblindness as well. It may not be practical journalism today, but it is offered for your consideration as you move toward the big question ...

B. As a copy editor, what do you do about all this?

I suggest every news organization needs a policy that anticipates controversies over dangerous words, and that copy editors – even one copy editor per organization – can initiate the formulation or reshaping of such policy. ...

Step 1: Find out what policy or guidance, if any, your organization has.
Step 2: Volunteer to draft an improved policy; agree to have or enlist help from your colleagues (try to include at least one high-ranking person and one who doesn't always agree with you); obtain a promise of top-level consideration of the draft.
Step 3: Research other organizations' policies and write your draft.
Step 4: Show it to a few provocative people who think of many situations, and rewrite, taking into consideration what you have learned today, including ...

The policy needs to:

- ↪ Seem reasonable to someone who disagrees with it (such as a reader who is furious with what your organization just posted as news).
- ↪ Be based on principle, logic and law, not personal opinion (such as "Everybody's already seen shit like that, so what's the problem?" or "I'm just not comfortable with that").
- ↪ Be easily available to everyone in the newsroom.
- ↪ Be applicable and applied at any hour, no matter which editors are present.
- ↪ Include a rigorous procedure for exceptions (e.g. the US president said it in a public forum; the chief editor can overrule; it runs under an advisory to the reader or a cautioning editor's note).