

## Getting emotive about an emoji

I have a one-off plea to readers: if you're aged five or below, please don't read this.

Knowing that such an appeal may enflame your curiosity, I'm assuming you will have read this far to see why I'm asking you not to, in which case I need to conceal the reason until at least paragraph eight, by which time you'll have switched back to your computer game or the digital note you're composing to your parents explaining why you're running away from home.

If the latter is the case, I recommend you flee to the fire station, because my personal experience and that of Neil Wolfe is the people there are kind and may let you sit in the driving seat of a fire appliance.

Those over the starting age for school will realise I'm about to discuss the emoji-gate scandal, and the reason for banning infants from reading this is they won't yet be regularly using the word "shit", except in private conversations with kindergarten mates out of the earshot of adults.

I have an unsupported theory about infantile cursing - they don't do it in context. They shout bad words during random public moments when they want attention, knowing Mum/Dad will take notice.

The child knows the intonations of adult swearing, has seen the facial expressions, noted the reaction of swearers, even when expletives are used routinely as adjectives (or is that adverbs?).

My neighbour recalls his toddler sitting on his shoulders while he and his wife were getting something from a pharmacy, and coming out with the f-word in a string of delighted repetitions. People batted an eye.

I'm intrigued by a *Taranaki Daily News* reader who says his primary school-age daughter learned what "give a shit" means via the New Plymouth District Council's unusual election publicity campaign.

Here's me thinking society had changed from nearly half a century ago when Tim Shadbolt and publisher Alister Taylor offended nearly everyone with their book, *Bullshit and Jellybeans*.

While protecting the so-called innocence of youth is worthy, it was hardly threatened by this election's imaginative marketing campaign put together decades after such seminal oath milestones as then-Prime Minister David Lange swearing on TV news; a 1980s TVNZ current affairs item in which a lottery winner shouted "holy shit" several times when told of his luck; Toyota's 1999 "bugger" TV advert that drew 120 complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (which ruled the word was unlikely to cause serious offence); and the 2006 Lara Bingle "Where the bloody hell are you?" advertisement.

True, there are strange and seemingly outdated conventions about swearing. Government and local councils are unlikely to lose their unprurient use of language, but news media of various kinds have always wanted a bet each way.

Newspaper rules are simple - don't get ahead of the general reading public when it comes to putting expletives on news pages or anywhere near content likely to be read by children, like the TV programmes.

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I have the dubious "distinction" of writing the f-word in this newspaper back at the turn of the century, but nobody noticed because it was a direct quote from a book I reviewed. Right place, right time, presumably.

NPDC had a different problem with the emoji. It had no control over where news media might publish or broadcast pictures and words about its poo pile, a good reason not to use the word intact.

Another was the nudge-nudge, wink-wink factor that gave the device much of its power.

That makes me wonder if we've changed much at all. When Taylor designed the cover for Shadbolt's book, he put a sticker saying "caution - this may offend" partially over the sharp end of the offending word.

If there's any real heat in protest about the council's blowup sign it's most likely related to the cost, which still hasn't been disclosed so far as I know (they said it was one part of a four-step, \$30,000 media campaign).

The key thing is the objections came from those who vote, the "older" section of the community who saw no merit in using the irreverence of young people to attract them to the ballot box.

But youngies interviewed about it on TV said they did give an emoji and would now be voting.

The New Plymouth vote count was down a bit, but not nearly as much as feared from the shift to STV. The data analysis that follows every election will be interesting.