

Too Funny for Words

By PETER FUNT

WHEN my dad, Allen Funt, produced “Candid Microphone” back in the mid-1940s, he used a clever ruse to titillate listeners. A few times per show he’d edit out an innocent word or phrase and replace it with a recording of a sultry woman’s voice saying, “Censored.” Audiences always laughed at the thought that something dirty had been said, even though it hadn’t.

When “Candid Camera” came to television, the female voice was replaced by a bleep and a graphic that flashed “Censored!” As my father and I learned over decades of production, ordinary folks don’t really curse much in routine conversation — even when mildly agitated — but audiences love to think otherwise.

By the mid-1950s, TV’s standards and practices people decided Dad’s gimmick was an unacceptable deception. There would be no further censoring of clean words.

I thought about all this when CBS started broadcasting a show last week titled “\$#! My Dad Says,” which the network insists with a wink should be pronounced “Bleep My Dad Says.” There is, of course, no mystery whatsoever about what the \$-word stands for, because the show is based on a highly popular Twitter feed, using the real word, in which a clever guy named Justin Halpern quotes the humorous, often foul utterances of his father, Sam.

Bleeping is broadcasting’s biggest deal. Even on basic cable, the new generation of “reality” shows like “Jersey Shore” bleep like crazy, as do infotainment series like “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart,” where scripted curses take on an anti-establishment edge when bleeped in a contrived bit of post-production. This season there is even a cable series about relationships titled “Who the (Bleep) Did I Marry?” — in which “bleep” isn’t subbing for any word in particular. The comedian Drew Carey is developing a series that CBS has decided to call “WTF!” Still winking, the network says this one stands for “Wow That’s Funny!”

Although mainstream broadcasters won a battle against censorship over the summer when a federal appeals court struck down some elements of the Federal Communications Commission’s restrictions on objectionable language, they’ve always been more driven by self-censorship than by the government-mandated kind. Eager to help are advertisers and watchdog groups, each appearing to take a tough stand on language while actually reveling in the double entendre.

For example, my father and I didn’t run across many dirty words when recording everyday conversation, but we did find that people use the terms “God” and “Jesus” frequently — often in a gentle context, like “Oh, my God” — and this, it turned out, worried broadcasting executives even more than swearing. If someone said “Jesus” in a “Candid Camera” scene, CBS made us bleep it, leaving viewers to assume that a truly foul word had been spoken. And that seemed fine with CBS, because what mainstream TV likes best is the perception of naughtiness.

TV’s often-hypocritical approach to censorship was given its grandest showcase back in 1972, when the comedian George Carlin first took note of “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.” The bit was recreated on stage at the Kennedy Center a few years ago in a

posthumous tribute to Carlin, but all the words were bleeped — not only for the PBS audience but for the theatergoers as well.

Many who saw the show believed the bleeped version played funnier. After all, when Bill Maher and his guests unleash a stream of nasty words on HBO, it's little more than barroom banter. But when Jon Stewart says the same words, knowing they'll be bleeped, it revs up the crowd while also seeming to challenge the censors.

In its July ruling, the appeals court concluded, "By prohibiting all 'patently offensive' references to sex ... without giving adequate guidance as to what 'patently offensive' means, the F.C.C. effectively chills speech, because broadcasters have no way of knowing what the F.C.C. will find offensive." That's quite reasonable — and totally beside the point. Most producers understand that when it comes to language, the sizzle has far more appeal than the steak. Broadcasters keep jousting with the F.C.C. begging not to be thrown in the briar patch of censorship, because that's really where they most want to be.

Jimmy Kimmel has come up with a segment for his late-night ABC program called "This Week in Unnecessary Censorship." He bleeps ordinary words in clips to make them seem obscene. How bleepin' dare he! Censorship, it seems, remains one of the most entertaining things on television.