

The Boston Globe

*BLACKLISTED: Journalists are used to hearing 'no.'*

By Jan Freeman

RANDY MICHAELS, CEO of the huge and troubled Tribune Co., took a few minutes earlier this month to enact a local language edict: He issued a list of 119 words, phrases, and pronunciations not to be aired by the company's Chicago radio station, WGN-AM. No more *aftermath*, *allegations*, or *area residents*, said the memo distributed by news director Charlie Meyerson; fie on *famed*, no to *near miss*, and a swift kick for *speaking out*.

"You'd *think* the chief executive officer of a company struggling to emerge from bankruptcy...would have better things to do," snarked Chicago blogger Robert Feder. And Meyerson's addendum, ordering employees to note verbal violations on custom-printed "bingo cards," caused consternation in the journosphere.

But the list itself attracted little criticism; journalists are used to this sort of thing. Usage writers, after all, have been ill-wishing certain words for centuries, and newsrooms — where editors enforce "house style" — are the natural bailiwick of the vocabulary police. One of Michaels's early models is William Cullen Bryant, who in 1870 or so put out a list of words not allowed in the New York Evening Post, the paper he edited for half a century. Bryant's "Index Expurgatorius" didn't address the use of "white stuff" for snow, but he told reporters not to call fire "the devouring element." He objected to "*juvenile* (for 'boy')," just as Michaels condemns "*youth* meaning 'child.' " *Bogus* was banned by Bryant; *guys* is taboo for Michaels.

In Chicago journalism, the banned-words tradition is at least a century old; Robert W. Ransom, an editor at the Record-Herald, published "Hints & 'Don'ts' for Writers and Copyreaders" in 1911. Ransom sounds almost contemporary as he denounces the journalese of his (and sometimes our) day: hyperactive verbs like *flay*, *grill*, *hit*, *roast*, *rap*, *probe*; elegantisms like *solon* and *city father*; *hero*, the *icon* of the time; and the redundancy Michaels is still condemning, *completely destroyed*.

For today's taboos, journalists can consult the AP or New York Times stylebook, or even the BBC's guide, available online, which casts a cold eye on *axe*, *quiz*, and *pledge* (as verbs), *clash*, *bid*, *aim*, *oust*, and *garner* ("only ever used by hacks"). And most copy desks compile their own local ordinances, attempts to limit the repetition of especially well-worn puns and clichés.

But many of these guides, written as quick references for editors, are terse to the point of mystification. Is "untimely death" banned because it implies regret (which might not be warranted) or because the editor thinks no death is "timely"? Is *perished* forbidden because we're supposed to use *died*, or is *passed away* OK? And how are Michaels's announcers, forbidden to say "stay

tuned” or “we’ll be back,” supposed to segue to commercials? We really do need some ritual phrases to get us through the day; this seems like trying to ban “hello” and “goodbye.”

And, of course, all banned-words lists embody the authors’ prejudices, which not all readers and listeners will share. Editors hate “fled on foot” (journalese!), but to me, “ran away” sounds like what Huck Finn (or Frances the badger) did, not like the act of an escaping suspect. John McIntyre, a former copy desk czar who blogs at You Don’t Say, grumps hilariously about the seasonal horrors — “white stuff,” Grinchy crimes, and especially “ ‘tis the season.” As a former editor myself, I know what he’s talking about. But as long as I never have to write another holiday headline, I’ll gratefully accept any cliché the suffering editor serves up.

Such “don’t” lists, you might say, are themselves a cliché— a standard defense against the ever-present threat of journalistic slackerdome. But lists of taboos leave the underlying questions unasked: When does convenient shorthand become a cliché? (Opinions differ, and there’s competitive pressure; some usage watchers seem eager to be ahead of the pack in declaring a catchphrase or slang word dated.)

The Chicago memo recommends using conversational English, but whose conversation are we talking about? We all know thousands of words we rarely or never use in conversation; surely we don’t think they should all be banned from the media. But if *aftermath* and *perish* are off limits at WGN, why would *intercede* and *jubilant* be spared? (In fact, *jubilant* was on Bryant’s banned list, along with *reliable*, *talented*, *ovation*, and *jeopardize*.)

The call for “fresh language” is another cliché that demands a closer look. Sometimes repetition and formulaic language serve a speaker’s purpose better than novelty; sometimes the story really is the same — only the names have changed — and too much striving for originality may annoy and distract. It’s not so easy to say when a familiar turn of phrase crosses the line from “efficient” to “clichéd,” when a narrative technique is no longer streamlined but merely lazy. Writing and editing are hard, sweaty work; sweeping the “bad” words off the table may look like a bold stroke, but if the past is any guide, it’s not the way to get the job done.

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<http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/03/28/blacklisted/?page=full>

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*Let us now praise . . . the cliché*

By James Parker

WHO WILL SAY a good word for the cliché? Its sins are so numerous. Exhausted tropes, numb descriptors, zombie proverbs, hackneyed sentiments, rhetorical rip-offs, metaphorical flat tires, ideas purged of thought and symbols drained of power - the cliché traffics in them all. A lie can be inventive; an insult can be novel. Even plagiarism implies a kind of larcenous good taste. But a cliché is intellectual disgrace. The word itself seems to shape the mouth into a Gallic sneer.

Writers of course have always been extra-spooked by cliché. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" No, I don't think I shall - because somebody else already did that. And in 2001 Martin Amis officially declared war against cliché with a book entitled, uh, "The War Against Cliché." "All writing," he proclaimed, pennants flying, "is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and of the heart." And indeed Amis in his dazzling career has routed cliché, scattered it, seen it off with a thousand boilingly brilliant and novel images.

But here's the thing: were any of them quite as good as "fit as a fiddle?" Time, to use a particularly sage cliché, will tell. If in 50 years an Amis-ism like "reduced to tears of barbaric nausea" is common currency, then he'll have made the grade. Durable, easily handled, yet retaining somehow the flavor of its coinage, the classic cliché has fought philology to a standstill: it sticks and it stays, and not by accident.

Let's consider the origin of the word. For 19th-century typesetters, a cliché was a piece of language encountered so often in the course of their work that it had earned its own printing plate - no need to reset the individual letters, just stamp that thing on the page and keep going. So the cliché was an object, and a useful one: a concrete unit of communication that minimized labor and sped things up. I imagine that a nice hardy cliché like "on its last legs" or "tempest in a teapot" does more or less the same thing inside our heads: one bash of the stamp, one neat little payload of meaning, and on we go. And speaking of tempests, how did we manage for so long without Sebastian Junger's "perfect storm," the epitome of a vigorous and helpful cliché? ("A perfect storm in a teapot," on the other hand, is not a cliché. Yet.)

I see one or two hands going up out there. You sir - yes, you at the back, in the felt hat. What's that? "Tempest in a teapot" isn't a cliché, it's an idiom? Ah, but there you hit upon the mystical super-cliché at the heart of cliché studies: No one can say with complete certainty what a cliché is. To me it might be a cliché, to you it's an adage. Or a catchphrase. Or a salty bit of slang. The very earliest examples of cliché, if you look at them for long enough, seem about to turn into

something else. From the Dark Ages: "hither and thither." Cliché or not? And how about Homer's "bite the dust"?

Let's head for safer ground, where the cliché-ness of the clichés cannot be questioned. "At this defining moment...", "We stand at the brink of...", "a few bad apples," "I apologize, above all, to my wife." Politicians, especially American politicians, are almost obliged to speak in cliché, for fear they will stray into that zone most terrifying to the electorate - the heady and unpredictable zone of original thought. Democracy, we might say, runs on cliché: on truisms, bromides, caricatured opinions, boiled-down ideas and statements that everyone thinks they agree with. Cliché implies the consensus without which we'd be shooting one another in the streets - and the more fragile the consensus, the grander and more magniloquently all-embracing the clichés must become. "The greatest country in the world...", "I put my faith in the American people..." An American politician can be off-the-cuff, instinctive, zig-zag, but only if he or she is prepared immediately to make a cliché of it: look at what happened to the word "maverick" in the last election. And the niftiest political-class coinage - "the politics of personal destruction," for example - becomes a cliché at amazing speed.

Blogdom, YouTube, and round-the-clock news have undoubtedly accelerated the cliché-certification process: you can say "Leave Britney alone!" at 10 in the morning and it's a fully-accredited cliché by noon. This is cliché skimming on the moment, seeking its opportunities, wonderfully alive. But what of the timeless cliché, the cliché you can steer your course by, the cliché that carries a small freight not just of meaning, but of wisdom?

I sometimes think that my entire psychological and ethical structure, such as it is, falls somewhere between "There's no such thing as a free lunch," and "It takes two to tango." Observations like these have been road-tested, times beyond number, and discovered to be sound. They are laden with experience, and yet somehow jaunty. Some witty individual must have coined them, somewhere, but they glow with the accumulated knowledge of the race. They are clichés, and they belong to you: as a speaker of English, they are your birthright. Use them proudly. And when life hands you a lemon, remember that it's better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.

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