

Who Can Say What?

When Don Imus used a racial slur against a college basketball team, it was clear he crossed a line. What's unclear is, Where's the line, and who can cross it?

BY JAMES PONIEWOZIK



The I-Man on ice Imus waits to go on the radio show of his critic Al Sharpton. "I'm not going to call you bigot," Sharpton said. "I'm going to say what you said was abominable ... You could be ... the nicest guy in the world, but you ought to be fired."

SAY THIS FOR DON IMUS: THE man knows how to turn an economical phrase. When the radio shock jock described the Rutgers women's basketball team, on the April 4 *Imus in the Morning*, as "nappy-headed hos," he packed so many layers of offense into the statement that it was like a perfect little diamond of insult. There was a racial element, a gender element and even a class element (the joke implied that the Scarlet Knights were thuggish and ghetto compared with the Tennessee Lady Vols).

Imus was a famous, rich, old white man picking on a bunch of young, mostly black college women. So it seemed pretty cut-and-dried that his bosses at CBS Radio would suspend his show—half frat party, half political salon for the Beltway elite—for two weeks, and that MSNBC would cancel the TV simulcast. And that Imus would plan to meet with the students he offended. Case closed, justice served, lesson—possibly—learned. Move on.

But a reasonable person could ask, What was the big deal? And I don't mean the lots-of-black-rappers-say-"hos" argument, though we'll get to that. Rather, I mean, what celebrity isn't slurring some group nowadays?

I exaggerate slightly. But our culture has experienced an almost psychotic outburst of -isms in the past year. Michael Richards and "nigger." Isaiah Washington and "faggot." Senator George Allen and "macaca." Mel Gibson and "f__ing Jews."

But we also live in a culture in which racially and sexually edgy material is often—legitimately—considered brilliant comment, even art. Last year's most critically praised comedy, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, won Sacha Baron Cohen a Golden Globe for playing a Kazakh journalist who calls Alan Keyes a "genuine chocolate face" and asks a gun-shop owner to suggest a good piece for killing a Jew. Quentin Tarantino has made a career borrowing tropes from blaxploitation movies. In the critics-favorite sitcom *The Sarah Silverman Program*, the star sleeps with God, who is African American and who she assumes is "God's black friend." And the current season of *South Park* opened with an episode about a Michael Richards-esque controversy erupting when a character blurts the word niggers on *Wheel of Fortune*. (He answers a puzzle—N_GGERS—for which the clue is "People who annoy you"; the correct answer is "naggers.")

This is not to say that Borat made Imus do it or to make excuses for Imus. Even in the midst of his apology tour last week, Imus did enough of that for himself, citing his charity work, his support of black Senate candidate Harold Ford Jr., even his booking the black singing group Blind Boys