clear content guidelines, top 40 and urban programmers are contending with sexual innuendo in several hit songs, especially Digital Underground’s “The Humpty Dance” and Bell Biv DeVoe’s “Poison,” and, to a lesser extent, Madonna’s just-released “Hanky Panky.”

In “The Humpty Dance,” the narrator, besides getting busy in the Burger King joint, also promises women that, “in the 69, my Humpty nose will tickle your rear,” and both, “I’m still gettin’ in the girls’ pants.” In “Poison,” Bell Biv DeVoe refers twice to women as “ho’s” and notes of one in particular, “Me and the crew used to do her.” Both have narrators who announce they’re “get- ting laid.”

“Hanky Panky” is much less graphic. But its sole subject matter is the joy of being spanked. In it, Madonna declares, “I’ll settle for the back of your hand, somewhere on my behind” and “Tell my hands behind my back and I’m in ecstasy.”

None of these songs approach the explicitness of Prince’s “Erotic City,” the best-known record cited in last year’s FCC indecency cases. But both “Humpty” and “Poison” have multiple innuendoes, and a look across the country shows just how widely standards vary these days as to what PDs consider beyond the pale for their listeners and how few clear guidelines exist.

Clearly, “Humpty,” which had the most rock flags with PDs. Even after Tommy Boy serviced radio stations with its WTOF edit in which the song’s touchier lines are replaced by whistles and other comic noises, only about half of the country’s top 40 outlets are playing it.

“Poison,” a No. 1 urban and top five pop record, has had an easier time in some circles. On the urban side, MCA issued a “No Ho” edit of the song, then informally served a few stations with an even more conservative edit from WTLF Indianapolis. But on the pop side, MCA’s Steve Meyer and Billy Brill both say they are unaware of any lyrics complaints or even that an urban edit exists.

That sort of inconsistency confounds any attempt at a national consensus on where programmers draw the line. While “Humpty” has prompted more complaints, there are stations like RZEP Phoenix that play “Humpty” unedited and get no complaints, but where PD Bob Case edits the “me and the crew” line in “Poison” because it is more “obvious” than the “ho” references, which he does not edit.

“I don’t think the word ‘ho’ by itself is offensive. You’re looking at a street word, not an obscene word. Arsenio Hall says it on his TV show, says Case. (Hall, in fact, had a rap on his Chunky A album last fall, “The Ho Is Lazy,” that received significant unreported airplay.)

Urban WGCI-FM Chicago MD Steve Ross, on the other hand, plays the “me and the crew used to do her” line. “That could mean anything. They could do her hair, or her nails,” he says. He does edit the line about “clockin’ the ho’s” because, he says, “It’s definitely obvious what they mean.” But the line where BBD declare “the low pro ho should be cut like an afro,” stays in.

Across town, top 40/dance WBDM-FM PD Dave Shaikes plays both “Poison” and “Humpty” unedited and has gotten no complaints. So are urban PDs touchier about lyrics? Sometimes. Tommy Boy’s Ed Strickland cites a number of urban stations who have cited “Hanky Panky” until they played unedited on their churban competitors. But in other markets, such as Washington, Salem, Boston, where “Humpty” and “Poison” are played “Humpty” unedited while a top 40 station edits it.

It’s all reaction and seems to defy any geographic or market-size pattern. Strickland calls the bible belt its biggest urban problem, citing a Georgia-based station that played the record after a week and would not play the edit. But WJJS Lynchburg, Va., PD Robert “Lad” Goins, gets away with both “Humpty” and “Poison” unedited in “Jerry Falwell territory. I get a lot of...” (Continued on page 20)

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