HARVEY MILK VS. THE MACHINE: How LGBT Issues Were Reported In The United States From the Cold War Until Present.

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Research Paper
Harvey Milk has little to do with the content of this essay. I put him in the title, because to me and to many others, he is a figurehead of inspiration. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay man to run for office in 1977, and a year later was assassinated by what was once his political ally. Milk's run for supervisor was not easy, and throughout his career he had to face death threats that corresponded with the proposed dates of his speeches. (Later on in his career, as the voting drew closer, the threats got more violent.) Along with the fear of the unknown people that wanted to harm him, Milk also had to deal with the media. Newspaper and television of the era was only accustomed to dealing with LGBT issues in the context of reporting police raids, and made their own views on LGBT culture well known. Pete Hamill included derogatory comments in his editorial page columns for the New York Post in mid-January 1970. In it, Hamill calls a GLF group (Group Leaders Forum, associated with the anti-War sentiments of the time) “slim-waisted freakcreeps.” (Torres, 1999) A sign, better than any other, that objectivity to LGBT issues in the news was completely unknown. Another Post writer, Harriett Van Horne, included a memorial bookstore (in honor of Oscar Wilde, an openly gay Irish writer from the 1850s who lived in England) in a tirade against pornography, despite the fact that the store did not sell such memorabilia.

Harvey Milk was quoted as saying “Burst down those closet doors once and for all, stand up and start to fight.” It was his belief that if gay and lesbians did not make it well known of their political wants and needs, those wants and needs would never be met. But first, they all had to fight to get accurate representation by the media.

**The Cold War**

More than half a century ago homosexuality was a crime throughout the United States. In the Cold War (famous for its rampant McCarthyism) homosexuals were targeted along with communists. This parallel purge was called the “Lavender Scare.” This was in an era where if it was merely
“thought” that you were a communist you could get fired from your job, subsequently blacklisted, and
give up hope of finding a job in that field ever again. McCarthy personally ensured that 91 homosexual
males were fired from their jobs in the state department. (Transcription, 1950) Newspapers did not
actively feature gay or lesbian individuals in their articles. If they were mentioned, it was in alignment
with police “purges.” (A “purge” is a colloquial term for a police raid that would happen at
underground gay bars or meeting places, carried out in the hope of sending those caught at these places
to jail. This was a serious threat at the time, because if you were tried under “sexual perversion” in
some states you had to register as a sex offender.) News media was not the only media that did not
favor the growing LGBT community. In the book “Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and the
Media in America,” it states that there were to be no openly homosexual characters in Hollywood.
Instead, the Motion Picture Production Code stated that any implied homosexual characters must be
villains. (Gross, 2002) Under these codes all outlets of the media in Cold War era United States would
be guilty of what is now known as Racial Vilification. (Racial vilification is a legislative term that
refers to a public act that encourages others to hate people because of their race, nationality, gender or
sexual preference.)

Despite the disfavor that the media would show them, reformers still moved forward to try to
achieve fair practices to both heterosexuals and homosexuals. 1958 was the first year that the United
States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the homosexual cause. One: The Homosexual Magazine, was a
pro-LGBT publication that had been created in 1953. The court trial took five years after the initial
charge against the magazine, the Post Master of Los Angeles declared the 1954 issue “obscene and un-
mailable” under Comstock laws. (The Comstock laws were a series of laws originally enacted in 1873
that made it illegal to send any obscene, lewd or lascivious materials through the mail.) But, the
charges could not be enforced due to the simple definition of the laws used to accuse One Magazine
with. One Magazine did not publish any overtly obscene, lewd or lascivious material; the magazine's
main entries were reader-produced poems and short stories. I have not been able to find the original article, but One Magazine quotes the New York Times as saying this: “The court today reversed a post office ban on a magazine, One, which deals with homosexuality. The petition for review filed by the lawyer, Eric Julber of Los Angeles, had apparently raised only one question: was the magazine ‘obscene’ within the statute banning importation of obscene matter? The court’s order appeared to answer: No.” There's no explanation for the brevity of the article, but take it in consideration that in our time the corresponding article probably would have taken up more than two columns of print.

(Murdoch, & Price, 2001)

The 1960s

On January 21st, 1966 Time Magazine published an anonymous, article called “The Homosexual in America.” The digital Time archive for this essay takes up six pages, where the author addresses several supposed “characteristics” of the homosexual condition. His examples show no real effort to see homosexuals as anything other than stereotypes, as he constantly refers to gay men's innate talent in interior decorating and acting. The anonymous author concludes the essay as thus: “It is a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life. As such it deserves fairness, compassion, understanding and, when possible, treatment. But it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as minority martyrdom, no sophistry about simple differences in taste—and, above all, no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness.”

(Anonymous, 1966) The Time Magazine today, I hope, would refuse to publish this essay. Because not only could it be categorized as a hate crime (the abusive language would make it in the eyes of the officers of the law, verbal abuse directed at a visible minority) the Time Magazine would no doubt be sued by the Human Right's Campaign and GLAAD (Gay And Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) for allowing it to be published in the first place. This essay is an example of how, prior to our modern age, media had no care as to what was printed about homosexuals. They were seen as the dirty little
secret of post-war society, something that the whole of it wanted to fix or remove completely. The people who were apathetic or in favor of homosexuals had no hope of getting their own views published. The media had no idea of objectivity in this matter yet. It was either you were with the consensus, or against it. There was no guide on how to treat these individuals that the whole of “polite society” now had to deal with. Before, the LGBT movement was underground, there was no need for it to be mentioned in the papers. As the movement began to gain speed, there was suddenly a need for a new vocabulary, and the only vocabulary that the people in the media had was their colloquialisms.

**The APA and The 1970s**

Most articles published in the 1940s and early 1950s reporting on homosexuality were the editorials written by medical doctors and published in medical journals. These journals only looked into the factual aspect of homosexuality, it lacked a human touch. They stated the reasons that homosexuality might occur, but not why it was considered a perversion among psychologists and doctors. The newspaper outlets did not comment on this lack because there was no call for the information at the time. The LGBT community at that point consisted of small groups of friends meeting secretly. In the 1960's it was agreed by The American Psychological Association that homosexuality was no longer a mental disease. With that news, the media could no longer frame homosexual citizens as being “psychological deviants” as they were often referred to. The removal of this from the DSM (the handbook of mental illnesses that doctors and psychiatrists work off of) there was no longer and legitimate reason to stigmatize LGBT individuals in the media. The removal of the “frame” however, did not stop the stigmatization of the LGBT community. One of the main purposes of the news is to reflect the sentiment of the people. The sentiment of the majority in the early to late sixties was not a very understanding one. But very slowly and into the early 1970s, popular media (such as TV or films) started to add gay characters or minor homosexual plot devices to the mainstream. The portrayals of these people were not accurate at the beginning (they still favored the
idea of the gay man as “effeminate” and homosexuality as a “disease”) but as time went on their portrayal began to shift more sympathetic than looked-down-upon.

The 1980s

In 1985, GLAAD is formed. GLAAD is an organization created to originally protest the sensationalized AIDS coverage of the time. Its mission is to monitor the media for works that may be defamatory or biased towards LGBT people. GLAAD specifically created a handbook of terminology for journalists and other media-involved persons to help them avoid disliked words concerning the community. In 1987, after a meeting with GLAAD “The New York Times changed its editorial policy to use the word "gay" instead of including anti-gay rhetoric.” (GLAAD, 2008)

June 5th, 1981 the US Centers for Disease control receive the first known reports of the disease known as HIV/AIDS. In the 1986 edition of Time Magazine, doctors and reporters show the signs of reason that they did not let shine through in earlier eras. “AIDS was initially called a gay disease because most U.S. victims are homosexual men. But, says Robert Gallo of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md., "AIDS was never a homosexual virus. It's just that the homosexual group was the first to be infected in the U.S., and they spread it among themselves." In some African countries, where homosexuality is uncommon, the virus has become so prevalent that doctors cannot single out risk groups, apart from prostitutes. In Kenya, 54% of the prostitutes from Nairobi slums carry AIDS virus antibodies.” Compare this to the report published in 1982, also by Times Magazine, “It began suddenly, in the autumn of 1979. Young homosexual men with a history of promiscuity started showing up at the medical clinics of New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco with a bizarre array of ailments.” (Pierce, Pratap, & Vollers, 1986)

Compare the language in these articles to that mentioned earlier, the anonymous letter written slandering the homosexual condition, and the two editorials of the Post Writers. Journalism now has a
specific language that is used to refer to the sexual minority, one that does not contain negative connotations or slurs. Articles in the early '80s, refer to HIV/AIDS as “The Gay Disease” in a fit of panic. There is more focus on the lifestyles of the group at danger, promiscuous homosexuals (it is said that one man from the test group had nearly 500 lovers? Is that a true fact or an example of yellow journalism making a slow comeback?) and intravenous drug users. However once the truth is realized, that heterosexuals are just as likely to contact the disease, the focus is much less on the traits of the people infected and more on how to stop the progression of the disease as quickly as possible.

**The 1990s**

Before the official adoption of the “Don't ask, Don't tell” policy in 1993, there had been a series of “unofficial regulations” concerning the presence of homosexuals in the armed forces. In the forties and fifties it had involved “blue slips”, which was a general discharge from the military on the grounds of being unfit to serve. In the eighties, the policy was (according to Jill Smolowe of Time Magazine) “Don't even think about it.” The “Don't Ask, Don't Policy” hinges on the idea that “Homosexuality is incompatible with military service.” (Kramer, 1993) This statement means that it is not just the sexuality of the person that is the issue (if it was sexuality itself that was a problem, you could demand that all people applying for the armed forces take up a vow of celibacy.) The statement gives the overarching idea that it is the homosexual him/herself that cannot be allowed in the military simply because he/she is a homosexual, and for no other reason than that. But, because the military does not ask what your sexual preference is when you apply, there is no way for them to keep homosexuals from applying in the first place. In the April 2010 issue of the Congressional Digest, the author goes over the history of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” and describes the founding rules as such: “The law codified the grounds for discharge as follows:
the member has engaged in, attempted to engage in, or solicited another to
engage in a

homosexual act or acts; (2) the member states that he or she is a homosexual or
bisexual; or (3) the

member has married or attempted to marry someone of the same sex.” (Not Given,
2010) This solidifies the idea of the Time Magazine writer, who stated that it was
not the sexuality of the person that was not fit for the military, it is the
entire person that is not fit for the military. In the same year that “Don’t Ask,
Don’t Tell” was put into action, a social psychologist was called before the
Armed Services Committee to determine whether or not a persons sexual orientation
would affect their ability
to serve, or affect the surrounding peoples ability to perform in the armed forces.
The social psychologist, named Gregory Herek, reported his findings as such: "The
research data shows that there is nothing about lesbians and gay men that makes
them inherently unfit for military service, and there is nothing about
heterosexuals that makes them inherently unable to work and live with gay people
in close quarters." (Herek, 1993) So if there is no medical reason for why
homosexuals should not be allowed to join the armed forces, why are they
restricted from doing so by the government?

In the late 1990s there was a campaign created by the R.J Reynolds Tobacco
Company targeting members of the “alternative lifestyle.” Their main region of focus would be San Francisco, the Castro neighborhood, the previous home of Harvey Milk and the Tenderloin district. Their campaign was called: SCUM, an acronym that stood for “subculture urban marketing.” In 2001, a reporter for SFWeekly wrote an expose on the methodology of Project SCUM and the response from the gay community for that terminology. The article gives the opinion of a LGBT-involved individual: “This is a hate crime, plain and simple,” says Kathleen DeBold, who directs the Washington, D.C.-based Mautner Project for Lesbians With Cancer. “What else do you call it when a group thinks of gays and lesbians as “scum,” and then targets us with something that kills?” (Engarido, 2001)

It is possible that the acronym was a simple coincidence, but what's more important is the connotations that the target audience got from it. If the LGBT community believes that the terminology is a direct attack on them, it doesn't matter whether or not the Reynolds Tobacco Company intended it as such. They were forced to change due to the level of public outcry that they received. The simple fact that the media backed up the minority rather than the massive company shows how much the media's outlook on LGBT individuals had changed from the Cold War to the dawn of our century.

A Modern Overview: 2000-2010

The 2000s is a time of groundbreaking achievement for the LGBT movement. The HRC actively tries to achieve equal rights for their supporters along with a host of other groups. Homosexuals are met with exactly the same type of language as heterosexuals when mentioned in articles or displayed in varying types of media. In 2010, Time Magazine's Top 100 influential contains
more than ten people who are actively involved in the LGBT community. In 2010 Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Vermont and Washington (D.C.) all have legalized same-sex marriages. New York, Rhode Island, and Maryland all recognize same sex marriages performed in other states. In 2010, several transgender individuals ran for official positions, their stories of success (or failure) were displayed in prominent newspapers. (Eskenazi, 2010) In the 2000s, none of the journalistic language used in the 1940s-1970s is present. Journalists have taken into account the needs of the small section of society, and changed their ways accordingly. Some media outlets may not support the lifestyle or the outlook of the LGBT community, and they make that well known. But unlike their ancestors, they do it in a way that does not include a personal attack. In the past, women taking birth control was something unseemly, and seen as giving a woman an excuse to be promiscuous. Now, most women take birth control if they do not want to become pregnant. As the media's way of reporting matters such as these changes, the way the media reports incidents involving the LGBT community changes as well.

WORKS CITED


