

“Gay Blogs and the Power of Outing: An Essay in the Politics of Sexuality.”

JOMC 223 – Global Impact of New Communication Technologies
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December 4, 2004

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Introduction

Throughout the course of the semester, our Journalism and Mass Communication 223 class has discussed various issues that arise from the development and global expansion of new communication technologies. Ranging from the digital divide to personal publishing to cultural influences, our conversations have only begun to uncover the depth to which some of these issues reside. At the same time, learning from each other's personal experiences and opinions has opened our minds to our own biases and perhaps has allowed us to recognize privileges that may never have been realized before.

My interests and initial research on how these communication technologies have impacted emerging lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movements across the globe has allowed me to focus my attention on the concept of a virtual LGBT community; a community that allows both growth and participation in the area of personal activism, while encouraging individuals to develop a sense of identity and place within that community. It is within the context of my own existence as a sexual minority that I am able to better understand how a community such as this is able to effectively use these new communication technologies to further the cause for equality and freedom.

I must admit that I never expected my final research project to refocus my attention to the LGBT movement here in the United States, a movement that has been going strong since the Stonewall Riots of June 1969. It should, however, come as no surprise due to the wide-reaching implications of the digital divide and the current political and social environment that continues to fester in some restrictive countries.

Thesis

This essay is a brief study of how new communication technologies have empowered the LGBT community and allowed its members to increase the impact of their message. By using specific tactics and strategies, the community has been able to not only gain attention from the mainstream media and general public, but to also flex some political clout in the midst of this ever so important presidential election year.

The use of weblogs, in particular, has begun to revolutionize the age-old act of “outing” lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of power and great influence. A weblog, or blog, is simply a personal Web site made for the public forum that is frequently updated with small bits of commentary. Blogs usually contain links to other Web sites and blogs of interest. According to Rebecca Blood, blogs represent a “staggering shift from an age of carefully controlled information provided by sanctioned authorities (and artists), to an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale. Each kind of weblog empowers individuals on many levels.”¹

For me, the real question lies in whether or not this type of political tool is being used to punish individuals, raise visibility for the LGBT community as a whole or, on a greater level, to dismantle the social construction of heteronormative values and anti-gay attitudes. It is my intent to write a persuasive essay that not only describes the influence that bloggers have had on the politics of sexuality during this last political campaign and to discuss the issues that come about from using this type of technology, but to also give a brief background on the history of outing. One could say that this is my own little stake at raising awareness and visibility for the LGBT community.

¹ Rebecca Blood, “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” Rebecca’s Pocket, http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html (September 7, 2000).

Background

I would first like to introduce a few basic concepts, such as “coming out,” “being inned,” and “being outed,” in order to set the stage for the content of my essay. Coming out is an often difficult and emotional process where LGBT individuals disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to people with whom they interact. The action is produced on various levels and in various combinations, such as coming out to friends, coming out to family members, coming out to co-workers or coming out to strangers. People often ask, “Why do gay people need to rub their sexuality in everyone else’s face? I don’t have to ‘come out’ as straight!” The point is that we live in a heterosexist society where being straight is considered the norm and an individual is assumed straight until proven otherwise.

Coming out, in and of itself, is a political act that brings about visibility for LGBT people everywhere. It proves that it is not just an isolated issue effecting “those people” in a different location, but something that is real and a part of everyday people’s lives. As well, coming out is not just a one time deal. LGBT people constantly have to go through the often nerve-racking task of coming out each and every time they meet someone new, move to a new area or start a new job.

Being inned is a term that often describes how the mainstream media delicately handles the secret lives of closeted LGBT celebrities, politicians and wealthy business people. The idea is that an individual’s personal life should not be discussed or reported on if he or she is a sexual minority (even if it is a well-known fact in inner circles). Instead, the illusion of heterosexuality is preserved at all times when the individual is discussed in a public forum.

A good example of this would be how the press delicately deals with obituaries in terms of “cause of death” and “survived by” information. Aaron Copeland, arguably the greatest American composer, had a full-page obituary written about him in the *New York Times* when he died in December 1990. He was described as a “life-long bachelor,” and it wasn’t until ten years after his death, when the *New York Times* published an article about the anniversary of his birth, that the paper disclosed information about his sexual orientation. The paper simply stated, “For a homosexual man coming of age in the America of the 1910’s, Copeland was remarkably well adjusted.”²

In its simplest form, outing is the disclosure of information about the sexual orientation or gender identity of another individual, who may or may not be closeted, without his or her knowledge or consent. It is an effective, though sometimes dangerous, tactic that is used to symbolically rip the doors off the closet and to bring awareness to LGBT existence. Often times, outing can be damaging to all those involved.

“The individual outed in a wave of persecution or chance discovery could expect to be prosecuted and imprisoned, banished, or executed. Even in more recent times, outing to society – to one’s family, friends, associates, employer, and the like – meant ostracism, disinheritance, loss of employment and career – a civil death, as the phrase has it, leaving the victim no option but exile or suicide, or else to suffer ostracism, assault, battery or murder.”³ – Perry Williams

² Gross, Larry. *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and The Media in America*. Columbia University Press: New York. 2001. Pg. 110

³ Perry, William A. and Warren Johansson. *Outing: Shattering the Conspiracy of Silence*. The Haworth Press: New York, London, Norwood. 1994. Pg. 18.

Outing reached its height of popularity and social impact when militant gay rights groups, such as AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) used it as a political tool to attack the mainstream media about the lack of coverage on the HIV/AIDS health crisis that was affecting our nation during the late 1980s and early 1990s (during the early 1980s, HIV/AIDS was thought to be a rare cancer found primarily in gay men and was referred to as the “gay plague” and later, Gay Related Immune Deficiency).

One individual in particular, Michelangelo Signorile, took outing to a whole new level when he published the names of closeted celebrities and officials in his “Gossip Watch” column featured in *OutWeek*. One of the most significant outings Signorile orchestrated occurred in 1991, when he outed Pete Williams, the assistant secretary of defense, on the cover article of the *Advocate*.⁴ At the time, Williams worked under Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney during the height of gay baiting and witch hunts in an attempt to discharge all LGBT service members out of the military.

“People need to let the gayness of individuals come up when it is relevant, rather than along with the shaming social convention of the closet, the demand that every gay person is bound to keep every other gay person’s secret secret. For the closet is the site where anti-gay loathing and gay self-loathing mutually reinforce each other. Even people who are out of the closet demean themselves when they maintain other people’s closets. For the closet’s secret is a dirty little secret that degrades all gay people.”⁵ – John Corvino

⁴ Alwood, Edward. *Straight News: Gays, Lesbians, and the News Media*. Columbia University Press: New York. 1996. Pg. 279.

⁵ Corvino, John. *Same Sex: Debating the Ethics, Science, and Culture of Homosexuality*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford. 1997. Pg. 282.

Blogging's Impact

Believe it or not, weblogs have been around for quite a while. The very first Web site, which also served as a type of blog due to its frequent updates, was created in 1992 by Tim Berners-Lee while he worked as researcher at Centre Européen de Recherche Nucléaire (CERN). This primitive blog, which was cleverly named “What’s New,” served as a central forum to announce the development and creation of new Web sites. The page even contained external links so people would have easy access to visit the sites. The Internet continued to grow at a steady pace and by the mid to late 1990s many people who were knowledgeable about HyperText Markup Language had created their own Web sites. The term “weblog” was first used by Jorn Barger in 1998.⁶

In 1999, an amazing development took place that would forever change the way we blog. Two Web sites, Blogger and Pitas, came up with innovative ways to allow everyday computer users to create their own hassle-free weblogs. They did this by offering free access to Web space on their server, thereby deleting the need for individuals to FTP (File Transfer Protocol) and upload files to their site. They also developed an easy-to-use interface that would allow individuals to create posts just as easily as composing and sending e-mail. Without the confines of having to know HTML in order to create a Web site or weblog and the expense of purchasing Web space, the internet opened itself up in many ways to new users.

Due to the new advances in communication technologies, there are millions of weblogs out there, with many new blogs popping up every hour. It is no surprise that a large number of weblogs dedicated much of their space to commentary about the 2004

⁶ Anton Zuiker, “Blogs – A Short History,” Blogging 101, <http://www.unc.edu/~zuiker/blogging101/> (February 27, 2004).

elections. What may have been surprising is the impact, or illusion thereof, that these blogs had on the various races. One thing is for sure, and that is that blogs forced the mainstream media to pay attention and dedicate airtime to covering the “new” phenomenon of personal publishing. From the huge success of Howard Dean’s online campaign, to rumors about President Bush’s supposed wireless bulge, to the uncovering of false documents about President Bush’s military records used in a CBS newscast, bloggers have certainly made a splash this past year.

According to a November 14, 2004 Associated Press article distributed on MSNBC.com, “Blogs have drawn attention to political stories that more established media outlets then report on, and exposed flawed journalism by those same newspapers and television news programs. But some at the gathering said they face a near-constant struggle to establish the credibility enjoyed by professionals.”⁷

On the heels of one of the most shocking stories of the summer, where Governor Jim McGreevey, D-NJ, came out as a “gay American” on August 12, 2004 under the threat of allegations which indicated that the governor conducted unwanted sexual advances, followed rumors that Congressman Ed Schrock, R-VA., had placed a phone call to a gay sex line. The story first broke in an August 19, 2004 posting on Blogactive.com by Michael Rogers.

"But what I do know is that forcing this man [Schrock] to cope with all of this in public, as an exercise in public humiliation and disgrace, is simply and manifestly cruel. And if the gay rights movement is about anything, it should be

⁷ The Associate Press, “Bloggers Offer No Apologies Over Impact On News,” MSNBC News, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6482016/> (November 14, 2004).

about the abatement of cruelty, not its enforcement. Especially when directed by one gay man toward another.”⁸ - Andrew Sullivan

Blogactive.com is based out of Washington, D.C. and run solely by Rogers. The blog primarily focuses on gay political issues and has been known to out political representatives and their staff members. On that day, Rogers’ headline indicated, “ACTION: Write Congressman Ed Schrock and ask how he can cruise for gay men and then co-sponsor the Federal Marriage Amendment.”⁹ A few days later, Rogers added a streaming audio file to his blog that captures the message supposedly left by Schrock. In an *Advocate* article, Rogers said, “I have two people who slept with the congressman, one person who met him on the phone. Two workers on the Hill have come into my house and heard the tape, and the first thing out of their mouths was, ‘That’s Ed Schrock.’”¹⁰

Schrock, who was considered the second most powerful republican in Congress, was well-known for his anti-gay legislation. He not only voted for the Marriage Protection Act, co-sponsored the Federal Marriage Amendment, but was also a staunch supporter of lifting the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” military ban on LGBT service members so recruits could be blatantly asked if they were gay and not be admitted into the armed services. Schrock himself served as a career officer in the Navy and is a Vietnam veteran.

The congressman ultimately stepped out of the race, neither admitting nor denying that he was gay. In his August 30, 2004 resignation speech, Schrock simply

⁸ Andrew Sullivan, “Outing: Why It’s Still Wrong,” *The New Republic Online*, <http://www.tnr.com/> (September 28, 2004).

⁹ Michael Rogers, “ACTION,” *BlogActive*, <http://www.blogactive.com> (August 19, 2004).

¹⁰ Etelka Lehoczy, “Bloggers Get Active,” *The Advocate*, http://www.advocate.com/html/stories/925/925_bloggers.asp (October 26, 2004).

stated, “After much thought and prayer, I have come to the realization that these allegations will not allow my campaign to focus on the real issues facing our nation and region.”¹¹

Whether or not Schrock is really gay is not the point. The real point lies in the rate to which the story was disseminated, the distance to which it traveled and the ultimate impact it had on the election. After the news broke on blogactive.com, it was quickly picked up by other bloggers and spread at a wildfire rate. It was only a matter of time before the mainstream media paid attention. The issue was something that the major networks could not ignore or wait on. In the end, the unspoken code of silence was broken and the mainstream media ran with the story.

“I don’t think there is any good argument for outing a closeted politician who supports gay rights. But any secretly gay person who uses his bully pulpit to vilify his own people deserves the treatment gay blogger Michael Rogers is now meting out in the nation’s capital. Rogers has caused consternation everywhere, from the Log Cabin Republicans to the Human Rights Campaign, by announcing that he will out any closeted Republican who espouses antigay positions or works for a congressman or senator who does.”¹²-Charles Kaiser

Analysis

In reading through various articles and publications, it is easy to see that some people are strong supporters of using outing as a political tool, some people are strong

¹¹ Louis Hansen, “U.S. Rep. Schrock drops re-election bid over allegations,” The Virginian Pilot, <http://home.hamptonroads.com/stories/story.cfm?story=74982&ran=126361> (August 31, 2004).

¹² Charles Kaiser, “When Outing Works,” The Advocate, http://www.advocate.com/html/stories/924/924_kaiser.asp (October 12, 2004).

opponents of using outing as a political tool and some people can see both the positive and negative aspects of such actions. I agree with this latter group and it is my opinion that outing can be an effective tool to create political and legislative change if it is used in the correct context and in an appropriate manner.

One of the things that stood out to me as I read through various reports and news stories dealing with political blogs was that no one seemed to agree on the degree to which blogs did or did not impact the election. It seemed as though the only real impact made by blogs stemmed from the findings that CBS had not verified some of the documents it used in a news story and ultimately used fake information in a breaking news story and from Ed Schrock's fall from grace and out of the public eye after he stepped down from his campaign to seek re-election.

I would also like to point out the fact that outing public individuals within the context of a blog is an action that is fairly new. Due to this reality, it became difficult at times for me to find news stories created by the mainstream media that offered new information or insight into the political situation surrounding the outing of Ed Schrock. Instead, I had to once again turn to the place where it all started, the bloggers, in order to find fresh angles and interesting facts. This can be problematic in itself due to the volume of bloggers and the risk that some of the published information may be false.

In a sense, it reminds me of the old saying, "Too many roosters in the chicken coop." With so many blogs out there, it can be challenging to find one that suits your needs, offers accurate and updated information and has longevity as one of its character traits. Once a blog is found that contains all of these elements, I would suggest using it to its fullest potential by researching its links and blogroll.

Finally, using blogs as a political tool is something that I think will be around for quite a while because it helps to increase grassroots activism and networking. I am not sure how great the impact will ultimately be on influencing elections and changing legislative policy, but I know that this momentum will continue to empower and organize the masses on all sides.

Concerns/Justifications

My first concern for outing people in a public forum, such as in the context of a blog, is that the author of the information can find him or herself in the midst of a legal battle for casting false accusations and, even worse, violating privacy rights. It is true that people who choose to take a public position and live in the public eye have fewer privacy rights as a public official or a public person compared to those who are considered private citizens. However, this difference in protection from the law should not result in the abuse and exposure of people's personal lives. It is interesting to note that the 2003 Supreme Court ruling in the *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* case not only overturned the state's sodomy law, but also relinquished the ability to sue an individual for slander *per se* after being called gay or homosexual.¹³

My second concern stems from the overall intent and meaning behind outing someone in such a public forum. If the consequence of an author's actions creates personal advancement for the author and nothing more than humiliation and punishment for the outed individual, then serious thought should be weighed against divulging sensitive information. It is true that the LGBT community can not move forward in equality if we keep tearing each other apart. Individual actions, such as outing another

¹³ "Supreme Court Collection," Legal Information Institute, <http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/02-102.ZS.html> (June 26, 2003).

person, should be measured against the good and advancement of the community as a whole.

My final concern involves publishing generalizations, gossip and hear-say as actual fact and this applies to all types of blogs. Throughout the semester, we have been gently reminded that personal publishing is a form of journalism and should be held to the same standards that we would expect from our trusted news sources. The fact is that personal publishing can also mean anonymous publishing, so it would be good advice to view information with a critical eye.

My first justification for using outing as a political tool and presenting it in a public forum, such as that of a blog, is that it holds people who reside in public office accountable for their actions, accountable to their position and accountable to their constituents. I think voters have been extremely surprised in the last few months to realize that they were represented by someone they didn't know at all. The worst image there possibly is for a politician is that of a hypocrite, a liar and a cheater.

My second justification for outing someone within the public forum of a blog is directly related to the blog's speed and ability to reach a wider audience. In the case of outing someone with the power and prestige of a high political office, a large audience is almost guaranteed by virtue of their position and the interest of the national mainstream media. A less influential politician, such as a small town mayor, will more than likely garner less attention from larger media outlets. This is where the power and influence of a blog comes into play. With access to the internet, people across the world can be notified about late-breaking news from any village, town or city within minutes due to the quick dissemination of information and the linkable flow of blogs.

My final justification for using a blog to out someone is that it holds the mainstream media accountable to fair and unbiased news reporting. It forces them to react in a timely manner because, let's face the fact, being scooped by an amateur armed only with a laptop could be pretty embarrassing to top news stations. The newsworthy content of some blogs has also forced the media to report on controversial issues in a more open and honest way, which doesn't always support the underlying and unmentioned politics of the station and its owners.

Conclusion

The emergence of new communication technologies has greatly assisted the LGBT community in finding its own voice and strengthening its message amongst the noise of mainstream society. Local, state, regional and national LGBT organizations are able to use these new technologies effectively and with very little cost in order to reach their target audiences. At the same time, they are able to create a broadening infrastructure of online networking and grassroots organizing.

Now, more than ever, LGBT individuals across the globe can participate in the movement toward equality, regardless of age, class, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and geographic location. All it takes is access to a computer, the will to publish thoughts and ideas on the internet and the ability to accept feedback, be it acknowledgement or criticism. Quite a few LGBT individuals have made this commitment and thanks to their dedication and hard work, a voice of unity is growing louder each and every day. It may seem difficult at first, but once an author or two are found whose writing closely match one's ultimate interests and whose blogroll can be

overwhelmingly intriguing, the doors of the virtual LGBT community will begin to open wide.

Personal publishing has set a precedent in the way the LGBT community works together and works within the greater society. All at once, it has increased accessibility to information that might not have been readily available before, it has promoted the idea of integrity and responsibility in terms of journalistic endeavors, it has pushed the mainstream media to take into consideration our values and opinions and, most importantly to this essay, it has held people of great influence and power accountable for their actions.