



The Perpetuation of Prejudice in Reporting on Gays and Lesbians: Time and Newsweek: The First Fifty Years

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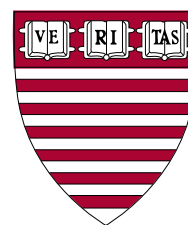
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The Joan Shorenstein Center
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Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

The Joan Shorenstein Center
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Telephone (617) 495-8269 • Fax: (617) 495-8696

Web Site Address: <http://ksgwww.harvard.edu/~presspol/home.htm>

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Time and *Newsweek*: The First Fifty Years

by Lisa Bennett

Preface

What must journalists do to get a story right?

Perhaps never before has this question been asked by so many people as it has this year, when the public watched a number of respected journalists stumble in their drive to report something new about a White House intern's affair with the President.

But what matters in the end is not just the question but the answer, and not just the answer in the case of the President and Monica Lewinsky but in all that we do. In short, perhaps now more than ever, we must ask ourselves if we still have a common set of professional standards that work—and if we do, how we may best stick by them.

This paper attempts to shed light on these issues by exploring the practice of journalistic standards over the past half-century on one of the most challenging subjects in contemporary America: the rise of gays and lesbians and their demand for the civil rights shared by other Americans.

The challenge in reporting this story—today, as in years past—comes on many fronts. But the one of most relevance here is that the majority of Americans continue to be negatively prejudiced toward gays and lesbians, and prejudice is, in itself, an anathema to the journalistic principles of fairness, balance and accuracy.

This paper's underlying question, therefore, is: How do journalistic standards hold up when put to the test by the presence of widespread prejudice? More specifically, it seeks to explore:

1. Has prejudice undermined reporting about gays and lesbians and, if so, how?
2. Where prejudice has undermined reporting, what have tended to be the weak links in common journalistic practices? and
3. What practical steps can journalists take to reduce the influence of prejudice and increase the reliability of reporting in the future?

Lisa Bennett was a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the spring of 1998. She is a freelance writer and faculty member at New York University and can be reached via e-mail at Benscribe@aol.com.

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of the 356 stories about gays and lesbians which appeared in the nation's major newsweeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*, from 1947 to 1997. These publications were selected not because they are thought to be substantially better or worse in reporting on this issue than other publications, but because they address a general nationwide audience and, thereby, have the potential to influence popular prejudices, just as they may be influenced by them.

The narrative is organized as a history of the most-frequently reported stories from each decade and includes a detailed analysis of recent reporting on gays and lesbians in the military, AIDS and rumors about the sexual orientation of various prominent individuals. The analysis, itself, focuses on issues of fairness and accuracy as reflected in the reporting of unsupported or unexamined assumptions, the use of derogatory language and the failure to lend balance to a story.

Among the major, ongoing problems addressed are:

- The reporting of unsupported negative allegations, such as gays and lesbians are more likely to molest children or to be sexually predatory than heterosexuals;
- The quoting of contemptuous labels, such as "queer dyke bitch" and "fascist pervert from hell"; and
- The assumption that gays and lesbians are inherently inferior to heterosexuals or, in themselves, "bad."

In conclusion, it is recommended that news organizations adopt a fair practices policy to counteract the tendency of popular prejudices to undermine journalists' ability to get the story right. Such a policy would, among other things, require a greater effort to balance sources and insist on evidence for negative allegations that have been reported for years on the basis of mere rhetoric.

Introduction

When journalists first came to the story of homosexuality at the end of World War II, the

stigma surrounding the subject was far greater than anything that exists today. All the major religions condemned it as a sin against God and nature. Psychiatrists treated it as a serious mental disorder. Almost every state in the nation had a law against it, with many calling for a prison term for convicted homosexuals. And Americans generally didn't talk about it, at least in public.

Many things have gone into lessening the stigma—and increasing the discussion—about gays and lesbians during the past fifty years. But it was the Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality, published in 1948 and 1953, that first drew journalists to the subject.¹ Both reports, authored by University of Indiana researcher Alfred C. Kinsey, revealed that various sexual behaviors—including adultery, premarital sex and homosexuality—were more common than Americans previously had thought. The general public's interest in these findings, as demonstrated by the rise of Kinsey's academic tracts to near best-sellers, seemed to justify reporting on what had been a taboo topic for journalists.

The nation's newsweeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*, approached the subject slowly, at first. Between them, they published just two articles about homosexuals in the 1940s, 21 in the 1950s and 25 in the 1960s. Nearly all these articles were resoundingly critical of homosexuals, both in the language used to describe them, and in the stories told about them. They also relied almost entirely on second-hand sources, such as military, law enforcement and government officials and psychiatrists. Homosexuals, themselves, rarely were quoted—in large part, because society's taboos (and laws) against them discouraged most from openly identifying themselves.

But in the 1970s, the nationwide gay and lesbian movement arose, soon to be followed by fundamentalist Christian opposition to it, and reporting about gays and lesbians has steadily increased ever since. *Time* and *Newsweek* ran 62 articles on the subject in the 1970s, 95 articles in the 1980s and 151 articles in the 1990s (through 1997). Most of these articles focused on controversies over the increased visibility of gays and lesbians and their quest for civil rights—including the right to be free from discrimination in housing and employment, the right to openly serve in the U.S. military and government and, more recently, the right to marry.

Throughout the past fifty years, social attitudes toward and "expert" judgments about gays and lesbians have changed dramatically—and, to an extent, reporting has simply mirrored these changing attitudes and judgments.² But

the fairness and accuracy of reporting on gays and lesbians also has been complicated—and compromised—by the fact that gays and lesbians challenge traditional ideas about sex, religion and gender, all of which evoke deep and complex feelings among many Americans. Moreover, reporting on this subject also has been both complicated and compromised by the presence of prejudice against gays and lesbians. The influence of sex, religion and gender will be discussed in the conclusion of this paper. But what is meant by "prejudice" will be defined here, as it plays a central part in the history of coverage to follow.

Articles about Gays and Lesbians
***Time* and *Newsweek*: 1947 to 1997**

Decade	<i>Time</i>	<i>Newsweek</i>	Total
1940s	0	2	2
1950s	13	8	21
1960s	12	13	25
1970s	35	27	62
1980s	32	63	95
1990s	41	110	151

Sources: Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature
(and Lexis-Nexis for 1997 only)

In *The Anatomy of Prejudices*, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl distinguishes the expression of prejudice toward gays and lesbians from the expression of prejudice toward other groups by arguing that, in this case, the prejudicial identification of a person's homosexuality is not used as a cue to some faulty generalized assumption about him or her—as it is in: African-Americans are criminals and welfare mothers, Jews are greedy and women are irrational. Rather, the identification of a person's homosexuality is used as the very statement of condemnation. When it comes to gays and lesbians, Young-Bruehl writes, "the category itself—and whatever it means to the individual using it—is the main accusation."³ In gossip, this form of prejudice has appeared in the simple statement: "He's gay" or "She's lesbian." In reporting, it repeatedly has appeared in stories that describe unfounded rumors that a politician is gay or lesbian as tantamount to a scurrilous defamation of character.

Prejudice in reporting also has appeared in the more universal sense of unsubstantiated generalizations about gays and lesbians, as a whole. This is the form of prejudice, referred to by Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice*, as "being down on something you're not up

Words Used to Describe Homosexuals and Homosexuality: 1940s to 1950s

Aberrant	Extreme medical disorder	Queer
Abnormal	Fairy	Sex criminal
Abominable, abomination	Filthy	Sex offender
Corrupt	Horrible	Sodomite
Criminal	Immoral	Undesirable
Degenerate	Indecent	Unmentionable subject
Degraded	Infamous crime against nature	Unnatural
Depraved	Invert	Unspeakable crime
Deviant, sex deviant	Misdeed	Vice
Dirty pansy	Neuropsychiatric case	Victim
Disgusting	Pervert	Vile
Evil	Psychopath	Wicked

on."⁴ Yet this is something more than a simple negative overgeneralization, as Allport wrote: "A prejudice, unlike a simple misconception, is actively resistant to all evidence that would unseat it." Prejudice is, in other words, "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization."⁵ While prejudice against gays and lesbians stems not only from "antipathy" but also fear, the important point from a journalistic perspective is that the reporting of a "faulty and inflexible generalization" can amount to little more than the perpetuation of prejudice.

This study reveals that the trend in reporting on gays and lesbians during the past fifty years has been going in the right direction, as the presence of prejudicial—or unsupported and unbalanced—allegations have steadily declined. Yet, more disturbingly, it also finds that prejudicial allegations have continued to appear well into the 1990s—distorting coverage of gays and lesbians in the military, anti-discrimination measures and the more recent issue of gay and lesbian marriage. Among the most significant and consistent findings in this regard have been the implicit assumptions that homosexuality is inherently negative; that gays are sexually predatory; and that gays and lesbians are a threat to children—or, more specifically, that they "recruit," "seduce" and "molest" children. These assumptions and allegations repeatedly have appeared, without the evidence to support them, and frequently without balance from the gays and lesbians who are subject to them. Moreover, they have continued to appear in spite of the occasional acknowledgment that the evidence on the specific charges that gays and lesbians are sexual predators and child molesters would, in fact, "unseat" them.⁶

This is not to suggest that journalists deliberately, or even consciously, perpetuated prejudice in reporting about gays and lesbians. Prejudice, after all, is very close to that other phenomenon so central and, as Allport argued, natural to the workings of the human mind: namely, the process of prejudgment. Given the complexity of life, human beings crave categories to make order out of seeming chaos. In reporting, as in life, there is no problem with this, in itself. The problem arises only when a prejudgment hardens into a prejudice: a state of mind that, as Allport described it, resists the information that would correct it.⁵

A History of the First Fifty Years

1940s–1950s: Homosexuals are a Problem

When homosexuals were first discussed in *Time* and *Newsweek* in the late 1940s and '50s, they were described as "aberrant," "abnormal," "abominations," "corrupt," "degenerates," "degraded," "depraved," "deviants," "dirty pansies," "disgusting," "evil," "fairies," "filthy," "horrible," "immoral," "indecent," "inverts," "perverts" and "psychopaths," "unnatural," "vile" and "wicked."⁷ Sometimes, these words issued from the mouths of sources—typically, government officials and psychiatrists. But, often, they came from journalists, themselves.

Underlying the earliest reporting about homosexuality, in other words, was an undisputed—and seemingly unquestionable—premise that homosexuals were a problem. About 60 percent of the articles published described homosexuals as a direct threat to the strength of the U.S. military, the security of the U.S. government and the safety of ordinary Americans.

Words Used to Describe Homosexuals and Homosexuality: 1960s

Aberrant	Fag	Psychic masochist
Abomination	Gay	Psychopath
Butch	Hair fairies	Queen
Crime against nature	Homme-femme	Queer
Crime of deviation	Homophile	Sodomite
Dandified sissy	Invert	Swish
Detestable	Le vice anglais	Third sex
Deviant	Lesbian	Transvestite
Deviate	Moral malady	Tweedy lesbian
Effeminate	Pederast	Unnatural
Emotionally immature	Pervert	

For example, the first article, published in *Newsweek* on June 9, 1947 and headlined “Homosexuals in Uniform,” reported that homosexuals were “undesirable soldier material” because they were effeminate, nervous, unstable and often hysterical. Army recruiters were instructed to screen them out by looking for “feminine mannerisms” and “repeating certain words from the homosexual vocabulary and watching for signs of recognition.” The second article, headlined “Queer People,” reported that homosexuals committed “the most dastardly and horrifying of crimes” and “should be placed in an institution.”⁸ And a third article, published by *Time*, reported that homosexuals who worked in the government were security risks because they could be blackmailed.⁹

The sources cited for each story were (usually unnamed) officials who represented the institution to which homosexuals were presumably a threat: Army medical officers, for example, were cited in reports that homosexuals were a threat to the military; law enforcement officials in reports that homosexuals were a threat to public safety; and senators in reports that homosexuals were security risks to the government. In short, only one side was represented in any of these stories: the side of those in power.

“The Abnormal,” a *Time* headline from 1950, introduced the second major theme of the period: What causes homosexuality, and what should be done about it? Homosexuality, this and other articles reported, was a mental disorder. Some articles reported that the disorder was a result of homosexuals being “overwhelmed by the ordinary shocks of life,” such as birth.¹⁰ Others stated: “Certain damaging childhood experiences cause anxieties that do not allow the person to express his feelings toward a member of the opposite sex.”¹¹ And most simply stated: Parents are to

blame. If homosexuals (presumed to be male) were effeminate, then mothers had been too strong an influence, and fathers too weak, the articles reported.¹² As for the solution to the alleged problem, six out of seven articles reported that psychotherapy was the answer. The chief source for all these articles were psychiatrists.

1960s: “Homosexuals: To Punish or to Pity?”¹³

The allegation that homosexuality was—or, rather, homosexuals were—a problem continued to be an unquestioned assumption during the 1960s, when *Time* and *Newsweek* published another 25 stories on the subject. But how to treat the alleged problem became a new focus of coverage, as the newsweeklies reported on a growing debate among government officials and psychiatrists over whether laws that called for a prison term for convicted homosexuals were justifiable, or cruel and unusual punishment for people who were, after all, classified as mentally ill. Summing up the debate, a 1960 *Newsweek* headline asked: “Homosexuals: To Punish or to Pity?”¹³

Time took a somewhat more direct approach to answering this question in its first lengthy article on the subject, which reported that homosexuals were “catty,” “megalomaniacal,” “supercilious,” “wimpy,” “psychic masochists,” “irrationally jealous,” “beset by inner depression and guilt,” “subservient around strangers,” “merciless around those weaker than them,” “antagonistic toward heterosexuals,” “mocking of heterosexuals,” “inferior to heterosexuals” and simply “not like everybody else.”¹⁴ “Homosexuality,” the article concluded, “is a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality.”¹⁴

In a cover story—the first published by either newsweekly, in the fall of 1969—*Time* further

reported that homosexuals came in six types: the blatant homosexual (“eunuch-like caricature of femininity”), the secret homosexual (“extremely skilled at camouflage”), the desperate homosexual (“likely to haunt public toilets”), the adjusted (“lead relatively conventional lives”), the bisexual (married and faking it) and the situational-experimental. An understanding of these types, the article stated, should correct past oversimplifications.¹⁵

As the publication of a first cover story suggests, there was a growing visibility of homosexuality at the end of the 1960s—or in *Time’s* words: “Though they seem fairly bizarre to most Americans, homosexuals have never been so visible, vocal or closely scrutinized by research.”¹⁵ Visibility, as in photographs that portrayed real, living, ordinary homosexuals—as opposed to comic Hollywood portrayals of homosexuals, dead homosexuals, and homosexual transvestites or prostitutes—were, however, rare. Among the nine that were published during the decade, six showed only the subjects’ backs. Visibility, as in the quoting of homosexuals, also was almost non-existent. But that would soon change.

**Words Used to Describe Gays and Lesbians:
1970s**

Aberrant, mental aberration	Fairy
Abomination	Flaming fag
Admitted homosexual	Fruit
Avowed homosexual	Homophile
Committed homosexual	Human rot
Confessed homosexual	Human garbage
Deviant	Militant homosexual
Drag queen	Queer
Fag	

1970s: Opposition to the Gay and Lesbian Movement

Coverage about homosexuals—or gays and lesbians, as they preferred to call themselves—more than doubled during the 1970s, with 62 articles, up from 25 in the 1960s. *Time* alone nearly tripled its coverage, with 35 articles, up from 12 in the 1960s. Both newsweeklies also put homosexuality on their covers during the 1970s: *Newsweek* did it once, *Time* twice. This jump in coverage was sparked by two major events: the rise of the gay and lesbian movement, and a backlash to it, particularly among fundamentalist Christians. There also was a

third event, which, though it received less attention than these two, underlay the coverage of the 1970s and most of what came before.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) had classified homosexuality as a mental disorder since 1952, when it issued the first official catalog, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Mental Disorders* (DSM-I).¹⁶ But in the late 1960s, homosexual organizations made changing that their top priority: They were not mentally ill, they insisted, and not in need of psychiatric help. They lobbied the APA and, in 1973, won the agreement of the association, which announced: “For a mental condition to be considered a psychiatric disorder, it should either regularly cause emotional distress or regularly be associated with generalized impairment of social functioning; homosexuality does not meet those criteria.”¹⁷ The move was hotly contested within the APA, however, as psychiatrist Charles Socarides petitioned to bring the decision to a vote by the full membership, insisting that homosexuals were ill and needed psychiatric counseling. Yet the majority of his colleagues disagreed and upheld the new ruling: Homosexuality was officially removed from the APA’s catalog of mental disorders, and only those men and women who were troubled by their homosexuality were to be classified as having a “sexual orientation disturbance.”

After more than 20 years of reporting that homosexuals were mentally ill—abnormal, psychologically immature, and damaged by overbearing mothers and weak fathers—one might imagine that *Time* and *Newsweek* would have found the APA’s decision big news. Neither one, however, published an article announcing something to the effect of: “Homosexuality No Longer a Mental Illness, says APA.” Instead, some seven months before the December 1973 decision, *Newsweek* ran an article about the growing debate over the issue. It was headlined: “Are Homosexuals Sick?”¹⁸ The news that homosexuality was, in fact, removed from psychiatrists’ roster of mental disorders was not reported in *Newsweek* until nearly three years later, as part of an article about the campaign for gay and lesbian civil rights.¹⁹

Time reported the declassification some five months after the APA decision, as part of an article about the controversy surrounding the decision and the impending membership vote.²⁰ The newsweekly’s first indication that the declassification was upheld came some eighteen months later, when it was described as “an awkward compromise by a confused and defensive profes-

sion"²¹ and four years later, when it described it as a "highly political compromise" that was "a bit like dermatologists voting to ordain that acne is indeed a skin blemish, but only if the acne sufferer thinks it is."²² The implicit message was that *Time* still considered homosexuals mentally ill, even though the American Psychiatric Association didn't.

Meanwhile, there was bigger news to report. In the summer of 1969, police officers had conducted one of many raids at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in the Greenwich Village section of New York City—only this time, the patrons resisted arrest. News of the rebellion, and the riot that followed, spread quickly, and the next night, several thousand people came out to demonstrate.²³ The result was the rise of a nationwide gay and lesbian movement. Thousands of men and women formed new organizations, which rejected the old term, "homosexual," because of its roots as a mental disorder. They encouraged others to "come out" or identify themselves as gay or lesbian, arguing that if people saw that they were not bizarre and frightening, as they had been reported to be, but rather familiar and, in most ways, ordinary, they might win more support. Meanwhile, they also began campaigning for civil rights: challenging bans against them in the military, government and church; organizing to overturn laws that prohibited sodomy—nonreproductive (oral or anal) sex—between consenting adults; and lobbying for anti-discrimination statutes to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in housing and employment, as other laws protected African-Americans and women from the same.²⁴

This activity led to numerous changes in the newsweeklies' reporting. Among them were a 50 percent decline in the use of derogatory terms, such as "pervert" and "degenerate"; an increased use of the words, "gay" and "lesbian"; a rise in images of real gay men and lesbians; and the routine quoting of gays and lesbians—albeit typically dubbed as "admitted," "avowed," "committed" or "confessed" gay men or lesbians, suggesting that they were admitting or confessing something sinful or, at least, shameful.

Perhaps most significantly, in 1975, the first cover story that featured a photograph of a real gay man or lesbian (as opposed to the illustration that appeared on the first 1969 cover) also was published by *Time*. It featured a photograph of an Air Force sergeant, Leonard Matlovich, who had won a Purple Heart medal for service in Vietnam, and was headlined: "I Am a

Homosexual."²⁵ Its news summary reported: "Since homosexuals began to organize for political action six years ago, they have achieved a substantial number of victories. But even as homosexuals congratulate themselves on [their] gains, many other Americans have become alarmed, especially parents. Some are viscerally hostile. Others, more tolerant, want to be fair and avoid injustice and yet cannot approve behavior that they believe harmful to the very fabric of society. They are especially concerned by the new contention that homosexuality is in every way as desirable as heterosexuality."

The growing visibility of gays and lesbians—described, in itself, as "shocking,"²⁶ "startling,"²⁷ "jolting"²⁸ and "undoubtedly offensive"²⁹—provided the largest source (approximately half, or 31 of 62) of the articles about gays and lesbians throughout the 1970s. More than half of these stories, however, were framed around opposition to their movement, primarily from fundamentalist Christians; and the largest share (7 of 17) of these, in turn, focused on Anita Bryant's campaign to overturn a Dade County, Florida, statute designed to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in housing and employment. Bryant's opposition inspired *Newsweek* to run its first cover story on homosexuality in 1977, featuring Bryant in the foreground, with her brow furrowed, against a background of gays and lesbians marching in a parade, carrying a poster that read, "Gay is Proud." Across a top corner, the cover declared: "Battle Over Gay Rights." Across the bottom: "Anita Bryant vs. The Homosexuals."³⁰

"Anita Bryant's Crusade" against homosexuals, as another *Newsweek* headline put it, poised on one side a celebrity—a Miss America runner-up, a singer, the voice of Tropicana orange juice commercials—and on the other, a new, little understood and widely-despised minority group. The characters, in other words, were inherently imbalanced, making the newsweeklies' balanced presentation of the issues all the more important. The central issue, as described in all seven articles, was Bryant's charge that gays and lesbians were a danger to children (as, indeed, the name of her organization, "Save Our Children, Inc.," repeatedly implied.) Sometimes the alleged danger was described vaguely, as in a *Time* report that Bryant's campaign said gays and lesbians would "lead [children] astray."³¹ But, more commonly, the allegations were both specific and frightening: Gays and lesbians, Bryant's organization was quoted as saying, recruited, seduced and molested children.³² For example, *Newsweek*

reported: "The Save Our Children forces took out full-page newspaper ads saying that the homosexual lifestyle was a 'hair-raising pattern of recruitment and outright seductions and molestation [of children].'"³³

Some articles went even further, as Bryant campaign supporters declared that gays and lesbians threatened everyone's safety. "So-called gay folks [would] just as soon kill you as look at you," *Newsweek* quoted Jerry Falwell as saying.³⁰ Other Bryant supporters described gays and lesbians as a threat to the nation at-large. Bryant herself was quoted to say: "The more we let violence and homosexuality become the norm, the more we'll become such a sick nation that the Communists won't have to take us over—we'll just give up."³³ *Newsweek* also quoted Bryant and her organization as saying that gays and lesbians were "human garbage"—something the newsweekly referred to as "hyperbole"—and "human rot."³⁴ *Time* cited a bumper sticker that declared, "KILL A QUEER FOR CHRIST."³⁵

Neither *Time* nor *Newsweek* reported any evidence for any of the charges—from the allegation that gays and lesbians molested children to the one that they were generally violent—in any of the seven articles published on the subject. Nor did they note that Bryant provided no evidence for the charges. Only one of the four articles published in *Time*, and one of four articles published in *Newsweek*, moreover, presented another side of the story, although, in one case, it appeared in the twenty-fifth paragraph of the story.³⁰ *Time*, for example, reported that gay activists said there had been no incidents in which gay and lesbian teachers harmed students in the 38 cities and counties that had passed similar anti-discrimination laws.³⁵ *Newsweek* reported: "Most experts believe that child molesting and direct recruiting by homosexual teachers are extremely rare. Statistics, though skimpy, show that the majority of sexual attacks on children are heterosexual, not homosexual."³⁰ According to these references, there were clearly two sides of the story—from a substantial, not merely a superficial point of view.

Why, then, didn't *Time* and *Newsweek* report them in more than one out of four stories? What explains the lack of balance and substance in the biggest gay and lesbian story of the 1970s? The appeal of celebrity might be one factor. The newness of the gay and lesbian movement might be another. But perhaps more revealing is the fact that underlying the reporting of this story was the use of both imagery and direct assertions which presumed that religion, family, decency

and America was represented by only one side of the story—Bryant's—as she was described as being on a "God and decency crusade,"³⁶ fighting a "holy war"³⁷ and "the image of devout wholesomeness."³⁸ Gays and lesbians (and those who would support them,) on the other hand, were described as representing "moral decay,"³⁰ "decadence"³⁰ and permissiveness.³⁹

**Words Used to Describe Gays and Lesbians:
1980s**

Avowed gay	Fruit
Consensual grossness	Homophile
Deviant	Militant gay, homosexual
Deviate	Oddwad
Dyke	Pervert
Faggot	Prissy sissy
Faggot bitch	Professed homosexual
Fairy	Queer

1980s: Allegations and Revelations: "He's a Homosexual"

AIDS, it frequently has been said, was the gay story of the 1980s—and, indeed, it was a big one, with 22 articles about the subject specifically in its relation to gays and lesbians. But it wasn't the only big story: During the 1980s, the newsweeklies ran 19 articles framed around allegations or revelations that some prominent individual—a tennis star, a general, a Senate leader—was gay or lesbian. More than half these stories were unfounded. But the more important point, from the perspective of this paper, is what they implied about gays and lesbians in the process. Here's how the newsweeklies reported three of the stories:

In 1981, Billie Jean King's former secretary and lover filed a suit, alleging that the tennis star owed her palimony. In response to questions from reporters, King called a press conference and stated that, yes, she had had a relationship with the woman who had filed suit. *Time* reported that King "admitted" a lesbian relationship, *Newsweek* reported that King "confessed" a lesbian relationship and headlined the story, "Billie Jean's Odd Match." *Time* reported that the lawsuit sent off "shock waves of publicity" and added: "The biggest shock of all was that King . . . admitted having a lesbian affair . . ."⁴⁰

In 1984, *Time* and *Newsweek* reported, over the course of five articles, that a West German general and NATO deputy commander had been dismissed because he was "a homosexual and a

security risk"; that his homosexuality then had been questioned; and, finally, that his homosexuality had been disproved and he was restored to his post. In reporting that the general was not a homosexual or a security risk, as previously thought, *Time* referred to him as a "victim of mistaken identity";⁴¹ *Newsweek* called him the "most mud-spattered officer."⁴²

Finally, in 1989, the newsweeklies reported that Republicans had "smeared" the new democratic Speaker of the House, Tom Foley, by strongly implying that he was a homosexual.⁴³ Both articles—*Time's* running a full page, and *Newsweek's* two—observed that Foley was not, in fact, a homosexual. Indeed, they framed the stories around outrage that Republican National Committee chairman Lee Atwater would accuse a respected politician of being one. *Newsweek*, in its own words, described the allegation as "dirt-ball," "squalid," "scurrilous" and "a wretched excess," and further noted that the "victim" was "one of the most decent men in American politics."⁴⁴ *Time*, in its own words, described the allegation as "vicious," "designed to humiliate," "an outrageous charge that would be devastating if true" and a case where "sorry was not enough," and further noted that Foley had "the bearing and rectitude of a parish priest."⁴⁵

What explains the emotion-laden language used to report all three stories? On the surface, it may seem to be due to the novelty of the stories; but novelty alone does not explain shock. Rather, two other factors seem also to have been at play: First, the focus in these articles was not on seemingly "fringe" characters, as gays and lesbians often had appeared to be in coverage during the 1970s, but rather on influential figures: in sports, the military and politics; and, second, the newsweeklies routinely presumed that homosexuality was inherently negative, reflecting what was discussed above as Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's description of the unique expression of prejudice against gays and lesbians: namely, that saying "he's gay" or "she's lesbian" can stand alone as a statement of condemnation.

The King story rested on such a negative judgment—or there would have been nothing to be "shocked" about, and her declaration would have been reported as a declaration and not an "admission" or a "confession." The Foley story rested on such a negative judgment—or implying that a prominent politician was a homosexual would not have been reported as a "scurrilous" defamation of character. And the West German general story rested on such a negative judgment—or he would not have been reported as a

"victim of mistaken identity" and "the most mud-spattered officer."

But the story about the West German general also invoked another form of prejudice, as each of the five articles unquestioningly assumed that gays and lesbians posed a security risk to the military. As *Time* put it: "Bonn buzzed with rumors about why the alliance's high command harbored a security risk. West German Defense Minister Manfred Wornat last week . . . asserted in a terse televised announcement that General Gunter Kiessling, 58, was an active homosexual."⁴⁶ Yet what was perhaps most striking about the newsweeklies' lack of examination of this assumption was that there was another side to it that was familiar to both, as they previously had published nine articles about Americans who had challenged (and in some cases, won) lawsuits against the American military and government, specifically on the grounds that they were not security risks.⁴⁷ The most prominent example of this type was the story of the Air Force Sergeant, Leonard Matlovich, who appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1975.

One of the dominant frames for news stories during the 1980s, in summary, rested upon the same unquestioned premise that marked coverage of the 1940s through the 1960s: Homosexuality is a problem. What changed, in forty years time, and more narrowly in the ten years since the gay and lesbian movement began, was that the subjects of the stories were now powerful figures in society: indeed, the more powerful (i.e., Congressman Foley), the more the newsweeklies expressed shock and outrage that the individual could be a homosexual.

AIDS and "The Promiscuous Gay Lifestyle"

When the AIDS story broke in the 1980s, the notion of "the promiscuous homosexual lifestyle" also was put on the map: a misleading generalization based on one subsection of a very diverse population, and one that implicitly suggested that the gay and lesbian campaign for civil rights was based on little more than hedonistic self-interest.

Before elaborating on this point, however, the following facts should be acknowledged: First, unprotected promiscuity does increase one's chances of getting AIDS; second, the Center for Disease Control did report that a number of people originally stricken with AIDS were gay men who had had numerous sex partners; and, third,

some gay men have engaged in indiscriminate or casual sex. In other words, there were good and understandable reasons why the newsweeklies, like other publications, discussed the role of promiscuity in their coverage of AIDS. Indeed, presumably one of the most compelling reasons was that some journalists hoped to stem the tide of deaths from AIDS.

The problem, therefore, was not that the newsweeklies discussed promiscuity: the problem was that they characterized the “homosexual lifestyle” as promiscuous. To be more specific, they made the characterization of a minority within a minority stand for the whole—despite the fact that those who were promiscuous tended to differ from other gays and lesbians in four respects: First, they tended to be men, not women; second, they tended to be relatively young, not middle-aged or old; third, they tended to live primarily in large cities, such as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles; and, fourth, many of them tended to frequent urban gay bath-houses and bars, and not stay at home in settled relationships or raising children.

The deeper problem with the promiscuity generalization, however, was not simply that it was inaccurate. It is that it implied that gays and lesbians were generally hedonistic—or concerned only about sex. Moreover, when the “gay and lesbian lifestyle” was described as promiscuous, and opinion polls asked, “Do you feel that homosexuality should be considered as an accepted alternative life-style?”⁴⁸ there was the implication that readers were to make a judgment, not about other full-blooded human beings, but, rather, about sexual practices. This implication also continued to appear in coverage of the 1990s, when the newsweeklies referred to “the lifestyle” in stories ranging from gay and lesbian marriage, to gays and lesbians in the military, to gay and lesbian parenting.

How, then, did the faulty link between homosexuality and promiscuity develop? The origins, in fact, lie twenty years before AIDS. In the 1960s, *Time* reported the idea in one-third (4 out of 12) of its articles. For example, the newsweekly reported that homosexuals have “a constant tendency to prowl or ‘cruise’ in search of new partners”;⁴⁹ that “to send homosexuals to overcrowded, hermetically sealed male prisons is as therapeutically useless as incarcerating a sex maniac in a harem”;⁵⁰ and that promiscuity and (the homosexual’s presumed) insecurity went “hand in hand.”¹⁵ The sources for these assertions were, respectively, a psychiatrist’s research, a member of the British Parliament

and an anecdotal story about one man who told UCLA Researcher Evelyn Hooker that “he had had relations with 1,500 partners during a 15-year span.”¹⁵ None of the articles quoted homosexuals about their presumed promiscuity; nor did they cite the specifics of any studies.

In the 1970s, *Time* again asserted—this time, in one-fifth (7 out of 35) of its articles—that homosexuals were promiscuous. For example, it reported: “Aside from the blurring of sex roles, perhaps the most obvious aspect of the male gay culture is its promiscuity,”²¹ “accepting sexual invitations from total strangers is an established part of the gay scene”⁵¹ and some people supported “antihomosexual statutes” because their goal was “the discouragement of promiscuity.”⁵² Sources were not identified for any of these assertions. Nor were any studies cited. Nor, finally, were gays and lesbians asked to comment about their presumed promiscuity, although they were available as sources during the 1970s.

When the AIDS story surfaced in the 1980s, the notion of the “promiscuous homosexual lifestyle” then began to appear in both *Time* and *Newsweek*. A look at *Time*’s coverage, however, lends itself to the clearest illustration of how the generalization was made. In the winter of 1981, *Time* reported the following statement, attributed to the CDC: “Nearly all the victims come from big cities with large homosexual communities: New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco . . . And a number of them report a high level of sexual activity with numerous partners.”⁵³ But did “a number of them” refer to 85 of the 95 people then identified as having AIDS? Fifty-five? Or 5? This was anyone’s guess.

Nonetheless, the point stuck, as in the fall of 1982, *Time* opened its second AIDS article with: “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.”⁵⁴ No sources were cited until the next paragraph, when the following was again attributed to the CDC: “75 percent [of the 547 people then identified as having AIDS] are homosexual men. Most are Caucasians in their 30s and 40s . . . [with] a sex life that has included many partners, more than 500 in several cases.”⁵⁴ But, again, how many were “many partners”? How many were “several cases”? These facts also were open to interpretation.

Then, in 1982, *Time* introduced the word “life-style,” linking it to the search for the cause

Words Used to Describe Gays and Lesbians: 1990s

Abnormal	Faggot	Queer
Acknowledged gay, homosexual	Fascist pervert from hell	Queer dyke bitch
Avowed gay, homosexual	Femme	Sexual nonconformist
Biker dyke	Go-go boys	Sinner
Butch	Lipstick lesbian	Sodomite
Butt pirate	The love that dare not speak its name	Unnatural
Degenerate	Pervert	Vanilla lesbian
Diesel dyke	Poofter	Wicked
Dyke	Professed homosexual	A willful choice of godless evil
Fag		

of AIDS. The newsweekly first used the word when quoting the CDC's Dr. James Curran, saying: "When AIDS was confirmed to the gay community . . . 'our efforts were concentrated on trying to dissect out life-style differences . . . ' The life-style theory does not, however, explain the emergence of AIDS in non-gay populations."⁵⁵ Again, "life-style" was a term left open to interpretation, and a reader reasonably might have assumed it referred to the promiscuity that had been emphasized in prior reporting.

What had been left to the reader's interpretation, however, then was made quite clear by 1983, when *Time* ran the headline, "The Real Epidemic: Fear and Despair: AIDS . . . is changing the gay life-style."⁵⁶ The article reported: "AIDS has clearly changed the rules of the sexual game for homosexuals. Anonymous and casual sex can be fatal." And, it concluded: "Unquestionably, AIDS is reshaping homosexual communities and pushing many toward mainstream mores."

In 1985, the approach changed slightly as *Time* reported on gay men's fears about contracting AIDS in this way: "For most of them, even that large conservative percentage that never enjoyed fast-track, promiscuous sex, [fear of AIDS] is the overriding issue of their lives."⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the rest of the article went on to focus on the promiscuous minority, reporting: "the AIDS crisis has caused a drastic change in the life-styles of those homosexuals who were accustomed to multiple partners."

In summary, the unfounded idea that promiscuity defined the gay and lesbian lifestyle seemed to develop in three parts: first, it had been a familiar—albeit unverified—stereotype in *Time's* coverage of the 1960s and 1970s; second, a partial corroboration was established, as the CDC reported that "some" of the early people stricken with AIDS had had multiple sex partners; and, third, promiscuity was defined as "the gay and lesbian life-style": providing a broad

platform on which the behavior of a narrow and uncertain subgroup was cast.

1990s: Gays and Lesbians in the Military

In the 1990s, coverage about the growing visibility of gays and lesbians (most notably, in Hollywood and schools) and their campaign for equal rights dominated the news. Yet while a number of the issues—such as, gay and lesbian marriage and parenting—were new, the allegations against gays and lesbians were not. Gays and lesbians again were described as a threat to (that is, as likely to "recruit," molest or otherwise negatively "sway") children in stories about the rise of gay and lesbian parenting, the battle over gay and lesbian marriage, efforts to include mention of gays and lesbians in schools, and reports about DNA research into the causes of homosexuality. One *Newsweek* article, for example, quoted the Christian fundamentalist organization, Colorado for Family Values, as stating that "gays are 12 times as likely" as heterosexuals to molest children.⁵⁸ Another article reported this comment from a Mississippi resident about some lesbians who lived on a farm in his hometown: "These people could pick up our little girls and take them to this place and do what they want with them."⁵⁹ In seven articles in *Time*, and 10 in *Newsweek*, allegations like these appeared without balance from the people who were subject to them, without any evidence to support them and without identification of known evidence that would disprove them.⁶⁰

The big story of the decade, meanwhile, lay elsewhere. Gays in the military, it might be recalled, was the subject of *Newsweek's* first article about homosexuality. Fifty years later, it became not only the biggest but—with respect to the players involved—the most important story of the decade. Nearly one-fifth of the articles published in *Time* and *Newsweek*, from

1990 through 1997, focused on gays and lesbians in the military. (The second-largest story, with less than half the number of articles, focused on gay and lesbian visibility in Hollywood.)⁶¹

Between the first 1947 article and the surge of coverage in 1993, the newsweeklies had published a total of eleven articles on the issue. The first two, which ran in the 1950s and 1960s, reiterated the original military position that gays and lesbians should be barred from service. Unlike the original story which alleged that homosexuals were security risks because they were effeminate and unstable, however, these articles asserted that homosexuals were security risks because they were vulnerable to blackmail. The next six articles, published after the gay and lesbian movement began in the 1970s, reported that some gays and lesbians were challenging the ban, on the grounds that they could not be blackmailed, since they were open about their homosexuality, and, therefore, were not security risks.

The next and final three articles, published prior to the 1993 surge, similarly reported that gays and lesbians in the military desired to serve openly, without threat of discharge; but these articles also went further in that all three challenged—indeed, were framed around questions about—the military ban. For example, one *Newsweek* article, published in January 1991, reported:

“The military’s own studies . . . undercut its rationale. A report commissioned by the Pentagon in 1988 suggested that ‘men and women of atypical sexual orientation can function appropriately in military units.’ A follow-up report found that the suitability of gays is ‘as good or better than the average heterosexual.’ (The Pentagon tried to suppress both reports.)”⁶²

The article also described the military’s argument that gays and lesbians were subject to blackmail and, therefore, security risks as “Orwellian logic.” Finally, it concluded with this epitaph from the former Air Force sergeant, Leonard Matlovich: “When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men—and a discharge for loving one.” It was hardly a conclusion supportive of the military’s point-of-view.⁶²

Seven months later, *Time* reported that the military ban was under increasing attack and added: “The flurry of criticism has Pentagon officials squirming to justify a policy whose existence and enforcement seems so at odds with the realities of American society.”

Describing the military’s response to the criticism, *Time* reported: “Officials fall back on the notion that allowing homosexuals to serve on ships or in the trenches would undermine the services’ order and morale.” But was that “notion” true? *Time* didn’t seem to think so, as it reported: “By and large, the presence of gay soldiers is not a major issue within the ranks. Younger soldiers tend to view the prohibition as a relic of bygone bigotry.” Even top military officials seemed to recognize the policy was unjust and destined to change, according to *Time*. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, for example, was quoted as writing in a letter to a former Army Reserve captain, who was dismissed because she was a lesbian: “I trust that you and all of the other individuals who have experienced such discrimination will one day have your day in court . . . It appears that society is about to accept that every person should have the freedoms and privileges that are granted under our great Constitution. Keep the faith!” Finally, the article concluded: “Can any country with volunteer armed forces afford to exclude talented people on the basis of fear?”⁶³

Both of these articles also drew comparisons between the military’s ban against gays and lesbians, and its earlier ones against African-Americans and women. Reported *Time*: “Over the centuries, the brass have used strikingly similar arguments to bar racial minorities, women and homosexuals from marching into battle with white heterosexual males.” Officials, the article continued, warned that the presence of each group would “risk security, weaken discipline, and jeopardize the chain of command.” Yet, it added: “Under the weight of justice and reason, these barriers have fallen one by one.” The implication was that the ban against gays and lesbians probably would fall, as well—though not, *Time* predicted, during an election year.⁶³

But then came a surprise move by Bill Clinton. During the 1992 campaign, a student from Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government had asked Clinton if he would lift the ban against gays and lesbians if elected president, and Clinton said yes. Neither newsmagazine reported the promise. But when Clinton was elected in November 1992, he announced that lifting the ban would be among his first official acts; the Joint Chiefs of Staff quickly responded that they were adamantly opposed; and suddenly, the story skyrocketed to the top of the news agenda. *Newsweek* ran a cover story about gays in the military during the week of Clinton’s inauguration. And between

them, the newsweeklies ran a total of twenty articles about the issue in the ten months between Clinton's announcement and the signing of the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy in August 1993.

What made this half-century-old issue big news in 1993 was a combination of factors: First, and least influential, it represented another step in the ongoing gay and lesbian campaign for equal rights. Second, it was the first time a president supported a gay and lesbian rights issue, of any sort. And, third, the conflict between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the new president—who, unlike his predecessors, had never served in the military (or as *Time* put it, was an "unrepentant draft avoider"⁶⁴)—seemed to be an important indicator of the future relationship between the Armed Forces and their new commander in chief.

Indeed, *Newsweek's* first article, announcing Clinton's intention to lift the ban, focused almost entirely on the political contest between the president and the military, declaring: "Clinton may have stumbled into his first postelection minefield."⁶⁵ *Time's* first article on Clinton's plan to lift the ban took a broader look at both the politics and the policy.⁶⁶ Yet several subsequent *Time* articles similarly emphasized politics over policy, including one story headlined: "Clinton Walks into a Brawl over Gays,"⁶⁷ and another, subheadlined: "By getting snarled in a battle over gays in the military, Clinton has lost valuable momentum."⁶⁸ In total, *Newsweek* ran three articles about politics and three about the ban, with others mixed,⁶⁹ while *Time* ran four articles about politics, two about the ban, with others mixed.⁷⁰ Who "won" and who "lost" over gays in the military, in short, became paramount—not in terms of those who were subject to the ban, but, rather, those who were in the positions to decide whether or not to impose it on gays.

This emphasis on politics was not surprising. The conflict was between powerful players. The stakes were high. The quotes were colorful. Moreover, it led to a series of events which provided clear-cut news pegs: from the president's announcement to the military's opposition to the Senate hearings on the subject to the signing of a new official policy. Yet as the newsweeklies emphasized the politics of the ban—or, more to the point, as the sources for the story emerged from higher perches than they had in the past,—coverage of the ban, itself, significantly changed from what had come just two years before: *Time* and *Newsweek's* willingness to challenge the military's rationale for the ban declined, and

the prejudicial allegations about gays and lesbians increased.

"We will not stand idly by and watch the fascist perverts from hell sodomize our U.S. military," *Newsweek* quoted Harley David Belew, coordinator of an organization called Back to the Closet, as saying.⁷¹ In a less hate-filled, but equally derogatory vein, *Time* quoted South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond's statement to a gay Navy bombardier: "Your lifestyle is not normal . . . It's not normal for a man to want to be with a man or a woman with a woman."⁷² If Thurmond's meaning was that homosexuality was not the most common form of sexual orientation, the comment would have been unremarkable. But his meaning was that gays and lesbians were somehow damaged, as the article goes on to make clear, reporting: "Thurmond then asked if the young bombardier 'had ever sought help from 'medical or psychiatric aids.'"

In itself, there was nothing wrong with *Time's* publication of a comment which invoked the APA's classification of homosexuality as a mental illness—despite the fact that it had been withdrawn 20 years before; nor was there anything wrong with *Newsweek's* publication of a comment from an individual who alleged that gays and lesbians were fascist, debased (perverted), immoral ("from hell") and sexually predatory ("sodomize our U.S. military.") The newsweeklies merely did what journalists are in the business of doing: They presented multiple viewpoints. But as journalists also are in the business of fair and accurate reporting, a problem arose when they failed to provide clarification and balance about these quotes. Reporting Senator Thurmond's implication that homosexuality was a mental disorder *carried with it a responsibility to clarify that it was not*. Similarly, reporting a little-known individual's implied allegations that gays and lesbians were, among other things, sexually predatory *carried with it the responsibility to balance the point with an examination of the evidence or a response from someone who could speak to the issue on behalf of gays and lesbians*.

But these two examples were only among the most obvious appearances of prejudice in the newsweeklies' coverage of the biggest story of the decade: They were not the most common ones. Indeed, the hallmark of prejudice in the newsweeklies' coverage of the gays and lesbians in the military story in 1993 was subtlety, as prejudicial allegations, first, were implied through what functioned as code words or phrases; second, were couched within larger

statements; and, third and somewhat less subtly, were presented without questioning, seemingly because a general or senator had uttered them.

Newsweek, for example, reported: "The navy is particularly resistant [to lifting the ban] because of the privacy questions presented by cramped conditions and enforced intimacies aboard ships."⁶⁵ In another article, *Newsweek* added: ". . . the president had been surprised during a recent visit to the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* at just how cramped the quarters were."⁷¹ "Cramped quarters," in both cases, served as a code phrase that invoked the stereotype of gays as sexually predatory and promiscuous and implied that the "privacy question" was: How will heterosexual navy men protect themselves from sexually-predatory gay ones? In other words, it allowed an unexamined and prejudicial assumption to pass, without evidence or balance.

In a slightly different form, *Newsweek* reported: "Military officials are gathering case histories of gay behavior in the armed services in an attempt to prove rampant promiscuity."⁷¹ *Time* also announced that "Clinton pledged to enforce 'rigorous standards regarding sexual conduct' that presumably would not allow a gay soldier to solicit sex from a straight one."⁶⁷ In the first example, while the statement that the military was attempting to prove rampant promiscuity could be taken as accurate, in itself, couched within it was the stereotype that gays were promiscuous, which *Newsweek* permitted to pass, without question or balance. In the second example, the statement describing the president's policy plans similarly could be said to be accurate, in itself, but couched within it was the implied stereotype that gays were sexually predatory (or why design such a policy?) which also was permitted to pass, without examination.

Negative stereotypes, nonetheless, only serve to reinforce prejudices. They do not lie at the heart of the matter. So, in this case, they did not directly represent the military's justification for the official policy of discrimination against gays and lesbians. What, then, was the military's justification for the policy, as reported by *Time* and *Newsweek*? "While a permanent order [to lift the ban] is being drawn up, *Time* reported, "the White House faces intense opposition from Pentagon brass, who deeply fear disrupting the closely knit culture of the armed services . . ."⁶⁷ *Newsweek* similarly declared: "Although many officers recognize that the time for change has come, they are concerned for morale and discipline and for what the brass calls 'unit cohe-

sion."⁷³ In more vivid terms, *Time* also reported a retired general's testimony that: "In every case that I'm familiar with . . . when it became known in a unit that someone was openly homosexual, polarization occurred, violence sometimes followed, morale broke down and unit effectiveness suffered."⁷²

In 1993, in other words, the reported justification for the ban on gays and lesbians in the military was what in 1991 had been described as a "fall back" notion—that gays and lesbians undermined morale, discipline and unit cohesion—a notion that *Time* had then contradicted through its own reporting. This notion, moreover, represented the third rationale that the military had provided for its policy, according to the newsweeklies' own reporting on the topic. First, in 1947, *Newsweek* had reported that the military justified the ban on the grounds that homosexuals were effeminate and unstable.⁷⁴ In 1961, the newsweekly reported that military officials justified the ban on the grounds that homosexuals were unstable *and* vulnerable to blackmail.⁷⁵ In 1975, according to a *Time* report, the military dropped the instability charge but continued to assert they were vulnerable to blackmail.⁷⁶ Finally, in 1993 another rationale was being emphasized: that gays and lesbians undermined morale, discipline and unit cohesion. Was that not a cue to journalists to be skeptical—or, at a minimum, to ask for specifics? How did gays and lesbians undermine morale, discipline and unit cohesion? If the presumption was, as it seemed to be, that they threatened it by being sexually predatory and promiscuous, where was the evidence for that?

There was, however, no hard evidence about these allegations presented in the 1993 story of gays and lesbians in the military. The closest thing to it was the testimony from the retired general, who happened to be retired General Schwarzkopf. But even that raised obvious questions, such as: How many cases was he aware of in which a soldier was openly gay or lesbian in direct violation of the standing policy? Might that violation of military policy have contributed to the alleged disruption among the troops? If the military changed its policy, might that not have changed the response? What about the ways in which Schwarzkopf's testimony seemed to contradict the letter in which he wrote to a dismissed lesbian Army Reserve captain: "It appears that society is about to accept that every person should have the freedoms and privileges that are granted under our great Constitution"⁷² And why didn't the

newsweeklies consistently balance the allegations that were made against gays and lesbians—namely, that they were sexually predatory and promiscuous and posed a threat to the military's morale, discipline and unit cohesion—by giving gays and lesbians the opportunity to comment on them?

It is possible that following the momentum of the story—from gay challenges to the military ban in 1990 through 1992, to the more powerful military challenge against gays in 1993—made a casualty of independent reporting: the kind of reporting that insists upon “checking it out,” no matter what the level of authority serving as a source for the story, and no matter how much more initiative it may take to go beyond the quotes that would justify a story. Yet if there is any lesson to be learned from the history of the coverage of gays and lesbians, it is that fairness and accuracy demand that one confirm—and, if confirmation is not possible, question—what authorities say. Indeed, from a standpoint of fairness, this is perhaps never more necessary than when one source is powerful—in this case, both factually and symbolically, as the keepers of our nation's security—and the other is subject to “disparagement and discrimination.”⁷⁷

What was needed to bring to this story the fairness and balance it lacked, finally, was an active third party: that is, journalists who questioned what sources told them; insisted upon evidence; put things in a historical context; brought forth the voices of those who did not, by virtue of their position, have a natural bully pulpit; and reached beyond the polarized sides of the story to incorporate some of the range of voices that might have better kept the focus on the facts at hand. What was missing, in short, was the independent reporting that *Time* and *Newsweek*, themselves, demonstrated in 1991, but from which they then retreated when the policy came under review and some of the nation's most powerful sources took center-stage: the very time, that is, when independent journalism matters most.

Conclusion

The more pervasive a prejudice is in society, the harder it is to recognize it as a prejudice. Indeed, the more people believe something to be true, the more it appears like a fact, regardless of its accuracy or inaccuracy. Whether such beliefs say that women are incapable of a man's rationality and, therefore, should be denied the vote; that blacks are morally inferior to whites and, there-

fore, should be kept in slavery; or that Jews are an anathema to Germany's well-being and, therefore, should be eliminated, history has shown us that—no matter how wrong such presumed truths appear in retrospect—only the few question them at the time. For ordinary individuals, this may be the result of what Allport described as “the need to conform to custom”—to fit in with what appears to be the dominant set of cultural attitudes.⁷⁸ For journalists working under ever-growing deadline pressures, it can be a matter of finding the questioning of presumed truths to be something necessarily left to artists and scholars. The unfortunate consequence, demonstrated by this study, is that journalists periodically find themselves party to the perpetuation of prejudice.

What, then, if anything, can journalists do—if not to eliminate, at least to minimize, this problem? Increased diversification of the newsroom is the recommendation that most frequently has been put forth as a solution to problems in coverage of women and racial and ethnic minorities. Gays and lesbians have rarely, if ever, been included in discussions about newsroom diversity—although, logically, the same benefits presumably would accrue from either increasing the number of gay and lesbian reporters or making it more conducive for gay and lesbian reporters to identify themselves as such.

Yet increased diversification—while important, in itself—is not the solution to problems in reporting on gays and lesbians, as it has not proven to be the solution to problems in reporting on racial and ethnic minorities. The reasons are several: First, news organizations have been unsuccessful in achieving diversification goals, recently leading a group of American Society of Newspaper Editors to make the controversial proposal that such goals be scaled back.⁷⁹ Second, even where newsrooms have been successfully diversified, numerous reporters recruited with diversity goals in mind have declared that they do not wish to be sidelined to reporting only on women and racial and ethnic issues. This path has appeared to them to be a professional ghetto best avoided by ambitious reporters.

Finally, the third—and most important—reason that increased diversification is not, in itself, the answer is that the very notion undermines the principles of the profession. The bedrock of journalism is that good reporting should not depend on whether one is old or young, rich or poor, gay or straight but on whether one has adhered to the central ethics of fairness and accuracy in reporting. If we surrender this principle, in other words, we lose more than we gain.

The challenge, therefore, is to find a way to help all reporters and editors, regardless of their personal background, achieve a higher standard of ethical reporting on what has proven to be a prejudice-laden subject. Specific recommendations for how this goal might be accomplished are discussed below.

Recommendations

Improving reporting on gays and lesbians requires three steps: First, recognizing the dynamics of prejudice particular to this subject; second, understanding the influence of the underlying issues that often make discussions of gays and lesbians more emotional than rational (namely: sex, religion and gender); and, third, adopting a set of reasonable standards—or “fair practices.” As this paper has concerned itself extensively with prejudice—both in theoretical and specific terms—it is suggested that a reader who has gotten this far already has achieved at least the minimal requirements of the first step. The remainder of this section, therefore, will focus on the second and third steps.

Understanding the Role of Sex, Religion and Gender

It is sometimes thought that talking about gays and lesbians means talking about sex—something which most of us don’t like to do in public, if at all. The reason lies, first, in the problematic category of homosexuality, itself. In what has been described as a “mania for classification,” late nineteenth century doctors invented the term “homosexual” as a way to categorize the feelings and behavior of people drawn to members of the same sex.⁸⁰ From here, some extrapolated an entire theory of the personality of the homosexual—describing a class of people on the basis of a single aspect of human character.⁸¹ The label itself, in other words, not only defined a people by their sexual practices, it seemed to reduce them to it, as well.

Most newly-described homosexuals spent more than the next half-century hiding their identity from public view, or denying it altogether, to protect themselves from discrimination or incarceration. But when the gay and lesbian movement emerged in the 1970s, some gays and lesbians responded in quite the opposite direction—deliberately drawing attention to their sexual difference—in what Gordon Allport might have described as the “ego defensiveness” found among those “set off for ridicule, dispar-

agement, and discrimination.”⁷⁷

Last but not least, journalists also have contributed to the misperception that talking about gays and lesbians is tantamount to talking about sex by focusing enormous attention on this aspect of their lives. In the 1970s, for example, much reporting focused on the most dramatic, sensational and explicit displays of sexuality at gay and lesbian parades—making it appear to casual observers as if gays and lesbians were always “flaunting it”—while overlooking the less dramatic, but more common images of gays and lesbians. In the 1980s, AIDS reporting led to the impression that gays and lesbians, as a whole, rather than that merely some—usually, young, urban, single gay men—were promiscuous. And in the 1990s, the focus has continued to appear in numerous stories. For example, stories about controversies over proposals to discuss gays and lesbians in school curricula frequently have quoted the opponents of such proposals as saying that it is inappropriate to discuss gays and lesbians in school because it is inappropriate to discuss sex in school. Frequently absent, however, has been the journalists’ recognition that talking about gays and lesbians is not tantamount to talking about a set of sexual practices, but, rather about a diverse group of people.

One simple and useful corrective, therefore, would be for journalists to understand that while gays and lesbians have been labeled, and many now organize themselves, on the basis of their sexual orientation, it would be as gross an oversimplification for journalists to perpetuate the notion that relationships among gay and lesbian couples are all about sex as it is to suggest that relationships among heterosexual couples are all about sex. There is far more to the lives of any man or woman, and far more that is properly the domain of public interest than sex, which (presuming it does not directly impact another, without his or her consent) most people still consider a private matter.

At the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, journalists reporting on this subject also need to understand the potential influence of religion. Centuries of religious authorities, after all, have taught us that homosexuality is immoral—a sin against God and nature—and religious authorities, no matter how secular our age, possess a potent hold on many. Numerous people believe that Biblical passages, such as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1–9) and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, provide evidence of the immorality of homosexuality. On the other hand, Harvard University

Chaplain Rev. Peter J. Gomes, among others, have argued that this is a serious misinterpretation of scripture, as there was no such thing as homosexuality as we now think of it at the time the Bible was written. Gomes further argues that to justify discrimination on these grounds is, in itself, immoral.⁸² The morality debate, in short, is both serious and passionately felt on both sides. But neither a religious leader's teachings, nor a journalist's personal beliefs on the matter, should be permitted to influence the basic standards of journalism that include fairness, accuracy and balance. This is especially important to note as the history of reporting on this subject shows that religious leaders (especially fundamentalist Christian leaders) have played a prominent role in asserting the most serious—and unsupported—negative allegations against gays and lesbians. When quoting them, or any other religious leader, therefore, a journalist should be as insistent on evidence and balance as in any other story—arguably even more so, granted the extraordinary influence religious leaders have on others. (See “Unbalanced Sources” below.)

And, finally, journalists need to understand the gender imbalance that has skewed reporting on this subject for fifty years. More than 90 percent of the articles published in the newsweeklies from the 1940s through the 1980s were focused entirely or primarily on gay men, with only 10 percent equally on lesbian women. Of those that did discuss women, moreover, most portrayed them in the narrow roles of controversial mothers, church members and “disputed,” “improper,” “tragic” and “odd” lovers.⁸³ In the 1990s, the trend shifted somewhat, as the newsweeklies put lesbian women on the cover for the first time and portrayed them in a wider range of roles. Yet 85 percent of the 151 articles published from 1990 to 1997 still focused entirely or primarily on gay men, with only 15 percent focused even equally on lesbian women.

The important point here is not only that lesbian women have been underrepresented, however, but that this imbalance has skewed coverage of the issues. To cite but one example: the 1993 story about gays and lesbians in the military was heavily focused on the presumed sexual behavior of gay men, despite the fact that the military discharges more lesbian women than gay men every year—a point that a reader would be most unlikely to deduce from reporting on the issue. A useful corrective on this point would be for journalists to make a con-

crete and consistent effort not simply to insert the words “gay and lesbian” but to recognize and explore the fact that there are, indeed, differences between the two. For example, if journalists began asking about the logic of military bans against gay men and lesbians on the basis of allegations that concern, by and large, gay men, the ongoing story of gays and lesbians in the military might take a very different turn.

Recommended Fair Practices

The problems that have plagued reporting on gays and lesbians have fallen into three categories: first, stories in which there was an implicit judgment that homosexuality was inherently negative—or, rather, that gays and lesbians were inherently inferior to heterosexuals; second, stories in which unsupported and unbalanced allegations were explicitly made about gays and lesbians; and, third, stories in which there was a profound imbalance in the power and prestige of the sources involved. On the basis of lessons culled from the history of reporting on this topic, it is recommended that the following “fair practices” be adopted when reporting on similar stories in the future.

(1) Question Derogatory Comments

When a politician or other prominent individual is falsely rumored to be homosexual, that individual—and others—may well take offense. The intent of the rumor, after all, is usually to discredit the subject. But reporting just the apparent facts of such a story can easily lead to little more than the perpetuation of prejudice. As discussed above, this is what occurred in *Time* and *Newsweek's* 1989 story concerning the unfounded rumors about former Congressman Tom Foley's sexual orientation. More recently, it also occurred in other news organization's 1998 reports about similar unfounded rumors about Congressman Bill Paxon. The *Washington Post*, for example, quoted Paxon calling the rumors “sick,” “malevolent” and “sleaze.”⁸⁴ The implicit message was that there was something inherently damning, or essentially inferior, about those who are, in fact, gay or lesbian.

Yet, for right or wrong, the reality is that being gay or lesbian in certain professions, such as politics, can have damaging consequences. People frequently make decisions not on the basis of facts, or fairness, alone but, rather, on what they think and feel—and opinion polls tell us that a significant number of Americans do not think well of gays and lesbians. A politician's

homosexuality—real or merely rumored, therefore—can be a newsworthy issue, if it is likely to influence his or her public support.

How, then, can journalists best negotiate such stories? The answer is that they should handle them as they would if a politician or other prominent individual made a derogatory comment about Jews or African Americans. First, rather than permitting the negative judgment to be insinuated, they should make it explicit. Second, they should directly question the source on it, by asking: Are you saying that it is wrong for a gay man or lesbian to serve in Congress? And, third, they should go to the representative of a relevant gay or lesbian organization, such as the Human Rights Campaign, and ask for comment. The solution, in other words, is quite within the bounds of ordinary journalistic practices.

To the extent that it is reasonable, the same steps also should be taken in lesser instances of implicit prejudice, as when derogatory words, such as “faggot,” are used by a source; or when naming an organization that implies something derogatory but unproven about gays and lesbians, as in Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children, Inc.,” which suggested that gays and lesbians were, indeed, a threat to children; or when identifying any of the numerous groups that use “family values” in their name and lobby against gays and lesbians, implying that gays and lesbians are an anathema to families rather than that they are part of families, themselves.

(2) Insist Upon Evidence

As discussed above, one of the most serious and continuing problems in reporting on this subject is the repetition of serious allegations against gays and lesbians, without the evidence to support them and without comment from those who are subject to them. Among the most serious such allegations: that gays and lesbians “recruit,” “seduce” and “molest” children; that gays and lesbians are promiscuous; and that gays and lesbians are sexually predatory or threatening to the well-being of Americans, in general. In most cases, these allegations have been attributed to someone or have appeared in a quote—both of which, in ordinary circumstances, do not demand independent inquiry (though they do call for balance).

But precisely because there has been a significant history of unfounded allegations against gays and lesbians, journalists have an ethical responsibility to consistently seek evidence and balance whenever these prejudicial allegations

are made. Given what we now know, in other words, quoting such allegations on the mere “say-so” of a religious leader, a celebrity, an official, or, a whole army of them is no longer justifiable. Journalists should insist upon evidence, and always give gay or lesbian spokespersons the opportunity to respond directly to the allegation. Doing no more, but no less, than this would help correct one of the most serious problems in reporting on this issue. Indeed, doing so is all the more important when one recognizes that coverage of gays and lesbians often sets members of a minority group against those who come draped in the most extensive trappings of religious, military and governmental power: a point on which this paper will now conclude.

(3) Challenge Powerful Sources

Powerful people have never proven to have a monopoly on truth. Yet, when working on deadlines, journalists often are tempted to consider a quote from a general, a psychiatrist, or a religious leader as justifiably newsworthy, no questions asked. Moreover, when the quote concerns a group that is ill-judged by popular opinion, the journalist’s temptation to go along with it, without serious challenge, is perhaps at its greatest. Like readers, journalists, too, in other words, are perhaps inclined to cast less doubt on the most powerful sources and more doubt on the less powerful ones. This combination of ingredients in reporting on gays and lesbians creates a perennial dilemma for journalists who seek fairness and accuracy.

What, then can a journalist do? As discussed in the history of reporting on “Anita Bryant’s Crusade” against homosexuals in 1979, and the Clinton proposal to lift the ban against gays and lesbians in the military in 1993, journalists must deliberately step into the mix—to serve as the fulcrum, as it were—and make an effort to counter the imbalance of sources with an added emphasis on the facts. If, for example, government officials say or imply that gays and lesbians do not deserve the right to marry because they are not equal to heterosexual couples who wish to marry, journalists should (as discussed in item one above) question the inherently negative judgment and give gays and lesbians an adequate opportunity to respond to it. Similarly, if military officials say or imply that gays are sexually-predatory and, therefore, threatening to national security, journalists should (as discussed in item two above) seek and report the evidence that will either support or refute the charge. The bottom line, in short, is that journalists should be

wary of permitting powerful sources to go unchallenged, especially when they are speaking about a group that has been “disparaged and discriminated against.” The history of reporting on this subject tells us, after all, that such sources have been wrong before.

Endnotes

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