

# Gearing Up to Cover the Knight Initiative: An Analysis of Press Efforts

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The Knight Initiative will be on the ballot in the upcoming election. The Initiative's simple declarative sentence is enough to spark controversy in any community, and California has placed it on a state ballot. The simply worded: "Only a marriage between a man and a woman is valid in the state of California," almost seems harmless to the general community, but upon closer evaluation, the minority exclusion is unparalleled since the Jim Crow laws of the Confederate South.

The average early poll shows that there is a 40% opposition to the bill, but many believe the bill will pass with ease. Maybe that's why Pete Knight, the senator who wrote the Initiative, has not made concentrated efforts to campaign for it yet. As the *San Francisco Examiner* recently quoted Rob Stutzman, "I don't think we'll see much movement in numbers, if at all, until there's a focused public campaign," he said. "There's been virtually no campaign activity in the public's eye from either side." But where has the campaign been? Why is it taking so long for the media to start blasting both or either sides? The answer lies in the money: funding and using dollars wisely. While the No on Knight campaign has definitely started with its Internet and sticker campaign, the Pro-Knight campaign has virtually been unseen.

What will make this Initiative a hot button issue or a bathroom joke will be the media's eventual constant coverage and exposure of the issue. With both Bill Bradley and Al Gore against the Initiative, the nomination for either of the democratic candidates seems likely; however with no debate, what is the media to cover to get exposure? The mainstream press has featured the key events such as the Gore and Bradley positions. The Internet remains a hub of anti-Knight activity while pro-activity is sure to become apparent. Yet by far, the greatest coverage has been within the gay and alternative press sources. This early coverage, like within the gay press, seems more like propaganda of the idea as opposed to coverage of the Initiative, and the negative voice is strongly heard.

But because of the proliferation of coverage styles in different media, we have chosen key articles from a selected number of sources, and directed our analysis on the few to maximize comprehensiveness of our research. We base our study on the assumptions that 1) the mainstream press should naturally be fair, complete and neutral in its coverage; 2) that online sources are more biased,

according to their site's policy orientation; and 3) that the gay and alternative press sources are apt to slant one way or another, since focused topic or view selection is a legitimate interest for such sources. Living to these "standards," we test whether such sources have met such criteria, and if not, whether that compromises a source's own "campaign" or fair coverage of the Initiative. We begin our analysis with the mainstream press.

In gearing up for what some consider to be the most important legislation involving gays and lesbians thus far, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* have done little but cover the negative and monetary happenings of the infant campaign. Can the mainstream press be blamed for their lack of coverage and seemingly nonchalant attitude about the Knight Initiative? All three papers have run stories in the past few months involving the Knight Initiative. The problem is that most articles talk merely about monetary contributions, and the supporters or opponents of the campaign. This coverage does little in aiding the progress of the campaign—that is, by exploring the views of the debate—other than to reinforce the stereotypes of those involved. Especially with the mainstream press, shouldn't they aim to disseminate well-researched, impartial reports of the pending ballot measure?

On August 17, Kathy Levinson made one of the largest donations ever made in order to defeat a ballot measure (Salladay). Of course, this is important information for the community at large. Yet, the focus of the *San Francisco Examiner* article is that of a lesbian woman who uses her stature in the community to raise monies for opposition. The coverage stressed Levinson's partner and family, and the importance of these things to Levinson. All this is well and good until the column becomes a biased and stereotyped view by grouping Levinson with "other" gay millionaires like David Geffen. Geffen had not yet been active in the Knight debate, and was mentioned in the article simply because he was philanthropic and gay. Could Miss Levinson not be categorized as a woman of substantial philanthropic good? Indeed, money issues are especially significant to the *Examiner*, since it directly endorses the No on Knight campaign (according to the NoonKnight website). To compromise journalistic neutrality in this sense is highly controversial, but this is beyond the most important observation: Both the *San Francisco Examiner* and *Chronicle's* early attempts seem pointed at the salacious comparison of gays in the news. Whether or not eventual coverage of the Initiative will result in a fair debate, inspection reveals the *Chronicle's* agenda against that of Knight's—in its glowing support of campaign fundraisers and their "Gay" community friends, and also negative bashing of those who support the Initiative.

The negative aspect of coverage from the *San Francisco Chronicle* is in the form of campaign monies raised on the supporting side. Mormons and Right Wing Christian groups get the blunt end of the stick in the *Chronicle* as their fundraising efforts are outlined and defaced through pointed quotes. Wednesday, August 4, provided the first of a series of articles penned by Zachary Coile that defined Knight supporters in a subtle negative light. Over analysis of his quote choices will lead any fair-minded thinkers to these conclusions about the *Chronicle's* stance on the Knight Initiative. The group in

discussion is the California Independent Business Counsel (Coile, 8/4/99, 6). This group is comprised of four businessmen ranging in trade from publisher to broadcaster. And while their trades are explored in the Coile piece, quotes such as, "If it weren't for these three guys and Sen. Pete Knight, Californians never would have even thought about an initiative," paint them in negative light. Even the end to the article: "Look at who they supported in the past, and look at what they are bringing us now," is a poignant reminder of the position of a biased paper. While the question of ethics is not an issue, the coverage of the issue remains one. Because of these fundraising opportunities, the *San Francisco Chronicle* has been steadily covering the campaign progress into the fall. But why has there not been active participation in debates or other coverage that balances all perspectives?

Perhaps the problem lies in the infant campaign, which is not yet ready to spend the millions they are raising. So the *Chronicle* is forced to cover the Right Wing Christians and the recent Mormon controversy of tax exemption. While Coile writes one article concerning the first raise of funds, Carla Marinucci and Ed Epstein write an article once again raising the Mormon issue. Coile's coverage focuses on "the letter" sent out to Mormon churches seeking funding for the Knight Initiative. In his quiet way, Coile once again suggests the underhanded by stating, in a caption, that the letter was sent to "urge" church members for donations. While traditionally, the choice of words can be overlooked, Coile, in this example, furthers his own stance as well as his papers. The blatant opposition to the Knight Initiative is seen in Coile's tone and his apparent lack of support of the Mormon Church. Once again, the king of ends, Coile chooses to end his piece by interviewing a couple that left the Mormon Church because they thought the Initiative was unfair. "We had never really felt a strong need to have our names removed from the church rolls until they started basically denying us rights . . . We didn't want to be numbered among the people of the Mormon Church when they started saying they don't believe in equal rights," said an angry Carolyn Bell as Coile ends his article (A14).

On October 5, after news had been dormant about the Mormon fundraising for some time, Senator Orrin Hatch provided the spark to re-ignite the controversy. Once again, the *Chronicle* covered the event when Hatch, a devout Mormon, criticized the city for investigating the contributions as IRS fraud (Marinucci, 1). Hatch strongly supports the Initiative. The *Chronicle* goes to work once again in setting him up for the fall. While not as planned as Coile's defamation of the opposition, Marinucci uses Hatch's own word to paint the tale. While Hatch chose to use the words he did, by ending with a sentence which emphasized that gays and lesbians are trying to "undermine the sanctity" of marriage, Marinucci has deliberately ended on a sour note (for any gay or lesbian reader) and aligned Hatch with an extremist. She also brings up, of course, the Mormon belief of polygamy. Hatch says he accepts that the fact that the government has defined marriage as a "monogamous" relationship, and he, himself, has been married for 43 years. Nevertheless, this should not change the lifestyles of many Mormons, according to what he believes, who are entitled to

their polygamist beliefs. And yet, also what Hatch believes, gays and lesbians cannot undermine the concept of marriage in any other way.

Another mainstream paper that is slowly trying to get caught up in the debate is the *Los Angeles Times*—who is much more balanced in its coverage. Once more, the main focus of the articles in this pre-election period has been on the monetary sponsors and vocal opposition. On the one hand, a recent article, on November 19, by Margaret Ramirez, focused on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Knight Initiative. The article pointed out that almost 10% of the funds raised in support of the Initiative so far have been from the Catholic church (and is one of the largest donations): \$145,000 from the Los Angeles Archdiocese. The article, nowhere near, approaches the tone of the *Examiner* or the *Chronicle*; however, the last sentence again becomes pivotal as Peter Liuzzi, Head of the Gay and Lesbian Ministry, gets in the last word: “It’s important to express our support for the gay community.” The article also raised the issue that “the effect of the initiative is simply to stir up anti-gay feelings.” In short, since gay marriage is already not legal in California, what is the point of the Initiative other than to prevent such union from ever being possible?

On the other hand, another group the *Los Angeles Times* has given coverage to is LA Amistad. In an article published August 18 by Antonio Olivo and Joseph Trevino, the group was given a sizable article to discuss their opposition to the bill. With membership of mostly Spanish Speaking Protestant congregations, the group opposes gay marriage, and also legislation that would strengthen state laws in public schools concerning the prohibition of homosexual discrimination. The group’s executive director, Rev Martin Garcia, stated: “We are out to promote family values, meaning the mama and the papa. Not two mamas or two papas.” (Olivo, 2). There is clear emphasis on aggressive evangelism that the group carries on, and its joining forces with their once conservative enemies. “Prop 187 is not a good issue anymore... we Latinos can control elections here in Southern California,” stated Rev. Jose Luis Soto. His position is firm, and the *Los Angeles Times* gives the group ample space to express its opinions.

The *Los Angeles Times* seems to be devoting a fair amount of coverage to the issue. The question will remain how its coverage may affect the extremely important market of Los Angeles in the California primaries. With both Gore and Bradley opposing the Knight Initiative, the *Times* has done an excellent job of reporting the secondary scoop. On Friday, September 17, an article ran through the *Los Angeles Times* that briefed the interviews from the *Advocate* magazine of both candidates. With Bradley’s definitive stance, “If I were a voter in California, I would not support the Knight Initiative,” and Gore’s later decision to oppose it after “educating” himself, has strengthened the No on Knight campaign. With the two leading democrats being outspoken in their opposition, the *Los Angeles Times* has further shown the city what to expect from political leaders. Of course, with Republicans like Orrin Hatch, on the flip side, just as many negative articles will get their chance to run. What the *Los Angeles Times* has not done, however, is not fully integrate gays into its coverage. Gays remain subjects of controversy, even though the threatening stage over minority coverage may be of

the past. But perhaps the *Times*—to some extent—still neglects to give gays and lesbians a chance to discuss their lives. The issues always become the pre-eminent coverage as opposed to the everyday life and loves of couples that the law might affect.

The *Los Angeles Times* is, however, in the heat of this issue. With the election months away, articles are gradually starting to run. A recent one, once again, focused on the sides that groups affiliate themselves with. In this article, published on November 20, the California Southern Baptists have expressed their support of the Initiative. One of the problems in the early coverage by the *Times* seems to be the narrowness of their vision in excluding groups. Most certainly, GLADD and most religious groups will have chosen sides. This information, indeed, is all good and well, like with industrial groups or commercial supporters and opponents. But only when these affiliations begin to express feelings, the *Los Angeles Times* will then have a chance to prove that they are not only dedicated to covering the controversial selections of gay and lesbian news. At that time, the true nature of the paper may be seen.

Paper is slipping away in our digital culture, and the biggest fight so far on the Initiative has been the online support centers. Online sites such as Mojowire and NewsPlanet have run stories that have tracked the progress of Knight and his campaign. While technically not considered “press,” the online sites for both campaigns are doing phenomenal jobs at trying to get their sides of the issue known. With other sites like [www.samesexmarriage.org](http://www.samesexmarriage.org) are trying to begin new campaigns, [www.doma.org](http://www.doma.org) and [www.noonknight.org](http://www.noonknight.org) both present the sides of the issues in the most comprehensive ways. Although both tend to slant in their own direction, the two sites prove to contain the most up to date information about support for each camp as well as recent news.

Way back in November of 1998, the NewsPlanet staff was already on top of the issue that would be explosive today. The article published on November 18, 1998 discussed Pete Knight’s repeated attempts to pass such items like the Initiative through the legislature. However, its focus was on his success in getting enough signatures to become a ballot measure. The article is one of a very few that focused on the personal life of Knight, involving his gay sons. Pete denied knowing his sons’ sexual orientation regardless of his domestic partnership with a man for 10 years (Newsplanet, 1). Even in those early stages of the legislation, members of the legislature, like Sheila Kuehl, spoke up and insisted that Knight will “take his particular talent for demonizing gay and lesbian people into the initiative process.” (And so a year later, the process is gaining momentum.) Lindsay Sobel of Mojowire referenced in a recent article in August on Knight’s slander of illegal immigrants, where he wrote a poem with the verse: “We have a hobby, it’s called breeding. Welfare pays for baby feeding.” The article discusses the Initiative’s power to “perhaps override the ‘full faith and credit’ provision of the Constitution (Sobel, 2). This provision, in regards to the validity of marriages in other states, being recognized in all states. While Sobel continues to explain that the statute may “seem moot” with states like Vermont and Hawaii in the mist of trials, the likelihood is fairly eminent.

Sobel also uncovers the interesting perspectives from otherwise unheard voices. Paula Ettelbrick, a legal scholar and activist, commented that “marriage would make [gays and lesbians] more invisible, force our assimilation into the mainstream and undermine the goals of gay liberation.” Sobel further covers the consequences of such a bill passing. In a statement by Rob Henning, co-chair of California’s gay-rights lobby, “If Knight passes[,] politicians will think there are ‘no costs going against lesbian and gay rights’.” This atmosphere can prove devastating to the community and is a strong issue being ignored by the mainstream media. This incredible devotion to many different sources and consequences of the issue in August by far makes Sobel a strong voice for the geared up press. Yet online media is not the only place online that is gaining strength. With Internet media quickly becoming one of the most prominent culture phenomena, both campaign camps have set up their interactive Internet sites.

While Senator Pete Knight’s website does nothing to promote the Initiative (on [www.doma.org](http://www.doma.org)), the country has nothing to worry about. With its Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) acronym, and simply designed website, its plain advertisement is an obvious and valid attempt at portraying traditional family values. The website touts the fact that the Initiative is a “defense of marriage initiative.” It continues to give quotes from head political officials, including State Senator Boxer, Governor Gray Davis and President Bill Clinton. The problem is that many of these quotes are taken from 1996, and they posit that “the state is not ready.” Having to use a quote from three years ago to discuss an act proposed today is quite an interesting campaign maneuver. The site is simple and answers the who and what as any good campaign would; they only advertise their own side. The [www.doma.org](http://www.doma.org) site clearly tries to ring the heartstrings of its viewers by stressing the evils of undermining marriage.

But no one is trying to undermine marriage in our state. In 1977, Governor Jerry Brown already defined a marriage in California between a man and a woman. The Knight Initiative is merely a way to prevent gay married couples from being recognized in California. This, definitely, is assuming that the day exists when a state would marry them. The No on Knight campaign clearly has the upper hand in its web design. Its three pronged campaign “Unfair, Divisive, Intrusive,” is leaps and bounds ahead of the DOMA camp in trying to get their campaign message out. The online message is by far the most important voice in these early stages of the campaign. Just recently did [www.noonknight.org](http://www.noonknight.org) add a campaign contribution advertisement to its website after realizing the fundraising potential. The resources needed by both campaigns are enormous, and the extreme ease and availability of the Internet medium allows access to hundreds upon thousands of people for a single cost. The No on Knight site also presents all events in the news related to the campaign, which helps to promote the message in a prepared way.

The most important thing on either site is the No On Knight’s early poll results. While many polls had placed the numbers at about 55% for and 40% against, the No on Knight Campaign went a step further in attaining their numbers. They let the people hear debates on the issue and the number went to

47% against and 46% for. This astonishing number gives real hope for the campaign against the Initiative except for a small stone in their path. That stone is the mainstream media's current coverage of supporters and monetary funding as opposed to the issue itself. Until this trend can be reversed, hopefully as the election race heats up towards March, the gay and alternative presses remain the only places where the Knight Initiative is getting substantial coverage.

The most conspicuous example of sources being on top of the issues remains the *Advocate's* coverage of the Democratic nominee's positions on the Knight Initiative. By jumping everyone on that crucial Los Angeles story, the *Advocate* proved that they could cover the decisive issues of the time. But more interesting is the publication *Frontiers*, which nearly devotes a story to every issue of the progress of the Knight Initiative. Karen Ocamb, a frequent *Frontiers* writer, explained that it's difficult to explain how they are gearing up, since "the gay press is geared up [already]." Because of the importance of the issue to many gay and lesbian Californians, the issue is hot on the minds and presses of these alternative journalists and papers. The focus becomes how communities are reacting to the campaign and if, we as a magazine, should raise any monies to fight it.

As Ocamb explained, "the family values debate spurns a spike of interest." This interest is what the general press will cover, not the meaning of the campaign to all involved or the issue itself. The values and integrity of a conservative nation become the issue. Ocamb continued to explain that it seemed to her that, in general, events were covered by the mainstream whenever there is "anti-gay visibility" or, in other words, the "hate crime spike." These things change in the gay press; while although these things are covered, they are not the only things covered. *Frontiers* Web Edition recently published a story commenting on the Gore and Bradley debate. In "Courting the Community," this article touched on many issues such as revising the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964 as well as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. The article neither biased on one side or the other but did include others commenting, like Congressman Barney Frank. The article went on to state that the debate was "relatively cordial." This fair coverage of news is by far the most accurate and optimistic outlook for the coverage of the Knight Initiative.

But even with this optimistic outlook, the same old stories do come into play. According to Ocamb, in the October or November issue, the major story will be the money issue. It is one of the few issues of the campaign that mainstream press is covering, and *Frontiers* will now be running a comparison. Yet, what makes the *Frontiers* story interesting is its goal to compare the publicity of such monies and why the Knight Initiative seems to have such monetary support. This spin, while being a nice gesture for the magazine, remains in focusing on the money as oppose to the issue. But as Ocamb explained the problem, it is that Knight is "ahead of the game." Basically so far he's "whipped our ass." Ocamb's final assertion remained that in the background of things, mainstream presses support the Knight Initiative, and that is why magazines like *Frontiers* strive to give both sides of the story. However the problem remains that the general public will not be informed by *Frontiers* or other alternative press.

Both the *Village Voice* (gay source) and *New Times* (alternative source) have run extensive and often inflammatory articles regarding gay and lesbian relationships. Primary examples of these types of articles are Jack Cheevers "Holy Homophobia" for the *New Times* on August 20 and E.J. Graff's "Planet Queer" for the *Village Voice* in June of this year. These publications are papers in stern opposition to mainstream culture. They also emphasize that they are accepting and never trying to segregate a group or individual because of their thoughts. This freethinking allows their opinions to come across more as a plea to the people rather than propaganda as so many would claim.

E.J. Graff, author of "What is Marriage for – The Strange Social History of Our Most Intimate Institution," had an article run in the *Village Voice*. The article echoed concerns of the Knight Initiative without ever mentioning it. This publication raised the issue of gay marriage far outside of a state—or of the country—and decided to act globally. Comparing our country to Canada, South Africa, Spain, Scandinavia and others, the article attacked our lack in the definition of marriage, as opposed to how it's defined around the world. A sarcastic and biting writer at heart, Graff stated matter of factly that the reason Americans don't hear about the rest of the world is that "the American news media rarely look up from their navals, leaving parochial Americans to believe we're the only country considering wedding bells . . . for same sex partners." The article is the best example of an argument for the redefinition of marriage on a worldwide level and the understanding of how politicians like Pete Knight and others are members of an old regime that will die-hard.

The Cheevers article opens with a statement regarding Pete Knight. In it, Cheevers criticizes Knight's stance on not having anything against gays except their right to marry in California. The *New Times* writer has a long sad story about the trials and tribulations of a gay partner's suffering when the family has ultimate control. When his partner died, he had no claim to the final resting place or any other claim, because while domestic partnership exists, it is still not law. In his article, Cheevers damns the "archconservative from Palmdale" who is looking to "make sure same sex marriages can't be exported to California" (2). The language of this statement is by far the most opinionated and biased that the press has to offer. Yet, in that opinion is a statement of solid fact and reasoning of opposition. This reasoning is lacking in many other publications. Cheevers brings up the fact of tax breaks not being equal and the extreme discrimination in child rearing. He also raises issues of polling not being the best guideline pointing to the 1978 Briggs Initiative which wanted to fire gay teachers but was defeated after a sizable campaign. However, for all the good and issues and points he raises, the writer falls victim to his own pen. A long statement comparing Pete Knight to R2D2 taints his opinion. Although humorous, the obvious character attack gives the *New Times* a substantial viewpoint as opposed to an unbiased objective opinion. Yet is this truly a bad thing? Shouldn't a paper—especially an alternative one—which openly expresses its opinions like the *New Times* be thought of higher than the subversive *Chronicle* or the objective-without-substance *Los Angeles Times*? Through this article, it is obvious that the writer's position and points were made. Geared up or not, the

*New Times* has one of the most spirited writers on its staff. Getting the true issues known is by far a battle being won by a reporter like Cheevers.

The Knight Initiative is a complicated issue that is being tackled by so many press forces. Who would have thought that fourteen simple words would cause such a controversy? Well according to some estimates, ten percent of this country would automatically take offense. Unfortunately, as it is with so many other minority issues, the press coverage is not completely integrated in the mainstream press, and other outlets seem to focus on one side of the issue. The *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times* both share the mainstream goal of remaining objective, but fail by making the coverage a stereotypical selection of events and supporters that emphasize the sides and grounds on which people are split. In no way has either paper, to this point, covered the issue in trying to understand the Initiative as opposed to its supporters. Hopefully, in the months leading up to March, things will change, and this issue will become a mainstream focus for public debate away from far left and right politics. Online journals as well as the campaign focuses have also been an obvious key point in this campaign as they gear up by promoting the message in the digital and revolutionary medium. Some of these online journalists such as Lindsay Sobel, and campaign promoters, are far ahead of others, because their message is available for anyone at anytime making their opinions extremely accessible. Yet the medium that has obviously geared up most, as Karen Ocamb puts it, are the gay and alternative presses. Unfortunate as a biased view may be, the articles get the message out along with their opinions, and any reasonable readers can then shape their own opinions. At least the integrated coverage of the entire issue appears standard and normal, and that these publications focus on the issues at hand as opposed to the players holding those hands. The Knight Initiative will be an interesting subject of debate come the New Year until March. It can only be hoped that all forms of media will treat the issue with the respect and fair coverage it deserves in the crucial California primary.

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