

TRANSGENDER COVERAGE: The Next Frontier

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The role of the journalist to accurately display its subjects in the fairest light possible becomes increasingly harder once the subject is from a minority group. In recent decades, many strides have been made to include quality coverage of African American, Latino and gay stories, including the hiring of people within those groups to be reporters. All too often, the perspective that prevails is of a white male standard, one that remains strangely conservative and unwilling to take chances on something considered “too different” or “radical.” Yet the increase of minority coverage has opened the doors for other groups to be heard, and an honest attempt to be nonjudgmental is now a standard. One group who is beginning to be heard is the Transgendered community. Going beyond race, creed, sex or status, transgendered people have taken great strides this century in becoming one of the most visible and active groups, gaining self-determination, as well as, medical and legal recognition. Yet still, the news media has yet to fully represent them in a way that accurately depicts who they are, using the correct terminology, and providing full coverage of their triumphs and defeats.

The Twentieth Century brought much of the transgendered theories and issues to a new level. In 1907, German doctor Magnus Hirschfeld, the first man to systematically describe and work with transsexuals and transgenderists, meet the American doctor Harry Benjamin. Through this meeting, the work that the German sexologists were doing was brought to the United States, and modern transgenderism studies began.¹ In 1919, Hirschfeld founded the Institute for Sexology in Berlin, which was the first clinic to serve transgendered people regularly. Meanwhile, in the United States, much discussion centered on the treatment of Dr. Alan Hart, who was born a woman, but requested to have a hysterectomy so she could live as a man. This, decades before the availability of male hormones, caused a debate on whether it was ethical to remove healthy organs based on the gender identifications of the patient. Dr. Joshua Gilbert, who assisted with the operation, documented the account in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders* in 1920, and it is considered the first attempt at modern sex reassignment.

In addition, the works of Hirschfeld, Benjamin and Gilbert were pointing to a larger entity. All three felt that the patients they were seeing were not mentally

¹ All historical data was found on www.transhistory.org

ill, but rather afflicted with a disorder that had no explanation. In spite of counseling gay and lesbian patients, it was recognized that the problem was not based in the sexual proclivities of the patients, but in the larger viewpoint of gender itself. This was further reiterated by the life of Lili Elbe, a German model, whose life, Male to Female transition and Sex Reassignment surgery was published in *Male to Female* in 1932. Elbe's story of conquering societal pressures and having a long-term relationship with artist Gerta Wegener, proved how the sexual practices of transgendered people had little to do with how they perceived themselves.

This came to a dramatic conclusion in 1966, when Benjamin's book *The Transsexual Phenomenon* described the intersexual diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria, a state where a person does not feel that they are the correct physical gender. Through his studies and attempts at clarifying any earlier misconceptions, Benjamin opened the doors for many to become who they felt they really were. His clients included Christine Jorgenson, whose own journey had captured media attention a decade before.

As the gay rights movement built in the late 1960s, coupled with the feminist movements throughout the country, a more active and political transgendered movement grew in larger cities across the United States. Today, personalities like Kate Bornstein, Angela Douglas and Cheryl Chase are demystifying transgenderism and broadening the acceptance levels throughout the country.

The very public triumphs of the transgendered community are causing a national interest in them and their causes. Within pop culture, gender lines have been allowed to blur with striking results and extreme popularity. Alex², a twenty-three year old student who identifies as male, agrees that it was seeing popular artists blurring gender lines that made him feel more comfortable with himself. "I would look at Patti Smith and Annie Lennox, and how they took what was supposed to be male elements and adapt them to their own style. It was comforting to see them, almost too familiar, but I appreciated them and what they were doing. When I'd go out, people couldn't tell if I was male or female, and I liked that."

Alex took a route that few people were willing to accept in his Iowa hometown. By cutting off his hair and putting on more masculine attire, he started to date girls and felt as if he fit in for the first time. "It felt right as soon as I did it. I don't know what I want to do with it, though. I mean, I can't afford the surgery, but I identify as male. The little girl that everyone saw when I was younger isn't there. And the hard part to get across is that it never really was."

The current successes brought by the play *Hedwig and the Angry Itch*, and the films *Boys Don't Cry* and *Flawless*, lean towards a growing fascination and acceptance with transgenderism. Yet that holds a real double-edged sword. Jeanne*, forty-four, was born a man and had a Male to Female operation in the late 1980s. She has real problems with how transgendered people are represented within the media. "I open a paper and never see myself, beyond the freak show quotient. When transgendered people are on TV, it's in the realm of

² All names indicated with an * have been changed.

Jerry Springer, where they are booed and hissed offstage. The real people are never discussed.”

Yet that is not where the real trouble lies. “We are overly sexualized,” says Jeanne. “Often the only newspaper coverage I see is in the back, among the escorts, who promise some sleazy action with transsexuals and transvestites. And the funny part is, I read somewhere that the transgendered as a whole are hyposexual: meaning we have less sex than other groups do within an allotted time period.”

This points to a particular problem faced within the transgendered community. The outside society seems to be more willing to allow them to be fetishized in a way to explain their behavior. “As long as it’s viewed as a perversion or merely sex-based, then it can be accepted,” Jeanne notes. “When I try to explain that my choice was based on how I felt and how I saw myself, then they have problems.”

This problem is seen in larger alternative newspapers, which run personals in the back of their publications. The LA Weekly, one such newspaper, often includes teasing ads for phone sex operations that promise “Naughty and Nasty She-Males” for interested adults. When that may be the only mention one group has within a major medium, it is easily seen why such protestations occur.

Yet when an article appears that attempts to detail a story surrounding someone transgendered, other problems can surface. Rob, a male dancer who performs in drag, discusses the issues surrounding terminology. “I once read an article in the paper about a man who was a pre-op transsexual and they call him a transvestite. I had major problems with that one. First, he totally wasn’t one and second, people make the same mistakes with me. I perform in female clothing, sure, but I ain’t no transvestite.”

This issue has long been at the foreground of transgender studies. The nomenclature seems daunting, yet in his study *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, Dr. Harry Benjamin attempted to sort things out by clearly defining the terms.³

Transvestitism (Tvism) “indicat[es] the desire of some individuals—men much more often than women—to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex....writers on the subject refer to [it] as a sexual deviation, sometimes as a perversion. It is not necessarily either one.” Thus one who is a transvestite is not interested with the overall gender identification of themselves. More often they are merely “cross-dressing” and using the clothes of another gender to express themselves. The slangier term “Drag Queen” refers to gay males who dress in female clothing as an act of expression. Yet transvestitism does not mean that the person is necessarily gay.

Yet the difference with transsexualism is highly pronounced. Dr. Benjamin noted that “The transsexual (TS) male or female is deeply unhappy as a member of the sex (or gender) to which he or she was assigned by the anatomical structure of the body, particularly the genitals....[transvestitism] is only incidental and not more than a partial or temporary help to the transsexual. True transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex.”

³ All definitions come from Dr. Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966)

The term transsexual does not cover those people who are hermaphrodites or have Klinefelter's Syndrome or any other biological combinations of chromosomes. It is purely a mental state, often caused by what is known as Gender Dysphoria, a condition which causes the member to identify with the opposite sex from their own and wish to be functioning within that gender.

With the developments within psychology, it was decided that a more blanket term, Transgenderism, would cover all those who blur gender lines. It acts as a safety net for all the various personal interpretations of gender heritage and allows room for all. What is problematic, however, is that transgenderism is often regulated to a form of homosexuality since it most closely matches certain behaviors. Yet most transgendered people are quick to point to the differences.

Ali*, a thirty year old pre-op transsexual, says that she doesn't feel accepted as part of the gay community. "People assume that since I sleep with men and did so before I started hormones, that I am totally gay. Well that is just looking at the surface. I have always felt that I am a girl and so the act of sleeping with men isn't based out of any homosexual tendencies, but rather natural urges like any other girl." Ali was diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria, which led to her decision to have the operation.

Such distinctions must be held with the proper respect and care treated to other minority groups by the news media. Although they have made definite strides, it is still a very personal area and a source of identity. Activists like Kate Bornstein have devoted much energy into challenging old stereotypes and systems of gender placement and appreciate the blurring of the lines. In her book, *My Gender Workbook*, Bornstein discusses the tangles:

In the majority of the cultures in the world, the socially acceptable way to define one's sexual preference or orientation depends on the gender identity of our sexual partners. To make things worse, the gender identity we're attracted to must also be phrased in terms of men and women. We're attracted to men or women or both; that's the sum total of our desire. So sex (the act) becomes hopelessly linked to gender (the category).⁴

Thus the problems are often not so much as what one does, but who one is doing it with. And identity is the first thing to be lost.

This is quite heavy stuff to be placed upon one newspaper. But at the same time, if it was nationally understood, then the paradigms could change for the better. In reality, the news media is often a reflection of what the society itself deems as important or newsworthy.

This is especially true in the case of reporting various transgender stories. Recently the activist group Transgender Menace staged a protest over a case that went unreported. Several transgendered people had been beaten on, and no news media picked it up. When asked about this, Ali expressed a certain

⁴ *My Gender Workbook*, Kate Bornstein

ambiguity. “I realize that every story isn’t necessarily newsworthy, and that one beating doesn’t mean it should be front-page news, but a mention does a lot. The papers are often filled with trivial stories, and this could have a profound impact had it been reported.”

Which does not mean that all newspapers are doing a bad job when reporting, or choosing to report, transgender stories. Often a case is not reported because it is not necessarily newsworthy. A convention of key transgendered people did not make the news, but the same happens with most conventions. Lifestyle stories do pick up coverage of transgendered people, particularly in art and culture, as do non-transgendered. Yet when people are in trouble, or a story is hot, the newspapers do rise to the occasion and good coverage has emerged. The recent case of Dana Rivers has proven to be a shining moment within the *Sacramento Bee*’s style and quality of reportage.

Dana Rivers was a teacher at Center High School in Sacramento. She had been living as a man, David Warfield, and had headed the broadcast journalism classes as well as teach American history. Award winning, she was popular, but had felt that something was missing from her life. After bouts of alcoholism, three failed marriages and other problems, she was diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria and started hormone treatments to prepare for a sex-change operation. Although the school was supporting her decision to become a woman, she was told not to discuss anything with the students. With this in mind, however, she did answer students’ questions and talked to the school paper about her decision. The school board decided not to hire her back for the fall school year. Rivers filed suit against her old employer, citing discrimination.

Starting on September 28, 1999, Walt Wiley’s article, “Teacher at Center Notified of Firing in Transition From Man to Woman,” the *Bee* took great pains at being accurate without a negative or judgmental tone. Although popular support was surrounding Rivers, the *Bee* took time to talk to the school board and allow them to voice why they chose to fire Rivers.

At all times during the reporting, Rivers was properly addressed as a woman, although she had yet to go through the final surgeries. Yet this showed the *Bee*’s acceptance of Rivers’ gender identity and silently proved that it could act as a reaffirming medium. All articles through the final “Sex-change Teacher Reaches Pact, Resigns,” on November 16, 1999, by Cynthia Hubert, properly addressed the situation without trying to stir up further controversy. They stood removed from the action, and let the people’s words speak for themselves.

When the issue surrounding Ms. Rivers gender arose, it was dealt in a professional manner. Obviously, since the story hinged on Rivers’ decision to have a sex-change operation, certain tact had to be raised with how to express that. But it was done in appropriate, yet delicate terms, as, “Dana Rivers, who taught at the Antelope school for more than eight years as a man and is in the process of becoming a woman.”⁵ This way shows the problem, but does not escalate the more “scandalous” properties therein.

There was one area of concern, however, in the *Bee*’s coverage of the Rivers case; the headlines themselves were often phrased to highlight the

⁵ “Sex-Change Teacher Reaches Pact, Resigns”, Cynthia Hubert

concept of the sex change. This could have been used as a means to draw readers to the story, but one could argue that it was a much-needed detail to the ultimate story.

By keeping the tone, angle and terminology proper and fair, the *Sacramento Bee* deserves much praise for its coverage of the Dana Rivers case. Letters were published to the editor that helped highlight the specific problems, and fairness was given to those who felt that Rivers deserved to be fired. Ultimately, the newspaper proved itself capable of handling transgender stories with professional capabilities.

In conclusion, it seems to be a matter of time until transgender coverage moves past its present situation. People will learn with increased positive figures like Bornstein, that certain stereotypes that are given to transgendered people do not accurately portray the persons they are. Terminology takes time to learn, and with reporting like the *Sacramento Bee's* of Dana Rivers, much hope is there for the future.

Transgender coverage now could be compared to gay coverage in the 1960s, when the lack of information available led to increased stereotyping and wrong terms used. If one could just move beyond over-sexualizing the situation and really see the people underneath, there are a wealth of stories worthy to be told. Because everyone has their similarities and differences, and tolerance is gained through the increase of communication. The news media is at the forefront of that. And with the Internet, the growth of zines and alternative presses, more voices are being heard everyday to accurately reflect the real face of America.

As far as I'm concerned, being any gender is a drag.
----Patti Smith

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