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The Politics and Ethics of Lesbian and Gay "Wedding" Announcements in Newspapers

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The decision to run or not run lesbian and gay commitment announcements—or "wedding" announcements—in newspapers is inherently political, involving choices about how to represent the world and whose definitions to use. I begin by examining oppression, media representations of lesbians and gays, and the politics of visibility. Then, drawing on interviews with editors at papers that run the announcements, I point out the limitations of basing a decision to run the announcements on the ideology of objectivity. While supporting that decision, I argue that journalists should more openly address the politics of newsmaking. The retreat to objectivity, while sometimes a good short-term strategy for deflecting critics, is counterproductive and dishonest. Journalists should make a commitment to a liberatory politics that explicitly works for people who are oppressed.

KEY WORDS: *Commitment announcements, ethics, gay, journalism, lesbian, news ideology, newspaper, oppression, stereotypes, same-sex commitment ceremonies.*

In July 1992, the Austin (Texas) *American Statesman* ran an announcement of the Strandtman-Umminger wedding, complete with a picture and notes about the honor attendants, flower girl, and honeymoon plans for the couple. It was a traditional announcement in all ways except one: Pictured were Sara and Karen.

The newspaper's decision to run a standard wedding announcement for a lesbian couple sparked a flood of calls, both positive and negative, and public denunciations of the paper on local radio shows. It put the paper in the middle of the political and cultural struggle between lesbians and gays and supporters of their rights,¹ and conservative, often religious, opponents who believe homosexuality to be immoral and oppose gay rights.

In this essay I examine how the *American Statesman* and other papers have supported the decision to expand traditional wedding pages to include lesbians and gays,² working from interviews with editors and executives of mainstream daily newspapers. I argue that the decision to run or not run the announcements

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is inescapably political, and that editors' attempts to frame it solely as a news judgment reveal the limits of contemporary U.S. news ideology, which is based on, and hides behind, political neutrality, detachment, and objectivity. I argue that a more explicitly political justification should be offered to readers. My aims, then, are overtly political as well as scholarly. I look to provide critical analyses that "address specific conflicts, aim to detail the logics of social power, and do not shy away from spelling out a vision of a better society in terms resonant to policy makers and activists" (Seidman, 1993, p. 137).

This project is grounded in the critical literature on newsmaking and the work on lesbians and gays in the media and the culture. I begin with a discussion of oppression, media representations of lesbians and gays, and the politics of visibility. I will then draw on the interviews to explain the apolitical approach that editors take to explain or justify their decisions to run such announcements. I will conclude with some observations about reporting on oppressed groups in society.

Oppression

I take it to be uncontroverted that lesbians and gays are oppressed groups.³ Even heterosexists and homophobes can agree that in contemporary society, lesbians and gays face entrenched legal and social discrimination and very real threats of harm. The question of whether lesbians and gays should receive legal protection from that discrimination is, of course, the subject of much debate. Some argue that a system that oppresses lesbians and gays is justifiable and even morally correct, or that society should oppress them with even more diligence. But the basic question of the current status of lesbians and gays should not be controversial.

I use the term *oppression* to make clear the systematic nature of the various attacks on lesbians and gays, drawing on Frye's (1983, p. 33) definition:

Oppression is a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize and mold people who belong to a certain group, and effect their subordination to another group (individually to individuals of the other group, and as a group, to that group).

The system of oppression at issue here, heterosexism, is defined by Gross (1988, p. 193) as

the belief that a particular complex of culturally defined sex and gender roles and responses is natural, that other configurations are unnatural—deficient, diseased, or delinquent—and, again, that these differences represent a value dimension in which the "natural" is the better alternative.

Lesbians and gays can, of course, have privileges in other ways, connected to other attributes, such as gender (in the case of men), race, class or economic status. But if they identify themselves as lesbian or gay, they are subject to oppressive forces as lesbians or gays. This oppression is manifested in a variety of ways, including being discriminated against in employment and housing (Hunter, Mi-

chaelson, & Stoddard, 1992; "Sexual Orientation and the Law," 1990), being targeted for harassment and violence (Comstock, 1991), and being denied state sanction for intimate partnerships with the corresponding denial of legal rights.⁴ In a more general sense, lesbians and gays live in a culture in which many people and institutions label them deviant and immoral or deny their right to exist; a heterosexist system works to negate their personhood (Gomez, 1983). Heterosexuality is taken to be natural, just the way things are. To be lesbian or gay, then, is seen as unnatural.

Visibility and Representation

As lesbian and gay media critics have pointed out, representations can be harmful both for what they include and what they exclude, and for the ways they use demeaning stereotypes and promote lesbian and gay invisibility. Gross (1988, p. 196) summarized this critique:

not only do [mass media] pick and use weak and silly, or evil and corrupt, clichéd characterizations, but they exclude and deny the existence of normal, unexceptional as well as exceptional lesbians and gay men. Almost never shown in the media are just plain gay folks, used in roles which do not center on their deviance as a threat to the moral order which must be countered through ridicule or physical violence.

It is important to the lives of lesbians and gays that the media stop representing them as deviant, sick, tortured, diseased, unhappy, dangerous, or crazy and begin to represent them as various individuals who are lesbian and gay (Gross, 1989, 1994; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992; Moritz, 1992, 1994; Wolf & Kielwasser, 1991). The central challenge for those who create media images, for both news and entertainment, is the responsible reflection of that variety. How one defines *responsible* varies with one's politics, and there is disagreement even within the lesbian and gay communities. But for now, with that goal in mind, the importance of lesbian and gay commitment announcements becomes clear. Such announcements have the potential to counter stereotypes of lesbians and gays that heterosexuals may hold (such as homosexual practices always involving cheap, degraded sex with multiple partners) while allowing lesbians and gays to see representations of a wider variety of their community. Questions about representation, then, are explicitly political questions. Gross (1988, p. 196) made this point:

[T]he visible presence of healthy, non-stereotypic lesbians and gay men does pose a serious threat: it undermines the unquestioned normalcy of the status quo, and it opens up the possibility of making choices to people who might never otherwise have considered or understood that such choices could be made.

Therefore, questions such as whether or not to include lesbians and gays in wedding announcements are important political questions. To continue to exclude lesbians and gays from representation or to depict them only in stereotypical ways is a political decision that indicates a lack of respect for their personhood and

negatively affects the status of lesbians and gays in the world; it is anti-lesbian and anti-gay. To include images of lesbians and gays that represent a broader spectrum of their community accords them respect as persons and can have a positive effect on their status; it is pro-lesbian and pro-gay. Later I will answer the contention that such inclusion can be the result of applying simple rules of fairness, but for now I want to make the claim that there is no neutral ground on such questions of representation.

Making News Decisions

Newspaper editors and managers are often criticized by readers and sources for what they include and exclude from the news columns. The common defense to charges of bias or bad decision making is objective news judgment. News selection and reporting decisions are said to be based on professional criteria; the politics of the paper or of individual employees are said to be irrelevant.

On one level, this is an accurate account of decision making. It is my experience (both as a former professional journalist and a current scholarly critic/observer) that many, if not most, contemporary editors and reporters try to be fair and honest in their coverage and work to avoid overt favoritism and bias. But as numerous scholars and media critics have pointed out, no decisions about news selection and news coverage can be detached. One of the central assertions of the critical literature is that news is made, not found, and that journalists are central to that process. As Tuchman (1978, p. 12) put it, "the act of making news is the act of constructing reality rather than a picture of reality." Gitlin (1980) discussed the ways in which reporters impose a frame on a story. Gans (1979) detailed the "enduring values" that lie behind those constructions. And, wrote Fishman (1980, p. 12), "It is not useful to think of news as either distorting or reflecting reality, because 'realities' are made and news is part of the system that makes them."

These critics illustrate how news decisions are always political, framed by a system of power and based on unstated assumptions about the social, political, and economic order. By political I do not mean partisan, favoring one political party or position over another. In this context, political simply means being part of the play of power in society. For example, a business story that accepts uncritically the tenets of capitalism (as most stories in mainstream media do) is political, not neutral. The act of constructing reality includes a multitude of political judgments, and the decision to run or not to run same-sex commitment ceremony announcements is no different. While such observations about newsmaking may seem obvious to many, it is important to remember that the ideology of objectivity still is firmly in place in U.S. newsrooms.

Editors' Decisions

All but one of the editors interviewed for this study resisted such a critique of objectivity. The interviews were conducted in the fall of 1992 by telephone (with one exception, done in person). I talked with 10 editors from nine mainstream

daily newspapers that ran commitment ceremony announcements⁵ and three editors from papers that did not.⁶ In most cases I talked with the editor who had the responsibility for making a final decision, although in many instances the decision was a consensus reached by several editors. I encouraged them to talk about the nature of the decision-making process and the way in which the issue was framed, and was less concerned with specific attributes of the individuals, their newspapers, or their communities. The goal was not to find out why particular papers made the decision to run the announcements, but how the editors conceptualized the issue and justified the decision.

Newspapers have confronted similar issues in the past. For example, many newspapers identify the partners or "longtime companions" of lesbians and gays in obituaries when such information is provided. And newspapers that run personal ads seeking companionship and sexual partners often accept ads for same-sex partners. But neither of those issues has sparked the level of controversy or attention that commitment ceremony announcements have, most likely because obituaries and personal ads make quite different statements. In an obituary, latitude is given to the family (at least the traditional family) in constructing the notice. And in personal ads, the partner-seekers are talking to "their own kind." In commitment ceremony announcements, however, lesbians and gays are making a more challenging and intrusive claim to equal status for partnerships. They are asking the entire community to see and accept them as regular folks.

In general, most papers addressed the issue of wedding announcements when a lesbian or gay couple in the community submitted a request. Some papers run such announcements free of charge. Others print a short announcement for free but charge for additional copy or pictures. The difference between ad and editorial copy did not seem to be important in the decision-making process, and the ethical and political arguments I make apply to both ad and editorial decisions.

Most of the editors described the decision to run announcements as a simple news judgment based on the assumption that newspapers should report what is happening in the community. The metaphor of a mirror was common. Newspapers reflect the community as it is, as these three editors explained:

This is reality. This is what's happening. And it's our job to tell people what's happening and record it and not sit here and say, "We don't like that and we don't think that ought to be happening, so we're gonna keep mum about it."

This is a lifestyle that occurs. We're a mainstream newspaper trying to reflect, or I should say general circulation newspapers, trying to reflect the community around us. . . . How do we say no to these people?

We need to reflect what's actually going on in our community and provide people with the information they need about what's going on out there.

To these editors, the decision to run same-sex commitment ceremony announcements was *not* a political act. For most, labeling the decision as political did not make sense:

I think we made a journalistic statement. I think politics had zero to do with it. . . .

The only agenda we have is journalistic. . . . The political thing is just so foreign to me, I have a hard time responding to it.

The same editor said that when someone called to ask if the paper had changed its policy on lesbian and gay relationships,

I explained to them there's no policy to change because we have no policy on gay relationships. We have a policy on open acceptance of all kinds of events.

Another editor said the decision was based on common sense and a news judgment of what is significant in people's lives:

Events occur in people's lives that are significant. People are born, people die, people get married, people graduate from high school or college. Those are significant things. You bowl a 300 game. Those are significant things in your life. Politics doesn't have a lot to do with how significant those events are to you. And it is the newspaper's function to present news of those significant events in people's lives to the community.

One editor who was especially concerned with political neutrality said he had worried that the lesbian and gay community would take advantage of the policy:

[O]ne of our bigger fears was that gay people would start running commitment ceremonies as a way of trying to politicize the issues or . . . give themselves a greater presence in the community. . . . I would have felt like we were being used. . . . I don't think any editor wants to be used in any way by any group.

Some of the editors said that in addition to the news judgment involved there was an ethical dimension to the decision, calling it a question of fairness:

I think a mainstream newspaper serves its entire community, and that means . . . an access page where the people in the community could announce the milestones in their lives. There simply was no moral basis for saying that you can't announce this milestone in your life. . . . It was purely an ethical decision in my mind.

But that sense of fairness was tied directly to neutrality, to the act of not making a political or moral judgment about lesbian and gay relationships. The key to editors' ability to see this question as a professional news judgment and not a political act was the assumption that news itself is not political. As one editor put it, "We don't look at information as good or bad. We look at it as information."

Thus, the idea that including lesbians and gays in traditional wedding announcement formats would, even if only in a small way, lend support to lesbians' and gays' political agendas was foreign to editors. While they obviously understood that the issue was a hot political topic, they constructed their place in the debate as outside politics. The comments of the following three editors expressed the belief that the presentation of news does not condone or legitimize people, groups, or behaviors:

Now, we report on a lot of stuff we don't like: Nazism, skinheads, Republicanism. [laughter] But a lot of stuff that we really don't care for, but we report on it anyway. But the fact that we carry a story about what the Ku Klux Klan is saying does not mean, and I don't think anybody thinks it means, that we're agreeing with them or legitimizing them or anything else, and I put this in the same category, and that's why I am so careful to say right up front that wedding announcements, engagements, obituaries and so forth are news stories in my eyes, and so we treat them that way.

I didn't think we were validating it any more than we were validating engagement and heterosexual marriage and retirement and 100th birthdays. It is the nature of that page to report what is happening in people's lives. . . . And for us to be saying that we were endorsing anything just isn't what we were doing. . . . It never occurred to me that our . . . publishing gay bonding announcements was going to help any cause, and this was not an issue, not an issue at all.

When do we stop playing God over the people we try to represent? This is something that is happening. It's no different than child abuse, it's no different than suicide, teen suicide, so forth and so on, that are now coming onto our front pages and getting into our newspapers more and more and more and more. And we have just got to loosen up a little. . . . At some point we've got to loosen up.

Is It Official?

A key question in this issue is the relationship between newspaper policy and government policy, which does not recognize lesbian and gay unions.⁷ Editors whose papers did not run the announcements used the lack of official sanction as a justification for their policy. One editor suggested that to move too quickly ahead of government would be unwise:

I think part of it is that you really can't allow yourself to be always on the cutting edge of social trends without seeing whether the social trend has legs . . . whether it's going to last, whether this is a real change in the situation.

Another editor whose paper did not run the announcements was asked how journalists' common perceptions of themselves as adversaries of government could be squared with reliance on government to define acceptable unions in this case:

Our job is to report the news. And in the context of doing that, we let an enormous number of people, many of whom work for the government, define the issues for us. I suppose you could not cover a presidential press conference under the same rationale: "Who's this guy but the head of the government?" . . . We don't define the news, our job is to report the news. Frequently, the governments are the ones who make the news. . . . There are many kinds of relationships that exist in the community. We report on very few of them. We report on weddings and divorces because those are legal occurrences.

Several editors who chose to run the announcements criticized that approach:

That's a chickenshit excuse. If you are going to do something, you do it for journalistic reasons. I think journalism should be at odds with state law as often as possible. It's irrelevant. It's a cop-out. . . . You can do whatever you want if you have a newspaper.

Several editors took intermediate positions. One paper chose to continue running heterosexual marriage announcements for free but also established advertising space for other kinds of announcements, including same-sex commitment ceremonies. An editor at that paper, which also had carried ads announcing a gay couple's adoption of a child, said the paper's policy was always evolving and could change as society changes:

If and when there is something approaching any kind of recognition of the legality of bondings . . . we will re-examine the policy.

Another paper changed its policy when the local city government began allowing unmarried partners (both heterosexual and same-sex) to register partnerships with the city. Although that action did not grant those unions the same legal status as marriages, the paper took it as a sign of a change in community norms:

I think we viewed it as somewhat presumptuous for us to make a determination of whether the community was ready or not to accept gay celebrations. . . . So, we were taking our cue from a body that more presumably represents the community, and that was where we took our cue so we didn't get in the way of trying to assume or presume where the community was.

The most curious compromise on this question was made by an editor who decided to run same-sex commitment ceremony announcements only if they were performed by a person who also could perform traditional marriages, such as a minister or judge. Although that editor was aware that such an official would not make a commitment ceremony a legally binding union, he emphasized that in some sense that made it official:

If you can get a justice of the peace or a judge or a minister to perform a ceremony, the onus as far as I'm concerned is on the person charged with making the wedding, the person who officiates. . . . [I]t has to be legally binding somehow. And to have that contract be legally binding, for a wedding anyway, you got to have somebody who's legally authorized, whether it's the ship's captain or the rabbi, you got to have somebody who's legally authorized to make a union, or you don't have a contract. Now beyond that, you have the question of whether gay and lesbian weddings are out ahead of the contract laws of the states. That's not my problem, frankly.

Another question related to the legal status of lesbian and gay unions concerns the label used to describe such announcements. Some papers used the term *marriage* in the announcements and ran them on the weddings page. Other papers called them *commitment ceremonies* or *bonding ceremonies* and had given the section a

new name, such as *celebrations*. An editor from one of the latter papers explained the decision:

We didn't think that was the appropriate connection, just as, for example, we reserve the right, if somebody wants to list a Ford in our classifieds under Chevy, to not allow that to happen, to create the wrong kind of sorting. It's part of our product design. And this didn't seem to fit weddings/engagement announcements.

These comments revealed the hesitancy of editors to take an independent action that would equate lesbian and gay unions with heterosexual marriages. Even those papers that chose to run the announcements often tried to find support for their actions in official decisions and definitions. And, while I have no definitive count on the number of papers that run such announcements, it is important to remember that the vast majority of newspapers do not carry them, which implies an acceptance of the official definition (Kent, 1991).

The Pull of Neutrality

Of the editors interviewed, only one was willing to talk about the decision to run commitment ceremony announcements as an overtly political decision. But his comments also revealed a commitment to detachment that was at odds with his own discussion of the decision. Asked if running the announcement was an implicit endorsement. Calling same-sex commitment ceremonies "worthy of legitimacy" and laws that prohibit same-sex marriages wrong, he expressed his support for lesbians and gays:

Ultimately, people—except for those who are completely out of their heads on the Old Testament—are going to acknowledge that sexual orientation is like color of skin. It's natural, it changes, it's different among people. Nothing is intrinsically bad.

The editor went on to describe his view of a newspaper's role in such an issue:

It's all right for a newspaper to do some things that make the world a better, more tolerant place. And this is one of the things this newspaper did to make the world better, more tolerant. We didn't duck, we didn't look for an excuse not to do something. And we thought about it. Some consciousness raising and valuable discussion and examination of a lot of intolerance would take place as a result of this, and has.

Although he was willing to talk about the politics of the decision, he preferred to frame it as an ethical and news judgment. He predicted that as society moved toward greater acceptance of lesbian and gay unions, the decision about announcements would cease to be even an ethical question; as such unions became part of the status quo, their inclusion in newspapers would no longer be controversial:

We're in the dark ages. And that's the only reason it's an ethical issue, because we are so goddamn backward on this subject.

The editor acknowledged that journalists "use judgment all the time" in a way that undercuts simple notions of objectivity. But he resisted using a term such as *activism* to describe the decision to run announcements. As he continued to talk about the issue, he moved away from open declarations of political intent, framing the question more and more as a news judgment intended merely to reflect reality:

Gay and lesbian unions [are] a real thing. I didn't make it up. It happens. These people came to us. . . . I think it would be a lot more activist to close our eyes, or passivist, I guess, and say, well, you don't exist. We're not going to acknowledge you. We're not going to acknowledge that there are gay people. We're not going to put any word out . . . we're going to allow to fester the image of gay perverts kidnapping children. I think that's activism. I think getting out what's true and what's happening is what a newspaper does.

He again resisted describing the decision as activism:

Maybe I don't have a position on whether people need to be validated in whatever they do, controversial or boring. [pause] I think that there's a subtext here, a side issue. . . . [Homophobia is] going to claim about 100 million lives. I think homophobia, which is rampant . . . is one of the primary reasons, the biggest reason why AIDS got out of control and is out of control. The feeling that, "They brought it on themselves. It's their own fault. It's God's wrath." . . . And homophobia, that ignorance and that anger, is a big villain in my eyes. So I think, in a public service capacity, to raise the discussion, to make it public, is a worthwhile thing to do.

He went on to take a stance firmly rooted in a standard notion of objectivity, telling of instances when liberal or radical readers complained that the paper favored President Bush in its coverage. He said that he was not a Bush supporter and that he took the complaints as a validation of his professionalism:

I think, though, that I would feel happiest about anything that this newspaper does or accomplishes if my own taste or values was not apparent or misunderstood, in fact. . . . But I'm always happy when people say that, because that means my colors didn't show. And I want to get out a newspaper that is as informative and useful to people as can be.

In the end, the editor said that while there were political and ethical considerations, he had not made a political decision in choosing to run the commitment ceremony announcements:

The issues here were reporting on something that's real and that's happening in this community. We didn't make it up, and it would have been a decision not to report on it. Once we reported on it we were thorough about it. . . . newspapers ought to raise a little hell now and then, which I believe. . . . And recognizing there is in a log of ground-breaking reporting, there are ethical and political considerations, and there were in this one.

The Results of Depoliticization

The unwillingness to address the political aspects of news limits journalists' ability to fully understand and deal with the implications of their reporting and coverage decisions. Two aspects of the commitment ceremony announcement issue reveal the problems.

The first point concerns the difference between tolerance and affirmation. In their comments, editors revealed that they take the position of tolerating lesbians and gays when they write stories about them and open a weddings page to them. In explaining that running the announcements was not an endorsement of lesbian and gay unions, many of the editors emphasized that simply printing news about any group does not constitute an endorsement. In comments reported earlier, one editor said that by running stories about Nazis, skinheads, and the Ku Klux Klan, for example, the paper was not endorsing their beliefs.

Those comments indicate a failure to distinguish between two different kinds of representation. In most mainstream newspapers, a story about Nazis would include material that makes it clear that Nazis preach a politics unacceptable to most Americans; Nazis are routinely framed as unquestionably deviant (which also helps divert attention from the day-to-day, routine institutional racism in the United States). In a routine wedding announcement, an editor must decide that lesbians and gays can, without such markers of deviance, be given space to define themselves. Yet several editors failed to recognize that distinction.

More important is how that editor's response collected into one category Nazis, skinheads, the Klan, and lesbians and gays. The joking reference he made to including Republicans in the group is instructive; while poking fun at a mainstream political party to which he did not belong, he marked even more clearly the other groups as deviant, outside the mainstream. Another editor described coverage of lesbians and gays as no different from coverage of child abuse and teen suicide, again revealing a view of lesbians and gays as deviant. Framing a group as deviant has an important effect on how it is represented, suggesting that lesbians and gays are viewed as a group whose life choices must be tolerated, just as Nazism must be tolerated in a pluralist society, for the greater good of individual liberty to express oneself.

Because lesbians and gays are actively oppressed in a heterosexist culture, the task (of society as a unit and individual heterosexuals) should be to *affirm* lesbians and gays, not simply *tolerate* us. But because of the ideology of objectivity, the editors seemed unable to make that distinction. While toleration surely is an improvement over active oppression, it still leaves us a long way from liberation. The result is a mixed message: An act of affirmation (expanding wedding announcements to include lesbians and gays) is undertaken, but that motive is denied and the action is explained in terms of tolerance of deviants.

The second point concerns the difference between offensiveness and oppression. When representation is depoliticized, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between words and images that are offensive and those that are oppressive. Editors are aware that a decision to run such announcements in most communities will spark outrage from readers who disagree. In some cases, the fear of negative feedback likely is a crucial, if not the crucial, factor in a decision to not run them.

It is easy to suggest that mere economics—the fear of losing readers and advertisers—drives some of the editors' decisions not to run the announcements. But even more interesting is how editors who choose to run the lesbian and gay announcement view the competing interests.

In making their decisions, some editors said they balanced the concerns of lesbians and gays who wanted to be able to announce their unions with those of other readers who might be offended. At one paper, editors considered:

How will Harry and Mabel, who are celebrating their 50th anniversary, feel about something so important to them and something that people very often save the page as some sort of official documentation of an event, feel about having a gay couple's picture next to them?

If the exclusion of lesbians and gays from representation is part of a system of oppression, it is easy to see the problems in equating the interests of protecting a heterosexual couple from potential offense and the interests of lesbians and gays struggling for basic rights in society. In a pluralistic society, there is never a shortage of issues that will offend someone. That is not to minimize the depth of feeling that open acknowledgment and support of lesbians and gays may provoke in some people. But being offended and being oppressed are very different states with very different consequences; offending someone does not deny the person housing, employment, or custody of their children.

Again, when the issue is depoliticized and treated as a professional judgment without political implications, such dangerous equations are possible, if not likely. The result is that the lives of lesbians and gays can easily be trivialized. For example, one of the editors quoted earlier defended the running of the announcements as the obvious result of opening up that section of the paper to any milestone in people's lives, including the bowling of a 300 game. While that is an important accomplishment in that sport, it is absurd and insulting to suggest it is equivalent to the announcement of a lesbian or gay marriage. Again, no one is attacked or discriminated against because of a bowling score. But the refusal to acknowledge the politics of the decision to run gay and lesbian commitment ceremony announcements makes it easy to take such a stance.

Journalism and Oppression

I have asserted that news coverage is inescapably political and that attempts to ignore politics in making news decisions are counterproductive. In moving from description to prescription, I would suggest that news media outlets make an explicit commitment to countering oppression, both in their choices about news story selection and in their more routine methods of representing the world, such as wedding announcements. This is at once a political and a moral contention; central to my argument is the claim that political and moral philosophy cannot be separated, that ethical questions cannot be examined outside the political context in which they arise, and that power is central to ethical analysis.

The goal of countering oppression is addressed by Gross (1988), who criticized

television for its tendency to stay in the mainstream and go for the middle. He suggested that media power "should be used to equalize and not to skew further the radically unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources in our society" (p. 192).

Similarly, Christians (1986, p. 110) suggested that journalists have an ethical obligation to address issues of oppression:

[J]ustice for the powerless stands as the centerpiece of a socially responsible press. Or, in other terms, the litmus test of whether or not the news profession fulfills its mission over the long term is its advocacy for those outside the socioeconomic establishment.

Christians (p. 124) also emphasized that his view is rooted in a conceptualization of society as persons in community—not merely a group of individuals, but also not faceless members of a social group:

[T]he powerless are not merely a long list of unfortunate individuals downplayed in reporting because their numbers and economic power are limited. They constitute a subculture whose grotesque rupture from the mosaic violates most starkly the communal essence.

My approach to politics and ethics similarly highlights the interdependence of individuals in the work of knowing about, judging, and acting in the world, and hence our responsibility to one another. I envision a system that allows for the expression of individuality but is not rooted in narrow conceptions of individualism (Friedman, 1988). Like Christians, I view society as persons in community, and I believe that people have a responsibility to support and affirm lesbians and gays in the interest of building a more humane and compassionate community.⁸

I offer no universal ethical or political principle that would logically compel every individual to support lesbians and gays, and suggest that no such justification is necessary. Instead of searching for a set of universal political and ethical rules to guide behavior, I would stress many of the basic tenets of various feminist approaches to ethics: the importance of moral imagination and integrity in moving away from ethics as a rule-bound form of control (Hoagland, 1988), the development of empathy (Lugones, 1987), and the need for a highly contextualized approach that foregrounds questions about power (Steiner, 1989).

Also, while agreeing with Christians's basic contention, I would press a point that Christians does not. He acknowledges that his position raises serious questions about contemporary professional values, such as claims to First Amendment freedom, a watchdog role over government, and objectivity. He suggests that those professional values are "distinctive contributions" and does not dispute their merit in his essay. I would suggest that a commitment to justice for members of oppressed groups is a more direct threat to the professional ideology of objectivity.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the critical approach to news making and my political commitment to lesbians and gays, I argue that newspapers should run same-

sex celebration announcements, treating them in the same way as those for heterosexual couples are treated. The goal is to give lesbians and gays an opportunity to communicate their stories to the community and to actively oppose negative stereotypes of lesbian and gay life, which construct the homosexual as a lonely and desperate person, unable to maintain healthy relationships. These are political goals as well as ethical ones. They assume that lesbians and gays are persons in community who should be able to expect the same rights, privileges, and responsibilities that heterosexual members of the community take for granted. If my prescription for a more overtly politicized news-selection process were followed, there would be editors who disagreed with that position and would, therefore, decide not to run the announcements. My assertion is not that every editor should agree with my decision, but that by highlighting the politics of the process, readers would be better served and the politics of a decision could be openly debated.

I have argued that news judgments invariably have an ethical component and that ethical judgments always have political implications and ramifications. Running or not running lesbian and gay commitment announcements is an inherently political decision, like most other important news judgments. When journalists make choices about how to represent the world and whose definitions to use, they are acting in the political realm.

It is not surprising that those editors at papers that did not run the announcements relied on arguments about neutrality and objectivity to explain their decisions. Government policies that deny legal status to lesbian and gay unions give editors the illusion that they are avoiding politics. But merely accepting the status quo, of course, does not depoliticize an issue.

Even more instructive is the fact that the power of the professional ideology of objectivity is so strong that editors who chose to run announcements overwhelmingly used the objectivity rationale. The only exception to this stance proved the rule by his unwillingness to call the decision a political one without qualification.

The retreat to objectivity by journalists, while sometimes a good short-term strategy for deflecting critics, is counterproductive and dishonest. Media outlets are not neutral bystanders in the fields of power in society and cannot escape making political judgments about how they represent the world. This does not mean that mainstream publications should become the mouthpiece for specific political positions or that they should not strive to provide as accurate an account of the world as possible. But journalists should acknowledge the politics of their newsmaking and make a commitment to a liberatory politics that explicitly works for people who are oppressed.

Notes

1. When I conducted the research and first wrote this paper, I identified myself as a heterosexual supporter of lesbian and gay rights. I now identify myself as a gay man. Because I felt it important to make my sexual orientation clear when I was "heterosexual," it seems important to note the change. How my previous identification of myself as heterosexual (and my current identification as gay) affect my work and my ability to make claims about lesbian and gay identity and rights is a topic beyond the scope of this paper.

2. There has been much discussion about the theoretical and political relationship between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. Because this paper deals with an issue that by definition

concerns only same-sex couples, I will use the term *lesbian and gay* throughout. That is not meant to suggest that lesbians and gays can be spoken of as a unitary group. However, for the purposes of investigating the issue of wedding announcements, such a grouping is sensible.

3. I say *oppressed groups* rather than *an oppressed group* because the nature of the oppression is different and the political responses of each group has been different. See "Lesbian feminism and the gay rights movement: Another view of male supremacy, another separatism" in Frye (1983, pp. 128–151). This paper, however, discusses lesbians and gays as a unified group because of the narrow question at issue.

4. Regarding the question of whether lesbians and gays should actively work for the right to marry or enter into marriage-like relationships, it is important to acknowledge that some lesbians and gays resist a strategy of winning equality by conforming to heterosexual norms. In short, if marriage is a corrupt institution, why should lesbians and gays fight for the right to marry? For a discussion of these issues, see Sherman (1992).

5. No attempt was made to identify all the newspapers in the United States that run such announcements. Through trade publications and information from journalists, I identified these nine papers: Austin (TX) *American Statesman*, Brattleboro (VT) *Reformer*, Everett (WA) *Herald*, Greenfield (MA) *Recorder*, Keene (NH) *Sentinel*, Marin (CA) *Independent Journal*, Minneapolis (MN) *Star Tribune*, Northampton (MA) *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, Seattle (WA) *Times*. Since completing the project, other papers have adopted similar policies, including the Albany (NY) *Times Union*, San Jose (CA) *Mercury News*, El Paso (TX) *Times*, Philadelphia (PA) *Daily News*, and Salina (KS) *Journal* (Pyle, 1993). Other daily newspapers, as well as weeklies, likely have made similar decisions. But my focus in this study is not on a broad survey to determine how many papers run them, but on the decision-making process as revealed in more in-depth interviews.

6. My focus is on the papers that ran the announcements. The interviews with editors at papers that did not were for comparative purposes. They included editors at a paper that had not had to face the issue and had not developed a stated policy, St. Petersburg (FL) *Times*; a paper whose competitor had chosen to run the announcements, St. Paul (MN) *Pioneer Press*; and a paper that had seriously considered the question but decided not to run them, Eugene (OR) *Register-Guard*.

7. No state in the United States allows lesbians and gays to marry. A Hawaii Supreme Court decision (*Baehr v. Lewin*, 852 P.2d 44, Haw. 1993), holding that banning lesbian and gay marriages violates state constitution's prohibition against sex discrimination) has raised the possibility that Hawaii will be the first state to legalize such unions. As of this writing, no final resolution of that question in Hawaii has been reached.

8. It is important to acknowledge that Christians's philosophy is rooted in a religious orientation, while my own is explicitly secular. I do not know his stance on the status of lesbians and gays, although the different assumptions we hold do not preclude agreement on this, or any other, ethical, political, or social question. For an elaboration on Christians's theological assumptions, compare the article cited above with Christians (1985). For a more comprehensive discussion of his ethical philosophy, see Christians, Ferre, and Fackler (1993).

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