

Aftermath of a Boycott: Moving the Discussion Forward on Trans Issues

By Guest

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Abstract

Today's guest post comes from Savannah Garmon. Garmon is a physics researcher and trans activist who presently lives in Toronto but calls Texas home. She likes social justice, cats, beer, and runs her own blog at lefttytgirl.wordpress.com. Most of us are familiar at this point with the events around the boycott declared on Xtra! by [...]

Article

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Most of us are familiar at this point with the events around the boycott declared on Xtra! by trans activists following editor Danny Glenwright's unfortunate decision to post Lexi Tronic's birth name on his Facebook wall, his initial refusal to remove it despite multiple private requests to do so, and worse yet, Danny's later comments on those events. Here I would like to follow up by giving an example of why this issue is so important and commenting on what a respectful relationship between Xtra! and the trans community should look like.

Towards the beginning of 2008, about a year after I graduated from the University of Texas, I took a year-long research position in Paris. Without going into all the details, this turned out to be an extremely difficult period of my life in which I experienced workplace harassment, deep isolation and severe depression. It was already a kind of in-between period for me as I took steps towards living fulltime as a woman a year later; yet, I made a difficult agreement with my mother to keep my transition secret during that time following a disturbing experience involving another family member.

Fortunately, I made it through those experiences and towards the end of my time in France I prepared to begin my life as a woman. However, I remember the sinking feeling I had in my stomach when I asked my advisor to provide a letter of recommendation using my chosen name with appropriate female pronouns and he flatly refused.

I was fortunate enough to find something (my present position here in Toronto) relying solely on recommendations from my previous research associates, however the fear I experienced for my career was intense, and I can't help but think that other trans people in a similar situation might not have such good fortunes.

Fast forward to my time here in Toronto: as an activist in the queer and trans community I have had a fair amount of interaction with Xtra! in my two years here. A lot of this interaction has been positive; during the free speech debates surrounding Pride 2010, Xtra! took a principled editorial line in favor of freedom of expression and I would argue there have been a lot of positive outcomes from that. For example, the first trans person was elected to the board of Pride in 2011, something I find hard to imagine happening had it not been for the events of the last two years.

However, I've had awkward interactions with some Xtra! staffers. For example, one night last summer I happened to share beers with two cis men on Xtra! staff (I will keep their names to myself). Most of this was cordial enough, but there was a weird moment when the subject of trans rights came up (seemingly out of nowhere, I didn't bring it up) and one of these gentlemen proceeded to argue that the need for federal protections on the basis of gender identity were overrated since such legislation would not likely be applied in many real world legal situations.

I view this differently: there is an education process that accompanies the bill, and passing it would provide a victory to a community that could use one. And anyways, recent events show that such legislation might have value in real world legal circumstances after all. However, I am not closed to debating these questions, and it's fine that some Xtra! staff might view the issue differently.

Where I do have a problem is in the fact that while these opinions were made, neither of the cis people involved made eye contact with me even though I was the only trans person present; it felt a bit like I was in a room with people who are talking about me as if I'm not there. Indeed, the all-knowing tone of the conversation made me feel like I had to butt in just to express my view (on trans issues!).

From this experience, I wasn't all that surprised when I read the following part of Danny's statement on our boycott:

... the tenor of the discussion quickly changed and, in fact, any helpful, informative dialogue that could have come from this story turned into bad activism and knee-jerk bandwagon jumping. I was once again being bullied, asked to apologize for being transphobic. "Activists" told me if I failed to apologize on behalf of Xtra for my transphobia, they would boycott this newspaper. The trans community would boycott a newspaper that is a lone voice for trans issues; and yes, these people deigned to speak on behalf of the entire trans community.

I find it disingenuous that Danny laments the lack of "informative dialogue" when in fact he not only refused to take Lexi's calls, he actually blocked her on Facebook when she politely asked him to remove her birth name from his page (I have seen the conversation, believe me when I say that she is very polite). It is difficult to have dialogue when an individual actively refuses to listen.

Which was exactly the point of our boycott: it was a way of compelling Danny to take Lexi's call; it was a way around a block on Facebook. Hence our boycott did not 'shut down the discussion,' on the contrary, it was the boycott that enabled meaningful discussion of the issue. It also served to level the playing field between an editor at a major media outlet and a grassroots community activist and sex worker with little relative media power.

Regarding the importance of the name issue itself, I'm proud to say that I did eventually compel my former boss to refer to me as Savannah, though it took about two years, long after I had departed

Paris. I accomplished this by gradually isolating him; the cis women in our lab were easiest to convince, then after a while I flipped the cis man researcher who was the third author on a paper with my former boss and myself. This served to isolate my advisor in our email correspondence and over time it became too awkward to continue using my birth name.

Further, I have myself been misgendered in print before, and in that case I had to debate with the editor why it was inappropriate and why it felt to me like it was an intentional stab at my identity (personally I feel it was a way for a writer who already desired to marginalize my voice regarding an unrelated issue to do so on the basis of my trans identity).

I would like to ask: how am I supposed to convince the transphobic mainstream press and bosses of this world that using my birth name or incorrect pronouns is totally inappropriate if even my supposed “ally” believes that doing so might be acceptable under certain circumstances, even without my permission? (And yes, if Danny feels justified in referring to me as a trans “activist,” then I am justified in referring to him as a trans “ally”).

Then there is Danny’s arrogant claim that “[Xtra! is] a lone voice for trans issues.”

The fact is those of us in the trans community are very much capable of speaking for ourselves. Certainly those of us involved managed to tell the story of our boycott quite well, didn’t we? Even though that was primarily promoted by word-of-mouth on social media and my rinky-dink blog. We didn’t rely on big media to carry our voices; the power of our message carried itself.

Hence, the way I see it is this: yes, telling our story in the trans community with Xtra! helping to project our voices would be ideal. However, if a respectful relationship can’t be maintained, then we will find another way.

Here I will make two specific recommendations for Xtra on how to develop the type of relationship to which I am referring. First, it has already been suggested that Xtra! should modify its page header to include bi and trans people. Secondly, I would point out that a media organization no more radical than GLAAD has put out a set of guidelines for respecting trans individuals in the media; if Xtra! had already adopted these guidelines (or something similar) none of this ever would have happened.

In the end, I hope that this incident will someday be viewed as a mere bump on the road to developing that type of respectful relationship. But in order for that to happen, dialogue must go both ways: certainly cis allies should feel compelled to listen when trans people are speaking about their own identities and their own experiences. Hopefully if that happens, then we can do away with all these kinds of ‘quotations’ around identities, and get back to sharing our all stories with the outside world.

Note: Xtra! declined to publish this article in any form.

cross-posted from leftygirl

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