

TRANSADVOCATE

“What’s Between Your Legs?” Is the New “So What Do You Do in Bed?”: Trans Issues In The Media

By Guest

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Abstract

By Cathy Renna @cathyrenna Possibly inspired by Laverne Cox and Orange is the New Black, I blurted out the title of this post at a recent panel about media coverage of transgender issues, as I was trying to put into context the quality of coverage of transgender issues today, as compared to gay and lesbian issues [...]

Article

By Cathy Renna
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Possibly inspired by Laverne Cox and Orange is the New Black, I blurted out the title of this post at a recent panel about media coverage of transgender issues, as I was trying to put into context the quality of coverage of transgender issues today, as compared to gay and lesbian issues in the early 1990s. It has stuck in my head since.

Back then I was working at GLAAD and gay and lesbian people were still seen by the mainstream media as one-dimensional. They asked questions that directly related to or skirted around our sex lives, because that’s what they thought their audiences wanted to know. They were probably right, for the most part, and it took a lot of time, education and activism to get the media to cover gay and lesbian issues -- and people -- more substantively.

For example, the coverage of the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy when it began was more about showers and submarines than service. It was primarily about men, too, even if lesbians were discharged at a much higher rate. The guys made better, more sensational headlines. When DADT was repealed in 2010, the stories were, pun intended, an entirely different story. Because activists did a better job and because the culture and the media changed.

Which brings me to the swift, growing visibility for transgender people we are seeing in the media. Transgender characters in entertainment were always around, but as the punch line. When it came to news, it was usually about a hate crime. And I can tell you from personal experience even that coverage had to be fought for, from Brandon Teena to Fred Martinez to Gwen Araujo.

But increasingly, we are seeing transgender actors, activists, filmmakers, politicians and people from

every walk of life coming out and telling their stories. We just saw the first transgender-focused TEDTalk by Geena Rocero, who got an instant standing ovation as she finished.

The release of the groundbreaking "Injustice at Every Turn" report by the Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality in 2011 showed the media the devastating impact discrimination and violence have on transgender and gender non-conforming people and is now a reference point for data the media can go back to, which is a critical piece of educating the public.

Which brings me back to that panel at CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

Of course, we talked about Piers Morgan's recent ham-fisted and very unsatisfying interview with author and activist Janet Mock and the controversy afterward. In my opinion, the underlying tone and language he used were not even good journalism. He asked the same kind of leading questions he always does and botched the opportunity to explore the life of an amazing woman. And obviously, he did not have to point out repeatedly that she was assigned male at birth. But does it make him transphobic?

It is exactly the situation I see time and time again with journalists. They are not homophobic, they are homo-ignorant.

I love the carrot and stick approach but some folks seem to forget the carrot and go right to taking the stick to someone who is making a mistake they don't even realize is offensive. As someone who has taken the stick out plenty of times, I think discerning between intentional offense and simple ignorance is something we should do more.

Like Katie Couric. Her interview with actress Laverne Cox and model Carmen Carrera about their live and careers came to an awkward impasse when she asked them what some would call "the plumbing question." Laverne handled it extraordinarily well, realizing it was an "educable moment." And you could see that Katie realized the same thing as Laverne responded to her.

After it aired there was a lot of criticism of Katie Couric. She correctly called it an educable moment in her very public apology. Then her apology was criticized. C'mon, really? I think things went a little overboard and could even backfire. I wonder if Katie will think twice before doing anything on transgender issues again but my hunch is she would redouble her efforts to get it right. That said, I have a vision in my head of babies and bathwater, you get my point?

Full disclosure -- I have worked with Katie Couric -- and she gets gay and lesbian issues. And while surely an ally to transgender people and a great journalist to boot, she took the simple and common route of asking what she and her audience was probably thinking out of curiosity and ignorant of how that feels to the person being asked. Laverne's response was worth a million sessions of "trans 101" not just because of what she said but how she said it. She was firm, confident and frankly pretty nice about it. I know it is painful to be on the receiving end of these questions. "Which one of you is the guy?" Umm, neither of us, that's the point. Been there, done that.

So while we will definitely see ups and downs, much as we did with coverage of gay and lesbian issues, the interest I experience with journalists on trans issues is impressive and bodes well. I worked on Anderson Cooper's daytime show where he devoted the entire program to transgender children and young adults. It was amazing. And it was hours and hours of work prior by a whole lot of people, including

the families and experts, who answered every question the producers and Anderson had -- before we went on air. And make no mistake, it is not about being an "ally," it is about being a good journalist. I don't work with clients who just want their name in the paper. My job is to work for fair, accurate and inclusive coverage (you can take the girl out of GLAAD, but not the GLAAD out of this girl) and it is our responsibility to help the media get it right.

And there are some amazing things on the horizon, as the transgender community and allies not only work with media to get it right, but make media themselves. Last weekend, the Trans 100 launched. In late May, the release of *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* will bring an incredible new resource to transgender people much as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* did in 1971.

I know that my tendency is to see the glass half full. Surprising, given how long I have been doing this, but when you see people really do their best to get it right it keeps me going. As I said to the CUNY students, if I can get someone to say "I never thought about it that way," I score it as a victory. And the beginning of a new way of thinking that will impact anything they do in the future.

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