MASS MEDIA AND GAY LIBERATION

by Randy M. Shilts

(submitted to Dr. Willis Winter, thank you)

de nada —
make the most of it.
Sit-in in the national headquarters of the Civil Service will continue until the agency gives into gay demands that the Civil Service stop discriminating against gay people.

The dramatic sit-in is now in its eleventh day with over 200 homosexuals chained together in the office suite of national Civil Service Director, David Straight. Today is the fifth day that the protestors have been without food as police have cordoned off the suite, refusing to let the gays' supporters bring food to the protesting group.

"Our group is prepared to starve if we have to," Shields said. "The Civil Service's capricious discrimination against gay people forces their gay employees to live in constant fear that they'll be found out and be fired. What for? Not because of any job incompetence on their part, but because of who they love. This discrimination can't continue. It's against basic American principles of equality."
said that if the protesters do not leave soon, police action may be taken.

"We're not sure how to do it though," Warner said. "The chains they've got are impossible to saw through. We can't use a blowtorch since they are chained so closely together that a blowtorch would burn them."

Warner said that no incidents of destruction or violence had thus far been reported.

Shields hinted that such sit-ins might soon take place in the national offices of the American Bar Association and the American Psychiatric Association. He did not rule out such a protest at the Pentagon.
"Gay people are discriminated against, too," Shields said.

"LGBTQ service members can't get an honorable discharge, so they are denied veteran's benefits. But right now we're just scratching the surface of gay discrimination. It happens all over the country on many levels."

Shields estimated America's homosexual population at 20 million.

Similar sit-ins in Seattle, Los Angeles, New York, Denver and San Francisco are also underway. Chicago police yesterday arrested over 100 homosexuals that attempted a protest in the Chicago Civil Service office building.

(See related stories on pages 8A and IB.)

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A vivid fantasy occurred me recently while contemplating a potential relationship. I imagined my fantasy lover and I at home cooking dinner. Perhaps we would be entertaining professionally colleagues in the most charming of manners. Then he and I would go out for a drink, dance at a swank hotel, and as we were standing on a corner waiting for a light to change, we would kiss. Like any respectable character in such a cinematic scene, I would look into his eyes and say... but I remembered something and the fantasy was shattered. Even if I had such a lover, we could not entertain our professional colleagues. We might be fired if they knew we were gay. If we tried to dance at a swank hotel, we would be evicted. We would invite a fight if we dared reenact a dramatic Gary Grant kissing scene. These things would not happen because of any fault on our part. They would happen because the society would consider our relationship sinful, perverted, unnatural, or, at best, sick. Why? Because this is the only way most members of our society have been taught to deal with homosexuality. The prominent task of gay people, therefore, is to teach these members of society something different.

This is no modest objective. Thousands of years of Judeo-Christian religious doctrine, hundreds of years of political persecution, and the complex framework of social traditions and institutions stand in our way. This, however, must not frighten us. Communications theorist Wilbur Scramm once pointedly noted anthropologist Edward Sapir's insight:
Our job is to alter the nature of these understandings. We should, therefore, first reduce our discussion to the lowest common denominator of the understandings' network: the individual. What is his understanding of gay people? How did he gain it? How can it be altered in our favor?

Finally, how can we use the wondrous potential of mass communications to make that needed alteration?

We should first understand the essence of human perception before we discuss how our society perceives gay people. For our purposes, Walter Lippmann most precisely defines the nature of human perception. Lippmann maintains that:

...what is called the adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions. (2)

We all have fictions, Lippmann called them "pictures in our heads," of what the world is, and we behave in accordance with what these pictures depict as real. Other theorists have called these pictures "cognitive structures" or "perceptual frameworks," but, in a most graphic description, they amount to no more than pictures. These pictures are not innate, but rather they are the cumulative effect of the social and personal communications that each individual has received.

The portrayal of homosexuality in these pictures has been inaccurate and unrealistic. Little open communication on homosexuality has gone into their construction. Homosexuality is most frequently referred to through derogatory jokes and derisive innuendos which imply the forbidden nature of the behavior. The earliest communication
Individuals about homosexuality usually consist of people hearing about strange people who have the notorious reputation of being child molesters. Subsequent communication informs that gay people are sick, obverse and unnatural for reasons that are never critically clear. Gay people are individuals who allegedly want to be the other sex, therefore, the male homosexual is supposed to be effeminate, and the female homosexual should be masculine. The list of myths and stereotypes is barely finite, yet they all point to the extraordinarily negative colors with which the society paints our "picture."

Before dealing with how our society's picture of gay people can be repainted through mass communications, we should note the obstacles we face. A basic obstacle to a gay public relations campaign, as with any media campaign, is the fact that our potential audience is more obstinate than receptive. Psychologist Dorwin Cartwright discovered:

> When a message is inconsistent with a person's prevailing cognitive structure, it will be (a) rejected, (b) be distorted so as to fit, or (c) produce changes in the cognitive structure.

Research has shown that the last alternative is the one least taken by mass communications audiences. A study on anti-prejudice propaganda by Eunice Cooper and Marie Jahoda revealed that prejudiced people will work more strenuously to evade anti-prejudice propaganda than they will to accept it.

Added to the problem of the unpassive nature of our obstinate audience, is the fact that we live in a social structure based on heterosexuality. Before our society can integrate homosexuality, it must radically alter its own sex role models. We can't ignore the social implications of religious factors. The Bible has explicit
be difficult to support gay liberation in any context of social morality beyond the "all men are created equal" concept. Identification with gay people will be difficult for most. Unlike anti-prejudice propaganda for ethnic minorities, pro-gay advertisements cannot show gay and straight children walking hand in hand since sexual orientation is usually not discovered until puberty. Gay propaganda cannot seek strong identification with family structures. Psychologist George Weinberg noted:

The tender sight of parents and little ones has won mercy for many groups; in fact, the fearsome animals in the zoo, those reputed to be the deadliest, steal gentle feelings from us when we see them in family groups—the bear licking her cubs, the tiger nursing her kittens and snarling when we come too close. The homosexual cannot lay claim to this sort of sympathy. (4)

Not only are we unable to exploit these institutions for propaganda purposes, our existence is seen as a threat to them, a threat to the very framework of society.

The proportions of the social threat gay people are considered to project, are only exceeded by the proportions of the psychological threat we offer to the society's members. If the society is not afraid of this threat to the social structure, we are still the source of a deeper fear. While a racial bigot has only values (rascism) threatened by the acceptance of black people, a homophobic has a most powerful psychological factor threatened by the openness of gay people—his sexuality. (No white person, no matter how racist, was afraid of turning black, but straight people are afraid of turning
This fear factor is the greatest obstacle to the straight

ty's acceptance of gay people.

A successful media campaign to overcome such obstacles must, therefore,
have messages that are non-threatening, difficult to evade and impossible
to distort. A commercial implying identification with gay people, for
example, could do more harm than good since the very process of identifying
with gays could be tremendously threatening for many people.

In spite of such obstacles, several media factors work in our favor.

Any discussion of homosexuality, even if it may offend a particular segment of the population, is better than none at all. Our society has many marginal bigots who are not prejudiced because they strongly believe gay people are bad, but are prejudiced simply because they have never heard of any other way to be. I have seen many such people, people shed their prejudice when initially exposed to the preliminary evidence for gay liberation. They will often do so with the reaction, "I've never really thought about it before." This is particularly the case with women who, as a group, seem less personally threatened by homosexuality than men.

Also aiding our attempt to get media exposure is "a variation

on the factor of "Afghanistanism." To some people we are no longer

despicable as we are strange and mysterious. This works in our
favor since we are becoming good media material, the stuff that
newspapers are sold on. We have only to look at the well-publicized,
gay threat to take over California's Alpine County in 1970. Carl Nitman,
an early San Francisco gay activist, recently assured me that the

more
A lone take-over plot was only a publicity stunt. Nobody had the slightest intention of attempting a lavender coup in that isolated area. Yet, because it was spectacular news from an already mysterious group, the story made all the major networks' news shows, and most of the nation's front pages. Newsmen mercilessly followed the few gay activists of that era to get more information.

Our strongest asset, however, lies not in this curiosity factor. Gay liberation will ultimately succeed because gay liberation is right. The facts are on our side. The myths and stereotypes, while they are conceivably accurate for a small segment of gay people, are inherently self-destructive. Unlike ethnic minorities who live in different neighborhoods, speak with different accents, are of a different social class, and who are physically different from the general media audience, gay people are everywhere in every size, shape, and color. Many racist people have never talked to a black person. But whether the homophobe knows it or not, he has talked to and known gay people. Gay liberation initially has more formidable barriers to overcome than the ethnic liberation movements confront, since we challenge more basic psychological and social networks, but we will be more rapidly integrated into the society than ethnic groups. We already are everywhere, in every neighborhood, economic bracket and occupational field. We only have to make a society where we can be open about it. How do we do this?

The best way to reach the most people is through mass media.

Many seasoned gay activists are skeptical of this route. They see the media as part of a monolithic enemy rather than as a potential benefactor. I would suggest that this arises out of ignorance as to the nature of the media as a social system. The only major national
Attention gay people have received has been the Alpine coup, a few shouting activists on talk shows, and the sporadic "feature stories" that documentary shows, as "60 Minutes," have presented. Local and regional news focus has been given the gay movement when we have dealt with local issues and activities such as gay pride marches, or state and municipal gay rights laws. This experience should make the gay movement realize that we will not get news attention unless we do newsworthy activities. We are not going to get other media attention, on talk shows or documentaries, unless we are a phenomenon that people are talking about and interested in. The sponsors of Jack Parr, Johnny Carson, or "60 Minutes" are not as interested in social change as much as they are interested in money—the basic ingredient of the media social system. If Jack Parr and "60 Minutes" can attract viewers to their programs, and consequently to the all-important commercials, through discussions of homosexuality, then discussions of homosexuality will abound throughout the media.

We must, therefore, start getting ourselves talked about.

We need to garner a national focus on some dramatic, gay news events to grab this limelight. Since the media has not been rushing to us for news copy, we must go to the media and create events in areas that already have high media concentration—the big cities. The events we create may not be as important in their real significance, as they are important in their symbolic significance. The particular incidents in Selma or at the University of Alabama were not as important individually as what they were transfigured to represent by the media. I would suggest that at this point we center our attention on a national protest in Washington, an area of national significance...
and high media concentration. A dramatic, long protest in the office of the Civil Service director, challenging the Civil Service's policy of discriminating against gay people, would be adequate. It would be a symbolic protest against the universal discrimination that gay people suffer nationally. It would focus on the area of discrimination, appealing to the social value of equality, and on the defensive. They would have to prove why they were right. Any such protest would have to be extraordinarily dramatic so that it would have to catch the media's eye, and focus on this national issue.

In the creation of this protest, gay leaders must be extremely aware of the medium factors involved. The medium of the media—whether they are television, radio or the news—are transfiguring events to no small extent, and we must stage the event so that the transfiguration will be to our advantage. A single march of two hundred people, the maximum such a protest could be likely to attract, would not look impressive to the TV viewer if those people were scattered in front a building three blocks long. But those same two hundred would look impressive if crowded into the Civil Service director's office. Such considerations cannot be ignored. Through a concerted series of such protests, we will not fail in getting the news attention we need.

Once we have captured the national news focus, we must begin to work on the more difficult task of changing the image (the 'picture') of gay people so that the society's behavior toward us will fit its new, more favorable perception. This is where the use of talk shows, " rejects story" documentaries, and local media come into play. Just as we focused news attention on a few dramatic events, we should focus the national media attention on one dramatic, movement leader,
a gay Martin Luther King. He should be a responsible, eloquent leader who will not personally and politically alienate large segments of the widely factioned gay movement or wide segments of the straight society. His personality must contradict all facets of the current social picture of gay people. Essentially, he must be masculine, deep voiced, and serious rather than cheerfully gay-in-spite-of-it-all. This prescription sounds comportic, but we see no nothing to perpetuate the old myths. While this leader handles "Meet the Press," Jack Farr and network documentaries, local leaders can take the initiative for their areas' T.V., radio and press features.

Our initial thrust must go beyond the individual sitcoms we may have in Washington. We must reconstruct the society's entire anti-gay cognitive structure. The statistics, facts and simple common sense supporting the gay movement must be strongly asserted. Our rhetoric must not lump us into any of the radical stereotypes. Indeed, our first movement leaders would be most effective if they were pleasantly bourgeois. Over and over again we must hammer away at the theme: we are all around you anyway; let us be ourselves; we are good and healthy people.

We must then become polite vigilantes of the media. Individuals in the media must understand our position since this will, in no small way, determine how they report it. Semantical changes must be implemented in media reporting. Just as the black movement nurtured a new image by changing the minority term from Negro to black, we must change our term from homosexual to gay. Homosexual, most frequently used as a noun, defines us solely on the basis of one characteristic and semantically focuses on our sexuality. Gay, most frequently used as an adjective, does not have the resounding, negative implications of "homosexual," and, while not perfect, conjures a more positive image.
An organization analogous to a Gay Anti-Defamation League must vigilantly watch the media to insure that derogatory words as fairy, queer, faggot, or dyke are not used. Similarly derisive "queer jokes" must not be acceptable media entertainment. Networks and sponsors are responsive to consumer pressure, and repeated attacks on perpetuation of gay myths could eventually succeed.

Once we get our feet in the media's door, an asset unique to the homosexual minority will aid is in our drive for acceptance. The asset is money. Ethnic minorities are economically oppressed because of their visibility; gay oppression is more of a social oppression. Because of this, gay people have more money to finance media campaigns than ethnic minorities had. Make sure, we are not disproportionately wealthier than our straight counterparts, but we have a lot more money than our ethnic counterparts. In a media social system based on money, this will be to our advantage because we will be able to afford media space and time for our own brotherhood commercials and advertisements. (All we need to do is liberate a dozen of the many gay millionaires that populate the major cities, and we'll be on our way.) The construction of the particulars of what our brotherhood messages will say, must be carefully studied. While we will not succeed in pleasing everyone (no matter what we say, a large segment of the society will ignore us), proper brotherhood commercials reinforcing our most basic points will work to give our side a more thorough airing.

Media alone will not alter the social norms. Studies have shown that supplementation of the media with interpersonal contacts is necessary for maximum effectiveness. To this end, gay panels to university classes, church groups, P.T.A. groups, and other such interest groups will be invaluable. Individual intra-social group will prove effective as well. The myths have been self-perpetuating
opression has kept the ordinary, well-adjusted gay

tion hidden from the social eye. Gay liberation spread through
interpersonal contacts will, in the same sense, be self-perpetuating.
As more ordinary gay people accept themselves and become openly
gay, they will work to disrupt the social stereotypes. As the social
myths become disrupted, and homosexuality becomes more accepted, more

ay people will come out of hiding. Gay liberation will work like a

althusian equation. We will grow in geometric rather than arithmetic
proportions.

With this optimistic projection, we must also realize the net effects
that the liberation transition will bring about on the society and
its members. As psychologists have stated, no particular facet
of an individual's cognitive structure can be altered without altering
to some degree, his entire cognitive framework. In the same sense,
an individual's facet of the social structure cannot be altered without
altering, to some degree, the entire social structure. These individual
and social alterations will not be easy for many, in fact, they will
be painful. To many, the increasing openness of gay people will be
terrifying. Our society will experience a jolting "future shock."
In this shock, many people will lash out against us. The life-span
of the early gay movement leaders will not be long. We would be
naive to imagine that our liberation will come without bloodshed.
The blood, I fear, will mostly be ours.

Many gay people will walk at an attempt at a national media
campaign preferring the slow, don't-rock-the-boat process of change.
As we confront this attitude, we must ask ourselves: if we don't rock the boat to change the society, who will? How many gay people will figuratively and literally die from the society's homophobic values while we idly wait? Too many people will live out that waiting period not knowing they can love, not knowing they are healthy, not knowing the fulfillment of a human relationship. Can we wait another generation for gay liberation if it means losing another generation of gay people must suffer?

It is no utopian fantasy to dream of kissing your lover right beneath a street-light. The fantasy is human; it can be attained. Gay liberation can be attained if we work to actualize it. The society has only a picture to change, we have our lives.

Interesting Randy... earlier in the quarter you expressed...
footnotes:

1) Wilbur Schramm, "The Nature of Communication between Humans."
   The Processes and Effects of Mass Communication, ed. Wilbur Schramm
   and Donald Roberts. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971, p. 5

2) Walter Lippmann, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads."
   The Processes and Effects of Mass Communication, op. cit., p. 274

3) Dorwin Cartwright, "Some Principles of Mass Persuasion: Selected
   Findings of Research on the Sale of J.S. War Bonds."
   The Processes and Effects of Mass Communication, op. cit., p. 241

4) Dr. George Weinberg, Society and the Healthy Homosexual. New York,