IN A MORE courteous era, famous homosexuals were comfortably separated from modern times by centuries, if not millennia, that lent all mentions of sexual diversity an air of the foreign and historical. There was Plato and Alexander the Great, Michelangelo and Leonard da Vinci.

The associations of homosexuality with times and personages so remote seemed to serve everyone’s purposes. Mainstream society found reassurance in acknowledging that homosexuality existed, that it had always existed, while never having to own up to the fact that it endured not only in Periclean Athens but in today’s Cleveland and Chicago. Gays, meanwhile, got to be identified with some of the most illustrious monikers in the history of art and philosophy.

Over the past two decades, gay liberationists groused that the true contributions lesbians and gay men were making in every endeavor of American life were obscured by the lack of modern, out-of-the-closet role models, but politesse prevailed. Both the gay press and the gay leadership courteously deferred to the desires of the homophile rich and famous to keep their sexual orientation safely cloaked in secrecy. Though just about everybody, it seemed, had a best friend with a close compadre who had slept with this television star or that movie mogul, the rumors were never dignified by the print of gay newspapers or the rhetoric of gay politicians.

Today, such niceties have gone the way of the Berlin Wall. New rules have been struck: old ones are being demolished. The way America deals with homosexuality may never be the same. What’s new is “outing.”

Outing is the practice of gay journalists’ and political organizers’ publicly announcing another person’s homosexuality. In the months since it has become popular, outing has inspired much controversy and debate, most of it phrased in high-minded talk of professional ethics, privacy rights and the quest for truth. In fact, the motivations and posturing of all sides are often as venal as they are elevated. And like just about everything that touches upon the confused way our culture deals with homosexuality, the outing controversy is crowded with contradictions that defy facile analyses of right and wrong.

**Naming Names**

*BY RANDY SHILTS*

Is “outing”—publicly announcing another person’s homosexuality—a political tool, a quest for cultural honesty or blackmail?

Few national journals paid much heed when outing quietly began a few years back. AIDS activists across the nation struck on outing as a political tactic when they grew angry over the AIDS policies of a handful of public officials who they knew to be secretly gay. A senior United States senator from the West was outed by AIDS organizers after a series of votes that, activists said, was inimical to the interests of fighting the epidemic. AIDS organizers soon materialized at the senator’s public appearances with fliers that said the politician was gay. A governor of a midwestern state and the mayor of a major eastern city faced similar treatment. Though some AIDS activists were not entirely comfortable with yanking these officials out of the closet, they invariably argued that the exigencies of the AIDS crisis demanded harsh action.

Outing first emerged as a major public issue earlier this year, when the publication hinted, were gay. These lists were routinely ignored—until the weekly ran a cover story, replete with partners’ interviews, revealing that the recently deceased Malcolm Forbes had led an extensive gay double life.

Supermarket tabloids gloommed on to the story, and a quick succession of signings followed. There were reports that ministers—king Richard Chamberlain lived in Hawaii with a male lover and that come-back-bound John... (continued on page 165)
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(continued from page 160) Travolta had had an affair with a male model. (The model, of course, insisted that he was by no means gay and had slept with Travolta only to advance his film career.) Chamberlain had no comment, while Travolta denied the story, as did Mick Jagger when the ex-wife of singer David Bowie said she had found the two rock stars in bed together one morning. (Not knowing how else to react, she said, she had followed the discovery by padding into the kitchen to make the pair breakfast.) Cold sweats, meanwhile, were breaking out all over Hollywood and Manhattan, where in-the-closet celebrities with far higher “Q” ratings than any of the above fretted over whether their faces would be the next to grace supermarket checkout lines.

Since the media loves nothing more than to talk about itself, the mainstream press—daily metropolitan newspapers and national weekly newsmagazines—quickly weighed in with a series of earnest articles about the propriety of outing. This approach allowed these serious journals to deliver the gossipy news about celebrity allegations while dressing up the salaciousness of their motives with talk about the right to privacy and about journalistic ethics. Outing defenders sniffed that they were only responding to the highest calling of journalism by revealing the truth. Such high-minded talk, however, covered the fact that both sides of this fracas were, to some extent, lying.

The hypocrisy crowding the outing debate is nowhere more pronounced than among the staunchest opponents of the practice: the journalistic Establishment. To be sure, most major news organizations concede that they would reveal the homosexuality of a public official who had made antigay rhetoric a centerpiece of his political agenda. Most editors would argue that the figure himself would have invited the coverage by insisting that homosexuality was an issue meriting public vigilance. This is the exception, however, that proves the rule that the mainstream press largely renounces outing.

Editors usually cite privacy arguments, saying they would not report on the sex life of anybody, gay or straight. Though such pronouncements sound very principled, the voices of these journalistic burgars are also laden with disturbing inconsistencies. It’s tough to swallow: Newspapers that made “Jessica Hahn,” “Donna Rice” and “Marla Maples” into household names have suddenly become staunch defenders of privacy rights.

The distaste for outing has far less to do with any true ethical considerations of privacy than with the editors’ own evaluation of homosexuality. What most editors really believe is that being gay is so distasteful that talk of it should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Few figures more amply demonstrated this truth than the man whose death launched the outing controversy, Malcolm Forbes. The publishing magnate’s alleged homosexual affairs with some of the world’s most celebrated women were the stuff of news coverage for years. Many newspapers in America included that information in his obituary. It was only when news reports indicated Forbes might also have been having homosexual affairs that editors began rallying around the banner of privacy.

This prejudice has left American journalism ensconced in an ugly incongruity. When it comes to talking about homosexuality, newspapers often are more invested in lying to readers than in telling the truth. Hundreds of publicity agents in Hollywood and New York make their living by planting items in entertainment columns about whom celebrities are dating. Many of these items are patently false and intended only to cover up the celebrity’s homosexuality. Many newspaper writers and editors know this and cheerfully participate in the deceptions because the bits help fill their columns. Editors who would never reveal that a public figure was gay have no problem with routinely saying that that same person is straight.

The deceit is brazen and omnipresent. Virtually all the media cognoscenti in New York, for example, had heard talk of Forbes’s extracurricular activities in the gay world for some time before his death. Yet, the way the media told it, Forbes was an inveterate womanizer. Such deceptions have provided a powerful argument for outing proponents. After all, the ultimate standard for journalism—of even greater importance than protecting privacy—is honesty. Whether all the truth should
The AIDS arguments shouldn’t belie the moral problems with the breaking-eggs-to-make-omelets tactics. Coming out, after all, has long been a matter of personal choice. It’s highly ironic that gay radicals, who would go to the barricades to defend women’s right to choice in respect to abortion, are themselves the most vociferous proponents of denying choice to their own gay compatriots.

There’s also a nasty overtone to the whole outing controversy, particularly as this procedure is used against gay politicians. When the threat of outing is employed to pressure a public official to vote a particular way, it amounts to nothing more than blackmail, plain and simple. What makes this form of political extortion more reprehensible is that the weapon it uses to bludgeon politicians into submission is the very antigay prejudice that the movement has sworn to eradicate.

Such tactics can also have unintended consequences. Gay activists have unleashed a powerful new political weapon with their use of outing; it’s only a matter of time before their foes on the religious right realize its potency. Homosexual radicals would undoubtedly denounce conservative attempts at outing as homophobic, but the claims will ring hollow after gay activists themselves have claimed it as a legitimate political strategy.

None of these problems should belie the fact that outing is ultimately a quest for cultural honesty, which is certainly not at its apex. It is only beginning. Because the vast majority of lesbians and gay men do not acknowledge their sexuality, a certain lie has been allowed to pervade society. This lie maintains that homosexuals are some fringe group colonizing Greenwich Village, San Francisco and West Hollywood, and that gays truly do not play a major role in American life. That, of course, is not the truth.

Only through the maintenance of this cultural dishonesty, however, has prejudice—and the discrimination that bias generates—continued to survive. If the truth about homosexuals were to emerge and Americans were to realize gays are among this country’s most respectable citizens, antigay prejudice would rapidly evaporate. This reality is why outing proponents defend their actions with an almost religious zeal. They are fighting for an end that is undeniably beneficial.

It’s the means that are so problematic. Without any doubt, the world would be an infinitely better place if all lesbians and gay men were open about their sexuality. Toward this end, I, for one, have made a personal moral choice to be open about being gay. As a professional journalist, however, I would have an extraordinarily difficult time making that moral choice for someone else. All the good ends that can be achieved by outing do not outweigh the fact that the means are wrong. That’s why most of the nation’s gay journalists and virtually all of the mainstream gay organizations are on the record as being against outing. But such opposition probably won’t do much to deter the practice. It only takes a handful of angry radicals or one gay publisher with a printing press to accomplish an outing.

Add to this equation the fact that there are simply too many gay people in too many important positions in our society for the trend not to accelerate. As more people die from AIDS and grief radicalizes a larger share of gay men, the emotional lure of this end-justifies-the-means tactic will only grow stronger.

The other volatile factor is the tabloid press. Gay journalists breached a dam when they started exposing major gay figures. This obviously caused the tabloid press to rethink its long-standing reluctance to write such stories. Now, just about anybody who has slept with a gay celebrity in the past decade can sell his or her story to the National Enquirer for $25,000. It doesn’t take a psychic to predict that there are going to be a lot of takers.

This fact adds one last uncomfortable contradiction to the outing controversy. It is an outcome that should give pause to others who believe they can gain a noble end from ignoble means: Outing was started by those claiming high moral principles, but the involvement of the tabloid press indicates that its ultimate practice will likely be charted by those with no moral principles at all.

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