

Good looking and glamorous

Is the gay and lesbian community story becoming the latest accessory of the mainstream media? That was a key question in a seminar run by the Communications Law Centre as part of Melbourne's Midsumma Festival

Michael Gorton, commissioner of the Equal Opportunity Commission, gave the opening address at the Communications Law Centre's "Good Looking and Glamorous" seminar in February 1999. He said that Australia in general was sadly lacking in tolerance, harmony and reconciliation in its relationship with the gay and lesbian community. The GLAD Report (Gays and Lesbians Against Discrimination) in the mid 1990s indicated that gay and lesbian people were commonly the victims of discrimination. In 1999, gay men and lesbians are still at risk of harassment and physical violence in streets, workplaces and schools, while the media displays little interest and the general community avoids the issue, if possible.

In 1996, the Equal Opportunity Act was amended to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Victoria. Since then, the commission has been surprised at the number of gay people who have lost their employment upon revelation of their sexuality. Complaints of this nature are considered to be under-reported but anecdotal evidence suggests that the levels of discrimination are far greater than the number of complaints reaching the commission suggests.

The commission has found that the media has not reported gay issues well. Traditional cliched responses have been either the glitz and glamour of drag queens or controversial and sensational responses to gay issues from ultra conservative groups in the community.

A recent example of the media's poor coverage of gay sexuality was its inability to sensibly and professionally report on tennis player Amelie Mauresmo without resorting to tabloid-like comments concerning her sexuality, her partner and her physical build.

When the commission's "Report on Same Sex Relationships" was released in March 1998 its conclusions were not as controversial or as radical as some may have hoped. It advocated the elimination of discrimination based on same sex relationships and broadening the definition of de facto to include these. It proposed a register of relationships whereby people in same sex and other forms of relationships could register these and achieve a limited form of legal recognition.

Despite careful planning as to the release of the report to avoid sensational responses, the banner headline on the front page of the *Herald-Sun* was "Bid for Gay Parenthood". During the day, the paper recognised its error and corrected references in follow-up stories. But there was an explosion of media controversy from other papers and politicians responding to the *Herald-Sun's* incorrect report. When the rest of the media realised the original story was wrong, balanced and accurate stories were published and broadcast.

Gorton concluded by saying that the media is still dealing with gay stereotypes. Apart from HIV/AIDS, there is little reporting of serious issues relating to the gay and lesbian community. The media needs to realise that gays and lesbians are part of life in the Australian community.

Steve Dow, Melbourne correspondent for the *Australian*, was the first speaker on panel one which was entitled *Reporting*. He has worked at the *Herald-Sun*, Australian Associated Press wire service, the *Australian* and *The Age*, and commented that newspapers in Australia are "conservative beasts still living in the 60s". He illustrated this by telling the seminar that News Limited journalists recently received a red defamation booklet which lists homosexuality as "a private failing".

Gay and lesbian journalists still have to worry about being out in the newsroom, according to Dow. So when someone comes up with the idea about a story on a French tennis player who "plays like a man" and makes no secret of her sexuality, there is no-one there to say "this is not a story".

On the positive side, Dow said that festivals get good media coverage. Last year, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras received front page coverage in the Saturday feature sections of *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. *Good Weekend* magazine recently ran a piece about legal inequalities for gays and lesbians, and *The Age* intelligently reported the Equal Opportunity Commission report on gay law reforms both as news and a feature.

Dow suggested that it was in the opinion pages where gays and lesbians suffered at the hands of columnists such as Paul Gray and Bettina Arndt. Arndt, in an article concerning Dr. Kerryn Phelps and

her partner Jackie Stricker, said that their "controversial personal behaviour" should not be paraded in front of schoolgirls. It turned out that Arndt's daughter attended the school at which Stricker taught.

On the positive side, Kerryn Phelps was given right of reply in *The Age* and Jill Singer took Arndt to task in her *Herald-Sun* column. In addition, Michael Kelly of the Rainbow Sash Movement recently wrote in *The Age* a powerful opinion piece on gay youth suicide.

Dow said that gay and lesbian voices are needed in newspapers on a regular basis. Gay lobbyists, academics and health professionals need to communicate with the younger, empathetic, liberal reporters and section editors who are moving through the ranks and who will be the editors of tomorrow. These journalists can bring about the broader coverage of gay and lesbian issues in the mainstream press.

The second speaker on the panel was Kelly Gardiner from online media service ninemsn. She applauded the efforts of the gay media through the 80s and early 90s in its comprehensive coverage of HIV and other important issues. But she said that the Tasty raid had brought in comprehensive coverage of gay and lesbian issues by mainstream newspapers like *The Age*, and had left the gay and lesbian media in an identity crisis. Gardiner believed that this crisis has continued, with the gay and lesbian press still struggling to provide a community voice and to cover news stories.

The creation of Joy radio, Bent TV and gay and lesbian websites has taken some of the role that used to be played by the print media in providing a community voice. The Internet has been vigorously adopted by gay and lesbian people interested in new technology, as it breaks down barriers of isolation and encourages those who enjoy experimenting with issues of identity. Ninemsn gives access to a number of gay sites and information that ninemsn boss Kerry

Packer would rarely allow coverage of in his print or television empire.

Gardiner concluded by saying that the gay and lesbian media could be more diverse and that it could be better. She thought that convergence would see the introduction of professional net journalists and while the big players would dominate as in other media, small sites and players would always have a place.

"Homosexual" not defamatory

A NSW jury has decided that a suggestion that a man is homosexual is not defamatory. In considering Kevin Perkins book, *The Gambling Man*, the jury found a number of other defamatory imputations were conveyed. The ongoing trial of defences is expected to continue until late March 1999.

The final speaker on panel one was ABC broadcaster Terry Laidler. His message to the seminar was to "get real". He said that the media was not just about accuracy and balanced coverage, it was also about audience reach and readership. The quality of programs was effectively secondary to gathering an audience for advertising. In his view, the media was about entertainment. A sympathetic gay and lesbian character on soap opera *Neighbours*, for example, could have a far more positive and powerful impact on a mass audience, than any number of serious newspaper editorials.

The second panel, entitled *Portraying*, opened with a clip from television drama series *State Coroner*. The writer of that episode, Michael Joshua, gave the first address. He said that when he was growing up in the 1950s, gay issues were avoided in film and television, and only covered in the most subtle manner by theatre. After working for many years in the U.S., on his return to Australia Joshua found

that issues involving gay characters were just appearing in Australian drama. He wrote gay characters for television programs like *The Box* and *Number 96*. The stock gay character created then and still in existence today was the friend who assisted the straight characters while never asking anything for themselves. Rupert Everett's character in the Hollywood movie *My Best Friends Wedding* is a recent example. Gay and lesbian characters have come a long way in the past 40 years but there is plenty of scope for further development.

Julianne Goss from ABC Television was the next speaker on the panel. As a prominent volunteer with Bent TV (Community Channel 31) she said that it was always intended to speak directly to the gay and lesbian community. It was television for queer people by queer people, yet there was much interest in it from the straight community and the mainstream media.

The ABC was the first station to cover the Sydney Mardi Gras which was immediately a success audience-wise and for ABC Marketing in sales of videotapes (the Mardi Gras is now covered by Network 10). ABC programs like *State Coroner*, *Seachange*, *Raw FM* and *GP* have all had gay characters. There are more gay characters on television now than ever before, according to Goss.

The final speaker was Deb Verhoeven, coordinator of Cinema Studies at RMIT. She said that several Australian films could have been queer films, such as *Muriel's Could-Have-Been-Queer Wedding*. But while there have been several gay and lesbian characters in recent Australian films, she said that the Australian film industry still looks for more traditional product, so it is often difficult to find a niche for gay and lesbian films. <

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