News Media Representation of Homosexuality: An Overview

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Abstract

The discussion on news media are always parallel with the needs of the society in disseminating information with the supports of news media tools available (de Jong, 2006), in which; (i) magazines, (ii) television, (iii) radio, (iv) newspapers, (v) movies, and the (vi) Internet—shows that the media gate keepers set the agenda of an issue for the society to be aware of from time to time, and as a tool to perpetuate one's propaganda. Based on de Jong's view, the researchers assume mass media practices come with several ways in exercising media analysis focusing on a particular time period to generate more in-depth insights. As stated by D'Emilio (1983), a particular time period was often chosen because it led to some bizarre events that took place giving much significance to the society's social and cultural pattern (Gross, 2001). Based on de Jong's view, the researcher's prime focus of these inquiry is to get comparative apprehension on media representation of news media of homosexuality, in assuming mass media practitioners that come with general ways in exercising media analysis on a particular time period in order to generate more in-depth insights.

Keywords: News; media representation; homosexuality; McCarthyism; Mattachine Society.

Introduction

The media representations of homosexuals (male and female) were abundant with various events including the AIDS epidemic of 1980s and the gay and lesbian liberation of 1970s. D'Emilio (1983) explained the homosexuals (male and female) sparked its existence to be reported in mass media begun in 1950s in the United States of America. This time period is often remembered for its unstable political climate and a raging panic resulting in the McCarthyism phenomena. The term McCarthyism is derived from Joe McCarthy—a Republican Senator of Wisconsin, to symbolize the paranoia associated with alleged threats by homosexuality and communism took it on himself to purge the alleged Communist and homosexuals (being labeled as sex perverts) from governmental positions. Homosexuals (lesbians and gay men) were the main targets because of their perceived inability to conform to mainstream middle-class moral standards. As mentioned earlier, though the homosexuality reporting started in the stormy political climate and panic raged in the society, but the continuous progress on such reporting have become reflective of political and sexual intolerance propelling to put into existence the homophile of lesbian and gay liberation movement (Douglass, 1994). He added the McCarthyism and Mattachine Society were used to examine the advantages and disadvantages of media visibility towards the government's agenda.

Minority Groups

The mass media serve an important function in society particularly for minority groups (Berube, 1990). The mass media also controls and shape all individuals in society they interacted with. However, mass media representation somehow contributes to several outcomes in defining the homosexuals as minority. First, mass media image contribute to the construction of social values among the society. According to Douglas (1994) and Gross (2001), although most individuals do not rely solely on the mass media to define their existence, most people are affected by the images produced by the mass media. Douglas and Gross's argument on the mass media

influence towards women and gay men living patterns is continuously debated. The argument concerns on; (i) how these homosexuals perceived themselves, (ii) how they assess their position in society, and (iii) how they interact with others. de Jong (2006) stressed that entertainment media continue to produce an abundance of female stereotypes that leads to changes of women portrayal in media. This view is in line with the recent portrayal of women in most popular television series such as Buffy: The Vampire Slayer and Alias, or in several blockbuster movies including Scream, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, and Resident Evil which promoted the perceived ideal of female beauty with additional attributes portrayal such as strong, aggressive, and independent. Thus, women received mixed messages about themselves, while at the same time they managed to free themselves from conforming with stereotypical perceptions of femininity.

According to Russo (1981), the changes on women's images in the entertainment media paralleled with the images of homosexuals in similar arena. Russo's study of homosexuality in the movies such as The Celluloid Closet focused on the specific portrayal particularly on attitude and behaviour by the characters. For example, the cocky self-confidence displayed by Will and Jack from the NBC Universal sitcom Will and Grace, to the hatred and emotions despair of lesbian and gay characters in the past movies. Similar to that, any other show featuring lesbian or gay characters uncovers the fact that these shows still embrace stereotypical conceptions of what it means to be a homosexual. For example, the Queer Eye for the Straight Guy perpetuates the camp, well groomed, white and middle class (de Jong, 2006) in which a rival to women depiction in entertainment media; thin and young— in order to be considered as feminine and attractive.

Fundamentally, according to Russo (1981), the images of homosexuals in entertainment media comprises of two characteristics, in which:

(i) The portrayal of specific attitude and behaviour in characterizing homosexuals on a particular nature (e.g. cocky self-confidence or warmth and friendly);

(ii) Stereotypical conceptions of being a homosexual (well groomed, white, and comes from middle class status of demographic lifestyle).

Russo (1981) listed the following traits in tandem of the over-representation of gay men to be well groomed, white, and middle class has relegated those gay men from different races, very young and immature, poor, or from the working class background. Since the mass media represent a platform to the world's view for readers, viewers, and listeners, such effort to disenfranchised groups to invisibility would have certain effects on their daily life. Therefore, when groups of people do not exist in the mainstream media, the possibility of them to be discussed, critiqued, or examined by people including the key decision makers is almost impossible to happen. Berube (1990) stressed the portrayal of lesbians were almost invisible to be found on prime-time television but somehow that scenario is not uncommon. However, homosexuality was predominantly discussed as a domain reserved for white and middle-class males.

Berube's view on the strength of mass media in marginalizing certain groups in society is relevant due to the homosexuals' ability to perpetuate stereotypes. Their ability to perpetuate stereotypes is rooted in their ability to reach large audiences followed by the function of the mass media in shaping the society's thinking. For example, if those appeared on television were white male homosexuals, it could give inaccurate portrayal to the society since such images of gay men may make one to believe that homosexuality is a white men's trait. Berube added:

> Despite the stereotype, the gay male population is not as white as it appears to be in images of gay men projected by the mainstream and gay media, or among the 'out' men (including myself) who move into the public spotlight as representative gay activists, writers, commentators, and spokesmen (p. 236).

Similarly, the news media portrayal of homosexuals in specific labels including the 'sex perverts' and 'deviants' may have affected

the way society treated and perceived homosexuality, and how homosexuals perceived themselves (Kinsey *et. al.,* 1948). However, Kinsey and colleagues stressed that visibility is a common issue in negating stereotypes in the media. The role of visibility in negating stereotypes explains why media representation is often a double-edged sword for minority groups, which lies on two fold; (i) the frequent stereotypes on homosexuals, and (ii) the need for them to be visible in negotiating more accurate representations of themselves in the media. However, de Jong (2006) mentioned that media visibility was a privilege and never reserved for homosexuals during the early days of news reporting. In the news media in particular, homosexuality was something that was written about by 'others'—without disclosing the journalist identity. Homosexuals themselves were rarely given a voice in the news media. Based on de Jong's view, homosexuals were rather being represented by medical experts and politicians with the intention of condemning homosexuality. During the years of Mattachine Society, the homosexuals were given a place to positions themselves politically in order to let their voices be heard by society. However, the Mattachine Society had limited avenues available for its political activism and litigation purposes due to the rampant homophobia and anticommunism issues. de Jong added most journalists refused to jeopardize their careers by writing articles that could be perceived as pro-homosexual or to be associated with homosexuality and political ideology of communism. The social stigma of homosexuality became serious and chronic when those homosexuals faced the risk of losing their jobs, friends, and families.

Various authors and communication scholars including (Kinsey *et. al.,* 1948). agreed that news media functioned as; (i) source of entertainment whereby homosexuals made up the characters in movies and radio (Russo, 1981), and treated as (ii) information hub for print media since the television industry was newly develop during the early days. Kinsey and colleagues' views was supported by Johnson (2004) in giving similar insight where news media was not the only source of information, but also given the relative underdevelopment of information technology at the time resulted in the written news media

becoming a vital tool to set the public agenda. Thus, the news media technically determined what society talked about and shaping their minds, attitude, and behaviours.

Society's Attitude towards Homosexuality

Kinsey and colleagues' study on homosexuality reporting on news media provides several inputs to the society's attitude towards homosexuality responsible for the construction of social reality in general (Kinsey *et. al.,* 1948). According to their views, the social interaction and interpretation by individuals stretched to suggest that the way the news media reports on certain events and topics is reflective of the way society feels about these events and topics. However, they added that the news media's coverage of homosexuality helped to shape the public perception of homosexuality itself, compared to the portrayal of non-homosexuality issues during the early days on news reporting industry (Kinsey *et. al.,* 1948).

In other words, the absence of direct references to homosexuality in some news media may lead to insufficient definition to what homosexuality is. According to Johnson (2004), many indexed books were not including any entries for articles dealing with homosexuality-related news coverage. As a matter of fact, several authors (Johnson, 2004; de Jong, 2006) preferred to use other terms to frame on news themes such as; (i) 'sex crimes', (ii) 'sex deviance', (iii) 'illness', or (iv) 'employee security' and it was subsequently indexed as regular themes by the newspapers' archivists. Johnson's study on the prosecution of homosexuals in the federal government during the McCarthy era faced him with the homosexual invisibility issues since his consistent observation showed that most newspapers used coded language to report on homosexuality, alluding the homosexuality without mentioning it in their write ups.

Although the existence of homosexuality was acknowledged but somehow or rather, it was often reported with vagueness that made it necessary for the reader to read between the lines of the article. Johnson (2004) stated, it was common for someone to be called as; (i)

'moral weaklings', (ii) 'sexual misfits', (iii) 'moral risks' (to be related to employment in the federal government), (iv) 'misfits', (v) 'undesirables', or (vi) 'person with unusual morals' (p.7), even though there was no direct terms being used to be associated with homosexuality. However, Johnson added major newspapers in America such as the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times, followed by a few magazines such as Time and Newsweek were being transparent when it came to reporting on homosexuality. For example, an article by Los Angeles Times reported that there were about 5,000 homosexuals in the capital where most of them worked for the government (Johnson, 2004)—where the article was titled as such, "Congress Hears 5000 Perverts Infest Capital" (Los Angeles Times, p. 28). Another reporting that carried the similar portrayal was reported by Los Angeles Times on the firing of several individuals by the State Department where the term 'homosexuals' was highlighted dominantly out of its full headline "16 homosexuals and 5 other persons" (Los Angeles Times, p. 5).

Is homosexuality a crime? Alwood (1996) in his analysis maintains the fear of homosexuals was largely influenced by a fear of child molester. In fact, the criminalization of homosexuality was emphasized by its inclusion in articles dealing with sex crimes such as rape or child molestation. During the early years, engaging in sodomy or any other perceived homosexual activities among consenting adults was illegal in America. A Newsweek (1949) journalist used the term 'queer' whom he associated with the sex pervert, homosexual, exhibitionist, or even a dangerous sadist—somehow tried to emphasize to the people that homosexuality only involve the homosexual without hurting anyone but himself. However, the journalist continued to portray that homosexuality is harmful to the society emphasizing on the different category of sexual offenses involving the rapist, pedophile, sadist, and the homosexual (p. 52).

According to de Jong (2006), doubts on why homosexuals constitute a risk to the society is still unresolved. Rapists, sadists, or pedopheles are categorized as a risk to society. Criminal psychiatrist, J. Paul de River is still looking for explanation as to why homosexuals are listed in this category. However, Alwood's view on the child molestation by

homosexuals somehow solved the doubts (1996). His discussion on homosexuals' portrayal in the news media over the editorial's oversight remarks, questioned why homosexuals are associated with rapists and molesters or labeled as mental incompetents with uncontrollable passions. Indeed, Alwood has pointed out that no one can justify on why male homosexuals should be prime suspects for molesting a young girl (p. 16) as reported mostly in mainstream newspapers. As a matter of fact, most journalists failed to explain the sort of threats that a homosexual posed to society besides the classical stigma for them in becoming potential rapist, pedophile, or a security risk.

de Jong (2006) continues to explain on the perception of homosexuality as threat to society can be understood within the sociological context by considering the power dimensions involved. Power dimension here means the recognition by the federal constitution to argue the existence of homosexuality as illegal and sex perversion. He stressed that even though historians suggest the condemnation of homosexuality mainly involved religious concerns, it somehow fails to justify the classification of the homosexual in the category of immoral sex criminals which is at par with sadism, rape, and pedophilia. de Jong's view strengthen the justification on the doubts of heterosexuality to lose its privileges if homosexuality is being recognized by the federal constitution. Thus, this is the reason why homosexuality issues are discussed by medical experts, media, and the society without having to provide justifications from moral, legal, or political dimensions for its alleged threat to society. For example, one could compare the homosexuality issues with racist policies of the past that justified the mistreatment of African American due to their non-whiteness which symbolizes inferiority. As a matter of fact, the different ideology carries with homosexuality interpretation by the society is strongly related with a threat to social stability without solid justification. Alwood (1996) stressed that the reinforcement of social hetero-normativity were made by the people in order to ensure their social privileges are secured. Based on de Jong's and Alwood's views, the criminal matters regarding homosexuality are concentrated on two main issues which are; (i) the risk of losing social privileges by practicing homosexuality in the society, and (ii) recognizing the hetero-normativity as norms in securing social privileges. For example, the

debate on homosexuals' marriage serve the same purpose of sodomy charges since both matters somehow accepted as trend to current lifestyle. Therefore, every interpretation towards certain uniqueness by the society bounds to the time as prime factor due to its dynamic changes in the political and economic landscape.

Strecker (1953) in his article justified that although homosexuality was illegal and invisible during the early days, somehow or rather, not all media discussed homosexuality from the medical point of view. Based on Strecker's view, there were few articles that quoted medical experts' views who believed that homosexuality was actually due to a biological or hereditary trait and treatable through medication and therapy, while other journalists cited studies which suggested homosexuality as sex perversions. Strecker's study revealed that the attraction of male-to-male sexual orientation developed due to overexposed of motherly devotion (1953). Strecker explains the tendency of becoming a homosexual is greater when a boy's sexual orientation development is very much influenced due to his closeness to the mother, which was treatable with early detection.

However, LeVay (1996) stressed that not everyone believed in the effectiveness of treatment programs for homosexuals. He suggested that most homosexuals choose to practice homosexuality at their own preferences. An article of Times Magazine published in 1953 discussed the psychiatric treatment for convicted offenders on their pressure of bowing down to the law and rarely repeat their offense once out on parole—which is not happening to the homosexuals. LeVay's view is interesting and relevant because the medical debates are never ending to discuss on the issue of treatment programs for sex criminals and homosexuals. His discussion of research provides a good overview of studies on the biological origins of homosexuality. An example would be the controversy that surrounds the medical programs that allow for voluntary castration and hormone therapy for convicted child molesters and rapists where most offenders were strongly related to homosexuality practices.

The Three Fundamentals of News Reporting

Alwood (1996) makes an important observation when he questioned the three fundamentals of news reporting; (i) neutrality, (ii) objectivity, and (iii) autonomy. A series of articles on homosexuality consisted of editorials' insights written by medical experts in the medical sections of newspapers and magazines were analysed. As mentioned earlier, these articles were lacking in contextualization. In other words, the journalists did not manage to ask on why homosexuality was perceived as a sex perversion and illegal. This lack of contextualization can be explained by two factors; (i) the notions of newsworthiness, and (ii) the lack of homosexual visibility. Alwood's observation makes an important point when he found those three fundamentals are influenced by the idea of reality, which socially constructed and become a prime source of news to the society.

The media frames used by journalists will be based on the reality, which makes it impossible for the news media and journalists to be neutral and objective (de Jong, 2006). de Jong's view on the issue of gender, race, and hetero-normativity is greatly influenced by the ways in which news was reported to the public. He added most reporters and news editors during the early days were male, white, and middle class. Although these characteristics do not necessarily prevent an individual from being sympathetic to a cause of prejudice and biasness, these factors somehow influenced the individual's perception of reality and how it carries the newsworthiness. For example, the overrepresentation of news coverage of crimes committed by non-white individuals often linked to the absence of ethnic minority journalists and news editors in the newsrooms. Thus, race plays a large factor in the construction of news.

However, Chauney (1994) justified that given the homophobic climate in society during the early years somehow have not changed the framing of homosexuality even though with the presence of homosexuals' communities. At the time, Chauney revealed that homophobia was such a widespread and accepted social practice resulting in uncompromised journalism ethics with job dismissal

among journalists. Furthermore, during the Mattachine Society's era the homosexuals' rights' activists started to lobby the media by staging protests and questioning medical reports on homosexuality, which lead to large diversity of images. Chauney's views made the points that only few individuals would dare to come out in the national news media since there were no associations of homosexuals managed to get the opportunity to lobby the media.

Formation of Mattachine Society

 D'Emilio (1983) explains the formation of Mattachine Society was one of the first attempts of homosexuals to organize themselves politically with civil rights' issues. At the early stage of its formation, this society analyzed homosexuality through a framework of Marxist ideology since homosexuals were seen as an oppressed cultural minority. However, D'Emilio added that the Mattachine was mainly recognised for its perceived conservatism and accommodation politics. Following the earlier discussion, the Mattachine Society's era collapsed after the McCarthyism was formed, publicizing its ideology in hunting for communist and sex offenders (labeled as sex perverts) who hold position in the government sectors. This created a distrust of all communists and homosexuals not just those in the government. A moral panic occurred rampantly with a widespread fear out of proportion to the actual threat creating daunting ambiance in which anyone at anytime could be reported to the federal authorities for alleged communist sympathies and any other claims related to possible subversion. Any charges of subversions will be investigated under the House Un-American Activities Committee with the threat of life-threatening consequences for all offenders.

It was alarming when pioneering members of the society were affiliated with the left-wing political organizations urging more passive and conservative approach in order to avoid the government's scrutiny. Bowing down to the pressures of a more moderate political direction based on the current flow of governmental stream, the founding members withdrawn themselves from the board. The new board members of the Mattachine Society opted for accommodation

politics by inviting medical professionals to disseminate information on the problems associated with homosexuality. However, D'Emilio revealed this society lost most of its members due to more radical homosexuals' organizations which emerged after the Stonewall Riots in 1969 resulting in the demise of this association from the political landscape—recognizing the fact of Mattachine as the partial movement of homosexuals liberation organization's of the post-Stonewall era.

However, Johnson (2004) argued the constant comparison of communism and homosexuality as a prime threat to the society sparked the rapid growth of homophobia pandemic jeopardizing the national security risk. In general, Johnson's justification on homophobia somehow may have contributed to the journalist's perception of newsworthiness and to the ways in which homosexuality was framed. The homophobic climate was not associated solely on medical issues of homosexuality but also resulted from the political unrest on communism. In order to maintain public order and social stability, McCarthy was looking forward to get rid of the subversives whom he believed had positioned themselves in the federal government, exposing more chances for them to disclose government's secret information.

McCarthyism resulted in more than 1,700 individuals denied employment in the federal government due to their association with homosexuality or affiliations with homosexuals (de Jong, 2006). It justified the necessity for the exclusion of homosexuals from the federal government due to the issue of emotional stability by arguing those homosexuals facing such incompetency as a normal person (S. Doc. No. 241, 1950). Such claims were discriminatory to most homosexuals as they would not be able to withstand the pressure of blackmail given the persistence of stigmatization that homosexuality is a lawbreaking exertion. This is consistent with Taylor (1962) in his reporting which claimed that homosexuals were considered to be politically weak of character and potentially to be such threat to the government rather than to be seen as sex offenders. Taylor justified McCarthy's exclusion of homosexuals was relevant due to their tendency in setting

stronger association against the government. Taylor's perception on McCarthyism through the issue of male homosexuality as potential subversives reflects the way most media represented homosexuality during the early years: physically and morally weak, compared to those heterosexuals employed by the federal government who were considered to be more morally masculine and hold higher moral standards in society. Somehow or rather, the attempt to eliminate homosexuals from the federal government was seen as contradicting the notion of male homosexual's visible effeminacy, which appealing to McCarthyism's doctrine is being applied until today, especially in the current entertainment media landscape.

From the discussions, it is notable that there are a few mentions of female homosexuals in the media's coverage during the early years. However, several publications by Kinsey (1953) revealed that most homosexuals mentioned in the news media were male. As a matter of fact, the perception of male homosexuals as feminine and weak suggests that most journalists and society in general disregards femininity as what being perceived by the patriarchal society that men simply could not be threatened by women's existence (Kinsey, *et. al.,* 1948, 1953). Therefore, it could be understood of the situation where men felt easily threatened by other men in competing for power and social status quo, remaining the fact that most crimes are committed by men and not women—that again, reflecting the world's interest on male rather than female.

Conclusion

 At the beginning of this discussion, the double-edged sword of media stereotypes for minority groups was mentioned. The overview of news coverage of homosexuality during the early years showed that stereotypes concentrated under two major issues in which; (i) homosexuals were portrayed as white men who were easily detected by femininity traits, along with (ii) their arguable moral and physical ability. However, these stereotypes suggest that homosexuality was not only a religious concerns or medical digression per say, but it is also portrayed as the reflective of deficient affiliation. In other words,

the claims that homosexuals were exposed to treachery due to their sexual orientation suggested these homosexuals are actually at subpar in becoming a good citizen.

This justification provides two important points; (i) it elaborated the comparison between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and (ii) the issue of being responsible citizenship. According to Marcus (2002), the news media played an active role in the negative portrayal of homosexuals without questioning the government on how this issue should be raised from the beginning, perpetuating the idea that homosexuality was actually a sexual disorder matter. However, the visibility of homosexuality during the formation of Mattachine Society and McCarthyism epochs, which became the prime factor to the beginning of homosexuals' rights movement. McGarry and Wasserman (1998) discussed invisibility in the media, which denies the minorities a voice and equality to be represented without prejudices and biasness, disclosing the gradual pattern for further society's social segregation towards homosexuality.

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