

Media and gender: How has the story of Chaz Bono impacted media's portrayal of transgender people?

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Abstract

The coverage of transgender issues in serious media is relatively new and has been on the rise. In fact, the amount of stories covering this issue on the major networks and cable news programs in the United States nearly doubled in 2007 compared to 2006 (Hollar, 2007). Despite the fact that this topic is becoming less taboo, and is more frequently treated as socially and politically important, the coverage has still been predominately sensationalistic. For example, the controversy surrounding the pregnancy of a transgender male, Thomas Beatie, in 2008 was headline news for months, while the first-ever congressional hearing on transgender issues and the beating of a transgender woman in Memphis were barely mentioned (Kalter, 2008).

In addition, research has shown that the coverage of transgender issues has been at times highly offensive. The mainstream media tends to publish stories that feature transgender people involved in crime or scandal. Some news outlets, such as *The New York Post* and *New York Daily News* often feature headlines that refer to transgender people with sensational and dehumanizing terms such as “trannies,” “he-turned-she,” or “transvestite hooker” (Hollar, 2007).

Furthermore, the coverage of transgender issues tends to focus on anatomy. The media most often want to describe, define, and explain transgender people, instead of talking about the systematic discrimination they face on a daily basis or their political struggles and victories. For example, Larry King, CNN’s retired anchor, has had several shows on transgender people and their personal stories. In each of his shows, King would manage to ask his interviewees about their genital status, whether or not they had the surgery, their sexual orientation, their sex life, or whether they urinate standing or sitting.

Hollar (2007) argued that while people may be fascinated by the sexual life of transgender people, there are few instances in which someone's genital status would be pertinent to a news story. She wrote that the transgender community deals with some serious issues, such as placing transgender women in male facilities thus increasing their risk of being raped, but the media does not talk about that. She adds, "There are serious problems for the transgender community, and they exist because of deeply ingrained misconceptions—misconceptions that instead of correcting, media perpetuate" (Hollar, 2007, p. 30).

Furthermore, the coverage of transgender issues has been narrow in focus. The stories usually feature a white, middle-to-upper-class man that comes out as a transgender woman. Media coverage details her struggles around feeling trapped in the wrong body, surgeries, and the adjustment to a new life. Stories regarding transgender minorities or women coming out as transgender men are largely neglected or completely absent.

Research has also shown that journalists are not well educated when it comes to writing about transgender issues. They depict transgender people as tricksters, and give the impression that they live their desired gender in order to deceive others. Furthermore, the coverage is often times misleading and inaccurate. There is a tendency to use the terms "transgender" and "gay" interchangeably. The distinction between the terms in news stories is often times nebulous, or even non-existent (Kalter, 2008). Barker-Plummer (2007) analyzed the construction of transgender identity in public discourse surrounding the murder of Gwen Arajuo, a transgender female, and the subsequent trial and sentencing of her killers in California between 2002 and 2006. She found that journalists in their stories about Arajuo struggled over what to call her – he or she.

Barker-Plummer (2007) argued they felt compelled to take a stand on the issue and put her in one of the categories, instead of trying to find a way to represent ambiguity. She concluded, “Like other commentators, it seems, journalists’ real concerns were not so much how to adequately represent Araujo, but to “fit” her into pre-existing language” (Barker-Plummer, 2007, p. 4)

In June 2009, Chaz Bono, the only child of celebrities Cher and Sonny Bono, publicly announced that he was undergoing female-to-male gender transition. In 2011, Chaz Bono competed on the popular reality television show, *Dancing with the Stars*. At both points, Bono was interviewed and talked about in the national media. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact a high-profile celebrity has on the media’s portrayal of transgendered people. As has been discussed, media coverage of transgendered people and issues has often been narrow and sensationalized. This study seeks to add to this body of literature by examining national media coverage during the periods of time during Bono’s announcement regarding his transition, and during his appearance on *Dancing with the Stars*.

Method

In an attempt to better understand how transgender people are portrayed in American newspapers, a qualitative textual analysis of editorial articles from seven different newspapers is being conducted. Each of the researchers are reading and analyzing all of the articles chosen for the sample, using inductive methods of analysis to yield the richest possible results.

The subject of this study is the discourse around transgender people as expressed in newspaper editorials. The intent is to examine that discourse to determine if

it is consistent with, or diverges from previous media coverage of transgender people when the main feature involves a high profile celebrity. This discourse is a fundamentally human phenomenon providing insight into individual experiences surrounding the meaning of what it is to be transgendered. Therefore, the researchers employed a phenomenological research perspective to access the subjective consciousness produced by these editorials. This perspective is informed by the philosophical writings of Gurwitsch and Husserl who stress the constructivist nature of reality and the lifeworld as the location of individual construction (Gurwitsch, 1974). While final results are not available at this time, research is underway and will be completed before the February symposium.

References

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