

Queer Political News: Election-year Coverage of the LGBT Communities on National Public Radio, 1992 – 2000. *Journalism Theory, Practice & Criticism* 4.1 (February 2003): in press.

*Queer Political News:
Election-year Coverage of the LGBT Communities on National Public Radio, 1992 – 2000*

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Abstract

The American press no longer reports events but explains them, inadvertently enhancing the cultural authority of journalists. To discover how a prominent news provider exercises influence over political discussion, this case study content analyzes NPR political coverage of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities. Reports increased in length and number during elections, and the tone of LGBT reporting grew more positive than other coverage. As NPR manufactured news content more routinely and professionally, attention shifted from ordinary citizens to officialdom. Increased coverage was a mixed blessing, becoming more polarized as journalists balanced LGBT concerns against extreme right-wing attacks.

Length: 8,024 words (text), plus references, abstract, biographical note, and 4 tables

Keywords: elections, gay, homosexual, journalism, lesbian, news, NPR, politics, professionalism, radio, reporting, sources

In the 20th century, journalism transformed from a report of recent events into a forum for explaining them. Although motivated by the desire to make journalism more responsible and useful to citizens, the changes had an unanticipated consequence. The redefined journalism tended to enhance the authority of journalists and news organizations. National Public Radio emerged by the end of the century as an important institution of the new, long journalism. Its flagship daily news programs, "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered," reached a substantial audience of voters with desirable demographics. Corporate sponsorship grew, and the programs acquired a reputation for political reporting that covered a wide variety of groups in depth.

As journalists acquire the authority to make sense of the political world, their decisions affect who and what matters. Which groups deserve attention? Who may act as their spokespersons? The impact is felt particularly among minorities, and among them perhaps most acutely among sexual

minorities: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, who rely on the media to find and enter LGBT communities.

Queer news entered the mainstream with the AIDS crisis during the 1980s, and began to figure prominently during elections in the 1990s. By the time of the 2000 presidential campaign, NPR and other major news organizations covered the LGBT communities regularly. This study measures that growing coverage on NPR in the context of the newly redefined journalism.

Changing Definitions of News

In the 19th century political news at first relied on the transcription of official acts and ceremonies (Schudson 1978), but by the end of that century, when muckraking had begun exposing political scandals, the definition of news had changed. The pressure of industrialization on press production demanded more and regularized news. Journalists had to search increasingly for the *new*, finding more events that had not previously been told. By the end of that century, *the reporting of recent events* had become the core definition of news.

American journalism gradually redefined itself again in the next century. As corporate organization advanced and news work professionalized, news moved from retelling to explaining events. Several studies point to the trend away from denotative events reported first and toward an emphasis on the interpretation of events (Schudson 1982; Patterson 1993; Hallin 1992) and find that the level of interpretation differs topically (Iyengar 1991).

Previous studies of the proposition that news was redefined in 20th American culture focused on the overall patterns of content, including politics but also exploring other events, such as accidents and crime (e.g., Barnhurst & Mutz 1997; Steele & Barnhurst 1996), without examining the consequences for any specific group.

National Public Radio came under scrutiny in the early 1980s, soon after launching its flagship news programs, when conservative charges of so-called liberal bias led to an effort to limit the role for public broadcasting (and accompanied a budget crisis, Witherspoon & Kovitz 1987). One study found "All Things Considered" subjected presidents to more negative reporting, especially a sitting Republican (Larson 1989). Conservatives expressed antipathy in part because NPR aired features and documentaries analyzing social issues of the 1970s and giving disempowered people a chance to speak (Doyle 1990). The emergence of gay topics in the arts and the ensuing public broadcasting coverage played a role in bringing on the wrath of conservative critics (McCourt 1999), and prompted a shift in strategy.

In the 1980s, NPR abandoned its populist and experimental beginnings to move into the mainstream (McCauley 1997). To increase its audience and budget, the network sacrificed its alternative editorial stance toward diversity and adopted disinterested professionalism instead (McCourt 1999). Content analyses indicates that NPR joined the mainstream of American journalism (Stavitsky & Gleason 1994). Reports on its principal news programs became more interpretative and less neutral in tone, while growing longer (Barnhurst, 2002). Journalists began to play a new role as expert sources, they shifted from informing to evaluating, and they inserted briefer sound-bites from politicians. The LGBT communities were largely absent from the first studies of minority news (e.g., Greenberg & Dominick 1969; Greenberg & Brand 1994). The lack of coverage in the media at that time made queer people the victims of symbolic annihilation (Alwood 1996), the systematic exclusion of a group by those dominant in the culture who control the means of media production. When stories did run, LGBT people were usually objects of scorn (Pearce 1981). However, the image of homosexuals as immoral, sick, and a threat to mainstream society slowly changed (Nardi 1997). Historians have described and documented the early media coverage, which grew and became more prominent (D'Emilio 1983; ed. Gross & Woods 1999).

Media representations are especially important to sexual minorities (Fejes & Petrich 1993). Without kith or kin who have the same or similar identities and community ties, queer folk often

begin by discovering like-minded individuals and groups represented in the media. Publications primarily for queer audiences built a dominant habitus, describing the relationship between their lives and the material and symbolic circumstances surrounding them (Sender 2001). In the case of gay readers, a diverse grouping of representations in the activist gay magazines of 1970s was replaced by an open but narrower representation of an affluent gay consumer market. Unlike queer-targeted publications, mainstream media represent not the community to itself but the community in relation to those dominant in the culture. Marginalized groups see themselves infrequently in these media (Gross 1998), but even negative portrayals provide a point of reference.

A Case Study

As journalists take upon themselves a key role as interpreters, their impact on minority groups coming into public attention has not previously been documented. This study takes the LGBT communities as a first case, to begin discovering how often does NPR political coverage touch on the LGBT communities? How are the communities' issues treated compared to all other coverage on NPR? Is the tone of reporting on the communities more positive or negative than other coverage? Is it more interpretative and analytical or more fact-based? What kinds of sources do journalists use when covering the communities?

Transcripts for the entire population of LGBT-related reports during three election years, 1992, 1996, and 2000, were gathered through Nexis and the NPR Internet site. The search terms (with variants) included *gay* and *homosexual*, which appeared each year, and *lesbian*, which appeared in 1996 and 2000. The terms *bisexual*, *transgender*, and *queer* were absent from coverage.

The study time frame, September 1 through November 15, included the period anticipating the Labor Day kick-off of the autumn general campaign through the immediate follow-up coverage of election results. Any activity related to politics was included, not only elections but efforts by citizens to influence the policies of local, state, regional, or national public institutions, as well as policy-related activities of government representatives and officials. (There were no LGBT-related reports from other countries aired during the periods under study.)

For each report, coders recorded two manifest measures, the length and topic, and two latent measures: emphasis and tone. Emphasis characterizes the reporting (using a ten-point scale) from the most specific event centered coverage to the most general news analysis (Barnhurst & Mutz 1997). Tone rates the overall tenor (negative, neutral, positive, or mixed/ambiguous) of the reporting (adapted from Hallin 1992).

For speech acts, coders noted each time a journalist or a source spoke continuously, recording the length and the type of speaker (various journalists, politicians, experts, and non-elite sources), along with two latent variables: the relationship of each utterance to the LGBT communities (supportive, neutral/ambiguous, or antagonistic) and its tone. The coding proved reasonably reliable for latent variables, despite their difficulty, and very reliable for manifest variables (Scott's pi ranged from .79 to .96).

Expanding Reports

The amount of LGBT coverage remained quite small but increased. In the first year covered by the study Bill Clinton courted the communities' votes, the first presidential candidate to do so openly. As coverage expanded and became more regularized, an initial emphasis on analysis and interpretation faded, and the tone of reports on gay and lesbian politics improved. (Individual reports, cited by program and date in the text, are available on line at www.npr.org).

A previous study based on a randomly reconstructed week for election years since 1980 (Barnhurst, 2002) found no LGBT-related political reports until 2000. Coverage appeared to have grown into a small fraction of political all coverage (1 of 51 stories, or roughly 5 percent) by the 2000 election. That year's sample included a story by Wendy Kaufman covering the consequences

after the Supreme Court upheld the Boy Scouts of America ban on gay membership ("All Things Considered," Monday, October 9).

The gay and lesbian communities did, however, receive coverage during 1992 fall campaign. A complete census of reports found seven stories that year, and the number increased each presidential election year through 2000 (Table 1).

Table 1 LGBT-related political reports on daily NPR news during the general election seasons

	1992	1996	2000
Reports, N	7	11	13
Total length, h:mm:ss	0:38:15	0:56:42	1:03:51
Length, M			
ss (SD)	327.81 (229.27)	309.28 (160.86)	294.73 (135.48)
mm:ss	5:28	5:09	4:55
Emphasis, M (SD) (from 1 = event-centered to 10 = interpretative)	6.29 (1.25)	7.55 (1.44)	6.92 (1.12)
Tone, M (SD) (from 1 = negative to 3 = positive)	1.29 (0.49)	2.27 (0.65)	2.15 (0.80)

The NPR programs dedicated about 38 minutes to reporting gay and lesbian political news during the 1992 general election. In each presidential campaign since then, reports got shorter, as indicated by the mean lengths, and were more uniform, as indicated by the declining standard deviations. But the rising numbers of reports each year made the total time used for gay and lesbian news grow to just more than an hour by 2000.

The share of coverage grew stepwise, not abruptly, and was about what might be expected based on the previous research. For the period included in the study (10.857 weeks), the coverage grew from 2 percent of weekly political coverage on average in 1992 (3 minutes : 31 seconds weekly), to 4.9 percent in 2000 (5:53), extrapolating from previous research results (Barnhurst, 2002). During elections, news organizations pay more attention to politics than at other times, but the LGBT communities clearly became a more or less routine (albeit very minor) topic on the programs.

The time dedicated to gay and lesbian coverage varies widely with events of the moment. In 1992, Clinton talked about lifting the ban of gays in the military, AIDS activists protested the inaction of the first Bush administration, a controversy erupted over the publication of the book *Gay Ideas*, and there were several anti-gay-rights initiatives. The State of Colorado and the city of Tampa, Florida, approved anti-gay-rights measures, the State of Oregon defeated a similar measure, and the town of Portland, Maine, let a non-discrimination ordinance stand. These stories found their way onto "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered," making gay and lesbian news a part of the election season coverage.

In 1996, coverage included several hard-news political reports, such as Christian Coalition criticisms of Bob Dole for failing to focus on the battle against gay rights and Religious Right criticisms of Clinton's record on the issue. The defeat of an equal-rights measure and approval of the Defense of Marriage Act in the U.S. Senate also received coverage, as did the Hawaii Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage and the defeat of an anti-gay congressman, Bob Dornan (R-

Calif.). The coverage also expanded to include political features, such as the infiltration of right wing militias by an activist performance artist and informer for political watch-dog groups. NPR also ran two conservatives' commentaries on gay issues (and none supportive of the communities), but audience members reacted strongly against the commentators during most of that week's Thursday segment, called Comments and Letters from "Morning Edition" Listeners. The single demurrer by a listener came from a Colorado resident, who called to say "thank you, NPR, it's about time you had a conservative commentator on your program. I believe that for too much of the time NPR includes the vocal minority" (September 11).

In 2000, the NPR programs described national campaign events, including Al Gore's handling of the gay marriage question on MTV as well as religious right criticisms of George W. Bush's statements on gay rights. The passage of a civil unions law in Vermont was covered along with its effects on the election. The coverage included yet another gay rights measure in Oregon and an administrative decision in California giving equal tax treatment to gay and lesbian parents. First Amendment controversies erupted in public schools over their nondiscrimination policies and over the existence of queer-supportive clubs.

Coverage through these election cycles followed a clear trajectory. It began with issues of national policy and formal processes of referenda, along with an intellectual controversy that mapped onto the conservative-liberal conception of electoral politics that journalists find amenable to brief description. During the next election season, the coverage expanded to include more interpretation and commentary by journalists, with responses from listeners. The latest campaign still used formal events as a gauge of newsworthiness, but extended coverage to domestic and local concerns. Some of this was the inevitable result of changes in political events, of course, but coverage over the period did move closer to the level of LGBT everyday life.

The political reporting also expanded in another direction. In 2000, coverage for the first time included more than one story on several of these events. In other words, after an initial report on an event or controversy, the reporter would do an update on later developments. The routinization of gay and lesbian reporting tends to generate more stories and also more follow-up stories for ongoing events. The declining length and decreasing variability in reports implies the emergence of a beat for gay political news, as reporting became more standardized.

Gay and lesbian election-year coverage stood out less each year, after making a splash in 1992. The long-term trend for the news on NPR has been toward longer reports, which allow for fuller explanation and analysis. Previous research showed the average of all NPR reports ran four and one-half minutes in 1992 (270.92 mean seconds) and grew slightly longer in subsequent election years (to 281.56 seconds in 2000, see Barnhurst, 2002). Gay-related political reports started longer and got somewhat shorter, running against the direction for other news. As news reports got longer, gay and lesbian reports blended in.

NPR reports generally became more standardized in length. The previous study showed a declining variability in story length since 1980 (the standard deviation of 182.84 that year dipped in 1992 and then moved to 134.60 in 2000, see Barnhurst, 2002). Because the LGBT political beat was fairly new to NPR, it is not surprising that gay and lesbian reports varied more in length. A continuing variability (above the norm) suggests that LGBT political news is still more volatile than other areas of coverage, but the trend is toward greater standardization.

Political reports get special treatment on NPR. They have grown in number, from about a sixth of all reports in 1980 to almost one-third in 2000 (Barnhurst, 2002). And they have grown in length, starting out longer than average in 1980 (224.24 mean seconds) and remaining above the mean for most election years since then (281.94 in 1992, 291.32 in 1996, and 292.78 in 2000). The gay and lesbian reports started longer than the typical political report in 1992 but dropped closer to the average during the next two general election seasons. The length of time a report runs can open the possibility for more interpretation and analysis, the next aspect to consider.

Positive Interpretations

American news has changed in emphasis, moving away from event-centered reporting (Barnhurst & Mutz 1997). On a scale from most event-centered (1.00) to most focused on interpretative news (10.00), the NPR news programs followed the trend in other media (increasing steadily from 4.62 in 1980, and, after a large increase in 1992, reaching a high of 6.90 in 1996, before declining slightly to 6.55 in 2000, see Barnhurst, 2002). Gay-related political reports were not quite as analytical (see Table 1).

A report on AIDS as a campaign issue is a clear example of analytical coverage (“All Things Considered,” Thursday, October 29). Reporter Brenda Wilson traces AIDS policy back to 1981, looking at the motives behind congressional appropriations, the inattention of the Reagan administration, the budgetary shell game the first Bush played with AIDS funding, and the influence of AIDS activism on research, which led up to the speeches by Elizabeth Glaser at the Democratic and Mary Fisher at the Republican conventions that year.

That story (at 7.00 on the scale for emphasis) was higher than the 1992 average on the scale, and in 1996 the reports contained even more interpretation, well beyond the general analytical content of other news. A typical story that year titled, “Trial in Hawaii Could Legalize Same-Sex Marriages” (“Morning Edition,” Tuesday, September 10), analyzed the case of one of the three plaintiff couples, the state’s argument against them, the potential consequences in other states, and the timetable for a resolution to the issue — the types of analyses that legal reporting now does routinely on NPR.

In 2000, the level of analysis dropped back somewhat, although remaining higher than the 1992 level. The reports each year were getting a bit shorter, becoming more like other political coverage. Political reports have been more analytical than other topics. The levels of interpretation and analysis jumped between 1988 and 1992 (from 5.63 to 6.82, see Barnhurst, 2002), and remained near there in the next two elections (7.09 in 1996 and 6.67 in 2000). The changes were small, but in 1996 news analysis increased for gay and lesbian reports, while decreasing for all political coverage, and then in 2000 analysis in gay-related coverage decreased, coming more in line with other political news.

Tone has become a barometer of journalist-centered news (Patterson 1993). In political reports about gay and lesbian people, there was a marked shift on NPR. In the initial year of coverage, most of the reports (5 of 7 in 1992) were negative in tone. In 1996, almost half of all the reports were neutral (5), and the remaining were divided among positive (4), negative (1), and mixed (1). In 2000, there were equal numbers of neutral and positive reports (5 each), but the amount of negative coverage increased (3, with no mixed or ambiguous reports). As the new long journalism has advanced in various media, the tone of reporting has become more polarized. Within that context the coverage of the LGBT communities has moved toward the positive pole.

The tone of a report is a measurement of journalism. The ratings result not from the news events themselves but from the valence of the talk surrounding the events, including the journalists’ handling of the story and the responses of their selected sources. For example, a report in 2000 described how Vermonters went after state legislators who had voted for the civil unions bill (“Morning Edition,” Wednesday, September 13). The events were presented as negative — a backlash. The challengers spoke harshly, and the story described the consequences of polarizing voters. As a result, the report had a negative overall tone (a 1.00). The fact that it covered anti-gay politics did not in itself make the report negative, because tone does not indicate whether the politics are for or against the interests of the LGBT communities. In this example, even supporters were negative: the best the legislators under attack could do was to express sadness and respond philosophically.

When the tone of gay and lesbian coverage is considered along a continuum (see Table 1), with the mixed, ambiguous, and neutral cases at the midpoint between negative (1.00) and positive (3.00), the gay-related reports began as largely negative in 1992 but moved close to neutral in 1996. The tone became slightly more positive in 2000, and the variability increased (as seen in standard deviations).

The average tone for all NPR news reports has remained quite close to neutral during election years from 1980 through 2000 (see Barnhurst, 2002). Overall, reports had been slightly positive in the 1980s, and 1992 was the first year since the two flagship programs were both on the air that coverage became slightly negative (1.95). That shift continued in 1996 (dropping to 1.83 on the scale) before recovering in 2000 (1.97). Political coverage of the gay and lesbian communities in 1992 was much more negative than the average for *all* NPR reports, but became much more positive over the next two campaign seasons.

Excluding other topics on NPR, reports on politics have consistently been more negative in election years since 1980 (when the average for political reports was at 1.96, slightly below the neutral mid-point, see Barnhurst, 2002). Political reports reached a low point in 1992 (averaging 1.62 on the scale) and recovered slightly in the next two election years (1.72 in 1996 and 1.84 in 2000), although still somewhat negative in tone. Compared to the general run of *political* news, the reports including gays and lesbians were much more negative in 1992 — clearly the appearance of the communities in mainstream election news contributed to what was also a very negative political season. After Colorado voters passed an anti-gay constitutional amendment (“Morning Edition,” Wednesday, November 11, 1992), a report described the “blatant hostility” toward gay people, the feelings of fear and anger, and the planned legal challenge. The director of a community center said, “We’re also getting just a lot of calls of, you know, ‘You p— you people should die,’ you know, ‘We would like to blow all of you away.’ That’s the flavor of the calls.”

Although the negative tone of political reports generally on the NPR programs continued, the move of gay-related political stories into the positive range resulted in part from broader coverage for the LGBT communities. Political features, such as the interview with Human Rights Campaign Executive Director Elizabeth Birch (“All Things Considered,” Tuesday, September 10, 1996), contributed to the positive tone. Gays and lesbians were also mentioned incidentally in reports that were not focused on LGBT issues, suggesting a greater level of inclusion in the news. Most importantly, the speakers’ general perception of the conditions of life within the communities greatly improved during the Clinton years. Al Gore’s appearance on MTV included the well-publicized question about gay marriage in a generally upbeat event — and story — that concluded with the question, “Paper or plastic?” (he chose paper) (“Morning Edition,” Wednesday, September 27, 2000).

Shifting Sound-bites

Shifting focus from entire news reports to individual *speech acts* reveals who was privileged to speak on the NPR programs, whether they supported LGBT causes, and what tone they adopted when dealing with the communities’ news. In broad strokes, ordinary citizens led the way in support of LGBT issues, but then moved to the sidelines. Expressions of support arose among politicians and political experts, but the tone became more polarized.

Shorter *sound-bites*, the recorded words spoken by sources (not including reporters), has become the rule in television (Hallin 1992), but journalists’ speech is not as affected by the trend (Steele & Barnhurst 1996). In the previous study of NPR news (see Barnhurst, 2002), the average length of all speech acts (journalists’ as well as sources’) during political reports declined by not quite half from 1984 (30.63 seconds) to 2000 (17.20). Other topics followed a similar course on NPR.

The trend also emerged in gay and lesbian political topics covered on NPR (Table 2). As the gay and lesbian coverage increased, the numbers of sound-bites almost doubled, but the average length of speech acts declined somewhat.

Table 2 LGBT-related speech acts in daily NPR political news during the general election seasons

	1992	1996	2000
All speakers, N (per report)	126 (18.00)	163 (14.82)	245 (18.85)
Length (SD)	18.21 (15.82)	20.87 (20.29)	15.23 (16.73)
<i>Journalists</i>			
All, N (per report)	71 (10.14)	93 (8.45)	120 (9.23)
Length (SD)	21.27 (19.14)	23.94 (24.22)	20.00 (20.89)
<i>Politicians/officials</i>			
All, N (per report)	12 (1.71)	9 (0.82)	26 (2.00)
Length (SD)	18.16 (12.92)	15.30 (7.36)	7.75 (6.99)
<i>Experts</i>			
All, N (per report)	11 (1.57)	27 (2.45)	48 (3.69)
Length (SD)	13.94 (4.16)	17.67 (15.32)	17.39 (9.77)
Political, N (per report)	2 (0.29)	21 (1.91)	35 (2.69)
Length (SD)	14.11 (7.45)	19.12 (17.02)	16.30 (9.89)
Subject, N (per report)	9 (1.29)	6 (0.55)	13 (1.00)
Length (SD)	13.90 (3.84)	12.58 (4.76)	20.32 (9.18)
<i>Non-elites/citizens</i>			
All, N (per report)	32 (4.57)	34 (3.09)	51 (3.92)
Length (SD)	12.91 (7.79)	16.50 (11.17)	5.78 (5.81)
Involved, N (per report)	22 (3.15)	22 (2.00)	12 (0.92)
Length (SD)	13.97 (6.90)	16.46 (12.88)	7.76 (4.83)
Uninvolved, N (per report)	10 (1.43)	12 (1.09)	39 (3.00)
Length (SD)	10.57 (9.43)	16.58 (7.59)	5.17 (6.01)
Reports, N	7	11	13

Journalists maintained about the same length and frequency of speech during the gay-related coverage — a pattern seen in earlier research. Politicians and government officials had about the same number sound-bites, but the length declined precipitously. In the 1992 coverage, government officials who appeared most often were from health departments, speaking from their authority as administrators of medical programs. Politicians were usually members of Congress, who occasionally received enough time to explain a complicated point. For example, Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) had a long sound-bite (101 seconds) during Brenda Wilson's report on AIDS:

We have this incredible catch-22. If you're HIV positive and poor and you cannot afford the early intervention medications, we require you to get full-blown AIDS and then we will allow you to get on the Medicaid program and most likely treat you in a hospital and pay for expensive care that might have been prevented. You're eligible once you get AIDS, but if you know that you're HIV positive and haven't developed AIDS, you can't get the

pharmaceuticals to keep you functional. I just think that's insane, but it's a policy that the Bush administration has kept from being changed. (Thursday, October 29, 1992)

None of the politicians' spoke this long in the 2000 sample. Anthony Brooks, for instance, included only three seconds from Al Gore in a report on the MTV program, "Choose or Lose":

Christie: You call yourself a champion of equal rights.

Gore: Mm-hmm.

Christie: Well, I'd like to know how you plan to protect mine and my partner's right to the benefits of marriage.

Brooks: Gore stopped short of supporting gay marriage, but said he does favor legally recognized civic unions. ("Morning Edition," Wednesday, September 27, 2000)

James Christie, one of the audience of college students, framed a topic, Gore agreed, and Christie posed his question. Then instead of letting Gore answer at length, the journalist paraphrased him. These excerpts illustrate the shifting balance of on-air power from politicians to journalists, which has been documented previously.

Among the categories of speakers, some small but interesting changes occurred in the length of sound-bites from other sources (see Table 2). While the comments of experts got longer, sound-bites from non-elite sources got shorter.

Among experts (see Table 2), the number of sound-bites grew for the *political* sub-category: leaders of interest groups, associations, policy think-tanks, and lobbyists. They included spokespersons for organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the major U.S. political parties, as well as for LGBT groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal Defense Fund. The Christian Coalition figured most prominently among anti-gay groups, along with the organizers of initiatives against political rights for sexual minorities.

Where only one in three or four reports had a sound-bite from a political expert in 1992, a typical report in 2000 included the voices of two or three of them, almost ten times as many. The length of expert political speech also grew somewhat. While politicians and officials faced a shrinking role on NPR, political groups outside of government gained ground in the discussion of LGBT issues.

The other sub-category, *subject specialists*, worked for universities, research centers, institutes, publishing houses, and the like. These experts spoke considerably longer in 2000, but there were fewer of them per report after 1992. The specialists differed from story to story: medical researchers appeared in Brenda Wilson's report on AIDS, for example, and editors from mainstream presses as well as from gay-owned Allison Publications appeared along with an expert on the First Amendment in David Wright's report on printers' refusal to print *Gay Ideas*, by Richard Moore ("Morning Edition," Monday, September 7, 1992). These specialists might provide greater context, background, and depth in the reports — a goal of the new, long journalism — but only one of them spoke per report over the period.

Among non-elite sources (see Table 2), a clear shift occurred away from citizens involved directly in the events being covered and the uninvolved people of in-the-street interviews. Sound-bites from the involved non-elites declined markedly, both in absolute numbers and as an element within the average report, in a fairly straight line from three voices per report in 1992, to two in 1996, to one (or none) in 2000, the year the length of their sound-bites dropped as well.

In a 1992 report on the anti-gay-rights amendment in Colorado ("Morning Edition," Wednesday, November 11), reporter Mark Roberts included two sound-bites from involved citizens, both of them participants in a rally on Capitol Hill in Denver. Unidentified Man No. 1, in a speech at the rally, described the expressions of fear and support pouring in from LGBT communities around the country after the amendment passed (15 seconds). Unidentified Man No. 2, who participated in the rally, gave a reaction sound-bite: "It is a terrible feeling to be hated by

other people for something that you had no choice in” (6 seconds). Reporters referred to non-elite speakers as activists, most often unidentified gay men, such as the heckler at a Bush rally in Brenda Wilson’s AIDS report. In general they contributed coherent, fully formed thoughts in complete sentences.

The opposite tendencies applied to the uninvolved sources, who almost quadrupled in number. The average report allowed one or perhaps two onlookers to speak in 1992, but included more than twice as many in 2000. A habitual NPR listener heard only one gay citizen’s sound-bite from the sidelines per week during the 1992 fall campaign, but heard three or four in 2000.

By then all non-elite sources spoke in much shorter sound-bites. Although more numerous, uninvolved citizens on NPR had the shortest utterances, five seconds on average in 2000. The few long speeches from non-elites — such as comments by Avery McGrue (“All Things Considered,” Thursday, November 2), a college student at North Carolina State University, who identified herself as “a religious right member of the conspiracy” (20 seconds) — were outweighed by brief comments, such as the repeated shouts of “That’s right!” at a rally against the civil unions law in Vermont (“All Things Considered,” Tuesday, October 24).

The shift for ordinary citizens, whether directly involved in events or not, is best illustrated by the question, “Paper or plastic?” during Al Gore’s MTV appearance mentioned earlier. Their sound-bites resembled slogans, coming mostly from the disengaged. Despite a net gain in air time by 2000, non-elite voices lost coherence and shifted to bystander status.

Supportive Voices

The citizens, experts, politicians, and journalists on NPR also took more or less overt stands with (or against) gays and lesbians. LGBT-supportive speakers identified themselves as a community member, worked for a pro-LGBT group or agency, or spoke in a clearly pro-LGBT fashion about the communities’ issues (Table 3).

Journalists, who adopt a posture of professional neutrality, never identified themselves on the air as members or supporters of the LGBT communities (despite the fact that journalists from other minority groups may reveal, for example, their racial identity).

More government officials became open in their affiliation or support during NPR coverage. The voice speaking supportively during the fall election season in 1992 multiplied by five in 1996 and doubled again in 2000. By the end of the period, almost every story had at least one supportive politician or official speaking as a source. Like other politicians, of course, the length of their sound-bites shrank, but there was an overall gain in air time.

During the 1992 period, the single voice among officialdom heard was Joanna Ommi, then New York City director of AIDS policy, in the Brenda Wilson report cited earlier. During 1996 a few politicians such as Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Carol Moseley Braun (D-Ill.) spoke out in support of LGBT issues. Moseley Braun made an impassioned argument against the Defense of Marriage Act, equating the bill with miscegenation laws that had been struck down by the Supreme Court. “Here we are faced with the exact same arguments,” she said, “the very same arguments being made against domestic relations of another order” (“All Things Considered,” Monday, September 10). In 2000, besides a major figure such as the vice-presidential candidate, a variety of other officials spoke out. In two stories about the Vermont civil unions law, the gay-supportive political voices ranged from a justice of the peace to the governor, including State Rep. John Tracy, the house majority leader who said he was very proud of the law: “People put their heart and their soul in it” (“All Things Considered,” Tuesday, October 24).

Scholars, authors, and jurists appeared only rarely as subject specialists willing to champion the LGBT cause. The single case for the entire period occurred in 1992, when University of Illinois professor Richard Moore was interviewed about the controversy surrounding the printing of his book. The absence of LGBT-supportive voices could mean that subject specialists hew to a

standard of professional neutrality, are not out about our affiliations and convictions, or are excluded from the NPR news programs. In any case, voices of intellectuals were largely silent.

Table 3 LGBT-supportive speech acts on daily NPR political news during the general election seasons

	1992	1996	2000
<i>Politicians/officials</i>			
All, N (percent)	1 (4.3%)	5 (15.2%)	11 (34.4%)
per report	0.14	0.45	0.84
Length, M (SD)	34.34 (*)	13.39 (7.73)	8.00 (6.60)
<i>Non-elites/citizens</i>			
All, N (percent)	19 (82.6%)	18 (54.6%)	6 (18.8%)
per report	2.71	1.63	0.46
Involved, N	11	13	4
Length, M (SD)	14.96 (6.11)	25.00 (9.16)	8.92 (2.65)
Uninvolved, N	8	5	2
Length, M (SD)	8.67 (9.30)	18.70 (8.97)	4.76 (2.88)
<i>Experts</i>			
All, N (percent)	3 (13.0%)	9 (27.3%)	15 (46.9%)
per report	0.42	0.81	1.15
Involved, N	2	9	15
Length, M (SD)	4.11 (7.45)	22.55 (24.41)	18.65 (11.88)
Uninvolved, N	1	0	0
Length, M (SD)	5.64 (*)	(*)	(*)
Total, N (reports)	23 (7)	32 (11)	32 (13)

*Not applicable

Political experts, however, were on the rise. The representatives of LGBT political groups became the largest category of news sources speaking supportively. In 1992, these included leaders of gay-rights and AIDS activist groups, such as Nancy Gallagher of the Oregon "No on 9" Committee: "Gays and lesbians are part of people's families. Homosexuals are daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts. So we feel like we represent the side that supports family values" ("Morning Edition," Tuesday, September 29). (The 2000 coverage also included words of support from another representative of the Oregon committee.) In 1996 and 2000, many of the supportive statements came from two long interviews, with Elizabeth Birch of the Human Rights Campaign in 1996, and with Shannon Minter, an attorney with the National Center for Lesbian Rights in 2000. Host Linda Wertheimer let Minter, who represented the lesbian couple, do most of the talking during his interview on the California Board of Equalization decision to give gay and lesbian parents the same tax benefits as heterosexual parents ("All Things Considered," Friday, November 3).

Partly because of interviews like these, sound-bites from political experts replaced the advocacy of ordinary LGBT citizens. Non-elite voices declined from more than four out of five supportive sources during 1992 to fewer than one in five during 2000. Meanwhile, expert sources grew from one of every ten supportive statements during 1992 to almost half during 2000.

Table 4 Tone of LGBT-related political speech on daily NPR news during the general election seasons

	1992	1996	2000
All speakers, N (percent)	122 (99.9%*)	161 (100.1%*)	245 (100.0)
Tone (SD)	1.89 (0.52)	2.01 (0.52)	2.02 (0.46)
<i>Journalists</i> , N (percent)	67 (54.9%)	93 (57.8%)	120 (49.0%)
Tone (SD)	1.97 (0.30)	2.00 (0.29)	1.98 (0.13)
Supportive, N (percent)	0	1 (1.1%)	0
Tone (SD)	2.00	(†)	(†)
Antagonistic, N (percent)	4 (5.9%)	6 (6.5%)	0
Tone (SD)	1.50 (0.58)	2.00 (1.10)	(†)
Unspecified, N (percent)	63 (94.0%)	86 (92.5%)	120 (100.0%)
Tone (SD)	2.00 (0.25)	2.00 (0.15)	1.98 (0.13)
<i>Non-elites/citizens</i> , N (percent)	32 (26.2%)	32 (19.9%)	51 (20.8%)
Tone (SD)	1.69 (.69)	1.84 (0.63)	1.96 (0.63)
Supportive, N (percent)	19 (59.3%)	17 (53.1%)	6 (11.8%)
Tone (SD)	1.58 (0.69)	1.94 (0.66)	2.17 (0.41)
Antagonistic, N (percent)	11 (34.3%)	8 (25.0%)	17 (33.3%)
Tone (SD)	1.91 (0.70)	1.75 (0.71)	1.53 (0.80)
Unspecified, N (percent)	2 (6.3%)	7 (21.9%)	28 (54.9%)
Tone (SD)	1.50 (0.71)	1.71 (0.49)	2.18 (0.39)
<i>Politicians/officials</i> , N (percent)	12 (9.8)	9 (5.6)	26 (10.6)
Tone (SD)	2.08 (0.79)	1.78 (0.83)	1.92 (0.69)
Supportive, N (percent)	1 (8.3)	5 (55.6)	11 (42.3)
Tone (SD)	1 (†)	2.00 (1.00)	2.09 (.83)
Antagonistic, N (percent)	0	2 (22.2)	5 (19.2)
Tone (SD)	(†)	1.50 (0.71)	1.40 (0.55)
Unspecified, N (percent)	11 (91.7%)	2 (22.2%)	10 (38.5%)
Tone (SD)	2.18 (0.75)	1.50 (0.71)	2.00 (0.47)
<i>Experts</i> , N (percent)	11 (9.0%)	27 (16.8%)	48 (19.6%)
Tone (SD)	1.81 (0.60)	2.30 (0.72)	2.21 (0.58)
Supportive, N (percent)	3 (27.3%)	9 (33.3%)	15 (31.2%)
Tone (SD)	1.67 (0.58)	2.33 (0.71)	2.33 (0.49)
Antagonistic, N (percent)	0	12 (44.4%)	10 (20.8%)
Tone (SD)	(†)	2.25 (0.75)	2.30 (0.67)
Unspecified, N (percent)	8 (72.7)	6 (22.2)	23 (47.9)
Tone (SD)	1.88 (0.64)	2.33 (0.82)	2.09 (0.60)

* Due to rounding † Not applicable

Positive Coverage?

Although reports overall became more positive (see Table 1), what pushed the NPR coverage from negative to positive, against the currents for other political news and for all topics in the news? The speech acts during gay and lesbian political stories reveal details about the shift in tone (Table 4).

The average for all speech acts moved only slightly from negative to positive, in increments very close to the neutral midpoint (2.00). Although the direction was the same, the movement for reports overall was much larger (see Table 1). The difference has to do with two factors, how individual speech acts relate to each other in a report, and how journalists exert a controlling influence over news. One outburst by a homophobe might sully an entire report, resulting in a negative tone. Even a sustained string of negative comments in a news story comes interspersed with the reporter's statements as questioner, which tend to moderate the tone. In a 1992 report on Clinton's intention to lift the ban of gays in the military, for instance, Robert Siegel interviewed David Hackworth, a retired U.S. Army colonel then working as a contributing editor on defense for *Newsweek* magazine. Hackworth said Clinton was "rushing into a minefield which he knows little about, because he's never served in the U.S. armed forces" ("All Things Considered," Thursday, November 12). He cited the example of an experienced non-commissioned officer in Korea who "molested a number of young 18-year-old boys" because "he couldn't control himself" and claimed: "It destroyed that company's combat effectiveness not for a week or two but for a long, long period of time." When asked about President Truman's historic order desegregating the U.S. Army, Hackworth replied that "to compare black Americans with this gay issue is really an insult . . ." The report received an overall rating as negative (1.00). Only two of Hackworth's statements were completely negative, but they colored the entire exchange. When Siegel's questions are combined with the responses, the resulting mean score (1.82) only hints at the tenor of the report.

The mean for all speech acts tells less about the ways people talked about gay and lesbian political issues than does a closer analysis of the tone used by distinct categories of speakers. Journalists, who generated about half of all speech acts, remained impartial fairly consistently, neither for nor against LGBT causes, and their tone stayed very close to neutral. Besides the comments of Hackworth in 1992, there were several cases of negative comments in 1996. For example, in a report on the Defense of Marriage Act, Reporter Peter Kenyon used a negative tone in his assessment of the chances for the LGBT communities to defeat the act or win approval of non-discrimination legislation (Tuesday, September 10, 1996). Another instance was the negative commentary by conservative analyst David Brooks, a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*. Despite these exceptions, the canons of professional journalism were observed with remarkable uniformity, especially in the 2000 coverage.

That non-elite sources became, on the whole, more positive from 1992 to 2000, hides the movement within the category. Citizens who supported the LGBT community were quite negative initially. In the tone of her comments during a 1992 report on Measure 9 in Oregon, for example, Donna Redwing, identified as a lesbian activist, reflected the experiences of gay-supportive citizens:

A heterosexual woman who works for an HIV project in southern Oregon — the lug nuts on her car were — loosened, and so as she drove the mountain roads home, her wheel started to come off. Women living in a trailer that was sprayed with machine gun bullets. Just the most horrific kinds of violence I've ever heard of. ("Morning Edition," Tuesday, September 29)

In 2000 NPR projected a much rosier world. Community supporters were listening to lesbian mothers receive tax benefits in California, witnessing a presidential candidate endorse LGBT relationships on MTV, and savoring the passage of civil unions in Vermont. Even the repeat campaign for Measure 9 in Oregon was a different story, with a student, Tori Conrad, leading a high school rally: "I want to welcome you all to our nice big youth 'No on 9' rally" (followed by cheers in the sound-bite).

The anti-gay forces started out much less negative in tone, at least in their NPR sound-bites, but grew more negative. The pattern held for politicians and leaders political groups, as well as for citizens. Lon Mabon, the founder of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, had similar complaints in both 1992 and 2000 when he appeared in reports on Measure 9, but his comment on the 2000 campaign characterizes the shift: "This is the last great battle," he proclaimed. Only the expert sources did not become more negative. Otherwise, LGBT-supportive speakers became more positive in tone and those against the communities resisting the trend.

The Trouble with Normalized News

Minority groups in recent years have made much of their representation in the mainstream media. The complaints typically refer to the numbers, such as how many characters of a certain gender, race, or ethnicity appear in entertainment programs on television. Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund, in a report on how gay issues were covered, counted stories on NPR and compared them to those appearing in the *New York Times* and in *USA Today*, concluding that the broadcaster was not keeping up (Lambda 2000). The Lambda strategy raises a key question: What does increased news coverage really mean for minorities?

This study shows that not only has NPR coverage of LGBT news has grown, in numbers of reports (from 7 to 13) and in overall air time (from less than 40 to more than 60 minutes), but also the tone became more positive overall. If news more or less reflected the world, as journalists claim, these changes would reveal concrete advances in the political agendas and life conditions of LGBT communities, but the more-detailed examination of the data presented here tempers such a simple view of the groups' progress. Several dimensions of the results gave important insights into the changes.

One was the professionalization of LGBT sources. Among those speaking in the reports, fewer non-elites appeared on air, replaced by more voices of experts. When NPR covered the gay and lesbian communities during the 1992 general election, ordinary citizens were the main sources. The typical report about a gay-related political issue had about three sound-bites from non-elite LGBT-supportive sources. Apparently individual citizens took courage and stepped forward and were allowed to speak out for themselves and their communities. Over the course of the next two elections, coverage shifted so that gay-supportive non-elite sources had on average only one sound-bite in half of the reports. They were replaced by professional voices, the leaders and spokespersons of LGBT political groups (some of whom are jokingly referred to as career queers or homocrats), and by gay-supportive government officials.

Ordinary citizens do not have office hours or job titles, they are hard to find on deadline, and they cannot be relied on to give good sound-bites. They add a little spice and realism to reporting, but they lack authority. As journalists tried to make sense of LGBT politics, they relied not only on access to the communities (to the out-of-the-way places and out-of-power voices of real people) but increasingly on access to leaders and experts. While non-elites led the way, LGBT institutions established in the 1980s grew stronger and built ties to news media such as NPR. Reporters allowed these new voices to speak on air, including the established politicians who became allies of the LGBT communities. With the advance of Rolodex-driven or Palm-toting reporting, the *vox populi* retreated.

A second dimension in the results is the standardization of LGBT-related journalism. As new workers began dealing with LGBT politics more frequently, their work routines in effect produced a gay and lesbian beat. Besides relying on sources who were readily accessible, reporters produced more LGBT-related political reports, which grew shorter and more uniform to blend in with other reports.

The regularity, repetition, continuity, and integration of the content indicated greater standardization. To summarize: By 2000, 5 percent of the news time on the NPR programs contained some reference to gays, lesbians, or homosexuality. By 2000, LGBT-related political reports referred to the so-called archive of previous, related stories, giving reporters a sort of shorthand to cover the events with less basic repetition after 1992. By 2000, continuing coverage emerged for some LGBT news, so that after an event was introduced, another report would appear a few days or weeks later as a follow-up story. And finally, by 2000 the LGBT communities were no longer treated entirely separately in their own stories only but were also mentioned in other reports focused on other political topics.

These dimensions of the analysis suggest that the trends in greater coverage and more positive tone do not paint a simple or bright picture of an advancing political life for the LGBT communities. Instead, what is evident is a pattern in LGBT content of normalization, which results from the professionalization of sources and the standardization of reporting work. Rather than reducing the real discrimination experienced by LGBT communities, normalization instead produces contradictory results. The voices of queer publicists contribute to a feel-good veneer, a symbolic accommodation of the groups, who are allowed to represent a set of special interests. The representatives are typically of the least offensive variety (to the ears of dominant groups): well-spoken, professional, upper-middle class, and probably white. As such voices become the stock-in-trade of LGBT news, the supposedly factual depiction of community issues more closely matches representations of the communities as they appear in advertising and in gay magazines (Sender 2001) and, not surprisingly, becomes more like representations of the dominant majorities as well).

All this contributes to the sense that things are getting better. If lesbians and gay men see educated role models and prosperous depictions of their communities in ads, in specialty magazines, and in the mainstream news media, the symbolic well-being of the groups may be enhanced. That does not mean that individuals or even a majority of community members are better off.

The mere inclusion in news coverage, along with the normalized voices speaking for LGBT groups, may feel good to gay and lesbian listeners, but it has a down side: Normalization in fact works against reducing prejudice by masking it in a symbolic normalcy, which serves to reiterate the assumption of heterosexual dominance and centrality. It turns up in several other dimensions of the study results.

One of these is polarization. While LGBT-supportive voices became more positive (as more of them operated from a public relations position within LGBT organizations), statements by unsupportive sources became more negative. The polarization of the symbolic space is also related to the increasing control exerted by professional journalists, who define good journalism as balanced, that is, giving voice to speakers from opposite poles. LGBT-supportive sources were usually balanced against voices from the religious right. Each pole of the dichotomy existed at the edges of on-air political discussion. The technique of reportorial balance, while allowing LGBT life into political discussion, defines right-wing reactions as equally reasonable. Reporting can thus encourage the participation of extremists and reiterate their irrational slogans, fueling hatred. Audience members presumed to be of the sexual majority not only receive reassurance about their central position but also can observe a counterweight to any perceived threat from a queer presence.

Some of the polarized talk may reflect a real-world reaction, as opponents saw LGBT people getting attention in the media and respond with homophobia, but the polarization is also a product of journalism. The tendency to reduce issues to opposing sides, as Patterson (1993) noted, makes journalism especially unfit for building consensus and finding compromise.

Another dimension could be called pacification. Consider the fate of non-elite sources on the programs. As citizens directly involved in events disappeared, the remaining non-elite sources more and more often were onlookers. The sound-bites from these bystanders became shorter and less varied. Brief sound-bites reduce citizens' voices to reactions, shouting "That's right!" rather than presenting reasoned argument. The representation of LGBT people also became narrowed in other ways. More reports involved the personal and private lives of LGBT sources, including such activities as parenting (and state tax law) and school life (and the First Amendment). The process produced non-elite voices that were less involved in public affairs, less disinterested and less coherent, that is, more given to catch phrases and slogans. Through the processes of reporting, ordinary people are thus sidelined, contributing to the low levels of public participation that journalists and experts are quick to decry.

It is a truism in sociology that what people believe to be real is in fact real in its consequences. The sociology of journalism matters because symbolic reality is made up of these social facts. LGBT content on NPR reveals a normalized reality in which extreme attacks on LGBT human rights are treated as legitimate and voices of ordinary citizens are reduced to irrational outbursts. As LGBT people respond to the symbolic environment of news, perhaps the belief in an improving lot is better than none. But the coverage itself has split LGBT people into haves and have-nots: the gay men and lesbians who enjoyed a symbolic boost, compared to bisexual and transgendered people (to say nothing of the less common varieties of sexual nonconformists) who had no voice at all on the NPR programs during these election seasons.

Whether or not the lives and political issues of LGBT people have advanced, journalism has prospered on NPR. As gay-related reports have gotten shorter, journalists have held their own, speaking almost as long and as frequently. News is always in some sense about journalists. They normally deliver more than half the speech acts and talk longer on average than anybody else. They also operate the machinery, deciding who else shall speak and for how long. Although they achieved a near-perfect neutrality in their tone during LGBT coverage, that professional veneer may obscure the ways already enumerated of using sources: airing sound-bites with ordinary people reacting, politicians delivering one-liners, and expert sources speaking at length. These elements made journalists more authoritative and contributed to the explaining function of the new long journalism.

The impact of explanatory journalism on people outside the mainstream has not been examined previously, but clearly the new definition of news benefits the listeners less than it benefits the explainers.

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