

“I Wasn’t Born a Boy – I Was Born a Baby”:
Best Practices Versus Accepted Practices
in News Coverage of the Transgender Community

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By Anna Hornell

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ABSTRACT

As transgender people and issues have gained prominence in American media over the past few years, more and more journalists find themselves covering a small and marginalized community that they may not have any previous experience with. Using standards set by LGBT media watchdog GLAAD, this study aimed to examine how the prevalence of problematic journalistic practices in covering the transgender community has (or has not) changed in recent years. A content analysis of 1,019 U.S. newspaper articles from 2009 and 2014 revealed some significant changes: almost all GLAAD-identified problematic practices that were studied appeared less commonly in 2014, although most remained in use. Although the appropriate language may change as cultural understandings of gender evolve, the results of this study indicated that news organizations have – to some extent – incorporated the recommended practices put forth by transgender advocates.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The transgender community in the United States has seen a near-explosive increase in media exposure in the past few years. Meanwhile, for many Americans, the mass media may serve as the introduction to and only source of information on transgender issues, putting journalists in a position of tremendous power. This study will examine to what extent U.S. media outlets follow the standards set forth by the transgender community, and what still needs to change.

Background of the Problem

The transgender community – comprised of transsexual people, cross-dressers, and others whose gender identity or expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth – is one of the most vulnerable groups in contemporary U.S. society. Surveys of self-identified transgender Americans show their rate of unemployment is double that of the general population, and the vast majority who are employed or in school report experiencing harassment, bullying or discrimination (Grant et al 2011). Transgender people are more likely than the general population to live in poverty, be homeless, work in underground economies such as sex work or drug sales, be victims of violence, contract HIV (Grant et al 2011). They also attempt suicide at a rate many times higher than both the general population and the lesbian, gay and bisexual population (Haas, Rodgers & Herman 2014).

Meanwhile, the transgender community's small size – the U.S. transgender population is estimated to be roughly 700,000 people (Gates 2011) – means that for the majority of Americans, the only source of information on trans issues may be mass media portrayals. This may be a greater concern in the case of transgender people than for other groups that fit under the LGBT

umbrella; a 2008 survey initiated by GLAAD found that only 8 percent of respondents personally knew a transgender person, while 72 percent knew someone who was gay or lesbian (Harris Interactive 2008). The fact that so few people personally know openly transgender people potentially places journalists in a tremendous position of power to either uphold or change the status quo for this vulnerable group.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to analyze how U.S. media coverage of the transgender community differed between 2009 and 2014 in its use of certain practices identified as problematic by the LGBT media watchdog GLAAD.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to examine recent changes in transgender media coverage.

1. How has newspaper visibility for transgender issues changed between 2009 and 2014?
2. How has the newspaper portrayal of transgender issues changed between 2009 and 2014?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A Brief History of Transgender People in U.S. Media

Transgender issues were first propelled into the landscape of U.S. mainstream media in 1952, when Christine Jorgensen underwent sex-reassignment surgery in Denmark. The former U.S. soldier became the most written-about topic in the media that year, and consequently “brought an unprecedented level of awareness to transgender issues” (Stryker, 2008, p. 49). Skidmore (2011) has argued that at this time, Jorgensen and a few other trans women were allowed extensive media coverage because they embodied white womanhood, while other women were excluded because of their race, class or sexuality did not fit with the idea of a “good transsexual” that was being constructed.

In Jorgensen’s time, “transsexual” was the favored term for people who sought to permanently move away from the gender they had been assigned at birth. Decades later, in 1992, Leslie Feinberg would popularize the term “transgender” as an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity or expression differs from what is typically associated with one’s birth-assigned sex (Stryker 2008).

Transgender historian Susan Stryker (2008) has argued that transgender scholarship – both scholarship on transgender issues and by transgender scholars – has been marginalized within academia, and that because of this, much knowledge of transgender history has been documented in nonacademic venues such as documentaries and community-based publications, rather than through professional academic channels.

Possibly as a result of this marginalization, peer-reviewed research on transgender representation in the news is relatively limited – and some of the existing research uses

terminology that nonacademic transgender advocates, such as GLAAD, have identified as problematic. A 2008 study of the news coverage of “Steve” Stanton, a Florida city manager who was fired in 2007 after coming out as a transgender woman, concluded that “journalists need to be prepared to report accurately and fairly about complex gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) issues” – but the study itself consistently used male pronouns and Stanton’s birth name, rather than her preferred pronoun and chosen name (Kenney 2008).

Several researchers have focused on news reports on transgender victims of violence. Mackenzie and Marcel (2009) identified three main trends in newspaper portrayals of transgender victims of violent crimes, particularly trans women of color: “deception” and the “trans panic defense,” referring to the argument that a violent reaction to learning a person’s transgender status is justified; undermining transgender identity; and depicting transgender women of color as “socially isolated, hypersexual monsters” (p. 80). Slight improvements were found, however, between the murder of black trans woman Chanelle Pickett in the mid-1990s and the murder of Latina trans woman Gwen Araujo in 2002, which Mackenzie and Marcel attributed to transgender activism (p. 93). Barker-Plummer (2013) argued that the Araujo murder served as a critical point in public discourse about transgender issues, as pressure from LGBT advocacy groups made news reports about the crime become more nuanced over time – for instance, in the renaming of Araujo “from Eddie or Eddie/Gwen to simply Gwen.”

The Evolution of Associated Press Style

The Associated Press Stylebook entry on transgender persons – then under “sex changes” – remained the same between 1977 and 2000, save one minor word change in 1994. Since the new millennium, however, the Associated Press has made several changes to its recommended practices (GLAAD 2006).

In the original entry, a “sex-change operation” was the determining criteria in pronoun use. If a person had undergone such a procedure, he or she would be referred to using pronouns consistent with his or her gender identity; otherwise, a person’s birth-assigned gender determined the pronoun regardless of expressed preference (GLAAD 2006).

In 2000, the “sex-change operation” requirement was dropped, and reporters were instead instructed to use the preferred pronouns of “individuals who have acquired the physical characteristics (by hormone therapy, body modification, or surgery) of the opposite sex and present themselves in a way that does not correspond with their sex at birth” (Goldstein 2000).

The revised entry caused some confusion following the aforementioned murder of transgender teenager Araujo in 2002, as is apparent in a Columbia Journalism Review article on the murder. San Jose Mercury News reporter Hull (2003) wrote that the newspaper was at a loss for how to report on Araujo, who lived as a woman but had not transitioned through surgery or hormones. “What does ‘body modification’ mean exactly? Can it include wearing makeup?” Hull wrote (p. 10). The newspaper eventually settled on referring to Araujo by her birth name and male pronouns, with “Gwen” in quotes.

According to GLAAD (2006), the “hormone therapy, body modification, or surgery” requirement was eventually dropped in 2003, and in 2005 “transgender” was added as a separate entry in the Stylebook, although it still redirected readers to the more substantial “sex changes” entry. In 2006, “transsexual” and “sex changes” were instead redirected to the “transgender” entry, and the new entry instructed journalists to respect the preferred pronouns of “individuals who have acquired the physical characteristics of the opposite sex *or* present themselves in a way that does not correspond with their sex at birth” (emphasis added).

Transgender in the 21st Century

When Stryker (2008) googled “transgender” in late 2007 while doing research for her book “Transgender History,” she found 7.3 million hits (p. 25). The same Google search performed during this study in late 2014 returned roughly 70.5 million hits – a near-tenfold increase in seven years. While a Google search may not be an accurate or even particularly valuable measure of what has happened to American awareness of transgender issues over the past few years, it may speak to a larger trend of increased transgender visibility.

The year 2014 in particular brought about many changes in the transgender community. Early in the year, transgender journalist Janet Mock’s autobiography became a New York Times best seller (New York Times 2014), and later, Laverne Cox became the first transgender person to be nominated for an Emmy Award in an acting category (Whipp 2014). When Cox graced the cover of Time Magazine in May – the first transgender person to hold that honor as well – the cover story named the struggle for transgender rights as “America’s next civil rights frontier” (Steinmetz 2014). President Barack Obama signed an executive order prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity (Hudson 2014), and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel stated that he was willing to reconsider the military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy for transgender people (Reilly 2014). The Department of Health and Human Services (2014) ended Medicare’s blanket ban on coverage for medically necessary sex-reassignment surgeries, and California became the first state to outlaw the “trans panic” defense in murder trials (Molloy 2014).

While there have been relatively few academic studies on recent transgender news representation, trans advocates outside of academia have found a myriad of venues through which to critique journalistic practices. In January 2014, sports and pop-culture website Grantland published *Dr. V’s Magical Putter*, wherein a reporter, over the course of investigating a golf putter, outed its inventor as transgender, after which said inventor committed suicide

(Hannan 2014). Following heavy criticism of the story's publication, Grantland published a guest editorial by a member of GLAAD's board of directors explaining why journalists should never out someone as transgender against that person's wishes (Kahrl 2014).

Some transgender advocates have used their own media exposure to critique journalists in very public ways. When ABC News talk show host Katie Couric asked transgender model Carmen Carrera to confirm that her "private parts are different now," Carrera declined to respond, but instead criticized the way journalists focus on the transition and genitalia of transgender people (Couric & Miskowiec 2014). Later in that broadcast, actress Laverne Cox responded to a similar question by saying that "the preoccupation with transition and with surgery objectifies trans people," and that such questions take focus away from the violence and discrimination that many transgender people experience (Couric & Miskowiec 2014). In a Rolling Stone profile, trans activist CeCe McDonald resisted the dominant narrative describing trans women as former men, stating that "I wasn't born a boy – I was born a baby" (Rubin Erderly 2014). And trans writer Janet Mock similarly criticized being framed as a former "man" and "boy" in an appearance on CNN's Piers Morgan Live (Hess 2014).

Chapter 3

Methodology

Level of Analysis

This study aimed to examine the existence and evolution of problematic journalistic practices in covering the transgender community. News coverage of transgender persons and related issues from two six-month periods five years apart was analyzed. News articles were collected through two separate searches using the online database LexisNexis Academic – one gathering articles from Jan. 1 through June 30 of 2009, and the other from Jan. 1 through June 30 of 2014. Each search collected all available full-text articles indexed “Transgender persons” from U.S. newspapers during the targeted time period. The 2009 search yielded 707 results, whereas the 2014 search yielded 1105. As this study aimed to examine transgender representation in news rather than opinion journalism, articles in which the headline or subject line indicated that it was an opinion piece, column, editorial, commentary, review or letter to the editor were excluded from the results. Following this process, 490 articles remained in the 2009 data set, while 697 articles remained in the 2014 data set. Another 72 and 97 articles in the 2009 and 2014 data sets, respectively, were excluded during content analysis as they were either duplicates of other stories or had not been caught as opinion pieces in the initial screening.

Concepts

GLAAD’s media reference guide on transgender issues (2014) was used to identify problematic and/or defamatory terms and practices. These terms and practices were broken into four categories: problematic terminology (see Table I), older terminology (see Table II), defamatory terminology (see Table III), and other GLAAD-identified problematic practices (see Table IV).

Table I: Problematic Terms

Concept	What GLAAD (2014) says	Example
Transgendered	Since transgender is already an adjective, “-ed” adds unnecessary length to the word and may cause confusion	“... believes she is the first openly transgendered person from Minnesota to run for Congress” (Magan 2014).
Transgender as noun	“Transgender” and “transsexual” are both adjectives and should not be used as nouns.	“Transgenderers are not allowed to serve in the U.S. military” (Baldor & Jelinek 2014).
Transgenderism	This is not commonly used by trans people, but by “anti-transgender activists to dehumanize transgender people and reduce who they are to ‘a condition.’”	“Cases such as Penner and Cluse raise questions about the causes of transgenderism” (Friess 2009).
Sex change	The preferred term is “transition,” as “altering one’s birth sex is not a one-step procedure” but a “complex process that occurs over a long period of time.”	“A federal appeals court on Friday upheld a judge's ruling granting a taxpayer-funded sex change operation...” (Chicago Daily Herald 2014).
Pre-operative/post-operative	These terms, along with “sex-change operation,” imply that one must have surgery in order to transition.	“... she reportedly caught him cheating on her with a pre-op transsexual” (Shapiro 2014).
Born male/female or biologically male/female	Phrases like these are “reductive and overly-simplify a very complex subject,” and may imply that biology “trumps” gender identity.	“Luxuria, 48, was born and remains biologically a male but lives as a woman” (Herszenhorn 2014).

Table II: Older Terms

Concept	What GLAAD (2014) says	Example
Transsexual	Transsexual is preferred by some transgender people, but unlike transgender it is not an umbrella term; many transgender people do not identify as transsexual, so it is best to ask what term someone prefers.	“... a 19-year-old student at Purchase College in New York, who chose to be identified as a gender nonconforming transsexual female” (Ball 2014).
Transvestite	Outdated; the preferred term is crossdresser. Only use if someone specifically identifies that way.	“The play revolves around a group of transvestites in the 1960s...” (Evans 2014)
Gender identity disorder	Was replaced by gender dysphoria in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), published in 2013.	“He said those with gender identity disorder are uncomfortable with their birth gender and identify as a member of the opposite sex” (Parascandola 2014).

Table III: Defamatory Terms

Concept	Explanation	What GLAAD (2014) says	Example
Deception	Using terms like “deceptive,” “fooling,” or “tricked” to refer to a transgender person’s gender identity/expression	Gender identity is an integral part of a person's identity, and thus transgender people are not “deceiving” anyone by expressing who they are.	“... Zapata - who considered herself a girl since the age of 7 - tricked Andrade into thinking he was going to have sex with a female” (Whaley 2009).
Transphobic slurs	“Tranny,” “it,” “he/she,” “shim,” or “shemale”	These terms should never be used except in direct quotes to reveal the bias of the person quoted. “The person used a derogatory word for a transgender person” is preferred.	“Don't use the word ‘tranny.’ It's always pejorative” (Orange County Register 2014).
Bathroom bill	Refers to bills aiming to prohibit discrimination based on gender identity or expression in public accommodations	The term is “geared to incite fear and panic at the thought of encountering transgender people in public restrooms.” Non-discrimination law/ordinance is preferred.	“The House killed an anti-discrimination bill that had become known as a "bathroom bill" that opponents said would allow sexual predators into women's rest rooms” (Fahey 2009).

Table IV: Other Problematic Practices

Concept	Explanation	What GLAAD says	Example
Trans as sexuality	Transgender or gender identity described as a sexual orientation, sexuality or sexual identity	“Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.”	“It defines gender in terms of a person’s consistent and sincere expression of sexual identity...” (Kunkle 2014).
Wrong pronoun	Using the wrong pronoun to refer to a transgender person, when his/her/their gender identity is clear from the article – including when describing the past.	Ask trans people for preferred pronoun. If that is not possible, use the pronoun consistent with the person’s appearance and gender expression. Avoid pronoun confusion in describing trans people before their transition.	“... Michelle Kosilek, who was born Robert Kosilek and is serving a life sentence for the killing of his wife in 1990” (Sentinel & Enterprise 2014).
Avoiding pronouns	Completely avoiding pronouns in reference to a transgender person, when his/her/their gender identity is clear from the article.	While not explicitly mentioned by GLAAD, this is a way of not using a trans person’s preferred pronoun.	“Vincent recited a self-written poem called "The Look" (...). In the poem, Vincent encouraged compassion and understanding (...). The audience gave Vincent a standing ovation (...)” (Leal 2014).
Other misgendering	Calling a transgender woman a man or a transgender man a woman	Use the correct terms to refer to a transgender person’s gender identity.	“Teacher Muriel Ring of Somersworth spoke about her transgender daughter, who is now a man” (DiStaso 2009).
Disclosing birth name	Disclosing the birth name of a transgender individual (whether it is mentioned as primary name or as former name).	Disclosing a trans person’s birth name may imply that this is their “real name.” Trans people’s chosen names should be respected just like other people’s (e.g. celebrities) chosen names are.	“They identified the victim as Ricky Carlos Hall (...). Police confirmed Wednesday afternoon that Hall was a transgender woman who was known as "Kandy" (Fenton & Rector 2014).
Questioning name	Terms like “wants to be called,” “calls herself” or “goes by” used in relation to a trans person’s chosen name.	“... do not say ‘she wants to be called,’ ‘she calls herself,’ ‘she goes by Susan,’ or other phrases that cast doubt on the transgender person’s identity.”	“... the soldier previously known as Bradley Manning came out as transgender and said she wanted to be known as Chelsea” (Londoño 2014).

In addition to the GLAAD-identified problematic terms, the visibility of transgender issues in each data set was estimated in three ways (see Table V). First, the number of stories in each six-month period was recorded. Secondly, stories that only listed transgender (or

transgendered/ transsexual) as a part of the LGBT acronym, but included no other trans-related terms (such as gender identity, gender dysphoria or cross-dressing) or quotes from transgender sources were recorded. Stories that mentioned at least three out of four terms from the LGBT acronym were recorded, as “bisexual” or “lesbian” is often left out. Finally, stories that used “gay” or “gay or lesbian” as shorthand for LGBT were recorded; for instance, referring to the Human Rights Campaign as a gay-rights organization or an LGBT nondiscrimination bill as a gay-rights bill. While not necessarily incorrect, a widespread use of this simplification could point to a tendency in journalists to render the “T” in LGBT invisible – and Stryker (2008) has argued in *Transgender History, Homonormativity and Disciplinarity* that conflating transgender with gay is a common practice that marginalizes transgender people and may contribute to the misconception of transgender being connected to sexuality, rather than gender. When necessary, additional research was conducted to determine whether a group, event or piece of legislation was gay-oriented or LGBT-oriented.

Table V: Visibility-Related Concepts

Concept	Explanation	Example
Gay as shorthand for LGBT	Using “gay” or “gay and lesbian” in place of LGBT. Excludes transgender people, and may imply gay is the same as transgender.	Referring to LGBT Pride Month as “gay pride month”
Trans only mentioned as part of LGBT	Transgender mentioned as part of LGBT acronym but no other trans-related terms (e.g. gender identity, gender dysphoria or crossdresser) appear.	LGBT pride story in which only gay issues are discussed and only gay people quoted

Coding

Each article was assigned an identification number and read twice to screen for the existence of any concepts listed above. The article identification numbers were added to a spreadsheet, along with whatever concepts were included. Only a concept’s existence within an article was recorded – not how frequently it was used. If a concept only occurred within quotes in a given article, this

was included in the total, but the fact that it was only in a quotation was noted. Quotations may be used to reveal the opinions of a source, rather than supplying the reader with objective facts – but including a particular quote in a story is still the choice of the reporter.

Rules

For each term, a list was created of terms that were deemed to have the same meaning. For instance, “biological sex” terms included biologically, anatomically, genetically, physically male/female, born male/female, birth sex/gender, and sex at birth.

When needed, additional online research was conducted – for instance, to determine whether a particular organization was a gay-rights organization or an LGBT-rights organization, or whether a person identified as a man or a woman. For instance, a visit to an organization’s web site may reveal whether it is a gay-rights organization or an LGBT-rights organization.

If information could not be verified through a credible source, the information in the article was assumed to be correct. When a 2009 article from Indiana newspaper The Evening News and Tribune wrote about an individual, by the last name Mayes, who had been acquitted of robbery, the reporter identified Mayes as a man. However, a quote from Mayes’ lawyer stated that Mayes identified as a “preoperative transvestite,” who “sometimes dresses as a woman” and planned to have “an operation.” The description sounds like a transgender woman, in which case Mayes would have been misgendered throughout the article, but as no sources could be found to prove or disprove what was stated in the article, the information in the article was assumed to be true.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Visibility Analysis

The final 2014 dataset contained 600 stories, which was 43.2 percent higher than the final 2009 dataset, which contained 419 (see Table VI). The number of articles that only mentioned transgender (or transsexual) as part of the LGBT acronym decreased; as did the number of articles that used “gay” as shorthand for LGBT, although they remained the two most commonly occurring concepts (see Table VI).

Table VI: Stories Overview

Category	2009	2014
Total stories in dataset	419	600
Stories where none of the identified concepts were found	67	208
Stories with only visibility-related concepts	155	166

GLAAD-identified Problematic Concepts and Practices

All but one concept appeared in proportionally fewer articles in the 2014 data set than in the 2009 one (see Table VI, Figure 1). The occurrence of “deception” terms and “transgenderism” disappeared completely, although the latter only appeared once in all analyzed articles.

Table VII: Prevalence of Identified Concepts in Samples

Concept	2009	2014	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	Change (percentage points)
Gay as shorthand for LGBT	121	101	28.9%	16.8%	-12
Trans only mentioned as part of LGBT	141	158	33.7%	26.3%	-7.3
Transgendered	56	39	13.4%	6.5%	-6.9
Transgender/transsexual as noun	39	21	9.3%	3.5%	-5.8
Transgenderism	1	0	0.2%	0%	-0.2
Sex change	23	28	5.5%	4.7%	-0.8
Pre-op/post-op	3	2	0.7%	0.3%	-0.4
Born a man/woman	52	62	12.4%	10.3%	-2.1
Deception	14	0	3.3%	0%	-3.3
Transphobic slurs	8	5	1.9%	0.8%	-1.1
Bathroom bill	12	5	2.9%	0.9%	-2.0
Transsexual	42	30	10.0%	5.0%	-5.0
Transvestite	9	14	2.1%	1.9%	+0.2
Gender Identity Disorder	N/A	9	N/A	1.5%	N/A
Trans as sexuality	35	23	8.4%	3.9%	-4.5
Wrong pronoun	20	16	4.8%	2.7%	-2.1
Other misgendering	18	21	4.3%	3.5%	-0.8
No pronoun	4	5	1.0%	0.8%	-0.2
Disclosing birth name	50	32	11.9%	5.3%	-6.6
Questioning name	6	7	1.4%	1.1%	-0.3

The greatest declines in usage were seen in “transgendered” (down 6.9 percentage points), disclosing a transgender person’s birth name (down 6.6 percentage points), using

transgender/transsexual as a noun (down 5.8 percentage points), “transsexual” (down 5 percentage points), and describing being transgender as a sexual orientation (down 4.5 percent).

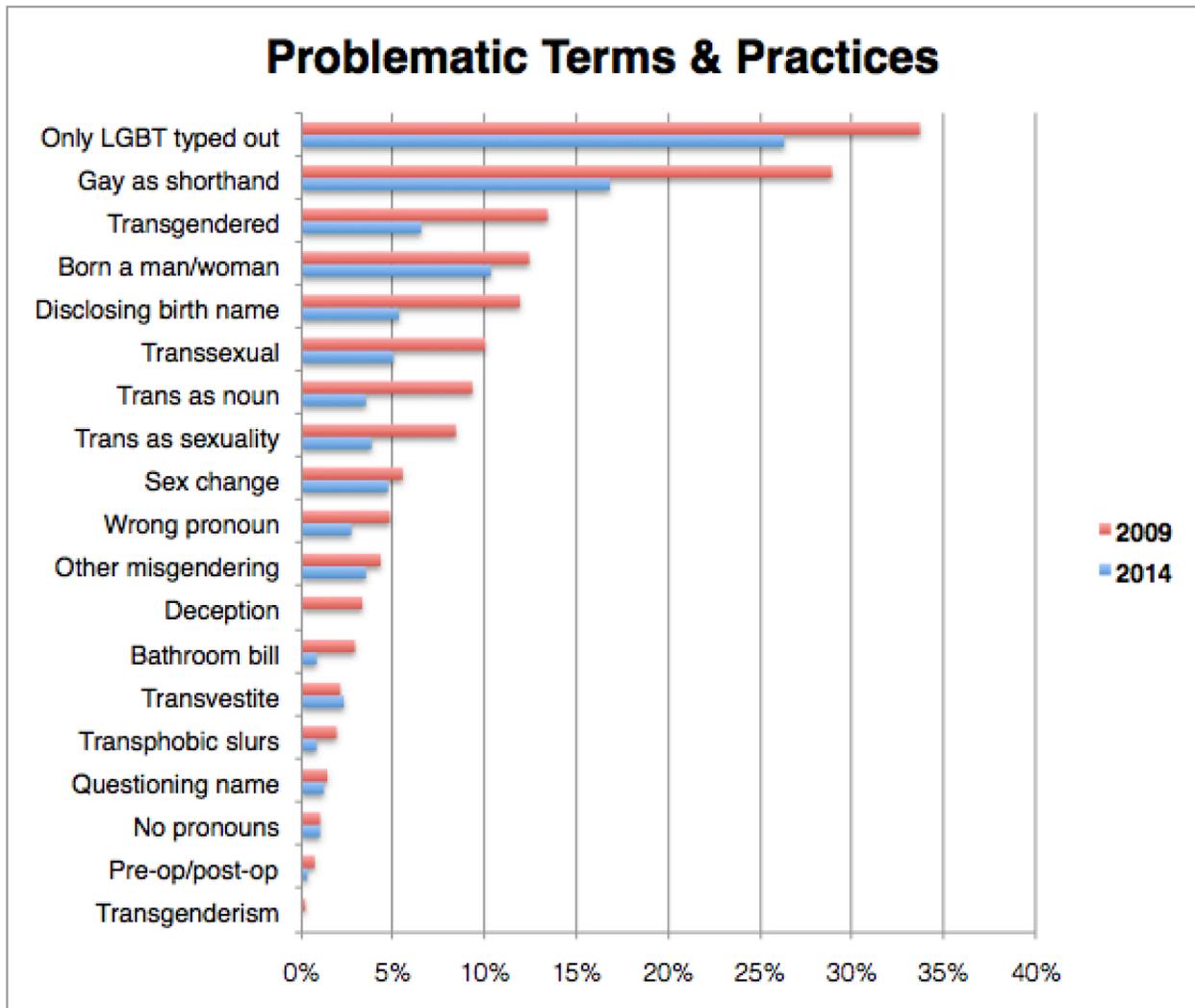


Figure 1. Change in occurrence of problematic practices between 2009 and 2014.

The only exception to the downward trend was “transvestite,” the usage of which went up 0.2 percentage points.

Nine out of the ten most commonly occurring concepts remained the same across both datasets, although all were less common in the 2014 articles: mentioning transgender only as a

part of LGBT, using “gay” as shorthand for LGBT, “transgendered,” “born a man/woman,” disclosing the birth name of a transgender individual, “transsexual,” using transgender/transsexual as a noun, describing transgender as a sexual orientation, and “sex change.” Of these concepts, “born a man/woman” and “sex change” saw the least amount of change between 2009 and 2014: a decrease of 2.1 and 0.8 percentage points, respectively.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

In analyzing the data from this study, some significant differences were found in how journalists wrote about transgender issues, and the following conclusions could be drawn regarding the original research questions:

RQ1: How has newspaper visibility for transgender issues changed between 2009 and 2014?

Although this study does not account for potential changes in LexisNexis article availability and indexing practices, the findings suggest that the visibility of the transgender community in newspapers has increased significantly between 2009 and 2014. The number of articles rose by over 40 percent, and the two concepts intended to measure a lack of transgender visibility in articles also decreased. The fact that 22 percent fewer articles listed “transgender” only as a part of the LGBT umbrella may indicate that journalists to a greater extent explored the lived experiences of transgender people in their stories. The decline of “gay” as shorthand for “LGBT” could be an indication of greater familiarity with the LGBT acronym among both media professionals and the public, as well as – perhaps – a greater understanding of the differences between the different letters within the umbrella. Given that the 2014 Associated Press Stylebook allowed the use of LGBT on first reference, there is reason to believe that this trend may continue.

RQ2: How has newspaper portrayal of transgender issues changed between 2009 and 2014?

The results indicate that media treatment of the transgender community has increased, as the use of all but two concepts that were studied decreased between 2009 and 2014. The two concepts that increased in usage – “transvestite” and avoiding pronouns in reference to a transgender person – increased by less than one percentage point. In the former case, part of the explanation may be the Broadway play *Casa Valentina*, a 2014 production centered on a group of male crossdressers. The writer and director of the play were quoted using the term – and the play is set in the 1960s, when “transvestite” was accepted usage. Although reporters could, and arguably should, still explain the context of an obsolete term, this may explain part of why the word appeared more.

Among one of the concepts that saw the greatest decline, disclosing the birth name of a transgender person, this study differentiated between stories that used birth names on first reference and on later reference. This was done because in the analyzed stories, birth name disclosures were typically done in one of two ways, both of which are not recommended by GLAAD (2014). Firstly, some stories – 14 in 2009, and 10 in 2014 – disclosed birth names as the primary name of a transgender person, with the person’s chosen name either not mentioned at all or mentioned as a nickname. Secondly – and this was the most common technique, appearing in 36 articles in 2009 and 22 in 2014 – birth names were disclosed on later reference in the context of describing a transgender person’s pre-transition past, such as “Jane Smith was born John Smith.”

Contributions

The results of this study indicate that as transgender visibility has grown over the past few years, there have been significant improvements in how newspapers cover the transgender community.

This is an encouraging sign that journalists are at least trying to learn and incorporate the stated requests from transgender advocates.

There is, however, still work to be done. Although few of the problematic practices that were selected for this study appeared in more than a tenth of the analyzed articles, their use could potentially be even less common if more journalists learned – or were taught – more about the particular issues involved in reporting on the transgender community.

Given the large sample of articles and the time constraints of the study, the practices that were selected for this study were selected because they could be identified relatively quickly in a story. Because of this, this study focuses primarily on issues of terminology, but there are many other ways for journalists to misrepresent or hurt the transgender community, some of which will be discussed in the recommendations for further research below.

In addition, this study does not take into account whether individual sources have either explicitly stated that they want to be identified in a certain way or agreed to a certain portrayal that differs from the general guidelines established by GLAAD. Journalists should, of course, respect the agency of transgender people who use language that GLAAD or other transgender advocates object to. However, media professionals might need to consider whether any standardized practices for contextualizing potentially problematic terms need to be in place for such cases, in order to aid in the readers' understanding of the diverse U.S. transgender community.

Recommendations for further study

Some GLAAD-identified problematic practices were deliberately not examined in this study due to time constraints. Firstly, GLAAD recommends not overemphasizing the role of specific medical interventions – particularly surgery – in a transgender person's transition. Over the

course of the study, multiple articles were found referencing “sex-change surgery” or “becoming a woman through surgery” – as if gender transitions were a one-step process, and as if there were not multitudes of possible gender-affirming surgeries for those transgender people who opt for surgery as one part of their transition. Other stories went into detail about individual transgender people’s medical decisions – and noted when they declined to answer questions about it – or referenced becoming “fully” female or male through a certain surgical procedure, thereby implying that transgender people who do not have sex-reassignment surgery are not fully the gender they identify with. Future studies could examine how surgery and other medical interventions are talked about in news, and whether there have been changes over time.

This study also did not look at how transgender people in news stories are identified as transgender, and whether they are identified as such even when that information is not pertinent to the story. Although such instances were not recorded for the official results of this study, several stories were found in the two samples where a person’s transgender status was mentioned despite it having nothing to do with the story. A 2009 story about a homicide, for instance, listed that the woman convicted of the crime was transgender, despite the fact that she had gone through her social and legal transition years earlier (Chicago Daily Herald 2009). As is evident in the Grantland story about the transgender putter inventor, publicly disclosing that a person is transgender against that person’s wishes can have devastating consequences (Kahrl 2014), which means that such issues may need closer examination.

Another area where further research could be done how to best implement the practices GLAAD recommends in covering the transgender community. It also may need to be considered whether implementing such practices would in any way pose a challenge to journalistic objectivity.

Study Conclusion

Although this is by no means an exhaustive study of the ways in which U.S. media cover transgender issues, the results indicate some significant changes – mostly for the better – in newspaper treatment of the trans community. Whether this is a temporary change or a permanently learned lesson, however, remains to be seen. Since mass media portrayals may be the only source of information on transgender issues that many Americans have access to, journalistic word choices, sensitivity to pronoun preference and explanations of trans-related concepts could mean a world of difference in removing the stigma around and improving the lives of transgender people.

While the appropriate practices in covering the transgender community are likely to remain a moving target as cultural understandings of gender and language change, it is reassuring to see that news media, or at least some segments of it, are making progress on problems that have been identified. It is also possible that as media professionals move away from the kinds of mistakes that can be avoided by a quick Google search – removing the “-ed” at the end of “transgendered,” for instance – GLAAD and other advocates can move on to more complex critiques of transgender media coverage, in turn allowing journalists to produce more nuanced and representative news accounts of the transgender community.

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