RE-SOURCING QUEER SUBJECTIVITIES: SEXUAL IDENTITY AND LESBIAN/GAY PRINT MEDIA

Abstract

With most critical discussions of lesbian/gay identities and media focusing on mass-circulation representation, visibility and stereotyping, the lesbian/gay community small press has remained neglected, particularly as it plays a role in the constitution of the performative lesbian/gay subject. This paper brings queer theory and communication theories closer together by focusing on both the reading positions inculcating subjective performativity and the mediation of contemporary discourses of sexuality. By examining the role of the gay press as an affirmative ‘first encounter’ site with oft-censored discourses of non-heterosexuality, it is concluded that there are issues of responsibility in the discursive foreclosure on sexual alternatives beyond the hetero/homo binary in contemporary media formations.

Because we exist everywhere but each of us must consciously identify himself or herself as a gay person, newspapers and magazines are uniquely important in our social movement. The writers and publications ... have, in other words, served an oppressed minority first by helping gay people identify themselves and then by speaking up and striking back against the powerful forces of prejudice and bigotry. (Streitmatter, 1995: xiii)

Although film, television, and recordings may reach more people, it is probably print media — with its relatively cheap technology and the possibility of private consumption — which has most expanded and extended the popular thinking and images of homosexuality. (Branski, 1984: 144)

Communication and media studies analyses of issues of sexuality have predominantly focused on the semiotics or political economies of representations of sexual identities in mass media. Running parallel, post-structuralist strands of queer theory — particularly those informed by the work of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Butler and Irigaray — have focused study on the discursive processes of subjectification of gendered and sexual subjects. However, the scope for the two fields to inform the work of one another has remained limited. This is partly the result of an unwillingness on the part of media scholars to break with the notion of the fixed heterosexual or homosexual subject as a priori givens in audience or representation. At the same time, there has been a significant unwillingness in much queer theoretical writing — only a decade old, so very theoretically young in that sense — to examine the political-economic, production and reading elements that are more commonly found in media/communication work. This is a particular lack in queer theory. Across the work which deploys Lacanian, Foucauldian and Derridean notions of subjectification, identities — or

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subjects — are seen to be constituted through discursive formations, whether that is through the linguistic operations of the Symbolic in the development of the psyche in a Lacanian analysis, or through the performativity of the subject as ‘in accord’ with the citation of particular discursive norms. A point that is rarely made, however, is that all such discourses are variously mediated through processes of production, reading, access, censorship (implicit or explicit), production values endemic to the culture of late capitalism, the economics of labour relations and the labour of audiences.

To open some directions in the joint work of media theory and queer theory, I have taken the long-neglected field of lesbian/gay print media in order to explore its very central role in processes of interpellation and subjectification of lesbian/gay identities, with a particular focus on the reading formations which inform a younger or inexperienced audience encountering discourses of non-heteronormativity for the first time in ‘queer press’ publications. By doing so, I want to display two significant points for the future of queer theory and communication studies: first, that notions of recognition of the lesbian or gay ‘self’ in the reception of texts are a highly unstable trope that needs further analysis, and second, that the positioning of an audience member of minority media formations as a member of audience-in-community inculcates a particular reading pattern which makes possible the subjectification of the non-heteronormative subject as a ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ subject.

Several years ago, Cindy Patton (1991: 386, n. 1) pointed out that the ‘importance and role of the gay media in the generation of the gay/lesbian subject in postmodernity has yet to be theorized’. I launch this inquiry from Patton’s dictate as well as through an example Valerie Jenness deploys, when she cites the case of a woman who, in encountering a lesbian magazine, The Ladder, in a magazine shop in Greenwich Village, New York, discovered a ‘legitimate universe’ in which she identified her desire with the periodical that was not full of ‘unhappy endings’ (1992: 70).

My concern here is to contemplate the ways in which younger persons are compelled to identify with what I call the dominant ‘widely available’ discourses of non-heteronormative sexualities — that is, lesbian/gay culture, as opposed to more marginal sexual knowledges outside of heteronormativity. This study pertains firstly to the heterocentric nature of discourses of sexuality as mediated through mass-circulation news and entertainment media and other Western cultural institutions such as family, education and peer rituals, and secondarily the marginalisation of alternative, non-essentialistic and non-hetero/homo binary based discourses of sexuality into obscure sites. Where the productive, circulatory and reading accessibility of the gay press is grounded in the secondary signifier of the hetero/homo binary, it presents a specific discursive representation of non-heteronormativity as lesbian/gay and forecloses on the more polymorphous, ambisexual and stylistically radical representations of sexuality such as can be found in various internet sites and underground-distributed ‘zines (Dunne, 1995).

In a queer theoretical formulation based in Judith Butler’s notion of identity performativity, the subject performs his or her subjectivity ‘in accord’ with given discursive norms through the repetitive citation of the signifier of that identity.
Where such signification is governed by various productions, mediations and readings is a significant — if not central — field of analysis in the ongoing inquiry into the generation of sexual subjects. I assert that lesbian/gay print media play a central role in that mediation by operating from an affirmative, lesbian/gay-positive set of representations, but the need to draw elements of performative queer theory and communication theories closer together is a need felt by all areas of media analysis into sexuality. To highlight this argument, I begin with a discussion of lesbian/gay media publications and the ways in which they must be understood as more than simply one among other ‘community’ institutions in the context of the formation of the sexual subject, since they circulate the symbolic codes which firstly imagine the ‘queer community’ and secondarily, if more endemically, provide the codes of intelligibility of lesbian/gay identity performativity. Following this, I discuss the shortcomings of several psycho-social models of ‘identity’ as being flawed in their claim that pre-identifiable lesbian/gay subjects come to discourses of sexuality as ‘resource’ and thus recognise themselves in the images, connotations and descriptions. I go on to examine the ways in which positioning an ‘audience member’ as ‘community member’ is implicated in the performative interpellation of the lesbian/gay subject.

**Lesbian/gay print media and community**

Much media research within gay and lesbian studies has ignored lesbian/gay community media and, no doubt for reasons connected with political claims to public sphere ‘visibility’ and ‘representation’, has concentrated instead on ‘mainstream’ or mass-circulation media. Particularly prominent among this research is the work of Vito Russo (1981) and Larry Gross (1991, 1994), both of whom make a now-outdated claim of lesbian/gay invisibility in mainstream media formations. This claim, however, does point to the historical need for an independent lesbian/gay press to carry not just lesbian/gay-specific news, but to assist in the building of a political minoritarian community. Steven Murray suggests that lesbian/gay newspapers and periodicals ‘are just another homosexual institution’ (1996: 72). This, however, reductively ignores the ways in which print journalism has greater cultural legitimation than many other institutions in terms of reception and consensus (Hall, 1982: 63–64; Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992: 14). Certainly, media formations are far more relevant sources of information on sex and sexuality for adolescents than family and education, as Greenburg et al.’s empirical findings assert (1993: 209). The greater importance of the lesbian/gay press as a site for the normative codes of non-heterosexual sexual performativity is for two reasons: first, because the legitimated journalistic rhetoric permits the circulation of the signifiers which are drawn upon or cited in a performative act of sexual identity; and second, because the publications circulate the symbols which, in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), allow ‘community’ to establish and police its borders. This sense of ‘community’ inculcates a particular reading position whereby the audience member sees herself or himself as an identifiable consumer of the text, positioned within the audience-community, as I go on to discuss below.
Dennis Altman likens lesbian/gay community media to ‘ethnic minority media’ (1982: viii). In a post-structuralist or post-colonialist stance, an ethnic minority is taken to mean a non-essentialist minority gathering under specific symbolic codes of language, history or customs (Riggins, 1992: 21). Riggins suggests that ethnic minority media tend to operate with both a cultural separatist stance and an assimilationist one by the provision of material which directly posits symbolic components coded as ‘cultural’ and ‘community’ material (1992: 13). Assimilationist material comes in the form of information which will assist especially immigrant minorities to be both accommodated in the region and to attempt to establish a social and economic ‘equality’ (1992: 4, 13, 17). For writers like Altman and Steven Epstein, lesbian/gay identity came to follow the ‘ethnic minority’ path laid out by the North American civil rights programs (Altman, 1982: viii; Epstein, 1990; Jackson and Sullivan, 1999: 21). According to my argument on lesbian/gay subjectivity as performative and the role of the text as inaugurating an encounter with discourses that disseminate the codes of performance, however, neither ‘ethnic minority’ nor ‘sexual identity’ is comparable, nor are the respective media formations which are produced in cultures that operate under their respective names. While Butler’s work on the significance of culturally hegemonic normative practices in the inculcation of performative gendered identities can be applied — differently — to both bodies of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘sexuality’, it would be reductive to assume that analogies of ethnicity and sexuality are compatible in the performativity sense: there is a specific and culturally legitimated age at which a subject encounters discourses of sexuality, whereas the discourses which uphold most other cultural ethnicities (racial or diasporic) are generally accessed at a much earlier point in a life cycle. ‘Knowledges’ and ‘truths’ passed down by families and within local ‘ethnic’ community formations, such as geographic ghettos, suggest that the inauguration of an ‘ethnic’ subjectivity occurs at an earlier age, at different times and thereby in ways different from the inauguration of sexual subjectivities. It might also be noted that the possibility of hostility of families, schools and other institutions to any non-heteronormative articulations marks a significant difference from familial affirmation of ethnic minority identities. Where both ethnic and sexual identities tend to be understood in contemporary humanist discourses as genetic attributes — the first through traditional racial bloodlines; the recent assertion of a ‘gay gene’ for the latter — sexual orientation remains a culturally inappropriate attribute to connect with pre-adolescent (and pre-adult) subjects. In that sense, a lesbian/gay identity is articulable only after a subject has reached authorised ages, and is thus considerably distinct from identities which are conferred in childhood familial institutions. The reading position from which either ethnic minority media or lesbian/gay press are accessed differs, then, and it remains the case that lesbian/gay media are frequently one of the first sites of discourse accessible which affirms any non-heteronormative articulations of desire, whereas ethnic minority difference is at least more likely to be disseminated within the institutions accessible in childhood.

Nevertheless, both media formations are central to the project of bounding their respective ‘communities’, much as daily newspaper consumption imagines and binds a nation (Anderson, 1983: 24–25, 32–33). This is significant if community...
understood not as in the liberal framework as a gathering of individuals of similarity, but as a cultural (discursive) formation which actively produces the identities it claims to have gathered. For Anderson, community-identity is a cultural artefact, the product of a complex system of historical forces (1983: 4). Anthony Cohen provides an important insight into how such a community is imagined into being by showing that its structures and institutions are subordinate to its symbols in generating a ‘community consciousness’ (1985: 76). In the case of the imagined lesbian/gay community, it is the lesbian/gay print media which effectively permit the circulation of the symbols (signifiers) such as ‘pride’, ‘outness’ and essential ‘difference’, imaged and imagined bodies, codes of desire and the desirable, trappings of identity-based lifestyle and consumption. All of these operate to bound the community, police its borders, and can be deployed in the Foucauldian sense of surveillance and self-surveillance of the community’s supposed ‘members’, its ‘identities’.

The signifiers which make lesbian/gay community possible do so on the basis of a cultural assertion of opposition, fixed as they are in the citation of a hetero/homo binary and the affirmation of its second (subordinate) term against the first. In circulating the symbolic codes of community such as the groundedness of hetero/homo distinctions and both the fixity and totalisational status of sexual identity, such media formations inadvertently disseminate the codes drawn upon to make the performativity of sexual subjectivity intelligible and coherent. As a mediated site for the discourses providing codes of intelligibility for lesbian/gay subjective articulations, the lesbian/gay print media do so with legitimacy and authority, representing a ‘truth’ that homosexuality and homosexual identity is the only alternative to heterosexuality. This is conveyed not only through the tone of truthful authority accorded in journalistic accounts — and the lesbian/gay press has become increasingly professionalised in its journalism (Goddard, 1996: 2) — but through the glossy representation of images of ‘happiness’ and ‘pleasure’ among groups of people in bar/club photographs and other ‘social pages’ imagery, the message being that one will be contented if that identification is made. Few of those featured in the publications’ images can be read as indicating an ‘unhappiness’ with their lesbian/gay identity, suggesting that such an identity is the passport to a stable and utopic ‘community’ place. Further, the fact that the gay press operates to represent non-heterosexual persons in their own voices conveys an additional and highly powerful sense of truth, legitimisation and authority (Fejes, 1997: 107). By positing ‘homosexuality’ as non-heteronormativity’s only possible articulation, it marginalises alternative ‘truths’ of sexuality, maintains the hetero/homo dyad and interpellates the non-heteronormative resource-seeker as lesbian or gay.

**Resource and recognition**

Most media analyses examining lesbian/gay identities either in representation or reception acknowledge that media and mediated discourse play at least some role in the processes of development and stabilisation of identities. However, most of these models have either predated or distanced themselves from post-structuralist queer theoretical models that assert there is no underlying foundation behind the identities that are represented or receptive to media texts. This has been a replication...
of what Foucault rejects as an older real/ideology dichotomy, where real is understood to be a discoverable ‘truth’ overlaid or obscured by ideological forces (Foucault, 1980: 118). This retention of a notion of real foundations is an extension of an older lesbian/gay media studies position, driven by a need to address the false or stereotyped representations — or lack of representation altogether — of non-heteronormative subjects in mass-circulation media. While it remains important to address the invisibility or stereotypical representations of non-heterosexual identities in media texts, the presumption of identifiable fixed same-sex desires problematically asserts two notions: that those allegedly fixed identities come to media texts (and frequently lesbian/gay print media) in search of a ‘resource’ for the specific behaviour codes of articulating that already-given identity. For example, Larry Gross suggests that ‘identity formation for lesbian and gay people requires the strength and determination to swim against the cultural stream that one is immersed in at birth’ and thereby come to require media texts which contain representations of lesbian/gay cultural identities (1998: 91). Similarly, Alan McKee’s study of the first encounters had by gay men with television examples of non-heterosexuality (2000) is grounded in a knowledge of sexuality as fixed, where the variabilities encountered through the media are in the field of the ‘self-esteem’ of those fixed gay subjects. Both of these lines of thinking are in accord with lesbian/gay cultural assertions of fixed identities which come to be recognised in media texts. This is a position that is best articulated in psycho-socialisationist literature, but is widely held in lesbian/gay community discourse. Vivienne Cass, for example, identifies six stages of identity construction, leading from ‘identity confusion’ through a move toward a homosexual self-image as ‘identity tolerance’ toward ‘identity pride’ and the synthesis of a homosexual identity as an integral but not sole element of a personal ‘self’ (Cass, 1979; Nungesser, 1983: 77-78). While this model usefully indicates the constructedness of identity and the reliance on the necessity of cultural/symbolic resources to move through the six steps, it suggests an essentialist predisposition to seeking (and recognising) those resources. Her model asserts an already-present identity and, although it does not suggest an origin such as the recent popularly expressed ‘gay gene’, the model is firmly rooted in a foundation — desire that is yet to be recognised as lesbian/gay desire.

The identity that is relegated to the ‘pre-identity’ involves two significant flaws. First, it rests on the idea that a private ‘pre-identity’ is something which comes to be expressed in some sort of ‘public’ way by the use of particular denotative labels. ‘Coming out’ is the usual term for this expression, and these psychological-socialisationist theories rely heavily on an analysis of whether or not a subject is ‘out’ in terms of the identity. ‘Outness’ is grounded in a very unstable and reductive notion of public versus private, of internal versus external. Second, it involves a fixity of sexual ‘desire’ that is read through a gender orientation rather than through other factors which might include time, place, space, class denotation, fashion, rebellion or any other set of attributes demarcating erotic/emotional attraction (Sedgwick, 1990: 26, 31, 35).

Self-recognition, then, becomes the central trope of lesbian/gay media analyses, and it could be asserted that this is as much to do with lesbian/gay cultural...
I've always been gay. I know that for sure even though I never made a connection with the word 'gay' until my mid-teens. (1999: 130)

While such a claim suggests retrospectively that a subject with a fixed non-heterosexual (i.e. lesbian or gay) sexual identity seeks or stumbles across a resource, and recognises herself or himself in the text, I suggest instead that the recognition is always a re-cognition (or re-thinking) of that subject's sexuality 'in accord' with the significations of the hetero/homo binary. This is in line with Butler's analysis of performativity, whereby she asserts that identities come into being only through significatory practices which operate to conceal their workings and naturalise their effects, such as a coherent, foundationalist subject (1990: 144). In that sense, then, there is no lesbian or gay subject — regardless of whether those particular names are used — who comes to recognise himself or herself in lesbian/gay media articulations, but in the process of reading, and reading as 'resource', the subject is re-constituted as a lesbian or gay subject in line with a contemporary Western cultural imperative to be a coherent, unified and recognisably intelligible sexual being. This re-constitution or re-cognition involves the re-signification of past memories through the discursive deployment of the hetero/homo binary that is articulated as a powerful nodal 'truth' in contemporary Western media texts dealing with sexuality, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Rather than a subject coming to recognise herself or himself in media texts, I suggest that a large number of subjects who do not, or would not, or could not identify as heterosexual come to these texts in order not only to fulfil the imperative of coherence and intelligibility in cultural terms, but to find ways in which to articulate a sexuality (and a requisite set of desires, erotic or otherwise) that is not heteronormative. Because non-heteronormativity does not automatically imply a 'homosexuality', but any range of identifiable desires that are outside articulations of opposite-sex attractions, there is no given reason why those subjects in their 'first encounter' should recognise themselves, but that in the subjection to the text, such readers come to recognise themselves, their desires, their identity as lesbian or gay.

What remains important here, however, is the fact that there is a requisite need for a 'resource'. Given the widespread censorship and prohibition of sexual knowledge from children and youth in Western culture (Evans, 1993: 210; Cover, 2000a), there is a given, culturally legitimate age at which the imperative to be (a sexual being) is inferred. In a theory of performativity, then, that imperative suggests that there must be a given set of discourses to provide the 'codes' for citation in the performativity of a sexual identity. And it is certain that, in the post-1970s political landscape, the claim made by lesbian/gay political articulations to their representation as the only non-heteronormative — following the logic of the hetero/homo binary — makes the lesbian/gay cultural artefacts the prime printed site for resource-seeking.
This need for a ‘resource’ has historically accorded lesbian/gay print media a significant central role — perhaps the central role — in the mediation of sexuality, and the provision of codes of non-heteronormative performativities. Fred Fejes points to the fact that, for those not growing up in a friendly lesbian/gay environment, the first access to knowledge of gay and lesbian sexualities and cultures, and thus codes of lesbian/gay performativity, is likely to come from a mediated source such as the lesbian/gay print media (1997: 105). The relative scarcity of non-heteronormative articulations in mass-circulation entertainment and film may be on the decrease, as discussed in Cover (2000), but it remains the case that at least for many contemporary younger adults in their twenties and thirties, lesbian/gay print publications were one of the most widely available media texts for articulations of non-heterosexuality.

Much of the essentialist and socialisationist literature on lesbian/gay identity claims lesbian/gay cultural artefacts such as the print media operate as a resource, sometimes for their role in assisting an agent to find ways in which to meet others who identify as lesbian or gay — a role that ‘community’ apparatuses have played since the nineteenth century (Weeks, 1989: 202). Almost all contemporary lesbian/gay city-based newspapers provide lists of clubs, venues, social groups and other lesbian- or gay-oriented organisations and gatherings. While rumour, gossip and public knowledge (and, most recently, the internet) are perhaps equal to the task of pointing to these community institutions and the necessary contextual codes for operating within and through them, the print publications provide additional and specific legitimation through the use of journalistic codes and rhetoric, and by the provision of continuous and up-to-date information in the frequency with which they are published and distributed.

Murray, for example, makes the telling remark that: ‘Many people learn that homosexuality is a possible way of life from print media. The existence of printed material that describes homosexuality without condemning it as inherently wrong is not taken for granted by those living in gay worlds.’ (1996: 72) This suggests the media plays a role in the provision of a resource, via the use of specific tropes and codes, it portrays a particular understanding of sexual identity in what is discursively presented as ‘positive’ or ‘affirmative’. While it does not provide this resource blatantly as a resource, it is within the context of political news, venue guides, feature articles or reviews of films, books and music that the codes of intelligible identity performativity are cited. The concentration of content as ‘gay-specific’ in opposition to articles which are considered ‘straight news’ is understood as a necessary resource for lesbian/gay readers; however, this obscures the subject-constitutive ‘resource’ that effectively manifests the hetero/homo binary through the implication of ‘specific’ or ‘related’ news. And, by the reiterative practices of print media production, they provide codes which operate as ‘hints’ for the understanding of a sexual order.

Because contemporary lesbian/gay media operate as a rhetorically affirmative space in which the reiteration of these codes occur, they are readily accepted and assimilated, and what is prior comes — in the constructionist position argued by Cass — to be called ‘confusion’ (perhaps because there was expressive desire which had no ‘language’, such as non-gender-based eroticisms). In other words,
the social imperative to be (a sexual being) has had for most ‘childhood’ understandings only the language of heteronormativity — a constraining category in general. But being able to have, express, desire or perform any sexuality outside of that constraint means relying on a language of sexuality through the codes of performativity. And it is the language of the hetero/homo binary that is accessed as an alternative, where polymorphous and non-gender-based sexualities are relegated to the cultural margins or labelled incoherence and confusion. Significantly, the hetero/homo binary enables a language of gender-oriented (homo)sexuality, and through the lesbian/gay press becomes the only ‘authorised’ language of non-hetero sexuality, impelling the sexual subject to articulate his or her desire primarily as for a (same) gender.

In discovering a language predicated by the media formation as a language of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ (Balibar, 1995: 187), the subject reconfigures his/her subjectivity as lesbian/gay through the acquisition and performativity of the intelligible cultural codes. And what occurs in speaking this language, in adopting the fiction of identity, is the re-writing or re-cognition of the experience of the past through the identity paradigms, providing then a naturalisation of identity by re-configuring the ‘past’ and past ‘experience’ in terms of the binary as fabricated proof. Identity confusion becomes one such fabricated element (as a cultural code of storytelling, such as the oft-repeated ‘coming out’ and ‘self-realisation’ stories — trajectories uttered retrospectively), articulated in the re-configuration of the subject and the illusion of the subject as having always already been a lesbian or gay subject. It is the ease by which lesbian/gay print media, as a legitimatory and affirmative set of texts, operate as a resource that is central to the discursive inculcation of lesbian/gay subjects.

What occurs here, then, is a re-cognition that masquerades as recognition. Rather than the subject coming to recognise his or her ‘true self’ in the publications, the publications — used as a resource for the day-to-day articulation of a performative sexuality — impel a re-signification (a re-thinking or re-cognition) of the trajectories of desire that caused the subject to encounter the publications in the first instance. Such desires — libidinal, erotic or perhaps merely an intent to break from heteronormative codes of social normality — are re-signified through the hetero/homo binary on which the publications are grounded, subjecting the subject into a re-configuration through the culture’s authorised ‘truth’ of sexuality, and compelling a performative subjectivity with all the subjective codes of behaviour and restraint. In other words, in attempting to fulfil the cultural imperative of sexual coherence, the reader is impelled to identify with the text as ‘resource’, and in that process of identification, the procedures and workings of subjection are obscured — the identity of the reader is naturalised through the compulsion to articulate recognition as opposed to re-cognition.

Identity, audience and audience-as-community

The adoption of a lesbian/gay discourse through which to read one’s experience and perform one’s (erotic) desires can similarly be understood as related directly to the ‘positioning’ operations of a text-inaugurated reading formation. By this I
mean a contextual positioning which activates a particular way in which meaning is produced by the reader and employed in the subjection of the reader. As Tony Bennett points out, 'meaning' is never in the text, but is productively activated in its reading from a particular set of discursive reading formations (Bennett, 1983: 216–18). In the case of minority media, one such reading formation is, I suggest, rooted in the assimilation of the membership of an audience with membership of an identity-based community. A necessity for contemporary lesbian/gay periodicals is the notion of 'community' — a constructed and imagined symbolic understanding of similarity in opposition to other gathered symbolic similarities, and operating on the basis of a heterosexual/homosexual dyad. For these publications, such a community is both the source of much of its material and, more importantly, its 'audience'. 'Audience' generally denotes a group of either passive or productive viewers/readers consuming media messages, producing meanings through the decoding of messages/signs, and being sold on, often, as a commodity to advertisers. However, there is no natural object that is the 'audience' constructed by anything other than the media itself. Media publications assume a consensus among readers and thus invest audience members with an impression of consensus (Philo, 1993: 255). By implication, entertainment and lifestyle magazines also construct and disseminate a 'community' of audience/readers. This can occur through the need to create a fixed notion of audience as a 'niche market' in order to generate important advertising revenue — a necessity for almost all lesbian/gay media whether entrepreneurial-owned magazines such as the North American Advocate, the Australian city-based newspapers run during the late 1990s by the now-defunct gay advertising conglomerate Satellite Media, or cooperatively owned newspapers such as the Sydney Star Observer. At the same time, maintaining high levels of circulation through subscription and distribution in bars, through newsagencies, and via hand-to-hand passage requires an audience which is identifiable, and which has members willing to see themselves as 'appropriate' readers of this media formation.

In the terms of the reading formation which governs the generation of the lesbian/gay subject through media texts, a lesbian/gay audience and a lesbian/gay community can be understood as conflated and assimilable. While much media theory has argued that there can be no isolated and identified media audience (Moore, 1993: 1–2), this notion is less applicable to minority and small-press publications than to mass-circulated media. Such media formations as the lesbian/gay press have a limited audience which, although likely to contain multiple subjective positionings (particularly in terms of class, gender and ethnicity), has in its targeting a reductive and totalised group identity (gay/lesbian). The significant point here is that lesbian/gay media publications cannot be understood as mere 'carriers' of the discourses which disseminate the codes to make lesbian or gay performativity culturally intelligible, but have a vested 'productive' interest in inferring such an identification in order to maintain a niche market audience for advertisers, a niche community for whom — and on which — to report.

The very term 'community media' enacts a link and establishes its audience as 'community'. In some recent work on the praxis of community, Etienne Wenger claims that an audience can be figured as a certain type of 'community'.
suggests that two readers of the same text share a ‘mutual link to a common readership [that] creates a kind of community to which they see themselves as belonging’ (1998: 182). This sort of community, for Wenger, does not involve mutual relations between the readers, but an imagined conception of a viewing or reading membership (1998: 181). Further, this is an alignment deriving from the way in which a text is distributed (1998: 181). But is the audience that which can be named ‘lesbian and gay’? Murray, in discussing HIV/AIDS public health warnings and guidelines, explained the difficulty of reaching the target audiences on the grounds that ‘those engaging in homosexual sex ... were not necessarily gay-identified and therefore could not be reached with information via the gay press’ (1996: 110). That those who do not identify as lesbian or gay might not read lesbian/gay press implies an identification is made with the name and audience of the media publication — an identification which, as Shane Phelan points out, requires an understanding of a shared common identity, a common membership within a ‘concrete community’ (1994: 78–79). As such, a mutual recognition is required for an identification — the audience must come to recognise itself in the publication. Such a recognition, however, is never guaranteed; instead, recognition is a performative act of signification mediated through the processes of lesbian/gay discourse.

In the act of a publication’s conflation of its audience as a lesbian/gay ‘community’, it operates to initiate a shift from a reader seeing herself as a member of an audience to a member of a community — a shift enacted in the repetitive process of reading. Note here that there are multiple reiterative citations in the lesbian/gay press: its necessary (and monotonous) reference to a ‘lesbian and gay community’; its re-hashed reports of anti-gay violence and nightclub events; its continued echoing of old cultural stories, rumours and claims to ‘gay membership’ of celebrities; its interest in identifying (reading) lesbian/gay characters in television and film productions; its regularity of publication — weekly for the newspapers, monthly for the magazines. The reader is faced, soon enough, with a familiarity — a comprehension of the discourses which establish the notional fixity of lesbian and gay identities, an acquaintance with the stories, the gossip, the news, the political paths carved out by local lesbian/gay political organisations. And it is this familiarity I claim is part of, first, the process of identification which, while foiling the idea of a fixed identity goes on to maintain the performative fiction of a core identity, and second, the reiterative process which establishes a context in which that identification can take place. In other words, what occurs here is that a reader, in an attempt to find a discursive platform for the expression of a sexuality that differs from the codes of heteronormativity, is hailed to a resource (in this case a lesbian/gay-affirmative resource), and by inculcation as reader, as interested reader, as reader identifying with the text, he or she is implicated as positioned member of an audience, and thereby a member of a ‘community’ which in turn is productive of the illusion of a coherent lesbian or gay subject. What occurs then is not a ‘natural’ progression from a stage of confusion to a self-acceptance in a subject’s recognition — an understanding that suggests a pre-given identity prior to the adoption of cultural codes which make that identity
acceptable. Instead, in the process of seeking a means by which sense can be made of sexuality *per se*, the placement as audience member makes possible the performative effect of the media in imparting the codes of performativity of the subject as it produces that subjectivity.

In reading the publications as a resource on non-heteronormative sexual articulations, the reader is positioned to make an identification not with the discursively produced ideological stance on identities that occurs in the context of the text, but instead with audience-as-community. To follow Butler, the ‘I’ — in this case, the lesbian or gay ‘I’ — only comes into being through a discursive reconstitution (1991: 18). In having encountered lesbian/gay discourse through print media publications, with all the legitimation, affirmation, authority and glamour conferred by the codings of print journalism, the codes of a non-heteronormative performativity are made available *as if* the only non-heteronormativity. What occurs, then, is the production of an identification and the interpelling the re-constitution of a non-heteronormative subject as a lesbian or gay subject. The reader does not recognise himself or herself in the print publications but, by having been positioned as resource-seeking reader, an identification with the audience-in-community is produced and, in the production of an *already-belonging*, that identification in turn makes the effect of the text’s encodings of performativity act to inculcate the lesbian or gay subject, and to impel the subject to perform a sexuality in accord with the discursively given codes.

**Identification and recognition**

Stuart Hall suggests that access to available knowledges allows the subject to “utter” ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors ... not because they emanate from our innermost, authentic and unified experience, but because we find ourselves mirrored in the positions at the centre of the discourses from which the statements we formulate “make sense” (1995: 18). Hall operates here from a humanist position in which identification is said to be possible through the self finding the self *mirrored*. Rather, this mirroring is a misrecognition — Butler points out that the very Althusserian notion of the hailing text is precisely what makes possible a misrecognition (1997: 95–96). The subject does not recognise himself or herself in the text, but a recognition as disguised re-cognition is produced through a productive identification.

In other words, it is not that the codes of lesbian or gay performativity were there, *always meant* for that reading subject. Instead, the reader is positioned as subject under the cultural imperative to express desire in legitimate and coherent ways (either hetero or homo) and, through the act of reading, produces an identification as reader *with* audience-in-community thus (mis)recognising the self in the text. The performative subject performs ‘in accord’ with the discursive codes cited in the text, stabilising an identity and the fiction that the identity *always was*. This is not to suggest that there is a core non-heteronormativity that pre-exists the encounter with the discursive hetero/homo binary that is thus interpolated into a lesbian or gay performativity. Rather, there are multifarious reasons behind the subject seeking resources in an attempt to fulfil the imperative of coherent and
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intelligible sexuality — from gender discord to non-voluntarist political positions opposed to the cultural performativity of heteronormativity.

Nor am I suggesting that the will to express a coherent form of non-heteronormativity guarantees an identification with lesbian/gay culture, either in the encounter or later in accessing alternative and marginal discourses of sexuality, such as queer theory itself. Where performativity is dependent on the citation of signifiers in order to fulfil the cultural imperative of coherent sexuality, any set of discourses can provide those codes of performativity. However, the lesbian/gay press remains the one legitimated site in which hetero/homo articulations are disseminated. It is non-heteronormativity through lesbian/gay cultural perspectives, but read as non-heteronormativity in the voices of non-heteronormative identities — manufacturing authenticity and authority.

In this process of subjection to the rhetorical tropes of identity posited in lesbian/gay discourse and effectively mediated through lesbian/gay publications, the desirous experiences prior to subjection become constrained dispositions, and what in the case of the sexual non-subject might have been desire predicated not on a gender (same or other) but via an alternative understanding that was never made available by any particular range of discourses. The process of subjectification that occurs in finding that resource literally produces desire itself anew; it performatively enacts upon that pre-subjective experience to establish the subject and particular trajectory for the subject from that moment of identification. Where otherness is the impossibility of the (non-voluntaristic) attempt to operate desire outside the available discourses of sexuality, by appealing to the alternative available discourse, the subjected 'lesbian' or 'gay' personage — who is then authorised by the discourse to claim alterity in terms of the hetero/homo binary — is constrained under a discursive regime of disciplinarity and regulation.

This opens a question of the ethics of the hetero/homo binary and whether the lesbian/gay print dominance of media texts on non-heteronormativity is just. A post-structuralist political position advocates a democratisation of language (hence subjectivity) through radical contingency and contestation where the homogenisation of meaning is equated to totalitarian structuration and imposition (Butler and Laclau, 1997). This would suggest, then, that the very grounding of lesbian/gay print media in the hetero/homo binary, and their primacy as a 'resource' for non-heteronormative performatative subjectivities, forecloses on the contestation of the binary and the proliferation of sexualities that is opened by queer theoretical discourses. For such proliferation, a multiplicity of legitimate discourses providing the codes for subjective performativity would be essential. However, as queer theory, media analyses of sexuality, and non-heteronormative articulations grow older, it remains to be seen whether lesbian/gay print media hold such 'first encounter' dominance, or if the frequently more radical articulations and alternatives that can be found through internet readership will foster that radical contingency and proliferation of sexual subjectivities, undoing both the dominance of heteronormativity and its lesbian/gay opposition.
Although the Advocate began as a politically oriented ‘gay rights’ periodical (Altman, 1982: 164; Bronski, 1984: 149), it was bought in 1974 by businessman David Goodstein, who re-focused its content on the promotion of a gay culture which could be explored and accessed by affluent gay men, publishing 40 pages of cultural coverage, and advertising on 20 pages (Streitmatter, 1995: 183). During the late 1990s, Satellite Media bought the majority of Australian city-based lesbian/gay newspapers, including long-running weeklies and fortnightlies such as Melbourne Star Observer, Perth’s Westside Observer and Brisbane/Melbourne’s Brother/Sister. In late 2000, the Satellite Group collapsed after financial mismanagement, wiping out most of the Australian gay press. However, in a move which shows the ongoing attraction of ‘pink dollar’ entrepreneurial activity, several new newspapers based on the style, circulation and distribution codes of the Satellite media were created within weeks. attracting new investors and the existing readership.

References

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