



## Outing

by Caryn E. Neumann

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Outing is a term that refers to the public revelation of a person's sexuality without the consent of the person.

Although outing has a long history, until recently it was a homophobic tactic. Homophobic organizations such as vice squads and the military, politicians who aimed to smear their opponents, and newspapers that practiced yellow journalism were generally the ones engaged in outing.

In the 1980s, however, the media began to expose various gay and lesbian celebrities as a way of selling magazines. Then gay men and lesbians joined in the phenomenon as a form of self-defense prompted especially by the AIDS crisis. Outing remains controversial in the queer community since it violates a fundamental principle of queer etiquette, the respect for privacy.

### Queer Invisibility

In the years before the establishment of the gay civil rights movement, very few people dared to reveal their homosexuality. Exposure could mean the loss of employment, friends, child custody, and social status, as well as the risk of physical assault. It meant becoming publicly despised. Consequently, much energy was expended by glbtq people to preserve the secrecy of their queerness.

The invisibility of queers allowed hostile stereotypes and grossly distorted caricatures of gay men and lesbians to flourish. Psychiatrists taught that gay men and lesbians were inherently impaired and too sick to live happy lives. The public imagined queers to be pathetic losers, dangerous child molesters, and promiscuous barflies.

Since heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation, most people assume that others are heterosexual unless someone lets them know otherwise. Gay men and lesbians could, thus, remain hidden by avoiding the stereotypical images of queers. Howard Brown, one of the first physicians to come out in the 1970s, was able to keep his sexuality secret for decades because he appeared too responsible to be gay. The armed forces believed that it could screen out homosexuals by looking for swishy men who expressed a dislike for women or for stereotypically butch women who were disdainful of men. Most gay men and lesbians easily slipped by the screeners.

### The History of Outing

Although outing is a practice that has received most attention because of its use in the culture wars of the last decades of the twentieth century, it is a practice with a long history. Homophobic slurs and accusations of same-sex sexual activity have long been a staple of political and religious controversy, dating back to ancient Rome, when opponents attempted to defame Julius Caesar by reminding people of his youthful



**Top:** Assistant Secretary of the Department of Defense Pete Williams publicly supported the exclusion of gays from military service. He was outed in 1991.

**Above:** Senator Barbara Mikulski (D, Md.) was outed by activists disgruntled by her support of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act.

experience as the passive partner of the King of Bithynia. During the Reformation, religious controversialists regularly accused each other of practicing sodomy.

The practice of outing also figured in the scandals known as the Eulenburg Affair, which rocked the German court of Kaiser Wilhelm from 1907 to 1909 and threatened the progress of the early German homosexual emancipation movement. Adolph Brand, publisher of the first homosexual periodical, *Der Eigene*, issued a pamphlet alleging that an anti-gay leader was secretly homosexual. His associates in the emancipation movement, including Magnus Hirschfeld, condemned the strategy.

Until the last decades of the twentieth century, most gay men and lesbians in the United States did not come out publicly. Many, however, were forced out of the closet. Newspapers published the names of men and women who were arrested by police in raids on gay bars or in cruising areas. Such publicity often had devastating consequences, ruining careers and family relationships. Hence, remaining in the closet was a great priority for glbtq individuals, who also respected the secrecy of other people who were in the closet.

The military frequently conducted witch hunts in search of queers. Queers in the military who were caught in sexually compromising situations were outed in the course of courts martial; others whose sexual orientation was deduced on the basis of letters or possession of periodicals or association with known homosexuals were discharged administratively.

With dishonorable discharges, these victims of outing could not return to their hometowns or easily find employment. With few options, many remained in their place of discharge. San Francisco, a large naval base, became the unofficial headquarters of the American gay community at least in part because outing victims of the U. S. Navy had few other places to go.

Some prominent Americans, including Supreme Court nominees, Congressmen, and politicians, were outed because of sexual indiscretions. In 1980, for example, Robert E. Bauman (R-Md.), an eight-year veteran of the U.S. House of Representatives, became a victim of an F.B. I. outing. Married and the father of four children, the conservative Bauman had a habit of picking up hustlers in gay bars in the Washington, D. C. area. After a year-long investigation, the F. B. I. charged Bauman with visiting gay bars in order to solicit sexual favors from men and transporting these men within the District of Columbia for sexual purposes. Bauman became one of only three Republicans to lose his House seat in the 1980 elections.

The mainstream media generally refused to report on the homosexuality of people who were not charged with a crime. This reticence resulted chiefly from fear of libel lawsuits and a loss of respectability from publishing "sleazy" news. Because homosexuality was considered a shameful condition, to allege that someone was gay or lesbian could constitute slander or libel; and to dwell on homosexuality in a family newspaper could lead to protests from proponents of family values.

Tabloid newspapers, however, thrived on sleaze and reported on the sexual habits of many well-known people, especially if they could be made to sound scandalous. Gay and lesbian film stars in the 1950s lived in terror that they might be outed by *Confidential* magazine.

The risks of exposure meant that the few celebrities who came out did so unwillingly. In 1981, the media exploited an outing when Marilyn Barnett exposed tennis star Billie Jean King. Barnett, once King's lover, sued the athlete in an effort to obtain "palimony." Some entertainers, such as George Michael, were outed as a result of arrests while cruising; others, such as Rock Hudson, were outed by their diagnosis with AIDS. Liberace was outed by a coroner after his 1987 death from AIDS. Like many others, he went "out of the closet and into the morgue."

### **The Politics of Outing**

With the rise of the gay rights movement, it became easier to come out. Still, despite urging glbtq people

to come out, no activists suggested dragging them out of the closet involuntarily. Extortionists and blackmailers threatened gay men and lesbians with exposure; respectable members of the queer community did not. The harm that could result from outing made it a reprehensible act.

On the other hand, the closet was itself an impediment to building a successful civil rights movement. As long as glbtq people could remain comfortably in the closet, it was very difficult to build a mass movement for glbtq equality. The gay liberation slogan, "Out of the Closet and Into the Streets," seemed to contradict the traditional respect most gay men and lesbians paid to the privacy of their friends and colleagues.

The first modern instance of outing as a political tactic occurred in 1982 when a conservative, straight-owned magazine used outing in an effort to destroy the influence of liberal politicians. *Deep Backgrounder*, a small Washington, D. C. publication that had a brief life, exposed a number of queer congressmen who leaned to the left. Large mainstream publications, such as *The Washington Post* and *New York Times*, refused to reprint the allegations. The magazine had negligible impact.

In 1994, conservative Congressman Robert Dornan (R-Calif.) became the first to use the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives to conduct an outing. (Other congressmen, such as Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Gerry Studds (D.-Mass.), had more or less voluntarily come out themselves on the House floor.) He referred to the "revolving closet" of fellow representative Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.). The sleazy innuendoes of the homophobic Dornan were, however, simply echoing the earlier outing of Gunderson by gay activists, who complained that in his eleven years in office he had never supported gay issues.

## **AIDS**

AIDS changed the attitude of the queer community towards outing. In 1989, ACT UP in Portland, Oregon carried out the first pro-queer outing. Its members exposed the sexuality of Mark Hatfield, the powerful conservative Republican U. S. Senator from Oregon. Hatfield had supported various homophobic initiatives, including the Helms Amendment, which aimed to prevent the federal government from paying for any AIDS education or prevention materials that would "promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual sexual activities."

The mainstream media did not report the Hatfield outing and few Americans learned of it. Despite this failure, this action of ACT UP helped change the face of queer America by using outing, and the threat of outing, as political tactics.

## **Queer Visibility**

Outing grew out of the frustration felt by many gay men and lesbians in the 1980s over the reluctance of the straight community and closeted queers to support glbtq civil rights. Anger over government indifference to the AIDS emergency also contributed powerfully to this new form of queer activism.

In 1982, investigative reporter Larry Bush used the pages of New York City's *Village Voice* to call for the exposure of gay politicians and officeholders who worked against the common good of queers. Bush wanted to neutralize such people by revealing their hypocrisy and making it impossible for them to enjoy heterosexual privilege by hiding behind the assumption of heterosexuality.

The gay men and lesbians who began to out others believed that they had a moral right to do so. Those who were forced out of the closet would have to back the gay rights movement or be discredited as hypocrites.

Some believed that only those who actively worked against gay interests should be outed. Closeted queers such as Roy Cohn, who defamed and persecuted other glbtq people while secretly indulging in gay sex, were prime targets. Outing such hypocrites would destroy their influence and punish them for their disrespectfulness to the gay community.

Some proponents of outing, however, also targeted passive opponents of glbtq rights, such as military leaders and church officials. These closeted queers did not directly fight gay rights, but they worked in support of homophobic organizations.

For example, Pete Williams, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Defense, who was a spokesperson for the Pentagon and the public defender of the ban on homosexuals in the military, was publicly outed in 1991. The outing brought to the fore the question of gays in the military.

Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) and Representative Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.), who voted in favor of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, were also outed by disgruntled activists. Having been tipped off that a story was to appear about him, Kolbe actually came out himself before the story ran.

British groups such as OutRage have outed several Anglican bishops and Members of Parliament.

Other proponents of outing, notably New York City columnist Michelangelo Signorile and writer Armistead Maupin, have argued that prominent individuals should be outed in order to illustrate that homosexuals are everywhere and include some of the most admired people in the world. Among the celebrities who have been outed in gay newspapers have been Hollywood moguls Barry Diller and David Geffen, actors Richard Chamberlain, Jody Foster, and Rosie O'Donnell, fashion designer Calvin Klein, publisher Jann Wenner, and media titan Malcolm Forbes.

Although many of those who were outed would not have come out voluntarily, their outing nevertheless yielded positive effects. The outing of Rock Hudson after he was diagnosed with AIDS helped AIDS fundraising and humanized the disease. Chastity Bono, who came out publicly because she was about to be outed by the tabloid *National Enquirer*, became a spokesperson for queer civil rights.

Those who defend the practice of outing contend that homosexuality is not shameful and that to reveal someone's homosexuality is simply to indicate a benign aspect of their life. Only if the individuals have been complicitous in oppressing glbtq people should their homosexuality be an embarrassment, and then they should be outed to expose their hypocrisy.

Others, however, condemn the practice as a fundamental invasion of privacy. It makes a decision for someone else that should properly be his or her decision alone.

## **Conclusion**

The face of outing has changed. Once it involved heterosexuals dragging queers out of the closet with the aim of damaging the individuals and the glbtq community. Since the 1980s, however, outing has become a tactic of a militant segment of the queer community. By hauling the fearful and the disloyal from the safety of darkness, queers hope to offer encouragement and support to the openly gay.

Despite supporters, outing remains controversial within the queer community. In 1990, the International Lesbian and Gay Association formally condemned it.

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