Two views on “outing”

**When the media do it for you**

Is outing ever the right thing for the media to do? It depends on whether you’re a private citizen or a public servant.

By Deni Elliott

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*Author bio information is from the time of article submission and may not be current.*


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It’s one thing to “out” yourself, as Juan Palomo did in Houston. It’s quite another when the media decide to do it for you.

The summer’s end brought yet another major outing — this time of a Pentagon official — accompanied by the ritual wringing of hands as editors and columnists decide whether or not to name the ousted individual.

This columnist won’t.

The arguments are familiar and unpersuasive: Hypocrisy and activists’ desire to force an unwilling individual to do something good for the gay community. These may be good arguments why someone ideally should out himself. But journalists who do the outing must have journalistic justifications.
Where others use the individual’s capacity for creating change as criterion for outing, I say that the news media should be no one’s conscience.

To put it succinctly, the only individuals who should ever be forced out of the closet are elected officials and those running for public office. And they ought to be outed as often as possible.

Outings don’t change institutions; outings don’t benefit individuals. Reporters and editors should have learned that long before the term “outing” was ever coined.

One of the most chronicled outings in recent history occurred in 1975, when a private citizen in San Francisco discovered he was standing next to a potential assassin. Sara Jane Moore raised her gun to shoot President Gerald Ford and Bill Sipple knocked it from her hand. He called his action “instinctive,” not heroic. He had no desire for publicity.

Gay activists had other ideas. Leaders from the local gay community gave columnist Herb Caen a tip about where Sipple and his friends had gone to celebrate that night and Caen printed the name of the well known gay hangout.

The activists told local reporters it would be good for the country to know that the hero was gay; it would help break the stereotype. Reporters liked that idea, but they hesitated. Sipple had refused to discuss his sexuality, claiming that his private preference had nothing to do with his public act.

Finally, a charge of hypocrisy tipped the scales. One day passed, two days and still no word of thanks came from the White House. Had Sipple’s sexuality shocked the president into silence? Publically, Ford had presented himself as tolerant of homosexuality.

With a little journalistic pressure, even the hero’s own mother back in Detroit wondered. A local reporter showed Mrs. Sipple the L.A. Times story, “Hero in Ford Shooting Active Among S.F. Gays.” She hadn’t known that her son was gay. Now her published response was: “No wonder the president didn’t send him a note!”

Sipple was delighted with the handwritten note of gratitude from President Ford that arrived three days after the event. It hung in a frame on a wall in his disheveled apartment until Sipple’s death in 1989. But it’s unlikely that the presidential note made up for the grief the outing caused Sipple. His mother died in 1979 without ever again speaking to her son and he remained estranged from the rest of the family until his own death.

San Francisco friends said that the unwanted publicity cost the community a caring man who had worked for gay concerns and helped the homeless. Sipple became a despondent recluse. He died of pneumonia at 47, alone in his apartment; his body lay undiscovered for two weeks.

So the outing was no more helpful to the gay and lesbian agenda than it was to Sipple. Sure, people got to know that a hero was gay, but that information was meaningful only in its irony.
Characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender and race are relevant only if they are thought to carry an element of surprise. Remember the days of black lawyers and women doctors? Stories about homosexual heroes and lesbian business leaders reflect the same kind of implicit intolerance.

Mainstream media should not out anyone except elected officials and candidates for public office. I don’t want a homophobic press, nor do I want one that tells voters that sexual orientation shouldn’t matter when they cast their votes. As a citizen in a representative democracy, I decide who best represents me and I can make that decision on any basis I choose. I assume that candidates put forth the picture of themselves they most want me to see and that their opponents try to do the opposite.

So I depend on the reporters in the fray to tell me whatever they learn and I depend on them to tell me without arrows or ribbons. When reporters decide that what they know about a candidate should not make a difference to me when I cast my vote, they are making decisions that belong to the voters. No one has ever suggested that only rational voting decisions ought to be allowed. The reporter’s job is to ensure that no candidate advances to elected office without all his or her discoverable secrets laid bare.

If journalists did this job indiscriminately, we’d all be better anchored in reality. Candidates could spend less time protecting false public images; voters could evaluate people who lead, rather than mythical heroes and villains. And news media could spend more time on issues of governance than on the vulnerabilities of those governing.

For the other view, see “When you do it yourself.”