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Star Wars: community journalism and patterns of change in the history of the *Sydney Star Observer*.

Marcus O'Donnell

ABSTRACT This article traces the dynamics of change in Australia's oldest surviving gay and lesbian publication, *The Sydney Star Observer*. It does not pretend to be a complete history of the publication but is a thematic study of change and self-definition, particularly interested in tracing the connections between visions of community, politics and market that have driven the *Star*. I have situated this analysis of the *Star* within the context of key works in the media studies literature on the gay and lesbian press. At different points in this study I will return to American examples in order to chart the sometimes contrasting, sometimes parallel trajectory of local and U.S. publications. I will argue that the *Star* has gone through regular cycles oriented to community access journalism and other cycles of pursuing traditional journalistic standards and conventions. Although much of the debate in the queer studies literature points to issues around commodification of gay identity through the gay and lesbian press I will argue that McKee's (2002) notion of gay citizenship is a more satisfactory way of understanding the interactions of commercial and political gay and lesbian cultures.

“Our way of thinking about ourselves has been formed to a large extent by the gay press. Validating who we are and what we want is a very important purpose of gay newspapers”

Jim Kepner pioneering gay journalist in Streitmatter (1999:456)

In spite of the flourishing of both queer studies and media studies very few scholars have attempted to bring the two fields together through an analysis of the gay and lesbian media (for one notable exception see Cover 2002).

James Carey warned as early as 1969 that, although the emergence of minority media was an integral part of “the communications revolution,” spurred in the 1890s by the growth of the telegraph and the emergence of the American penny press, such publications remained “virtually unstudied”. He argues that the emergence of minority media was perhaps an even more significant revolution than the emergence of national media. While national media gives “identifiable form to symbols and values of national identity,” minority media “are in many ways more crucial forms of communication because they are building blocks upon which the social structure is built up and they serve as intermediate mechanisms linking local and partial milieus to the wider community.” (Carey 1969: 130)

In what is probably the first analysis of gay media in mainstream media studies, Carey uses early homophile magazines *One* and the *Mattachine Review* as examples to support his argument.

Such magazines turn a locally based, decentralized, tenuously connected subculture into a highly identifiable group and, above all, into an audience. Constituting a class of discredited people, homosexuals create a common culture by transcending geographic boundaries through such media. They build this common culture into an encompassing ideology, an explanation of their behaviour and an argument stipulating their relationship to the larger society (Carey 1969: 130-1).

Carey argues that minority media are a “centrifugal force in social organization” through their capacity to “nationalise” groups, through their ability to “mark off boundaries of conflict and accommodation with values and institutions of the larger society” and crucially, from the point of view of the communications scholar, such media transform “groups into audiences” (Carey 1969: 131).

Since the publication of Carey’s article there have been numerous attempts to theorise the role of alternative/radical/minority media (cf. Downing 1984; Downing 2001; Rodriguez 2001; Atton 2002; Couldry 2002). But gay and lesbian media have received relatively little attention. The few studies that do exist tend to be historical rather than theoretical or they tend to be polemical critiques by gay/lesbian activists, they also tend to focus on American media.

This study of the dynamics of change in Australia’s oldest surviving gay and lesbian publication, *The Sydney Star Observer*, aims to make a contribution to this still “virtually unstudied” area.

It does not pretend to be a complete history of the publication but is a thematic study of change and self-definition. I am particularly interested in tracing the connections between visions of community, politics and market that have driven the *Star* in its different incarnations over the last 25 years, particularly in its formative years.

I have not attempted to produce a content analysis of the *Star* over this time. I have chosen editions that mark particular moments of

change in the *Star's* history and analysed the way this change is explained to readers. These changes and self-definitions are tested against some analysis of other editions from the same period. Reference is also made to cumulative documentation of the *Star's* history as produced in various anniversary issues.

As the editor of the *Sydney Star Observer* for the last five years¹ I cannot pretend that this is an impartial piece of research but it is a series of practice reflections (Schon 1995) which arise out of my practice as a gay journalist and through an engagement with the practice and self reflection of other producers of the *Star* over its twenty five year history. However I have primarily focused on the early formative history of the *Star* and treat its later years – those to which I am most closely connected – only cursorily.

I have situated this analysis of the *Star* within the context of key works in the media studies literature on the gay and lesbian press. Although these studies tend to focus on American publications, some of which are markedly different to the weekly news focused *Star*, these studies delineate many general parameters of debate, which are relevant when discussing Australian publications. As with much in gay and lesbian culture generally, gay and lesbian publications in Australia have often looked to American models as examples.² At different points in this study I will return to American examples in order to chart the sometimes contrasting, sometimes parallel trajectory of local and U.S. publications.

Readers, Consumers, Citizens

In his study of the history of the first gay newspaper, *The Advocate*, Rodger Streitmatter suggests that it became the standard bearer for future gay and lesbian publications. He delineates three characteristics that made it particularly significant:

¹ I have been editor of the *Sydney Star Observer* since May 1999, the four years prior to that I was editor of the national gay magazine *OutRage*, and an active member of gay community organizations for many years prior to that. As such many of the people mentioned in this article have at some point been colleagues, acquaintances or friends.

² While this is true generally, with publications in the US having at least a ten year lead on their Australian counterparts, the Melbourne based *OutRage* established in 1983, was one of the earliest examples of the gay glossy lifestyle magazine a genre which reached its zenith with the establishment of the New York based *Out* in 1992.

1. It gave the gay and lesbian community a “powerful voice...it did not limp apologetically onto the journalistic stage...it raised a defiant editorial voice that was strong and relentless.” (1993:456)

2. It helped articulate gay and lesbian values and norms. “By speaking in the lexicon of gay America and by publishing homoerotic images the Advocate served to legitimate and affirm gay values” (1993:457)

3. It helped the emerging gay movement by “serving as a cohesive force for a diverse readership...[it] served to galvanise individuals who previously had felt isolated in a society that was inhospitable to them” (1993:457).

He suggest that true to its name, *The Advocate*, practiced advocacy journalism and fulfilled a similar social role to newspapers and magazines established by African Americans and the women’s movement. He argues that the influence of these presses extended far beyond their primary goals.

Scholars have suggested, for example, that the black newspapers created African-American role models and developed a sense of black fraternity; that the suffrage press served the movement by identifying leaders and allowing its ideology to be communicated to a much more diverse audience of women; and that the women’s liberation press of the 1960s in initiated an open forum for feminist ideas. (1993:451)

Although these similarities are often evoked in discussions of gay and lesbian media, as Rob Cover points out, there is at least one significant difference, which would suggest that gay and lesbian media are particularly important to gay and lesbian subjectivity formation. Ethnic or racial identities are generally – although not always – produced through family socialisation and affirmative identity formation often occurs from a very early age. Whereas “lesbian/gay media are frequently one of the first sites of discourse accessible which affirms any non-heteronormative articulations of desire” (Cover 2002:112).

However the social influence of gay and lesbian press has not always been read sympathetically. Much of the recent debate on the role of the gay press has centred around its commodification of gay and lesbian lives. This view is expressed at its most provocative in Mark Simpson's (1996) collection of essays *Anti-Gay*, in which a number of British gay writers suggest that the early liberation slogan "gay is good" has been transformed into a market driven slogan "gay is goods". The historic task of the gay community and gay publications to name, to make gay life visible has, they argue, deteriorated into a mere making of lists.

The listing impulse has nicely evolved into the material function of the gay press which is to advertise gay goods, services and performers. Complaints about poor quality of these goods are redundant – the act of discrimination and approval is in the naming of them as gay in the first place. Critical faculties must be suspended once the naming moment is over (except in terms of 'how gay' – i.e. how useful to the self justificatory project of gay). The reverse discourse has gone from political project to marketing strategy. The Great Gay (Shopping) List is the 'gay community'. (Simpson 1996: xiv)

While Simpson suggests that commercial imperatives are prioritised by today's gay/lesbian media, it is interesting to note that even in the early days of *The Advocate*, its clearly idealistic founder Dick Michaels was criticised for following both commercial and movement objectives (Streitmatter 1993:452).

In a theoretically more sophisticated argument Cover echoes some of Simpson's concerns. He argues that because of their "first encounter' dominance" as a resource for the performance of non-heteronormative subjectivities, the gay and lesbian press exercises a hegemonic effect. "Younger persons are compelled to identify with...the dominant 'widely available' discourses of non-heteronormative sexualities – that is, lesbian/gay culture as opposed to more marginalised sexual knowledges" (Cover 2002:110) such as bisexual/transgender/queer.

While Streitmatter's analysis of the emergence of the gay and lesbian press, as indicated in his study of *The Advocate*, is both insightful and almost unwaveringly positive, he is less sympathetic or astute in his analysis of the emergence of commercially

successful gay publications like *Out*, which launched in the early 1990s as a self-styled gay *Vanity Fair*.

Streitmatter concludes his book length study of gay and lesbian media with an opinionated critique of *Out* and similar publications. He writes:

Until a cure for AIDS is found, lesbians and gay men are allowed to serve in the military, federal law prevents employers from firing gay people because of their sexual orientation, and gay bashing is no longer running rampant across the country, it is difficult to applaud gay and lesbian journalism that concentrates on documenting the joys of owning a red damask love seat....By becoming mainstream in their editorial content, design and advertising, the gay glossies slipped away from the most fundamental purpose of a movement press: securing equal rights for their readers. (Streitmatter 1995:337)

There are several flaws in this argument. In judging *Out* against earlier news-oriented, movement publications he is comparing apples with oranges. This is like dismissing *Vanity Fair* or *Details* because it is not the *New York Times*. Secondly Streitmatter is unduly dismissive to imply that *Out* is only interested in red damask love seats. Thirdly he fails to take into account the diversity of gay and lesbian media currently being produced, no single publication has to bear the burden of pushing forward the fight for gay and lesbian equality. But most significantly he fails to take into account the changing nature of gay and lesbian cultures and politics and the increasingly complex ways that contemporary readers interact with both alternative and mainstream media in constructing identity.

In judging the global state of gay and lesbian journalism *Out* must be put alongside rigorously news oriented publications like gay and lesbian weeklies such as the *Washington Blade*. In judging 'movement' objectives one has to sift through the plethora of gay and lesbian political positions from national political lobbyists such as the Washington based Human Rights Fund through to the LA based media/entertainment industry oriented Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation through to the gay Republican group Log Cabin Republicans. To talk simply, as Streitmatter does, of a

singular “movement press” belies the complexity of the contemporary lesbian and gay movement.

Others have seen the emergence of strongly commercial gay press in quite a different light. Larry Gross (2001) argues that the emergence of a strong gay and lesbian advertising niche is the “ultimate accolade.” Following media theorist Michael Schudson, Gross writes:

Advertising does not claim to depict life as it is but as it should be – life and lives worth emulating. Thus to be ignored by advertising is a powerful form of symbolic annihilation, but to be represented in the commercial universe is an important milestone on the road to full citizenship in the republic of consumerism. (Gross 2001:232)

Hamilton and Atton (2001) warn against a decontextualised “mediacentric” view of alternative media that relies on essentialist and/or vanguardist narratives. They argue for a more complex relational view that replaces:

an essentialist conception of social movements with one anchored in a materialist perspective, which reconceptualizes culture as not a simple expression of a social movement, but as the public, discursive activity by which it comes into being. (Hamilton and Atton 2001:124)

Simpson and Streitmatter exemplify such a “mediacentric” tendency, common to much that has been written about the gay press. On the one hand they reify the gay press as almost single-handedly producing the gay movement and then on the other hand critique its evolution without any concurrent engagement with the simultaneous changes in the gay movement and in mainstream society and media.

Sydney Star: Attack of the Clones, 1979-1985

Activist and social commentator Craig Johnston’s description of the milieu that gave birth to the *Sydney Star* in late 1970’s Sydney makes clear the complex mix of cultural, commercial and political elements which saw the birth of Australia’s first local gay newspaper.

The opening in 1979 of the first hotel which aggressively catered to the non-effeminate, noncloseted self-image of the post-Stonewall, subculturally-identified gay man signalled a new openness about the subculture. It also catalysed a growth in the number of gay hotels, the emergence of the neighbourhood around Taylor Square, Darlinghurst, as a focus of gay-oriented small business generally, and the emergence of the 'clone' style as the dominant image within the gay subculture. With the publication of the *Sydney Star*, a fortnightly newspaper distributed free throughout gay venues and social clubs across the city which fused the interests of the movement and the subculture, and with campaigns in 1981, especially, for homosexual law reform, the basic parameters of political mobilization by Sydney gay men were established – all against the background of a larger, more visible network of institutions called the “gay community”. (Johnston 1983)

This interplay between the symbolic and the material expression of gay culture was critical in the development of the *Sydney Star* and the emergence of both a lesbian and gay communities and political movement.

The “clone” culture, which celebrated images of masculine self-identified gay men, was the key stylistic marker in the early years of the *Sydney Star*. More than just an image, these masculine gay men with muscles and moustaches were icons of a newly found strength and confidence, which defined itself against the more closeted images of drag and effeminate gay men that had been the primary forms of symbolic representation of gayness until then. This image of gay self-confidence gradually took root and became part of the early *Star* brand.

The first issue of the *Star* featured a shirtless moustachioed man in Levi's placed in front of Hyde Park's fountain. This image of the new gay man, proudly outside, in front of an iconic Sydney scene, epitomised the new look and feel of late 1970s gay culture. In contrast the fountain's classical design of bronzed naked figures epitomised history's underbelly of unrecognised homoerotic culture.

The clone culture and image, adopted and promoted by the *Star*, was more than a mere fetish it became a political badge. In an article that Johnston wrote for the *Star* in 1994 to commemorate

the tenth anniversary of gay law reform in NSW, he notes that during the period 1980 to 1984 “the [Gay Rights] Lobby targeted clones as the newest expression of gay power.” (SSO 3/6/94)

The emergent gay economy of small businesses and venues was also critical. It allowed both a developing sense of gay space and gay identity. These businesses were critical to the success of the *Star* and there are constant pleas in early editions for readers to “support our advertisers”. In his first editorial (undated July 1979) *Star* founder Michael Glynn introduces the product as “a gay business and entertainment guide, published fortnightly and distributed free of charge to businesses throughout Sydney.” He then goes on to say: “You may thanks our advertisers who brought us to you.”

Although the *Star* was later to style itself primarily as a political, news publication, Glynn’s early issues are very focused on serving and promoting the emerging gay commercial economy.

However the connection between commerce and politics is not absent, even in this first issue. Glynn ends his editorial:

Some of us have just finished celebrating Gay Solidarity Week, when we tried to express ourselves through various ways. If we had a strong sense of community, a real feeling of support from friends and others, then we might be able to face the conflicts that rage around us. We could live in unity and strength and love. This whole process is called ‘getting your act together.’

This nascent sense of ‘solidarity’ is expressed more as an environment in which survival is made possible rather than as a forceful sense of active politics.

Three paragraphs of local news note a “storm brewing” over fire regulation adherence in gay venues and the fact that Gay Pride week “saw only moderate action in the city” with one hundred people attending a candlelight rally.

An further three paragraphs on entertainment note the first gay stage production in Sydney, *As Time Goes By*, and announces an all male ballet will come to Sydney soon. “Is Gay Theatre here to stay?” the piece asks.

This first issue also carries a “Special Feature” a list of famous gay composers. It is introduced by flagrantly anti-heterosexual statements of defensive gay pride:

Nothing seems to stick more fiercely in the heterosexual craw than the knowledge that many of the major ‘movers and shakers’ of our civilisation were gay. When a choir performs the Messiah, a literature class studies Walt Whitman, or a father reads his child a fairy tale by Hans Christian Anderson, they are treading on gay turf.

The straights steadfastly refuse to acknowledge such realities. They’ll often deny it to the point of fisticuffs. They can’t abide the reality that the knack for academic or creative excellence usually co-exists with the knack to suck cock. Straights lack the knack for any such endeavours and are painfully unaware of the truth.

Handel, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Wagner, Tchaikowsky, Ravel and Cole Porter are all claimed for the gay lineage in camp sexually explicit and sometimes misogynist language. Although its historical carelessness, heterosexism and misogyny are shocking to contemporary readers the explicit power of such statements for a still embattled minority cannot be underestimated. In Streitmatter’s terms the *Star* emerged with a “powerful voice...it did not limp apologetically onto the journalistic stage...it raised a defiant editorial voice that was strong and relentless.” (1993:456)

This tone of confidence matched with brittle defensiveness shows the fragility of both this embryonic not-quite-movement, not-yet-community, and of the businesses, gatherings and spaces that had begun to give it form and the publication would give it voice.

Glynn continued to produce the *Star* for the next five years. It gradually grew into a more news-oriented publication even while retaining its grass roots vernacular approach. The front-page stories of its first anniversary issue document its expanding horizons. It features five stories, one national, two local and two international.

One announces the Sixth National Conference for Lesbians and Homosexual Men, another heralds a new secretary at local rights

group CAMP and the other local story marks the demise of a gay radio group. Internationally the *Star* notes that the American gay church MCC has raised \$60,000 for gay Cuban refugees and the US Democrats have adopted a gay plank in their party platform. Both international stories are reprinted from *The Advocate*, which was Glynn's common practice throughout these early years. Inside there are venue listings, social pictures, a short story about a visit to a porn cinema in Boston and several pages of film, music and theatre reviews.

Glynn was to retain this basic formula throughout his time helming the *Star*. In the fifteenth anniversary edition of the *SSO* Craig Johnston remembers Glynn's *Star* this way:

It took on tabloid format, personified the passion and commitment of Michael, was full of infuriating typing mistakes, upbraided the gay male community into maturity, was loved and hated, depended on volunteers, printed absolutely everything you gave it (which was great for the homosexual law reform campaign and my campaign for election to Sydney City Council), happily antagonised advertisers, lived on a shoe string (which couldn't last), and was entirely maverick and unpredictable – except for its unshakeable commitment to gay power and community development. (*SSO* 15 July 1994)

As Johnston notes, Glynn's commitment to the *Star* as a news vehicle was more along the lines of a community noticeboard – he “printed absolutely everything you gave” him – than a traditional editorially driven newspaper. However the *Star*, during this time, also fulfilled an information leadership function.

Apart from supporting the development of important community institutions such as Mardi Gras and the homosexual law reform campaign, most significantly it was the first Australian publication to report that American gay men were suffering from a “new pneumonia linked to gay lifestyle” (3 July 1981). Over the next two years, as the gay community began to formulate a response to what would become known as AIDS, the *Star* played a vital role in publishing the information that was known about the syndrome and in supporting the formation of AIDS action groups within the community. The *Star* has continued its pre-eminent role in HIV/AIDS information ever since, consistently ranking in various

surveys³ as the leading source of information on HIV for its readers.

The *Star* also managed to publish a number of significant interviews and features such as the powerful Q&A interview with Paul Taylor a man who had been sentenced to jail time after being arrested for having consensual sex with another man in his own home (*Star* 4/11/83). This was published, the introduction states, in response to those opponents of law reform who argued that it was unnecessary because the anti-sodomy laws were rarely used.

Although Glynn made important, some would argue critical, contributions to the emergence of the gay political movement in Sydney, he was much more concerned with its very concrete manifestation as a “community”. In an interview with Gary Dunne, published in the fifteenth anniversary edition of the SSO, Glynn makes his position clear. Dunne writes:

Glynn was strongly on the side of those who wanted to change the timing of Mardi Gras from mid-winter, around the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, to February. The battle was over far more than climactic practicalities. The real debate was about the nature of event; a political march versus a celebratory parade. (SSO 15 July 1994)

Within that debate, Dunne notes, was the bigger question about the “nature” of the “gay community”. For Glynn the answer is very concrete. He tells Dunne:

People kept pushing that there was no community. I was going out every weekend. I was seeing that community. I have documentary evidence, photos, of that community. For people to stand up and state, or write that we don't have a community or 'What is this community bullshit', these people have their heads so far up their arse they can't see daylight. I was seeing it all the time. The final proof of that for me was identifiable people popping up again and again at various places, to me this spoke of community. (SSO 15 July 1994)

These questions: What is this “gay community”? How does it manifest itself? and How can it best be nurtured, informed and

³ Readership surveys conducted for the SSO by Significant Others Consulting every two years since 1994.

developed? have in various guises remained central to the *Star's* evolution ever since Glynn first grappled with them. However the next phase in the *Star's* development would introduce another, very different, set of questions, which would prove equally important in the evolution of the paper and the groups that controlled it.

Although a group of Glynn's key contributors took over the day to day running of the *Star* in 1984, under the company name Seruse Pty. Ltd., the real break came in 1985 when a Melbourne group, Gay Publications Co-operative, [GPC] publishers of the national magazine *OutRage*, reinvented Glynn's *Star* as *The Star Observer*. The Seruse directors had been in the process of buying Glynn out of the company, but in 1985 decided that the paper in its current form was no longer financially viable. They received a buy-out offer from GPC, who were looking for a Sydney base, but ultimately the deal went sour because Glynn rejected GPC's offer on the debt that Seruse still owed him. So the *Star* folded and the next week *The Star Observer* was born.

***The Star Observer* and the emergence of gay journalism, 1985-1987**

Although the content mix of the first edition of the *Star Observer* (2 May 1985) is similar to that of the later issues of the *Star* (news, entertainment reviews, health and opinion columns and venue/community guide) it is a noticeably different paper. The paper looks and reads more like a traditional newspaper. In this issue and those that ensue over the next few months it is evident that much more care is given to traditional journalistic conventions such as:

- The separation of news and opinion;
- By-lined and date-lined reports;
- Traditional news style with summary leads;
- The introduction of directly quoted and named sources;
- Better use of active, attention-getting headlines;
- The use of news photography.

This first issue includes a front page investigative report into a "fake" AIDS trust, which had been attempting to raise money for unspecified AIDS related projects. Separately, under an editorial banner, the paper takes a stand urging caution about donating

money to unverified organizations. It specifies the known organizations that can be trusted.

Another editorial on page three, by GPC general manager Danny Vadasz, shows that the changes are not merely stylistic. This editorial is significant as much for its language and choice of terms as for the story it narrates:

This is the first edition of Sydney's new, free fortnightly gay newspaper, the *Star Observer*. It comes at a time when major changes are occurring in Australia's gay publishing industry, and it marks the expansion of its publishers, the Gay Publications Co-operative, into Sydney.

GPC, a non-profit business co-operative, was established in Victoria in 1982⁴ with the expressed aim of developing and improving the standards of gay journalism in Australia, and to ensure that this infant industry established itself under the control and ownership of gay people for gay people

Since that time, it has produced the publication *OutRage*, a national monthly news-magazine. Although endeavouring to satisfy a national market, *OutRage* has acknowledged that its ambitions would only be realised by its establishment of a substantial permanent presence in Sydney. (*Star Observer* 2 May 1985)

Vadasz's editorial situates the *Star*, for the first time, within the context of "standards of gay journalism" an infant "gay publishing industry" and a "national market". In the same editorial Vadasz refers to GPC as "Australia's largest clearing house of gay information" and the benefits of the new venture for "the gay public".

Although Vadasz is at pains to reassure his Sydney readers that the *Star Observer* will continue to be managed by the same Sydney staff as its predecessor and that it will be "autonomously managed

⁴ GPC was formed under an innovative Victorian government scheme which provided seeding funding to assist the development of worker co-operatives. Vadasz was later to spearhead the transformation of the co-op into a private Pty. Ltd. company, which was ultimately taken over by The Satellite Group, the world's first "pink" listed public company floated on the stock exchange. Satellite, a property and media company, was floated on the stock exchange in September 1999 but went into administration in November 2000. It controlled a national suite of gay publications including all state-based weekly gay and lesbian newspapers apart from the *Sydney Star Observer*.

by its own management committee,” he makes only one passing gesture to the language of community. Vadasz primarily frames the intent of the new “venture” in business terms: establishing a “new benchmark in the rising standards of Australian gay publishing”.

Although, as I have already noted, Glynn always acknowledged the importance of advertisers and urged his readers to support them, Vadasz sets up a very different relationship between the paper, its readers and its advertisers.

The advertisers of both the *Star Observer* and *OutRage* can look forward to renewed co-operation through an advertising package which, for the first time in gay publishing history, will provide unprecedented access to Sydney’s gay reading public.

GPC is here presenting itself in traditional publishing terms whereby a media product delivers “access” for advertisers to a market. This is a far cry from Glynn’s simple pleas for mutually beneficial reader-advertiser support.

However GPC’s vision for the *Star Observer* was not driven by purely commercial imperatives. Vadasz and his colleagues had grown into publishing through the gay liberation movement. The predecessor to GPC was a political collective that produced the movement oriented *Gay Community News* and although GPC was becoming increasingly corporatised it remained a non-profit co-operative at the time of its move into Sydney. The underlying politics of the GPC venture are inherent in Vadasz’s reference to a publishing industry controlled and owned by gay people for gay people.

In attempting to create a “gay public” rather than “gay readers” or a “gay community” Vadasz and his colleagues were attempting to broaden both the base of economic support for the venture as well as extend its vision outside the bounds of the venue-based ghetto: the “community” that Glynn claimed to “see” each weekend.

This move to professionalised gay journalism and publishing with a national vision is one that had occurred much earlier in the United States. In 1979, the year Glynn produced the first issue of the *Star*, Streitmatter (1995:226) reports that *The Advocate* published a five-page article about the gay press

including a round table discussion with the editors of several US gay publications. The article “served as a ‘self-study report’ prompting the editors to assess the status and potential of the institution they were leading” (1995:226). This was followed by a number of other significant steps such as the 1981 national seminar for gay media organised by a leading New York advertising executive and the formation in May the same year of the Gay Press Association.

Streitmatter presents this growing professionalism as a response to the rise of the new right in American politics and the election in 1980 of Ronald Reagan as president. He identifies (1995:211-242) several key changes in the gay and lesbian press:

- The adoption of the standards of professional journalism particularly the separation of news from opinion;
- ‘Nationalising’ gay news even in locally based publications;
- The emergence of key publishers and editors as national leaders;
- The bringing together of gay and lesbian issues;
- Confronting controversial issues within the gay and lesbian community as well as outside it;
- The identification and documentation of trends and patterns rather than mere reportage;
- The emergence of investigative reporting;
- Improvement in the design quality and images

All of these issues, which the US gay media faced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were to be faced by the *Sydney Star Observer* as it moved from the mid 80s into the early 1990s.

The new benchmark in gay publishing promised in GPC’s first edition of the *Sydney Star* was a fragile project. Although as noted, some improvements in journalistic standards were immediately apparent, these conventions were inconsistently applied and at many levels the *Star* retained the feel of a larrikin student paper with a sometime-serious edge.

The news pages are filled with competent first hand reports of the meetings of both mainstream institutions such as Sydney City Council and community institutions such as the Mardi Gras and various AIDS organizations. A traditional set of news sources are negotiated from police spokespeople, through to community office

holders through to politicians. Regular articles about AIDS with original research by GPC's Adam Carr⁵, provide important health information. The social pages continue to provide information, imagery and allure. The entertainment pages document the increasing number of gay themed performances and films.

However there appears to be little second order processing that would provide evidence of editorial intervention or design. Simple meetings are often reported in exhaustive detail. Facts, organizations and personalities are introduced without explanation in ways that assumes all readers possess the necessary pre-existing knowledge to understand the article. Serious news reports can suddenly end with a humorous coda. Although it had much higher ambitions, in many ways the *Star* remained an inward looking inner urban community newspaper for gay men who frequented the Darlinghurst gay nightclub scene.

Unlike the US gay press, who changed and organised nationally in response to a perceived national threat from the religious and political right, changes in Australian publications were slower coming and were marred by embroilment in more mundane local politics.

Practical issues as well as classic Melbourne Sydney rivalry saw the GPC era of the *Star* draw to an end in 1987. Editorial functions were based in Sydney but design and production were done out of GPC's Melbourne head office. This led to some notorious production blunders with the first editor under GPC, Richard Turner, resigning after a major story ended, halfway through its intended course, in inexplicable white space. As Gary Dunne puts it in the *Star's* fifteenth anniversary issue:

Despite initial optimism, there were practical difficulties with this geographical separation of editorial and production departments. These lead to more communication problems between the Sydney branch office and the head office down south, which is a very polite way of saying it became a very nasty power struggle. Sydney alleged censorship and

⁵ Carr played a seminal role in Australia's response to HIV as both a journalist and activist. He was the first journalist to write extensively about the disease and his articles in both *OutRage* and the *Star* provided access to state of the art medical information at a time when little was known about the disease. Carr was later to serve on a number of government policy committees and played a key role in the drafting of the first Australian National HIV/AIDS Strategy in 1989.

interference, Melbourne alleged sabotage. Exactly what happened depends on who you talk to. (SSO 15 July 1994)

Although by 1987 the *Star* had managed to attract some corporate advertisers, such as the liquor company Jim Beam, the production of a gay newspaper was still largely a marginal enterprise that relied on advertising from gay businesses. When a proposal was put forward that a community owned company should buy back the *Star*, there was little resistance from GPC.

The *Sydney Star Observer*: community ownership, community development, 1988-1995

Sydney Gay Community Publishing [SGCP] was formed when Jim Jenkins and a group of Sydney gay community activists purchased a shelf company and set about selling 200 \$200 shares in the company to interested members of the community. Gary Dunne outlines the rationale:

With a large local shareholder base , the company and hence the paper would never be at risk of control by any one faction, group or interested party. It would be accountable to the wide cross-section of individuals interested enough to invest. Many prominent community members added their names to the public drive for investors. On February 7 1988, having sold 145 shares, [the company] purchased the *Sydney Star Observer*. (SSO 15 July 1994)

Just as the first issue of the GPC *Star Observer* had promised a “new benchmark” in gay publishing, the editorial that introduced the first issue of the SGCP’s *Sydney Star Observer* promised, “the start of an exciting new era in gay publishing” (SSO 19 February 1988). However that’s where the similarity between the two statements begins and ends.

Although the new group announces that management will be “brought up to professional business like standards” this probably should be read as a swipe at their predecessors rather than as a whole-hearted commitment to a commercial model of publishing.

Much more is made of the fact that the paper has been “transferred back to the community it serves” and that the paper’s policy will be “controlled by the local community through three shareholder

meetings a year.” The overall thrust of the paper is represented this way:

The broad editorial policy of the SGCP is to provide a newspaper which reflects the diversity of the Sydney gay community, acting as an information resource and a public forum. The *Star Observer* will become a “community access” newspaper, with individuals, community groups and businesses being encouraged to use the newspaper for the dissemination of information and the promotion of public debate (*SSO* 19 February 1988).

The group also announced that it would extend the distribution of the *Star* across “the entire Sydney metropolitan area, Newcastle, Wollongong and the Blue Mountains...to ensure that all gays have an opportunity of keeping in touch with and making a contribution to their community”.

In its first years under the editorship of former academic Tim Carrigan, the *SSO* increased its readership and community profile. It retained the traditional *Star* mix of political and community news, arts reviews, social scene guide, columns and features.

In the edition that celebrated the first six months under SGCP stewardship (22 July 1988) the cover boasts three stories. None are by-lined but all provide original, researched, reportage. The lead story “Gay arts group fights back” reports on the controversy over a lesbian artist whose work had been branded obscene and removed from a public exhibition. The second story reports that Sydney radio station 2UW had refused to run safe sex ads produced by the Federal government. The final story is a picture story-featuring actor Mark Hamlin and his fears about taking the lead role in a proposed gay film. While they would not necessarily pass rigorous scrutiny, the stories are pretty good imitations of traditional news style, they show a good news sense, they quote a range of sources, and are informative on important issues for gay and lesbian readership.

Inside much of the rest of the news seems to have been submitted by a variety of gay community groups and reprinted with minimal editorial intervention. The paper also contains two features one a first person account of gay pride celebrations in San Francisco and

the other offers an innovative piece of writing by SSO regular Keith Howes.

Howes, a British gay journalist resident in Sydney, reflects on a recent trip back to England. But this is not typical travel journalism. Howes weaves together snippets from British press coverage of AIDS, elements of British soaps, some scenes from plays and a trip to the home and garden of Howard Nicholson and Vita Sackville-West. It is an entertaining, insightful reflective feature that manages to communicate a powerful sense of gay history and analysis of current culture.

It is commitment to quality writing like this, rather than any major innovation in news coverage, that marks the strength of the early SGCP *Star*. Howes, who was later to publish the encyclopaedic, state of the art reference work on gay radio and TV, *Broadcast It*, began a regular TV column shortly after Carrigan took up the reins. This column was a pioneer in documenting the emergence of gay and lesbian themes on television.

Howes was to become the first in a series of significant critics that contributed a thoughtful ongoing analysis of contemporary gay and lesbian arts. Later both Campion Decent (1990-92) and Stephen Dunne (1992-93) – who became a theatre critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* – provided a critical analysis of theatre. At this time when gay and lesbian visual arts, theatre, TV and film were slowly blossoming, both locally and internationally, these critics provided an important documentation and analysis of this movement.

Paul Peach's "Mediawatch" column (begun in 1989) about gay and lesbian issues in the mainstream newsmedia and Robert French's, "In the Past Lane", (begun in 1992) a gay community history column, also provided important documentation of the development of gay and lesbian culture and its representations.

Martyn Goddard a trained mainstream journalist took over as editor briefly (ten months) in May 1989. Goddard's professional training is immediately evident in the quality, quantity and subtle shifts in emphasis in the news stories. Goddard's news stories are classic examples of the genre, short, direct with strong leads and an inverted pyramid structure. Goddard also moves the focus to

strong, almost tabloid front page headlines and introduces much more national news into the mix.

Although Goddard's successor, Larry Galbraith, maintains some of these elements Galbraith's training is in old style community publications and the *Star* under his editorship is again much more community focused.

Galbraith's ambivalence to professional journalism is evident in a piece he wrote on his resignation as editor in 1992. Although he acknowledges Goddard's professionalism and thanks him for advice and assistance ("An hours conversation with Martyn is perhaps more educational than a semester in the UTS communications course") he is clearly pleased that his successors as editor and news editor "are from the contributor's ranks."

Both Campion [Decent] and Will [Harris] have shown a strong commitment to the paper...It's a commitment that has matched their natural talent and their willingness to learn. It is upon people like Campion and Will that the future of gay media depends...

While media professionals should be made welcome the welcome should be tempered by the sincerity of their commitment. And we should wonder about the sincerity of people who refuse invitations to write for the *Star* as mere contributors but are all too willing to take the secure, reasonably well paid jobs when they are available.

The *Star* should never allow itself to become a soft landing for those wanting nothing more than to leap from the towers of Fairfax, Packer and Murdoch. (SSO 17 April 1992)

This ambivalent attitude to media professionals was to remain a part of the *Star* ethos in various ways until it was finally banished under the pressure of the new weekly production schedule in the mid 1990s.

One of the main issues that was to be negotiated under Campion Decent's editorship was the inclusion of lesbians as a designated part of the *Star*'s readership, mission and staffing.

The history of gay and lesbian coalitionist politics in Sydney is far too complex to detail here. However one of the seminal moments in the move for a more inclusive politics was the inclusion of Lesbian in the name of the Sydney Gay and lesbian Mardi Gras at the end of 1988. This was followed by the election of Cath Phillips as president of Mardi Gras in 1989.

The *Star* began a regular lesbian gossip column, Catwoman, in 1991 and in 1992 a page three story “Star Observer to welcome Lesbians” reported on a meeting between the editor and key lesbian activists. Decent said that the paper would actively encourage lesbian writers and photographers and increase lesbian content in the paper. (SSO 12 June 1992) In August 1993 a SGCP shareholders meeting voted to split all existing \$200 shares into four fifty dollar shares so that people could sell or transfer some of their shares to new members. A strong part of the rationale for the was to increase the lesbian shareholding of the company.

But the most important event in this outreach to lesbians was the appointment of Barbara Farrelly as staff journalist in November 1992. Farrelly was to take over as editor in June 1993.

The last part of Decent’s editorship, with the arrival of Farrelly as journalist, marks the beginning of a new professionalisation of the *Star*. Apart from the symbolic importance of the female appointment, Farrelly was to prove a very capable journalist and editor with a strong investigative news sense. The return to regular use of by-lines during this period indicates both the diverse group of staff and contributing writers and secondly an evolving ethos of public journalistic responsibility. This, together with the debate over gender, is also symptomatic of the *Star’s* general maturing and it’s movement from an inward community focus to an outward investigative mode that wanted to both celebrate and hold to account the community it served.

Conclusions: the various Stars

If I was extending this article to bring my analysis up to the current day I would probably characterise the remaining period under two headings:

- The *Sydney Star Observer*: weekly news and community journalism, 1995-2000

- The *Sydney Star Observer*: news, culture, lifestyle, 2000-2004

The change from a fortnightly to a weekly schedule brought with it a changed dynamic and an increasing emphasis on seeking out community news. An expanded staff and a vital group of contributors also contributed to this. Under the strong leadership of trained journalists, the *SSO* more than at any time in its prior history adopted the conventions of traditional journalism. As community organizations like the Mardi Gras and the AIDS Council turned into multimillion dollar enterprises the *SSO* paid even more attention to its important role of fourth estate watchdog.

The final period, under my own editorship, has been a time of stability for the newspaper with both myself as editor and a number of key staff remaining in their positions for lengthy periods of four or more years. In the history of the *Star* this has been very unusual and indicates a more professionalised environment for working journalists. Changes in gay community and mainstream culture have led to changes in both the style and content of the *SSO*'s coverage. I will note only two of those changes.

The role and power of community organizations has declined significantly over those years, culminating in the financial collapse of Mardi Gras in 2002. This has meant that the paper's bread and butter news has shifted away from the coverage of those expressions of community. Simultaneously the movement for gay and lesbian rights has taken on an increasingly national and international flavour with campaigns for same-sex marriage in places as diverse as Taiwan, France and the United States framing calls for similar relationship reform in Australia.

Coverage of cultural and media representations of gay men and lesbians have always been important for *SSO* but over the last two to three years the explosion of gay and lesbian images on television has pointed towards popular culture as an important frontier for contemporary gay politics.

This move towards the cultural and the global in both gay and lesbian politics and in *SSO* coverage is perhaps the biggest shift

away from the original vision of the *Star* as a community noticeboard. But just as Michael Glynn argued that he knew there was a gay community because he *saw* it when he went out on Saturday night, many contemporary gay men and lesbians know there is a gay community because they have *seen* it on *Will and Grace* or *The L Word*.

In looking back at the “various *Stars*” of the paper’s first fifteen years Craig Johnston talks about a change in emphasis from “advocate (Michael Glynn’s *Star*) to chronicler (Larry Galbraith’s *Star Observer*) to critic (Campion Decent’s *Sydney Star Observer*)” (*SSO* 15 July 1994). Johnston’s types have a certain validity as characterisations of the *Star* under the three editors he names. However I think what is even more evident is that throughout its history the *Star* has moved backwards and forwards along the spectrum marked by those three words: advocate, chronicler, critic.

The success or otherwise of the various *Stars* can be measured in various ways but I would contend that it has made significant contributions in four separate areas: a) the development of the gay and lesbian community; b) the development of gay and lesbian journalism; c) assisting individuals in negotiating gay or lesbian identity and d) the definition and maintenance of a gay market.

The *Star* has, as the various debates surveyed here show, made an important contribution to the self-understanding and development of the Sydney gay and lesbian community and that community’s key institutions. This has occurred through both its role in community development and community critique.

Secondly the *Star* has been critical to the development of gay and lesbian journalists and gay and lesbian journalism. Many writers who received their first journalistic training at the *Star* have gone on to work in the mainstream press. To pick two very different examples, Ruth Pollard a staff journalist with the *Star* in the mid 90s, who specialised in reporting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, is now a health reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and her colleague from that era Ben Widdicombe, an arts reporter, is now the gossip columnist for the *New York Daily News*. That the *Star* could help launch two such diverse careers is a tribute to both its diversity and professionalism.

Bernie Sheehan, the editor who oversaw the *Star's* move to weekly publication in 1995, was poached to head the start-up of one of the first Australian city-based internet portals, *Ninemsn's Sydney Sidewalk*. Although Sheehan was a journalist of considerable talent it was her helming of a diverse publication such as the *Star* with its mix of niche community news and serious arts and entertainment coverage that caught the eye of the portal developers. She took with her a number of the *Star's* key contributors. Sheehan's recruitment started a trend with the editor of a Melbourne gay and lesbian weekly becoming Sheehan's counterpart in the start-up of *Melbourne Sidewalk* and her rival at Sydney's other gay and lesbian weekly *Capital Q* leaving to become her internet competitor at *Sydney City Search*.

Apart from these individual success stories the *Star* has had an ongoing role as a source for mainstream coverage of gay and lesbian issues. Throughout its first decade the *Star* was a strident critic of the mainstream press, regularly running pieces deconstructing the mainstream media's inaccurate or homophobic reportage. However in the 90s, with the mainstream press beginning to cover gay and lesbian issues more extensively, it becomes a key source. During her term Bernie Sheehan was a regular guest on ABC National's afternoon drive-time program, summing-up what was in the *Star* that week.

The *Star* has managed to hold its own in the reporting of gay and lesbian issues, even in big stories that receive blanket coverage by the mainstream media. During the 2002 allegations against openly gay high court judge Justice Michael Kirby, which was front-page news nationally, elements of the *Star's* coverage were quoted by both ABC and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The *Star's* influence on individual lives is harder to document, but in a sense this follows logically from the other areas of influence I have just outlined. As I noted early in this article, gay identity, unlike other minority identities is not usually a product of family socialisation in the same way as say, ethnic identity. In fact gay identity most often emerges counter to family socialisation. Therefore points of entry, particularly media, which can provide a private space for initial contact and exploration, are uniquely important for gay men and lesbians who are 'coming out'. The *Star* as a widely available access point to the various social and political institutions of the Sydney gay and lesbian community has

undoubtedly been a critical prop in this coming out process for many Australian gays and lesbians.

Finally, although the *Star* did not single-handedly create a viable gay market it has always been a key player, from its GPC days to the current time, in the promotion of a gay and lesbian advertising market and commercial culture. Ironically, it is only because it was left out of the biggest commercial adventure in Australian gay publishing that it survives today.

In 1999 the Satellite Group, the world's first 'pink' publicly listed company, took over all the weekly gay and lesbian publications apart from the *SSO*. Following the group's spectacular crash in 2000 the *Star* remained the only weekly paper left standing. Even though it has chosen to define itself as a community owned not-for-individual-profit company, through its survival over 25 years it has become one of the commercial success stories of community publishing.

This commercial success should not be seen as separate to its other areas of achievement. As I have noted earlier in this article, there is a well-worn debate in the queer studies literature about the effects of commodification and consumerism on gay and lesbian culture generally and its print media specifically. Alan McKee (2002) has argued that it is unhelpful to frame this as a binary citizen/consumer conflict. He argues for a notion of "queer citizenship" or "queer nation" that is not just about individual/state relations, nor is it just a linguistically innocent replacement for "queer community".

I would agree with McKee that rejection of gay 'commodification' is often more a question of aesthetics than economics or politics: "It is not commercialism *per se* that offend most of these writers: it is the fact that people choose the wrong *kind* of commodified culture" (2002:19). McKee writes:

It is important to lay claim to the term 'citizenship' for members of a Queer nation, rather than accepting that we are 'only' involved in identity politics or merely a community. According to the strict definition of citizenship we exist only as a lack. We are 'not citizens' – or perhaps more accurately and with an even more derogatory thrust, we are 'not good citizens'. Our lack of engagement with the state appears as an

absence, apathy, laziness, a failing. But what if we are still engaged with public spheres, with governance, with rules, with customs in other spheres – can this not be recognised as citizenship? (McKee 2002:20)

Similarly, Alexander Chasin recognises that “print capitalism generates equations between readers, consumers, and citizens” (2001:92). He sets the importance of the gay press in a context that recognises the gay market, alongside both gay movement and gay community as political and relational frameworks that produce what Anderson (1991) would call an imagined nationhood.

The national...gay community came into being through the imagined comradeship of gay men and lesbians reading an increasingly commercial gay press. In that press, gay men and lesbians read for news of the growth of the movement, they read for news of consumption opportunities that reinforced their belonging in the community, and they read vernacular language that helped delineate the boundaries of the community. (Chasin 2001:92)

The debates about community, inclusion, locality, journalism, and commerce that have played themselves out in the pages of the various *Stars*, and within their equally various boards of management, are examples of the vitality and complexity of the possibilities of such queer citizenship.

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