Online and onwards: it gets better for gay and lesbian media

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Abstract
Last week’s announcement that Australia’s oldest and most respected lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) weekly newspaper, Sydney Star Observer (SSO), will change to a monthly print format and a reinvigorated web presence does not come as a surprise given the global state of newspapers.

I edited SSO from 1999 to 2006 and, to me, the shift makes sense. What’s more, the publication's move online says just as much about the evolution of the LGBTI community as it does about the changing fortunes of print media.

Gay and lesbian media have been one of the essential elements in the evolution of LGBTI communities and the success of the LGBTI rights movement. Even before highly visible LGBTI subcultures emerged, newsletters and magazines of early rights groups like the Mattachine Society played an important role in building solidarity among a disparate and oppressed group.

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The Sydney Star Observer won’t appear in a weekly print format any more – but the community it’s helped build is thriving. AAP Image/Dan Himbrechts

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**How LGBTI media has built audiences – and communities**

As early as 1969, in one of the first studies of minority media, the doyen of American journalism studies, James Carey, wrote that these first publications turned “a locally based, decentralised, tenuously connected subculture into a highly identifiable group and, above all, into an audience”.

In 1993, when journalism scholar Rodger Streitmatter wrote a history of the weekly gay news magazine The Advocate – kind of a LGBTI Time Magazine – he highlighted two elements that contributed to this galvanising function of the LGBTI media.

First, The Advocate and other early gay and lesbian media played an important public-facing role: they were quick to develop a defiant unapologetic editorial voice that demanded a place at the table of public discussion.

Second, within the emerging communities they helped articulate gay and lesbian values and norms by using a community vernacular and circulating positive gay and lesbian imagery.

In other words, they played the same role that Benedict Anderson famously attributed to “print capitalism” in the evolution of national identities: they helped form “imagined communities”.

**Early days at the Sydney Star Observer**

The SSO launched in 1979 – the year after the 1978 protest march that would eventually turn into the Mardi Gras Parade.

The first edition cover featured a shirtless man in Levi’s 501s with hairy chest and moustache – typical of the “clone” look popular at the time. He stood in front of the elaborate deco detail of Hyde Park’s Archibald fountain making a striking statement about public visibility and the contrasting traditions of Sydney society and the emerging gay subculture.

This affirmative gay posture was in contrast to the mainstream media at the time.

The Sydney Morning Herald, for example, had the year before published the names and addresses of all those arrested at the first Mardi Gras protest.

When HIV/AIDS appeared four years later the existence of a healthy, local and national LGBTI media was critical in dissemination of early information about the unknown disease and the first efforts at prevention education and community organisation.

Gay journalists such as Adam Carr who wrote for SSO and national gay magazine OutRage played a critical role in educating gay men about HIV/AIDS and in the formulation of national HIV/AIDS policy.

Again the response of the LGBTI media was in strong contrast to the early coverage of HIV/AIDS in the mainstream press.

**Reaching out online**

Jump ahead to 2010 and American gay activist and journalist Dan Savage was concerned about the stories of bullying and suicide among LGBTI teenagers. When 15-year-old Indiana gay teen Billy Lucas hanged himself after daily threats and bullying from fellow students, Savage decided he had to do something.

When Savage wrote about Lucas’ suicide on his blog a commentator wrote:
My heart breaks for the pain and torment you went through, Billy Lucas. I wish I could have told you that things get better.

Savage felt the same way and established a YouTube channel and urged his readers to post messages to LGBTI youth telling them that “It Get’s Better”. This has become a hugely successful campaign with contributions from more than 50,000 people, including celebrities from President Obama to Lady Gaga.

The It Gets Better project.

The initial impetus and runaway success of the It Gets Better Project tells us something about the evolving space of LGBTI media.

The project was born out of an online communication between Savage and one of his readers. It was launched as a participatory video project on YouTube and gained momentum both from the grass-roots organisation that grew up around it and from Savage’s ability to publicise it through mainstream media.

It is a great example of the exciting hybrid possibilities that could characterise the next stage of LGBTI media’s evolution.

**The future of LGBTI media**

So when SSO editor Elias Jahshan writes that the paper has made its recent changes because they are adapting to the ways their audience now consume news, he is right. As he put it:

A news story now is the words, the pictures, YouTube clips, audio, and even embedded tweets. It is about related stories that can be clicked at a touch of a button so you can be properly informed. A newspaper cannot deliver this.

It also means taking seriously opportunities for interaction and participation and this is the one area of online media that both mainstream and alternative media struggle with as they move primarily to multiple digital deliveries through web and mobile apps.

Strangely, for LGBTI media, building these new opportunities for interaction and participation means a return to their roots when these weekly newspapers were an integral part of an activist community and a network of vocal agitators for change.