

Frames of Homosexuality: Comparing *Los Angeles Times*' Coverage of California's Proposition 6 (1978) and Proposition 8 (2008)

Tony E. Adams

Published online: 30 June 2012
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Abstract In this essay, I use qualitative framing analysis to discern frames of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction present in the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of Proposition 6 (1978) and Proposition 8 (2008)—propositions aimed to regulate the rights of lesbian and gay persons. I specifically describe differences between the coverage of each proposition, and I illustrate how the news coverage of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction, at least by one source, has changed over the span of 30 years.

Keywords Qualitative framing analysis · News · Proposition 6 · Proposition 8

Introduction

The film *Milk* (2008) portrays the story of activist Harvey Milk: his rise to political fame, turbulent love affairs, and death. The film also portrays the social struggle to defeat Proposition 6, the 1978 ballot measure that sought to eliminate homosexuals from teaching in California's public educational system.

Ironically, the release of *Milk* in November 2008 corresponded with Proposition 8—California's 2008 ballot measure that sought to eliminate the marriage rights of same-sex couples. While the script for and production of *Milk* happened before Proposition 8 was established (June 2008), and even though a thirty-year difference exists between Proposition 6 and Proposition 8, the similarities between the propositions were striking: both took place in California; both aimed at curtailing the rights and freedoms of lesbian and gay persons; and both were immensely contentious.

T. E. Adams (✉)
Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL, USA
e-mail: tony.e.adams@gmail.com

Given my background in media, communication, and sexuality, I wondered about the differences between Proposition 6 (1978) and Proposition 8 (2008), particularly how each was covered by news sources. More specifically, given that each proposition aimed to regulate the rights of lesbian and gay persons, I wondered how the coverage of the propositions discussed homosexuality, gay and lesbian identity, and same-sex attraction. I assumed that the coverage of each proposition and of these topics would be different, but I did not know *how* it would be different, especially across a thirty-year time span. I thus arrived to this project.

In this essay, I use qualitative framing analysis to discern frames of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction present in the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of Proposition 6 (1978) and Proposition 8 (2008). I specifically describe differences between the news coverage of each proposition, and I illustrate the ways the news coverage of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction has changed.

Frames of (Homo)Sexuality

Framing consists of the techniques a media source uses to define or promote a particular interpretation and/or evaluation of a person, object, event, or issue. Frames are determined by the “presence or absence” (Entman 1993, p. 52), “foregrounding” or “backgrounding” (Bardhan 2001, p. 284) of certain keywords, phrases, images, and types of information. Frames are important because they can influence how audiences perceive and understand the represented phenomena. “The mosaic or gestalt resulting from a frame,” McCombs and Ghanem (2001) write, “can predispose the recipient of the framed message toward a particular line of reasoning” (p. 77). Bardhan (2001) notes that “news frames give us particular renditions of events and issues that, in turn, define what is normal or legitimate and what is deviant” (p. 287). And Goldman and Kuypers (2010) argue that news media, in “their relaying of information,” construct stories in ways that motivate audiences to “draw the same, or very similar conclusions” (p. 4). Framing thus not only defines a person, object, event, or issue in particular, ideological ways, but can also motivate public opinions, interpretations, and evaluations of the represented phenomenon (see Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Correa 2010; Entman 2010; Meyer 2004/2005).

Many studies have focused on the framing of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction. Cooper and Pease (2008) identify frames—common keywords, phrases, and evaluations—in reviews of *Brokeback Mountain*, a film about love, same-sex attraction, and homophobia; Pan, Men and Zhou (2010) analyze frames of same-sex marriage in *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*; Landau (2009) examines frames of same-sex parenting in US print media sources; Gray (2009) analyzes frames of Queer Nation/San Francisco, a social movement aimed at promoting lesbian and gay visibility; and Stewart (2005) interrogates frames of “reparative therapy”—therapy that tries to change or repress a person’s same-sex attraction. While these projects address the framing of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction, none compared the framing of these phenomena across a significant amount of time.

Thus, in this essay, I discern frames—common keywords, phrases, and types of information as well as notable absences—used to define, interpret, and evaluate homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction in the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of Proposition 6 (1978) and Proposition 8 (2008). More specifically, I asked:

How did the *Los Angeles Times* describe homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and/or same-sex attraction in the coverage of Proposition 6 in 1978 and in the coverage of Proposition 8 in 2008?

I then discerned differences between the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of each proposition, and, in so doing, illustrate ways in which one news source, the *Los Angeles Times*, has shifted in its discussions of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction.

Method

Since Proposition 6 and Proposition 8 explicitly addressed homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction, I assumed that the news coverage of each proposition would describe these phenomena in different and particular ways. I was not concerned with why each proposition passed or failed, or with whether the propositions were socially important or harmful. Rather, my concern was with the differences in how homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and/or same-sex attraction were described—and, consequently, evaluated—in the coverage of each proposition.

Given that Proposition 6 and Proposition 8 were California-based proposition, I only focused on the news coverage of each proposition as featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, the largest circulating daily newspaper in California. I wanted a large and reputable source that covered both propositions, and a source that had a comprehensive and accessible archive. I also isolated my analysis to one newspaper, as my goal was to focus on one particular source's particular descriptions of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and/or same-sex attraction. Such a narrow focus allows for a thorough and nuanced investigation, one that allows me to do a close read of a limited number of texts, rather than a general and abstract investigation of a variety of sources.

I used a few limits in my search for articles. I found articles about each proposition by searching the *Los Angeles Times* web archive. For Proposition 6, I used the keywords "Proposition 6"; for Proposition 8, I used the keyword "Proposition 8."

To keep my search and analysis consistent across the coverage of the propositions, I wanted to establish the best "control group" of texts I possibly could. To do this, I searched for texts about Proposition 6 between September 1, 1978 and November 7, 1978 (Election Day); for Proposition 8, I searched between September 1, 2008 and November 4, 2008 (Election Day). I worked back from Election Day to September 1 for four reasons. First, I assume that the majority of news coverage for each proposition happened in the months closest to the election—that is, as the day that voters would decide each Proposition's fate approached. Second, given that each

proposition began at different times, with the coverage of Proposition 6 starting in November (1977) and the coverage of Proposition 8 starting in June (2008), Proposition 6 had more time to be covered (November 1977–November 1978) than Proposition 8 (June 2008–November 2008). As such, I did not want to analyze the coverage when each proposition emerged, as there would be more time and coverage of Proposition 6. Third, and related to the previous concern, had I started analyzing the coverage of each proposition from June or July until Election Day, I would be covering all of Proposition 8's coverage and only part of Proposition 6's coverage—again, a condition that would not allow for a parallel analysis across both sets of texts. And so, I worked back from the Election Day—again, the day of fate for each proposition—rather than from the start of each proposition. Fourth, I ended my search at Election Day because the outcome of each Proposition was different: one passed (Proposition 8) whereas one did not (Proposition 6).

I engaged in a close textual analysis—not a content analysis—of every article (Goldman and Kuypers 2010). I did not “begin with pre-established themes and frames” (p. 5), and I examined every article for repeated and noticeably absent keywords and phrases, taking note of what was included as well as what was excluded (Connelly-Ahern and Broadway 2008; Meyers and Abrams 2010). In doing a qualitative framing analysis, my focus was on the possible interpretations and understandings of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction as present in the analyzed texts; I was not concerned about whether my sample of texts was statistically significant or generalizable across all news sources (as these are not concerns of qualitative studies).

Further, I only chose texts that included extensive discussions of each proposition, particularly texts that detailed thoughts about and responses to each proposition and the possible social impacts if it passed. I disregarded articles that casually mentioned the proposition, e.g., articles that included a brief, one-sentence description of the proposition or texts that mentioned that the proposition would appear on the election ballot. For Proposition 6, I analyzed 54 texts: 16 feature-length stories and 39 letters to the editor; for Proposition 8, I analyzed 62 texts: 40 feature-length stories and 22 letters to the editor.¹

1978

Proposition 6—also called the “Briggs Initiative,” named after Senator John Briggs, the author of the proposition—aimed to eliminate teachers who “publicly engage in or advocate homosexuality” (McMillan 1978b, p. A3). Such a phrase makes multiple interpretations possible: some people believed Proposition 6 meant homosexual teachers should be removed from the classroom solely for being homosexual; others

¹ When analyzing my texts, I did not distinguish between “letters to the editor” and more traditional news reports. I focused on any and all coverage of each proposition; I did not distinguish between the form of the coverage. I recognize that there are differences between “letters to the editor” and more traditional reports in terms of tone, placement, and form, but I also recognize that editors of the *Los Angeles Times* choose which “letters to the editor” to include, and, consequently, that they still have a say in the coverage of the propositions.

believed that teachers should be removed only if they mentioned homosexuality in the classroom; and others believed that any teacher who advocated for a pro-homosexual agenda, anywhere, should be removed. “We’re not saying homosexuals can’t teach,” Briggs said in an interview. “We’re saying public homosexuality shouldn’t be tolerated” (cited in McMillan 1978a, p. A31).

Five interrelated frames dominate the 1978 news coverage: (1) the use of “sexual preference” to describe homosexuality, (2) the idea that homosexuals prey on children, and (3) the belief that homosexuality can be taught, (4) a fear of publicly opposing Proposition 6, and (5) an absence of support for homosexuality.

Frame 1: Sexual Preference

Noting three exceptions (Chandler and Dart 1978; Demoss 1978; McManus 1978a), all of the texts describe homosexuality as a “sexual preference,” and, correspondingly, as a “lifestyle.”

The next two frames are made possible by this frame, particularly the description of and reference to homosexual as a lifestyle, as something acquired and passed on, a way of living that others can choose and learn. If the homosexuality-as-preference frame did not exist, the next two frames make little sense.

Frame 2: Homosexuals Prey on Children

In nearly half of the coverage, there is a sentiment that homosexuals have a tendency to prey on, and take advantage of, children. This is the argument against homosexuals being teachers and allowed in classrooms as teaching and classrooms offer, for homosexuals, an abundance of naïve and innocent sex objects.

“We already know that homosexuals are attracted to children,” John Briggs says in an interview. “If you have a proclivity for having sex with young boys or people of your own gender, then you ought not be put in a position where you are going to be tempted” (cited in Scheer 1978, pp. A7, A26). “At worst,” Briggs says in another report, “homosexual teachers” will “molest their children, or, at best, offer unacceptable ‘role models’ from which students will pattern their lives” (cited in Martinez 1978, p. 25). Lee agrees, noting that it is society’s best interest to “protect our children from the rape of their minds before they’re raped physically” (cited in McManus 1978b, p. 28). This taking-advantage-of-children assumption is critiqued by other reports (e.g., Demoss 1978; Ibson 1978), but is also evident in the next frame.

Frame 3: Homosexuality as Teachable, Contagious

In nearly half of the coverage, there is an assumption that homosexuality is something a person—a homosexual—can teach another person, either explicitly, by talking about (and, by the act of speaking, advocate for) the homosexual lifestyle, or implicitly, by being a role model.

John Briggs refers to an “open and avowed homosexual” as a bad “role model” (cited in McMillan 1978b, p. A3). In another report, Briggs calls homosexuality a

“creeping disease” that can “spread like a cancer”—a “disease that turns young men away from their natural role as an establisher of a family, with a wife and a protector of the family” (cited in Scheer 1978, p. A26). Reporter Martinez (1978) describes a man who fears his children will “grow up to be homosexuals” if they are “taught by homosexuals”; another man, in the same report, says “It’s nobody’s business if a teacher is homosexual,” as long as the teacher doesn’t “teach our kids to be homosexual” (p. A25). Lee argues that if a child perceives a homosexual teacher to be “nice,” the child may then believe there is “nothing wrong with homosexuality” (cited in McMillan 1978b, p. A31). Resovich (1978) agrees that “something should be done” if a teacher “makes gestures or flaunts his or her sexuality” (p. B4), and Laing (1978) fears that the “defeat of Proposition 6 will encourage homosexuals to display their tastes more openly” (p. B4). Middings (1978) calls homosexuals “unsuitable” for “any position in which they may influence children to follow their ‘life-style” (p. B4). “We believe that a man has a right to believe as a Nazi,” Thomas (1978) writes,

but we do not believe that he should have the right to teach and advocate Nazism in the public classroom. We believe that there is a limit to the right of the Nazi. So it is on the homosexual issue. We believe there is a limit to where they shall be allowed to spread and advocate their life-style. We are saying you have a right to be homosexual, but you do not have the right to teach it to our children in the public classroom. (p. B4)

Baxter (1978) agrees, noting that homosexuals practice “inside-out” and “destructive” ways of life, and, consequently, are unsuitable role models, “simply disabled” and inadequate to work with, or around, children (p. F1).

One critique of homosexuality is that homosexuals—because they engage in homosexual acts, acts that do not facilitate procreation—are thus inadequate members of society, and, consequently, should not serve as role models. Ironically, however, the belief that homosexuality is something a person can teach makes “reproduction” for/by homosexuals possible: homosexuals can reproduce—that is, carry forth the population—by teaching people to be homosexuals; as Briggs says, homosexuals want to “expand their numbers” because they “don’t breed” (cited in Scheer 1978, p. 27). While some people suggest that homosexuals are deficient because they cannot create biological offspring, many of these same people believe that homosexual offspring can be cultivated in a classroom as homosexual teachers and advocates can teach students about becoming homosexual.

Frame 4: Public Opposition to Proposition 6

In the texts that describe who does and does not support Proposition 6, reporters and letters to the editors address the fear some people have of publicly opposing Proposition 6.

With the exception of celebrities such as Bea Arthur, Lily Tomlin, and Carol Burnett (Rood 1978), political figures such as Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, and Jerry Brown (McManus 1978c), a few religious figures and organizations (Anonymous 1978; Chandler and Dart 1978), few people publicly opposed Proposition 6. Reporter Penelope McMillan (1978a) notes that “No on 6” campaign officials “have

found that people are afraid to lend their names, give money or even put bumper stickers on their cars” (p. A8). Peter Scott, an organizer for the campaign, even says, “We have the largest first name volunteer list in the history of politics” (cited in McMillan 1978a, p. A8). “Only a relative few seem self-confident enough to stand their ground against a repressive initiative such as Proposition 6,” Weston (1978) writes. “Fearful that their names will appear on some future blacklist, and they will lose a good job, they turn their backs and—one presumes—wash their hands” (p. C4). Pon (1978) expresses her concern about supporters of Proposition 6 choosing to proceed unidentified:

[The *Los Angeles Times*] reported that many people are willing to lend financial support to the campaign against Proposition 6, but unwilling to have their names made public, for fear of reprisals should the current ‘liberal climate of opinion’ change I am opposed to the Briggs initiative because it is an outrageous violation of our civil rights, an invitation to witch-hunts. I hope you will print my letter and my name. (p. C4)

Redman (1978) says, “it is sad to know that people opposing Proposition 6 feel unable to campaign openly against its passage” (p. C4), and Dank (1978) fears that “if more of us do not become sympathetic and empathetic to the plight of homosexuals in our society and end up not speaking out, we will become the amoral bystanders [read about] in history books” (p. B4).

Frame 5: Public Support of Homosexuality

According to Entman (1993), a frame can be determined by the “presence or absence” of certain keywords, phrases, images, and types of information (p. 52). This frame is one marked by a significant absence—a silence—across the majority of the news coverage: With few exceptions (e.g., Chandler and Dart 1978; Marks 1978; Resovich 1978), there is little public support for homosexuality, gay and lesbian persons, and same-sex attraction.

There is a fair amount of opposition to Proposition 6, but the opposition seems to come from people who view the proposition as unfair and unnecessary, or as not their place to decide or judge (Ellis 1978; Michaelson 1978; Ramos 1978). As such, few people validate homosexuality as good, normal, or acceptable. Even somewhat favorable letters in opposition to Proposition 6 still exude caution: “I have no fear that my son will be ‘converted’ to homosexuality,” Richards (1978) writes, “because our family life is good, and my wife and I represent a loving picture to him” (p. B6).

2008

In November 2000, voters of California approved an initiative to define marriage as a coupling of one man and one woman. In May 2008, the state Supreme Court ruled against the initiative by calling the right to marry a fundamental right—a right that cannot be denied to a couple solely because of each person’s sex. In June 2008, Proposition 8 emerged to give voters a chance to overturn the ruling, and, in

November 2008, voters approved Proposition 8, thus overturning the Supreme Court decision.²

Five interrelated frames dominated the 2008 news coverage: (1) the use of “sexual orientation” to describe homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction; (2) voting for Proposition 8 is an act of bigotry; (3) endorsements for and against Proposition 8; (4) lesbian and gay persons are okay, but same-sex relations are not; and (5) legalizing same-sex marriage is a violation of religious freedom.

Frame 1: Sexual Orientation

In every text that references sexuality, the term “sexual orientation” is used, and only one text refers to homosexuality as a “lifestyle.”

Frame 2: Voting for Proposition 8 is Discriminatory

Nearly one-third of the texts either argue that voting for Proposition 8—that is, voting against same-sex marriage—is a vote against lesbian and gay persons, and, consequently, an act of bigotry and discrimination, or that voting for Proposition 8 should not be perceived of as negative and discriminatory.

There are texts that frame persons who do not support Proposition 8 as fair, tolerant, open-minded, and compassionate (e.g., Howard 2008; Russell 2008; Van Wagenen 2008)—a “vote against discrimination” (Garrison, 2008c, p. B1) and a vote for equality (Guynn 2008, p. C3). Consequently, people who vote for Proposition 8 are framed as anti-gay, politically incorrect (Roberts 2008), and as wanting to strip the rights away from lesbian and gay persons (Helfand 2008). Consider, for example, Richard Peterson’s (2008) justification of Proposition 8:

Proposition 8 is not about the morality of homosexual lifestyles. It is not designed to diminish comprehensive rights already guaranteed to same-sex couples by law in California. It is not motivated by bigotry, discrimination or intolerance. Proposition 8 is a reinstatement of the people’s will as expressed by the passage of Proposition 22 in 2000 by 61 % of California voters. (p. A21)

As Peterson suggests, Proposition 8 has little to do with a person’s sexual orientation, but rather with the will of the people; the power of majority rule—as emphasized by the passage of Proposition 22—is most important. Gallagher (2008) also puts forth a critique against the perceived “Yes on 8” bigotry: “If Californians vote no on Proposition 8,” she writes, “the great historical cross-cultural meaning of marriage will be replaced by the new government dogma on which gay marriage is based: There is no difference between same-sex unions and opposite-sex unions; anyone who thinks otherwise is just a bigot” (p. A21).

² Proposition 8 continues to maintain cultural significance. In July 2010, Federal Judge Vaughn Walker judge ruled that Proposition 8 was unconstitutional. In June 2012, the 9th Circuit Court declined an appeal to revisit Walker’s verdict. As some legal experts believe, the United States Supreme Court will rule on the case.

Frame 3: Public Opposition to Proposition 8

Nearly one-third of the news coverage describes endorsements for and against Proposition 8.

Large corporations (e.g., Apple, Google, Yahoo, Adobe, Facebook), groups (e.g., California Teacher's Association, Service Employees International Union, American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, *Los Angeles Times*), celebrities (e.g., Brad Pitt, Steven Spielberg, Kate Capshaw, Steve Bing, Melissa Etheridge, Mary J. Blige), and political figures (e.g., Gavin Newsom, Episcopalian bishops, Catholic priests) came out against Proposition 8 (see Daum 2008; Daunt 2008a, b; Garrison 2008c; Guynn 2008; Helfand 2008; Larrubia 2008; Quinn 2008). Pepperdine University distanced itself from a professor who endorsed the proposition (Garrison 2008a), and Bolthouse Farms not only distanced itself from its founder, William Bolthouse, for financially contributing to the Proposition 8 campaign, but also, in response, began extending "medical benefits to same-sex partners of gay employees" (La Ganga, 2008, p. B1). With the exception of the Church of Latter Day Saints, support for Proposition 8 came primarily from unknown individuals, not organizations, celebrities, or political figures.

Further, even the tone of much of the news coverage was against Proposition 8. Consider, for instance, the opening of the story, "Prop. 8 Backers Push for Yardage":

It was supposed to be the largest mass lawn-sign planting in the history of California politics: A million signs in a million yards across the state, all stuck into the ground at the same moment in a show of support for Proposition 8. Except it never happened. (Garrison 2008b, p. B3)

Failure on behalf of the Proposition 8 supporters—a story that one reporter, and, by affiliation, the *Los Angeles Times*, felt needed to be told.

Frame 4: Criticisms of Same-Sex Relationships

In more than half of the coverage, persons criticize same-sex relationships, not (individual) lesbian and gay persons. Even though one report explicitly referred to homosexuals as inappropriate and immoral, the other reports discussed the need for a mother and father in a child's life as well as the immorality and inappropriateness of same-sex *relationships*; persons could be lesbians and gays, just not united together in intimate, meaningful, and legal partnerships called "marriages."

"For every child born, there is a recognized mother and a father, accountable to the child and to each other," Blankenhorn (2008) writes. "For healthy development, what a child needs more than anything else is the mother and father who together made the child, who love the child and love each other" (p. A27). While Blankenhorn attempts to show respect for gays and lesbians in saying "I reject homophobia and believe in the equal dignity of gay and lesbian love," he also reiterates his support for mothers, fathers, and (heterosexual) marriages (p. A27).

Gallagher (2008) makes a similar argument: "marriage matters because children need a mother and a father, long for a mother and a father, deserve a mother and a father" (p. A21). Jessel (2008) agrees, and notes that the legalization of same-sex

marriage (somehow) promotes “out-of-wedlock” births that thus (somehow) lead to “welfare states, higher taxes, increased poverty and increased crime” (p. A20).³ Catholic Bishop John Steinbock calls sex a “gift from God” only to be enacted by a “man and a woman within marriage.” However, “Proposition 8,” he insists, “does not represent a condemnation of gays or lesbians” (cited in Helfand and Saillant, p. B1). Reporter Martinez (2008) describes how “Harvey,” an evangelical Christian, “cannot stand the idea of two men walking down the street holding hands, much less indulging in more intimate expressions of love in the privacy of their bedroom” (p. B3). And Combe (2008) notes that the reason for Proposition 8 is because persons in “same-gender relationships” cannot reproduce.

No report mentioned California’s “domestic partnership” law, a law that grants most of the rights of marriage to same-sex couples. Rather, as Peterson (2008) argues, Proposition 8 is focused on defining and protecting “the enduring union of husband and wife”; it has nothing to do with “the morality of homosexual lifestyles” (p. A21).

Frame 5: Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Freedom

Nearly one-quarter of the stories suggested that the use of the term “marriage” to label same-sex relationships would violate religious freedoms in that the term would force religions that do not accept or validate such marriages to recognize the partnerships; consequently, religious freedoms would be compromised.

“Many voters believe incorrectly that Proposition 8 is simply about the rights of same-sex couples,” Heaton (2008) argues. “In actuality, an important aim of the proposition is to preserve the rights of religious individuals to act in accordance with their conscience” (p. A22). Wyne (2008) is concerned that same-sex marriage “contradicts many churches’ doctrine” (p. A22), and Morain (2008) worries about persons being “sued over their personal beliefs” (p. B4). “Some contend that the ruling in the same-sex marriage case obliges churches, synagogues and mosques that rent out their social halls for wedding receptions to make them available for ceremonies involving gays and lesbians,” Rutten (2008) writes. “Next, according to this argument, clergy will be compelled to officiate at such ceremonies, regardless of their religious objections” (p. A31).

Comparing Coverage: 1978 Versus 2008

In this section, I describe some key differences between the coverage of each proposition and, in so doing, illustrate *how* one news source, the *Los Angeles Times*, has shifted in its discussions of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction. In particular, I note differences in the uses of “sexual preference” and “sexual orientation,” the public support and endorsement of homosexuality, the

³ I use “somehow” to qualify Jessel’s (2008) statements because I am unsure of his connections between same-sex marriage and out-of-wedlock births. His concern sounds legit, but upon close inspection resembles a slippery slope.

move from devaluing lesbian and gay *persons* to devaluing same-sex *relationships*, accommodating religious freedoms and sexual orientation, and further justifying why same-sex marriage matters to individual persons.

My first observation is tied to the uses of “sexual preference” and “sexual orientation.” In 1978, contributors to the *Los Angeles Times* used sexual preference to describe homosexuality; in 2008, contributors used “sexual orientation” to describe homosexuality. This change in language is significant: Discrimination towards lesbian and gay persons is often justified by framing homosexuality as a “sexual preference,” as something constructed and chosen, and, consequently, conducive to change; conversely, “sexual orientation” suggests that homosexuality is not a choice and is biological/genetic, natural, and unable to change (see Adams 2010; Brookey 2000; Perry and Ballard-Reisch 2004). In many legal contexts, protections for lesbian and gay persons stem from the view that their attraction is an orientation, not a preference—it is difficult to justify discrimination against lesbian and gay people, especially if it is believed that they cannot control who they are and who they find attractive (Yoshino 2006).

Further, unlike 1978, not a single story in 2008 referenced homosexuality as transmittable. This lack of reference may also illustrate the importance of and transition to “sexual orientation.” For instance, under the rubric of orientation, homosexuality cannot be taught or learned; under the rubric of preference, it can. I find it notable that none of the texts characterize homosexuality as able-to-be-taught and able-to-be-caught; in the 2008 coverage, such contagious references—references rampant in the 1978 coverage—disappeared.

While the change from sexual preference to sexual orientation may seem promising, the transition to “sexual orientation” can have consequences. In 2007, Reverend Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued that it is “biblically justified” to biologically alter fetuses to cure non-heterosexual sexualities (Lindenberger 2007). The ability to alter fetuses, as Mohler proposed, is an act only possible if homosexuality is viewed as biological/genetic. Consequently, the call to change a fetus’ (homo)sexual orientation may thus make the social use of “sexual preference” more important: If homosexuality is viewed as something chosen and open to change, then trying to change the same-sex attraction of a fetus becomes futile, particularly since the fetus, post-birth, will be able to make a choice in who she or he finds attractive.

I mention the nuances of sexual preference and sexual orientation because we must recognize the possible benefits and consequences for using these terms, especially given that one of the terms—sexual orientation—is used prominently by one media source (at least as recent as 2008). Initially, it may seem like the *Los Angeles Times*’ transition from sexual preference to sexual orientation is indicative of progress and is a positive transition. However, in lieu of Albert Mohler’s comments, the transition is not progress nor is it positive. For me, the continued use of either of these terms is problematic, particularly because the preference-orientation binary reinforces the debate about (homo)sexuality’s biological/genetic and chosen/social characteristics. And I feel that we need to change or transcend this age-old debate, especially since there is no conclusive research that supports either

“side” and, if there were, there would be more legislation like Proposition 6 or more people like Mohler who may try to find ways to rid society of homosexuality.

My second observation is that the 1978 coverage did not include many stories about who does and does not support Proposition 6. With some exception, the coverage steered clear of saying who did (not) endorse the proposition (Ramos 1978; McMillan 1978a). By contrast, much of the 2008 coverage featured stories about political figures, celebrities, and organizations refusing to endorse Proposition 8.

The heightened coverage of endorsement (2008) suggests that prominent cultural figures and organizations not only support same-sex *relationships* (the crux of Proposition 8), but also are not afraid to support them. What was once considered a risky move—evidenced by the lack of 1978 coverage about prominent figures and organizations refusing to endorse Proposition 6—this no longer seems the case, particularly since not supporting same-sex relationships may be framed as indicative of discrimination, bigotry, and political incorrectness.

The third observation across the news coverage is the abundance of ridicule of homosexuals in the 1978 coverage and the near absence of ridicule of homosexuals in the 2008 coverage. In 1978, lesbian and gay *persons* were referenced as sick, immoral, and inappropriate, but in 2008 lesbian and gay *persons* were no longer referenced in these ways; rather, their *relationships* with each other were the problem—the legal legitimization of same-sex relations was the issue, not the inherent worth or morality of gay and lesbian persons. Some persons even made sure to mention that their support of Proposition 8 should not be perceived as homophobic or as a “condemnation of gays or lesbians” (Steinbock, cited in Helfand and Saillant 2008, p. B1). The emphasis on the condemnation of same-sex relationships may have occurred because Proposition 8 dealt with same-sex marriage, a legal union—relationship—of two people, but, at least within the *Los Angeles Times*, there seems to be an obvious shift from lesbians and gays being called immoral and inappropriate to a concern about mothers, fathers, and the (perceived) stability and importance of male–female relations. The coverage illustrates a “love the sinner, hate the sin” philosophy, where it is okay to be a person with same-sex attraction as long as this attraction is not discussed or forced upon others to recognize and legitimate (via marriage).

My fourth observation is tied to the significant amount of religious concerns present in the 2008 coverage, particularly the need to show how and why same-sex marriage would not violate religious freedoms. The heightened coverage suggests that finding ways to accommodate—not necessarily accept—anti-homosexual religious doctrine may be a significant social obstacle lesbian and gay persons and advocates must continue to address. However, advocacy on behalf of same-sex attraction must also make accommodations for religious freedoms, especially since the disregard of religious doctrine can also serve as an act of bigotry and intolerance (see Nussbaum 2010).

My fifth observation based on the coverage is that there continues to be a need to show how persons with same-sex attraction are harmed by not having marriage rights. I find it intriguing that in the 2008 coverage, opponents of same-sex marriage rarely condemned gay and lesbian persons, only their close, meaningful same-sex relationships. Consequently, it seems like a stronger connection needs to be made in

terms of how the rights of (individual) gays and lesbians are violated by not having marriage rights—that is, to better show how marriage impacts each/all person/s personally.

Conclusion

To conclude, I acknowledge two limitations of this project, each of which can motivate future projects. First, I only focused on *one* newspaper's coverage of *two* propositions. I did not consider how other newspapers—not only within the Los Angeles area, but also nationally and globally—discussed each proposition or discussed other lesbian- and gay-related propositions. I believe my observations provide insight into the news coverage of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction, but I do not claim to speak on behalf of other propositions, issues, or news sources. Second, there are differences between Proposition 6 and Proposition 8: Proposition 6 was focused on homosexual teachers whereas Proposition 8 dealt with same-sex relationships; Proposition 6 did not pass whereas Proposition 8 did; the not passing of Proposition 6 received minimal backlash whereas Proposition 8 received a significant amount of criticism. While my focus was on how homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction were discussed in *Los Angeles Times'* coverage of these propositions, I did not account for the specific ways in which such descriptions may have been impacted by the content and focus of each proposition.

If a relationship can exist between news coverage and public opinions about particular social issues (see Gerbner and Morgan 2002; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Signorielli and Morgan 1990), then a comparison of the news coverage of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction in 1978 and 2008 can illustrate ways in which public opinions of these phenomena have changed with time. While an easy-to-determine, casual relationship does not exist between what a source says and what people do, a source, via framing, can simultaneously promote and discourage particular kinds of understanding (Goldman and Kuypers 2010; McCombs and Ghanem 2001; Meyer 2004/2005). An analysis of *Los Angeles Times'* coverage of Proposition 6 and Proposition 8 can thus illustrate progress lesbians and gays have made in terms of news coverage and social understanding as well as illuminate areas about which scholars interested in the media coverage of sexuality should be concerned.

When I started this project, I assumed that the coverage of homosexuality, lesbian and gay identity, and same-sex attraction had changed in the past 30 years; I assumed “progress” had, was, and is being made, and I assumed that many of the changes would be positive. However, I did not know *how*, specifically, the coverage had changed. And so, I leave this project having shown how the coverage has changed, at least for one news source. I leave this project hoping the coverage will continue to change, for the better, for this new source as well as many other new sources. Only time will tell—someone, hopefully me, will have to revisit the coverage again, in another 30 years.

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