Responding to Offending Images in the Digital Age: Censorious and Satirical Discourses in LGBT Media Activism

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This article critically examines the censorious campaigns of media watchdog organizations such as Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), challenging the assumptions about media effects and media power underlying this discourse. In addition, I explore alternative modes of response to offending images within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community that take advantage of emergent participatory media platforms and satirical modes of critique to challenge representational power in the public sphere. Adapting Finnegan and Kang’s Latourian theoretical framework of iconophilia, I argue that contemporary popular practices of digital remix and parody suggest a promising, if imperfect, strategy for media activists to embrace and actively transform the meaning of offending images while resisting an iconoclasm that assumes their static power over weak and vulnerable audiences.

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The debate over minority representation in the media has long centered on the problem of what to do with images that offend. For the so-called media watchdog organizations that advocate on behalf of minority groups, a frequent response to such problematic portrayals can be characterized as censorious discourse, that is, advancing the position that these offending images should not be countenanced and that every effort should be taken to effectively remove them from public circulation.1 In addition to issuing condemnatory press releases and advertisements, media watchdog groups have historically employed a variety of strategies to pressure media executives to suppress offending content.
In the case of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) media activism from the 1970s onward, these strategies have included picketing media company headquarters, disrupting film sets, and calling for boycotts of sponsors (Capsuto, 2000). While this censorious discourse is not always effective in achieving its goals, it has been successfully deployed in numerous instances in recent decades, spurring producers and executives to re-edit or completely eliminate media content that is deemed offensive. One media watchdog group that has been particularly successful in this regard is the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD); for example, in 1998, the organization prompted the WB network to re-edit a controversial episode of *The Wayans Bros.*, and in 1999, it convinced Kia to altogether drop a nationwide automotive ad that it labeled as defamatory (Hill, 2006). As this type of censorious strategy has become commonplace in organized media activism, it has touched off a long-standing debate regarding freedom of expression and the limits of tolerance toward media offense (e.g., Graham, 2005; Wilson, 1981).

In this article, I examine the censorious discourse of media watchdog campaigns led by GLAAD—in particular, its effort to pressure ABC to pull the 2012 sitcom *Work It* from broadcast—in order to raise questions about the sagacity of its approach as well as the validity of its claims regarding media effects and media power. In addition, I explore alternative modes of response within the LGBT community that take advantage of emergent participatory media platforms as well as satirical modes of critique to challenge representational power in the public sphere. Adapting Finnegan and Kang’s (2004) Latourian theoretical framework of iconophilia, I argue that contemporary popular practices of digital remix and parody (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Jenkins, 2006) suggest a promising, if imperfect, strategy for media activists to actively transform the meaning of offending images while resisting an iconoclasm that assumes their static power over weak and vulnerable audiences. As participatory digital technologies provide citizens with a growing set of tools to interact with and directly respond to the maelstrom of media images that surround them, traditional approaches to media activism that rely on older conceptual models of mass communication are in need of reconsideration. Furthermore, I argue that the case study of LGBT activism offers a productive point of departure for exploring alternative strategies of response to media offense more broadly, given its long history of contesting cultural hegemony through transformative and satirical modes of political critique (e.g., Warner, 2012).

To be clear, my aim is not to defend or endorse media representations of minority groups that are perceived as problematic, nor is it to fault members of these groups for feeling offended by demeaning or untruthful portrayals in film, television, and elsewhere. As Peters (2008) contends, “taking offense is an essential human faculty that is closely tied . . . to our sense of justice. We are outraged by things that strike us as wrong” (p. 702). 2 Certainly, the outrage expressed by organizations like GLAAD in their censorious campaigns is born from a sense of justice, with the goal of seeking fair and respectful treatment for a class of citizens that has long been denied their dignity (not to mention their full civil rights). My concern in this article, however, is what to do with these offended feelings—that is, how to mobilize them most
appropriately into a political response that works to improve the welfare of these citizens. Specifically, my aim is to challenge the wisdom of censorious discourse as a strategy for minority media advocacy and to highlight alternative strategies that have emerged in recent years due to key shifts in media technology and practice. While participatory social media and digital remix practices are by no means a simple fix for the problem of minority media representation, and while their capacity to reach a mass audience in an increasingly consolidated Internet landscape (Hindman, 2008) remains an open question, they signal an important and provocative shift from an iconoclastic to an iconophilic approach toward the dilemma of media offense.

Censorious discourse in LGBT media activism

The present-day censorious discourse of GLAAD has its roots in a long tradition of LGBT media activism. Following the Stonewall uprising of 1969, newly formed LGBT coalition groups such as the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), and Lesbian Feminist Liberation (LFL) initiated the first organized efforts to combat negative media representations of the community, which were rampant at the time (Capsuto, 2000). While early targets of these groups consisted mostly of news media outlets, activists also began to address entertainment media representations. One of the first coordinated efforts of this kind centered on a 1974 episode of the ABC medical drama *Marcus Welby, MD*, which featured a plot about a gay man molesting a teenage boy. Activists from the NGTF attempted to halt the episode from airing on ABC by calling network affiliates as well as the program’s sponsors. The pressure convinced a few affiliates to drop the episode and some advertisers to pull out, although the group was not able to prevent the program from airing nationally (Gross, 2001, pp. 47–48). That same year, both the NGTF and the LFL “demanded that NBC permanently shelve” an episode of the drama *Police Woman* featuring a trio of lesbian criminals with protests that included an occupation of network headquarters; although the episode aired as scheduled, NBC agreed to never rerun it and it was later removed from syndication (Capsuto, 2000). Throughout the 1970s, LGBT activist groups waged similar campaigns against network programming with mixed success, “demand[ing] changes in program content, deletions of material, or even the cancelling of particular episodes” (Gross, 2001, p. 49). As the NGTF shifted its focus from media representation to policy matters in the 1980s, GLAAD stepped in to fill the vacuum and continue the ongoing battle to remove offending LGBT-related content from public circulation.

Now one of the most well-known and high-profile media watchdog groups representing minority communities, GLAAD was originally founded in 1985 by a small group of New York City-based LGBT activists in response to news media coverage of the AIDS crisis. The group’s initial purpose was to challenge articles in newspapers such as the *New York Post* that vilified gay men as a public danger and portrayed AIDS as a justified punishment for immoral sexual behavior (Gross, 2001). However, this targeting of defamation in news coverage soon expanded to a broader mission of
LGBT media advocacy that included the monitoring of entertainment images and narratives. The organization’s growing influence in the entertainment field was reflected in a 1992 issue of Entertainment Weekly naming GLAAD “one of Hollywood’s 100 most powerful entities” (Gross, 2001, p. 107). By 2005, the now-national GLAAD organization was raising over $7 million in annual donations (Graham, 2005), signaling its spectacular growth over a 20-year period.

On its current website, GLAAD articulates its claim to represent the interests of all LGBT people, referring to itself as “the LGBT movement’s communications epicenter” and stating unequivocally that “GLAAD amplifies the voice the LGBT community” (About GLAAD, n.d.). The website also outlines its watchdog role with regard to entertainment media specifically:

The Entertainment Media Program monitors film, television, music, and related entertainment media to ensure inclusive and accurate portrayals of the LGBT community. When anti-LGBT content runs, GLAAD speaks out about why anti-LGBT attitudes and content have no place in the media. (Entertainment Media, n.d.)

As this statement makes clear, GLAAD takes the position that entertainment content that it deems “anti-LGBT” should not be permitted to circulate in the public sphere. To ensure that such content never reaches the audiences, the organization employs a variety of strategies to influence the way that LGBT persons and stories are portrayed in film and television. As Gross (2001) notes, this includes a number of proactive measures such as meeting regularly with TV network executives, publishing a guide for media producers about improving LGBT representation, and putting on an annual awards show to celebrate media producers who create LGBT media images that are perceived as positive. Equally important for this watchdog group, however, is campaigning to block content that they view as offensive, typically by issuing “media alerts” to the press. Notably, these missives do not present any specific qualifications for its representatives to judge the merits and effects of media content; instead, its spokespersons appear to rely on the presumed authority of GLAAD as the self-appointed conduit for the “voice of the LGBT community.”

In fact, a closer look at the upper ranks of GLAAD reveals that they are composed not of social scientists or established media critics but rather of industry professionals with backgrounds in corporate media and public relations. As Doyle (2008) notes in his critical ethnography of the organization, GLAAD has steadily increased its ties with the corporate media entities that it monitors since the 1990s (e.g., former executive director Joan Garry had previous executive experience at Showtime and MTV, and former director of entertainment media Scott Seomin came from Entertainment Tonight). For Doyle, this cozy relationship with major corporate media players—who not coincidentally are some of GLAAD’s biggest financial contributors—threatens to blunt the group’s critical voice and shift its politics toward a mainstream assimilationist strategy that he decries as “homonormative”
Along similar lines, some former members have accused GLAAD of going soft on its media watchdog role due its increasing focus on strengthening industry relationships via red-carpet awards shows and gala fundraisers. As one former employee put it, “GLAAD has to be much more laser-sharp in its definition of what’s acceptable and not acceptable . . . it cannot be afraid to be an activist organization” (Graham, 2005). However, the group has continued to wage periodic high-profile campaigns to pressure executives to suppress images that it feels “have no place in the media,” possibly as a strategy to quell this kind of criticism and downplay its close industry ties.

When GLAAD does choose to go after a particular piece of corporate media content, the results can be quite controversial. In 2004, for instance, GLAAD successfully lobbied FOX to remove a program entitled Seriously, Dude, I’m Gay from its broadcast schedule without first discussing its concerns with the show’s creators. The producer of the series, who himself identifies as gay, expressed his dismay in The Advocate that GLAAD would act so swiftly and decisively to prevent his work from ever reaching the air:

I never got a chance to defend myself . . . I don’t understand where GLAAD’s power comes from to tell someone who is creating the show and producing the show—a group of gay men—that this is not politically correct. GLAAD does so much good, but in this case you don’t even get the discussion of “this is why this is good, this is why it was important, this is why I did it that way.” That’s a hell of a way to make a decision about the show. (Graham, 2005, pp. 36–37)

For the creators of Seriously, Dude, I’m Gay, GLAAD’s censorious campaign was a blow to their expressive freedom and a sign of its questionable authority to judge what is and is not offensive to the entire LGBT community. For GLAAD, on the other hand, this action was seemingly a simple matter of routine.

Indeed, GLAAD has conducted myriad campaigns of this nature over the past few decades. One of the first involved efforts to shut down the production of Basic Instinct, a 1992 film that features a bisexual character who commits a series of murders. Numerous LGBT activists were alerted to the nature of the script by GLAAD (who obtained it in a leak from a Hollywood source), and attempted to disrupt the shooting of the film; however, this did not prevent it from being completed and eventually becoming a box-office success (Gross, 2001). While the suppression of Basic Instinct may have failed, GLAAD enjoyed one of its biggest successes as a censorious media watchdog in 2000, when the group mounted protests aimed at Paramount Television to pull the Dr. Laura talk show (which featured a conservative host who frequently spoke negatively about homosexuality). The series was cancelled after one season, due in part to the public pressure applied by GLAAD and other LGBT activist groups to the show’s producers and sponsors (Graham, 2005). With the Dr. Laura victory, GLAAD demonstrated its growing power to silence voices and block out images that it deems offensive to the LGBT community, using informal channels of influence to effectively censor media content.
GLAAD and the campaign to cancel *Work It*

To gain a clearer sense of the censorious discourse employed in such campaigns, I turn now to the case study of GLAAD’s recent effort to pull the ABC program *Work It* from distribution. In late 2011, ABC announced that it would begin airing the sitcom as a midseason replacement. *Work It*’s plot involves two heterosexual men “who dressed as women in order to land jobs as salesmen at a pharmaceutical company looking to hire female sales reps” (Goldberg, 2012). The ostensible humor of the program revolves around the two main characters’ attempts to “pass” as female to their coworkers while constantly struggling to hide their male gender identity. While the series did not include any characters who identify as transgender, and while the cross-dressing comedy genre has been a Hollywood staple for decades without attracting much controversy (e.g., *Some Like It Hot*, *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *White Chicks*, and the highly similar 1980s sitcom *Bosom Buddies*), GLAAD determined that it presented a danger to the LGBT community and swiftly sprang into action. Teaming up with the LGBT advocacy group Human Rights Campaign (HRC), GLAAD took out a full-page advertisement in the trade magazine *Variety* to directly pressure ABC executives to remove it from its midseason schedule (Ferraro, 2011).

The ad, entitled “Message to ABC: *Work It* Will Harm Transgender People,” articulates an argument for the series’ cancellation that centers on what the two advocacy groups assume will be its effects upon audiences:

> By encouraging the audience to laugh at the characters’ attempts at womanhood, the show gives license to similar treatment of transgender women . . . Since ABC has a record of positive portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, they should know how offensive this show is, and that it even has the potential to jeopardize the safety of many transgender Americans in the process. Transgender Americans—who can be legally fired in 34 states today simply for being who they are—face an inordinate amount of workplace discrimination that images like those on *Work It* perpetuate. In fact, 97% of self-identified transgender people reported being harassed or abused at work, and 26%—that’s one in four—reported losing their jobs because they are transgender. (Message to ABC, 2011)

Notably, while the *Variety* ad offers compelling statistics to highlight the discrimination and harassment of transgender people, it refrains from offering any evidence to support the assertion that viewing the show will contribute to these problems; rather, the potential audience effects of *Work It* are left as unquestioned assumptions.

To underline their intention to shut down *Work It* before it reached the air in light of this perceived social danger, GLAAD stated in a press release coauthored with the HRC that “ABC should not air this show—plain and simple. At the very least, *Work It* is offensive and insulting. At worst, the show is downright dangerous and sends a message that transgender people are to be laughed at, or are somehow less-than” (Ferraro, 2011). Thus, GLAAD’s argument to suppress *Work It* frames the show not
only as offensive to transgender persons but also as a potential safety threat that must be stopped before the damage gets out of control. Ultimately, while GLAAD was unable to completely prevent the show from airing on ABC, the group more or less achieved its goal. Work It was cancelled by ABC after only two episodes in the midst of low ratings and excoriating reviews (The AV Club even went on to name it the worst show of the year; Worst TV of 2012, 2012). The industry trade press noted the GLAAD campaign in reports of the series’ demise (e.g., Goldberg, 2012), although it is unclear exactly how much its efforts affected the network’s decision. Regardless, GLAAD celebrated the cancellation of the series in a subsequent press release, drawing attention to its own role in “[speaking] out against the series for its potential to cause harm to transgender people” (Ferraro, 2012).

As the Work It example illustrates, LGBT media activists that adopt a censorious approach have developed a set of rhetorical arguments to justify their position that “anti-LGBT attitudes and content have no place in the media” (to borrow the above-noted language of GLAAD). First, these activists put forward claims that offending media content will undoubtedly cause immanent material harm to the public, invoking a highly simplistic and mechanical model of powerful media effects. Second, they position offending media images produced by Hollywood as the only representations of the LGBT community that are publicly available, suggesting a great imbalance in communicative power between majority and minority groups. In the following sections, I work to unpack these underlying logics behind the arguments used in censorious campaigns, as well as discuss a range of scholarly research and theory that calls them into question. To do so, I draw examples from perhaps the most well-known and well-documented historical campaign of its kind (and one that parallels the anti-Work It campaign in a number of respects): the protests against the 1980 William Friedkin film Cruising. In the process of critically analyzing these logics, alternative strategies of response to offending images begin to come into focus that hold the potential for advancing politically potent critique while avoiding the problematic assumptions of the censorious approach.

“People will die because of this film”: Iconoclasm and the fear of harmful media effects

The first of these two logics involves the model of media effects that is routinely assumed in censorious discourse. When justifying the need to remove an offending image from circulation in the public sphere, activists who adopt this approach often invoke the threat of imminent harm. The idea here is that the media content will not only upset members of the minority community but also endanger their material well-being as viewers are persuaded to act discriminatorily or even violently toward them. This rhetoric of imminent harm is readily observable in GLAAD’s above-described campaign against Work It, as press releases emphasized the program’s power to increase transgender workplace discrimination and harassment.
Invoking a threat of endangerment has indeed been a common refrain in historical campaigns to block out media content perceived as anti-LGBT. For instance, during protests in 1979 to shut down the on-location production of the film *Cruising* — which features a story about a gay serial killer whose violent actions are seemingly linked to or even caused by his sexuality — some LGBT activists handed out fliers on the set printed with the slogan “people will die because of this film” (Sova, 2001, p. 86). Another leaflet distributed at the protests claimed that the film “will encourage more violence against homosexuals. In the current climate of backlash against the gay rights movement, the film is a genocidal act” (Gross, 2001, p. 66). As this heated rhetoric indicates, the fear of the *Cruising* protestors was that the cinematic image of a homicidal gay man would encourage physical violence toward other gay men as a form of retribution. In fact, the author Vito Russo points to these warnings as “prophetic” in his book *The Celluloid Closet* in reference to a 1980 shooting incident in which two gay men were killed by the son of a minister at a gay bar where on-location filming of *Cruising* had taken place (Sova, 2001).

However, the problem with the imminent harm justification for censorious discourse is that it relies on an overly simplistic model of media effects that does not hold up well under scrutiny. Indeed, while censorious media watchdog campaigns often make strong claims about the material harm that will be caused by offending images, they typically do not attempt to legitimize these claims with empirical evidence. Rather, media effects are left as unquestioned assumptions (or in the case of *Cruising*, a single isolated incident has been used to substantiate the slogan “people will die because of this film”). If an organization like GLAAD were to turn to the media effects literature to bolster this line of argument, they would likely not find what they are looking for.

According to Mutz and Goldman (2010), the majority of scholarship on media imagery as a cause of prejudice toward LGBT persons and other groups is largely speculative in nature, relying on content analyses that suggest possible effects of negative representations without documenting these effects empirically. Moreover, scholars often disagree over the nature of the effects that such media portrayals might have on audience perceptions; for example, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2006) predict that the gay-themed sitcom *Will & Grace* would lead to more positive perceptions of gay men due to the likability of the characters, whereas Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) suggest that the same program would lead to negative perceptions due to certain stereotypical aspects of how the characters are portrayed. Adding to this confusion, the body of scholarship that has attempted to empirically demonstrate adverse media effects that range from increasing racial prejudice (e.g., Ball-Rokeach, Grube, & Rokeach, 1981) to gender stereotyping (e.g., Morgan, 1982) largely suffers from a reliance on correlational data, which fails to establish causation; as audiences are likely to selectively expose themselves to media content that is consistent with their belief systems, such correlations may in fact demonstrate a reverse causation (i.e., holding prejudicial or stereotypical beliefs may lead viewers to consume the media content at issue, rather than the other way around).
To date, there has been a noted lack of experimental studies that demonstrate an increase in negative attitudes toward LGBT persons following exposure to media images, although Mutz and Goldman (2010) maintain that these sorts of effects are possible in light of other studies that show some parallel effects on prejudicial attitudes such as race (e.g., Ford, 1997). However, the authors conclude that “scholars still know very little about the kind of content that is most influential in either encouraging or discouraging prejudice” (Mutz & Goldman, p. 253). The existing body of scholarship thus offers very little in the way of assurances regarding how, for instance, a program like Work It would affect an audience’s view toward transgender persons. Even less is known about whether such a program would jeopardize the safety of this community by increasing workplace discrimination and harassment. Furthermore, decades of media and cultural studies research has drawn attention to the polysemic nature of media texts and the capacity of audiences to interpret content in multiple ways based on their social and ideological positions, including those that run “against the grain” of preferred meanings (e.g., Hall, 1973; Morley, 1980). Thus, while some audience members might possibly react in the ways suggested by groups like GLAAD in their campaigns, many others may interpret and respond in a very different manner. However, the rhetoric of imminent harm in these campaigns leaves no room for such nuance, making hard and fast claims about the inevitability of widespread deleterious effects without substantiation.

If such arguments are not grounded in empirical evidence, then what is their driving force? I would contend that the answer is iconophobia, that is, fear of the power of images. Specifically, in the terminology of Finnegan and Kang (2004), such efforts to prevent the circulation of offending images due to concerns over the possible social harm that they might cause can be described as iconoclasm that derives from an underlying iconophobia. Finnegan and Kang (2004) define iconoclasm as “anxiety about vision coupled with an active will to control vision” and “the active attempt to suppress or abolish images” (p. 381). In their discussion of the role of images in the public sphere, the authors argue that fear over the power of “bad” images to influence and manipulate the public in undesirable ways lies at the heart of the rational-discursive model of public sphere theory popularized by figures from Dewey (1927/1954) to Habermas (1989). According to the authors, this impulse to rid the public sphere of presumably harmful images “denies the possibility that images and representation can contribute positively to communication in the public sphere or to the construction of public opinion” (p. 387). While their specific focus is on challenging public sphere theorists to rethink their treatment of images more broadly, Finnegan and Kang’s ideas are equally applicable to the debate over how media watchdog organizations representing minority groups can go about responding to media images that they perceive as offensive.

As an alternative to iconoclasm, Finnegan and Kang (2004) turn to the work of Latour (1998, 2002) to develop an iconophilic theory of images centering on the concept of circulation. As the authors explain, “Latour’s conception of iconophilia, a friendship with images that respects their movements and transformations,
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challenges conceptions of image culture as a scene in which passive viewers are captive to an endless stream of images passing before their eyes” (p. 395). In other words, iconophilia replaces the fear of the static (or “freeze-framed”) image’s power to manipulate minds with a respect for people’s capacity to interpret these images as well as actively participate in the construction of their meaning as they are circulated and transformed. For Finnegan and Kang (2004), “a focus on circulation cultivates an iconophilia that, by embracing the movement of images rather than images themselves, frees us from the paradox of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ images” (p. 396). By shifting from an iconophobic to an iconophilic response to offending images, media watchdog groups like GLAAD can likewise free themselves from problematic assumptions driven by unsubstantiated anxieties. Rather than working to suppress presumably “bad” images over fear of their harmful social effects, these organizations can alternatively participate in the construction of their meaning through practices of active transformation.

“We haven’t the means to respond in kind”: The changing landscape of communicative power

In order to conceptualize what such an iconophilic strategy of transformation would look like in the context of the contemporary information environment, it is first necessary to interrogate the second underlying logic of censorious discourse — that is, the imbalances in communicative power between majority and minority groups. Historically, LGBT activists who have taken the censorious approach have defended their position by referencing their lack of resources to produce their own media representations that counter the offending ones produced by the outside (e.g., the mainstream Hollywood film and television industries in the United States). This notion of rectifying power asymmetries between majority and minority groups is made clear in the rhetoric of the LGBT activist Bill Krause, a member of the Harvey Milk Gay Democratic Club in San Francisco who was a leader of the protests against the film Cruising. In response to the filmmakers’ invocation of the free speech defense during the Cruising controversy, Krause offered these words in support of the protestors:

[It is] absurd to argue the First Amendment in this case, because it presumes equality. There’s no equality as long as haven’t the power of economic base that Hollywood has to make films on the scale of Cruising. We haven’t the means to respond in kind. (Sova, 2001, p. 87)

Along similar lines, Wilson (1981), a social and cultural critic, invokes power inequalities in the field of media production in his challenge to those who defend Cruising on free speech grounds and who accuse the protestors of de-facto censorship:

The notion of freedom underlying the arguments . . . is the limited one fashioned after a “free market” economy. Those who own or control the media are allowed to print or film what they wish; the community, on the other hand, is a passive
audience whose freedom is limited to their right to purchase in the marketplace. (Wilson, 1981, p. 102)

Like Krause, Wilson offers a picture of the media landscape as one in which the LGBT community is at a great disadvantage in the marketplace of ideas due to its minority status. Without the capacity to “respond in kind” by producing media images of their own to counterbalance the offending ones, LGBT citizens are seemingly rendered as passive victims of a bigoted majority. Thus, in addition to the rhetoric of imminent harm, censorious discourse within LGBT media activism appeals to structural imbalances of power when justifying the use of informal pressure channels to block out images and silence voices that are deemed offensive to the community.

To be clear, such asymmetries of power undoubtedly still exist, particularly for the transgender community that is far behind gay men and lesbians in taking control of their own representations. However, the media landscape has itself undergone a dramatic structural shift that has opened up new opportunities for mediated expression and critique—a development that has important implications for the present discussion. Specifically, the expansion of networked digital technologies in recent years has greatly lowered the barriers of entry to media production and distribution, allowing myriad individuals and groups to become active in what Jenkins (2006) has termed the “participatory culture” of the digital age.

While the democratizing potential of the Internet has been challenged by scholars who point to continuing imbalances of power between professional and “grassroots” communicators in an Internet landscape characterized by widespread corporate consolidation (e.g., Hindman, 2008), it is apparent that the playing field has been greatly altered—if not entirely leveled—by the spread of these technologies. In particular, Web 2.0 user-generated video platforms like YouTube have given anyone with an inexpensive digital camera and an Internet connection the ability to create and distribute media images to a potentially global audience, and social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter have provided citizens with accessible tools to circulate information and opinion in a peer-to-peer fashion across geographic boundaries (Castells, 2009). These developments, which call into question long-held assumptions of communicative inequality that media watchdog campaigns have relied upon in the past, may offer a way forward for how these groups can proactively “respond in kind” to offending media images while avoiding the censoriousness of iconoclasm.

Indeed, there is a growing body of scholarship that suggests how networked digital networked technologies can be used to challenge traditional media power and advance counterheterorhetoric and alternative viewpoints in the public sphere. For instance, Jenkins (2006) makes precisely such an argument in his discussion of the peer-to-peer online circulation of anti-Bush parody videos during the 2004 U.S. presidential election, positing that “the current diversification of communication channels is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard; though some voices command greater prominence than others, no one voice speaks with
unquestioned authority” (p. 208). Along similar lines, Bennett (2003) considers how anticorporate activists have used memes (i.e., “easily transmitted images that cross social networks because they resonate with common experiences,” p. 31) to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and distribute counterhegemonic messages to a global networked audience. To illustrate this “new media power,” Bennett recounts how in 2001 a series of e-mails written by a “culture jamming” activist that satirized Nike’s sweatshop labor practices spread “virally” to an online audience of millions and was eventually given further exposure by being picked up by mainstream media outlets. Bennett argues that incidents such as these suggest how “the empowerment offered by distributed, networked digital communication . . . warrant an important adjustment to media hegemony theories” (p. 34).

For the LGBT community, which has traditionally been marginalized and stereotyped by the brokers of hegemonic media power, the appeal of these participatory digital technologies is readily apparent. Gross (2003) notes that in the struggle for gays and lesbians to gain access to the media and control self-representation, “the balance of power shifted somewhat with the rise of the internet . . . for the first time, it seems, control over the means of reproduction has been placed in the hands of ordinary citizens — the residents of cyberspace” (p. 259). While Gross expresses a degree of skepticism about the ability of the Internet to improve LGBT media representation, pointing to the potential chilling effects of government censorship and corporate consolidation, the developments outlined by scholars such as Bennett (2003) seem to offer more cause for optimism. Indeed, the very same opportunities for contesting media power through peer-to-peer online distribution that are available to activists working in global anticorporate circles are likewise available to groups representing the concerns of LGBT citizens.

Another important point to note is the key role of satirical modes of discourse in such online-based efforts. As the examples described by both Jenkins (2006) and Bennett (2003) attest, the politically oriented memes and videos that become “virally” popular online often contain elements of humor and parody, as these attention-grabbing qualities seemingly propel peer-to-peer sharing. Underlining this concept, Davison (2012) offers a definition of the Internet meme as “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (p. 122) [italics added for emphases]. All of this suggests that those who are able to translate their political critiques into the comic style favored by the Internet may have more opportunities to successfully go “viral” with their message.

The LGBT community, which has a long history of using satirical modes of cultural expression to critique oppressive power arrangements, may thus be particularly well equipped to utilize the participatory culture of Web 2.0 to its political advantage. In her recent book Acts of Gaiety, Warner (2012) offers a detailed documentation of this cultural history—which she claims has been largely forgotten in typical LGBT movement narratives—and advocates for its revival in the contemporary context. Warner defines gaiety as “playful methods of social activism and mirthful modes of political performance that inspire and sustain deadly serious struggles for
revolutionary change” and as “comical and cunning interventions that make a mockery of discrimination and the experience of social exclusion” (p. xi). As historical examples, she describes a wide range of performance art practices from the 1960s and 1970s such as “zap actions, pageants, parades, spectacles, kiss-ins, camp, kitsch, and drag” (p. xi). Emphasizing the unique strengths of LGBT persons in the deployment of satirical political discourse, Warner makes the claim that “sexual minorities are expert at poking fun at the physical dangers and bad feelings associated with being queer in a straight world, transforming them through jokes, humor, and parodic intervention in the service of liberatory practices.” As her work suggests, LGBT activists are in an advantageous position to draw upon this cultural history when advancing counterheteropic on the Internet, as the theatrical “zap actions” of decades past give way to the “culture-jamming” memes of the digital age.

Importantly, this notion of transformative satire described by Warner (2012) in terms of gaiety closely aligns with an iconophilic response to offending media representations. Rather than attempting to shut down and block out “bad” images, satire resituates their meaning by embracing them and transforming them through creative cultural processes. Indeed, Warner implies that the satirical LGBT activist discourse that she celebrates can serve as an antidote to censoriousness, asserting the “need to promote dialogue, disagreement, and dissent. What we don’t need is . . . the silencing of oppositional views” (p. 190). Through the use of digital technologies, the images that one may oppose on political grounds can even be literally reworked (i.e., remixed) and spread across peer-to-peer networks as a way of contributing to the public discourse that surrounds them. While Finnegan and Kang (2004) do not explicitly reference this emergent culture of digital remix and parody memes in their discussion of Latourian iconophilia, such practices offer a concrete manifestation of what an iconophilic (and gaiety-imbued) circulation of images can look like in contemporary media activism.

Can media watchdog groups like GLAAD capitalize on the participatory culture of digital networked technologies—as well as the gaiety of satire and parody that may potentially thrive across these networks—to move from an iconoclastic to an iconophilic approach to offending images? Would such a shift in strategy allow LGBT activists to retain the capacity to advance robust political critique, or would attempts to rework the meaning of offending images collapse under the weight of communicative power imbalances? In the remainder of this article, I explore a recent case study of online-based LGBT media advocacy that suggests how participatory digital platforms can be successfully used to challenge offending images in an iconophilic fashion. Furthermore, it highlights how activist strategies of gaiety (Warner, 2012) can be applied to the satirical discourse of Internet memes as a means of critiquing and recontextualizing representation. While this case study involves a somewhat different media context, tracking the response to a political advertisement rather than an entertainment program, it nevertheless suggests how LGBT activists can embrace offending images as the raw materials for their own potent political critiques rather than fearfully attempt to shut them out of the public sphere altogether.
Iconophilia and gaiety in practice: The YouTube parodies of “Gathering Storm”

In 2009, the National Organization for Marriage (NOM), one of the leading anti-same-sex-marriage groups in the United States, released a 60-second ad for television and YouTube entitled “Gathering Storm” (Politicalchange, 2012). The clip features a series of concerned citizens (portrayed by actors) expressing how marriage equality—and the LGBT rights movement more broadly—infringes upon their rights and harms their way of life. For instance, an actress states that “I’m a Massachusetts mom helplessly watching public schools teach my son that gay marriage is okay,” while an actor remarks that “I’m part of a New Jersey church group punished by the government because we can’t support same-sex marriage.” In reference to the efforts of LGBT organizations to push for marriage equality, the actors recite the slogan, “There’s a storm gathering. The clouds are dark. And I am afraid.” While the video does not explicitly depict any LGBT persons, images of storm clouds stand in as metaphorical representations, accompanied by ominous music. To many, this portrayal of the LGBT community as a creeping social menace was taken as offensive. However, the response on the part of LGBT advocates to this “bad” image in the public sphere centered not on fear of harmful effects, or calls for YouTube to remove it from circulation, but rather on what Warner (2012) would call “mirthful modes of political performance” (p. xi).

Shortly after appearing on YouTube and on television, the “Gathering Storm” ad became the subject of myriad video parodies by LGBT advocates in both professional and amateur contexts. For instance, the sketch comedy troupe Wake Up World, led by the comedian Lizz Winstead (a cocreator of The Daily Show), produced a low-budget parody that received over 220,000 views on YouTube (Djm8dj8, 2009). The video, which mimics the storm images and music from the original as well as much of the script, includes tongue-in-cheek additions like “there’s a storm gathering . . . and soon it will be raining men.” Along similar lines, the popular humor website Funny or Die released a more slickly produced parody featuring a number of openly LGBT public figures such as Jane Lynch and George Takei (Funny or Die, 2013). Entitled “Gaythering Storm,” the video has been “Liked” on Facebook over 12,000 times according to the Funny or Die website. The video also reproduces the visuals, music, and language of the original NOM ad, adding over-the-top dialog such as “soon gay people will start falling out of the sky, onto our homes, onto our churches, and onto our families, a downpour of gay people threatening the way we live. And this gay rain army won’t stop.” At this point in the clip, a special effect depicts dozens of miniscule people descending from the storm clouds and falling onto the concerned citizens, making explicit the original’s implicit representation of LGBT persons as a nefarious plague. Like the Winstead clip, “Gaythering Storm” uses comic exaggeration to not only poke fun at the preposterousness of the NOM ad itself but also to mock the political perspective that it promulgates.
In addition to the “Gathering Storm” takeoffs produced by professionals from the entertainment industry, thousands of amateur parodies surfaced on YouTube shortly after the NOM ad debuted. As of early 2013, a YouTube search for “gathering storm parody” returns over 6,770 results, the majority of which were created by amateur video-makers. Some, like the clip uploaded by a YouTube user named BornAgain (2009), simply take the original NOM ad and overdub satirical commentary on the audio track, while others create “remixes” by splicing in video from other sources for comic effect. For instance, a video uploaded by YouTube user Livetotry (2009) cuts between footage of the original “Gathering Storm” and music videos from gay icons like Madonna and Cher. This kind of activity, lauded by scholars like Jenkins (2006) as representing the “grassroots” political force of participatory culture, demonstrates how citizens can use the appropriative and transformative capabilities of digital networked technologies to “respond in kind” to media images that they find problematic. Indeed, it is telling that many of these YouTube parody clips are officially labeled as “responses” to the NOM ad, as this participatory platform allows for—and even encourages—two-way exchanges of ideas via mediated audiovisual discourse.

Taken as a whole, the thousands of “Gathering Storm” parody clips that proliferated via peer-to-peer digital media suggest what an iconophilic response to offending images can look like in the new information environment. As Finnegan and Kang (2004) argue, iconophilia empowers citizens to become active participants in processes of meaning-making; instead of calling for the removal of the NOM ad over fears of what its harmful social effects might be, the YouTube parodists worked to reframe its meaning by embracing the image and playfully drawing public attention to its deplorability through practices of digital circulation and remix. Indeed, the NOM ad itself may have been ultimately overshadowed by its myriad parodies, remembered now more as an inspiration for pro-LGBT videos and memes than for the conservative political ideas that it actually expresses.

Conclusion

When confronted with offending images of LGBT persons such as those of Work It, media watchdog groups like GLAAD have the opportunity to take a page from the “Gathering Storm” parodists and respond with iconophilic—and also satirical—modes of critique. While this may seem out of character for organizations that have historically relied on the censorious rhetoric of imminent harm and appeals to imbalances in communicative power, such a move would reflect a more judicious understanding of the contemporary media landscape and the meaning-making power of participatory and networked audiences. Furthermore, it would dovetail with Warner’s (2012) call for LGBT political activists to revive strategies of gaiety pioneered in earlier decades, as dour condemnations of iconoclasm give way to playfully transformative modes of image critique.

It is certainly true that the limits of so-called digital democracy explored by scholars such as Hindman (2008) push back against the notion that platforms like YouTube
can completely rectify long-standing asymmetries of communicative power. However, the case study explored earlier suggests that the capacity of LGBT persons and other historically marginalized citizens to “respond in kind” when faced with offending images is expanding at a rapid pace due to key structural shifts in media production, consumption, and circulation. While we are far from a truly level playing field, the recent successes of peer-to-peer digital media activism give cause to be optimistic that these strategies can potentially be employed more systematically and intensively through broad-based coordination and collaboration. At this point, it remains to be seen how formal organizations representing a range of marginalized groups might incorporate digital remix, parody memes, and satirical discourses more broadly into their media advocacy campaigns. Considering the opportunities that are now opening up in the new information environment, media scholars and activists should pay close attention to how the iconoclasm of censorious discourse might potentially be replaced by an iconophilic embrace of images as the pixelated building blocks for wide-ranging political expression and critique.

Notes

1 I introduce the term “censorious discourse” here to refer to the use of informal pressure channels (i.e., press releases, advertisements in trade publications, and public protests) to compel media self-censorship. The term is intended to delineate this set of practices from state censorship, which involves formal legal restrictions on speech. Censorious discourse should indeed not be confused with censorship; rather, it should be recognized as one of many possible modes of response that media activists can utilize to counteract offending representations in the service of improving conditions of the groups that they represent.

2 In taking a position against the use of censorious discourse in campaigns targeting offending images, I must acknowledge that my argument is vulnerable to Peters’s (2008) critique of liberals “tak[ing] pride in their ability to entertain abominations” (p. 700). Indeed, my philosophical approach is more aligned with that of defenders of the liberal tradition such as Marvin (2008), who specifically takes Peters to task for calling for a reassessment of the limits of tolerance. However, my specific focus here is not to articulate a broad philosophical defense of liberal tolerance with regard to the freedom of expression debate, but rather to more pragmatically analyze the weaknesses of censorious discourse and to consider the possibility of alternative modes of response to offending images.

References

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