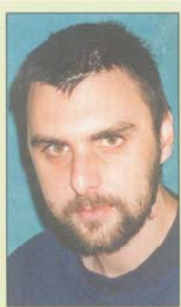


Enraged by the Sunday Times' coverage of the Anglican Church's Lambeth Conference, Brett Lock dug deep into the newspaper's electronic archives to uncover the tabloid-like anti-gay agenda of the popular weekend paper.

The Sunday Times goes gay



BY BRETT LOCK

TIMES MEDIA Limited's Sunday Times, arguably the biggest national Sunday paper in the country has been slow to embrace the spirit of South Africa's New Constitution when it comes to the coverage and reporting of gay and lesbian issues. Sticking dogmatically to the term "homosexual" it insults gay readers and perpetuates vicious stereotypes that make it more difficult than it need be for gay people, youth in particular, to construct a positive self-image and end the needless cycle of self-loathing, isolation and suffering they endure.

I do not discount for one moment the possibility that that is precisely what they aim to achieve. The selection of gay-related news, the tone of the coverage and the sources which are emphasised — combined with pop psychology and a reluctance to let go of tired stereotypes and prejudices — produces a brand of gay-bashing, perhaps subtle, that when viewed in the context of a huge co-ordinated media voice against a marginalised community, has a brutal effect.

THE ELLEN DEGENERES AFFAIR

NEVER mind the fact that "declarations of love" and the anticipation of the onscreen kiss have been the pivotal points upon which the plots of almost every major Hollywood production have been hung since we discovered that celluloid could be rolled in front of a light-bulb, the Sunday Times correspondent speculates that:

The gilded world of actresses Ellen DeGeneres and Anne Heche, the most famous lesbians in the US, is losing its glitter. What seemed like a bold declaration of alternative love last year has become a bit of a bore just a few months later.

How odd that in over a century of film and five decades of television, all it takes is 90 days of media attention on a lesbian love affair to bore the Sunday Times, a paper that has managed to follow romances — heterosexual, of course — for years at a time without an editorial yawn. Princess Diana's death did not terminate media interest in her love life. The media generated copy spanning three decades and twice as many husbands about Elizabeth Taylor. The Sunday Times practically serialises the ongoing romances of a variety of Hollywood stars on their back page, but one lesbian couple's romance quickly "loses its glitter".

They continue:

Then DeGeneres turned her homosexuality into a plot device in which her TV character, Ellen Morgan, came out in an episode that attracted 36 million viewers.

Since when has sexuality not been a plot device? The fact that it's [homo]sexuality is no reason for the Sunday Times to hint at some cynical motive unless it practices a clear double standard.

Finally, commenting about the trailer to the movie in which Heche stars opposite Harrison Ford (as his "love interest"), the Sunday Times writer quips:

A voice-over declares: "This summer, find adventure in the most remote place known to man."

That's just a cheap shot!

Of course the sub-text of the report about the paper's boredom with Ellen DeGeneres is that if they can find no evidence of scandals, recriminations or sordid revelations they feel utterly let down by stories about gay people.

THE HOUSEHUSBAND, THE HAIRDRESSER AND THE SUNDAY TIMES BIGOT

IN a fairly innocuous story about a Durban man who stays at home doing the cooking and child-minding while his wife, a hairdresser, goes out to work, the Sunday Times could not help editorialising thus:

Despite his feminine tendencies, Brian is not gay. He is happily married and has a two-year-old daughter named Shannon.

Now that is boring. Tapping into the old stereotype that gay men are feminine (in 1998!!) is well past its sell-by date. Not only that, it is profoundly insulting to women, who, the newspaper clearly believes, cook, clean and child-mind because they have a tendency towards it, not because of they have been forced to by a patriarchal society.

A SENTENCE ABOUT GEORGE MICHAEL

ALMOST mimicking the script of Hugh Grant's fall from grace came the news of pop star George Michael's arrest for "lewd conduct" in a public toilet. Lewd conduct is in this case a euphemism for masturbation. The Sunday Times cannot resist adding the irrelevant tag "homosexual" to the report.

Singer George Michael wants to give a charity concert instead of doing menial community service as punishment for lewd conduct. The 35-year-old homosexual singer was sentenced to 80 hours of community service for committing a sex act in a West Hollywood public toilet in April.

They are clearly smug both about the singer's humiliation, but doubly so because they've managed to use the word homosexual in the same paragraph as "lewd conduct", as if one

man's indiscretion was somehow symptomatic of his sexual orientation. I do not recall any disparaging reference to Hugh Grant's heterosexuality in the reports about his indiscretion. Indeed, I'd bet a few journalists were quite put out that it ended speculation about the actor's homosexuality.

THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

THE headline begins promisingly enough: "Gays show they're the President's men", however, who gets the lead? Certainly not the "homosexuals".

A special committee set up to organise President Nelson Mandela's 80th birthday celebrations has lashed out at the organisers of a massive "queer" party to be held in his honour, claiming it is in "poor taste" [sic].

When do the gay organisers finally get a word in? In the sixth paragraph!

However, the company organising the Cape Town event, Mother City Queer Projects, claims its Madiba birthday bash is meant as a mark of respect for "one of the country's greatest queer heroes".

The final four paragraphs of the story describe the official celebration events focusing particularly on children's events and letters the President received from children, mining, once again, that rich vein of media prejudice in which children and gays are always seen in conflict.

PRE-MADONNA, ONLY LATER

THE Sunday Times had an orgy of character assassination on the occasion of pop star Madonna's 40th birthday, and unsurprisingly homosexuality was shredded in the crossfire of rhetoric and sensationalism.

In the past few years, have you, for example, worn a conical bra, smoked cigars, had a bisexual affair, indulged in sadomasochistic sexual practices involving hot wax or insisted on being photographed naked?

Real people — real women — can regard her antics only with wry amusement.

I have no idea what "real women" are let alone whether they smoke cigars or rev up their sex lives with hot wax, however the Sunday Times seems more certain. And, of course, they would have the reader believe that no "real woman" have bisexual affairs. Real women do not sleep with other women. Of course not.

The writer tries his or her hand a psychoanalysis and points out that in an interview

A handy definition of "heterosexism"

The promotion of heterosexuality as better, right, the only, is known as heterosexism. Simon Harris defines heterosexism as: "A set of beliefs, attitudes and practices which presents and promotes heterosexual relationships and lifestyles as the norm. It therefore sees such relationships and lifestyles as being superior to any others and, in extreme cases, considers such alternatives as unacceptable and unnatural." Harris, Simon (1990). *Lesbian and gay issues in the English classroom: the importance of being honest.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

bashing

with US magazine *The Advocate*, Madonna revealed that she was "still trying to gain her father's approval". They could not resist pointing out that *The Advocate* is a "homosexual" magazine, as if that had any bearing on the source of the information at all.

THE SOCCER PLAYER WITH BALLS

"LIFE of torment for misfit footballer" reads the headline. The coverage of the suicide of gay football player Justin Fashanu in the tabloid press was vicious and undoubtedly flavoured with lashings of racism and homophobia. Fashanu once remarked that one of the unexpected benefits of "coming out" was that it added some variety to the insults he suffered. Detractors started calling him "that gay bastard" instead of "that black bastard". The *Sunday Times* report was little better.

It sketched a picture of a thoughtless, selfish person, rather than the confused, frightened and bitter person Fashanu understandably was. Again they tap into well-worn prejudices and the psychobabble notion that gay people come out to punish their loved ones.

The reporter who interviewed him said Justin was "obsessed with money" and cared little for the effect of the disclosure on his brother, or on his adoptive parents.

Admitting you're gay is a "disclosure" which one only does with a selfish disregard for the feelings of those around one. Oh come on!

Nevertheless, this is the view that the *Sunday Times* promotes. It scares me to think what effect this comment might have on gay South African youth, and especially since soccer is so popular this remark would not go unnoticed. The idea that gay people ought to sacrifice their personal truths and emotional health to spare the feelings of others is absurd. It is like asking black South Africans to remain in bondage to spare the feelings of their "masters" and "madams", or heterosexual women to sacrifice any personal aspirations so as to better "honour and obey" their husbands.

It all seemed to go wrong for him after he went to Forest. He fell out with manager Brian Clough and was banished to the A team and that was the end of Justin's career really.

Newspapers should realise that homosexuals are not an abstract class, they are very real everyday individuals with lives, hopes and dreams and — like everyone else — they buy newspapers.

That allegations of harassment over his sexuality on the part of his teammates and the coach may have led to both his "falling out" and "banishment", and his subsequent cynicism in the way he dealt with the subject of his sexuality were obviously not worthy of investigation by the *Sunday Times* journalists.

LAMBETH TO THE SLAUGHTER

THE final straw in which "the paper for the people" unambiguously displayed its commitment to undermining the constitutional strides South Africa has made towards equality for gay people occurred when on 23 August this year they ran a half-page article on the editorial spread by a British correspondent Dr Theodore Dalrymple headlined: "Straight and narrow: Dr Theodore Dalrymple applauds the victory of traditional over 'liberal' Christian values".

The gloating, self-satisfied tone of the report about a conservative "crushing victory" over liberal clergy who had proposed that the Anglican Church end its discrimination against gay people with regard to ordination and marriage is disgusting.

Newspapers should realise that homosexuals are not an abstract class, they are very real everyday individuals with lives, hopes and dreams and — like everyone else — they buy newspapers. To read this smug diatribe about

what amounts to a severe blow against their personal and emotional realisation is deeply offensive. So offensive in fact that a heterosexual *Sunday Times* writer remarked:

The underlying values of the writer, Dr Theodore Dalrymple, have been assimilated by the publication and promoted, by the mere inclusion of the article in the editorial mix. This sends a clear message to the public, and that message is simply that the Sunday Times Insight supplement, and the publication as a whole, is insensitive to the fight for the extension of current gay rights. This implies that the Sunday Times has made an assumption about its readership and the values of its readership. I was deeply insulted as a reader and a writer for the Sunday Times, even though I am not gay. If I was gay there would be a letter bomb in the mail.

CONCLUSION

WHAT'S really sad is that the homophobic content the *Sunday Times* carries is almost exclusively reprinted from the British tabloid, *The Telegraph*. Most of the local coverage of gay issues is quite positive. Admittedly there is very little. It occurs mostly on the arts pages in the form of movie or theatre reviews and occasionally a report on a constitutional issue.

My task of analysing their content was made really easy by the fact that very few gay- or lesbian-related stories are printed in the first place. An online search of the *Sunday Times* archive reveals that only about 35 stories mentioning the words "gay", "lesbian" or "homosexual" have been written this year — and even fewer focusing specifically on a gay issue.

This of course points to an issue which is perhaps more serious than the negative — and often vile — reporting of gay issues or gay related stories. At the very least, no matter what the tone of the *Sunday Times* reports, it gets the topic on the tongues of the readers. It is far worse to be completely invisible.

Ironically, with a ratio of less than one short story a week and the assumption that all its readers are heterosexual, that's precisely what gay people seem in the *Sunday Times*. Invisible.

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10 STEPS

towards fair & balanced reporting of gay-related stories

1 Drop the term "homosexual". This term is highly offensive, chiefly because of its clinical sound which is a reminder of when homosexuality was still regarded as a pathology. The term "gay" is preferred for both men and women. "Lesbian" when referring particularly to women is also acceptable.

2 Make an effort to get both sides of the story. Often assumptions are made. The Justin Fashanu incident is a good example. Yes, it is fact that he fell out with his coach and reacted very bitterly afterwards ... but why? Find out, and give equal weight in the story to both sides.

3 Avoid simple stereotyping. Avoid tired old clichés like gay men are effeminate or lesbians are butch — it is simply not true.

4 Don't point to a person's sexual orientation unless it is relevant to the story. For example, George Michael was caught committing a lewd act, but then so was Hugh Grant. Don't make an issue of Michael's sexuality when it is irrelevant. The worst example is found in stories of child abuse where the perpetrator's sexuality is only pointed out if they're gay, creating a skewed image in the public's mind about who abuses children.

5 Don't assume that all your readers are heterosexual. When you're offensive to one sector of the community you are offending a section of your readers. Everyone reads newspapers.

6 Don't be sensational just because there's gay content. If a male politician is caught with a prostitute, it makes no difference whether it's a male or female prostitute. It's not fair to fuel the public's homophobia by blowing up the issue when gay people are involved — if you're serious about the transformation of our society.

7 Cover a representative spread of gay-related news. Don't wait for the Hollywood scandal or the Internet child porn scare before writing stories with gay content. There are positive gay-related stories too. Also, don't just ignore gay issues — don't make gay people invisible.

8 Play an educational role. Report on the current legal status of gay rights and on gay issues in general, for example workplace issues and partner benefits. Like other minority rights, these affect everyone, and besides, thousands of your readers are gay.

9 Don't be flippant about issues gay people take very seriously. Gay people take pride marches and the gay "olympics" very seriously. You wouldn't offend people with disabilities by making fun of their sporting events, so don't offend gay people either.

10 Give gay people positive role models. Focus on the heroes as well as the villains. All communities need to know about both — for collective self-image and personal growth.