

## Lesbians In The Papers

When the Charlotte Museum opened last year the Harbour News refused to accept its logo in an advertisement. Logo designer Jill Segedin managed to put tiny bikinis on the two embracing women but to no avail. The manager said it was 'a family newspaper' and the logo was reduced to a labrys only. This experience inspired the museum to host a discussion about how newspapers represent lesbians in June. Jenny Rankine writes about 25 years of newspaper representations of lesbians.

When Paula Wallis studied a year of coverage in Auckland newspapers in '1983, she came up with 108 items dealing with homosexuality. Only five were about lesbians - 'we are invisible unless indulging in the sensational or the bizarre,' she wrote in a Broadsheet article. The items covered custody awarded to an English lesbian mother, an Australian student union declaring 1983 as the International Year of the Lesbian, an overseas celebration of a 'homosexual marriage' between two women, a local advertisement from a lesbian requesting a man to father a child, and 'militant lesbians' who had stopped New Zealand moves to legalise male homosexuality.

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### 1998

In 1998, 15 years later, I found 40 items about homosexuality over 14 months of the New Zealand Herald, only three of which were about lesbians. Lesbians and gay men were routinely excluded from the 'general population', the imagined community to whom the newspaper spoke and which it created. It did this by leaving lesbians and gays out of the 'we' or 'us' made up of the audience and writer, or by talking about lesbians as 'they' or 'them'.

It also excluded us from families. Our own children or innovative family structures are not included as real families, and our place in our birth families is ignored. We were an outside threat.

We were also regularly associated with criminals - we were 'self-confessed' lesbians; gay men had 'well-known haunts', they 'practiced sodomy' on each other (have you ever heard of heterosexuals as 'practising intercourse?'). The criminal association was also invoked when we protested against discrimination or unfair treatment.

### 2009

Before the Charlotte Museum talk, I searched for the word lesbian on the New Zealand Herald website and retrieved 841 items. So we're not so invisible anymore. The items I analysed for the talk, though, were the 20 that turned up when a museum volunteer searched for 'lesbian and gay'.

Out of those 20, nine mentioned lesbians; the rest were about gay men or homosexuality generally. Four of those were passing references, throwaway lines or a small appearance in a much longer piece. Of the longer items, two were about the court case by homophobic residents of Sappho's island of Lesbos attempting to claim the word Lesbian for themselves. The male homophobe from Lesbos was quoted far more than the lesbian representing the Greek gay organisation being sued. One was a small Sideswipe item about The Edge radio station attempt on the world record for girls kissing girls, and another an item about gay marriage in the USA that quoted a lot of gay men and gave Ellen DeGeneres two sentences. Not one of them gave lesbians the most space to speak - our voices were a minority, often against homophobic people who got lots more space.

The last was a doozy of an item in Rachel Glucina's I Spy gossip column. Titled 'Girl-on-girl action, like, so hot right now', it featured a picture of Brooke McAlister (All Black Luke's ex) with her arm around Reanin Johannink (a model off Shorty St). It talked about USA-based celebs Lindsay Lohan and Samantha Ronson 'dabbling' in the world of lesbianism; and described Brooke and Reanin's kiss at a city club ('Eewww') as put on for the men around them. It asked whether 'hooking up with a girl (for a typically heterosexual woman)' was 'just a way to garner attention' or 'a fall-back option' in a man drought.

Talk about overdosing on stereotypes - there's hardly one she hasn't covered. Women kissing are either doing it for male attention, going through a phase or settling for second best. They're definitely not genuinely attracted to a woman. The themes identified earlier were all still there. Rachel's items excluded lesbians from her audience - the 'we' she wrote about definitely didn't include us.

Some of the items depicted lesbians as bizarre or weird. There was the gay and lesbian rodeo item, for example, saying they weren't normal because one of their events was a competition to put hot-pink underwear onto unco-operative goats. And in case you missed it, the item was sourced from News of the Weird. There were a couple of items about weird lesbian and gay brains as well.

One passing comment from a That Guy column (some unnamed bald White man) implied that lesbians made good baby competition judges because they don't let their hormones and feelings get in the way (like normal women do), they are not hardwired to have a special attraction to babies, and are therefore not nurturing. We're outside real families again. Two of the 20 items talked about us having partners, but in none of them did we have families.

One of the items that linked us to criminality was about a gay vicar who got married overseas. He had 'gone to ground' after this dastardly event, was 'lying low' and had 'upset many' in his denomination. Another item about a gay American bishop positioned him, not the church's prejudice, as the cause of conflict in the worldwide Anglican Church.

Then there were the poor Mormons in Salt Lake City who were 'under siege' from terrorist gays and lesbians because the Mormon Church had thrown its money and clout behind a ballot outlawing same-sex marriage in California. The gays and lesbians hadn't done much - a bit of graffiti, mailed some innocuous white powder, organised a consumer boycott. No one was hurt, but the terrorist label was trotted out anyway.

Cultural stereotypes don't die out when attitudes change; they remain part of public understanding, built into jokes. Ordinary lesbians won't get their lives in the papers, but the media loves celebrities, and it's the people whose lesbianism is just the everyday background of their public lives that are gradually inserting lesbians into the everyday 'we' of newspapers' imagined community.

The Topp Twins, MP Maryann Street, singer Anika Moa, Takataupui presenter Tania Simon, MP Louisa Wall, Marilyn Waring, Shona Laing, writer Renee, Clark's chief-of-staff Heather Simpson, Mahinarangi Tocker; every performer, public figure, sports player or celebrity who comes out add to the list of people whose lesbianism is the taken-for-granted background to what they do.

Jenny Rankine