

SOCIAL (MEDIA) CHANGE



BY: MATT ALDERTON

Social networks aren't just "social" anymore. They're also political, and they are changing the way gay men fight for equality. At 8:42 p.m. on September 22, 2010, Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, 18, posted the following message to his Facebook page: "Jumping off the gw bridge sorry." Clementi meant it. When his college roommate secretly filmed him having sex with another man—and streamed the video live on the Internet—he drove his car approximately 100 miles from Camden, N.J., to nearby Fort Lee, N.J., where he jumped off the George Washington Bridge into the autumn waters.

Earlier that month, 15-year-old Billy Lucas of Greensburg, Indiana, hung himself in his family's barn when classmates who thought he was gay reportedly told him he should kill himself. This just two weeks before 13-year-old Asher Brown of Houston shot himself over similar anti-gay harassment at school. All told, at least six men committed suicide in September as a result of homophobic harassment, according to media reports, some of which place the number as high as 11.

"The tragic suicides of our youth have started an important dialogue among Americans about the dangers of bullying," Jarrett Barrios, president of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), said after the suicides. "Now is the time to show our children that millions of Americans

accept and value them regardless of their sexual orientation."

Gay sex columnist Dan Savage began that dialogue on September 21, when he and his boyfriend posted a short video about their lives on YouTube. In their video they acknowledged that they, too, had been bullied for being gay. "However bad it is now, it gets better," Savage said. "It can get great and it can get awesome. Your life can be amazing."

And so began the It Gets Better Project, an online video collection of personal stories from gay men and women, as well as straight allies, that in its first two months generated more than 15 million views and inspired more than 5,000 user-created videos. Some of the posts include high-profile submis-

sions from President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Adam Lambert, Tim Gunn, Ellen DeGeneres, and the staffs of The Gap, Google and Facebook.

Kelly McBride, a teacher at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, has likened the videos to squares on the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which was started in 1987 and now features more than 40,000 panels. "Thousands and thousands of other people can connect their own personal narrative in a meaningful way," she told Austin, Texas newspaper *The Statesman* shortly after the It Gets Better Campaign was launched. "They created a fabric narrative. This is a digital narrative—metaphorically they are all stitched together."

Because it's at once grassroots and cutting-edge, as easy to share as it is to access, that digital narrative is profoundly changing the course of the gay rights movement, which is increasingly using online social tools like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to affect real world social change.

THE ONLINE MIGRATION

Although it exploded last fall, the gay community's digital narrative has been present for at least the last 20 years, according to Mary Gray, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Communications and Culture at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. "It's always been there, even from the early days of bulletin board service dial-ups," she says, recalling the early days of the Internet, when gay men were among the first and most voracious users of online bulletin boards, AOL chat rooms and other outdated social networks. "We were using this stuff when it first rolled out, and I don't think that's surprising when you think about any community that perhaps has social stigma attached to it; when you're not able to easily connect in public, the Internet can be an incredibly powerful force for overcoming barriers."

If the gay community has been congregating online since the early 1990s, one has to wonder: why is its voice only now being heard so clearly? According to Gray, the answer is as much offline as it is online. "What we don't tend to talk about is what's the cultural context for why that's become so important. In many cases, it's happening against the backdrop of urban centers that increasingly don't have gay enclaves that are specifically ours."

In other words, while gay men used to use the Internet casually, to make friends and meet sexual partners, they did most of their political organizing offline, in gay bookstores and coffee shops. Because those places are disappearing as more heterosexual couples

move into traditionally gay neighborhoods, many offline gay communities have dispersed, forcing their members to reconvene electronically. "We've lost a lot of our community-based resources," Gray continues. "So, as those resources fold, there's been an equally sharp rise in digital media to fill the gap."

FILLING THE GAP

The erosion of gay urban enclaves is one explanation for the surge in gay political activity online. Another is technology, which has evolved such that social media is the perfect medium for the gay rights message, according to Michael Crawford, director of new media for Freedom to Marry, a national pro-gay marriage campaign. "Social media is enabling everyday people to actually have a role in winning LGBT equality," he says. "If you take, for example, the It Gets Better Project, all anybody needs to participate in that campaign is a webcam and an Internet connection."

The reason it's so powerful is that it facilitates storytelling. "I think storytelling is one of the central features of the public education work that we need to be doing in order to win LGBT equality," Crawford continues. "With social media, we can do that faster, we can do it better and we can do it with more people."

GLAAD Director of Communications Richard Ferraro agrees: social media is perfectly suited to the gay rights movement because it doesn't tell—it shows. "Social media's platform—given the user-generated nature—gives voice to our full community," he says. "Whether it's posting a 'NOH8' photo or being 'In a Relationship' on Facebook with your same-sex partner, more and more people are able to see the diversity of our community and that we share the same hopes and aspirations as all Americans."

Indeed, before social media, people had to "opt in" to gay issues. If you weren't interested in them, you didn't hear about them. Now, gay

men can start political conversations with their straight friends and family members simply by posting a link or photo to their Twitter account or Facebook page.

Take, for example, Spirit Day, founded by teenager Brittany McMillian, who asked people to wear purple on October 20, 2010, in remembrance of the bullied gay youth who'd committed suicide the month before. In addition to wearing purple, Spirit Day included a social media component organized by GLAAD, which asked participants to turn their Facebook and Twitter photos purple that day using a special online tool. As a result, GLAAD received its highest-ever surge of Web site traffic, added more than 10,000 Facebook friends and more than doubled its Twitter followers. Advocacy 2.0

There are countless examples like It Gets Better and Spirit Day. NOH8, for instance, is an image campaign started in 2008 by photographer Adam Bouska who wanted to protest the passage of California's Proposition 8. Bouska has taken more than 5,500 portraits of gay rights supporters since the campaign's inception, many of which have been posted and shared via blogs, Facebook posts and tweets. During Pride month 2010, Freedom to Marry distributed an educational video about gay issues to its supporters, who shared it more than 1,200 times on Facebook, garnering 21,000 views on YouTube. When the Today Show launched its 2010 "Modern Day Wedding Contest," GLAAD worked with Change.org to circulate an electronic petition that resulted in 5,000 viewer e-mails, persuading the show to open the contest to gay couples.

As powerful as it is, however, social media alone isn't likely to create gay equality. "When we talk about creating a Facebook group that's protesting Prop. 8, that can be incredibly powerful in terms of

Continued on page 27

But sites like Manhunt also include a lot of sensitive information.

"Joining Manhunt taught me all kinds of things about my friends, and even the half-strangers I see in the bars," said Wayne. It showed him that some self-proclaimed monogamous couples he knows actually aren't as true to one another as he once thought. He's even stumbled across pictures of friends restrained in fetish gear. Manhunt is also where he learned that a friend of his had turned HIV-positive.

"He hadn't unlocked his pictures," said Wayne, explaining that the visible photos in his friend's profile didn't show his face. "But I saw part of his tattoo. And I recognized his condo in the background."

So Wayne sent his friend a note on the site and unlocked his own pictures. "It actually worked out really well," he says. "My buddy wasn't sure how to broach the subject with me, and he was really relieved that Manhunt had essentially had the conversation for him."

In the multifaceted world of sharing private information online, the loss of control can be the easiest way to achieve a welcome level of freedom.

Jake Stigers is a Chicago writer and blogger at nofo.blogspot.com. He may or may not have told his own story under a pseudonym for this article.

Social (Media) Change

Continued from page 15



showing the numbers who care about that issue, and it can be very pragmatic in terms of having a conversation with a Facebook friend that we might not otherwise be having," Gray says. "But at the same time, it's not entirely clear yet what kind of political impact that can have."

That impact is further complicated, Gray argues, by the composition of gay networks. Gay rights aren't likely to advance without the support of the entire LGBT community, and many gay people, particularly in rural and inner-city areas, continue to lack Internet access even in public places like schools and libraries, which often use filtering software to block Web sites and searches with the word "gay."

"The potential to use social media for political work is always compromised by issues of access," Gray says. "We still need resources that allow us to do actual work in the physical streets."

For that reason, social media can, at its best, work by starting online conversations that incite offline action. That doesn't mean, however, that one has to march to make a difference. "Whether it's having face-to-face conversations, e-mailing members of Congress, or sharing a piece of content online, everybody has a role to play in helping us win equality," Crawford says.

"Internet-based tools are not tactics in and of themselves; they're tools that help us better organize people, reach out to people and communicate our political viewpoints to make our voices heard," Crawford continues. "The future is really about the fusion of online and offline organizing so that we can grow our movement to scale and do the work that's needed to win full LGBT equality."

