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AP Revises Stylebook References to Gay and Transgender

Date: 16-Aug-2000

AP REVISES STYLEBOOK REFERENCES TO GAY AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE
===== [New York, NY: 7 Aug 00] As a result of meetings with GLAAD and GenderPAC, the Associated Press (AP) has revised its stylebook regarding references to gay and transgender people. The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law is considered the standard for proper news reporting and terminology usage.

The previous edition recommended different proper names and personal pronouns usage when referring to transgender people based on whether or not they were post-operative.

In the new edition, wording for 'sex changes' is: 'Use the pronoun preferred by the individuals who have acquired the physical characteristics (by hormone therapy, body modification, or surgery) of the opposite sex and present themselves in a way that does not correspond with their sex at birth. If that preference is not expressed, use the pronoun consistent with the way the individuals live publicly.'

'Gay' in the old edition: 'gay: acceptable as popular synonym for homosexual (n. and adj.).' In the new edition: 'gay: acceptable as popular synonym for both male and female homosexuals (n. and adj.), although it is generally associated with males, while lesbian is the more common term for female homosexuals. Avoid references to gay, homosexual, or alternative 'lifestyle.'" ###

For the "sex change" entry, reporters are instructed to use the pronouns preferred by the individual who is referenced. This clarification in the stylebook will help insure transgender persons can have themselves identified correctly and not be subjected to the sometimes erroneous or even prejudicial judgment of the reporter.

'Changes' at the Associated Press (AP):

GLAAD and GenderPAC recently convinced the AP wireservice and AP Stylebook to make a major change in their policies regarding gendering and pronouns for transsexuals who have undergone a 'sex-change'. Here's the story of the old AP practice and why it was so terribly damaging, and then the recent news of the change in those AP policies:

Background:

It has long been editorial policy at the Associated Press to describe a post-op transsexual woman as a "man who had a sex change", and then use male pronouns wherever possible when referring to her in their stories.

This AP practice has long been one of the most insidiously transphobic of media activities, and has greatly harmed transsexual people for many decades. Far more damage has been done by this policy than by, for example, the Jerry Springer show (which everyone knows how to calibrate).

Example of the AP practice:

Recently, there was a very important court decision in Puerto Rico that granted a long-time post-op transsexual woman the right to change her gender on her Puerto Rico birth certificate to 'female'. Just look at how the AP told the story over the AP wireservice:

The Associated Press State & Local Wire July 13, 2000

PUERTO RICO: Court allows transsexual to change gender on birth certificate

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) - Puerto Rico's Supreme Court has ruled to allow a man who had a sex change operation to change the gender on his birth certificate to female. A dissenting judge said it could a precedent for same-sex marriages in the U.S. Caribbean territory.

Andres Andino Torres petitioned local courts beginning in 1995, nearly 20 years after the sex change operation, to change his gender and name on the birth certificate. The lower courts approved legally changing the name to Alexandra Andino Torres, but had denied the change the gender on the record.

Judge Miriam Naveira de Rodon, the only woman on the seven-judge panel, said she supported Wednesday's ruling because she believes its interpretation of gender was limited only to the specific context of Andino's case - changing it on the birth certificate.

Think a moment about this example:

Suppose you were someone who had an innate female gender identity, had undergone surgical sex reassignment 20 years ago, and had been quietly living a normal life as a woman ever since. How would you feel upon being referred to in national media as a 'man who had a sex change', called by your old male first name, and referred to as 'he, him and his'?

Can you see what a terrible defamation this is? Can you see how such misrepresentations cause ongoing prejudice against transsexuals?

Now contrast that awful AP treatment of Alexandra (who is 20 years post-op) with the sensitive, humane, common-sense way the Orlando Sentinel edited and presented the extended story:

Orlando Sentinel, July 17, 2000

Court gives gay-rights activists hope

By Ivan Roman, San Juan Bureau

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- Alexandra Torres Andino, who became a woman 24 years ago, can now officially say she is one.

In a split decision made public last week, the Puerto Rico Supreme Court permitted Torres Andino to change her gender on her birth certificate to reflect the results of her 1976 sex-change operation. That move has gay-rights advocates cheering and conservative religious activists fuming.

The case was unprecedented in Puerto Rico, but changing the name and sex on birth certificates at the request of transsexuals has been done for years in many parts of the U.S. mainland. "We have to respond to the times and to the social realities of the day," said Ada Conde, president of the Human Rights Foundation, a local gay- and lesbian-rights group.

She calls it a welcome sign for gay-rights supporters that the island's courts may now be more willing to tip the balance in favor of the individual's right to privacy vs. the state's need to intervene.

Gay-rights opponents called it a "disastrous" decision that could lead to fraud in public documents and get other parts of the gay-rights agenda in through the back door.

"It's changing the facts, that he was born a man and still is one," said Carlos Sanchez, president of the conservative Pro-Life of Puerto Rico organization, an outspoken opponent of gay rights.

Reacting to the controversy, Justice Secretary Angel Rotger Sabat would say only that he will decide this week whether he is going to ask the Supreme Court to reconsider the 4-3 decision.

The new AP policy and AP Stylebook guidelines:

Shortly after this latest round of AP wireservice trashings of transsexual women, the following news flash was released by GLAAD. It reports that the new AP Stylebook has changed the policy of mis-gendering of post-op transsexuals, and that reporters are instructed to ask the transsexual person what their preference is regarding name, gendering and pronouns in press articles:

Date: Thu, 20 Jul 2000 15:17:06 -0700
From: Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation <glaad@glaad.org>
To: Multiple recipients of GLAAD_GLBST - Sent by <glaad@glaad.org>
Subject: [GLAAD COMM] [GLAAD Alert] 07/20/00 GLAADAlert

July 20, 2000

The GLAADAlert is the bi-weekly activation tool of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

Journalists' "bible" makes positive changes

The Associated Press (AP) Stylebook is used by the majority of journalists as the gold standard for proper news reporting form and accurate terminology.

GLAAD and GenderPac, a transgender lobby group, met with AP Stylebook editors and senior staff earlier this year to discuss revisions in terminology when covering lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. A significant addition has now been made in the new edition of the stylebook under the entry for "gay." Under "sex change," the use of pronouns is clarified.

For the "gay" entry, the new edition has the added sentence, "Avoid references to gay, homosexual or alternative 'lifestyle.'"

This addition will affect how many stories about the lesbian and gay community will be written. By recommending not using the word "lifestyle," AP is helping to prevent reporters from giving the false representation that being a lesbian or a gay man is a matter of choice or something less than genuine. Dropping the word "alternative" does the same.

For the "sex change" entry, reporters are instructed to use the pronouns preferred by the individual who is referenced. This clarification in the stylebook will help insure transgender persons can have themselves identified correctly and not be subjected to the sometimes erroneous or even prejudicial judgment of the reporter.

Please thank AP for making these important changes and encourage it to continue revising the stylebook.

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This message clarifies why the old AP policy was so damaging over the years. The AP Stylebook is the 'bible' to journalists, and is what they turn to when reporting in unfamiliar areas, so the old AP practice spread to journalists all over the world.

Let's keep an eye on the press in the future to make sure they are following the new AP guidelines, and come down hard on any reporters who don't follow them. Hopefully the new guidelines will gradually be extended by implication to cover all transgendered people.

We owe GenderPAC and GLAAD a real debt for getting this serious media problem fixed. All TG/TS people should join and strongly support these organizations!