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Queer Representation in the Age of Social Media

“The power of social media is it forces necessary change” (“Erik Qualman”). Social media is a driving force of publicity and attention, wanted or unwanted. The broad scope of the online social media realm allows for individuals, organizations, companies, and even locations to represent themselves online for all to see. As a student studying human relations and English, I am intrigued by the way that social media affects human interaction, both largescale and on a day-to-day basis. My concentration on LGBT studies allows me to focus more specifically on the ways that LGBT identified people and organizations use their social media accounts. Traveling on the Sex, History, and the Cities Study Abroad 2015 has allowed me to experience firsthand the social media presence of AIDS/LGBT activists, organizations, and queer friendly monuments and locations. The social media site that I will be focusing on primarily is Facebook, though I will touch on Twitter and Instagram as well. These are the social networking sites that I am most familiar with and active on.

Facebook intrigues me because of its interactive nature. While each individual account has the ability to laboriously construct its own public image through meticulous wording of an “About Me” section, the photos it uploads, relationships, “likes,” and so on, connections and friends also have the ability to “like” statuses, comment on activity, write on walls, and affect a certain account’s image for all to see. In a queer context, an individual that is out only to certain friends may be very closeted on Facebook. If a friend happens to tag this individual in a photo

that makes clear their sexuality, this person has been outed despite the thought out construction of the actual profile. Studies have shown that LGBT individuals not completely out tend to avoid posting about their sexuality in order to avoid backlash from unsupportive families, religious reasons, and professional concerns (Fox and Warber 86-7). However, during our study abroad, our class interacted and connected overwhelmingly with out, queer individuals and organizations whose networks are supportive and accepting of their sexualities, identities, and causes. This openness and acceptance of LGBT culture on social media is an understudied field into which I will attempt to break into.

In this essay, I will be incorporating my experiences in New York City, Paris, and Amsterdam with the ever present social media element. I will first concentrate on the social media influence of ACT UP NY, looking at the beginning years, contemporary times, and how individuals involved in the organization use their own private profiles. I will then analyze how queer monuments are represented on social media, focusing on the Stonewall Inn, Pigalle, and the Homomonument. Individuals, organizations, and locations all use social media to promote their values of queer acceptance, but to varying degrees and in different ways.

ACTIVISM AND ACTING UP

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, is an activist organization founded in March 1987 in New York City. Subsequent chapters quickly sprouted up in other cities across the country (and later, around the world), creating a national direct-action AIDS movement. ACT UP intervened in every



Figure 1. The ACT UP logo (ACT UP /NY Alumni).

facet of the AIDS epidemic with exceptional success by way of demonstrations, civil disobedience, street theater, meetings with government officials, and campaigns (Gould 4). Successful campaigns must have some sort of media coverage to accomplish goals. ACT UP New York is an organization that has, from its genesis, been able to use the media to their advantage to “get things done.” With the prevalence of the Internet and social media, ACT UP has successfully adapted to continue reaching its target audience.

ACT UP 1980s-1990s Media Representation. Media representation played a large role in ACT UP during its early years. ACT UP created its own Media Committee which generated press kits and press packets containing information for ACT UP membership (Davis). Another committee within ACT UP is DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists. DIVA TV was founded in 1989 and served as a video-documenting affinity group within ACT UP, recording public testimony, the media, and community activism to stimulate the fight against AIDS and HIV (“DIVA TV”). Documentation was important to ACT UP as well, with DIVA TV and other ACT UP members including Tony Arena, Bill Bahlman, Gregg Bordowitz, Bob Huff, and many others in charge of videotaping meetings, actions, and basically anything that ACT UP was involved in (*How to Survive a Plague*). Because of the archives created by these important cinematographers, documentaries have been created and history has been preserved.

ACT UP was also represented by its members on television. Peter Staley, Larry Kramer, Mark Harrington, Jim Eigo, Ann Northrop and other members appeared on interviews for local news reports and talk shows (*How to Survive a Plague*). ACT UP was used to being in the limelight, what with its use of radical demonstrations that brought a great deal of media attention. Maxine Wolfe discusses in an interview the way that ACT UP maneuvered the use of the media:

The New York ACT UP style was wonderful--writing leaflets that you could read and I think, more importantly, not relying only on the written word but also visual media. ... they were visual: people in theater and art. Other younger men and women, who were not part of that scene, were totally willing to go with it. They were media generation people who had grown up with television and multimedia. They were well aware, any time we did a demo, that there would be TV cameras present and what these cameras would be looking at.

We focused on what would stand out, what would show up. This was in a way that no one I ever knew had done before. It was easy to learn stuff. What color do you make banners when you use them at night as opposed to day? And what size does something have to be to show up? How will this move through space? And I think that was very important because in fact that's exactly what caught the media's attention. Not just that we did things that other people did not do, but that the was [sic] that we did them, we were very present. ... you wouldn't be on the outside looking in, asking people to take your leaflet but you would be demanding that people pay attention to what you had to say and taking over spaces where people would not expect that you could get in. (Wolfe)

ACT UP Social Media Presence of Today. The current chapter of ACT UP NY is smaller in membership than during its prime, but still just as passionate and dedicated as ever. In the social media era, the Media Committee of the past still “encourages and monitors coverage of the AIDS crisis and ACT UP

visibility in the print and electronic media by sending news releases and press kits to the general media”



("Committees/Caucuses/WGs"). DIVA TV continues to create and disseminate video covering AIDS activism, now including a weekly public access show

Figure 2. ACT UP New York's public Facebook page, including a cover photo that features many of the currently active members (personal screenshot).

("Committees/Caucuses/WGs"). ACT UP NY has embraced the rise of social media and has a variety of Facebook pages, including an ACT UP NY Alumni group, ACT UP Oral History Project page, an ACT UP NY public group, and an official page designated as an AIDS resource ("Facebook Search ACT UP"). The group also has a Twitter account that is used infrequently to remind members of weekly meetings and retweet pertinent articles. The account has tweeted almost 2,000 times and has over 3,000 followers. The Twitter page also includes a link to the official ACT UP NY website ("ACT UP NY"). The page with the most attention is the ACT UP New York Facebook page, with over 4,000 likes and 112 reviews. The page is used to promote campaigns (the current one being a GoFundMe campaign), share relevant articles, create event pages for upcoming demonstrations or meetings, and display the current work of ACT UP

members (“ACT UP New York”). The page also includes a wonderful “About” section, contact information, a link to the official website, access to photos and ACT UP merchandise, and ways to connect with other people involved in the organization.

While our group was in New York City working with ACT UP, an event page was created for the demonstration that we participated in. Our focus with ACT UP was primarily on the closing of the widely used Chelsea STD Clinic. The clinic was shut down in March 2015 for “renovations” that had not yet began when we visited in June 2015. While a renovated and high-tech clinic is wonderful theoretically, in reality the closing of the clinic was not announced

beforehand and leaves patients stranded over 70 blocks away from the next nearest clinic. Located in the epicenter of the ongoing HIV and syphilis epidemic, the closed clinic will directly cause an increase in infections and a drop in diagnoses



(Eigo et al). ACT UP decided that this was unacceptable, and began attempting to contact city officials to do something about it. When this strategy

failed to make a change in the situation, it was decided to do something a little more drastic: a demonstration in front of City Hall. The demonstration coincided with another protest and a ceremony for firefighters, which allowed for a great deal of media attention from newspapers, online magazines, and television. The Facebook event page served as an informative resource

Figure 3. Photo from an album shared to the Save the Chelsea STD Clinic event page; Purdue students participating in ACT UP NY's die-in in front of NYC City Hall (Social + Diarist).

before the action, and a way to see all of the media coverage afterwards. Attendees shared articles and videos of the action, as well as personal pictures and photo albums. This page served as a great resource for staying connected, both before and after the action (“Save the Chelsea STD Clinic”).

Personal Facebook Account Use. Social media allows for each individual member of the organization to act as a spokesperson for ACT UP to his or her respective audience of Facebook “friends” or even strangers, depending on privacy settings. I have become connected with several ACT UP NY members through my personal account, which allows for a glimpse into the personal lives of such active ACT UP members. For privacy reasons, I will not go into specific names or posts. However, in my experience, ACT UP members use their personal accounts not only to share personal photos of weekend trips and pets, but also to promote articles and videos that pertain to queer culture, ACT UP, and current events that affect the LGBT community. I have seen heartfelt posts about the negotiations going on in regards to the Chelsea STD Clinic closing, Caitlyn Jenner’s transition, and other queer going-ons. These members have been extremely welcoming and supportive of my classmates and I’s first experiences with ACT UP: the activism, street demos, sign designing and painting, and meetings. They are quick to “like” pictures and statuses and to comment encouraging words. ACT UP members certainly use social media to their advantage, creating and maintaining connections, getting the word out about important events and happenings, and overall demonstrating what wonderful people they are time and time again.

MONUMENTS ON MEDIA

Social media is a discourse so pervasive as to allow much more than only personal accounts of individual persons. Anonymous parody accounts, restaurants, Hollywood films, bands, brands of

food, and much more all find their home somewhere within the realm of social media. Amidst the heteronormative infrastructure, queerness seeps into the picture through not only famous organizations, but also lesser-known affiliates of LGBT including landmarks and monuments.

The Stonewall Inn. In New York City's historic district of Greenwich Village, we had the pleasure of visiting the historic Stonewall Inn. The riots that occurred at Stonewall in 1969 are commonly attributed as the genesis of the gay rights movement that we are still are part of today.



Figure 4. A view of the outside of the newly designated NYC landmark, the Stonewall Inn (personal photo).

I had an incredible afternoon sitting in the Stonewall and listening to the stories of Tree Sequoia, Stonewall bartender and riot veteran. Tree, now in his seventies, is no stranger to social media and has a thriving Facebook page with over 3,000 friends, 111 followers, as well as many pictures and

posts promoting the Stonewall Inn and other queer organizations in which he is active (Sequoia). Stonewall

itself has a large social media following. Recent publicity over the success of the bar's designation as a New York City landmark (Ennis) has drawn attention to the bar's official Facebook page. The page has even more of a following than its employee does: 4,000 likes; 65,000 check-ins (a handful of which our group contributed!); 1,300 reviews; and numerous posts of congratulations and pride ("Stonewall Inn"). A search on Twitter turns up five accounts related to the landmark, though none appears to be officially affiliated ("Stonewall Inn Search"). Stonewall Inn also shows up as a location option in the mobile app Instagram, which allows for

users to post photos and tag the Stonewall as the location. Through social media, the pride and defiance to mainstream heteronormativity that Stonewall represents continues to have a presence, reaching a larger audience with every tagged photo, share, and check-in.

Pigalle. Pigalle, nicknamed Pig Alley, is the sleazy, sexy, and queer red light district of Paris. “Paris’s Pigalle is an epicenter of debauchery with sex shops, peep shows, strip clubs, cabarets, and many other, unpublishable X-rated adventures” (Cohen). Our group visited Pigalle in the daylight, traversing the shops, le Chat Noir, and le Musée de l'érotisme de Paris. My love of Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman’s hit movie added to the excitement of seeing the Moulin Rouge, red windmill and all. Pigalle is an area of the city that is very sex positive, which is generally accompanied with an acceptance or even celebration of queerness. Le Musée de l'érotisme, as well as the shops that I explored, had a great deal of queer representation.

Searching for articles that pertain to Pigalle proves to be difficult. However, the district has a strong representation on social media. Le

Moulin Rouge Officiel Facebook page has thousands upon thousands of likes and check-ins, and regularly posts status updates that receive numerous shares, comments, and thumbs ups (“Le Moulin Rouge [Officiel]”). The district itself has been posted about enough on Facebook for the site to generate an unofficial page, which users

can like, check-in at, and post pictures from (“Pigalle”).

This district of Paris that once could only be discovered



Figure 5. The famous Moulin Rouge, in all of its red windmill glory (personal photo, edited).

through word of mouth or an accidental stumble, is now moderately accessible on social networking sites. This unprecedented accessibility allows for Parisians and others to discover an atmosphere of sex and queer positivity, which previously could have been difficult to access.

The Homomonument. Just down the street from the Ann Frank House in Amsterdam, Netherlands, is nestled a monument with much meaning. The monument is a tribute to “the long road of gay emancipation in the Netherlands and abroad” (*Homomonument*). The

Homomonument consists of three pink triangles (which allude to the identifying symbols worn by homosexual men in Nazi concentration camps) at various heights, which all connect to form

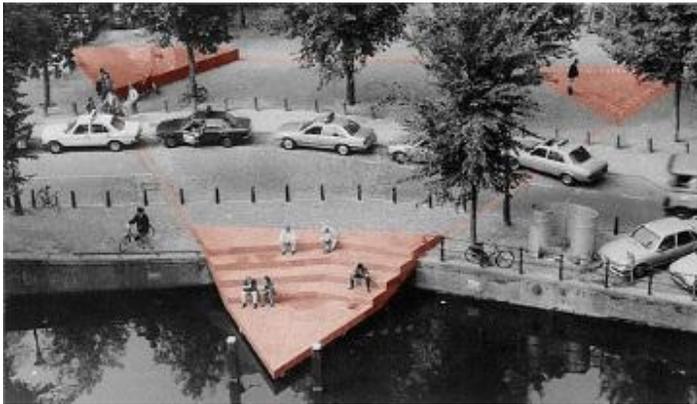


Figure 6. Aerial view of the three pink triangles of the Homomonument (BoBink).

one large triangle. The triangles represent the past, present, and future: “Here we remember all those who were killed or persecuted (and still is) to his or her sexual orientation and / or identity [*sic*]. Here we celebrate the

freedom to be who we are. Here we call for vigilance in the present and in the future” (*Homomonument*). The monument tends to blend into the background if one is not specifically seeking it out, similar to queer representation in art, media, and history as our Sex, History, and the Cities course has demonstrated. However, once the monument and its background are discovered, it is a very moving experience to stand on the pink stone and contemplate the past, present, and future of queerness.

With such a powerful background and meaning, it is not surprising to learn that the Homomonument is represented on social media. The monument has its very own website,

complete with contact information, a link to the official Facebook page, a link to press coverage of the monument, links to sister organizations that support LGBT issues and causes, a page with access to more information about war and homosexuality, LGBT event information, and volunteer opportunities (*Homomonument*). The page, which I had to translate from Dutch, is a fabulous resource for queer people living in Amsterdam. The page uses social media to promote its values and beliefs in a stylish and visually pleasing fashion. The Facebook page promoted on the official website has a wide audience base, with 3,575 likes; 1,652 check-ins; and 32 reviews (HOMOMONUMENT). Followers of the page have access to posts promoting upcoming LGBT events, videos, pictures, and similar pages. The posts are colorful and immediately catch the eye. The page, as well as the official site, are clearly ran by knowledgeable and passionate LGBT supporters. I would consider these social networking sites to be examples of successful campaigns to promote the ‘un-erasure’ of queer history, acceptance, and celebration.

QUEER USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A FINAL ANALYSIS.

Social media is a prevalent part in many people’s lives today. We live within a society that spends its free time flicking through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter posts during free time, at work, and in school. Social media can easily receive a bad reputation, especially when the “good ole days” before social media become romanticized. However, social media sites are far from being all-bad. In the context of queer culture, I argue that social media plays a positive role in spreading knowledge, current events, and providing a positive support system built on acceptance.

Queer Erasure Rediscovered. The way that sites such as the Stonewall Inn and Homomonument use social media serves as a beginning to the rediscovery of queer history after generations of erasure. Sites such as Facebook provide a platform for education that is not particularly

monitored or edited by a higher up authority. This public freedom to express little-known queer history, previously only accessible to certain people, allows for anyone that happens to stumble upon the page to educate themselves on important queer historical events, see pictures posted by other visitors, and access an entire network of other users and organizations affiliated with each site. In addition, each “like,” tagged photo, and check-in in Pigalle, at the Stonewall, or near the Homomonument is directly accessible by that particular user’s Facebook audience. Facebook is all about connectivity and networking, and each hit on a page causes a ripple effect that reaches out to other potential “likes” and activity. A major focus of our study abroad was the erasure of queer history, and though a public Facebook page certainly does not bring to light all of the lost history of the queer community, it does provide a foundation of reclaiming the LGBT community’s lost or censored past.

Public Social Networking Pages. Social media sites provide a way for users to connect with people that care about similar issues and causes. By “liking” the ACT UP NY Facebook page or following its Twitter account, users not only can more easily follow ACT UP’s current events and campaigns, but also gain access to the other accounts affiliated with the organization. I personally used the Save the Chelsea Clinic [*sic*] event page to seek out ACT UP members that I had met at a meeting. Supporting the same organization on social media is a common bond between users that can serve as a jumping off point to becoming connected and networking. Following the Twitter page, Facebook page, and being connected with ACT UP members has served as a way for me to remember the importance of activism, questioning the status quo, and the prevalence of the current HIV epidemic, even hundreds of miles away from all of the action in New York. I know that my classmates are having similar experiences, some of them even having connected with ACT UP Paris and the Parisian Order of the Sisters of Perpetual

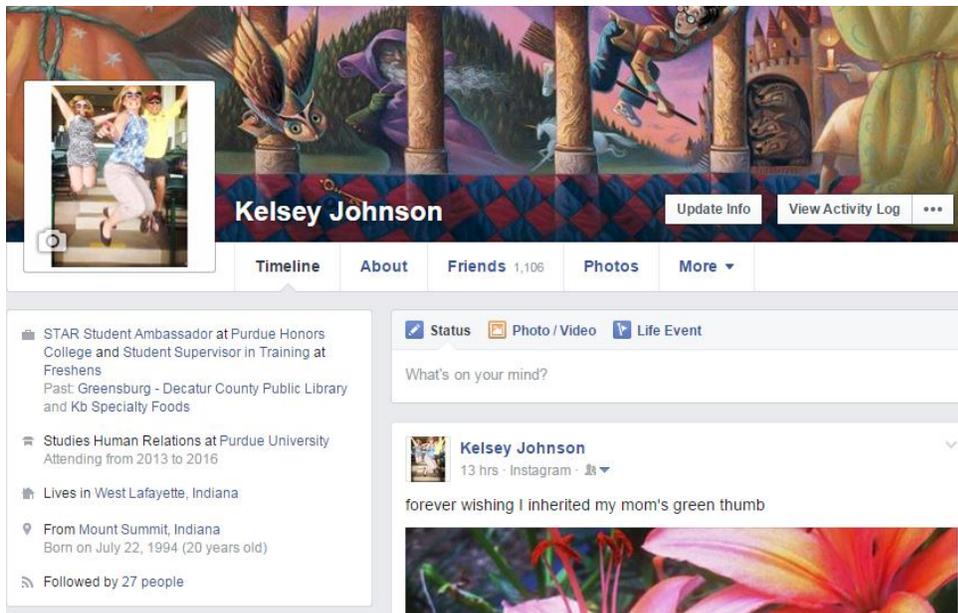
Indulgence. Social media truly does serve to make the world seem like a smaller place, allowing for connectivity and collaboration between different countries and cultures. Though Purdue students may not be able to physically be a part of demonstrations, Pride Parades, and meetings around the world, through social networking sites we are able to be there in spirit and cyberspace.

Expression on Individual Accounts. Social networking sites also provide a safe and accepting community for queer identifying people to express their sexuality and identity on their own private account. Previous research has shown that people in varying levels of “outness” also have varying levels of queerness displayed in their online profiles (Fox and Warber 87). Fox and Warber argue that out individuals, those that have fully embraced their queer identity publicly and privately, tend to express their identity on their profiles and feel comfortable sharing information about LGBT issues. Facebook and other social networks are used as platforms for communicating self among friends and allies, as well as for intragroup networking. Out users tend to avoid assimilation in favor of educating others who happen to make insensitive remarks and dispelling negative stereotypes by simply being oneself (87). Fox and Warber’s research also shows that this group is quick to unfriend or unfollow homophobic accounts, creating an interpersonal barrier between offending parties and themselves (88).

The ACT UP NY members that I have personally connected with on Facebook fall into Fox and Warber’s out category. These Facebook users share their identities openly on their profile with their relationship statuses, profile pictures, and tagged photos. My timeline displays photo albums, articles, and events that these men are a part of or choose to share, most of which advocate queer identity or sexuality. Many of these posts are filled with comments from other community members, sharing love and support. It is very clear that Facebook is a safe space for

these men, in which they feel comfortable sharing details of their lives. I do not have information about the rate of unfriending, but I have yet to see homophobic slurs or comments on posts, so it would seem that these Facebook profiles are primarily affiliated with like-minded users and organizations, thus creating Fox and Warber's interpersonal barrier. ACT UP NY members use their Facebook profiles as a way of expressing their identities, passions, and support for others in their community.

A Personal Reflection. I have always enjoyed using social networking sites. I have grown up



using Bebo, Myspace, Iconator, Facebook, Tumblr, Path, Twitter, Instagram, and others that have gained popularity only to fizzle out to the next best thing.

Figure 7. The expertly crafted, current representation of myself on Facebook, featuring a family jumping photo, Harry Potter cover art, and artsy Instagram posts (personal screenshot).

I never questioned my use of these sites until I got to college. I realize now that each of my profiles has been a carefully constructed representation of myself so that

others could see me only how I wanted them to see me. I put incredible amounts of time and effort into crafting the perfect “About Me” section while simultaneously creating a façade of having just thrown together my profile quickly (“trying hard not to look like I’m trying too hard,” in the words of Modern Baseball). Coming from a small town in central Indiana, there

were certain things that I felt comfortable sharing with my virtual audience and other things that I chose to keep to myself. My senior year of high school, there began to be many posts about marriage equality and LGBT rights on my Facebook feed, a decent amount of which was not positive. It was during this time that I first began showing myself as an ally on social networking sites. “Ally” is not a term that many are familiar with in my hometown, so my pictures and comments that showed support for queer issues immediately had rumors starting about my own sexuality. This continues on today, particularly with all of my recent posts from the study abroad trip and my promotion of our class blog. Though many of my college friends, acquaintances, and connections are accepting and supportive of the queer community, my hometown Facebook friends have dwindled over time because of rejection of my seemingly progressive and radical views on human equality.

Participation in Sex, History, and the Cities has renewed my faith in the possibility of change through social media. With my new connections, my timeline is now filled with articles celebrating queerness, equality, reproductive health, feminism, and other passions that I share with Facebook friends, and less posts promoting closed-mindedness and bigotry. The use of social media in my experience has helped me to keep people with similar values on my radar, which makes me optimistic for change. Knowing that there are so many people working together to promote a better world is such an invigorating change from the normal gloom and doom of the news and pessimists that take over my newsfeed. Becoming involved in campaigns for social justice and equality has never been so simple. Social media is here to stay, so why not use it as a weapon for change?

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