

‘Pop’ goes our movement Gay watchdogs slam celebs, but where does that leave us?

By RYAN LEE
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In a world where the death of a third-rate, largely unremarkable actress gets more attention and TV time than a war in Afghanistan or genocide in Sudan, it's impossible to overstate the power of popular culture in American society.

The gluttonous coverage of Anna Nicole Smith's accidental overdose — as well as her autopsy and baby-daddy-drama — was temporarily threatened as America's top never-ending news story when radio shock jock Don Imus called members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team “some nappy-headed hos.”

Had Virginia Tech not tragically experienced the deadliest school massacre in our country's history, there's no telling how long the What-Does-Imus-Say-About-Us-As-Americans media marathon would have continued.

Gay rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and **National Gay & Lesbian Task Force** have issued countless press releases in the past few months on everything from homelessness among gay youth to U.S. House subcommittee meetings on a pending federal hate crimes bill.

But arguably, the recent “gay” stories that resonated most with the mainstream public were conservative columnist Ann Coulter calling presidential hopeful John Edwards a faggot, former NBA player Tim Hardaway saying he hates gay people, and a bunch of folks getting upset about a homophobic candy bar commercial.

Gay groups continue to tap into the opportunities pop culture offers to elevate their platform, whether it's going after “Grey's Anatomy” star Isaiah Washington for calling a co-worker a faggot, or wagging their fingers at liberal humorist Garrison Keillor for making fun of gay men and their “striped sofas.”

“What resonates through the broader media may get a broader response to our [positions and press releases],” said Roberta Sklar, a spokesperson for the Task Force. It's important for gay groups to “rise to the occasion” and get involved in gay controversies that involve pop culture and celebrity political figures, Sklar said.

“How engaged you get has to have a limit,” she added. “What is useful to the community, to the work of you advancing equal rights? And you can't get pulled off track.”

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, which honored the TV show “Grey's Anatomy” at its annual GLAAD Media Awards on April 14, declined comment for this story.

The Human Rights Campaign did not respond to interview requests by press time.

'NATURAL' STRATEGY

Exploiting pop culture in an attempt to change society's views on gay people and issues is not only practical, but practically unavoidable, said Ingrid Crepell, an associate professor of political science at George Washington University.

"It's natural," Crepell said. "People absorb a lot of their attitudes through pop culture — a lot of times they are more familiar with that than they are with long political debates."

From Mel Gibson to Michael Richards to Don Imus, lately America seems to be in a particularly intolerant mood for bigoted potty-mouths, and gay people have had plenty of recent opportunities to express their outrage at insensitive comments.

"I think a major thing we look at is we do not condone the 'gay exception' [that it's OK to still make fun of gay people]," Sklar said. "The U.S. culture has found certain kinds of slurs no longer acceptable."

One word Sklar hopes has passed the threshold of unacceptability is faggot, which got quite a workout by celebrities and political figures in recent months.

Last October, Washington reportedly slung the slur on the set of "Grey's Anatomy" to co-star T.R. Knight, who later came out as gay. Backstage at the Golden Globes in January, Washington again said the word faggot (this time to deny that he previously said it on-set), sparking widespread outcry and media coverage.

Also in January, a video began circulating on the internet showing pop socialite Paris Hilton — who served as the grand marshal at the 2005 Los Angeles Pride festival — freely using the words faggot and nigger at a party. A month later, speaking at a major conservative political conference, Ann Coulter indirectly called John Edwards a faggot in a "joke" that blew up in her face.

Other celebrities didn't use the word "faggot," but drew high-profile criticism from gay groups for other comments deemed homophobic. They include former Miami Heat guard Tim Hardaway, Garrison Keillor and Roseanne Barr.

And in the most offbeat anti-gay episode of all, several gay groups blasted Snickers for airing a Super Bowl ad that featured two men accidentally kissing one another and responding by ripping their chest hair off. An online component to the advertisement showed the men responding to their smooch by beating one another with crowbars, which some interpreted as promoting violence against gays.

POP CULTURE VS. POLITICS

Hardly any of these incidents went by without gay organizations chiming in their disapproval, which Atlanta resident Travis Davis considers a good thing.

"People pay more attention to pop culture, and so we should focus and hone in on this thing because this would be something that we could really get out into the wind," said Davis, who is gay. "Basically I would say nobody would pay attention to anything political. Especially nowadays, they always pay attention to everything in pop culture.

"[Pop culture] enlightens a lot more people on gay issues, and it will make people look at the politics a lot more," he added.

But some gay people believe that gay groups risk being diverted from their primary mission of politically advancing gay equality if they are busy commenting on Paris Hilton or Snickers.

“We need to finish what we set out to do before we branch out to something else,” said Sanh Truong, another gay Atlantan. “We need to really focus on the government and the policies that it has that affects our lives.”

When the “Grey’s Anatomy” controversy arose, all of Hollywood rallied to condemn Washington’s words, proving that it was unnecessary for groups like HRC and the Task Force to turn attention away from their political work in order to address the situation, Truong said.

But Travis believes that gay organizations can effectively engage in politics and pop culture simultaneously. For example, HRC’s denunciation of anti-gay language used by CBS Sports announcer Billy Packer was sandwiched in between releases celebrating a civil unions bill passing a New Hampshire legislative committee and an investigation into an Army recruiter accused of homophobic practices.

The Task Force issued a press release calling on Don Imus to be fired a day after announcing a \$25,000 reward for information related to an anti-gay killing in Detroit, and on the same day it sent out a release applauding passage of a domestic partnership bill in Washington state.

“I would love for us to be able to ignore pop culture figures, but the reality is ... that kind of bigotry has to be countered — it cannot be condoned by simply ignoring it,” Sklar said.

But it’s also important for gay groups to be careful about which pop culture conversations they enter into, or risk appearing humorless and trivial, said Crepell of George Washington University.

“I could see the wisdom in just letting some of these things just slide,” Crepell said. “You don’t want every sort of cultural innuendo to be something you fight about.”