

When will we play it straight?

It's 20 years since the Homosexual Law Reform Act legalised homosexuality in New Zealand. But MARC CHECKLEY discovers that fair representation in the media is still some way off.

Gay rights in New Zealand have come a long way in the past two decades. Last month marked the twentieth anniversary of the Homosexual Law Reform Act that legalised the status of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

Once thought of as the devil's spawn and the perpetrators of the AIDS virus, the gay community is now a more visible and accepted part of New Zealand society.

There is no doubt the media have played a part in cementing the gay voice. In recent years advertisers, artists and producers have caught onto the gay market. It is now common to see gay characters represented on television or in film. Twenty years ago a film about the unrequited love of two gay cowboys would not have made it to the can, let alone onto the cinema screen.

Coverage of gay issues has also increased over the past decade. But there is a view the news media systematically ignores or distorts the lives and experiences of the LGBT community for entertainment value, rather than their newsworthiness.

Although society has caught on to the fact LGBT people are found in all walks of life (except maybe the US Army), the image of normality does not yet rest comfortably with the news media.

"It's because normal doesn't make good copy," says artist and academic Dr Welby Ings, whose short film *Boy* (2004) was inspired by his life growing up with his sexuality in small town New Zealand.

"The media are still coming to terms with our normalness and that we're not all 'fabulous'."

"Their view of the [gay] community is a single, social and flamboyant male whose best friend's a girl. The truth is there are plenty who aren't like that and they're still happy."

In the early 1980s, Dr Ings was an active member of the gay community, protesting for the rights of homosexuals. He says the news media of the time kept the issues marginalised by under-reporting the numbers in protest marches.

"Whatever was reported, you had to double it to get a true figure of protesters. There has always been a significant difference in reporting – that same ethos exists today. The media exoticise or scandalise common issues for effect."

Dr Ings mentions last year's Big Gay Out in Auckland. The media's presence was not in aid of promoting the uniqueness of the event, but to report on a protest staged by the obstreperous Destiny Church.

"It's altercation seeking," says Dr Ings. "We're viewed as different from the norm. There's value in that."

One such issue that drew anger from the gay community was the coverage of Canterbury University scientist Dr Frank Sin's "gay gene" comments.

Dr Sin made a public statement that parents on IVF programmes should be advised of sperm from a gay donor carrying a "gay gene". This was met with disdain from many in the gay community, who thought Dr Sin's comments implied he was homophobic and believed being gay was inferior.

Studies have shown there is indeed evidence of a genetic component to sexual orientation but other research has found similar genetic links to that of obesity and violence. These links, though, are still largely inconclusive.

In retrospect, Dr Sin was surprised by the response his comments received.

"It is a touchy issue but I never thought it would make the front page. I feel the reporting was provocative and I was accused of being anti-gay which is unfortunate, as on the contrary I'm not."

"My comments were from a scientific point of view, I wasn't making a social statement."

By placing undue emphasis on the issue, the media created a scandal that in turn stirred public comment on the acceptance of the gay community.

Roman Kuhar's book *Media Representations of Homosexuality* says in the reporting of homosexual issues counter arguments are minimal, with value-laden statements presented as facts.

This type of reporting was also prevalent in the US during what is known as the dark days of AIDS (1981-1985).

Journalists stirred up debate, not based in fact but from their own speculation and the personal views of public figures in society. The reporting of Patient Zero, an urban myth that accused a gay Canadian flight attendant of planting the virus onto American soil, incited a new wave of fear towards the gay community. Many of those scars are still visible today.

David Young is a gay journalist at TVNZ. He believes there is no conspiracy behind the reporting of gay issues but there's still a lot of room for improvement.

"Reporting is not out of ignorance like it may have been in the past. But a lot of the issues are reduced to only one voice."

In a *Listener* article, Young noted the Civil Union Act, the "landmark bill" for New Zealand's gay community, was not fully supported by all homosexuals.

He was one of those who opposed the law. He believes it is discriminatory as it falls short of full marriage rights.

News coverage placed itself alongside the bill's advocacy groups, gay couples who planned to *unionise* and the politicians who assisted its progress through Parliament. Contrasting views barely made the radar.

Reporting may have been pro-civil union, but by no means was it fair and balanced. The approach to the Civil Union Bill seemed to be the media giving LGBT the cake but inferring, don't expect to eat it too.

The NZ AIDS Foundation is typically rallied by the media to speak on behalf of the gay community. Fund-raising manager Garreth Spillane likens gay reporting to how Maori are treated by the news media.

"Every day achievements don't make the news. Reporting is based on statistics or scandal."

Such scandal-mongering is exemplified in a *Southland Times* article regarding recent HIV statistics. The page-two headline proclaimed: *Net hook-ups and gay sex fuel HIV rise*. Implying that all gay sex, not just unprotected sex, is the cause of the 17 per cent increase in infections.

"AIDS will always be associated with the gay community," Spillane says.

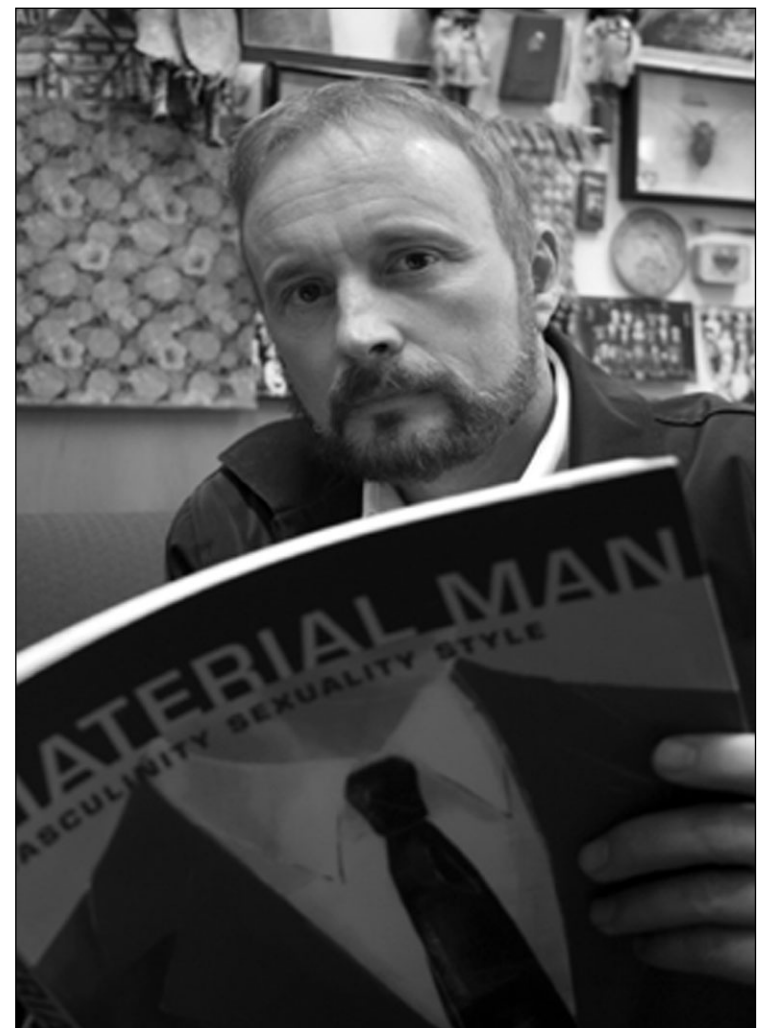


PHOTO: MARC CHECKLEY

INSPIRED: Welby Ings says the ethos of under-reporting gay issues still exists today. BELOW The 1986 Homosexual Law Reform protests drew people from all walks of life.

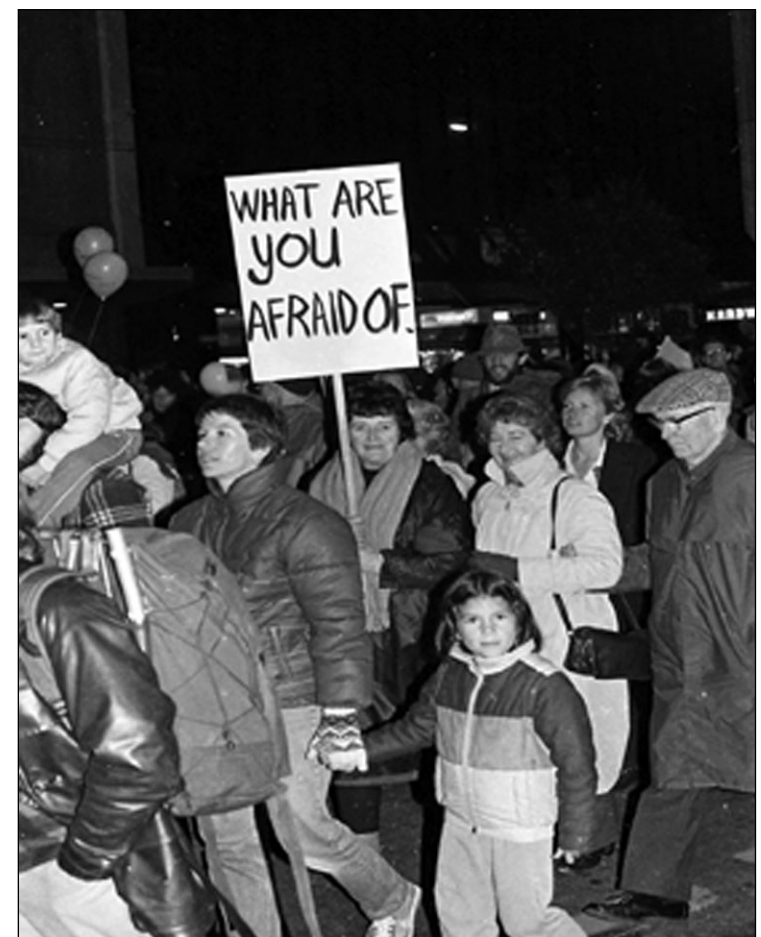


PHOTO: DAVID HINDLEY

"But our world class research centre, or that the rates of infection in our gay community are still some of the lowest in the developed world, rarely make headlines."

He says this affects the New Zealand community as a whole.

"There's a vacuous hole of information not being reported on. The media have a social responsibility to report issues fairly and accurately – negative reporting of gay issues continues to keep them sidelined in society."

The media play a key role in shaping public opinion. The majority of New Zealand's population relies, as does the world, on broadcasters and publishers to provide them with news and information.

The marginalisation and distortion of LGBT issues through finite stereotypes and scandal-mongering will continue to see the community curtailed by the mainstream.