





“We Have to Stand Out to Blend In”: Ordinary Transgender People Speak About Being Subjects of News Stories

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ABSTRACT

This interview-based study focuses on the experiences of ordinary transgender people in US news. Fifteen transgender people were interviewed about how they felt about their interactions with journalists, the resulting representations, and being cast as an exemplar—a representative of the trans community. Interviewees were overall satisfied with their interactions with journalists, and pleased with the resulting coverage, though they took issue with some aspects of both. Journalists sometimes asked insensitive questions or tried to pressure subjects to fit into stereotypical roles. Misgendering (the use of incorrect names and pronouns) was rare and mostly indirect, but suggests a need to reexamine reporting conventions. Subjects said the risks of being identified publicly as trans, and the challenges of representing such a diverse community were worth the opportunity to raise awareness about trans lives for other trans individuals and the general public. Ultimately, they felt a responsibility to make themselves visible in the short term to advocate for the rights of transgender people in the long term.

KEYWORDS

Ordinary people; news subjects; transgender; trans; LGBTQ; journalist–source relations

A rich growing literature examines the phenomenon of ordinary people in the news. But scholars rarely ask ordinary people themselves to reflect on what it is like to speak to journalists and be named in a news story (for exceptions see: Muller and Gawenda 2011; Palmer 2017). Studies of how different minority groups experience the news production process and feel they are represented by journalists are especially needed (Palmer 2017). While interacting with journalists and appearing in news stories can be a strange and potentially life-altering experience for any ordinary citizen, minority news subjects face unique challenges, including interactions with journalists who may not be accustomed to covering people like them; writing and reporting conventions, such as terminology, conceived by and for dominant groups; and repercussions from news coverage, such as prejudiced comments or even threats to their safety. In order to increase the range of voices included in the news, journalists must take into account how individuals from different backgrounds experience news production processes, and address ways those processes may be insensitive, discriminatory, or exclusionary.

This case study uses in-depth interviews to understand how members of a particular minority group—people who identify as transgender—experience becoming subjects of news stories.¹ The transgender population is an important case study of the phenomenon of ordinary people in the news for multiple reasons. The publicity associated with being named in a news story can raise concerns about privacy and security for anyone, but those concerns are particularly acute for the transgender community. Increases in transgender visibility in media in general (Stryker 2008) and in news in particular (Billard 2016) do not necessarily correspond with improved treatment of trans people in real life (Capuzza 2014; Gossett et al. 2017b; Cavalcante 2018). Trans people, especially trans people of color, continue to face high levels of violence, discrimination, economic hardship, and psychological and physical distress related to social exclusion (Heinz 2012; James et al. 2016). Being identified as trans in a news story challenges the possibility of living “stealth”—not being identified as transgender in daily life—raising questions for both journalists and trans news subjects about how they can be identified and described in news stories in ways that preserve their privacy, dignity, and safety.

Furthermore, media representations of transgender people are a key source of information about the possibilities and realities of trans lives for both trans and cisgender people (McInroy and Craig 2015; Cavalcante 2018). But transgender individuals have historically been subject to stereotypical, exploitative, and degrading representation in media in general and particularly in journalism (see: Spencer 2015; Cavalcante 2018). Although scholars document recent improvements, they also identify deficiencies, including a continued use of “delegitimizing language” (Billard 2016), a neglect of transgender voices (Capuzza 2014; Graber 2018; Åkerlund 2019), and a narrow range of trans identities in the news (Barker-Plummer 2013; Capuzza 2016). All of these criticisms raise questions about how transgender individuals who are represented in the news think and feel about their interactions with, and representation by, journalists.

Since the question of how trans people feel about becoming subjects of news stories had not been explored before, in this study we take an inductive approach based on constructive grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). We began with fifteen in-depth interviews with people who were identified in US news stories as transgender or gender nonconforming, in which we asked broad, open-ended questions about how they experienced different stages of the news production process. After the interviews, we did a close reading of existing literature on ordinary people in the news, transgender representation, and the role of media in transgender lives, which inspired a set of focused research questions that we used in a second round of analysis and to structure the findings section below.

We found that interviewees were overall satisfied with their interactions with journalists, and pleased with how the articles turned out, though they took issue with some aspects of both. Journalists sometimes asked insensitive questions, or tried to pressure subjects to fit into stereotypical roles. Examples of basic misgendering (the use of incorrect names and pronouns) were rare and mostly indirect, but, along with more subtle ways in which subjects felt delegitimized by their interactions with journalists and the resulting news coverage, they highlight areas where reporting conventions should be reexamined to avoid offending or misrepresenting transgender subjects. Subjects acknowledged risks of being identified so publicly as trans, and the challenges of representing such a diverse community, but found the risks were worth the opportunity to raise awareness about trans lives for two distinct audiences they had in mind: other trans individuals and the general

public. Ultimately, subjects felt a responsibility to make themselves visible in the short term to advocate for the rights of transgender people in the long term.

Literature Review

Ordinary People in the News

Studies of ordinary people in the news tend to focus on either “exemplars”—people chosen by journalists to illustrate a particular trend, experience, or social group (Brosius and Bathelt 1994)—or people included in “vox pops”—brief comments from people-on-the-street that provide snapshots of public opinion. Both exemplars and vox pops are important tools for journalists from a practical and a normative standpoint, because they lend human interest and clarity to otherwise dry or abstract issues, and they allow for the inclusion of more citizen perspectives (Arpan 2009; Hinnant, Len-Ríos, and Young 2013).

But scholars studying exemplars warn of potentially negative effects of their inclusion in the news. Exemplars may be chosen intentionally to sensationalize a story (Hinnant, Len-Ríos, and Young 2013), or they may inadvertently have that effect, raising questions about whether the use of exemplars exploits audience sentiments and the people chosen as exemplars themselves (Vanderford and Smith 1996; Stroobant, Van den Bogaert, and Van Leuven 2017). Exemplars are chosen based on journalists’ subjective decisions and various ad-hoc procedures that do not guarantee representativeness (Hinnant, Len-Ríos, and Young 2013). And yet, audiences tend to assume that exemplars *are* representative, even when they are not, which can lead to a distorted understanding of an issue (Allen, Preiss, and Gayle 2006; Zillmann 2006). That raises concerns because experiments indicate that exemplars often have a greater impact than statistics or other information on how audiences perceive issues (Brosius and Bathelt 1994).

Research focused on vox pops raises an overlapping set of concerns. Some scholars find vox pops often show only one perspective (Beckers, Walgrave, and Van den Bulck 2018), and, like exemplars, can be chosen based on journalists’ biased judgments. For example, Cushion’s (2018) analysis of 2017 UK election coverage revealed that citizen opinions were selected to fit journalists’ assumptions about public opinion, instead of illustrating what public opinion actually was according to more objective measures such as polling data. Taken together, the research on exemplars and vox pops raises questions about the degree to which people chosen for inclusion in news really are, or are taken to be, representative of whatever specific group, opinion, or phenomenon they are chosen to represent.

Meanwhile, ordinary people who have spoken to reporters and appeared in news stories are almost never asked to reflect on their experiences, with a few notable exceptions. Muller and Gawenda (2011) explored how 27 survivors of an Australian bushfire reflected on their interactions with the press. Palmer’s (2017) *Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight*, explores how ordinary Americans feel about becoming the subjects of news stories. Using in-depth interviews with 83 people who had spoken to reporters in the US, Palmer finds that, although some subjects complain that reporters are pushy or try to cast them in already-written stories, most subjects like the reporters they meet. Many subjects take issue with one or more aspects of the

coverage, but unless it is outright damaging to their prospects or reputations, most subjects find the upsides outweigh the damages (which Muller and Gawenda also conclude). Subjects find they benefit from the opportunity to address the large news audience, and their status increases by virtue of their having been included in the news at all.

Transgender People in the News

There is little question transgender representation in news has come a long way since the early twentieth century, when transgender people were depicted rarely, and exclusively as “social deviants and sexual oddities” (Capuzza 2016, 82). As Billard (2016) notes in a review of this growing body of literature, well into the 2000s scholars criticized journalists’ tendency to misname and misgender trans people, their reliance on a few narrow tropes, and a tendency to sensationalize and sexualize them (e.g., Squires and Brouwer 2002; Mackenzie and Marcel 2009; Cloud 2014). More recently, coverage of trans people has increased (Billard 2016), possibly due to agenda-setting effects from digital native news outlets (Billard 2019). Though still imperfect, the quality of news coverage and recommendations in journalism style guides have improved in areas like correct use of pronouns, names, and terminology (Billard 2016; Capuzza 2016). However, scholars also call attention to ongoing deficiencies in news coverage of trans issues and individuals, including a fair amount of “delegitimizing” and trivializing language (Billard 2016; Åkerlund 2019), and a tendency to focus on individual trans peoples’ stories of suffering and death, rather than the structural challenges faced by the community (Capuzza 2014; Steinbock 2017).

Scholars and transgender activists have also criticized a tendency for media to sensationalize transgender bodies, focusing especially on genitalia, surgery, and the mechanics of sex (e.g., Squires and Brouwer 2002; Sloop 2004). Recently, some scholars find less emphasis on physical transformation in the news, and note that journalism stylebooks now clarify that surgical transformation does not define what it means to be transgender (Capuzza 2016). Others still note a tendency, especially in TV journalism, to linger salaciously on invasive questions about medical procedures (Steinbock 2017), or to suggest that physical transition is when a transgender person’s internal gender identity changes—when in fact, from the perspective of many transgender people, the latter precedes and is the impetus behind the former (Booth 2015, 124).

Regarding sourcing patterns, scholars find that elites and experts, such as medical professionals and politicians, are cited far more than people who identify as trans, and that trans people are almost never portrayed as experts themselves (Capuzza 2014; Graber 2018; Åkerlund 2019). Meanwhile, transwomen are covered considerably more than transmen, and nonbinary and other gender nonconforming populations are almost completely absent from news (Capuzza 2014; Billard 2016).

The absence of nonbinary and other gender-variant news subjects is consistent with a broader recurring critique: while news coverage now accommodates the existence of some gender variance, it does so only to a limited degree, most obviously by including only trans identities that fit into, and reinforce, the deeply entrenched gender binary (Barker-Plummer 2013; Capuzza 2015; Åkerlund 2019). Scholars criticizing this trend toward “transnormativity” argue that more—and more approving—coverage is given to trans people who conform to legible gender roles and self-presentations than to those who might identify and/or present themselves as gender fluid, agender, or less

stereotypically male or female (Barker-Plummer 2013; Glover 2016; Gossett, Stanley, and Burton 2017a).

Transgender representation is particularly important given the prominent role media plays in educating trans and cisgender people about transgender issues (McInroy and Craig 2015). Cisgender people often have little direct exposure to those who choose to live openly as transgender or who want to share their experiences. For transgender individuals who may lack support and guidance in their immediate social circles, both on- and offline media provide important sources of support, community, and a wide range of information and advice on how to transcend culturally entrenched gender norms (Heinz 2012; Cavalcante 2016, 2017, 2018; Erlick 2018; Kosenko, Bond, and Hurley 2018). Still, even as media can play a key role in showing the possibilities of a transgender life, limited or stereotypical media representations can reinforce a sense of impossibility and despair (Cavalcante 2017, 2018). While trans participants in audience studies usually argue that mediated representation has improved, they still say transphobia persists in both on- and offline media (McInroy and Craig 2015). As a result, trans people seek information and support in specialized books and internet resources more often than in news (Kosenko, Bond, and Hurley 2018).

To our knowledge, no studies have focused specifically on how transgender individuals who are not public figures but are depicted in mainstream news stories make sense of that experience. However, in a study of trans audiences in the UK, Humphrey (2016) finds that those who feel most let down and misrepresented are actually those who had been news subjects themselves. Although the sample is small, some feel their story was misrepresented to fit journalists' preconceived narratives, several question whether their story would have been considered newsworthy had they not been trans, and others feel that journalists simply do not care about the repercussions of their stories on trans individuals.

These findings, along with findings cited above about ordinary news subjects in general and transgender representation, suggest our first research question:

RQ1: How do transgender news subjects think and feel about their interactions with journalists and how they are represented in the final product?

Emerging Tensions

The two sets of literature reviewed above also suggest some fundamental tensions, which give rise to two additional research questions.

One source of tension arises with regards to the term "ordinary" itself.

Most scholars studying ordinary people in the news define "ordinary" people simply as private citizens, as opposed to the public figures and other "elite" sources long found to dominate the news (e.g., Hallin 1989; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2008). But a more colloquial understanding of ordinary, like the one Cavalcante uses in *Struggling for Ordinary* (2018), his ethnography on transgender peoples' relationship to media, would define it more as everyday and routine—recognized, but accepted as mostly unremarkable (20–21). He argues that, for minority groups such as the trans population, being able to go about everyday life as an "ordinary" person, free to move about and make decisions safely, is itself a privilege, and one many feel they must continually struggle to achieve (Cavalcante 2018). While Cavalcante acknowledges that some queer activists

and scholars reject a desire for “normal” as a capitulation to hegemonic gender norms, his participants express a strong desire to see transgender people—in life and in media—“not defined by their transgender identity, but rather as people who, as they said, ‘happen to be’ transgender” (Cavalcante 2018, 22). Instead, Cavalcante’s participants find trans lives almost always represented in media as extraordinary and extreme (14).

But extremity and extraordinariness is “built into the very definition of news” (Gans 1979, 15), so it is not clear that one *can* be simultaneously newsworthy and “ordinary” in the colloquial sense at all. Ordinary people usually only make the news by doing or experiencing something extraordinary (Gans 1979), and even if one makes the news as a representative of ordinariness itself—in a vox pop, for example—being chosen for inclusion in the news confers extraordinary status, at least temporarily (Palmer 2017).

How, then, might news coverage fit into the “struggle for ordinary” Cavalcante documents? For a transgender individual, agreeing to be identified in the news *as* transgender means agreeing to be depicted *because* one is transgender—otherwise there would be no reason to identify the person’s transgender status. That seems at odds with the ideal of media portrayals of people who “just happen to be trans” (Cavalcante 2018, 22). It is also one of the things that trans news subjects have objected to in the past (Humphrey 2016). If being singled out for news attention because of one’s trans status signals to the world that that status is itself remarkable and newsworthy—the opposite of ordinary—what then? Moreover, being identified in a published news story as trans means agreeing to be “out” as a trans person, which some trans people do not want, and which can entail safety and privacy concerns. These tensions and concerns suggest our second research question:

RQ2: How do transgender individuals think and feel about being identified as trans in the news?

A third and final set of tensions emerges when we consider the concerns about the (often) false representativeness of exemplars in news coverage alongside the literature on the role of transgender media coverage in educating both trans people and the broader public about trans lives. Agreeing to be identified in the news as transgender in most cases also means agreeing to be an exemplar—a person chosen by journalists, and interpreted by audiences, to be representative of the wider trans population. And yet, as explained above, research on exemplars shows they are often *not* representative by any objective measure. Given the diversity of the trans population, it is not just unlikely but probably *impossible* for them to represent all or even most transgender people. At the same time, being an exemplar of the trans population carries additional responsibility, since media are such an important source of information about transgender identity for both trans and non-trans audiences. These various tensions would appear to put trans news subjects in a challenging, even precarious position, giving rise to our third research question:

RQ3: How do transgender news subjects think and feel about being cast as exemplars—representatives—of the transgender population?

Methods

Applying a constructive grounded theory approach, between June 2018 and January 2019 we conducted phone interviews with fifteen people who were identified as transgender or

gender nonconforming in US news stories published in 2018. We identified subjects through Google News searches based on the keywords “transgender” and “gender nonconforming,” and contacted those who were described by those terms in the resulting articles. Some participants had never been in a news story before, while others had been quoted and featured in a number of media outlets prior to the coverage about which we contacted them. Some subjects had been interviewed for newspapers, while others appeared on television, radio, or in online-only publications. Although most subjects were interviewed for mainstream media, three appeared in outlets identified as LGBTQ. About half of subjects appeared in local news outlets, while the others appeared in national publications. All subjects, however, also appeared in articles that were posted online, which meant that their audience was potentially global.

After subjects were identified, we attempted to find contact information for them online, primarily through searches on Google and social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Potential subjects with common names were more difficult to locate, as were subjects who used multiple names. In spite of these challenges, the response rate among potential subjects was relatively high. Out of 36 people who were contacted, 15 agreed to be interviewed, a response rate of 42 percent. Each subject was only contacted once. The final sample included six transmen, eight transwomen, and one person who identified as nonbinary gender nonconforming, but they expressed a broad array of perspectives on what being trans meant to them. Some of them described gender in binary terms, while others spoke of it as a spectrum. Some described feeling that their gender was fixed, while others saw it as fluid.

Under the terms of the Institutional Review Board that approved this research, all participants were at least 18-years-old and signed a consent form that promised confidentiality and anonymity. Some participants were more concerned about anonymity than others. One subject, Austin Smartt, specifically requested that she not remain anonymous, because she was pursuing a comedy career and wanted publicity, so we use her real name. All other participants are identified by pseudonyms and some identifying details have been altered.

Interviews lasted around an hour. From the outset we wanted to avoid imposing our assumptions about how transgender people might experience making the news differently from other ordinary people in the news, so we adopted the same interview schedule used by Palmer (2017) in her exploratory study of ordinary people in the news, which uses broad, open-ended questions about how interviewees experienced different stages of the news production process (see appendix).

After transcribing the interviews, the authors discussed and coded for emerging patterns and themes. Applying the “constant comparative” approach central to constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014, 305), we then did a deep dive into the literature on ordinary people in the news and the relationship between transgender people and the media, a process that revealed several “sensitizing concepts” (Charmaz 2014, 30) and tensions that resonated with our initial analysis. These gave rise to the more focused research questions that we applied in a second round of analysis, and that structure the findings section below.

In-person interviews would have been preferable to phone interviews in some respects: researchers have long argued that telephone interviews can tax interviewees quickly, and provide less opportunity for rapport-building and observation (for example: Chadwick,

Bahr, and Albrecht 1984). However, interviewees were located all over the US, making that impossible. As Bird (2013) argues, when conducted with sensitivity, telephone interviews can produce rich qualitative data because they provide an intimate medium for the sharing of personal information, and they reduce pressure on interviewees to manage appearances.

Findings

RQ1: How do transgender news subjects think and feel about their interactions with journalists and how they are represented in the final product?

Interactions With Reporters: Friendly, but Sometimes Awkward

Consistent with previous findings about how ordinary news subjects experience interviews, participants generally found the reporters who interviewed them friendly and respectful (Palmer 2017). However, their experiences differed from those of news subjects in other studies in some important ways.

Trans news subjects were highly aware throughout the process that encounters with journalists and the resulting coverage could be offensive, or even dangerous, and they had a number of strategies for managing that. Several said they, or other people working on their behalf, planned their media contacts carefully based on which journalists and/or outlets they thought would be sympathetic. Others tried to vet reporters ahead of time to ensure that the reporter and the interaction would be “safe,” a term used by several interviewees. But the most consistent strategy, and the one interviewees themselves seemed to think was the safest bet, was to be interviewed by a reporter who identified as LGBTQ themselves or worked for a LGBTQ-focused outlet. Interviewees felt those reporters were better informed about trans issues and less likely to ask invasive or ignorant questions than cisgender reporters working for mainstream outlets.

Those concerns appeared to be well-founded. Although some interviewees were pleasantly surprised by how non-LGBTQ reporters treated and represented them, they often felt they had to use the interview to educate reporters about basic issues and terms they should have known already, which could be time-consuming and annoying. And most interviewees identified at least one moment in those interviews they felt was inappropriate or insensitive, often in exactly the ways we would anticipate based on the literature on trans news coverage. Rarely, reporters requested subjects’ “dead names”—names that trans people were given at birth but no longer used. But it was more common for reporters to ask invasive questions about sex lives and bodies. Carl described one such interaction:

I identify as pansexual. And I was fine with telling her that, but then it was the matter of, ‘Well how does that work? Like do you still identify with your genitalia?’ It wasn’t a hateful conversation, but it made me feel icky. And I shut it down.

Similarly, Madeline, who did a television interview that she knew would not be edited, said she set ground rules beforehand: “I wanted to let them know right off the bat that if you’re going to ask anything personal about my body or anything like that, the deal’s off, I’m not going to do it.” But interviewees varied in the degree to which they felt they could redirect

journalists who were going down what they felt was an inappropriate path, and some said they regretted answering questions that made them feel uncomfortable.

Some trans news subjects said they got the sense during interviews that journalists were trying to fit them into already-written stories that fit tired stereotypes, similar to Humphrey's (2016) findings. As Austin explained, she found herself educating an unprepared reporter who focused on the most obvious and superficial aspects of trans experience:

It was like listening to an interviewer like talk to a famous musician that's been around, like Bob Dylan, and someone's like So Bob, tell us about writing 'Blonde on Blonde.' Like do you wanna hear Bob Dylan talk about writing 'Blonde on Blonde'? There's so many articles and interviews about that. Go with something else, let's ask him about some new things that no one's talked about yet.

Some news subjects said they felt journalists pushed them to pose or say things to fit formulas that felt not just stereotypical but delegitimizing, and struggles could ensue over the direction of the narrative. For example, Jessica rejected a request from a photojournalist who asked to document her morning routine. Jessica explained that the whole scenario seemed designed to call into question her female identity, and to reinforce the gender binary:

You want to take pictures of me putting on makeup and, you know, stuffing my bra and those sorts of things, and I'm not going to do that ... they're trying to either inauthenticate me as a woman or they're trying—you know, they're engaging in that thing saying 'All women should wear makeup,' and neither one of those things are any good, especially for trans women who have the obstacle of being discredited all the time.

Reactions to Articles: Misgendering and Missed Opportunities

Like other ordinary news subjects in previous studies (e.g., Palmer 2017), participants in this study said they were generally satisfied with the articles that resulted from their interviews. As we discuss further in the next section, most participants felt the articles met their main goals to inform the public and the trans community, so they were willing to overlook small factual errors, which they mostly did not bother to correct with reporters. They were more bothered by errors they felt misrepresented their own gender identities or important aspects of trans life. For example, the journalist who interviewed Carl wrote that he was saving up for surgery to get his breasts removed, rather than using the term "top surgery," which Carl preferred and felt was the more accepted term in the trans community.

But errors of terminology and misgendering usually took a more indirect form than reporters' simply using the wrong words. For example, the journalist who wrote about Lana's conflicts in highschool used her preferred pronouns, but included direct quotes from people who did not. Maria said a newspaper used an outdated bio they had found online that included her dead name. Unlike most participants, she contacted the newspaper, which then changed the bio in its online version. But these examples illustrate that although many journalists may know to avoid the crudest forms of misgendering—using incorrect names or pronouns when referring to transgender people—practices of quoting and attribution warrant reexamination.

The same may go for the use of visuals, where interviewees encountered a different kind of misgendering. For example, Ella said she agreed to be photographed, but the photographer rebuffed her suggestions for angles and lighting, and she was disappointed when she saw the image that accompanied her article: she felt it had been chosen deliberately to make her look masculine, as if to highlight the physical qualities with which she least identifies and to delegitimize her as a woman.

Interviewees' most consistent complaint about the published news stories was that reporters used only a fraction of what they had said, a common grievance among news subjects (Palmer 2017). However, in this case, interviewees argued that one of their main goals was to educate the public about the complexities of trans lives and trans identities, so a lack of depth and detail felt like a missed opportunity. Like Bill, they wished there had been "more chance for education" in their articles. For example, Adrian, who prefers they/them pronouns, said they felt like they put a lot of thought into their responses, and that the opportunity to talk in the mainstream media about nonbinary identities is particularly rare. They were disappointed that the resulting article turned out to be fairly superficial—relatively "vanilla."

A related complaint raised by several interviewees was that they felt they had been cast to fit stereotypical narratives—particularly those that focused on adversity. Those sentiments are consistent with earlier findings (Capuzza 2014; Steinbock 2017) that news coverage of trans issues often evokes themes related to personal struggles. Austin described the phenomenon as a "minority strife Mad Lib":

Like, 'What it's like being transgender in X Y Z?' Fill in the blank. Like, 'what it's like being transgender in Hollywood?' Yeah, it's hard. 'What's it like being a transgender truck driver?' Let me guess, is it hard? ... It seems like it's a good thing those stories are being told and that that information's being put out there, but it is such a repetitive narrative of struggle and strife.

Given all of the deficiencies interviewees found in their interactions with reporters and the ways they were depicted in the news, it is striking they all assessed their experiences overall in positive terms and said they would agree to be interviewed by journalists (although perhaps not *all* journalists)—again. As we discuss further below, that was largely because they saw the opportunity to raise awareness about trans life as worth the offenses and errors they had endured.

RQ2: How do transgender individuals think and feel about being identified as trans in the news?

Most people interviewed for this study had mixed feelings about being included in news stories specifically because of their trans identity, and acknowledged that it had both pros and cons. The most consistent benefit interviewees saw in being depicted as trans was that it provided them with an opportunity—even a responsibility—to present positive messages about trans people, and to educate both trans individuals and the wider public. We detail this benefit further in the next section, because it is closely tied to being depicted as an exemplar.

But some trans news subjects also saw other, personal benefits to their news appearances. Three of our 15 interviewees worked in the arts or entertainment, and acknowledged that their trans status likely brought them additional publicity. Maria, for example, said she knew she was getting more news attention than a non-trans performer

ever would at the same stage in her career, but it was hard to resent the career boost. Other individual benefits of being depicted as trans included just having their stories heard by sympathetic listeners. Adrian said they found it therapeutic to talk about their nonbinary status, and validating to have their story heard by a journalist and shared with a broader public. They shared the article to promote dialogue with their mother, explaining, “I was like, ‘Hey listen, now you can finally use my right pronouns.’ It’s media legit.”

On the other hand, interviewees discussed a number of risks and downsides to having their trans identities highlighted in a news story. For some, it was distinctly uncomfortable, because it seemed to distance them from the gender category with which they identified. As Jessica explained:

Talking to anybody about trans issues makes me nervous because I don’t want to be seen as a trans woman—I want to be seen as a woman. And so any time I have to separate myself from cisgender women, it’s nerve wracking and upsetting.

While none of the interviewees had been living completely stealth before their media appearances, not everyone in their circles knew they were trans. Being depicted as trans in the news felt like a public outing that could have personal and/or professional ramifications, including safety concerns. Phil received death threats. Randall went into hiding at friends’ houses after his article came out, because he heard that his estranged parents were angry and looking for him. Madeline said she declined a television reporter’s request to gather video at her home, because her neighbors did not know she was trans. As she explained, “That’s why we opted to do it at our office building. One, for my safety, and two, I can stay anonymous to everyone else in the world.” Other trans news subjects only shared their articles with a few trusted people.

That said, some interviewees felt risks were minimal for them, and most said feedback about their articles was generally positive. Several said they felt fortunate that their circumstances made them feel safe speaking publicly about being trans, and as such they had a responsibility to do so. As someone who was white, middle class, lived in a trans-friendly city, and passed easily as a man, Ryan said he felt privileged: “It’s easier for me to talk about the oppression that my community faces, because I don’t receive harassment and threats every day when I step out my door.”

Whether they had to deal with negative repercussions or not, all interviewees concluded that the personal risks of being identified as trans in news coverage were worth it to them, because the benefits of discussing their experiences in the mainstream media were so great. Jessica explained that calculation:

The reason that trans people need to speak out is because we’re not being treated the same as cisgender people ... we have to speak out because we need to shame our oppressors. But it also outs us to our oppressors.

As we detail in the next section, interviewees like Jessica felt the biggest benefit—and their biggest motivation for speaking to reporters—was the opportunity to represent the trans community in what they perceived as an ongoing struggle for equality.

RQ3: How do transgender news subjects think and feel about being cast as exemplars—representatives—of the transgender population?

When Adrian was approached by reporters they found themselves asking, “Okay, well if I’m going to be the face of this, like, how do I do that?” Interviewees were generally aware that agreeing to speak to reporters meant not only being identified as a trans individual, but also being depicted, and interpreted by the audience, as a representative of the whole trans community—as an exemplar. As we discussed in the literature review, the use of exemplars can lead to distortions and oversimplifications, and the assumption that everyone in the group they are chosen to represent is like them (Allen, Preiss, and Gayle 2006; Zillmann 2006).

Interviewees were aware that they were being asked to represent a group of people whose identities are diverse and often complex. Adding to the challenge, they had two distinct audiences in mind: the trans community, and the wider public. As Ryan explained, communicating the complexity and diversity of trans identities was a challenge, but also a vital one to take on. He said,

Telling our stories is important to the trans community. It’s important for us to see stories that are similar to us or are different from us, important for us to understand ourselves that way. But it’s also I think really important for the broader community to hear and see these stories.

Interviewees were highly conscious of how the trans community might react to their news appearances. Some said they worried they might anger or alienate trans people who might feel poorly represented by their quotes or stories—or worse, that they might inadvertently mislead someone who badly needed guidance. As Jessica said, “If I’m going to be out there, I don’t want to make mistakes that are going to make other trans people upset.” Randall found himself cast as an inspirational story of a trans person who had overcome adversity. He said that, at first, he was pleased to think that his story might inspire other trans people. But later, he worried that it might have the opposite effect, because he sensed his story would be perceived as the norm, rather than the exception:

If I was where I was like six months ago, with, you know, living on the streets and stuff, and I saw someone in my situation have this much success, I would feel so terrified and so lost, wondering how the hell is that possible? What am I doing wrong?

But interviewees spoke even more of the *benefits* of addressing the trans community through news, including the chance to inform, inspire, and make people feel less alone. As Bill put it, he wanted to “be a beacon” for members of the trans community who might need inspiration or guidance. He explained, “Any chance that I come across where I can be of information or be a source of learning for people is really neat, and I take that opportunity quickly.” Some had depended on mediated representations of other trans people for guidance themselves, while others had longed for them and found them lacking. Nora said she felt “an obligation to be a role model, because I never had role models growing up. Because everybody was in the closet. Everybody was stealth.”

And the feedback they received seemed to confirm that members of the trans public valued their efforts. Although Phil, a religious leader, received death threats following his news coverage, he also felt gratified at the positive feedback he received from people who knew him, and from other people of faith around the world who were transiting or considering it. “That outpouring of people looking for resources and support has made it worth it,” he said.

Interviewees also saw being an exemplar as part of an ongoing struggle for recognition and acceptance for trans people by the wider population. That mission included educating the general public about trans lives, but also just making those lives visible in media so they would be seen as less extraordinary. In echoes of Cavalcante's (2018) "struggle for ordinary," Maria said she never turned down an interview, because the more often trans people appeared in the news, the less novel they would seem. She explained, "My goal is to say, 'Look, this isn't interesting, leave people alone,'" a strategy she called "advocacy through normalcy ... just trying to destroy the mystery around this thing."

Discussion

Overall, our findings are consistent with previous research on ordinary news subjects, as well as with research that finds that news coverage of trans people, though still imperfect, has improved in recent years. Interviewees' most common complaints were that reporters, particularly those who worked for mainstream news organizations, sometimes seemed ill-informed about trans issues or asked insensitive questions, including those about transgender bodies that would never be asked of cisgender news subjects. Their most common complaint about the published news coverage was that it omitted much of what they had said and that it lacked nuance, sometimes casting subjects in stereotypical roles in what felt like already-written stories. All of those complaints align well with ongoing problem areas that scholars have identified in content analyses of transgender news coverage.

We also found that, as we would expect from the literature, the most straightforward kinds of misgendering—the use of incorrect names and pronouns to describe transgender individuals—did not occur often in our sample. Instead, misgendering usually occurred indirectly or visually, by sources that reporters had quoted who used incorrect pronouns or dead names, or in photos that emphasized aspects of subjects' bodies they felt did not accurately represent their true identities. These forms of misgendering raise practical and ethical questions that news organizations and style guides should address in the future.

That interviewees were overall satisfied with the way they had been represented, despite the uncomfortable moments in their interviews and deficiencies in the news coverage, largely came down to their motives for speaking to reporters in the first place. It is also a testament to the resilience of trans news subjects, which is often lost when scholars critique news coverage on their behalf. Literature on media and trans experience emphasizes the important role that media can play in informing both the general public and trans people about trans lives (McInroy and Craig 2015; Cavalcante 2017; Kosenko, Bond, and Hurley 2018), and interviewees were highly conscious of both audiences. They wanted to provide information, inspiration, support, and a sense of possibility to other trans people, and the feedback they received confirmed that their efforts were appreciated.

They also wanted to educate the broader public and increase trans visibility, which they saw as an important part of the ongoing fight for trans rights. Interviewees had all, to varying degrees, concluded that the inconveniences, indignities, and risks of appearing in the news were worthwhile not only for themselves, but as a necessary step toward improved treatment and acceptance of the trans population as a whole.

That strategy is not by any means consensual within the broader LGBTQ community. One of the central questions in ongoing debates over LGBTQ visibility is to what degree

and in what ways people should conform to the demands and confines of mainstream media in order to ensure the inclusion of LGBTQ stories and voices (Doyle 2016; Gossett, Stanley, and Burton 2017a). But our interviewees' argument resonates with Cavalcante's (2018) finding that, despite some activists' and critical scholars' view that blending into the mainstream is a kind of capitulation to hegemonic norms, many trans people may well long for a kind of acceptance and everyday life that they themselves characterize as "ordinary." Our interviewees accepted—and sometimes even enjoyed—being newsworthy for their trans status today, but their long-term goal was to be seen as un-newsworthy tomorrow. As Bill put it, "We have to stand out first in order to blend in."

Note

1. For the purposes of this study, we borrow Capuzza's (2016) definition of the term "transgender" to mean people "whose gender identity and expression are incongruent with their birth sex," including those who "perceive their gender to be both masculine and feminine, neither masculine or feminine or fluidly moving across a gender spectrum" (p. 83). For other definitions, see: Adams 2015; Åkerlund 2019; Cavalcante 2018; Heinz 2012; Kosenko, Bond, and Hurley 2018; McInroy and Craig 2015; and Spencer 2015. In this study, we use the terms "transgender" and "trans" interchangeably, and the term "cisgender" to mean people who do not identify as transgender.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Previous experience

Had you ever been in the news before? What was that like?

Had you ever had the opportunity but turned it down?

General

So, tell me about this experience.

Getting in the News

Can you walk me through the events leading up to your being mentioned/profiled/quoted?

How did the reporter or news organization get in touch with you?

What did you know about what the story was going to be about? What gave you that idea?

Motivations

What were your initial thoughts when you were asked to participate in the news? Do you remember how you felt? Did you have any qualms?

Did you discuss it with anyone else?

Why did you agree to be quoted/profiled/mentioned in the news?

Is there any type of story for which you would not agree to talk to a reporter?

Expectations before the interaction with the reporter

Before you spoke with the reporter, do you remember what you were expecting the interaction to be like?

Before your interaction with the reporter, did you imagine what the story might be like or what your role in the story might be? Can you describe it?

Interaction with the reporter

Can you walk me through your interaction with the reporter?

Was the interaction what you expected or did anything about it surprise you?

What were your thoughts or feelings about the interaction/interview while it was happening?

Was there anything that you did not want to answer or talk about?

At the time (or right after the interview, before seeing the story) was there anything you wished you hadn't said or that you wished you had said differently?

After the interaction with the reporter, how did you feel about it? What were your thoughts or feelings about your contribution?

Expectations after the interaction with the reporter

After the interview, did you imagine what the story would be like? Can you describe what you were expecting?

What were you thinking or feeling after you spoke with the reporter but before you saw the final story?

Did you tell anyone to look for you in the news? Who?

Reaction to the Story

Did you see/hear/read the story? When? Where were you?

Do you remember what your immediate reaction was? Over the course of the day or the next few days, did your feeling about the story change?

Did you refer anyone you knew to the article/story you were in after it came out? What did you tell them?

Did you think the story was accurate? Why or why not?

Was it different from what you were expecting? In what way?

What kind of feedback did you get from other people?

Any other repercussions from the story?

If you had the chance to write the story yourself, what would you do differently?

If they did not like the story or felt it was inaccurate:

Did you do something to try to set the record straight? Why or why not?

Comparing to other experiences

Can you think of another experience that was similar to this one?

Have you ever had information published about you in a different format? How was this similar or different from that experience?

Do you publish things about yourself online? Do other people publish things about you there?

How was this similar or different from that?

Future

Would you agree to do this again?

Would you do anything differently?/do you have any regrets?

What advice would you give someone you cared about who was approached by a reporter?

In 5 years, how do you think you'll look back on this experience? What role do you think the press will play in your memory of this?

[esp. for traumatic events] How do you think your experience of this event would have been different if there had been no press involved?

News Use and Perception of the News Media

Do you think this experience affected your way of thinking about this news outlet in particular?

What about the news media in general?

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