

national news

Looking out across his busy *Hotwired* newsroom at 6 o'clock on a Monday evening, Steven Petrow counts the number of out, gay journalists that he sees for the interviewer on the phone. With just one glance, he finds three within eye shot. Not counting himself.

Try that at most tradition-bound newspapers or magazines, or at a big-city television affiliate.

"This is the most creative, fascinating job I've ever had," says Petrow, who produces health programming for *Hotwired*, among the hottest of the on-line magazines. "It is really comfortable to be out."

Cyberspace may be the new frontier for all journalists, regardless of sexual identity, but gay and lesbian journalists seem to be at the head of the charging wagon train. At many of the new Internet magazines and information services, lesbian and gay journalists are not only numerous and out, but many of them are in positions of power and influence.

Gay journalists who have made the leap into cyberspace say they were drawn by the cutting-edge technology, by the idea of being in on the ground floor of the next big thing. They were drawn by the nature of the on-line world, where the unconventional is accepted and there are few lavender ceilings. And there may also be a bit of that inherent, undefinable gay aesthetic at work.

"Not to be stereotypical here, but gay people like to stay current, stay at the forefront of life in general," says Jeff Yarbrough, who after leaving his post as editor-in-chief of the *Advocate* was hired as a supervising producer of on-line services and interactive television at C/Net. "I think that's part of the reason so many gay and lesbian people are in the on-line world."

Part of the reason may also be geographical. Though the Internet can be accessed from anywhere in the world, there has been a particular explosion of new on-line information services in and around the San Francisco Bay area, which has long been a high-tech center. So these start-ups are fishing for writers and producers in an area where any number of the same happen to be gay.

"The Internet has a long and proud tradition of being a libertarian means of communication, without a lot of governing authority. And that fits in really well here," says Karen Wickre, a San Francisco-based writer who has been working in the computer world for more than a decade. "There has always been more opportunity here for people who are not traditional to make headway."

That acceptance of "nontraditional" journalists doesn't just apply to their sexual identity. Many mainstream media outlets might be reluctant to hire people who have taken unconventional career paths (say, for instance, alternative or gay/lesbian media) or who don't have a formal journalism education. But in the on-line world, the lines are less rigidly drawn.

Virtual equality

Why are so many gay and lesbian journalists making cyberspace their new home?

by Richard Shumate



Michael Goff

"I think having an interest and aptitude and energy for this are really more important than anything else," says Wickre. "I really think that what is most important here are good writing and critical thinking skills."

Before coming to *Hotwired*, Petrow was editor of the now defunct *10 Percent*, a national gay magazine based in San Francisco. He describes himself back then as being somewhat anti-technology. "I didn't even have e-mail," he says.

But Petrow wanted to stay in journalism and he wanted to stay in San Francisco. "And here, the jobs are in the new media. So that's where I went," he says.

Seattle, home of the software Goliath Microsoft, has become another center for cyber journalism. When Microsoft was looking for someone to launch a high-profile group of on-line city guides, called "Sidewalk," it turned to Michael

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Goff, a founder and former editor-in-chief of *Out* magazine.

"I think, across the board, journalists are looking at new technology in order to do their best work. I wouldn't say that's necessarily more applicable to gay people," says Goff. "This is a new medium. It's like when they first invented television. And that's compelling."

But even though the primary attractions for Goff (whose professional background prior to *Out* was in mainstream magazines) were the nature of the medium and the ability to shape an entirely new product, he also admits Microsoft and the on-line world offered him career potential that the mainstream magazine world might not have provided, despite the success he had at *Out*.

"I would have loved to be the editor of *Esquire*," says Goff. "But I don't think they would have ever hired me."

This new medium also has a new attitude toward its gay employees. While lesbian and gay journalists in more traditional companies continue to fight the lavender ceiling in their workplaces and lobby for domestic partnership benefits, gay and lesbian cyber journalists usually find a more equitable atmosphere. Take Goff's employer, Microsoft, for example. Not only does it offer full benefits coverage to domestic partners, but the company will also pay the moving expenses for partners of employees when it relocates them. It will even help those partners find a job.

When Yarbrough left the *Advocate*, he says, "I got a couple of other offers from some major media companies that were pretty traditional," including one he describes as being among the "stodgiest." But he says the atmosphere of equality at C/Net tipped the balance.

"In other places I've worked [before the *Advocate*], I've sometimes felt like my voice was considered to be a minority voice," Yarbrough says. His concern was that if he took one of those traditional jobs, "I was going to have to face that again. I knew my voice was always going to be taken with a grain of salt. Here, that is not the case."

One of the challenges for openly lesbian or gay journalists working for traditional media outlets has always been to try to work for fair and accurate coverage of gay people and their issues, usually in the face of a decidedly heterocentric workplace culture. Wickre, Goff, Petrow and Yarbrough all agree that the cyber world, with its culture of inclusion and equality, also presents an opportunity for inclusive and equal coverage.

"This is the first new medium that has come of age since the gay movement came of age," says Yarbrough. "This medium, as it grows, is going to be a place where a gay voice is not a secondary voice."

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But gay journalists working inside cyberspace say the idea is not to turn the medium into a forum dominated by lesbian and gay themes or to create a propaganda tool with particular political axes to grind.

Petrow says when *Hotwired* runs a story that has a gay or lesbian angle, it has to meet the same standards of newsworthiness as any other story. The difference, though, is that with out gay men and lesbians working inside, more newsworthy stories that involve or reflect gay life will be pitched.

In essence, the rush of gay men and lesbians into cyberspace is creating an atmosphere where gay-related stories are seen as just a part of the overall news flow, not as something out of the ordinary.

"I don't think [gay-related content] is something we will try to seek out deliberately. But I think having gays and lesbians in positions where they are making decisions about content is going to make it a matter of course to include those kind of stories," says Goff.

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