

THE STINK BENEATH THE INK: HOW CARTOONS ARE ANIMATING THE GAY AND LESBIAN CULTURE WARS

By Frank Baiocchi

Social problems can become the topic of national discourse through many different, indeterminable ways. There has been a recent surge in dialogue on the interpretation of cartoons that possibly reflect or promote gay and lesbian sensibilities. This dialogue has generated media attention and organized responses from social movements on both sides of the gay and lesbian culture war. The current article analyzes the social, political, and clinical implications of this national conversation. The work's goal is to help social workers and policy makers understand how this conversation began, enabling them to explore where the dialogue might lead.

WAGING WAR THROUGH CARTOONS

On January 25, 2005, in her second official day on the job, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (2005) wrote a letter to the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) expressing “strong and very serious concerns” about an episode of a popular children’s half-animated, half-reality show called *Postcards from Buster*. The episode featured Buster, an animated rabbit, and his visit to a real-life family headed by a lesbian couple. This was a part of a series of episodes in which the show investigated multiculturalism. The series included explorations of various ethnicities, religions, and, with this particular segment, sexual orientations.

In her letter, which the U.S. Department of Education released to the news media, Spellings pointed out that “many parents would not want their young children exposed to the lifestyles portrayed in this episode” (Spellings, 2005). She asked PBS to remove the episode from the broadcast lineup.

She also asked PBS to return the funds used to produce the episode. The Department of Education provided PBS with funding, and Spellings asserted that “Congress’ and the Department’s purpose in funding this programming certainly was not to introduce this kind of subject matter to children, particularly through the powerful and intimate medium of television” (Associated Press, 2005; Spellings, 2005). The Department of Education’s grant to PBS for the series specifies that the programs “should be designed to appeal to all of America’s children by providing them with content and characters they can identify. Diversity will be incorporated into the fabric of the series to help children understand and respect differences and learn to live in a multicultural society” (as cited by Salamon, 2005).

Acquiescing to the request, PBS withdrew the episode from 349 of its 350 stations nationwide in an attempt to avoid potential social and political backlash. Pat Mitchell, PBS’ fifth president and chief executive officer, quit as a result of the controversy. The Boston PBS station that produced the series, WGBH, was the only PBS station that decided to air the program (McDonough, 2005).

These events follow shortly after James Dobson’s remarks at a presidential inauguration banquet in January of 2005. Dobson, founder of the group Focus on the Family, lectured members of Congress at an Inaugural banquet in January about the troublesome “pro-homosexual” stance taken by the very popular animated show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Olbermann, 2005). The sponsor of an educational video featuring SpongeBob mentions on the program’s Web site that sexual identity is one of the attributes that merit tolerance and sensitivity, but sexual orientation is not addressed within the video itself. The video was distributed to thousands of elementary schools (Goldstein, 2005). Dobson explained that this was an instance of “homosexual propaganda” and that cartoon characters were being “hijacked” to promote the gay agenda (Goldstein, 2005, p. 6; see also Olbermann, 2005).

Other animated figures have also recently gained national attention for direct or indirect depiction of gay or lesbian sensibilities. *The Simpsons* made headlines with an episode on February 20, 2005, that identified one of the characters as a lesbian and featured a same-sex wedding ceremony (Burns and Kruse, 2005). Dreamworks Studio’s film *Shark Tale* includes a character, Lenny the Shark, whose sexual orientation has been discussed by the media, right-wing conservatives, and gay and lesbian activists (Mathewes-Green, 2004). The character Big Gay Al has been a recurring cast member on the hit television show *South Park* and played a prominent role in the movie *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* (Parker, Stone, and Brady, 1999).

Popular culture has often sought to link animated characters to gay or lesbian attributes (e.g., Batman and Robin, Peppermint Patty and Marcie, Velma from *Scooby Doo*, and Bugs Bunny, to mention a few; Goldstein, 2005; Norman, 2005). A recent social discourse explores how these cartoons, and organized responses to them, affect the culture wars being fought in the U.S. over concerns with the rights of gay and lesbian individuals and their families. This article identifies the social construction of the gay and lesbian cartoon wars. It investigates the mobilization tactics of both gay and lesbian activists and conservative leaders, demonstrating that while cartoons may help expand public awareness of issues concerning gay and lesbian rights, social justice will only be truly served once the culture wars have transcended to the battleground of the legislative arena.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT: CULTURE WARS IN AMERICA

B. Guy Peters defines culture wars as disagreements over issues that “tend to divide citizens sharply on the basis of religious, social, and culturally based conceptions of right and wrong” (2004, p. 427). Peters also suggests that while all social problems separate people, “the fissures created by these moral issues are deeper and more difficult to contain within the civil and constrained discourse of the conventional political process” (2004, p. 427). Social problems emerge in the public awareness and gain legitimacy through the involvement of interest groups, political figures, powerful organizations, and mass media (Blumer, 1971). The U.S. Department of Education, PBS, the *New York Times*, Focus on the Family, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the American Family Association (AFA), and Concerned Women for America (CWA) have all recently released strong reactive statements about the portrayal of gays and lesbians in animated programming. Janice Irvine asserts that “the passions of culture wars, particularly because they are negative and sensational, enhance news value” (2002, p. 151). The incidents concerning SpongeBob and Buster, in particular, became front-page news stories throughout the nation, bringing these culture wars to the forefront of national social debate.

Gay and lesbian identity and activism have always had challenging relationships with the media. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the media repeatedly associated homosexual lifestyles with themes of deviances, scandal, stereotypical archetypes, and disease (Kirk and Madsen, 1989). However, the media has made gays and lesbians increasingly visible in recent years, enabling them to infiltrate the average American household (Schilt, 2004; *Chicago Tribune*, 2005). This new visibility is exemplified by Ellen Degeneres’s public

disclosure of her lesbian sexual identity, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Will and Grace*, as well as by gay weddings on *Roseanne*, *Friends*, and *Northern Exposure*.

In light of the visibility of gays and lesbians in the national media, it is useful to consider why the Buster and SpongeBob cartoons struck a nerve with the American public, prompting such intense social discourse. Richard Goldstein notes:

Cartoons are powerful in a special way.... [They] have an unfinished look that leaves a lot of interpretative space. Their sparse details and antic distortions are surreal yet recognizable enough to hit the target, whether it's a powerful politician or a basic human type (2005, p. 7).

In his discussion of cartoons as vehicles for social debate, Larry Gross says, “*The Simpsons* could make a strong political point that the networks would never dare in a sitcom ... television is the common ground on which we all discuss issues, whether it's race or feminism or sexuality” (*Chicago Tribune*, 2005).

Parents and politicians worry that children are being influenced by implicit value messages within these cartoons; both are concerned that such values conflict with their own. As Irvine suggests, “Neither emotions nor culture wars are simply spontaneous reactions” (2002, p. 143). For years, fundamentalists have been concerned that “pop culture is stealing the souls of their children” (Goldstein, 2005, p. 7). In his review of *Shark Tale*, Ed Vitagliano of the AFA argues that the message of the movie was intended to teach children acceptance of homosexuality, not to educate them on issues surrounding multiculturalism (Shepard, 2005). He asserts that the movie “comes far too close to taking a bite out of traditional moral and spiritual beliefs” (Vitagliano, 2004). Spellings responds to critics of her intervention with PBS by saying, “On lifestyle issues, I think it's appropriate for parents to deal with those as they see fit, in their own way and in their own time” (*Chicago Tribune*, 2005). However, Wendy Luttrell maintains, “There is simply no evidence to suggest that children watching SpongeBob or TeleTubbies or Bert and Ernie or any other cartoon figure ‘read’ either a unified or single gendered or sexual message” (as cited by Lisman, 2005).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE CARTOON WARS

Invariably, any discussion of the cartoon wars should also consider the collective mobilization efforts that were organized in response. Herbert Blumer notes that “social problems lie in and are products of a process of collective definition” (1971, p. 301). This process initiates a movement toward solutions or

amelioration of the issues. As Armand Mauss posits, "Social problems as simply a special kind of movement ... are indistinguishable" (as cited by Jenness, 1995, p. 146). Donald P. Haider-Markel argues that in order for social movements to "form, survive, and influence policy," they have to "include a communications network, a series of crises or general change, the attention of the media, political opportunity, movement resources, movement activity, and supportive public opinion" (1999, p. 243).

Among gays and lesbians, an important motivation for political mobilization is the right to equal treatment. As individuals with sexual orientations that differ from those of the majority, they mobilize to claim the right to be treated as equals of the majority (Peters, 2004). This citizen-based movement has expanded its domain by aligning with other similar movements (including the women's movement, the black Civil Rights movement and various antiwar movements) that are bound in the common pursuit of equal rights (Haider-Markel, 1999). As activist Urvashi Vaid argues:

A more real and meaningful equality can be achieved only by linking up with other progressive movements for social change, focusing especially on the racial and economic injustice that plagues U.S. society, and which anti-gay politics succeeds so well in exploiting (1995, p. 212).

Perhaps John Stuart Mill best summed up the goals of these types of social movements over a century ago:

Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development and if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own (1974, p. 63).

By contrast, the coalition of social movement organizations that has formed in opposition to the gay and lesbian social movement maintains that these gay and lesbian groups seek special rights and protections for which there is no constitutional basis (Peters, 2004; Robert Fairbanks II, personal communication, March 2, 2005). These oppositional forces insist that gay rights groups' desires for recognition and acceptance undermine moral standards in the United States, conflict with traditional gender and sexual relations, and deflect family values (Irvine, 2002; Peters, 2004). These battles

are not just about sexuality. They are fought over which sexualities and which citizens are valued as legitimate (Irvine, 2002).

Both sides of the battle frame their arguments and shape social and political discourse on gay and lesbian rights through the battleground of the cartoon wars. Haider-Markel observes:

How an issue is framed will determine whether or not an issue reaches the political agenda, what venues are suitable for a discussion of the issue, what actors will be mobilized and/or allowed to participate in the policy process, and the focus of policy that actors are demanding (Haider-Markel, 1999, p. 245).

Valerie Jenness contends that some frames have more “cultural legitimacy” than others and that frames vary according to the historical moment, the target of influence, and the social location of those involved in the social movement (1995, p. 158).

Tony Norman (2005) argues that perhaps these cartoon wars have particular relevance due to the social and political contexts around which the battle lines have been drawn. He notes, “Now that virtue reigns in the land and morality is enshrined at the heart of American foreign and domestic policy, the jihad against cartoon characters of dubious sexuality can begin with all the ruthlessness such campaigns demand.”

The Concerned Women for America (CWFA), a conservative organization, chose to frame the gay cartoon controversy around the issue of appropriate parenting of children. In response to the idea that children should view a family headed by gay parents, such as that featured on the episode of *Postcards from Buster*, as representative of American multiculturalism, the CWFA stated, “By that logic, children should be exposed to every form of deviance imaginable. Why not show polygamous parents, or alcoholic parents, or promiscuous parents for example? Surely some kids are raised in such households” (Knight, 2005). The organization expanded the domain of its movement against gay and lesbian equal rights by comparing homosexuality to maladaptive relationship patterns and addictions.

Another right-wing group, the AFA, also fought against the notion that homosexual relationships could be considered as legitimately multicultural and suitable for discussion with children. On behalf of the AFA, Ed Vitagliano responded to the distribution of the SpongeBob videos to elementary schools, arguing that the videos are inclusive of homosexuality as a multicultural experience. Vitagliano expressed happiness at the removal of what he termed a “pro-gay agenda” from the teachers’ guide that accompanies the film (Shepard,

2005). He said, "This is a victory. This video is part of an ongoing ideological attempt to expand the definition [of multiculturalism] so that it will include homosexual couples" (Shepard, 2005).

The gay and lesbian social movement framed the cartoon wars from a different perspective. After the *Postcards from Buster* situation, HRC, a liberal organization supporting the campaign for gay and lesbian rights, issued a statement in defense of gay parenting rights:

The nation's leading child welfare, psychological, and children's health organizations have issued policy or position statements declaring that a parent's sexual orientation is irrelevant to his or her ability to raise a child. These organizations include the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, Child Welfare League of America, and North American Council on Adoptable Children (HRC, 2005).

In aligning itself with these institutions, HRC attempted to build a professionalized coalition of support for its position.

In response to the conservative idea that these cartoons were pushing a pro-gay agenda, GLAAD asserts that another agenda may be at play. In its own press release reacting to Spellings's action, GLAAD states, "Secretary Spellings attempt to create and enforce a policy of invisibility for gay and lesbian families is a profoundly offensive display of intolerance, one that imposes on our children an agenda of ignorance under the guise of 'education'" (Lund, 2005). Such words as "family" and "agenda" are prevalent in the rhetoric of those who oppose gay and lesbian rights; by using those words, GLAAD leverages a shared vocabulary with multiple interpretations and morphing definitions in an effort to shape the way people choose to view this social problem (Fraser and Gordon, 1994).

"THE STINK BENEATH THE INK"

In early March of 2005, at the seventy-seventh Academy Awards, comedian Robin Williams appeared with his mouth taped shut in an act of defiance towards the producers who did not allow him to sing a song entitled "The Stink beneath the Ink." The song was written by the gay songwriting couple Mark Shaiman and Scott Whitman. The problem was not that the songwriters were gay; the problem was that the content of the song alluded to possible other so-called deviances portrayed by cartoon characters throughout the ages.

The song highlights Cinderella's role as an identity thief, notes that Charlie Brown sees a shrink, depicts the Road Runner as hooked on speed, lampoons Superman as a user of steroids, and presents Pocahontas as a problem gambler (Shaiman, 2005). The song goes on to describe Betty Boop working as a prostitute in Beverly Hills and Tom and Jerry dating the guys from the pop group 'N Sync (Shaiman, 2005). The ABC network, which aired the program, censored Williams, prohibiting him from singing the song because the producers were afraid that the song might run afoul of new Federal Communications Commission guidelines and the network could possibly be slapped with a huge punitive fine. The producers argued that the song did not necessarily represent the traditional American values promoted by the show (Shaiman, 2005).

So what place do the cartoon wars have on the national political stage? Many theorists believe that culture wars can effectively move toward the amelioration of a contentious social problem only if the problem finds a place on the national public policy agenda, legislation is formulated, and a policy is implemented (Blumer, 1971; Irvine, 2002; Peters, 2004). Haider-Markel asserts that there is a "continuing struggle between pro-gay and antigay forces in national politics—each side has influence, but its influence is weakened by the strength of the opposition" (1999, p. 262).

While incrementalism may not always be the optimal way to move policies onto the national agenda, it has proven an effective way to create big changes through little steps (Lindblom, 1979; Peters, 2004). Both sides of the campaign recognized a window of opportunity in the debate over the cartoons and attempted to take advantage of the situation by pushing the respective agendas onto the national stage.

Although these wars are still being fought, neither side has found the cartoons debate to be an ideal vehicle to the national agenda. However, both sides do share an opportunity to organize around perceptions of American life. The sides also have the chance to expand their respective domains to include more people and resources for the battle. Both social movements have made progress in placing gay and lesbian rights on the national political and social agendas. Organizations on both sides are using the tools of mass media to appeal to the general public, thereby increasing public understanding of the respective positions on issues of identity. Both sides continue to work towards definitions of such complex and loaded American political terms as equal rights and family values. While both sides are "still muddling" in the daily campaigns of the culture wars, it is also true that both sides are still "not yet through" (Lindblom, 1979). The final frame of these culture wars has not yet been drawn.

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