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# TARGET: PRIME TIME

*Advocacy Groups and the Struggle over Entertainment Television*

**Kathryn C. Montgomery**

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the bill from passing. The following year, broadcast lobbyists persuaded the FCC to institute rules at the Commission that did basically the same thing the bill had been designed to do. Again media reform groups fought back, and the courts struck down the rules.[37]

But the struggle was not over. Broadcasters continued to press for legislative or regulatory relief from the threat of citizen groups, waging a public campaign against the media reform movement. NAB chief Vincent Wasilewski warned a group of broadcasters in 1974 that "pressure groups using the government process to manipulate programming to meet their own selfish needs pose as big a threat as government dictated programming." Added another broadcaster: "Peace in our time may have come for most Americans; it has not come for broadcasters. . . . We must fortify ourselves with sufficient ammunition and extensive legal armament for full-scale warfare."[38]

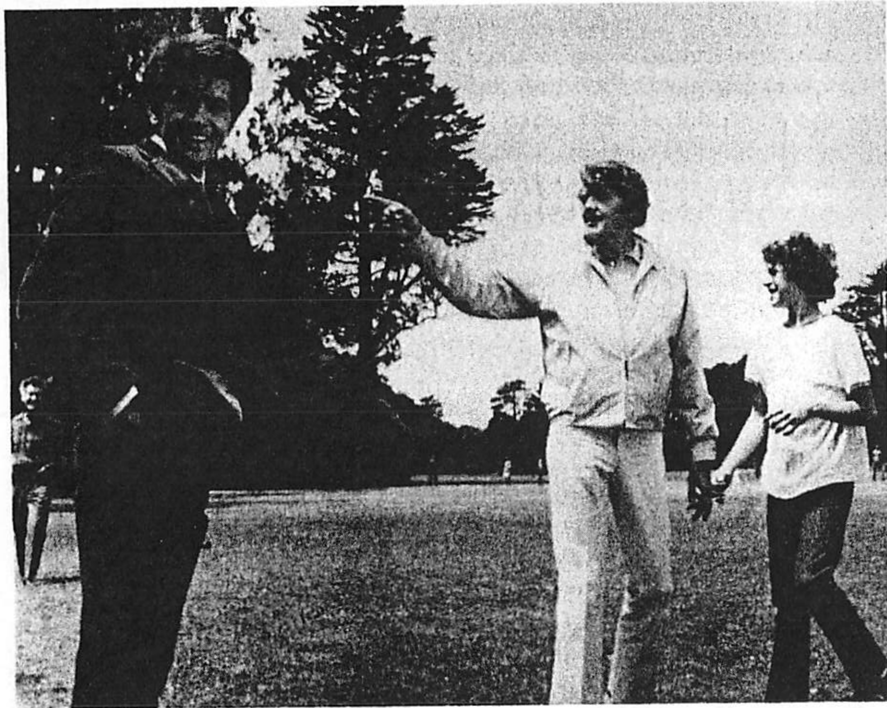
CHAPTER FIVE

# Invisibility and Influence

*That Certain Summer* was a breakthrough for prime-time television. Written and produced by the team of Richard Levinson and William Link, the ABC TV movie featured Hal Holbrook as Doug Salter, a divorced father whose son comes to stay with him for the summer. The boy is shocked to learn that his father is homosexual and lives with a lover (played by Martin Sheen). For two hours, the characters in this penetrating drama struggle with the issues of honesty, personal choice, and acceptance. Though the child is ultimately unable to accept his father's lifestyle, the movie is a sympathetic portrayal of what it means to be gay. Never before had this touchy subject received such serious and sensitive treatment on television. In fact, prior to the airing of this film on November 1, 1972, the topic of homosexuality had hardly been dealt with at all in prime time.[1]

Like the *Maude* series (which debuted that same autumn), *That Certain Summer* reflected network television's growing interest in controversial issues. But while *Maude* was criticized for presenting abortion in a comedic context, *That Certain Summer* was critically acclaimed for its serious and compassionate treatment of a delicate subject. It also did very well in the ratings. Its success suggested that provocative social and political issues might be the ideal ingredient for network television's newest genre—the made-for-TV movie. As one-shot broadcasts, television movies needed story lines that could draw audiences. *That Certain Summer* fit the bill very well, generating considerable press coverage in the weeks prior to its airing.[2]

But the film was important for another reason as well. By



ABC's 1972 television movie *That Certain Summer* was the first full-scale treatment of homosexuality in prime time. *(Courtesy of William Link and Universal Studios)*



bringing homosexuality out of its television closet, *That Certain Summer* helped make prime-time TV a target for influence by gay activists. For it wasn't until after this first serious treatment of homosexuality that gays began approaching the networks about their portrayal.

The gestation period for *That Certain Summer* coincided with a crucial time of renewed gay activism in America. The Stonewall Riots—which erupted in 1969 when police raided a gay bar in Greenwich Village—had launched the gay liberation movement. Shortly afterwards, gay activist groups began forming all over the country. By the time the film aired three years later, political activism among gays and lesbians had risen dramatically. The movie got mixed reviews from the gay community. Some praised it; others complained that it didn't go far enough. As one viewer wrote in a letter to the *New York Times:* "Why did the two male lovers never touch or kiss? Why did Doug Salter cry at the end of the film—his tears were a repudiation of the life he had chosen for himself. Why did his son reject rather than accept him?" Levinson and Link attribute this negative criticism to the rapid rise in militant activism among gays:

> The gay sensibility had altered during the time span between the conception of our film and its airing. When *That Certain Summer* was shown on television the militants had arrived at a point where they did not wish to be reminded that there were still many among their number who were troubled, unsure, and not quite ready to face society with a strong sense of self identity. The character of Doug Salter was a homosexual in transit, and therefore not as liberated as the militants may have wished. They wanted propaganda, not drama.[3]

It should not be surprising that the airing of a film like *That Certain Summer* would generate considerable expectations in the gay community. Like other advocacy groups, gay activists were beginning to see prime-time television as critical symbolic territory in their struggle to gain acceptance in the wider society. The film's success demonstrated television's power to bring an issue to national attention. It also showed that prime time was ready to deal with the difficult subject of homosexuality. Enter-

tainment TV could become an essential political tool for advancing the cause of gay civil rights, just as it was for black, Hispanics, Asians, and women.

Gay activists shared many of the same goals and objectives of other media advocacy groups. They wanted wider representation in entertainment programs, as well as influence over the way they were portrayed. Like other groups, they sought: a way to get their views across to the right people in prime-time television, a knowledge of effective pressure points, and some form of leverage. But gays faced unique problems that set them apart from other advocacy groups. They were not afforded the kind of legal assistance that minorities and women got from the FCC. Nor did their cause have widespread support among the general population. Many people still viewed homosexuality as sinful, deviant behavior rather than a legitimate life-style. Thus, pushing for positive portrayals was much more difficult for gays than for women or minorities. Like abortion, homosexuality was the kind of explosive issue that could require television to walk a tightrope between opposing groups. Despite these obstacles, gays had one important advantage over other groups. They referred to it as their "agents in place."

According to gay activists, there were a substantial number of gay people working in the television industry who were not open about their life-style. Some held high-level positions. While unable to promote the gay cause on the inside, they could be very helpful to advocates on the outside, especially by leaking information. These "agents in place" became one of the linchpins of gay media strategy.[4]

Like the network system for managing advocacy groups, the strategy used by gay activists to influence prime-time programming evolved over time. Through trial and error, gay activists learned which tactics were most effective in dealing with the networks. They learned how to adapt their tactics to fit network strategies. Sometimes gay activists worked within this system, sometimes around it. While some of their efforts were modeled after what other groups were doing, gays ultimately worked out a method of influence that reflected their own needs, strengths, and goals. In time, the gay activsts gained a reputation within the industry as the most sophisticated and successful advocacy group operating in network television.[5]



Shortly after the groundbreaking broadcast of *That Certain Summer*, several gay activist groups began to approach the networks to discuss the portrayal of homosexuality. One was the New York-based Gay Activist Alliance (GAA). GAA's media director, Ron Gold, had been a reporter for *Variety*, so he had some familiarity with the decision-making structure at the networks. In January 1973, he wrote to all three network standards and practices departments, requesting meetings. Before a meeting had been scheduled with ABC, GAA members were smuggled a script by one of their agents in place. It was for an upcoming episode of *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, entitled "The Other Martin Loring," and it concerned a married man who asked Dr. Welby to help him with his homosexual tendencies. Welby assured the man that as long as he suppressed his homosexual desires, he would not fail as a husband and father.[6]

As Gold remembers, GAA leaders "blew a cork" when they read the script. They were particularly offended that the show was coming from the same network that had played an important role in promoting positive, sympathetic portrayals of gays. Instead of waiting for an appointment with ABC executives, the activists—with the help of another network insider—"took over" the network executive offices. Recalls Gold: "We knew somebody who worked there who gave us a kind of plan of the place and we did a little scouting in advance and we managed to sneak into the offices. The confrontation at ABC headquarters was hostile and explosive. This unexpected visit from twenty-five angry activists was hardly the manageable kind of meeting network executives preferred to have with advocacy groups. Executives offered to talk with two group members if the others would leave. But, as Gold recalls, "we said we would talk to them but we wanted everybody to stay there. . . . They wouldn't agree to that so everybody went out and people got arrested."[7]

This first angry encounter didn't keep the objectionable episode from airing a few days later, but it did have an impact on

later decisions. As they were beginning to do with Justicia and other groups, ABC executives decided to invite gay activist comments on any new scripts dealing with homosexuality. Since gays had their own ways of getting scripts anyway, this approach was even more essential than with other groups. The following year, the producers of *Marcus Welby* submitted another script dealing with homosexuality. Entitled "The Outrage," it revolved around a male teacher who molested a teenage boy. This time, the network standards and practices department gave a copy of the script to the gay activists.[8]

Since the first meeting with ABC, Gay Activist Alliance had experienced an internal rift. Some of its members, including Ron Gold, separated from the group and formed their own organization. Called the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), it was set up as an umbrella organization for grassroots gay rights groups around the country. Both NGTF and the GAA then began to compete to become the "one voice" to represent gays to network television. ABC chose to submit the *Welby* script to the newer group.

By allowing the activists to see the script, network executives no doubt hoped for approval or suggestions for minor changes in the story that would make it less offensive to the gay community. But a story line that appeared negotiable to the executives proved to be unacceptable to the activists. The very premise of the episode—tying homosexuality to child molestation—was a prime example of what gay activists wanted to eliminate from the mass media. To them, the broadcast threatened not only to reinforce anti-gay sentiment but to create it as well. The situation was exacerbated by Ron Gold's explosive reaction. When he lost his temper with standards and practices executives, communications broke down between the network and the activists.[9]

The National Gay Task Force then turned the matter over to another activist, Loretta Lotman, one of the pioneer gay media activists in Boston. Since meetings with network executives had not been successful, Lotman and her colleagues decided to launch a nationwide grassroots campaign against the *Welby* show.



This first national campaign by the gay and lesbian community became a turning point in the evolving relationship between gay activists and the networks. It galvanized the national gay constituency, focusing their attention on a single issue. It publicized the gay rights cause, garnering support from sympathizers outside the gay community. It served as basic training, during which national and local gay activist leaders learned how to pressure the television industry. And, most important, like the *Maude* protest, it was a dramatic show of power. Though ultimately unsuccessful at keeping the program off the air, the campaign against *Marcus Welby* demonstrated that gay activists had the constituency and the know-how to apply considerable pressure on network television. Unlike those who protested over *Maude*, however, gay activists used this first incident to begin the development of a sophisticated system for influencing network television.

In their campaign against *Marcus Welby*, the gay activists planned to strike at the most vulnerable pressure points in the network industry. As the Catholic organizations had done the year before, the gay activists used their grassroots groups to apply pressure on local ABC affiliates. But gay groups had a decided advantage. They had advance knowledge of the upcoming episode, and therefore more time to organize their pressure efforts. In some cities, the gay activists knew more about the controversial network program than the station executives did.

Like other media activists, Loretta Lotman already had established ties with the management of her local Boston ABC affiliate, WCVB. She telephoned the station a few weeks before the scheduled broadcast of the *Welby* episode. When asked if he knew what the network planned to "foist" on him, WCVB's program director was caught by surprise. Lotman urged him to find out about it right away, warning that, if something were not done about the program, the station would be "hit with a protest the likes of which you've never seen before." Lotman then contacted gay and lesbian groups throughout the country, sending them copies of the script, along with detailed instructions on how to pressure affiliates. Knowing that local activist

leaders would encounter skilled community liaison people at the stations, Lotman shared some of the lessons she had learned in dealing with station personnel. "Keep your temper," she advised. "We can yell at each other. You have got to get a meeting there. They're going to try and give you a tour of the station so you'll be so in awe of the 'Great God Media' that you'll be incapacitated in the meeting. Don't buy it. Go get a tour beforehand if you have to get yourself immuned, but go in there and tell them they're in a very bad position."[10]

Pressure was also directed at advertisers. Through their agents in place, gay activists were able to find out which companies had bought advertising spots in the upcoming episode. As Lotman remembers, "Certain compacts were made with people who were broadcast professionals at the ABC network, including some people in some very well placed positions. I can go no further than that." The National Gay Task Force then instructed its members to write protest letters to these advertisers. NGTF also used the gay press, which was already regularly carrying stories about the Welby campaign, to publish the names of the sponsors.[11]

Activist leaders used the mainstream press to publicize their campaign and to generate support from people outside the gay community. They also made specific appeals to professional organizations. Only a year earlier, gay activists had participated in a protracted struggle within the prestigious American Psychiatric Association to get homosexuality removed from the organization's list of mental illnesses. Having succeeded in that effort, NGTF now convinced the APA to issue a public statement condemning the *Marcus Welby* episode. Gay leaders also persuaded the National Education Association to put out a press release objecting to the show's negative portrayal of the teaching profession, as well as its "misconceived, stereotypical portrayal of a homosexual [which] may deepen public misunderstanding rather than enlighten or educate in any way."[12]

As a counter-strategy to this well-publicized campaign against the *Welby* show, ABC issued its own statements defending the episode, asserting that a psychiatrist had been consulted on the preparation of the script. At the same time, the network and the producers made changes in the program in an attempt to



minimize its offensive elements. During this last-minute, patch-up effort, several scenes were removed from the controversial episode and some material was reshot; overt references to homosexuality were deleted; and the term "pedophile" was introduced as the new label for the sex offender. Although the network had identified the episode with homosexuality a few months earlier—and hence had initiated contact with the gay activists—officials later explained to the press that the program was not about homosexuality, but about child molestation and the "extreme emotional problems physical assault can cause its victims."[13]

These stopgap measures proved to be too little and too late to reverse the effects of the protest on advertisers and affiliates. Seven of the companies that had bought time in the one-hour drama withdrew their ads, leaving only one minute of air time sold before the broadcast. And at least five affiliates refused to air the program. The pressure campaign had drawn attention to the controversial nature of the episode, which many advertisers preferred to avoid. It was one thing to buy into shows with provocative content, quite another to subject one's company to the damaging association with such a contentious and unsavory plot line. The ABC stations in Lafayette, Louisiana, and Springfield, Massachusetts, both announced their refusal to air the *Welby* episode because the subject matter was "unfit for prime-time viewing."[14]

But in the larger cities, especially those with sizable gay communities, local station executives were more directly influenced by the gay rights activists. WCVB's general manager in Boston told the press that he had been impressed by the "quality of letters" protesting the show. The episode was being rejected because of fear that it would reinforce the notion that homosexuals are commonly child molesters. "That isn't true," he carefully explained to reporters, "but that's what would come through to an audience." In Philadelphia, the management at WPVI-TV issued the following statement, explaining their reasons for refusing to air the episode:

> It appears to us from the outset of this program that integral to the author's original premise is a false stereotype of homosexuals as persons who pursue and sexually assault young boys.

> While it is also clear that the producers have earnestly attempted to alter the effects of this unfortunate premise, it is equally clear that they have not succeeded. We think, also, that the presentation contains substantial improbabilities and contradictions that impinge upon the credibility of the situation portrayed while actively reinforcing the negative stereotype.[15]

Since the New York station was owned by the ABC network, its management could not as easily reject the program. However, to cover itself under the Fairness Doctrine, WABC agreed to broadcast a pro-gay documentary, entitled *Homosexuality: The Open Secret*, in which gays were given the opportunity to "speak for themselves with a minimum of interference from the narrator." The documentary's strong conclusion declared that "all of our institutions must sooner or later adjust to the idea that homosexuality may be nothing more than a normal variant in the total spectrum of sexual behavior."[16]

ABC's decision to air the *Welby* episode came as a surprise to the leaders of the protest campaign. Such vociferous opposition from the national gay community seemed to them enough to persuade the network against the broadcast. National Gay Task Force leaders charged that their efforts had been sabotaged by several members of the Gay Activist Alliance, who secretly and unilaterally offered ABC their approval of the show on behalf of the gay community. But ABC executives obviously had other factors to consider as well. Even with the pullout of sponsors and the loss of some affiliates, not to air a program that had generated so much press attention would appear to be capitulation. This could set a precedent that would alarm advertisers and affiliates alike. Weathering the strong reaction of gays after the broadcast might have seemed an easier course for the network in the long run.

Gay activist reaction to the October 8 airing of "The Outrage" was predictably vehement. A coalition of groups picketed the ABC station in Washington, D.C., some of them dressed up as "Dr. Marcus Quackby." The National Organization for Women participated in the protest, complaining that several "male chauvinist stereotypes" appeared in the program along with the homosexual stereotypes. National Gay Task Force representatives wrote angry letters to ABC-TV president Elton Rule,



chastising the network and demanding that the offensive program not be aired again. This time ABC agreed, and the episode was quietly withdrawn from the reruns.[17]

Though this campaign was not entirely successful, it did have an impact. Because of advertiser drop-out, the episode lost money for the network. But, more important, the protest campaign had shown the TV industry that the gay activists were capable of causing major disruptions when they objected to programming. This could have worked to the disadvantage of gays. ABC might have concluded that it would be easier to leave the subject of homosexuality out of prime time altogether than to face the wrath of unhappy activists. Leaders of the gay community knew this. So, to ensure continued incorporation of gay issues into entertainment programming, they began developing a coordinated strategy.

Influencing a large, complex institution like network television required not only sophisticated political skills but an understanding of the structure and operation of the industry. As other successful advocacy groups would do, gay activists had to educate themselves in the workings of network television.

One of the most important lessons from the *Welby* confrontation was that divisions among groups could too easily weaken their position. In the years following this first protest, the National Gay Task Force became the official group to deal with the networks on behalf of the gay community. Though the movement itself was not monolithic, and from time to time there were serious disagreements among the various divisions within it, gays and lesbians, in their media strategy, consciously sought to behave as a single political entity. An NGTF pamphlet for local groups explained the rationale for this unified image:

> Before meeting with you, the media will want to be sure that they aren't going to be bombarded with similar requests from competing gay organizations. They want to feel that they will meet with representatives of the gay community, not just with a few individuals who only represent themselves. So it's a good idea to establish your credentials in a letter. If you're the only group in the area, or the only one that's active politically, that's good enough. But, if you're not—and particularly if there are

> not women or men in your group—it would be advisable to approach other gay groups in your community and send a letter signed by leaders of two or more of these organizations.[18]

As important as a unified image was the need for the activist group to be located near the centers of decision making. Shortly after the Welby protest, Loretta Lotman moved to New York and became the full-time media director of NGTF, establishing regular ties with the executives in the standards and practices departments at all three networks.

But the gay activists soon learned that being in New York still left them at a disadvantage. Not only was most TV production done in Los Angeles—as East Coast standards and practices executives routinely explained to complaining advocacy groups—but the networks themselves divided their decision making between the two cities. While overall policy decisions were made in New York, the day-to-day programming decisions took place on the West Coast, where both standards and practices and programming departments had large staffs. When network executives invoked this 3000-mile separation as a way to shift responsibility to more distant areas of the industry, the gay activists quickly came up with their own counter-strategy.

In order to make the networks accountable on both ends of the continent, the National Gay Task Force encouraged its California allies to open up a "West Coast branch" in Los Angeles, which they called the Gay Media Task Force. Though the two organizations were not officially tied together, they operated as a team when dealing with the networks. The Gay Media Task Force was really a one-man operation, run by psychologist Dr. Newton Deiter. Working out of an office in his home, Deiter spent some of his time counseling patients and some of it consulting with the networks on gay issues.

The bi-coastal set-up gave the gay activists an edge over other groups who were based in only one city. It became virtually impossible for the networks to escape the scrutiny of gay activists. In addition, grassroots activist groups functioned as "affiliates" in the gay lobby. These local groups could be called upon to pressure local stations if necessary, as they had done in the



*Welby* protest. This overall structure paralleled the geographic and decision-making structure of the network television.

Rather than appearing to be a demanding pressure group, the advocacy group leaders presented themselves to the networks as a "resource" for information about homosexuality. Referring to itself as an "educational lobby," the National Gay Task Force regularly provided media decision makers with statistics and research to dispel commonly held myths about homosexuality. NGTF representatives repeatedly asserted to the networks and to the public that the group had no intention of censoring program content. What they were doing, they insisted, was simply helping the networks in their own self-censorship process.

But the advocacy group did not restrict itself to occasional network-initiated technical consultation. NGTF had an agenda for specific changes in network programming. This was made very clear to the network standards and practices departments on a regular basis. Arguing for "minority group status," gay activists demanded: increased visibility, elimination of stereotypes, continuing gay and lesbian characters, and gay couples. Gays also insisted on a "moratorium on negative portrayals."[19]

In contrast to some of the advocacy groups that had approached the networks with a strong stance and then vanished when funds or organizational momentum ran out, NGTF set itself up as the most prominent national gay organization in the country. With funding from foundations and individuals, NGTF employed a full-time media director whose job it was to initiate and maintain regular contact with media organizations. Gays thus became an ongoing political presence in network television.

This presence was enhanced and supported by the infrastructure of gays working in the industry. Insiders continued their surveillance of the television industry, assuring that the networks carried out the agreements made with the activists, and keeping a watchful eye for any offensive content that might have slipped by the scrutiny of the standards and practices departments. Sometimes the gay activists knew about problems before the network censors had even seen them. In one case,

an agent in place, working on the set of an NBC situation comedy, telephoned Newton Deiter about a problem he'd spotted during rehearsals. One of the actors was behaving in a noticeably "limpwristed" fashion, he reported. Within minutes, Deiter was on the phone to the manager of the Los Angeles standards and practice office, who was surprised to learn of the incident. Such instances of surveillance encouraged the networks to consult more consistently with the gay lobbyists at the script stage. If such consultation did not occur, gays were often able to find out about the scripts anyway. As Deiter noted, "They finally learned over there that we find out."[20]

The monitoring of industry operations was paralleled by a continual monitoring of programming content. Other advocacy groups used different kinds of analyses of program content. The National Organization for Women commissioned various studies that identified the number of women and the kinds of portrayals in prime-time television. These quantitative studies were often used to educate decision makers at the network on the overall representation of a group or issue. Gays engaged in a more grassroots form of monitoring. Since gay activists had an inside track on most gay portrayals before they were broadcast, gays around the country could be alerted by newsletter of upcoming programs to watch. They were encouraged to send their reactions back to NGTF. They were also advised to report any other gay portrayals they came across on television. These grassroots reports in turn would be presented as "feedback" to the network by NGTF's media director. Sometimes the feedback would be part of a periodic meeting which NGTF would call with network executives; at other times, the comments would be part of a letter from NGTF's media director. These reports were always concrete, carefully presented, and balanced. Portrayals which gay activists approved were lauded, and specific reasons were given for what was good about them. Objections to negative presentations were also explained in detail. In this way, the gay activists were sensitizing network decision makers to the nuances of behavior of which gays approved or disapproved.[21]

In a 1978 meeting with CBS, NGTF leaders summarized the accomplishments of the network in portraying homosexuality



in its programming by presenting to executives a list of portrayals, stereotypes, and images that the group considered "Good News" and "Bad News." "Stereotypes" to which gays objected included:

> murderers, child molesters (male prostitution); mental disturbance (pathology); weak or absent father, domineering mother, unhappy childhood; bad experience with opposite sex—promiscuity—no lasting relationships, unfulfilled, miserable empty lives. Gay men = swishy, limp-wristed, female role, want to be women, transvestites, transexuals, Instant hilarity. Lesbians = masculine, want to be men. No comic value.

"Good images" included:

> person doing a good job—gay cop, business executive, sportsperson, secretary, psychiatrist—*mainstream*. Person who stands up for himself/herself, people of courage; heroes sensitive, compassionate, ethical, personable. Loving and affectionate gay couples. Gayness just *incidental*. More *lesbian* portrayals.[22]

While presenting themselves as cooperative lobbyists, the gay activists also made it clear that the possibility of a protest was never out of the question. The Welby protest was periodically invoked—especially to ABC—as a threat if the network would not cooperate with the activists. When ABC failed to consult with the advocacy group on an upcoming TV movie, NGTF wrote a letter to executives suggesting that grassroots groups were poised for another battle with the network:

> The way your network representatives are handling the "Jenny Storm Homicide" is leading directly to another Welby-ish confrontation. Such a situation is not to be desired. We don't even know if the material is offensive or not. However, you are giving us the impression that ABC has something to hide from us. Going from past experiences, we're not going to wait for it to air to find out whether you've struck another blow against gay civil rights. . . . [W]e are prepared to move on 72 hours' notice. We will *only* if there is no other way.[23]

In this case, the "zap"—as the gay activists called their protests—was avoided. But there were occasions when gay activists did battle with the networks. These confrontations oc-

curred infrequently—there were seven of them between 1974 and 1977—and were gradually reduced in intensity over the years. They usually resulted from some breakdown in the smoothly running relationship between the advocates and the networks.

One of the more memorable "zaps" occurred over a 1974 episode of *Police Woman* on NBC. Entitled "Flowers of Evil," the program featured three lesbians who ran a rest home and systematically murdered its occupants. National Gay Task Force leaders met with NBC executives in New York following the broadcast and demanded that it not be rerun. A few weeks later, then Vice President of Broadcast Standards, Herminio Traviesas, was attending a network meeting in Jamaica when he received a frantic phone call from his New York office. As the corporate executive recalled: "I was told that a group of lesbians had invaded my office and would not leave unless we guaranteed them 'Flowers of Evil' would not be rerun." Members of the New York-based Lesbian Feminist Liberation Organization—alerted by members of NGTF—had used an inside contact in order to sneak into the well-guarded NBC headquarters in Manhattan. Some of them had brought their babies with them. Traviesas ordered his staff to feed the women and let them stay for twenty-four hours until he could catch a plane to New York. Although no agreement was reached at the meeting, the National Gay Task Force received a call from NBC a short while later, assuring them that the episode would not be rerun, and it was not.[24]

Disruptive incidents like this one provided additional incentives for networks to consult with gay representatives during the development stage of TV programs. For that process, the Los Angeles-based Gay Media Task Force became the central clearinghouse. Newton Deiter was designated as the primary technical consultant to the networks on any gay-related program material. He also functioned as the hub of a network of more specialized gay consultants, who could be called upon for input. If a script needed the help of a gay or lesbian teacher, lawyer, or psychologist, Deiter would recommend the appropriate consultant. Deiter himself not only consulted regularly on scripts with gay characters or issues in them but also sought



to encourage incorporation of gay characters into programs where there otherwise may not have been any. These consultation services, for which fees were sometimes paid, ranged from a quick telephone call to get a reaction on a line of dialogue to actual participation in the scriptwriting process. The services of the Gay Media Task Force were generally well received by the production community. Producers found the technical assistance of Deiter and his colleagues helpful not only in providing information on homosexual issues, but also in getting otherwise politically volatile material on the air with a minimum of protest from the gay community.[25]

In his dual role as consultant and advocate, Deiter was in a curious position. As a spokesman for the national gay community, he was expected to take a strong position on portrayal of gay characters and gay issues in order to ensure that representation of gays on television was consistent with the objectives and policies of the gay activist leadership. At the same time, Deiter was working within an industry with its own imperatives and constraints, which were sometimes in opposition to the expectations of the activists. To function effectively in Hollywood, Deiter had to learn how to make compromises. He also quickly internalized the rules of the game for the production of prime-time entertainment programming. In many ways, Deiter's dealings with television producers paralleled those of the network standards and practices departments. Just as the editors in standards and practices departments carefully couched their requests for script changes in "helpful" terms, Deiter applied the same principles. Refraining from a heavy-handed, censorial approach, Deiter never told producers they could not do something. Rather, he explained, (using the very same phrase used by standards and practices executives): "We always try to come up with alternative methods to accomplish what they [the producers] want." While he always appeared conciliatory and cooperative with producers and networks, Deiter often used his connections with the National Gay Task Force as leverage to encourage compliance with his recommendations. As the official barometer of gay attitudes and responses, the consultant would periodically suggest that, though he may not personally object to this line or that portrayal, he could not guarantee that

his constituents would be so agreeable, and he was obligated to inform the National Gay Task Force of whatever decision the network made. These warnings, with their veiled threats of possible "zaps" from the gay activist community, provided additional weight to the consultant's recommendations.[26]

Sometimes Deiter's compromises did not meet with the approval of gays at large, or with his colleagues at the National Gay Task Force. While the NGTF insisted on a moratorium on negative portrayals of gays, Deiter's policy was to allow a negative character to appear in a program, if there were a positive one to balance it. In one case, Deiter approved the incorporation of a limpwristed swishy gay purse snatcher and his lover in an episode of *Barney Miller*. The consultant saw the two characters as very funny parodies of familiar stereotypes. But many gays were offended, and they wrote angry letters to the National Gay Task Force complaining about the program. Deiter then went back to the show's producers, and persuaded them to do another episode which challenged prevailing myths about homosexuality.[27]

Deiter's intervention in specific programs was sometimes quite extensive. The consultant worked closely with the producer and writer of two 1979 TV movies about male prostitution: *Dawn: Story of a Teenage Runaway* and its sequel, *Alexander: The Other Side of Dawn*. In fact, according to Deiter, one of the characters in the drama was modeled after the consultant himself. On other programs, Deiter succeeded in reversing the plot line so that it would reflect a pro-gay point of view. In the script for a 1977 episode of *The Streets of San Francisco*, criminals tried to blackmail a closeted gay cop. When the cop went to his superiors with the truth, his partner refused to work with him. The end of the drama showed the gay policeman resigning from the force, while making an impassioned speech about intolerance. Deiter felt the script was sending a negative message. He pointed out to producers that the real police chief in San Francisco had urged cops to come out of the closet. In compliance with Deiter's suggestions, the script was rewritten. In the new version the partner conquered his homophobia, the gay policeman kept his job, and the two of them continued to work happily together.[28]



Gay activists were so successful at establishing themselves as a presence in the television industry that more and more gay characters began to appear on prime-time TV screens throughout the seventies. These portrayals clearly reflected the consistent input of the gay lobbyists. "All but gone are lisping gays and homosexual murderers and child molesters," noted one TV critic in 1982. "Virtually every series has done its gay show." But the pattern of gay representation in entertainment programs also reflected the compromises that had to be made in incorporating the controversial issue of homosexuality into a commercial, mass medium. Though the advocates used every possible means to push their agenda as far as it could go, the boundaries of network television shaped the portrayal of gays and gay issues.[29]

In 1976, which one critic labeled "the year of the gay" in television, these patterns were clearly in evidence. Gay characters appeared in at least seven situation comedies and in several television movies that year. All of these programs involved some consultation with the Gay Media Task Force. Most of the characters appeared one time only in the sitcoms and vanished the following week. Generally the focus of the plot was on the acceptance of gay characters by the regular heterosexual characters. Very few gay couples were shown, and they were not permitted to display physical affection.[30]

In an episode of *Sirota's Court*, the judge agrees to perform a wedding ceremony for two gay men. Though acknowledging that marriages between gays are illegal, he explains to the court that he is "testing the law." At the end of the ceremony, the judge pre-empts a possible kiss of the two newlyweds, and orders them to shake hands.

In the television movie *In the Glitter Palace*, the subject of lesbianism is examined in the context of a conventional crime drama. Because of extensive consultation with the Gay Media Task Force, the producers went to great lengths to make the portrayals of the two women positive. At the beginning of the film, the audience is purposely shown that the lesbian accused of murder is innocent. But the two women lovers are only allowed the very minimum of affection between each other. One of them spends much of her time in jail. The one embrace be-

tween the two women could easily be interpreted as the innocent hugging of two heterosexual girlfriends.[31]

In situation comedies that season, the comedic device of mistaken identity became a convenient way to tie in the subject of homosexuality. On one episode of *Alice*, a husky, athletic fellow is Alice's date for the evening. She can't figure out why he hasn't made a move on her. Finally, he informs her—quite proudly—that he is gay.

Most of the shows that featured gays that season appeared to be conscious efforts at public education. In virtually every one of them, the heterosexual characters learn to accept gay people and their life-styles. The dialogue in many of these shows includes some rather self-conscious sermonizing. Phyllis, of the popular show by the same name, finds herself on a date with a guy who turns out to be gay. Steve confesses to Phyllis that no one else knows he is gay. He wants to tell his parents, but is fearful of their reaction. "These are the 1970s," Phyllis assures him. "Being gay isn't something you have to hide anymore." Phyllis encourages him to tell his parents, but he chickens out and announces to them that he and Phyllis are engaged. It isn't until the "engagement" party that Steve gets up the nerve to tell his family the truth. When he finally does, they immediately accept him and he goes around the party with Phyllis in arm, announcing, "I want everyone to know that I am gay and I have this woman to thank for it."

On *CPO Sharkey*, the audience is introduced to the new terminology. Says one character: "Do you know what it means to be gay?" The second: "Do you mean like on New Year's Eve?" The first: "No, to be gay means that on New Year's Eve you'd rather be with Burt Reynolds than Debbie Reynolds."

Treatment of homosexuality in television shows sometimes reached the point of self-parody. Richard Levine described one show which included:

> a dispute between network censors and a TV producer about whether certain jokes in his show would offend gays. At the height of the argument, the producer brings out the head of the "Gay Task Force" from the next room. Mincing and flouncing in the most stereotypical manner, the gay leader walks in, limpwristedly shakes hands all around, and says, in a lisping, high-pitched voice, "We're not really concerned with occasional derogatory emphasis." Then his voice drops two octaves and his effeminate mannerisms suddenly cease. "I'll tell you what we do find offensive," he continues. "We are deeply offended by the fact that supposedly sophisticated men like you could so readily accept the fact that a gay person would come in here talking like Sylvester the Cat."[32]



By the mid-seventies, gay activists had become so institutionalized in network television that they rarely needed to use protests. Relations were smooth between gays and the networks. More and more the media work of gay activists shifted from the East Coast, where they had first gotten access to network decision makers, to the West Coast, where the Gay Media Task Force had become part of the fabric of the production community. Though representations of gays in prime time would always remain circumscribed by the constraints of commercial television, gays would continue to make progress. But other forces were beginning to mobilize which would weaken the influential position gays had fought so hard to establish. As gays and lesbians became more visible—both in programming and as an activist group—they would draw more attention from political conservatives who would exert counter-pressures on the network television industry. The 1977 controversy over *Soap* signaled some of these new developments. Just as CBS had found itself in the middle of a collision between liberal and conservative forces over *Maude*, so ABC placed itself in a similar crossfire with *Soap*. Though the gay activists were firmly entrenched in the TV industry, they found the task of negotiating their portrayal in this case more difficult than usual.

*Soap* was in hot water before it ever got on the air. One of programming chief Fred Silverman's pet projects, *Soap* was a prime-time spoof of daytime soap operas. Touted as the most important breakthrough since *All in the Family*, the new series vowed to leave virtually no controversial subject untouched. A memo from the standards and practices department described the show as "a further innovation in the comedic/dramatic form presenting a larger-than-life frank treatment of a variety of controversial adult themes such as: premarital sex, adultery, im-

potence, homosexuality, transvestism, transsexualism, religion, politics, ethnic stereotyping (and other aspects of race relations), etc." When it was screened to station executives during the yearly affiliates meeting, many were "appalled" at the new program and one of them referred to it as "one long dirty joke." When *Newsweek* published a story about the affiliates' reaction to the new series, *Soap* became the subject of a public controversy within days.[33]

Most of the protest over *Soap* came from religious organizations. Four powerful church groups—the National Council of Churches, the United States Catholic Conference, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church—representing 138,000 member churches, were particularly active in organizing protests against the show. In a little over four months before the show premiered, ABC received more than 22,000 letters, mostly negative. In the midst of the uproar, a number of advertisers withdrew their ads before the show was aired, and at least twelve affiliates refused to run the first two episodes.[34]

While the churches protested many elements of the new series, gays were concerned about one thing: Jodie, the show's continuing gay character, the first in prime time. Newton Deiter was given a private screening of the first two episodes of *Soap* before they were shown to affiliates. In the episodes—which Deiter was told were an "in-house test"—Jodie was portrayed as a swishy stereotypical homosexual who liked to try on his mother's clothes and who desired a sex-change operation. Though Deiter wasn't particularly happy with the character, he didn't make objections. Since the show presented a unique opportunity to develop a continuing character, the consultant offered suggestions on how that might be done. In a letter to ABC's West Coast broadcast standards chief, Deiter wrote: "I understand what the producers are trying to do in that no one will be sacred in this presentation." He then went on with several pages of detailed recommendations on how the character could be changed so that he would not be "grossly offensive to the gay community." "In the next episode to be filmed," Deiter proposed that Jodie "discard the idea of being a transsexual and, instead, become an upfront and somewhat



militant Gay Liberationist. The advantages are several," Deiter explained to the network executive. "The characterizations and slurs that are so much a part of the show could then remain, except 'Jodie' would be answering back in kind. That could possibly result in his emerging as an even stronger character." The consultant ended his letter with a mildly stated—but nonetheless clear—threat: "We stand ready to be fully cooperative in keeping this character funny, outrageous and real," he wrote. "[However,] should the character remain as shown in episodes 1 and 2, there will undoubtedly be substantial backlash and reaction from the gay community nationally. At this point, the matter need not go in that direction, since letting our constituency know of the character's future development, we should be able to assist aborting any protest."[35]

If the show had not already gained so much notoriety, the network might have willingly complied with Deiter's requests. But a great deal of attention was already focused on the new series, not just from the gays but from religious organizations that were outraged at what they had heard about the *Soap*'s immoral content. To assuage the nervousness of affiliates and advertisers, Fred Silverman told the press that developing plot and character lines would not be "immoral" and that Jodie was going to "meet a girl and will find there are other values worth considering."[36]

Gays around the country were enraged at this statement, which seemed to indicate a complete reversal of progress for them in prime time. Deiter continued to negotiate with standards and practices executives over the development of the gay character, urging the National Gay Task Force to "hold off on a protest" until after the series had begun. Deiter assured his colleagues that, despite what Silverman was saying publicly, network executives were encouraging the producers to modify the character in a way that would meet with the gays' approval.[37]

But, when leaders of the NGTF held their own private screening of the yet-to-be broadcast first two episodes (which they obtained through a gay sympathizer in a New York ad agency), the activists were not as understanding as their Los Angeles counterpart had been. NGTF's media director, Ginny Vida—who had taken over the position from Loretta Lotman—

telephoned the network's New York offices, and "threatened another *Marcus Welby*" unless substantial portions of the show were deleted. Unsatisfied by the response from the network, NGTF took out an ad in *Variety* to publicly protest the series. The one-page advertisement was headlined: "Why One of the Largest Ad Agencies in the World Will Not Let Its Clients Sponsor *Soap*." The ad agency was never identified but was said to have refused to let its clients sponsor the show because of the program's stereotypical and negative treatment of gays. The copy read in part:

> We of the National Gay Task Force are particularly angered by a gay character on "Soap" who is portrayed as a limp-wristed, simpering boy who wears his mother's clothes, wants a sex-change operation and allows everyone to insult him without a word of response. You know, a "faggot." We are angry that a national network could be so insensitive to 20 million people in their struggle for their rights. We are angry that a gay "Stepin Fetchit" is being trotted out for a cheap shot at easy humor. And, we are sickened that ABC finds the notion "hilarious." What we want is for the scenes involving the gay character to be reshot, as several scenes already were to appease others and their morality. We want reassurance that Jodie, the gay character, isn't going to go "straight"—as Fred Silverman implied when he told ABC affiliates that Jodie was going to "meet a girl and find there are other values worth considering."[38]

The ad appealed to members of the television and advertising industry to encourage their ad agencies to boycott the program. It also suggested that individuals write to Silverman and do what they could to get local affiliates to drop the program. NGTF also issued a "Gay Media Alert" to member gay groups around the country, urging them to put pressure on affiliates, go to the press, and write to advertisers and the network. Vida wrote a very strongly worded letter to Fred Silverman, in which the media director outlined NGTF's objections to the program. In reference to the possibility that Jodie was going to fall for a woman, Vida concluded the letter with this threat: "If this means that, in an effort to pacify the homophobes, *Soap* is going to engage in the fiction that all gay people need to change their ways is to meet 'the right woman' or 'the right man,' you are



going to have the gay community down on your corporate necks in a way you've never experienced. (This is not a threat; it's a fact.)"[39]

Despite the intensity of these pre-broadcast protests from the gay community, the first episode of *Soap* aired without changes on September 13, 1977. Ad cancellations and affiliate drop-out did occur, but the protests from gays may have had little to do with it, since the program was under fire from so many other quarters.

In an exchange of letters with the network following the broadcast, NGTF continued to make threats. East Coast vice president for broadcast standards Richard Gitter responded to NGTF's letter to Silverman with one of his own, in which he defended the portrayal of Jodie, characterizing him as "neither a transvestite nor a transsexual" but "a strong, positive character, comfortable in his sexual preference . . . [whose] mannerisms are neither stereotyped nor offensive. He invoked the serial nature of the program as providing opportunity for growth and change, and suggested that after NGTF had "viewed several episodes of our series, we will be happy to entertain your reactions and suggestions."

Gitter also made a statement that indicated some new directions for network policy. "ABC is receiving conflicting messages regarding homosexuality," the executive explained. "On the one hand, certain church groups criticize us for too positive a portrayal of homosexuality in 'Soap,' while you argue that our portrayal is negative and stereotypical, and likely to constitute a set back in the Gay Rights movement. The weighing of widely divergent points of view is illustrative of the problem we face in dealing with special interest groups. We take pains to ensure that our programming does not espouse a point of view, particularly as regards infidelity, promiscuity and homosexuality, which we recognize are extremely sensitive issues."

Though it had threatened to do so, NGTF did not launch a major campaign after *Soap*'s debut. The group may have succeeded with its earlier threats in letting the network know that gays would be closely watching future developments in the series. And the activists later claimed victory for their efforts, attributing positive changes in Jodie's character to their pressure.

Ginny Vida later recalled, "The character actually improved enormously. It turned out to be one of the more sympathetic and really sort of sane voices in the series."[40]

But the experience over *Soap* had troubled the activists. They were particularly alarmed at the network's response to pressure from conservative groups. If this kind of pressure intensified, gays might face new challenges in their efforts to maintain control over their prime-time image.

CHAPTER SIX

# He Who Pays the Piper

Ira Davidson was shocked to hear the news. A veteran TV writer with a long, successful career in the business, he had never experienced anything like this before. A TV movie he had written was under attack for causing the death of a twelve-year-old boy. *Web of Fire* was about a deranged architect who set fire to his own building. It seems a young boy in Seattle had watched the movie and, in "copycat" fashion, had gone to his school, set it on fire, and died of smoke inhalation. Davidson, a responsible writer with a family of his own, was so disturbed to hear of the boy's death that he decided to fly to Seattle and find out for himself what really happened.

So goes the plot of *The Storyteller,* an NBC TV movie. Written and produced by Richard Levinson and William Link—the team responsible for *That Certain Summer—The Storyteller* was part docudrama, part mystery. For two hours, as the protagonist investigates the boy's death, the issue of TV violence is debated. Fictional social scientists cite research findings about the harmful effects of televised violence. Fictional TV executives defend the medium. And fictional "man-in-the-street" characters spout off their assorted opinions to the camera. The debate is purposely never resolved. In the final shot, a myriad of voices is heard on the sound track in a virtual cacophony, symbolizing the confusion and lack of resolution surrounding the violence issue. But in counterpoint to this ambiguity, the story itself absolves TV of responsibility. After his long search, Davidson finds out—much to his relief—that the boy was a troubled child. The parents had failed to seek psychiatric help for

## CHAPTER NINE

# The Hollywood Lobbyists

The guests had finished their catered buffet dinner of "nouvelle Chinese" cuisine, and had found their seats in the large, comfortable living room of this Spanish-style home in the exclusive Hancock Park district of Los Angeles. The atmosphere was friendly and informal, and most of the guests already knew each other. This "gathering" of about forty prominent Hollywood producers, writers, and directors was sponsored by a nonprofit organization called Microsecond. Microsecond's director, Norman Fleishman, a soft-spoken man in his late forties, introduced the evening's guest speaker, Michael Pertschuk, public interest advocate and former chairman of the Federal Trade Commission. Pertschuk spoke for about twenty minutes, telling stories of successful public interest lobbying campaigns. Like the standard "pitch" that producers make to programming executives, Pertschuk's talk was spirited and entertaining, packed with drama, humor, and colorful characters.

The audience included some of the top people in television's creative community. Interested in political and social issues, they wanted a chance to meet and talk with someone who had been on the front lines of political action. Always looking for new material, they listened carefully, quickly processing what they heard. Was there something here that could be worked into one of their current TV series? An idea for a Movie of the Week?

This 1985 meeting was not the first of these events. Norman Fleishman had been holding these soirées in Hollywood since 1973, when, as the director of the Los Angeles chapter of Planned Parenthood, he had given his first party in support of producer



Norman Lear during the *Maude* controversy. During the pivotal 1972–73 television season, when entertainment television's new trend toward more liberal social and political issues was under fire from conservative political groups, Fleishman was on hand in Hollywood to orchestrate support for those who took the risk of incorporating such issues in their TV shows. Since that time, Fleishman had become an institution in Hollywood. Some called him a "liberal pied piper." After leaving Planned Parenthood, Fleishman became TV project director of the Population Institute. Throughout the seventies he continued to hold regular gatherings in the homes of Hollywood celebrities. Noted speakers such as Norman Cousins, Paul Erlich, and Margaret Mead were featured. In recent years, Fleishman had set up his own nonprofit organization, Microsecond, to serve as "a catalyst in mass media entertainment programming to wake up the public to the threat of nuclear annihilation."[1]

By the mid-1980s, Norman Fleishman had been joined by a handful of "Hollywood lobbyists" who sought to influence entertainment programming by going directly to producers, writers, and directors. Though their styles varied, these groups shared a common strategy, one that was strikingly similar to that used by government lobbyists to influence Congress. These nonprofit organizations situated themselves as close as possible to the centers of decision making, setting up offices in Hollywood where they could establish and maintain routine contact with the creative community. Like Washington lobbyists, they made themselves valuable by providing facts, expertise, and support. Because their success depended on Hollywood's willingness to work with them, their tactics were cooperative rather than confrontational. They successfully adopted the rules of the game, compromising when necessary, and adapting to changing industry trends. Some of them offered incentives in the form of awards and public recognition.

Like the organizations that had successfully negotiated ongoing relationships with network standards and practices departments, the Hollywood-based groups were advocates for "manageable" issues. They did not demand broad changes in programming content, but sought narrowly defined alterations in the patterns of prime time. Unlike most other advocacy

groups, however, these organizations focused their efforts primarily on the introduction of new ideas to television. Since most of them represented those social causes that could be easily incorporated into entertainment programs, they sought ways to participate in the generation of programming. This approach required a familiarity with not only the structure and process of decision making in network television, but also the unique imperatives that govern the development of programs. It involved knowing what "works" in entertainment TV and how issues could be translated into dramatic elements. It meant learning how to frame issues so that they conformed to standard formats, commercial constraints, and audience expectations. It also required a full understanding of the culture of Hollywood.

The production of prime-time programming is controlled by only a few companies. They operate within a tightly knit society, where interlocking social relationships are an integral part of the structure and operation of business. The community—as those in the industry call it—is not easily accessible to outsiders. For advocacy groups, it is particularly difficult to penetrate, since producers and writers have traditionally resisted efforts by outside organizations to tell them what to do. In order to gain access to the creators of entertainment TV, Hollywood lobbyists attempted to find their way into the informal social structures of the production community. They did this by initiating contacts with a few producers who were sympathetic to their issues and then building upon those relationships. Though some of these groups also worked with the network standards and practices departments, all of them based their strategies for influence on direct involvement with the production community. A few of them formalized their relationships by setting up advisory boards comprised in part of industry representatives and by linking up with industry guilds and organizations.[2]

Though some of the groups had only brief periods of involvement with Hollywood, others became permanent fixtures, solidly integrated into the world of TV production. With continued funding they were able to remain a significant presence. The glue of permanence was a compatibility—of style as well



as content—between the advocacy groups and the Hollywood creative community. Smooth relations between individual producers and writers and advocacy group representatives were enhanced by a congruence of values and political attitudes. The more successful Hollywood lobbyists were also able to "fit in" to the Hollywood culture, successfully internalizing the "mind set," the routines, and the rituals. Though they remained outsiders, they learned to negotiate the meetings, lunches, and social events so essential to the functioning of business in Hollywood.

### *Population Institute/Center for Population Options*

Advocates for population control pioneered the strategy of appealing directly to program creators. The New York-based Population Institute set up its West Coast office in 1970. That office was under various leaders until Norman Fleishman took over in 1973. Though the organizations lobbying on behalf of population control went through several leadership and structural changes, the issue remained well represented in Hollywood on into the eighties.[3]

From the beginning, population control was a double-edged sword for entertainment television. On the one hand, it lent itself quite easily to dramatization. Topics like teenage pregnancy and abortion were the kinds of "problems" to which social issue drama was naturally drawn. On the other hand, as the experience with Maude's abortion had shown, the incorporation of population control issues into prime time could generate protests from conservative groups. Therefore, the population control groups had to walk a fine line in their dealings with prime-time television.

Throughout the 1970s, the Population Institute maintained a quiet presence in Hollywood. Its primary tactic was to "educate and sensitize." Because of the creative community's resistance to outside pressure, care had to be taken, in Fleishman's words, "to show people I wasn't trying to persuade or propagandize them." Fleishman's trademark became the social gatherings that he held several times a year in private homes. The purpose of these events was to introduce ideas in a subtle way

and to stimulate interest. Fleishman referred to this process as "cultivation," tilling the creative soil, planting seeds that may take root and grow.[4]

The Population Institute continued its awards program for several years after the *Maude* controversy, handing out more than $100,000 to writers and producers during the five years it was in operation. The program was discontinued in 1977. According to Fleishman, the Institute stopped the awards because its leaders felt they had established a significant enough presence in Hollywood so that awards were no longer necessary. It was a costly program, and limited funds could be allocated more effectively to other advocacy efforts. The decision could also have had something to do with the rise of conservative groups in the late seventies. Awards increased the Population Institute's visibility, and it was more advantageous to keep a lower profile.[5]

Since it could take a year or two for an idea planted at a meeting to find its way into prime time, it was often difficult to assess the impact of the Population Institute's efforts on programming. But the elusive quality of influence could also work in the organization's favor. Critics of the lobbying group were hard-pressed, for the most part, to identify specific instances of direct involvement with program creation. At the same time, to show his supporters that his work in Hollywood was effective, Fleishman could take credit for certain story lines for which he may or may not have been responsible. "I've seen things happen two years after I met with somebody," Fleishman explained, "and I'll just get a little feeling inside I had something to do with it and I can't prove it."

In his role as a technical consultant, Fleishman's influence was more clearly in evidence. The advocate was frequently called upon to provide statistics, as well as advice, on how an issue could best be translated into drama. Occasionally, this led to rather extensive involvement in the development and writing of scripts. Like the Gay Media Task Force's Newton Deiter, Fleishman offered more than technical assistance. A partnership arrangement developed with a few Hollywood writers and producers. From time to time the lobby group would join forces with producers and writers to do battle with the networks.



Fleishman consulted with Norman Lear on a number of his series. He characterized himself as an important "offstage presence" in an episode of *All in the Family* where Archie's son-in-law Michael had a vasectomy. A few years later, when actress Sally Struthers (who played Michael's wife, Gloria, in the show) became pregnant in real life, CBS wanted to write her pregnancy into the series. The only way that could be done was by making the vasectomy fail. As Fleishman recalled:

> Bob Schiller [the writer] called me and told me that the network wanted this vasectomy to fail. What could we do? I said, "You can't do that. There's no way. They fail so rarely. If you did the show, there'd be fifty million people who saw where a vasectomy failed. You'd send jitters to men all over the country." . . . I thought up all kinds of things they could somehow get by, but for sure you couldn't have the vasectomy fail. Well, we kept talking and kept talking and kept talking. . . . I even got the doctors in the East who were with the Association for Voluntary Sterilization to call Bob and to talk to him, and to write letters to the network.

But before any final decisions were made, Struthers had her baby.

Fleishman also worked with writer Dan Wakefield on ideas for introducing birth control into NBC's *James at 15* series. The show's popularity among teenagers made it an effective vehicle for educational messages. Wakefield and Fleishman brainstormed about subtle ways to incorporate the issue into one of the episodes. One idea was to have a teenage character in the show carrying a wallet with an obvious outline of a condom. Remembered Fleishman: "One of the kids would say, 'I'll give you a dollar,' and another kid says, 'I'll give you two dollars,' and another says, 'I'll give you five dollars.' It was kind of a nice thing to show their respect for contraception." But standards and practices refused to allow the dialogue sequence.[6]

It was an argument with the network over a later episode of *James at 15* that exploded into a public controversy. Fleishman again played a key role. When programming chief Paul Klein suggested that the lead character lose his virginity to a Swedish foreign exchange student on James's sixteenth birthday (which just happened to fall during the important February ratings

sweep period), Wakefield agreed to the idea, but insisted that this time a message about birth control be incorporated into the story. The original script included the following exchange of dialogue between the two young people:

James: I love you and I want to protect you. I've heard about teen-age pregnancies and all that and I think people ought to be responsible.

Girl: I am responsible, James.

James: You are? That's great.[7]

Fearing that such a routine reference to contraception might encourage premarital sex among teenage viewers—and worried that conservative groups might protest, network censors insisted on changes in the script. Wakefield refused to comply and resigned in protest. Fleishman helped the writer take his story to the press and held a special honorary event for him to encourage support. As a consequence, the network was subjected to a deluge of angry mail, before and after the controversial broadcast.[8]

In 1980 the Population Institute split into two organizations. The newly created Center for Population Options established its headquarters in Washington, D.C., and also took over the work of lobbying the Hollywood community. Fleishman worked with CPO until 1982, before starting his new organization, Microsecond.

When Marcy Kelly stepped in as the new media director for the Center for Population Options, she too had already established herself within the Hollywood creative community. Her first stint as a Hollywood lobbyist had begun a few years before with the Scott Newman Center, a nonprofit organization set up by actor Paul Newman in the name of his son who had died of a drug overdose in 1978. Like the Population Institute, the Scott Newman Center worked directly with the creative community as well as the networks, to encourage prime-time TV to deal responsibly with the issue of drug abuse.[9]

By the mid-eighties, the Center for Population Options had broadened its scope to encompass not only teenage pregnancy and birth control but also the portrayal of sex roles and sexual behavior in general. Its strategy had also shifted somewhat, from an informal, low-profile involvement to a more institu-



tionalized, visible presence within the Hollywood creative community. CPO formalized its relationships with the television industry by setting up an advisory board comprised of prominent producers and writers as well as network executives. CPO consulted regularly with a number of producers. After-school specials like CBS's *Babies Having Babies* were made with considerable input from CPO, which also helped promote the TV movie. The advocacy group also worked more closely with the network standards and practices departments, enlisting their cooperation along with that of the creative community. With increased funding from several foundations, CPO set up workshops and conferences for creative community members.[10]

CPO revived its awards programs in 1985. This time, instead of offering cash prizes directly to writers and producers, the organization awarded the prizes to universities to encourage research on sexual responsibility and the media.

By that time, there were a number of other awards programs that honored members of the creative community for furthering various causes. Like the Oscars and the Emmys, ceremonies for these awards became yearly gala gatherings, with glamorous Hollywood celebrities as presenters, performers, and recipients. Only a handful of the groups gave out cash prizes as incentives to producers and writers. Most offered plaques and statues and public recognition for contribution to their various causes.

The oldest program was the NAACP's IMAGE awards, which began in 1967. Nosotros patterned its Golden Eagle awards after the IMAGE awards banquet. The Scott Newman Center began awarding cash prizes to the creators of programs dealing with drug and alcohol abuse. The Association of Asian-Pacific American Artists started an awards program to recognize "fully dimensional" portrayal of Asian Americans. The Washington, D.C.-based National Commission on Working Women developed a program to honor outstanding portrayals of working women in prime time.[11]

One of the most influential programs was the Humanitas Award, which was created to "encourage the industry to do audience enrichment in prime time." The criteria for earning the award were purposefully vague, going to writers of scripts

that promoted "those values which most fully enrich the human person." By the 1980s substantial awards ranging from $10,000 to $25,000 were being given out yearly to individuals, and the Humanitas had become a kind of quality status symbol in Hollywood. Writers designed certain scripts as Humanitas nominees, consciously directing their efforts toward winning the coveted prize.[12]

There were media awards for so many causes that every possible issue seemed to be covered. Commented one leader of an advocacy group that did not have an awards program: "I wish we could start one, but there's nothing left to give an award for." The awards worked well to give the advocacy groups visibility. The yearly regularity of the awards ceremonies served as reminders that these organizations had established themselves as permanent adjuncts to the entertainment community. A few of the groups succeeded in getting their names listed in the monthly Writers Guild newsletter as part of a regular column of technical consultants on various subjects.

The awards and the consultation services reflected a general trend among a number of advocacy groups toward closer cooperation with the creative community and a more "positive" stance toward the industry in general. This was especially true of the organizations with industry professionals in their membership, who relied on the good will of the television and film industries for their livelihood. Nosotros had been one of the first of these organizations to become established in Hollywood. By the mid-eighties, others had followed the Nosotros model. One of them was the Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Artists (AGLA), which began as a small actors' support group in 1975 and grew to become an active advocacy group with a membership of more than three hundred actors, directors, screenwriters, and other media professionals. AGLA began offering "script consulting services" to screenwriters and producers in 1981. That same year (which was also during the Coalition for Better Television's campaign), AGLA began its own awards program. In 1982, at a well-publicized gala event, AGLA honored actor Tony Randall for his portrayal and creative input in the series *Love, Sidney*, which the Coalition for Better Television had so bitterly attacked.[13]



AGLA provided the same kind of technical consultation service as the Gay Media Task Force, which continued to operate in Hollywood. But the new group had no affiliation with the more militant New York-based National Gay Task Force. AGLA's leaders were careful to characterize their group as one whose interests were mutually compatible with those of other industry professionals. "We at AGLA prefer to be seen as a celebrator, not a watchdog," one of them told the press. "Very often, when gays lobby for change," added another, "we hear negativism and criticism. . . . It is important for us to recognize positive work."[14]

A group with a similar agenda and operating style was the Media Office, which was set up in 1980 to represent the disabled. The Media Office held yearly awards banquets and offered script consulting services to producers and writers. The office also worked directly with standards and practices departments.[15]

Quite often the programs cited for commendation by these advocacy groups had involved extensive input and consultation from the group representatives. Producers and writers were therefore rewarded not only for the way they presented the issues but also for their willingness to cooperate with the organizations promoting those issues in the media. The Media Office's executive director, Tari Susan Hartman, recalled her extensive involvement in the ABC series *The Fall Guy*. In 1984, the producers decided to do an episode about a stunt man who becomes disabled. As Hartman explained: "I met with the writer when he just got assigned the project. . . . He said, 'What should I avoid?' I told him what to avoid. Then everything I warned him about ended up in the script and the script got yanked. We're not sure who yanked it, but we're so well networked, it could have been anyone." Fearing that the script would offend the advocacy group, the producer called Hartman back, to help to "save it." "We met with the producer, the story editor and the director," Hartman recalled. "We reworked almost the entire script. We talked about it line by line, page by page, scene by scene. . . . We even talked about camera angles, ones that were less condescending." Later that year, the Media Office gave the series an award.[16]

Many of the advocacy groups operating in Hollywood found that entertainment television had an uncanny ability to "use up" issues quickly. There were limits to the number of times a particular issue could appear in a series or a season. Programming executives were inclined to say, "We've already done that one," and often the creative community and lobbyists alike were faced with the dilemma of coming up with innovative ways to repackage an issue that television had already treated. One solution to this problem was to incorporate messages into the background of prime time programs. For controversial issues, this strategy could also get around the problem of complaints by opposing groups. There was an added advantage to the strategy. Following the well-known advertising principle of frequent repetition, advocacy groups could reach more people with a long-running show than through a single broadcast. Each group had its own agenda in this area and each experienced varying degrees of success.

AGLA leaders sought increases in the TV characters that "just happened to be gay," rather than those whose homosexuality became the focal point of the drama. This was easier to achieve in the eighties than the seventies, when the whole idea of homosexuality was new to television and to mainstream culture as well. However, the AIDS crisis, which reached epidemic proportions in the gay population by the mid-eighties, made it somewhat difficult to routinely incorporate gay characters into prime time.[17]

The Center for Population Options asked for similar routine references to birth control. As Marcy Kelly explained it: "On any of these shows [in prime time] there will be a moment where two people come together romantically and are going to go to bed together or we see them in bed together. . . . I would like the shows to just take one moment, either a visual moment or a verbal moment, where the woman says 'just a minute, are you protected?' or 'I'm not taking the pill.' . . . It doesn't have to take them 10 seconds to do it. I want to incorporate it as a natural function of daily life. People drink orange juice at breakfast tables. Well, lots of women take a pill every morning." Because the issue was so sensitive, such routine references were not that easy to achieve. However, for CPO, the



AIDs crisis helped draw attention to the need for certain kinds of birth control methods—particularly condoms, which were considered a safeguard against the sexually transmitted disease. As a consequence, Kelly found producers, writers, and networks more willing to incorporate material relating to birth control devices into programs.[18]

### *Cooperative Consultation—Alcohol Education*

The emphasis on the background of prime-time reality was one of the key components of the strategy used by the research team of Warren Breed and James De Foe. With a grant from the U.S. Public Health Service and several foundations, the two "scholar consultants"—as they called themselves—set up a Los Angeles office in 1979 to lobby the production community around the issue of alcohol consumption in entertainment programming. Through a process they referred to as "cooperative consultation" the two engaged in a campaign to change the way drinking was portrayed in prime time. This strategy resembled those employed by other Hollywood lobbyists, but it also had several unique features.[19]

Breed and De Foe first set out to educate and sensitize television industry professionals. Like the other groups, part of the task was to provide statistics and research results that could enlighten creative community members. But, since these efforts were corrective in nature, a more important initial step was to show media professionals what they had been doing wrong. For this purpose, scientific content analyses were conducted to track patterns of drinking in prime time. Many other advocacy groups had used similar studies to point out excesses and inaccuracies in entertainment programming, often to the chagrin of TV industry executives, who did their best to undermine the credibility of the research methods. What Breed and De Foe found, however, was that many members of the creative community were quite interested in their results. One reason was that a number of producers and writers had had personal experiences with alcohol abuse, either themselves or through friends and relatives. Another reason was that the issue was not considered controversial. "While people differ about