**Community Rights: Mobilizing through Discourse in *Gay Community News***

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**Abstract**

Is rights talk a narrowing, limiting vehicle for social change as rights critics claim? Is rights discourse responsible for the funneling of activist claims into legal rights claims that fail to broadly challenge institutional power? This study finds that LGBTQ persons attached rights to a wide variety of both legal and political issues in the 1980s, and, thus, rights discourse is not necessarily connected to placing formal legal rights claims on the LGBTQ community's agenda. Consequently, one must study external political and social forces in addition to rights talk in order to determine how and why formal legal rights claims become part of a community's agenda. In order to support these assertions my study (1) presents a content analysis *of Community Voices* and *Speaking Out*, letters to the editor columns that appeared in *Gay Community News* (the first national gay and lesbian weekly newspaper) in 1980, 1984, and 1988, and (2) demonstrates that rights discourse does not limit agenda-setting and that community discussions of rights are malleable in they readily adapt to novel, ordinary political issues as they arise.

**INTRODUCTION**

“Rights discourse in liberal capitalist culture casts as private potentially political contests about distribution of resources and about relevant parties to decision making. It converts social problems into matters of individualized, dehistoricized injury and entitlement, into matters in which there is no harm if there is no agent and no tangibly violated subject” (Brown, 1995, p. 124). According to critics of rights discourse, by attaching political contests to rights-based identities that are free from government action, rights in the modern state function as a means of perpetuating oppression and keeping it in the private sphere, without questioning the public institutions that are responsible for an unequal distribution of resources (West, 2011; Herman, 1993; Gabel, 1984; Tushnet, 1984). Rights are claimed on behalf of a group “we” that uses the discourse of universal personhood, yet rights are conferred upon depoliticized individuals (Brown, p. 98, 1995). As a result, when collective groups of depoliticized individuals claim a right based on an injury, the moment that right is achieved, the collective groups ceases to exist and the individual is “free” even though the oppressive state structure responsible for the injury remains untouched. The right is granted, but the institution responsible for its necessity remains.

Given this reifying nature of rights, rights discourse seems incredibly limiting because it prevents rights-based social movements from addressing structural inequalities and state power. If rights fail to challenge institutional inequalities, and, instead, legitimate them, then rights talk is an inadequate vehicle for social change. However, is rights talk a narrowing, limiting vehicle for social change as rights critics claim? Is rights discourse responsible for the funneling of activist claims into narrow, individualistic, legal categories that fail to broadly challenge institutional power? This paper explores the argument that rights discourse necessarily legitimates institutional inequalities by examining rights talk amongst those who identified as part of the LGBTQ community in the 1980s. This paper argues that there is an important distinction between formal legal rights claims and rights discourse at the grassroots level. Scholars who argue that rights force activist discourse into legal, state-legitimating arguments frequently focus on formal legal arguments over grassroots rights, bottom-up claims-making (see e.g., Spade, 2011; Eng, 2010; Brigham, 1987: Brigham, 1996). By focusing on rights talk within the LGBTQ community in the 1980s, this paper will explore precisely how members of a minority community use rights and whether or not the appearance of rights talk coincides with the narrowing of minority community grievances into purely legal categories that do not challenge structural inequality or state power.

Most research that connects rights-based claims to the LGBTQ community’s agenda, focuses predominately on the 1990s and 2000s, a period when litigation was already central to the LGBTQ Rights Movement (Spade, 2011; Eng, 2010, pp. 28, 34-57; Butler, 2004, especially chapter 5). In order to determine whether rights discourse is responsible for narrowing the LGBTQ community’s agenda towards legal rights activism, one must conduct an over time analysis at a moment when litigation was not a primary community issue. By looking at how rights claiming impacted the community before the onset legal victories like the right to marriage, one can determine the extent to which rights discussions may or may not have contributed to forcing legal claims onto the LGBTQ community’s political agenda. This paper will provide a context for the LGBTQ community’s current focus on rights-based issues by delving into how issues important to community members evolved over time. In order to do this, this paper will look at to a time before litigation was a central focus of movement activity, presenting an analysis of the LGBTQ community from 1980 to 1988, a time period that was not marked by major litigation wins.

Studying the connection between rights discourse and agenda setting within the LGBTQ population presents some unique methodological challenges. How does one go about studying rights within a given community? In this paper, I use rights talk, or LGBTQ-identified persons’ invocations of rights, to measure how rights discourses have impacted the community’s agenda over time. My understanding of the LGBTQ population’s invocations of rights encompasses the rights talk of those who do and do not identify as activists. Consequently this paper recognizes a continuum of what constitutes “law.” Law can refer explicitly to litigation, or formal rules enforced by legal institutions or actors. However, law can also exist outside of formal legal settings in a conceptually murky terrain (Merry, 2000; Ewick and Silbey, 1998; Yngvesson, 1989). Rights talk or rights discourse is important to popular understandings of the law because it is dynamic and is indicative how minority populations, rather than those with ties to the legal profession alone, believe formal legal processes can resolve collective grievances. Rights language is dynamic in that it is simultaneously indeterminate and infused with “meaning by cultural practices themselves, by the repeated acts of citizens using...[rights language] to negotiate material relations with each other” (McCann, 1994, p. 297; Lovell, 2012). In other words, rights language is polyvalent, it can mean many different things at different moments in time because it is both unstable and attains meaning through its ability to help individuals understand and conceptualize collective grievances (Polletta, 2000).

Does a community’s use of rights discourse necessarily limit that community’s political agenda? In order to answer this question accurately, a study that, (1) specifically targets the LGBTQ population, and (2) measures rights talk within the LGBTQ community over time is necessary. This study presents a content analysis of the *Community Voices* and *Speaking Out* columns of *Gay Community News* (*GCN*) in 1980, 1984, and 1988. *GCN* was a national, lesbian and gay weekly newspaper that represented the Lesbian and Gay Rights Movement in the 1980s. *GCN*’s managing editors considered the paper a “forum for liberation” that “did not want to take any opinions or ideas or assumptions for granted” (The History Project, 2011). Furthermore, *GCN* was unusual among lesbian and gay organizations of the 1980s because “the *GCN* collective included both women and men from the very beginning and was mixed in terms of class and age” (Hoffman, 2007, p. xiv). *GCN*’s editors openly maintained an inclusive, broad understanding of the LGBTQ Rights Movement that reached well beyond legal activists and leaders, a commitment that makes *GCN* a useful resource for studying the community views of the past. Furthermore, *GCN* published letters to the editor from historically marginalized sub-groups within the LGBTQ population, including trans persons, LGBTQ racial minorities, those who identify as bisexual, and closeted members of the community whose letters were published anonymously upon request.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consequently, this study differs from previous studies by painting a dynamic, rather than a static picture, of the relationship between rights talk and issue importance over time.

This study finds that LGBTQ-identified persons attached rights to a wide variety of political and legal issues throughout the 1980s. Thus, rights talk did not narrow the LGBTQ community’s agenda to legal rights activism, which rights critics argue has prevented the LGBTQ movement from addressing structural inequalities. Regardless of whether or not an issue was attached to a litigation campaign, rights talk is not determinative, but dynamic. Rights language is a community activity that is both unstable and a meaningful tool available to everyday people to help in the understanding and theorization of their collective grievances (McCann, 1994; Lovell 2012; see also Ewick and Silbey 2000). As this paper will show, rights talk is not always attached to litigation, it is also a general means of asking for recognition of community grievances that readily adapts to alternative non-legal or ordinary political grievances over time. In order to support these assertions this paper will (1) present a content analysis of *Community Voices* and *Speaking Out* letters to the editor that appeared in *GCN* in 1980, 1984, and 1988, and (2) demonstrate that rights discourse does not limit agenda-setting and that community discussions of rights are dynamic in they readily adapt to novel, ordinary political issues as they arise. Overall, this paper finds that rights talk does not necessarily result in politically narrowing legal claim. Consequently, more research, which makes makes clear distinctions between rights talk and formal legal rights claims, is needed in order to determine the roles lawyers, organizational actors, and everyday members of the LGBTQ population play in the narrowing of political activism over time.

**DATA AND METHODS**

As Hull (2001) demonstrates, using letters to the editor to gauge public opinion has several obvious limitations. First, only some of the letters that are sent to newspapers are actually published and the selection criteria are not known, so the letters published may not be representative of all the letters received. Second, letters to the editor are often not representative of a newspaper’s complete reader base, but of the wealthier, more educated, and more politically active readers (Buell, 1975; Volgy et al., 1977). Third, letter writers may have more “extreme” views than the majority of a newspaper’s readers (Volgy et al., 1977). Finally, letters to the editor are generally very brief, so the “richness of their content is restricted by their form” (Hull, 2001, p. 211).

The study presented in this paper addresses some of the problems identified above regarding the difficulties associated with measuring a population by using *GCN’s* community-based letters to the editor columns. This is not a perfect solution, but there are several unique attributes of *GCN’s* columns that directly resolve these concerns and, hence, avoid some of the usual limitations of using letters to the editor. For example, the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation, which achieved non-profit status in 1984, ran *GCN* from 1973 to 1999 (when the paper ceased its operations due to financial difficulties).[[2]](#footnote-2) This organization was volunteer-intensive, depended on community donations for its revenue, and was owned and managed collectively (Rofes, 2001; Hoffman 2007). *GCN* was also a national LGBTQ community newspaper, whose audience spanned all 50 states (Hoffman, 2007). Furthermore, *GCN*’s managing editors considered the paper a radical, left wing “forum for liberation” that “did not want to take any opinions or ideas or assumptions for granted” (The History Project, 2011). As a result, unlike most newspapers, which have relatively short letters to the editor sections, *GCN*’s letters to the editor section spanned two columns (*Community Voices* and *Speaking Out*), covered anywhere between 1 to 3 pages in each issue, and included somewhere between 6 and 20 letters per issue, varying based on the number received each week. In addition, according to Streitmatter (1995), *GCN* was “the only major paper in the country to balance the voices of lesbians equally with those of gay men” (Streitmatter, 1995, p. 247). Consequently, it is likely that *GCN*’s published letters to the editor were more representative of the letters actually received than the average newspaper.

In addition, letters to the editor are a unique, if imperfect, way to measure issue salience amongst the LGBTQ population because they include both community and organizational activist viewpoints (Hull, 2001). This is especially true of *GCN*, which included letters from LGBTQ-identified prisoners, transgender persons, and racial minorities, people who are often marginalized by the mainstream lesbian and gay movement, alongside letters written by civil rights attorneys and individuals representing major lesbian and gay political organizations. Yet, this also speaks to one glaring shortcoming of *GCN*’s representation of the lesbian and gay community overall: *GCN* was a mainstream lesbian and gay movement newspaper whose editors identified themselves as “liberals” and “radicals.” As a result, *GCN*’s letters to the editor likely are not fully representative of conservative or more moderate lesbian and gay-identified persons.

However, in spite of their shortcomings, *GCN*’s letters to the editor columns, which did publish letters from minorities within the LGBTQ population, including more moderate readers, closeted individuals (*GCN* published anonymous letters upon request), transgender persons, those who identified as bisexual, and LGBTQ racial minorities, are still likely representative of the LGBTQ community as a whole. In particular, *GCN*’s letters to the editor columns are likely more representative of the LGBTQ population than the datasets of similar social movement studies that focus purely on publications from LGBTQ Rights Movement organizations or studies that focus on mainstream newspapers, which, undoubtedly, published letters from marginalized members of the LGBTQ population even less frequently than *GCN* did between 1980 and 1988.

In *GCN*, letters to the editor appeared in two columns: *Community Voices* and *Speaking Out*. My content analysis covers all letters published in the first issue of each month (12 issues per year) in 1980, 1984, and 1988, a total of 340 letters over an eight-year period. I modeled my content analysis after Hull’s (2001) content analysis of letters to the editor that appeared in two daily newspapers in Honolulu, HI in 1996 and 1997, which Hull (2001) used to analyze rights framing in the same-sex marriage debate in Hawaii. I allowed thematic codes to emerge from the data as I compared letters over time, and did not constrain myself to a predetermined coding scheme (Hull, 2001). As I began reading the letters, I realized that there was a great deal of variation and volatility in issues salience over time, so it was necessary to develop a coding scheme as I read from and discovered new and emerging issues in the letters. Overall, I coded for 39 different issues.[[3]](#footnote-3) Appendix I discusses each issue in detail.

In addition to coding for all issues that appeared in the letters to the editor columns in *GCN* in 1980, 1984, and 1988, I also coded for the appearance of rights talk attached to a given issue. In my content analysis, I noted whenever a writer explicitly discussed rights, in all forms, in relation to an issue. The below section illustrates my findings, delineating which issues *GCN* writers attached rights to in all three years, in order to understand the evolution of rights discourse over time in the LGBTQ community. The next section will delineate my content analysis of *GCN*’s letters to the editor column, illuminating issues that appeared with the greatest frequency and describing when writers attached rights talk to these issues.

**RESULTS**

**A. LGBTQ Community Discourses: Rights Talk & Most Common Issues**

My content analysis of *GCN’s* *Community Voices* and *Speaking Out Columns* in 1980, 1984, and 1988 reveals dramatic shifts occurred in issue salience within the LGBTQ population over time. In addition, LGBTQ-identified persons freely attached rights to a wide array of issues. Individuals talked about rights within virtually every issue I coded for. For example, letter writers used rights talk while arguing in favor of more open notions of sexuality, while discussing the AIDS epidemic, while arguing for and against political candidates and positions, while criticizing the mainstream media, while supporting feminism or opposing violence against women, while arguing against discrimination, while discussing race and religion, and while decrying problems with the nation’s prison system and police departments. Furthermore, issues emerged and disappeared throughout the sampled time period. For instance, the AIDS epidemic did not emerge as a primary community issue until 1984 and was non-existent in 1980. In addition, discussions of sexuality and feminism gradually diminished over time. Overall, this content analysis illustrates that, because LGBTQ-identified persons attached rights to such a large quantity of issues, it is necessary to look at more than rights talk, in order to determine whether or not rights impact issue salience over time.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the frequency of appearance of issues overall without accounting for rights talk. Table 1 delineates the frequency of appearance overall and Table 2 illustrates the frequency of appearance by year. According to Table 1, the issues that appeared with the greatest frequency overall were AIDS/HIV (8% of all issues), prison (9% of all issues), sexuality (12% of all issues), feminism (9% of all issues), and political issues (22% of all issues). Prison and feminism probably appeared in *GCN* at a relatively high frequency because the newspaper had a dedicated prison penpals column and published interviews with some of the most prominent feminists in the 1980s, including Andrea Dworkin. AIDS/HIV, sexuality, and politics likely appeared with great frequency for obvious reasons: the AIDS epidemic reached its pinnacle in the 1980s, sexuality has and always will be a prominent issue in a community that defines itself via sexual identities, and politics (political party or candidate, legislation, political movement, and political protest) is, by definition, a major concern of groups that seek to accomplish social change.

----- Table 1 Here -----

Table 2 depicts shifts in the appearance of issues over time. The issues with the most interesting changes over time are AIDS/HIV (with 0% of the letters on AIDS/HIV in 1980, 3% in 1984, and 24% in 1988); media critiques (with 10% of the letters on the media in 1980, 5% in 1984, and 3% in 1988); prison (with 1% of the letters on prisoner’s issues in 1980, 14% in 1984, and 13% in 1988); sexuality (with 12% of the letters on sexuality in 1980, 19% in 1984, and only 4% in 1988); feminism (with 14% of the letters on feminism in 1980, 6% in 1984, and 4% in 1988); and politics (with 26% of the letters on politics in 1980, 20% in 1984, and 17% in 1988). There are several explanations as to why the interest in each of these issues shifted over time. First, awareness of AIDS/HIV within the LGBTQ community at large began in 1981 and steadily increased as AIDS related deaths reached epidemic proportions in the late 1980s. Second, media critiques likely diminished after 1980, when many within the LGBTQ community protested negative depictions of homosexuality in the films *Cruising* and *Windows*.

----- Table 2 Here -----

Third, prison issues likely increased over time because the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation, the non-profit organization that ran *GCN* also headed a Prisoner’s Project, that sued the federal prison system in order to allow prisoners to receive gay publications (*Bromfield Street Educational Foundation Records*). As a result, *GCN* was actively involved in prisoners’ rights issues throughout the 1980s, which likely corresponded with an increase in letters on prisoner’s issues over time. Fourth, sexuality, feminism, and political issues probably diminished over time as the LGBTQ community shifted its focus away from discussions of sexual expression and towards the AIDS epidemic. In other words, the AIDS epidemic likely overtook other issues as it tragically claimed more lives and, thus, dominated the conversation in LGBTQ community in the mid to late 1980s.

Tables 3, 4, and 5 summarize the frequency of rights talk by issue and bolster the argument that one must look beyond rights talk in order to determine whether or not rights impact issue salience. Table 3 summarizes the frequency of rights talk overall. As we see in Table 3, the appearance of letters that included rights talk remained relatively constant over time (with 20% of the letters with rights talk in 1980, 25% in 1984, and 29% in 1988). Tables 4 and 5 summarize the percentage and frequency of rights talk by issue in 1980, 1984, and 1988. In other words, these tables depict how many letters on a given issue included rights talk within each of the years sampled. Tables 4 and 5 show that rights talk appeared alongside virtually every issue I coded for (with the notable exception of issues dealing with youth, substance abuse, and the transgender community). Interestingly, there does not appear to be any consistent pattern indicating a shift towards more rights talk over time, which one would expect if rights talk was, in fact, connected to issue salience. Rights talk appeared with greater frequency over time with respect to some issues (with rights talk increasing from 0% to 24% in letters on AIDS/HIV by 1988, from 29% to 100% in letters on police brutality by 1988, and 13% to 24% in letters on prisons by 1988, for example). However, rights talk also remained constant over time with respect to some issues (with 42% of all letters on discrimination including rights talk in 1980, 1984, and 1988 respectively), and decreased over time with other issues (with rights talk decreasing from 25% to 0% in letters dealing with immigration, from 25% to 0% in letters dealing with the military, and from 50% to 26% in letters dealing with politics).

----- Table 3 Here -----

----- Table 4 Here -----

----- Table 5 Here -----

These shifts in the appearance of rights talk by issue over time even further support the argument that rights talk is not related to issue salience when one considers the data presented in tables 2 and 4 respectively. On some issues, rights talk increased as letters on a given issue increased in appearance. This occurred with AIDS/HIV, for example. As letters on AIDS/HIV increased from 0% in 1980 to 38% in 1988, the percentage of rights talk in letters on AIDS/HIV increased from 0% in 1980 to 24% in 1988. However, on other issues, rights talk increased as the percentage of letters on a given issue decreased. For instance, letters on feminism decreased from 30% in 1980 to 7% in 1988 while the percentage of rights talk that appeared in letters on feminism increased from 10% in 1980 to 43% in 1988. If rights talk were connected to issue salience in the 1980s, one would expect the frequency of rights talk to correlate with the frequency of appearance of a given issue. Yet, the data presented in Tables 2 and 4 do not show that this pattern held consistently across all of the issues that appeared within *GCN*’s letters to the editor columns. The data further demonstrates that LGBTQ community members frequently attached rights talk to issues that were not clearly aligned with mainstream litigation campaigns, such as AIDS/HIV, the media, and political issues (i.e., political candidates, protests, and parties). This indicates that a disparity existed between rights discourse and institutionalized litigation within the LGBTQ community. The following section will further explore how and when rights talk appeared alongside issues by delving into letters that exhibited rights talk and situating these letters alongside prominent events in the 1980s.

**B. LGBTQ Community Discourses: Rights Talk in the 1980s LGBTQ Community**

When letter writers discussed rights they did so in general terms and on a wide variety of issues. Writers talked about rights as “constitutional rights,” “equal rights,” “civil rights,” or “human rights.” Generally, writers attached rights discourses to both sides of a given issue, used rights talk when comparing LGBTQ community issues to issues that impact racial minorities, used rights talk when asking readers to support and oppose political campaigns, and attached rights to issues that both disappeared and appeared with greater frequency over time. This section demonstrates that conversations around rights varied tremendously over time, suggesting that rights talk operates more as an adaptable tool than as means of constraining the array of issues within a minority population. In addition, rights talk frequently did not appear alongside discussions of litigation, but, more often than not, along everyday discussions of community grievances, illuminating a conceptual distinction between rights discourse and litigation.

**i. Rights Discourses on Both Sides of an Issue**

*GCN* letters to the editor writers frequently attached rights talk to both sides of an issue. For example, writers used rights talk while arguing both for and against expansive notions of sexuality. In an article that appeared in *Community Voices* on July 7, 1984, Scott Tucker lamented the banning of sexual activity in gay bathhouses in San Francisco:

“For the gay community at large, the most crucial issue is not the right to privacy but our right to the world: in this case, our right to public institutions where we can meet and grow strong together. The baths are not presently an ideal place for that purpose, but with imagination and militance they could become true community meeting places. They could become places for education, culture, and safe erotic play. Instead, a few of our gay ‘leaders’ have joined hands with straights...for our own good.”

Here, Tucker used rights talk in order to express a collective grievance over the censure of sexual activity in bathhouses as a result of the rise of the AIDS epidemic in 1984 (Eaklor, 2008, pp. 174-178). By contrast, in a letter that appeared on May 3, 1980 in *Community Voices*, S.K.L. used rights talk while arguing against a more expansive notion of sexuality:

“It distresses me to read paragraphs on the evils of police harassment and the harassed gay patrons of the Boston Public Library without a single mention of one obvious fact: the unquestionable right of users of the library, straight and gay, to use those facilities without sexual harassment.”

Both Tucker’s and S.K.L’s letters use rights talk while discussing sexual activity in places of public accommodation. However, Tucker’s letter used rights talk is used in support of public sexual activity while S.K.L.’s letter used it against public sexual activity.

In addition to expansive and non-expansive notions of public sexuality, people who wrote letters used rights talk while discussing whether or not to ban pornography. In the early 1980s, disputes occurred amongst LGBTQ persons over pornography and sadomasochism (S&M) as prominent feminists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (who read and wrote in *GCN*) “attempted to institute legal bans on pornography” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 146). These disputes appeared with frequency in *GCN* and rights talk was attached to both sides of the debate. For instance, in “Playing Thought Police,” a letter published on October 4th, 1980, Jim Kernochan utilized rights talk while criticizing attempts to ban pornography:

“Now, those who believe pornography is offensive have every right to present their argument in the hopes of convincing others. But they have no right to impose their rights on those that are not convinced.... Women, lesbians, gay men, and people of color have been the particular victims of this white patriarchy. But some in our ranks have internalized our enemy’s aspiration, and rather than renouncing all vestiges of power and privilege, wish to obtain it to use force on those they oppose. To deny others certain rights that you would never relinquish for yourself is a traditional straight male play.”

On the other hand, in “Pushing Porn,” published on November 3rd, 1984, Robin Lippincott indirectly referred to rights via the First Amendment, while recalling an argument he had with the manager of a bookstore he worked in that opted to sell pornography, leading to Lippincott’s decision to quit his job and call for a boycott of the bookstore. In his letter to *GCN* readers Lippincott stated that, “as a gay man, I strongly oppose and am offended by depictions of the human body as an object to be used, abused, and disposed of.”

Rights further appeared on both sides of the man/boy love debate. Man/boy love was a particularly controversial issue in the LGBTQ community in the early 1980s, drawing criticism from feminist lesbians and gay men (Eaklor, 2008 p. 135; Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999, p. 407). The issue appeared occasionally in *GCN* as individuals expressed concern over the marginalization of man/boy love and from prison inmates, likely incarcerated due to crimes involving man/boy love.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, in “Some Good Advice,” published on November 3rd, 1984, prison inmate Karl Ahlers wrote to *GCN* over an incident involving his receipt of the North American Man Boy Love Association’s (NAMBLA) newspaper. Ahlers used rights language, arguing that his counselor “had no right to comment on anything [he received] in front of the other guards.” The following month, a closeted child psychologist heavily criticized *GCN*’s decision to publish letters like Ahlers’s, in a letter entitled “A Cavalier Attitude,” published on December 1st, 1984. The child psychologists utilized rights language in the following segment:

“I find myself shocked and appalled by the acceptance and tacit encouragement in both your paper and apparently the gay male community of sexual contacts with children. The Manscape ad, coverage of the man/boy love association, and comment on kiddie porn all seem to point to a rather cavalier attitude regarding children’s rights.”

The man/boy love debate appeared with some frequency in *GCN* as gay men and women like the child psychologist above fought with pro-NAMBLA readers over whether or not their concerns should be included within the LGBTQ community’s liberation movement.

Each of the examples in this section demonstrate the adaptability of rights discourse and show that resorting to rights discourse did not always occur alongside a litigation campaign. *GCN’s* letters to the editor writers used rights talk while making arguments on both sides of debates on sexual expression, pornography, and man/boy love. In other words, rights talk was attached to a wide variety of arguments on different sides of select issues throughout the 1980s.

**ii. Rights Talk Comparing LGBTQ and Racial Minority Struggles**

In addition to using rights talk on both sides of an issue, letters to the editor writers also used rights talk while comparing the LGBTQ rights movement to other movements for social change. For instance, rights talk was particularly prominent in articles discussing both sexual and racial minority struggles against discrimination. In an article published on September 6, 1980 in *Community Voices*, Dee Michel addressed both racial and sexual minority struggles for social change while criticizing an African American representative of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination:

“Why was the representative so unsympathetic to the subject of lesbian/gay rights? Black people certainly have reason to feel their recent gains threatened, as other groups agitate for social and political change. But this conflict is the fault of the system that causes discrimination and inequalities, not the other groups trying to better their lots.”

Michel's letter recognizes the transcendence of rights across multiple movements while, at the same time it acknowledges the tension rights struggles can create between different groups, here racial minorities and the LGBTQ community.

In addition to Michel, *GCN* writer Phillip Brian Harper also spoke to the problems associated with comparisons between gay rights and civil rights in a letter published in *GCN*’s *Speaking Out* column on April 2, 1980, entitled “Lesbians and gay men of color speak out!” According to Harper:

“To the extent that the lesbian and gay movement is concerning legal protections for the rights of lesbian and gay men – and to my mind this should only be one of its objectives – it has an affinity with the black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.... For all its usefulness, however, the comparison of the gay and lesbian struggle to the fight for black civil rights has often been problematic, to the detriment of coalition building between the two communities, and much to the chagrin of those whose interests encompass both movements.”

Here, Harper attaches rights language to a discussion of the problems with comparisons between the LGBTQ Rights and the Civil Rights Movements. Furthermore, Harper’s last sentence hints at an increasing marginalization experienced by LGBTQ people of color whose identities spoke to both movements.

The tension described above is indicative of a growing racial divide within the LGBTQ population. Many of the LGBTQ community’s most prominent activist leaders where white in the 1980s, resulting in the marginalization of issues impacting LGBTQ racial minorities. In fact, *GCN*’s editorial staff and reader base was primarily white (Rofes, 2001). LGBTQ-identified people of color occasionally published letters in *GCN*’s letters to the editor column expressing their grievances with the LGBTQ activist movement and its insistence on comparing LGBTQ rights to racial struggles for rights in the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, many of these grievances would become the impetus for an intersectional critique of the LGBTQ movement (Hutchinson, 2000).

The use of rights talk in comparisons of LGBTQ and racial minority struggles is interesting because it demonstrates that right talk is transcendent: rights talk is not limited to a specific minority groups’ struggles or collective interests. As a result, rights talk may serve as an adaptable tool for social movement mobilization that does not constrain the variety of issues available to communities that strive to achieve social change.

**iii. Rights Talk in Political Campaigns**

In addition to the rights talk that appeared in *GCN* on both sides of the same issue or in letters comparing different struggles for social change, rights talk occurred most frequently in letters that generally discussed political candidates, legislation, LGBTQ movement activities and direction, and protests. Because 1980, 1984, and 1988 were election years letters, in the October and November issues in each year letters to the editor writers used rights talk in order to encourage *GCN* readers to vote for and against varying political candidates or party platforms. For instance, in a *Speaking Out* letter published on November 1, 1980, Jill Raymond used rights talk while arguing for the creation of a third party:

“Alternative voting moves against the increasingly vulnerable two-party monopoly on the electoral system. In the long run, I think it is a necessary early step towards serious political change, justice, peace, and human rights. One way to stop the rightward drift in this country of both the Democrats and Republicans is to build a mass-based party on the Left.”

Similarly, in a letter published in *Community Voices* on October 6, 1984, Melissa Fisher used rights talk in order to encourage readers to vote for the Independent Party candidates Dennis Serrette and Nancy Ross:

“My growing dissatisfaction with the two party system and their representation of gays & lesbians, and women, has led me to seek alternatives. This is a serious time in history. The Democrats & Republicans have not passed gay rights legislation or ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], or provided adequate jobs or daycare centers. Now we have an alternative.”

As each of these letters demonstrate, many in LGBTQ people in the 1980s believed that their issues and interests were being entirely ignored by the Democratic and Republican parties, and rightly so. Throughout the 1980s, the Republican Party, the New Right and the Moral Majority actively campaigned against LGBTQ issues. President Ronald Reagan, furthermore, did not publicly refer to the AIDS epidemic until 1985, after more than 12,000 individuals had already died from the disease (Eaklor, 2008, p. 175).

Many LGBTQ-identified persons were equally disillusioned by the Democratic Party, which refused to adopted gay rights into its party platform and, in 1988, selected Michael Dukakis as its presidential candidate, whose ambivalent stance on gay rights both included the “removal of two children from the care of gay foster parents” in 1985 and an active courting of the gay vote during the Massachusetts governor’s race in the 1970s (Califia, 1994, p. 277; Clendinen & Nagourney, p. 223).[[5]](#footnote-5) Consequently, *GCN* letter writers like Raymond and Fisher (above) likely advocated for third parties within *GCN* in order to attract LGBTQ-identified people who felt that neither the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party represented their interests.

While some *GCN* letters to the editor writers frequently wrote in support of third parties, other letter writers encouraged readers to vote for the Democratic Party, which, these writers believed was much less hostile towards LGBTQ interests. Letter writers also used rights talk while advocating for Democratic Party Candidates in *GCN*. For instance, in a letter published on November 11th, 1984, Diane Elze criticized Melissa Fisher’s letter encouraging readers to support Democratic candidates, writing that:

“We *must* get rid of Ronald Reagan. If we don’t vote for Mondale/Ferraro, we are handing votes to Reagan.... We only have a chance if we vote for Mondale/Ferraro. Certainly, Mondale/Ferraro do not embody our vision of a new world. But Reagan is a dangerous man.... The fact that he is a primary opponent of reproductive choice is dangerous. He and his cohorts have effectively weakened or dismantled Title IX, the EEOC, the Civil Rights Commission, and Section 504. They are dangerous men.”

Also, in a letter published in *Speaking Out* on November 5, 1988, Terry Cosgrove used rights talk while encouraging readers to vote against George Bush and for Michael Dukakis:

“There would be very little doubt in any or our minds that the last seven years in the U.S. have been among the most hostile toward our community in the long and difficult struggle for lesbian and gay rights.... On November 8th when the polls close, we must know that we did everything possible to ensure that George Bush is not the next president. We cannot afford to just vote for Dukakis as some have suggested.... We must talk to every friend, every family member, and every co-worker, explaining that our very lives are on the line with this election.”

As the above selections from letters written during the campaign months of 1980, 1984, and 1988 demonstrate, rights talk continued to be an avenue for mobilizing support for different political perspectives in the LGBTQ community throughout the 1980s.

Because rights talk appeared frequently in discussions of political candidates and parties in a general manner, it is clear that rights talk is not limited to discussions of litigation alone. It appears alongside political activism as well, an alternative method for achieving social change. Consequently, rights discourse does not seem to limit minority populations to rights-based issues that center on litigation campaigns.

**iv. Rights Talk and Emerging and Disappearing Issues**

In addition to appearing on both sides of the same issue, in rights movement comparisons, and in political campaign discussions, rights talk appeared alongside issues as they emerged and disappeared in *GCN*’s letters. The two issues where the appearance and disappearance of rights talk was most prominent were within letters on general media discussions and letters that addressed the AIDS epidemic, which had the largest impact in the LGBTQ community in the 1980s and beyond.

In 1980, two movies were produced that greatly angered the LGBTQ population and resulted in film picketing protests modeled off of similar protests conducted by those involved in the Women’s Rights Movement. The first movie, *Windows,* opened in January of 1980 and “portrayed a psychotic lesbian killer who hires a man to rape her best friend with whom she is secretly in love” (Osborn, 1994, p. 197). The second movie, *Cruising*, starred Al Pacino “as an undercover cop seeking a killer of gay men in S&M bars and clubs” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 190). Some LGBTQ-identified people who wrote *GCN* were greatly angered over both films, which they believed portrayed lesbians and gay men as inherently dangerous and deserving of violence.

Other members wrote into *GCN* in an attempt to stop the LGBTQ community from protesting the films, and, in doing so, bring the films more publicity. *GCN* letter writer Jay Meryl, in a letter entitled “Lessons from the Past” and published in the February 2nd, 1980 edition of *GCN* wrote the following:

“As we decide what to do about *Cruising* and *Windows*, we need to consider the following: will a demonstration outside the theater keep people from going in, or arouse the morbid curiosity of more people?”

In this quote, Meryl argues that picketing major films may actually draw more people to attend the films.

It is important to note that the quote above does not include any rights talk. In fact, none of the letters that discussed *Windows* and *Cruising* in 1980 used rights talk. Instead, rights talk was attached to furor over other media events that negatively depicted LGBTQ persons in predominately in 1980, likely as an indirect result of the anger inspired by *Windows* and *Cruising*, which were released that year. For example, in a letter submitted by Diane M. Greene of Lesbian and Gay Media Advocates, Green used rights talk while criticizing CBS for producing a program that did not fairly represent the gay rights movement:

“We want to stress, as your program did not, that *this* exercise of “gay power” is not an act of violence or intimidation of the public or your network; rather it is an exercise of legitimate procedures in the struggles for fair representation. Your report was not felt to be representative of gay and lesbian groups and the struggle for civil rights, and its distortions must be corrected.”

After 1980, rights talk attached to media campaigns completely disappeared. *GCN* letter writers would occasionally write to express dissatisfaction with media portrayals of LGBTQ people; however, the furor and rights talk inspired by *Windows* and *Cruising* subsided once the movies left theaters.

The most controversial event of the 1980s, that had the broadest impact on the LGBTQ community, was the AIDS epidemic. The AIDS epidemic had an incredibly devastating effect on the LGBTQ-identified people, and would shape activist approaches taken for decades to come. According to Eaklor, “the apparent public and government apathy over AIDS acted as a catalyst to unite people identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 178). The epidemic first made national news in 1981, or, more specifically, on June 6th, 1981, when *The San Francisco Chronicle* ran a story entitled “A Pneumonia that Strikes Gay Males” (Eaklor, 2008). Because the disease first emerged as an LGBTQ issue in 1981, discussions of it did not appear in any of the *GCN* letters in 1980. However, following the naming of the disease in 1982, the identification of the HIV virus in 1984, and the deaths of many gay men, the letters published in *GCN* expressed deep concern and, even, hysteria over the growing epidemic. This hysteria was fueled by a general public attitude that blamed the disease on gay men and refused to provide viable assistance to the LGBTQ community. The hostility directed towards gay men as a result of the disease is perhaps best exemplified in Senator Jesse Helms’s Anti-Gay AIDS Legislation, passed in 1988, which restricted “federal AIDS funds only to educational materials that promoted monogamous (heterosexual) marriage” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 182).

The AIDS epidemic and the devastating crisis it created for LGBTQ-identified people permeated the majority of letters published in *GCN* in 1984 and 1988. Letter writers frequently attached rights talk to virtually all discussions of AIDS/HIV as their community experienced a debilitating disease that mainstream society refused to acknowledge. For instance, letter writers used rights talk while discussing the impact of AIDS/HIV on different communities – communities impacted beyond the LGBTQ population. In a *Speaking Out* letter written by the U.S. PROStitutes collective in the September 3, 1988 issue, the collective used rights talk while referring to both sex worker rights and AIDS/HIV:

“Far from preventing the spread of AIDS, bills like [California’s Bronzan bill] can only penalize poor women further for refusing poverty, and push us further underground, making it harder to gather information about AIDS and to reach women and men who may need medical help. The issue of mandatory testing for people involved in prostitution has serious implications for everyone’s right to free confidential health care; to a private life of their choosing; and for human, legal, and civil rights generally. If it’s prostitute women today, who’s next?”

Here, the collective’s letter used an appeal to rights in order to encourage *GCN*’s readers to oppose a bill mandating AIDS testing for those convicted of prostitution. Furthermore, in a *Speaking Out* letter written by Janice Irvine in in the May 7, 1988 issue of *GCN*, Irvine used rights talk while criticizing the medical discourse around AIDS. Irvine argues that the medical discourse does not differentiate between men and women and, hence, does not acknowledge that men are overrepresented in awareness campaigns and research in comparison to women (particularly lesbian women):

“Lesbians experience a particular configuration of contradictions with respect to AIDS. Since we are often subsumed under the overarching category of “homosexuals,” we too are the targets of spiraling homophobia and AIDS-related gay-bashing. On the other hand, AIDS is much less efficiently spread by female-to-female contact. Although this has not catapulted lesbians into the “good girl” realm, it has rendered us and our sexuality virtually invisible in this epidemic.... A medicalized discourse on AIDS leaves us with body parts, diseases, statistics, and the plight of the individual people divorced from any social context. The medial model is empiricism is couched in the dominant ideology. It is a refusal to deal with issues of civilrights....”

In addition to letters that discussed the AIDS epidemic and its relationship the sex worker and lesbian communities, letters also used rights talk while referring to the AIDS epidemic in the prison community. In a letter published in *Community Voices* on March 5, 1988, and written by prison inmate Adam Starchild, Starchild discusses the impact of a mandatory testing on the incarcerated. According to the letter, those who were diagnosed with HIV while in prison in 1988 (under mandatory testing, due to President Reagan’s mid-1987 executive order) were not released until their mandatory release date. This meant that early release was withheld for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in Starchild’s prison:

“Even before this implementation of the policy was made, I started to write dozens of ‘civil rights’ and legal aid groups, trying to get help to oppose the President’s executive order in court. So far, not one group has shown any interest. Don’t these people realize that if prisoners can be held beyond the end of their sentence solely because they test positive, it won’t be long until the precedent can be used to detain anyone who tests positive?”

As the above excerpts indicate, rights talk was used to gain support for AIDS/HIV related grievances that impacted different populations within the LGBTQ community.

The preceding discussion demonstrates that LGBTQ people who wrote letters to *GCN* used rights talk across a wide variety of issues, on opposite sides of the same issue, in support of different political perspectives, while discussing AIDS/HIV issues in relation to different segments of the LGBTQ community, and while addressing issues that were not clearly aligned with litigation campaigns. In other words, that rights talk adapted to different issues and perspectives over time and, hence, does not appear to constrain issue salience within the LGBTQ population.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of my content analysis of *GCN*’s letters to the editor columns in 1980, 1984, and 1988 demonstrate that rights talk alone likely did not limit the LGBTQ community’s agenda to legal rights claims that fail to challenge structural inequalities and state power. Instead, rights talk arose around both legal grievances and ordinary political grievances as they emerged as important issues from between 1980 and 1988. The community attached rights talk to almost every issue: to arguments on both sides of a given issue, while comparing LGBTQ struggles to the struggles of racial minorities, to discussions of political candidates and parties, and to issues that both emerged and disappeared over time. These findings challenge the argument that rights talk necessarily limits political activism within communities. Instead, the data indicates that the LGBTQ community continued to attached rights talk to a variety of both legal and ordinary political issues throughout the 1980s, with the frequency of rights talk and issues varying each year.

There may be some issues that rights talk does not readily attach to, but, given the data presented above, it is difficult to imagine what these issues might be. Based on the results presented in the preceding section, this section will argue the following: (1) that scholarship that argues that litigation is determinative is problematic because it fails to acknowledge that rights talk, a measure of how communities engage in legal language, is dynamic rather than static and is frequently attached to ordinary political rather than purely legal issues, and (2) that, given the adaptability of rights talk, rights language alone is likely not connected to forcing formal legal rights claims, like same-sex marriage onto the LGBTQ community’s agenda. Instead, organizational activists, lawyers, and/or external social and political events may have played a greater role in shifting the LGBTQ populations towards a focus on the right to marriage.

Rights critiques suggest that rights discourse is deterministic, that it limits the LGBTQ population’s collective interests to a small number of issues while marginalizing others (Spade, 2011; Eng, 2010; Butler, 2004; Brown, 1995). Spade (2011) makes this argument, for example, by asserting that the LGBTQ population’s attention on legal tactics and rights discourse contributed to the emergence of same-sex marriage as a major issue in the LGBT Rights Movement instead of non-legal solutions to the real violence faced by LGBTQ racial minorities and transgender persons. However, the research presented in this study delineates an alternative narrative respecting rights discourse. Rights talk may not limit the LGBTQ community’s agenda to formal legal rights claims; instead, rights discourse from the bottom-up is malleable and can attach to a wide variety of issues, including issues that are non-legal in nature. For example, LGBTQ community members who wrote in *Community Voices* and *Speaking Out* from 1980 to 1988 used rights language while discussing the relationship between the struggles of LGBTQ-identified peoples and racial minorities (including racial minorities within the LGBTQ community), while advocating for political candidates, while encouraging the social recognition of the AIDS epidemic, and while protesting negative depictions of lesbians and gay men in the media. Each of these issues did not address litigation or formal legal processes. Instead, rights language represented the politicization of a community’s call for social recognition.

Furthermore, this study reveals that rights talk is dynamic and malleable (Lovell, 2012). Rights talk is adaptable in that it readily attaches to perceived community grievances as they arise. For instance, rights talk occurred with greater frequency with the AIDS epidemic, gradually increasing in prominence from 1980 to 1984 to 1988. Similarly, rights talk appeared following media discussions during the protests of *Cruising* and *Windows* in 1980 and disappeared from media discussions in 1984 and 1988 in both letters to the editor columns. This suggests that rights talk likely arises alongside issues that gain salience due to external events that impact a population.

Even though rights talk is dynamic rather than static, rights is still constraining in other respects. In other words, the findings reported in this study do not indicate that rights talk is incapable of constraining a community. Rather, the findings indicate that rights talk is not connected to agenda setting and that adopting rights talk does not preclude the adoption of new issues over time as communities respond to the rise of new circumstances and events. Like other linguistic means of identifying a collective grievance, rights talk enables minority groups to define their goals, and, in doing so, open themselves to language appropriation, or attacks from counter-movements. Language appropriation is most apparent in the use of “special rights” claiming done by LGBTQ community opponents. “Special rights” claims essentially argue that when LGBTQ community members assert that laws need to be changed to realize equal treatment, these individuals are asking for *more* rights than the average American receives. This type of rights talk “infuses conservative political action with nationalistic ardor…[and] convinces [conservatives] that their opposition is necessary for protecting the American way of life” (Dudas, 2005, p. 725). Through “special rights” claiming, counter-movement populations can organize against minority communities and appropriate rights talk for their own purposes (Dudas, 2005; Goldberg-Hiller & Milner, 2003; Goldberg-Hiller, 2002). In other words, rights talk can be constraining because it provides a community with a language to define itself that can then be appropriated by those who oppose that community’s interests.

Yet, despite of the fact that rights discourse can be constraining, this study demonstrates that rights talk is not deterministic. Instead, rights talk is constitutive in a strategic sense (McCann, 1994; Goldberg-Hiller, 2002). Rights talk is a resource or a tool kit that is readily available and adaptable as a means of defining and identifying collective grievances. In the study presented in this paper, rights talk attached to a variety of non-legal avenues: it was used during protests and used to encourage the endorsement of political parties and campaigns. The data, hence, suggests that there is nothing intrinsic about rights talk that limits a community’s ability to use an array of political and legal avenues for social change or limits a community’s vision to legal issues alone. Rights talk appears to be a malleable linguistic vehicle, which becomes constraining only when state actors or other external forces reject a minority community’s use of rights to define a given collective grievance as, for instance, LGBTQ community opponents have attempted to do through an appropriation of rights talk via “special rights” claiming.

Consequently, this study supports the contention that rights language is dynamic rather than static. The idea that rights language is dynamic is based in Wittgenstein’s theory of language, which holds that language is an activity that can hold multiple, conflicting meanings and is not fixed at a particular moment in time (Wittgenstein, 1953). McCann (1994) applies Wittgenstein theory to rights language, arguing that rights language is (a) indeterminate in that it is adaptable and changes over time, and (b) invested with meaning as minority populations use it to negotiate and coalesce around collective grievances. According to McCann, “[w]hen we invoke rights, we shift the character of our demands from the status of mere ‘wants’ to that of ‘entitlements’ deserving greater respect from others” (McCann, 1994, p. 298; see also Polletta, 2000). This seems to be the role that rights language played for the readers of *GCN* in the 1980s. Those who wrote *GCN* used rights language in conjunction with a wide array of issues in an attempt to obtain LGBTQ support for those issues and respect from the greater society. Thus, the use of rights talk was not determinative, but it was also a powerful means of acknowledging and understanding collective wrongs for those within the LGBTQ community in the 1980s.

Finally, one might make some inferences about how rights talk could have influenced the right to marriage based on the data presented here. This study suggests that rights talk is likely not connected to the salience of the right to marriage within the LGBTQ community. It is perfectly plausible that, as with all of the issues discussed in this study, same-sex marriage became salient as a result of external forces other than formal legal processes. For example, the right to marriage might have become a major issue in the LGBTQ community as a result of the community’s perceived need to distance itself from non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality following the AIDS epidemic. Further, same-sex marriage may have become a salient issue amongst the LGBTQ community as a result of the gradual “mainstreaming” of lesbians and gay men or a greater desire for social acceptance over the difference that characterized the LGBTQ Rights Movement in the 1980s. As a result, in order to conclude that the law is related placing same-sex marriage on the LGBTQ community’s agenda, research must look at external social and political forces in addition to formal legal processes and the roles that lawyers and organizational actors have played in the LGBTW Rights Movement over time.

Because this study focuses on issues of importance to LGBTQ people in the 1980s, in order to more delve into the connection between rights and same-sex marriage, further research is needed. A future study might look at how the LGBTQ population discussed same-sex marriage in the 1990s through 2013 by focusing on secondary historical accounts of the social, political, and legal developments surrounding same-sex marriage, interviewing activists involved in the campaign for same-sex marriage, and analyzing additional LGBTQ news sources to see how the population discussed marriage during this time period.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper argues that one must look beyond rights talk to determine whether or not rights discourse results in the narrowing of the LGBTQ agenda to formal legal rights claims. Right discourse is dynamic and adaptable and, within the LGBTQ population, has been attached to arguments on both sides of issues, to discussions that compare LGBTQ minority struggles to those of racial minorities, to political issues, and to issues that both emerge and disappear over time. This paper supports these arguments by presenting a content analysis of letters to the editor published in the *Community Voices* and *Speaking Out* columns of *GCN*, the first lesbian and gay community weekly, in 1980, 1984, and 1988. The letters are largely limited to left wing, mainstream LGBTQ community members in the 1980s, and, as a result, they are not fully representative of the community as a whole. Still, *GCN*’s letters to the editor are more representative than alternative studies because *GCN*’s staff made efforts to publish minority viewpoints and opinions in the LGBTQ population, with some letters written by LGBTQ prison inmates, those who identified as bisexual, transgender persons, and LGBTQ racial minorities.

Due to the limitations of this paper, additional research is necessary in order to determine the relationship between rights discourse, formal legal rights claims, and community agenda-setting. Future research may look to letters to the editor published in more mainstream newspapers or other LGBTQ newspapers and magazines that concerned LGBTQ issues, LGBTQ rights litigation, and LGBTQ Movement publications over time. Future research should also look to the social and political development of same-sex marriage as a major LGBTQ issue in order to fully understand how rights talk impacted this issue, which did not become a major issue for the LGBTQ-identified people until after the 1980s. Overall, this study supports the argument that rights talk may not constrain communities from adapting to non-legal issues or to alternative issues over time; however, additional research is necessary in order to fully understand the evolution of rights talk within the LGBTQ community today.

**TABLE 1**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Frequency of Issues Overall** | | |
| Issue | Frequency | Percentage |
| Adoption | 5 | 1 |
| AIDS/HIV | 44 | 8 |
| Discrimination Overall | 36 | 6 |
| Hospital Visitation | 2 | 0 |
| Immigration | 10 | 2 |
| Media | 37 | 6 |
| Medical Access | 2 | 0 |
| Military | 7 | 1 |
| Police Trouble/Brutality | 16 | 3 |
| Prison | 52 | 9 |
| Sexuality Overall | 71 | 12 |
| Violence Against Women | 19 | 3 |
| Non-Police Violence | 27 | 5 |
| Feminism | 50 | 9 |
| Political Overall | 126 | 22 |
| Race | 38 | 7 |
| Religion | 15 | 3 |
| Substance Abuse | 5 | 1 |
| Transgender Persons | 6 | 1 |
| Youth | 6 | 1 |
| Other | 8 | 1 |
| Total | 582 | 100 |

*Source: Gay Community News “Speaking Out” and “Community Voices” Letters to the Editor Columns, 1980, 1984, 1988*

**TABLE 2**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Frequency of Issues by Year\*** | | | |
| Issue | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 |
| Adoption | 0 | 4 | 1 |
|  | (0) | (2) | (1) |
| AIDS/HIV | 0 | 6 | 38 |
|  | (0) | (3) | (24) |
| Discrimination Overall | 12 | 12 | 12 |
|  | (6) | (6) | (7) |
| Hospital Visitation | 0 | 0 | 2 |
|  | (0) | (0) | (1) |
| Immigration | 8 | 0 | 2 |
|  | (4) | (0) | (1) |
| Media | 21 | 11 | 5 |
|  | (10) | (5) | (3) |
| Medical Access | 0 | 0 | 2 |
|  | (0) | (0) | (1) |
| Military | 4 | 2 | 1 |
|  | (2) | (1) | (1) |
| Police Trouble/Brutality | 7 | 8 | 1 |
|  | (3) | (4) | (1) |
| Prison | 3 | 28 | 21 |
|  | (1) | (14) | (13) |
| Sexuality Overall | 25 | 39 | 7 |
|  | (12) | (19) | (4) |
| Violence Against Women | 8 | 7 | 4 |
|  | (4) | (3) | (2) |
| Non-Police Violence | 12 | 9 | 6 |
|  | (6) | (4) | (4) |
| Feminism | 30 | 13 | 7 |
|  | (14) | (6) | (4) |
| Political Overall | 57 | 41 | 28 |
|  | (26) | (20) | (17) |
| Race | 18 | 10 | 10 |
|  | (8) | (5) | (6) |
| Religion | 8 | 3 | 4 |
|  | (4) | (1) | (2) |
| Substance Abuse | 0 | 5 | 0 |
|  | (0) | (2) | (0) |
| Transgender Persons | 0 | 2 | 4 |
|  | (0) | (1) | (2) |
| Youth | 2 | 2 | 2 |
|  | (1) | (1) | (1) |
| Other | 1 | 3 | 4 |
|  | (0) | (1) | (2) |
| Total : | 216 | 205 | 161 |
|  | (100) | (100) | (100) |

*\* In this Table the top number outside of parentheses is the frequency and the bottom number within parentheses is the percentage. Source: Gay Community News “Speaking Out” and “Community Voices” Letters to the Editor Columns, 1980, 1984, 1988*

**TABLE 3**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Frequency of Rights Talk By Year** | | | |
|  | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 |
| Total Rights Talk Frequency | 44 | 51 | 47 |
| Total Rights Talk Percentage | 20 | 25 | 29 |
| Total Issues | 216 | 205 | 161 |

*Source: Gay Community News “Speaking Out” and “Community Voices” Letters to the Editor Columns, 1980, 1984, 1988*

**TABLE 4**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Percentage of Issues That Contained Rights Talk Per Year** | | | |
| Issue | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 |
| Adoption | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| AIDS/HIV | 0 | 17 | 24 |
| Discrimination Overall | 42 | 42 | 42 |
| Hospital Visitation | 0 | 0 | 50 |
| Immigration | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| Media | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Medical Access | 0 | 0 | 50 |
| Military | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| Police Trouble/Brutality | 29 | 25 | 100 |
| Prison | 13 | 14 | 24 |
| Sexuality Overall | 32 | 23 | 50 |
| Violence Against Women | 13 | 14 | 0 |
| Non-Police Violence | 8 | 22 | 17 |
| Feminism | 10 | 23 | 43 |
| Political Overall | 50 | 41 | 26 |
| Race | 6 | 50 | 30 |
| Religion | 25 | 33 | 0 |
| Youth | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Substance Abuse | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Transgender Persons | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | 100 | 33 | 0 |

*Source: Gay Community News “Speaking Out” and “Community Voices” Letters to the Editor Columns, 1980, 1984, 1988*

**TABLE 5**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Frequency of Issues that Contained Rights Talk\*** | | | |
| Issue | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 |
| Adoption | 0/0 | 0/0 | 1/1 |
| AIDS/HIV | 0 | 1/6 | 9/38 |
| Discrimination Overall | 5/12 | 5/12 | 5/12 |
| Immigration | 2/8 | 0/0 | 0/2 |
| Hospital Visitation | 0/0 | 0/0 | 1/2 |
| Media | 1/21 | 0/11 | 0/5 |
| Medical Access | 0/0 | 0/0 | 1/2 |
| Military | 1/4 | 0/2 | 0/1 |
| Police Trouble/Brutality | 2/7 | 2/8 | 1/1 |
| Prison | 1/3 | 4/28 | 5/21 |
| Sexuality Overall | 8/25 | 9/39 | 3/6 |
| Violence Against Women | 1/8 | 1/7 | 0/4 |
| Non-Police Violence | 1/12 | 2/9 | 1/6 |
| Feminism | 3/30 | 3/13 | 3/7 |
| Political Overall | 14/28 | 17/41 | 15/57 |
| Race | 1/18 | 5/10 | 3/10 |
| Religion | 2/8 | 1/3 | 0/4 |
| Substance Abuse | 0/0 | 0/0 | 0/5 |
| Transgender Persons | 0/0 | 0/2 | 0/4 |
| Youth | 0/2 | 0/2 | 0/2 |
| Other | 1/1 | 1/3 | 0/4 |

*\*In this table, the first number before the slash is the number of issues that contained rights talk and the number after the slash is the total number of recorded issues. Source: Gay Community News “Speaking Out” and “Community Voices” Letters to the Editor Columns, 1980, 1984, 1988*

**APPENDIX I**

**ISSUES**

*These are policy discourses or issues that are mentioned in a letter. They may or may not be connected to a rights discourse and a single letter can encompass multiple issues. The definitions of the issues are as follows:*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Adoption | Articles that mention the adoption of minor children and adults by LGBTQ couples (married, not married, domestic partners, designated beneficiaries, civil unions, etc.) or by an LGBTQ individual |
| AIDS/HIV | Articles that mention HIV or AIDS in any way including reporting on films, reports, or books on HIV/AIDS. |
| Anti-Marriage (DID NOT APPEAR IN *GCN*) | This is a permutation of the non-marital relationships policy discourse. However, this discourse is concerned with a rejection of heterosexual norms (marriage). This discourse includes all articles that, in some way, discuss the need to reject marriage. |
| Custody **(DID NOT APPEAR IN *GCN*)** | Custody disputes involving LGBTQ couples (married, not married, domestic partners, designated beneficiaries, civil unions, etc.), a couple with a heterosexual and an LGBTQ parent, and third party custody disputes (involving the state, grandparents, siblings, other family members, friends, etc.) |
| Discrimination Education | Discrimination in the educational setting, including, but not limited to: refusal to admit into a primary, secondary, post-secondary, or graduate institution and discrimination in the distribution of education-based funding packages. Do not include discrimination in teaching or educational jobs (include this under employment discrimination). |
| Discrimination Employment | Discrimination in the employment setting (non-military), including, but not limited to: lack of job availability, failure to hire, firing, unequal pay, and forcing an individual to leave due to harassment in the workplace. |
| Discrimination Housing | Discrimination in housing including, but not limited to: evictions, lack of housing availability, restrictive covenants, and forcing an individual to leave due to neighborhood harassment. |
| Discrimination Service | Discrimination in public accommodations (restaurants, bars, hotels, etc.) including, but not limited to: failure to serve, arrests, and raids. This policy discourse is designed to account for discrimination in LGBTQ bars (e.g. Stonewall). Also includes discrimination in immigration. |
| Discrimination Sex | Discrimination on the basis of sex – for this type of discrimination, check multiple policy areas if at all possible. For instance, an event may constitute discrimination based on sex and employment discrimination (for example, a woman could be fired from her job because she is pregnant – this is discrimination based on sex in the employment arena, as a result, it covers discrimination in two settings: sex and employment) |
| Discrimination Generally | Use this category whenever it is unclear what type of discrimination an article is referring to or if the article refers to multiple types of discrimination. If multiple types of discrimination are listed, count them individually, not in this category (may collapse later). |
| Hospital Visitation | Instances in which an LGBTQ individual is prevented from visiting his or her partner in the hospital because the individual and partner’s relationship is not legally or socially recognized. |
| Immigration | All issues having to do with immigration, including: discrimination (i.e., refusing to grant visas to LGBTQ individuals). |
| Media (Music, Film, Art, etc.) | This issue encompasses references to lack of LGBTQ representation or inaccurate LGBTQ media outlets, including music, film, art, and literature. Also included in this issue are discussions of media and art forms produced by LGBTQ artists. |
| Medical Access | This category is designed to capture the refusal to provide medical treatment, particularly with respect to the AIDS epidemic |
| Military | Discrimination in the military setting of all kinds including, but not limited to the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy, employment discrimination and benefits related discrimination. |
| Police Trouble/Brutality | This category is designed to include all events or incidents that have to do with police harassment. Include all arrests in this category (although arrests may apply to multiple categories – for instance, Stonewall Raids – arrests are would be placed under police trouble and discrimination service). |
| Prison | This category encompasses all grievances that are specific to the prison environment, including but not limited to: discriminatory practices, mail policies, prison guard violence, and prison inmate violence. |
| Sexual (Man/Boy) | This category refers to all issues related to man/boy sexual practices by authors who both support and oppose these practices. |
| Sexual (Marriage) | This category includes all attempts and failures to legally recognize LGBTQ legally relationships as marriages (non-marital relationships are included in item 11 below) |
| Sexual (Non-Marital Relationships) | This category encompasses all attempts for the legal recognition of LGBTQ relationships outside of marriage, including: civil unions, domestic partnerships, and designated beneficiaries. |
| Sexual (Public) | This issue includes all references to public sexual relations, specifically sexual relations in public parks, public restrooms, bars, bathhouses, and other places of public accommodation. |
| Sexual (S &M) | This issue encompasses all references to bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism or sadism and masochism sexual practices. It includes discussions that both support and opposes these practices. |
| Sexual (Sodomy) | This issue refers to all references to sodomy specifically including struggles for the decriminalization of sodomy, including the sodomy cases (Bowers v. Hardwick and Lawrence v. Texas). Although the sexual issues listed above obviously encompass sodomy, this category is limited to discussions of sodomy alone. |
| Sexual (Generally) | This category is reserved for discussions of sexual liberty or sexual intercourse generally. |
| Transgender Persons | This category refers to all issues relating to the trans\* community, including references to transgender persons, those who identify as transsexuals or transvestites, and gender-fluid persons who identify with the trans\* community. |
| Violence Against Women | Events concerning violence against women such as: domestic violence, rape, sex trafficking, date rape, etc. |
| Violence General | This category is designed to account for all violent events/incidents that do not clearly fall within the other categories. Specifically, this category is meant to encompass private hate crimes. Public hate crimes (i.e., hate crimes carried out by police agencies) should be coded under #17 –Police Trouble/Brutality. |
| Feminism/Women’s Issues Generally | This is designed to pick up those discourses that appear to exclusively represent the interests of the Women’s Rights Movement. This includes discussions of feminism/feminist ideals, violence against women, sexist portrayals of women, etc. Does Not Include Discrimination Sex or Violence Against Women (may collapse these into this category later) |
| Political (Candidate; Party) | This category encompasses all references to political candidates and parties, specifically, discussions of political candidates and parties that represent, do not represent, and/or partially represent the LGBTQ community (or parts of the LGBTQ community). Also included in this category are references to socialism and communism. |
| Political (Legislation) | This category encompasses all references to pro and anti-LGBTQ legislation. I primarily created this category in order to code for discussions of gay rights legislation that do not clearly fall within any of the above categories. However, discussions of anti-discrimination legislation or pro-sodomy legislation are also included in this category. These discussions will, thus, be coded under two categories (or more depending on the number of issues mentioned). |
| Political (Movement) | This category encompasses all discussions that specifically mention the LGBTQ or gay movement as well as criticisms of the movement and its perceived focus. I primarily created this category in order to code for movement discussions that do not clearly fall within any of the other categories. However, as with the Political (Legislation) issue, it is possible for a discussion to receive two codes – both for Political (Movement) and another issue, such as one of the Discrimination or Sexual issue categories. |
| Political (Protest) | This category encompasses all discussions of political protests. It serves the same function as the Political (Legislation) category with respect to political protests. |
| Race | This category includes all discussions of race as it relates to the LGBTQ community, specifically, discussions of racial minorities within the LGBTQ community and comparisons of struggles for LGBTQ and racial minority rights. |
| Religion | This issue encompasses all references to religion as it relates to the LGBTQ community, including both criticism of a religion’s impact on the community and letters from religious leaders that discuss the LGBTQ community. |
| Other | This category is meant to include all discussions of issues that do not seem to fit clearly within the above categories. |
| Sexual (Pornography) | This category refers to all discussions of attempts to censure pornography and all criticisms of attempts to censure pornography. |
| Youth | This issue includes all references to LGBTQ youth, including discussions of bullying. |
| Sexual (Prostitution) | This category encompasses all references to prostitution, including both pro and ant-prostitution rallies and conferences. |
| Substance Abuse | This issue includes all references to substance abuse in the LGBTQ community, including discussions of Lesbians and Gay men who contract HIV/AIDS through substance abuse. |

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1. Even though *GCN* included letters to the editor from historically marginalized members of the LGBTQ community, it’s staff members were not very diverse in terms of race (Hoffman, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Bromfield Educational Foundation was originally called Gay Community News, the same name as the paper, in 1973; however, the organization was forced to change its name in 1982, to eliminate the word “gay,” when it had difficulty achieving non-profit status. It is believed that this is the reason that it took the organization so long to achieve non-profit status (Northeastern University, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I coded for the following issues: adoption; AIDS/HIV; custody; anti-marriage; discrimination in education, employment, housing, service, sex discrimination, and discrimination generally (collapsed into discrimination overall in the results section); hospital visitation; immigration; media; medical access; military; police trouble and brutality; prison; man/boy love, marriage, non-marital relationships, public sex, dominance and submission or sadism and masochism sexual practices, sodomy, pornography, prostitution, and sexual practices generally (collapsed into sexuality overall in the results section); transgender issues; violence against women; violence generally (i.e., non-police hate crimes); feminism and women’s issues; political party or candidate, legislation, political movement, and political protest (collapsed into political overall in the results section); race; religion; youth; and substance abuse. I also included an “other” category for those issues that did not clearly fall within a category. The anti-marriage and custody issues did not appear in any letters in *GCN*, so they are not reported in the results section below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *GCN* included a prison pen pals section and published letters from LGBTQ prison inmates in its letters to the editor column. Prisoner’s who wrote to *GCN* sometimes identified with man/boy love segments of the LGBTQ community. However, it is entirely possible that these prisoners were, in fact, in prison for child sex crimes and wrote into the paper with the hopes of obtaining sympathy from the LGBTQ community. As a result, it is possible that man/boy love segments of the LGBTQ community would have rejected any alignment with these prison inmates. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Because my I sampled letters from 1980 to 1988, the *GCN* letter writers did not discuss the Massachusetts Gay Civil Rights Bill, which Dukakis signed into law in 1989 (Cicchino, et al., 1991, p. 590). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)