

## National Coming Out Day: Come Out for What?

by Hannah “Scout” Anvar

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Everyone that exists “outside of the closet” has a few pressing coming out stories. Contrary to popular belief, the experience of coming out with your gender identity and sexuality cannot be truly conveyed within a single punchline story, but rather a series of events and introspective epiphanies. My coming out story began in October of 2013—the year the metaphorical “closet” closed in on me tighter than I could resist and six months before I had the courage to come out formally. The leaves were changing colors, and the season had snuck up on me. To avoid coming to terms with my true self, I busied myself organizing my wardrobe instead of my identity.

Once I finally decided I was ready to come out to my parents, I crept up behind the living room couch as they watched the daily news, backed away, paced back and forth, panicked, then put it off for weeks. I didn't sleep for days and composed seven versions of the same coming-out letter in an email (since the thought of conversational confrontation chilled me to the bone.) My mind raced with questions that entire week. *Will they kick me out? Will they still love me? Will I have to tell my friends? Will they accept me? Will they turn away from me?* I had talked myself in circles and convinced myself that my identity was just a phase I would grow out of, which was blatantly

untrue. Thus, I reasoned that the email was, in fact, a step in the right direction for me. After deliberating over each word in my coming-out note, I finally pressed send. Once I reached that point of no return, I was filled with regret and rushed to a friend's house. I came out to her before even exchanging pleasantries, blurting out the words, “I'm here, I'm queer, and I might need a place to hide out for a few days.” She hugged me in a way that could have ended wars, yet said nothing outside of her teary-eyed smile.

This was my reality, something no coming out campaign could ever convey, something no heterosexual or cisgender individual could understand. I was lucky enough to have a solid support system once my parents came forward to speak to me about my identity, embracing their misunderstandings and allowing me to express my gender and sexuality outwardly, as long as I did not “shove it in their faces” — a phrase I'll never understand. However, many people are not as fortunate as I am. Now, I continuously come out. When meeting new people, I must immediately weigh the pros and cons of coming out or



*Members of the University of Toronto's Engineering Skule Community marching Toronto's 2014 Pride parade.*

expressing my gender outwardly. While my immediate family knows of my gender and sexuality, I still had the rest of the world to email, so to speak. Nonetheless, coming out, for me, was not a simple Facebook post, rainbow cake, or Youtube video, and coming out to the people around me is an integral aspect of my becoming and ever-growing identity. For society to move forward and for the social conditions for queer bodies to improve, we must all recognize “the closet” as a means of marginalizing and commodifying the LGBTQAI+ experience. It is the media’s contribution to the unfair perpetuation of negative stereotypes on queer bodies. The institution of coming out needs to be recognized as an ongoing, complex, personal experience.

Being queer and belonging to the LGBTQAI+ community means one either does not fit on the male/female gender binary or follow social norms of heterosexual preferences. With this being said, even individuals belonging to the LGBTQAI+ community can participate in heterosexuality and cisgenderism. The LGBTQAI+ acronym includes people who identify as lesbian, gay, intersex, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, or any other gender or sex that does not conform to the status quo of either male or female. Queer-identifying individuals, specifically trans\* or intersex individuals, do not fit on either side of the sexual binary system associated with reproductive anatomy and chromosomal makeup. People with XX chromosomes are socially assigned female and those with XY chromosomes are assigned male, while those who do not undergo sexual reaffirmation surgery or are born with chromosomal mutations are considered intersex or, more insultingly, “confused,” whether their genetic makeup is XXY, XYY, XXX, or a number of other possibilities (Nair).

As a genderfluid, queer-identifying individual raised within many intolerant groups that left me feeling forcibly assimilated into either traditional Iranian culture or traditional western culture, both marginalizing the LGBTQAI+ commu-

nity, it seemed unsafe for me to “out” myself within my social sphere. However, the media had left me under the impression that coming out was a vital step in my development. So basically, I had the impression that to be accepted by the LGBTQAI+ community, I had to identify my sexuality/gender openly and risk being labeled and ostracized by my cisgender and cissexual friends. Was advertising my sexual preferences supposed to “free” me? I don't think so! How free can a queer individual truly be when the life expectancy of LGBTQAI+ individuals has decreased steadily for the past twenty years (Nichols)? From my experiences, I am opposed to the entire concept of a national holiday (National Coming Out Day) that not only puts pressure on individuals to declare their identities to a potentially intolerant social sphere but also strokes the collective ego of self-proclaimed “allies” who inexcusably “out” people against their will on this day, commodifying their queer experience.

Surely I’m not the only queer individual opposed to the institution of National Coming Out Day (NCOD). After speaking with my LGBTQAI+ peers and doing some research, I found a surprising amount of solidarity against NCOD. On a simple Google search, out of the top 15 results, only one personal blog entry was in favor of NCOD. Now to assess the institution of Coming Out Day, I needed to first explore how the philosophy of “the closet” marginalizes queer individuals, why this can be detrimental to queer individuals, and how National Coming Out Day campaigns cause counterproductive perpetuation of the gender and sexuality norms.

Media outlets are arguably the biggest contributors to deepening the social expectations that queer individuals must identify themselves (specifically television appearances and advertisements). James Nichols, an author and writer for *The Huffington Post*, highlights an online movement sparked by National Coming Out Day. The “Closets are for Clothes” movement attempts to reclaim the limiting concept of “the closet” and

empower others to do the same. This movement seems genuine on the surface—promoting coming out of the closet as a liberating rite of passage, giving many the opportunity to be open about their identities in solidarity with other members and supporters. However, this popular Youtube campaign was sponsored by two organizations: Heterosexuals for Same-Sex Equality and The People Project (Nichols). These organizations sought to show the LGBTQAI+ community that coming out can be empowering. However, it is an experience they will never fully conceptualize, as heteronormative people, since their identities match those assigned to them at birth, leaving no sexual discrimination in their way.

Dictating how or when someone should come out is not an acceptable way to show support for the queer community. The media, whether it be ad campaigns, television shows, magazines, or social networking websites, forces us out of a metaphorical closet (a space which they forced us into) without proper support or validation, into a social sphere of wandering eyes, where curiosity about queer "otherness" overpowers respect.

Coming out of the closet is a concept and term coined in 1988 that promoted celebrating and advertising one's sexuality and gender, which seems vital on paper, but in practice it has evolved from a way to label oneself to a way to be labeled by others in a derogatory way. The harmful nature of NCOD is arguably rooted in the formation of the "closet." In the sixth chapter of *Sexual Identities and the Media: An Introduction*, Wendy Hilton-Morrow and Kathleen Battles touch on the harmfulness of the restricting implications of the closet, perpetuated by subliminal messages in consumer culture. Media has been instrumental in structuring the closet as a metaphorical and physical frame for the "gay experience" as an oppressive experience, while shaping the way consumers perceive queer individuals. A closet creates an image of an enclosure, surrounded by heterosexual cisgender individuals

who had a hand in creating the emotional, social, political and mental separation between heteronormative folk and queer folk.

This separation and isolation within the closet marginalizes the LGBTQAI+ community both from the legal system and the constructs of society. After they marginalized queers into a metaphorical closet, they expect us to come out on command for the convenience of others? Announcing one's personal identity is a choice, not a necessity. Any cisgender, heterosexual individual would agree that it is inappropriate to openly ask about their anatomy and sexual preferences; yet media continuously misrepresents the queer community and encourages coming out as if it is a struggle that everyone can understand. Media (including movies, ad campaigns, commercials, newscasts, etc.) traditionally depict queer individuals negatively, and these messages subliminally shape the way all people view us. This poor representation conditions society to perceive LGBTQAI+ individuals in a negative light (Hilton-Morrow and Battles).

This begs the question, where did hatred for the LGBTQAI+ community surface and why? The first appearance of the term homosexual was in 1869 on a German pamphlet encouraging the repeal of sexually and martially restrictive laws in America. During a time when the existence of LGBTQAI+ people was considered taboo and dangerous, the media gained a foothold in constructing whether society will accept or reject the community. Since society had yet to understand or respect queer individuals (which they arguably still haven't), the media took the responsibility of instructing them how to present themselves to the world in a socially acceptable way.

By endorsing National Coming Out Day, heteronormative individuals protect the harmful and engrained gender binary while forcing anyone outside of this binary to label themselves, according to their sexual preferences (information that should not be of any public interest). This leads

people to psychologically associate queer individuals with sexual deviance. This is exemplified when evaluating the many trans\* (referring to either transgender or transsexual individuals) roles in television shows for both children and adults. The Powerpuff Girls for example, is a relatively new children's cartoon about a group of very powerful girls protecting their town from chaos caused by one of the shows villains. "Him," notorious for being the most deviant enemy of theirs, is a red-skinned, androgynous (or genderless appearing) individual that embodies a multitude of negative stereotypes for trans\* individuals. He is dressed in feminine clothes and wears makeup that matches his high heel shoes (all typical attributes of femininity which are not expected to be seen on a masculine individual). Young viewers are then conditioned very early to believe that this evil "creature" is synonymous with being or appearing trans\*/non binary (Bychowski). Media as a whole wrongly portrays non-binary individuals as dangerous enigmas. Last time I checked, neither my gender nor sexuality is dangerous. The painful influence this has on dysphoria, or the discomfort in one's physical form or skin which is common in the queer and trans\* community, is very strong. Due to the social pressures keeping queer individuals closeted and uncomfortable, coming out day doesn't sound palatable.

One of the most precarious institutions of coming out for me was embodying my queerness within my clothing choices because many media outlets teach everyone to stereotype queer-appearing individuals negatively. The daily struggle then deepens: should I really wear these pants? How will I style my ever-shortening hair without fueling others' negative perceptions of my gender and my persona? The media's influence on people's views on societal constructs of gender and sexuality is solidified through children's media before the age of seven (when vital

neural pathways begin to take shape). As these young viewers grow into active consumers, it is much more likely for them to be transphobic (Hilton-Morrow and Battles). The media thus has a very strong foothold in creating a social landscape that is becoming increasingly unsafe for LGBTQAI+ individuals.

Poor LGBTQAI+ representation, leading to poor societal perception, has been consistently prevalent in pop culture since the mid 1900s. The biggest shift in the perception of LGBTQAI+ people occurred in America from the 1860s through the 1980s, focusing on how sexual preferences translated into personal identity formation. Within the last ten years, however, a new phenomenon has sparked an indirect tokenization of coming out through the rise of what I will call "ally culture." This new term within the community, "ally," describes cisgender, heterosexual individuals who support the LGBTQAI+ community and promote social change in their favor. Being an ally sounds like an effective way to raise support and awareness for the queer community. Yet some have begun commodifying their allyship and using it as a token to gain respect, while holding on to unyielding, inaccurate perceptions of queer individuals. This can be seen in a problematic *Buzzfeed* (a prominent media platform seen mostly on social media websites) article titled "24 Awesomely Creative Ways to Come Out of the Closet" (Negatu and Karlan). The article depicted rainbow cakes and glittering banners, but the captions to each photograph, although well intended, belittled the struggle of coming out. Scrolling through the misinformation being taught to heteronormative individuals as fact, I realized that those holding the title of "ally" many times have helpful intentions but their actions are inexcusably problematic. Within this article, each coming out experience being exemplified as "cute, brave, and quirky" exhibits just how deeply queer individuals are tokenized. We, as a community, are misunderstood because the

media projects information that most people are unable to fully understand. The article's heteronormative authors did not take into account that coming out is a personal affair and decision many of us make each day. Not only will heteronormative readers now share it with their friends and mistake themselves for allies, while damaging the LGBTQAI+ community, but they will further see NCOD as a positive event, but in many cases it is just the opposite.

These self-identified "allies," rather than changing their behavior or attitudes toward LGBTQAI+ folks, will begin to mistake their allyship as a free pass to target the community since they "care" and "don't intend to be problematic" although this is no excuse for non LGBTQAI+ to use derogative language or discredit the queer experience. This could mean outing their queer friends or using slurs such as "faggot" or even "queer" when in reality, it is not language that they have the right to use on others. Now, what about queer folk in favor of NCOD?

I came across an article written by Yasmin Nair, an "out queer lesbian" that addresses the issue of privacy that is taken away from the LGBTQAI+ community. Nair views NCOD as a way for society and media to point a spotlight at a group of people and believes it takes away the rite of passage as a sacred and personal matter. She goes on to say that it is a way for the media to prove their tolerance toward the LGBTQAI+ community, and, in the process they take away the rights of these people to keep their coming out stories personal. If heteronormative, gender-binary-conforming individuals truly cared for the queer community, they would leave coming out (one of the most difficult and personal decisions a queer individual can make) to the individual instead of turning it into a nationally observed "holiday." By creating a social environment in which coming out of the closet is seen as a social asset or rite of passage, the stories and struggles of those who choose to come out are undermined and falsely advertised.

Many queer individuals are heavily in support of NCOD, as it can be a self actualization process, a rite of passage, and a way to belong to group that is entirely accepting of your identity. Coming out, to me, is a much more complex and integral facet of my daily life. After coming forward to my parents, the task of coming out slowly to my friends and extended family was troubling. It took me three years to feel comfortable disclosing my gender identity and sexuality to the people around me, which is not unusual for most queer individuals. NCOD undermines this entire line of thought and commodifies coming out as a one-time, tokenized event when in reality, it is a personal journey to self acceptance that never truly ends. Each day, queer folk are faced with situations in which they can either out themselves, or hide in an uncomfortably complacent "closet." We are too frequently forced to hold our tongues in the name of safety when we are misgendered by cashiers or referred to by our birth names by our peers simply because changing one's name is "inconvenient" for heteronormative people to respect. Thus coming out day is outdated and far more problematic than helpful for the queer community.

Coming out is both brave and terrifying. Being expected to undergo such a tremendous obstacle simply because of your identity is unfair for the media to dictate to the world. Overemphasizing the need for people to express their gender or sexuality to the world is unwise for all people, including heterosexual cisgender individuals. Coming out can be extremely precarious for some people, especially if their safety is at stake. Even though it can be liberating, immediately celebrated by some groups and families, it can mean the difference between life and death for others. People are encouraged to out themselves to a community with a track record of police brutality and social inequality, targeting LGBTQAI+ people, which is inherently problematic and misleading. Preston Mitchum, a prominent author and member of the queer community, shows their

disdain for the institution of NCOD: “When making a public declaration about one’s sexual orientation and gender identity, some LGBT individuals receive an immediate celebration for displaying enough courage and strength to do so. On the other hand, some testimonies are not warmly received, as illustrated by the countless stories highlighting workplace discrimination, family rejection leading to homelessness, physical violence (particularly against black trans women and gender-nonconforming men), and unfair criminalization of black LGBT youth.” Mitchum’s article was very inclusive, which is rare in this day and age, addressing different genders and sexualities, transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia. Mitchum addressed the contradictions that the media projects into society in addition to the intolerant landscape that it creates for people who choose to come out at all, let alone on this day.

One of the biggest misconceptions of coming out is that it is a once-in-a-lifetime event, when in reality, coming out is one of the most integral aspects of daily life for many LGBTQAI+ individuals. Each time I interact with someone new, I am forced to decide whether coming out will be harmful or beneficial to me. When greeted with the question, “what’s your name?” I feel a huge rush of anxiety that I cannot convey in any other example or context. I changed my name from one that is overtly gendered to one that matches my personality much more comfortably. Since I have not come out to everyone in my social sphere, I have to carefully dance around the immediate impulse of telling people my chosen name rather than my birth-name. The metaphor of the closet, in this case, can be seen as jarringly inaccurate for some individuals who are forced to remain “closeted” for as long as possible, especially with one’s pronouns and self identifiers, like a name change. This is a crossroads that queer people everywhere must come to, and this aspect of the gay experience is not accounted for within the institution of NCOD.

One prevalent example of the ignorant exclusivity and heteronormative influence in some

NCOD supporting ads can be seen in the “We are your neighbors” campaign that surfaced on October 11 2004 (Christensen 16). This campaign included large billboards along a high traffic area in North Carolina depicting cisgender homosexual couples that embodied the American standards of beauty and aesthetics which excluded a vast majority of the LGBTQAI+ community. The community is, after all, more than just the “G” and the “L” and is not exclusively white. These photographs of white cisgender homosexual couples were captioned with the phrase “We are your neighbors” in order to show the community that heteronormativity does not have to be synonymous with commonplace. This type of practice and advertisement theoretically improves the psychological associations made by other community members, but it does not improve the environment for genderqueer, asexual, bisexual, trans\*, or pansexual individuals or people of color to come out. In a 2012 Gallup poll, African Americans were identified as the most prominent group within the LGBTQAI+ community, which is unsettling because the campaign did nothing to pay homage to the community. This under representation could very well be a result of the heteronormative campaign organizers— the Triad Equality Alliance (Christensen 2004). Although the campaign only included homosexuals and disregarded the rest of the LGBTQAI+ community, I concede that it was effective in painting a very clear contextualized example for very large audience (upwards of 70,000 people) to see of how people of different sexual orientations are just regular people.

National Coming out campaigns can, in some cases, raise awareness and create ally-ship to promote the safety and acceptance of LGBTQAI+ individuals. Both the institution of the day and the media’s influence on the perception of these queer folk far outweigh the benefits— most directly through subliminal exposure to negative stereotypes in television shows and advertisement. As an out, genderfluid, pansexual feminine body, I stand in solidarity with other people like me, in opposition of the day for several reasons.

Everyone must remind themselves that the philosophy behind "the closet" marginalizes and commodifies the LGBTQAI+ experience, the media is an unfairly large contributor to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes on queer bodies, and coming out of the closet needs to be recognized as a personal affair rather than breaking news.

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