

Straight news? Queer media and AIDS

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Straight news? Queer media and AIDS (episode 8) CREDITS:

Host/producer: Lewis Raven Wallace

Producer: Ramona Martinez

Guests: John Scagliotti, Steven Thrasher, Sarah Schulman

Theme music: [Dogbotic](#)

Additional music: [Podington Bear](#)

Social media: Roxana Bendezú

Editorial consultant: Phyllis Fletcher

Distributor: Critical Frequency

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United in Anger documentary

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MUSIC (in order of appearance):

- *Chill Accordion + Vibes* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky
- **Easygoing** by Podington Bear
- **Has Pluck** by Podington Bear
- **Degradation** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky

- **Charmed** by Podington Bear
- *Chill Vibe + Snap* by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Juliette** by Podington Bear
- **Gnossienne 1** by Podington Bear
- *Electro Percussion* by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Relinquish** by Podington Bear

TRANSCRIPT:

Ramona Martinez: This is the View from Somewhere, a podcast about journalism with a purpose. I'm Ramona Martinez, the producer. Today's episode is about the history of queer media and coverage of AIDS, and we're so excited to share it with you.

Lewis Raven Wallace: But real quick before we do—this is Lewis with an update on our fundraising campaign. We are getting so close to our big goal, and we have until Thursday morning Feb. 6 to get all the way there. We are depending on you to go to the website, viewfromsomewhere.com click on the big orange button, or find me on Twitter at [lewispants](https://twitter.com/lewispants) and give what you can. And while you're there you can see our really cool puppet show!

Ramona: Also, if you're just listening for the first time, the podcast is serialized which means if you like this one, we'd recommend listening back from the start. Thanks and enjoy the show.

MUSIC: *Chill Accordion + Vibes* by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

Lewis: Gay people love potlucks. It's a thing. And honestly, I kinda hate them, because I have food anxiety AND some social anxiety and like how can you trust everyone to provide enough protein and like not be an asshole???

But I'm gay, and I have been for a long time so...I've gotten used to it. Anyhow, hi, this is the View from Somewhere podcast. I'm Lewis Raven Wallace—and I'm here to tell you about a *different* kind of potluck...one I'm more excited about.

ANNOUNCER: *And now it's time for this week's potluck, imagined and produced by Little John and Andy...*

LH TAPE: *We're here today to talk about Gay Liberation. [Billie Holiday music]*

Lewis: Y'all. How cuuuute is this...a gay radio show, called a potluck cause it's a variety show. It debuted on Boston's rock station, WBCN, in 1973....It was one of the

first queer radio shows ever. It was created by journalist Andy Kopkind, and his boyfriend, John Scagliotti, this guy...

John Scagliotti: So we just turned it into the gay hour from 10 to 11 on Sunday night. And it turned out to be much heavier and I thought it was we were just going to have a good time and put fun stuff on...uh It's called The Lavender Hour.

Lavender Hour tape: *Little Girls in their dresses, pretty curls, flaxen tresses, and I think I'm going to throw up on the floor. Little boys keep fighting angry, running madly, do it gladly, and I don't think I can take it anymore.*

John: So we would string that in with something like David Bowie [laughs] Or whatever, you know, some rock n roll song that we thought was gay-ish along with spoken word from Auden or something like that. Right? But it turned out to be very important stuff. It allowed a lot of young people to go put earphones on and listen to the radio at 10 o'clock at night and hear themselves. So that was important.

JOHN: *None of that music we just heard was explicitly homosexual. Commercial music has been closeted in the same way the audiences have been, until this year, when rock superstars have suddenly begun to come out. It's fantastically exciting for gay people to have their own music to listen to and identify with.*

Lewis: I love that image, of gay kids in the 1970s listening to the Lavender Hour through their headphones and dreaming their way out of their parents' terrible houses...

Theme music

JOHN: *Potluck with the Lavender Hour, will be back right after these messages....*

Lewis: This week on the View from Somewhere, we're peering into queer journalism history...looking at how queer journalists were excluded from the industry—and how they, we have always responded by making our own things. And those things—radio shows, newspapers, documentaries—have turned out to be REALLY important in times of crisis—specifically, the AIDS crisis.

We'll talk to queer journalism luminaries Sarah Schulman and Steven Thrasher. Stay with us and be aware that there is some fun explicit sex stuff straight ahead in just a minute.

MUSIC: Easygoing by Podington Bear

Lewis: As I continued on my own journey away from the myth of objectivity, I found myself wondering more and more...what if objectivity isn't just a wrong idea, but a harmful lie? What if

it's like, opposite day...what about the times when the opposite of detachment...*connection and intimacy* actually get journalists closer to the truth?

A few episodes back, we met Kerry Gruson—the amazing woman who had the accident covering Vietnam vets. And she told me I should look up a friend of hers, John Scagliotti, aka Little John. John and his partner Andrew Kopkind were both longtime media makers...Andy died in 1994. I met John on the Vermont farm they bought together, and turned into a writing retreat...their romance started in Boston...in a very gay 1970s way.

Music: Has Pluck by Podington Bear

John: So we all lived in this sort of great place right around the fens the Fenway.

Lewis: The Fens was actually a gay cruising spot—you could go down there and suck dick after the business guys got off work. Little John got into it...started going to the Fens on the regular...

John: At one point this gorgeous man came in and I followed him into the Fens and he we started having a little sexual encounter and then all of a sudden, I happened to be down a little bit on my knees kind of adoring him when all of a sudden he grabs me by my armpits or arms and lifts me up and says "cops" and the cops used to come in and so he because he was tall he could see the cops coming and other people couldn't. And so we ran out and got to the road and look back and out of this kind of small area maybe 75 to 100 men I had no idea that many people in the fens at this time all come running out and it was a very funny scene to see all these kids, sort of escaping the fence and Andy turned to me and laughed. And I thought oh it is funny. And he said would you like a cup of coffee. And I said sure, it was the first time anyone had ever spoken to me in the six weeks that I had been going to the Fens. And we stayed together from that day on.

Lewis: Andy Kopkind was older than Little John, and it turned out he was a reporter for the New Republic...but he wasn't really out, because you couldn't be. A few years back, when Andy was working for Time magazine in LA, in the 60s, he got caught by the cops in one of these same public sex sweeps. But get this: instead of firing him, Time Magazine required him to go to conversion therapy to try to make him not gay; the magazine *paid for it*.

John: The funny story was that, with the therapist they would do roleplaying, and the therapist would play like he was a stewardess, and Andy's job was to try to pick up the stewardess on the plane...

Lewis: The male therapist would play the stewardess role, oh my god.

John: Andy thought it was very funny...he couldn't believe it, he would have to drop lines, oh, your skirt looks very nice...I don't know how you pick up a woman, I don't think Andy knew either. [laughter]

Lewis: After meeting Andy, John became a journalist and a filmmaker too...and they started creating programming by and for queer people, which was a BIG DEAL even though this was after Stonewall...when the Lavender Hour came out, queerness was still dangerous to even talk about:

John: Everyone agreed that homosexuals are disgusting and horrible. The debate might have been well maybe they shouldn't, they certainly should be put in mental institutions and in hospitals and in jail and they all are child molesters, that was pretty much it at the time when we started out.

Lewis: Throughout the 50s and 60s, gay people—homosexuals they were called—were depicted as sick, psychotic, dangerous. Or at best, just sad. They were also generally cis men; lesbians and trans folks weren't shown at all. The activist movements of the 60s and 70s created a *little* more push and pull, occasional coverage of protests and things like that.

But this marginalization of gay people from mainstream media was a problem for gay people. And it was a problem for *everyone*...when people started dying, and no one knew why.

FUNDRAISING BREAK!!!

LEWIS: Remember when I said “suck dick” on this podcast? God, that's like, living the dream. I mean...the news doesn't *have* to be geared towards the tastes and sensibilities of the most prudish people, right Ramona?

Ramona: That IS one of the problems of objectivity. Objectivity reflects status quo thinking...about sex and sexuality and race and *everything*, really.

Lewis: And on the View from Somewhere we are committed to pushing back—to having fun and learning history and lifting up these non-status-quo stories about journalists you might not have heard of, but should have.

Ramona: It's an antidote to hopelessness in this often hopeless time.

Lewis: And we have some amazing stuff planned for the rest of the season—we're covering public media history, the rise of the right wing, and most importantly,

SOLUTIONS

Ramona: Solutions, people!

Lewis: —what people are doing today to change journalism and make it more people-driven and hopeful.

Ramona: But we can't do that without your help. Our second and *final* Kickstarter campaign is underway and we have a pretty modest goal to get to the end of this season

and pay for our basic costs—living wages for the production team, studios and software, archival footage...

Lewis: There's no other podcast like this one, and we're doing this all independently, with just your support. So if you value this stuff...if you want to hear more of it...you can do something really simple, and REALLY meaningful, by giving in ANY amount now. Most people give 10 or 25 dollars Just go to View from somewhere dot com for that link.

Ramona: THANK YOU!!! View from somewhere dot com

Lewis: Doooo itttttt...

Ramona: Hey Lewis, do you remember when I called SCOTUS a bunch of motherfuckers on this podcast?

Lewis: That was cool. Um. I mean...but it was cool. [laughter] The view from our foul mouths. ...that's a little graphic actually... [laughter]

.....

MUSIC: Charmed by Podington Bear

Lewis: By the early 1980s, coverage of queer people had *started* to improve, but there was still a lot missing.

Sarah Schulman: The New York Times wouldn't use the word gay. There was if you died that you couldn't be survived by anybody.

Lewis: This is Sarah Schulman, she started out in journalism in 1979 and has been an influential queer writer ever since.

Sarah: There was really no coverage I mean the only way that queer people ever could read anything about themselves was by reading this kind of underground movement press.

Lewis: Sarah wrote for queer, feminist and socialist rags, like the Gay Community News out of Boston, and eventually the New York Native, a biweekly gay paper—she became their City Hall reporter in the early 80s...

Sarah: The story at the time was that there was no gay rights bill in New York City. And it took 13 years before that bill was passed. And then in 1981 is when AIDS began.

CLIP [6/17/1982 NBC Robert Bazell]: *"Scientists at the national centers for disease control in atlanta today released the results of a study which shows that the lifestyle of some male homosexuals has triggered an epidemic of a rare form of cancer..."*

Lewis: When AIDS began, it wasn't even called that. No one KNEW what it was or how it spread. People started dying, and no one understood why. And the media, AND

politicians, were really slow to *care*. Because...it was a disease that primarily affected gay men, at least at first. The mayor of New York, Ed Koch, was supposedly a closeted gay man...and lots of gay people were horrified to see him drag his feet on this. Sarah did all kinds of shoeleather coverage those first few years...

Sarah: I covered the closing of the bathhouses in New York City and that's a very interesting story because first of all the fact that I was assigned to cover the closing of the bathhouses is interesting in and of itself because I was never in a bathhouse women were not allowed in bathhouses.

MUSIC: *Chill Vibe + Snap by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

Lewis: For the uninitiated...bathhouses were where gay men to came to hook up; a legal alternative to the public sex Andy Kopkind got busted for. And there was this idea that HIV/AIDS was spreading *because of* bathhouses—which there was no good evidence for. Still, Mayor Koch joined the call for these establishments to be shut down.

CLIP [11/6/1985 News4Manhattan Mary Civiello]:

KOCH: This is a matter that involves a lot of money to these people, they are selling death. Places where death can be distributed, we don't want that go on, but nevertheless, they don't give a damn about it apparently because it's going on, and they're making money."

Darrel Yates Rist: Mayor Koch is an utter hypocrite if that's what he said. This place has had its role in educating people.

Sarah: But the real issue around that was, if we close spaces where people go for sex, how do we get information to people about sex? But you know I was assigned this because everything was so chaotic that journalists themselves were sick and dying. My editor at The Village Voice Robert Massa died and also nobody knew what the stories were.

MUSIC: Juliette by Podington Bear

Lewis: Sarah Schulman was *so close* to this story...because these were her friends, her community dying...

Sarah: It was an overwhelming experience, it was very hard to understand what was going on. People were dying very very very fast like you would see someone and the next thing you knew they'd be dead or you'd just never see someone and then you didn't know if they were dead and...I think one of the things people don't really understand about AIDS is that it was an absolutely horrible disease. You had a total breakdown of your immune system so you know people couldn't eat. Their legs were swollen. They had skin cancers. Their mouths were filled with thrush, which is this white stuff. They had dementia. They had blindness. And so to be young, you know when I started being an

AIDS reporter I was 24, and be surrounded by your generation literally falling apart and suffering and nobody cares. It's very overwhelming. So there was all of that and nobody could see the way out.

Lewis: It was a nightmare. And at first, AIDS was referred to as a “gay cancer.”

Sarah: Now now we know that there's no such thing as ‘gay cancer.’ Cancer is not gay. There's no link between being gay and having cancer. But at the time the two concepts were merged because at that time people believe that homosexuality was biological that it was in fact that homosexuality was the disease and that therefore AIDS was a natural expression of the disease of homosexuality.

Music: Gnosienne 1 by Podington Bear

Lewis: By the end of 1982, nearly 800 people had confirmed cases of AIDS, and the number was rising exponentially. The death rate appeared to be above 50 percent. But the national media was still mostly ignoring it. At that point the New York Times, Sarah Schulman's hometown paper, had done five stories, none of them on the front page. By comparison, in 1982 the Times did four front-page articles, and fifty articles total, on the Chicago Tylenol murders, which killed seven people.

It was a huge failure, to cover a huge story, right in the Times own backyard. But the Times wasn't accountable to the LGBT community...

Steven Thrasher: The New York Times is relatively conservative, if you were to look around, it's gonna have business, it's gonna have apartment listings, it's also going to have sort of small-c conservative framings of political stories.

Lewis: This is Steven Thrasher, a queer journalist and the Daniel H. Renberg Chair of Media Coverage of Sexual and Gender Minorities at Northwestern—he researches AIDS history. He says the alternative weeklies were a really important journalistic counterpoint to outlets like the Times...covering the sphere of deviance, as it were.

Thrasher: And these gay community news things. You might find in those same pages articles about fisting, and sex parties, and communism. Very leftist kind of newspapers with lots of leftist things going on. And a very community focus. Not striving towards a dual both sides sense of objectivity or faux objectivity.

Lewis: And they weren't beholden to homophobic advertisers. The New York Native was the first paper to report on the so-called ‘gay cancer.’ Also, since the first cases were reported in Los Angeles and New York, Thrasher thinks mainstream outlets based there were *more* likely to pay attention—

Thrasher: So I think a lot about how the New York Times, which has had a problematic history covering gay people and HIV and AIDS, but they're still in New York City, and social relationships are important. And you have a lot of reporters, who are around a lot of gay people, some of whom are able to lobby them and say, you should be able to cover this. And some of them who just out of their reporting sensibility and out of their own sense of empathy want to know what's happening in their own town.

Lewis: Physical proximity to the crisis helped get the coverage to happen, but shame, and fear, and just straight-up homophobia played a huge role. It was hard to be *out* in mainstream media, which meant gay people were often afraid to push for better coverage from the inside. And without big outlets making a fuss, it was a struggle to get the attention of the people in power. President Ronald Reagan didn't say the word "AIDS" publicly until September 1985.

REAGAN: "Our battle against AIDS has been like an emergency room operation. We've thrown everything we have into it. We've declared AIDS public health enemy number one. I'm determined that we'll find a cure for AIDS."

Lewis: That same day, he advocated for abstinence education and teaching moral values to kids.

In the first five years of the crisis, while Reagan and so many others were silent, 40,000 people died. And the people closest to it—the journalists closest to it, like Sarah Schulman—seemed to be the only ones speaking out. They were excluded from places like the Times, so they *had* to push from the outside.

Sarah: And so one of the objectives of the AIDS activist movement was to force mainstream media to cover AIDS.

MUSIC: *Electro Percussion by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

Lewis: In 1987, queer activists founded Aids Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP—Schulman joined ACT UP because she saw that just reporting the stories for alternative outlets still wasn't enough.

CLIP: Silence equals death, silence equals death

Lewis: Act Up used all kinds of tactics to get more coverage. They would film protests with camcorders, and literally bring the footage down to television stations to get them to play it.

CLIP: "The government has the resources to deal with the AIDS epidemic and they won't do it unless we force them. So we're trying to force them to deal with the AIDS epidemic. [Reporter:

Tell me who you are and where you're from!] I'm David Stern, I'm a person with AIDS from San Francisco.

Lewis: I watched a 2012 documentary Schulman co-produced, *United in Anger*, about ACT UP...it's all on YouTube. It shows a famous demonstration where activists did a die-in inside of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

CLIP: [sound sound] You're killing us, stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it! We're fighting for your lives too... [MUSIC]

Lewis: Sarah Schulman was there, and she was interviewed by a reporter just after.

CLIP: "I'm Sarah Schulman, I was sitting in a pew and watched the die in, which I think was pretty effective. But when people from ACT UP started standing on pews and screaming, it really alienated the people who were praying, I saw people get very angry and upset. Um I think they felt really violated by that, although the die-in I think was much more effective because it was silent."

Lewis: ACT UP got a lot of attention through these dramatic demonstrations.

Sarah: But then there was also direct action towards the mainstream venues, like, I remember we faxed a mile of black paper to the New York Times when they got their first fax machine or they were act up made a facsimile of the New York Times called *New York Crimes* and put it in their newspaper boxes and because the, the reporting was just terrible.

Lewis: This is sort of a setup question, or a leading question, but what was so terrible about the reporting of the New York times at the time?

Sarah: Well the first thing is they weren't reporting on it. So when the mainstream media finally did start to cover AIDS, they started to create these false dichotomies between innocent victims and guilty victims. And this was purely a creation of the media. So if you were straight and you got AIDS through a blood transfusion you were an innocent victim. If you got AIDS through sex or needle use, you were a guilty victim and they did a lot of damage that way.

Lewis: But even though the coverage could be problematic, getting mainstream outlets to cover AIDS was a goal...because she says reporting for papers like the New York Native could only go so far....

Sarah: When you're writing for a movement newspaper in the 80s or 90s you are influencing activists, you're influencing people in the community, but the people with power are not being influenced. So if you can inform people and then you can participate with those people in creating direct actions that will force the powers that be to confront certain realities then you're carrying it through.

MUSIC: Relinquish by Podington Bear

Lewis: Steven Thrasher thinks coverage of AIDS was a dance between these queer papers and mainstream outlets—and it *mattered* to have both—

Thrasher: The gay community news might write something and the CDC might not respond to them. Then the Times might write something and the CDC will respond to them. Now...the framing of it might be off, might be limiting, might be racist, might be homophobic, might be incomplete BUT there are all these things that the community group can kind of glean from what happened with that exchange, and that gives them the ability to have a bit more information, to ask new questions...and so I think you see that tension and that push and pull alot, in the traditional media and community media of all kinds.

Lewis: Being close to the story helped queer journalists see just how urgent the AIDS crisis was. But because gay people were soooo marginalized, they also had to push, to be journalists AND activists, before bigger outlets would cover these stories at all. They couldn't *afford* detachment—because being detached in this case too often meant staying silent.

CLIP: We'll never be silent again, ACT UP!

Lewis: These journalists succeeded, in a lot of ways. ACT UP and all the many queer media activists before and after, got coverage and attention. Changed the narrative.

But this question of proximity—how close we are to the story, and whether and how that matters—is complicated. Because closeness can be good, can make the work more powerful. But it can also distort our perspective.

In 2016 I was working for Marketplace when the Pulse massacre happened—50 people, almost all queer and Latinx, were shot and killed out dancing at a gay club in Orlando. I remember the morning it happened...waking up to an avalanche of grief and confusion on social media. Going to vigils, dance parties honoring the victims. Calling in sick from work to grieve.

And then a couple weeks later, I flew south myself, to do feature stories for Marketplace...the day I arrived, I went to this midnight drag show where almost everyone there knew the victims; one of the queens was a survivor of the massacre. My stories, which were about job discrimination against queer people in Florida, and about the economic situation for Puerto Rican and Latinx survivors of the massacre, felt visceral and raw.

But proximity here isn't straightforward. I'm queer, white, and trans. I was coming from New York City. I felt both close to the story, *and* like an outsider. Whether it was "my community" wasn't a cut and dry question...and it rarely is...

Steven Thrasher—who's queer and Black—is teaching his journalism students now that being aware of your closeness to the story, of how you relate to it, can make your reporting deeper *and* build trust with audiences.....

Thrasher: Being a good journalist I think means creating a relationship with readers or viewers or listeners overtime where they know that you're going to ask tough questions of your subjects, and of yourself. And even if they think you have a bias, or they think that you are inclined to look at certain things and ask certain questions. If they think you are being critical and tough on everything in the story, including on yourself and on your own position, they'll go on the ride with you. They will trust you, even if they think that you are apt to be looking in one place or another, and that's the way I think that having written about Black and queer issues has helped me build up credibility with myself and with my audiences over the years.

Lewis: And he says having some direct experience of misrepresentation is also helpful when covering communities we *aren't* part of—

Thrasher: I think that gives me a way to be more self critical when I'm talking to other people. And I think that subjects of stories and readers just benefit any time that the writer of those stories is being self critical, self analytical and interrogating things, not just leaving things as assumptions, but being willing to wrestle with them and think about how their own positioning affects the story.

Lewis: After I got back from Orlando, I wrote something on my blog about how there is no *good* way to cover a crisis, especially an ongoing crisis. We all bring biases, positive and negative, to every decision about what matters, about whose grief and whose loss takes center stage, what details to include or leave out. I was aware that my *feeling* of closeness to the Pulse massacre made these deaths particularly vivid for me, and motivated me to do these stories. Which is a good thing but also complicated. It's an *ambiguous thing, when we base what we care about on how close we are to it*. Because there were mass killings all over the world in June 2016. It was a terrible summer. I wrote in my blog...

"It makes me think about Turkey, Bangladesh, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Cameroon, Libya, Somalia, Nigeria, Yemen, all places hit by mass killings in public places in the same month of June, 2016. It makes me think about how those faces won't flash through my Facebook feed, my friends and I in the United States will never know their names. And I think there is no fair, complete story about a mass killing, or a killing of any kind; it's clear in Orlando that the ripple effects are almost endless. But so are the remarkable human responses, the ways of showing up in grief and healing."

Lavender hour reprise: “We’re here today to talk about gay liberation....”

Theme music

Lewis: Next time on the View from Somewhere podcast, public media was born in the 1970s. And it shared some of this kinda radical vision that these queer journalists had, of a pluralistic, truly representative news media. But then, that vision never *really* came together...

Brenda Salinas: I don’t think we necessarily have to -- like, we don’t necessarily have to burn public media down, because I think it’s doing a pretty good job of burning itself down.

Lewis: ...almost 50 years later, public media still has a “diversity” problem. What the hell happened? I’m Lewis Raven Wallace. Our editorial consultant on this episode was the fabulously intelligent Phyllis Fletcher, and here’s our wonderful producer, Ramona Martinez.

Ramona: Original music for this podcast is created by Dogbotic; additional music by Podington Bear. Billy Dee created our logo, and Roxana Bendezu does our social media. Thanks to WUNC for recording help. Subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts, and leave us a review! Thanks and talk to you next time!

Lewis: Oh, you thought we were done, but we’re not quite done, because I’m here to remind you just one last time to go to ViewFromSomewhere.com, give us ten, 25, 50 bucks, get cool swag, and support this independently produced podcast, to get the end of our season.

Ramona: Like my cat probably has a really weird view of the world. ...if we were to interview him. I feel like he’d be really problematic. He really hasn’t seen a lot. [laughter]. Okay.