



## Gay 'outings': True or false, they're fueled and spread by Internet rumors

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When the comedian Bill Maher went on "Larry King Live" and alleged that some top Republican operatives were gay, it was too much detail for CNN, which edited the remarks out of later broadcasts and off the transcript on its website.

But the remarks could not be edited out of cyberspace, where they remain available, along with virtually everything else these days.

Maher's comments last week, and a series of recent coming-out announcements by Hollywood figures responding to persistent rumour rumours, show just how much the Internet has changed the rumour rumour mill, and consequently the process of "outing" celebrities.

Where anti-gay sentiment used to fuel these revelations, these days they are more likely to be merely a byproduct of a voracious Web-based gossip culture where no part of a celebrity's life is off limits \_ or, in the case of politicians, an attempt by one side or the other to score political points.

Either way, the information, true or not, is out there for everyone to see.

"The reality is that the kinds of gossip and celebrity rumour rumours that used to spread by phone, around the water cooler or over dinner are now ending up online where anyone can see them," says Glenda Testone, senior director of media programs for GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. "It doesn't mean that they're more credible, just that more people can see and spread them."

In the recent political case, Maher was arguing that a number of "people who run the underpinnings of the Republican Party" are gay, even though they don't support pro-gay positions. He said he was not going to name names, but then began to.

Despite CNN's actions to remove the remarks from circulation, several versions were available – including on Youtube.com, the repository of all events in our culture.

Many major gay rights groups oppose outing, saying it is a personal choice and should remain so. But there is a difference of opinion when it comes to the idea of outing political figures perceived as harming gay interests.

**"When someone is in a position of power and they are using that power to hurt gay people ... it's perfectly appropriate that they be outed," says Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "We don't do it, but we have no problem with it."**

**Foreman notes that the type of "outing" happening these days shows, in one way, that social progress has been made. "The stigma around being gay is gradually diminishing,"**

**he says. "At one point it was a huge scandal to say someone was gay." Now, he says, what fuels "outings" is something else: "It's not, 'This person's gay.' It's, 'This person's gay and can you believe what they're doing with their power?'"**

Or, in the case of the entertainment world, merely a prurient interest in every aspect of a celebrity's life, from where they get their coffee to the results of their pregnancy tests to what baby clothes their kids are wearing.

"I don't think it comes as a surprise to see gossipmongers speculating about celebrities' sexual orientations," says Testone, "particularly when there's little about celebrities' private lives that these folks don't gossip and speculate about." She adds that truth is often a casualty: "When it comes to some of these websites that thrive on celebrity gossip, the rumour rumour is often all that's needed."

rumour rumours are what prompted three recent Hollywood figures to come out publicly, all to People magazine. The most recent was Neil Patrick Harris, the former title character of "Doogie Howser, M.D." and now starring on the CBS comedy "How I Met Your Mother." Earlier this month he told People's website he was gay, saying he was responding to "speculation and interest in my private life and relationships."

A few weeks earlier it was "Grey's Anatomy" actor T.R. Knight, who said he was addressing "any unnecessary rumour rumours that might be out there." Knight made it clear he would have preferred to keep his personal life private, and added he hoped "the fact that I'm gay isn't the most interesting part of me."

And before that it was Lance Bass, the former 'N Sync star, telling People he'd decided to "speak my mind" because rumour rumours about his sexuality were starting to affect his daily life.

While gay groups applaud anyone's decision to come out, they are critical of the pressure on them by purveyors of gossip to do so.

"Celebrity outing can be very problematic," says Damon Romine, entertainment media director of GLAAD. "While this kind of gossip and speculation about a celebrity's orientation might lead some people to come out of the closet, it may drive others even further in."

"Ultimately," he added, "coming out is a personal process, one that ideally happens when celebrities make the decision not out of fear or intimidation but because they want the fuller, richer life that that openness provides."