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A Time for Change

In today's world, the overwhelming amount of media, information and technology cannot go unnoticed. It has become such a strong influence on society that many cannot imagine life without it. As the ability to spread ideas, information and communicate in various ways grows, so does the effect it has on people. Information in the current generation passes so quickly across such long distances that the truth and validity can become skewed in the process. This flaw is one of the fundamental problems with communication as a whole, and a recurring theme in Beth Loffreda's "Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder." Loffreda describes a horrific murder that occurred in Laramie, Wyoming of a homosexual man and the tremendous amount of publicity and attention it received. While the news seems to always have some sort of coverage of terrible events, or murders, there was something about the murder of Matt Shepard that caught the media's eye. According to Loffreda, Matt Shepard was brutally beaten by two men he had encountered at a bar who then managed to drive him to the edge of town where they tied him to a fence, leaving him for dead. While the facts of the murder reached the public extremely quickly, Loffreda states that, "making sense of them took much longer" (Loffreda, 368). The truths about the murder were hidden by the wave of media attention it received in a matter of days. At first glance, it was just another vicious murder, yet as Malcolm Gladwell describes in his essay "The Power of Context: Bernie Goetz and the Rise and Fall of New York City Crime" throughout every environment there are Tipping Points that pushes something from a fad to a frenzy or in this case a murder into a sudden rush for social and political justice. The words and actions of the public served as Tipping Points to fabricate the

media's stories which would eventually influence and unveil the desperate need for political and social change.

Throughout everyday life, society communicates to one another in a multitude of ways, yet sometimes these messages are received or interpreted incorrectly. In the days following Matt Shepard's murder, the details of the event became so exaggerated that it took a long time to get the clear facts. This problem began with a single moment that sparked the media and the people's attention nationwide; a Tipping Point in the form of one word: scarecrow. As a routine for any murder there was a press conference to explain to the public what had happened and the progress of the case. It was here that Gary Puls, the sheriff at the time, had indicated that they might have beaten him up because he was gay, which we would later find out to be true. Puls later described that, "Shepard was found by a mountain bike rider, tied to a fence like a scarecrow" (Loffreda, 370). A simple word such as scarecrow, created a horrible image in the minds of the public. The idea that he had been tied to a fence spread out for all to see swiftly went through everyone's mind, separating the murder of Shepard from any other at the time.

While Puls description was interpreted in the worst way, the sheriff's deputy, Reggie Fluty would continue to develop the horrible image of Shepard's murder by stating that, "At first she thought Matt could have been no older than thirteen" (Loffreda 371), furthering the image of Shepard into one that of an innocent child. Fluty would continue to state that, "the only spots not covered in blood were the tracks cleansed by his tears" (Loffreda 371). These types of descriptions instilled an image of horrid brutality and would expand the image of Shepard into a truly hurtful thought to all. Loffreda later writes that Fluty's comment, "...continues to appear in essays, poetry and songs dedicated to Shepard" (Loffreda, 371). These descriptive images created by the sheriffs were not only horrific, but instantly reminded the majority of the public of

something more serious - a crucifixion. This would create a relation between the people and Matt himself, and would spark the public's interest and response due to its eerie similarity. This became the first Tipping Point which sent the media into a frenzy and would initiate Matt's transition into a symbol. Such a transition was demonstrated in Gladwell's *The Power of Context* stating that, "The Goetz case had become a symbol of a particular, dark moment in New York City history, the moment when the city's crime problem reached epidemic proportions" (Gladwell 235). Although the facts of Shepard's case were fabricated, his murder still symbolized a dark moment in the nation's history, not just New York City's. It was a moment when discrimination in the nation had once again reached epic proportions, a fact many were slow to admit.

As the details of Matt's murder became known, exaggerated or not, the public and the media quickly picked up on it. The idea that something so horrible had happened to one of their peers struck the students and faculty of the town's university very hard. This began a tremendous amount of protesting, as Shepard's death symbolized a limit in the gay community; that it was time to make a change. The students were filled with fear, and sadness while some were very angry. The United Multicultural Council, the LGBTQA (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association) and the student government decided to use the homecoming parade as the place to get the message out there. Loffreda writes, "They began printing flyers, making hundreds of armbands, and arranging permits to join the parade" (Loffreda 372). This tribute represented the seriousness of the matter as well as the strong push for change in the community. Yet it was not just these types of tributes that contributed to the attention. In the Colorado State University homecoming parade, a float carried a scarecrow covered in anti-gay signs and phrases. The students were punished immediately in an effort to put down this type of behavior. This act was

similar to the ideas described in Gladwell's *The Power of Context* which states that, "an epidemic can be reversed; can be tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment" (Gladwell, 240). The University attempted to put an end to such behavior smoothly in order to prevent any future actions it might influence. Yet unlike in New York City that Gladwell describes, it was the people's own views that needed to be changed, not the environment. These events drew the media's attention to Matt's murder even more because of the clear division in society it began to uncover. Not only was this shown in the protests but in the politics in the area as well. While the town of Colorado State University, Fort Collins, is as Loffreda states, "home to a visible and energetic community of gay activists" (Loffreda 374) they would still vote no to a proposal to expand the city's antidiscrimination law to include protections for gays and lesbians. While Matt's murder represented a push for change in society, it also made clear that it was still a change all of society was not ready to undergo.

In addition to the brutal descriptions, and protests both pro and anti-gay that served as Tipping Points, the fact that the murder was indeed a hate crime fueled the media. The idea that a man's sexual orientation was the reason for a murder was almost inhumane. Yet it was the fact that this took place in such a small town in Wyoming that captured the media's attention. The idea that hate crimes occurred often in Wyoming began to spread throughout the nation and was the main concept for the media's coverage. Bob Beck, the news director for Wyoming Public Radio, recalls being interviewed by journalists with comments such as "Well, this kind of thing probably happens a lot up there," (Loffreda 375) or "You have that cowboy mentality in Wyoming, so this was bound to happen" (Loffreda 375). The stereotype of Wyoming and the fact that the murder was a hate crime became Tipping Points for the media. It created a rapid amount of coverage and attention because of the brutality in an otherwise calm state. Once city

officials cut the media and tabloids off they began to take it upon themselves to find their own facts. They began to use each other as sources without trying to validate the facts and in result fueling themselves to continue down a path of exaggeration and false facts. The influence of these incorrect ways of reporting is described in Gladwell's *The Power of Context* through The Law of the Few. Gladwell states that, "what we think of as inner states—preferences and emotions—are actually powerfully and imperceptibly influenced by seemingly inconsequential personal influences" (Gladwell 243). In this case it is the media that subconsciously influences our own personal ideas, whether positively or negatively. Yet if the media is broadcasting false statements and facts, it only fuels the hysteria instead of influencing the public to the path of positive change.

Although the media's fabrications became overwhelming, Matt had grown to be something more than just a murder. He became a symbol of the hate that still existed in the nation and society and a reason to push for a change. In a sense, Matt himself was a Tipping Point for future political change, and awareness. This was not just because of his death and the facts surrounding it but because he was, as Loffreda writes, "someone we can identify. Matt was the boy next door. He looked like everybody's brother and everybody's neighbor. He looked like he could have been anyone's son" (Loffreda 386). Even though the fabrications surrounding his death were repetitious and hearing false facts became hard to bear, if it were not for the Tipping Points Matt Shepard's death may have gone on as just another murder. As in Gladwell's *Power of Context* and how the incident with Bernie Goetz sparked the need for change in New York City, Matt Shepard's death was the point where the problem of discrimination against homosexuals reached its limit. While it is in fact a tragedy, the Tipping Points directed the

media's behavior in such a way that, although hectic, would result in awareness and change in the future.

References:

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