

‘Gay Sex Kits’: Lessons in the History of British Sex Education

Glyn Davis

On 27 November 1978, the British tabloid newspaper *The Daily Star* ran an ‘exclusive’ report under the headline ‘Schoolkids in “Be Gay” Shock’. The piece, written by Ian Monk and Bernard Jordan, opened with the claim that ‘Homosexuals are preparing a shock recruiting campaign – in Britain’s classrooms. They plan to sell gay “sex kits,” made in Manchester, to schools. The kits contain tapes and propaganda encouraging teenage homosexuality.’¹ The short article stated that ‘already the campaign – due to be launched in the New Year – has raised a huge storm’, a foment to which it evidently intended to contribute.

The ‘sex kit’ to which the report referred was ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’, an educational tape-slide programme for secondary schools created by the Tyneside branch of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE), a gay rights organisation with regional factions across England and Wales. Almost two years in the making, and involving input from dozens of individuals, ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ stirred up public debate at a national level about the role and value of sex education in schools, especially in relation to the topic of homosexuality. It also contributed to a wider interrogation of the ability of schoolteachers and the curriculum to adequately address social and cultural modernisation in the wake of the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s. Although these discussions had specific national ramifications, they took place within an international context: European innovations in school sex education influenced the evolution and content of the tape-slide,

¹ Ian Monk and Bernard Jordan, ‘Schoolkids in “Be Gay” Shock’, *The Daily Star*, 27 November 1978. Unpaginated clipping, Newcastle University special collections, Tyneside CHE archive, CHE 03-06-13+14.

and the finished kit made its way beyond Britain's borders to educators and activists in a number of other countries.

The completion and dissemination of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' at the tail end of the 1970s was one in a series of public ruptures, creative interventions, and activist gestures concerning the complex intersections of homosexuality and schooling that took place across the decade. The one-off hour-long drama 'Roll On Four O'Clock', written by Colin Welland and directed by Roy Battersby, was broadcast on ITV on 19 December 1970; it centred on the plight of 'sensitive' schoolboy Peter Latimer (Frank Heaton) and the homophobic bullying he endures from teachers and fellow pupils. In 1971, the UK's Gay Liberation Front authored a manifesto which criticised schools for their role in fostering and perpetuating queer oppression:

In the context of education, homosexuality is generally ignored, even where we know it exists, as in history and literature. Even sex education, which has been considered a new liberal dynamic of secondary schooling, proves to be little more than an extension of Christian morality. Homosexuality is again either ignored, or attacked with moralistic warnings and condemnations. The adolescent recognising his or her homosexuality might feel totally alone in the world, or a pathologically sick wreck.²

If the plight of queer schoolchildren was marked, so was that of queer teachers. In December 1974, John Warburton, a teacher at Marylebone Church of England Girls' Secondary School, was banned from his profession by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). Some of his students had spotted him on a CHE demonstration; when they raised this with him in class (unsubtly, by chanting "homo-homo"), he had an honest conversation with them about sexuality and prejudice. Accused of causing distress to pupils and acting unprofessionally,

² Gay Liberation Front Manifesto (1971), reprinted in Lisa Power, *No Bath But Plenty of Bubbles: An Oral History of the Gay Liberation Front 1970-73*, Cassell, London, 1995, p 317

Warburton found himself dismissed from his position. He decided to challenge the ban, and was supported in this by the Gay Teachers' Group, which had formed in the summer of 1974; despite petitions, a picket of County Hall, and appeals to teaching unions including the NUT (National Union of Teachers), the adjudication was not overturned.³ Warburton's case was indicative of a widespread narrow-mindedness that saturated the profession. Indeed, a survey by the National Council for Civil Liberties, published in 1975, stated that 'Nowhere has [prejudice in employment against homosexuals] been more evident than in the field of education which must rank alongside the higher grades of the civil service as the area where the greatest discrimination exists.'⁴ Michael Wilcox's BBC radio play *Standard Procedure* (1976), about a gay teacher who is sacked when outed, addressed this prejudice. So did Paul Hallam and Ron Peck's film *Nighthawks* (1978), which centres on a secondary school geography teacher (Jim, played by Ken Robertson) who spends his nights cruising London's gay bars and clubs, and features a climactic scene in which he is coerced by a classroom of students into confessing his queerness. Not only were Warburton's experiences an influence on the narrative of the film, but he was briefly considered for the lead role.⁵

'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' – completed and first exhibited in the same year as *Nighthawks* – was assembled as a teaching tool. But the terrain to which it intended to contribute, the secondary provision of sex education, was an especially thorny one. It has been a contested field since the late nineteenth century, when the first publications offering guidance and advice on sex education started to appear, and continues to be so. The Newsom Report on Secondary Education of 1963 was the first to call for mandatory sex education in British schools, though the subject was only explicitly referred to by statute in England and

³ For an account of Warburton's case, see the Gay Teachers' Group booklet, *Open and Positive*, published in 1978.

⁴ *Homosexuality and the Teaching Profession*, NCCL, London, 1975, n.p.

⁵ For an overview of the making of *Nighthawks*, see Glyn Davis, "'A Panorama of Gay Life": *Nighthawks* and British Queer Cinema in the 1970s', in Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2021, forthcoming.

Wales in 1986. Prior to this date, as Ann Blair and Daniel Monk note, ‘whether or not to teach sex education [...] was left to the discretion of individual head teachers’, though they ‘were often strongly influenced by the policies of local education authorities’ and by ‘guidance on health education from central government’.⁶ Schools and their teachers had to negotiate a complex, conflicting set of forces in making their decisions about the delivery of sex education. These were spelled out by Martin Dobson in an essay on homosexuality and schooling:

The school is considered to be *in loco parentis*, which creates tensions between what the school wants to do, what parents expect of it, and the prevailing educational philosophy of both local and central government (which can often be in conflict).

Further conflict stems from the fact that the school is supposed to educate the young in the ‘correct’ social behaviour, which means accepting society and its institutions; the ‘correctness’ of the role of the police, for example, and the supremacy of the ‘nuclear family.’ For many, if not most, of the young people at school such a view of society does not match up to the reality that they experience.⁷

In the 1960s and 1970s, liberal and conservative perspectives clashed. Representatives of the former advocated for a curriculum that recognised new sexual freedoms, some of which had already been legally enshrined; in contrast, conservative and Christian pressure groups such as the Festival of Light and the Responsible Society pushed a harder agenda, lobbying for the reduction or elimination of sex education in schools. Teachers delivering the subject had to negotiate a precarious path between divergent and unresolvable points of view. Despite the conflicting opinions, the provision of the subject did expand in Britain in the 1960s and

⁶ Ann Blair and Daniel Monk, ‘Sex Education and the Law in England and Wales: The Importance of Legal Narratives’, in Lutz D.H. Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, eds, *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe*, Routledge, London, 2012, p 38

⁷ Martin Dobson, ‘At school’, in Bruce Galloway, ed, *Prejudice and Pride: Discrimination against gay people in modern Britain*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, p 22

1970s. The BBC produced sex education filmstrips and television programmes which by 1971 were being used by thousands of schools. The type of messages being conveyed in the classroom, however, and the moral angles adopted, were sorely limited. As Jonathan Zimmerman writes, ‘sex education rarely moved beyond [...] “plumbing” lessons – as critics mockingly called them – to examine the social contexts and dilemmas of sex. Indeed, in most instances, there was no dilemma at all; even as they widened their sexual vocabulary, schools continued to instruct students to avoid sexual activity.’⁸

The furore over ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ was the first time that a teaching resource designed to enlighten British schoolchildren about homosexuality became the focus of contentious views. The press coverage and public debate about the kit finds partial echoes in the responses to specific materials from subsequent decades. Susanne Bösche’s book *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (first published in Denmark in 1981, and available in translation in the UK in 1983), ‘achieved totemic significance’ in the London local government elections of 1986, and influenced the introduction of the bill that would later become Section 28.⁹ The No Outsiders education programme, a resource created to introduce primary school pupils to the Equality Act 2010 and its promotion of diversity and inclusion, became the focus of community concern and protest in Birmingham in 2019. With the most recent of these still fresh in the nation’s memory – and the potential for future tumult over other, similar educational resources and initiatives – this essay revisits the CHE tape-slide kit of 1978 in order to identify how its shaping, mobilisation and defence by its creators can offer models for inevitable forthcoming action.

⁸ Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education*, Princeton University Press, New York, 2015, p 85

⁹ Julian Petley, “‘A Wave of Hysteria and Bigotry’: Sexual politics and the “loony left””, in James Curran, Ivor Gaber and Julian Petley, *Culture Wars: The Media and the British Left*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, 2nd edition, p 83. As Petley notes, ‘the myth was created that this book was homosexual propaganda and was widely available in London schools. [...] But for all the lurid stories splashed across the newspapers, the truth was that ILEA did not consider the book suitable for general use in primary schools and thus decreed that it should not be available to pupils. Indeed, the Authority had only one copy’, *ibid.*

++

Tim Bolton-Maggs was a central figure in the creation of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life'. At his flat in Edinburgh in June 2018, he shared with me his extensive archive of papers and materials related to CHE and the tape-slide. Bolton-Maggs taught biology at the Royal Grammar School (RGS) in Newcastle from 1974 to 2004. He joined the Tyneside branch of CHE in the same year he started working at RGS. Bolton-Maggs was out to his school's Headteacher; when he began working on 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life', the Head advised him to do so anonymously, to avoid controversy. 'CHE was *the* [queer] social space', Bolton-Maggs told me. 'And it was a social place that was safe. On Tyneside we had a brilliant mix of social and campaigning activities. And that's what made it so good. People came in for the social activities, but those who were interested, like myself, got siphoned off into the political activities as well.'¹⁰ Members of the group would meet in various locations: they would hire a room in a local pub, use the Quaker Meeting House, or congregate at someone's home.

CHE emerged from the North-Western Homosexual Reform Committee in 1969; initially the Committee for Homosexual Equality, it became the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1971. In the early 1970s, CHE and the Gay Liberation Front were often seen as conflicting in their attitudes, aims and politics. As Jeffrey Weeks notes, the GLF 'saw itself as a "people's movement", a radicalised mass movement of homosexuals fighting for their own freedom. It rejected traditional organization and leaders'; in contrast, CHE 'became notoriously concerned with "structure" [...] and displayed a constant preoccupation with *how*

¹⁰ Interview with the author, 14 June 2018. All subsequent unattributed quotes by Bolton-Maggs are extracted from this conversation.

to do things rather than *what* to do.’¹¹ CHE, however, was notably successful in recruiting members and setting up a network of local chapters: in 1970, it had 500 members in 15 local groups; in 1972, 2800 members in 60 groups. Where GLF was known for its militant activism, CHE was a more conservative and assimilationist organisation; as Weeks writes, CHE had a ‘fear of rocking the boat, of over-militancy, of alienating necessary respectable support.’¹² And yet certain political concerns united different British gay organisations active during the decade – one of which was teaching schoolchildren about homosexuality. GLF, for instance, according to their manifesto, had a youth group ‘involved in working for a liberated sex education in schools’.¹³ Although the tactics of specific movements and organisations differed, their aims sometimes aligned.¹⁴

The Tyneside chapter of CHE had formed an education group, which Bolton-Maggs was invited to join when the convenor of the branch discovered he was a teacher: ‘the idea was to train people to go out and talk to other groups [about gay rights]. We offered our services to people like National Housewives’ Register.’¹⁵ There was a recognition that having a presentation of some form to introduce CHE and its aims would be useful. The education group were first alerted to the existence of tape-slide as a new technology with pedagogical potential by one of their members. As Bolton-Maggs remembers: ‘I thought at the time it was a brilliant piece of technology. One of the people in the education group in Tyneside CHE worked in the AV department of the [Royal Victoria Infirmary]. He was familiar with tape-

¹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, Quartet Books, London, 1977, p 189, p 211. For a comprehensive account of the early years of CHE, see Peter Scott-Presland, *Amiable Warriors: A History of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality and Its Times, Volume 1: A Space to Breathe, 1954-1973*, Paradise Press, London, 2015.

¹² Weeks, *Coming Out*, op cit, p 207

¹³ Gay Liberation Front Manifesto (1971), reprinted in Lisa Power, *No Bath*, op cit, p 329

¹⁴ Indeed, according to Bolton-Maggs, prior to the making of ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’, members of GLF based in Tyneside were already giving presentations in schools. Email correspondence with author, 24 July 2020.

¹⁵ The National Housewives’ Register was started in the 1960s by Maureen Nicol. Initially known as the Housebound Housewives Register, it soon changed its name; in 1987, it became the National Women’s Register.

slide because of making presentations, as it was a teaching hospital. He said this was the upcoming thing: “This is the way forward.” And it was at the time, though technology moves on.’ At the 6 November 1974 meeting of the education group, the possibility of making a tape-slide was proposed and accepted: ‘It was felt that a tape-and-slide kit offered [wide] possibilities, not only for schools, but also for colleges of education, Samaritans, the clergy, etc.’¹⁶

Tape-slide was a relatively short-lived media format in which carousels of slides were synched with an audio cassette; signals on one track of the tape would activate the progression of the slides. In the absence of the required synch technology, the slides could be moved on manually. Tape-slide was widely used in a variety of institutional settings, but it was also deployed by some artists; its segregation of sounds and images, the splicing of the audio from the visual, enabled an exploration of the ways in which cinema’s constituent components collaborate in the production of a seeming seamlessness.¹⁷ It was a rickety and fragile form, prone to collapse or fragmentation (lost or damaged slides, snapped tapes, jammed projectors). Many instances of tape-slide works have been lost; those that have been stored or archived may be missing elements, and the technology required to re-stage any individual programme can now be difficult to source.¹⁸ Tyneside CHE created two tape-slide kits: ‘Homosexuals in Society’, for introducing CHE; and ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’.¹⁹ The copy of the former that I have had access to was missing a couple of slides; I had to listen to the wobbly audio cassette while holding the slides up to the light. The latter, in contrast, has been fully preserved: it was scanned and converted into a Powerpoint file for an

¹⁶ Tyneside CHE Education Committee Minutes, n.p. Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

¹⁷ For an introduction to tape-slide’s use by artists, see Mo White, ed, *Slide/Tape*, Vivid Projects, Birmingham, 2018.

¹⁸ For more on tape-slide and its fragility, see Glyn Davis, ‘The Queer Archive in Fragments: Sunil Gupta’s *London Gay Switchboard*’, *GLQ*, vol 27 no 1, 2021, forthcoming.

¹⁹ In 1983, Tyneside CHE embarked on a third tape-slide, which was known as ‘Project 83’. It was centred on myths and stereotypes associated with homosexuality. Storyboards and a script were created. Colour illustrations for some of the slides were completed. However, the project was never finished.

exhibition, 'Private Lives and Public Battles,' at the Discovery Museum, Newcastle, in 2006.²⁰

[Image: 'Homosexuals in Society' tape-slide kit. Courtesy of Tim Bolton-Maggs' personal archive. Photograph by author.]

The fabrication of the first Tyneside CHE tape-slide kit took place across 1975: a script draft was scrutinised in May, and a potential list of slides was assembled in June. The completed version of 'Homosexuals in Society' consisted of 80 colour slides and a 15-minute audio cassette. Screenings could be accompanied by a leaflet, 'Homosexuality – Facts and Fallacies', which had been produced prior to the tape-slide. Copies of the kit were available to buy or rent. The script of 'Homosexuals in Society' noted the statistical prevalence of homosexuality; it countered common stereotypes; it identified the need for social spaces for queer people to meet each other; it introduced CHE and its associated counselling service, Friend; it detailed forms of hostility and discrimination experienced by queers. The audio track ended with a number of statements that drew on gay liberation rhetoric:

Gay people demand the freedom to love and be loved. We are working for the day when to be homosexual will no longer cause shame and embarrassment; when no homosexuals need feel that they must be deceitful about themselves; when all homosexual people will feel as glad and as proud of their love for one another as heterosexual people do now.

The images accompanying the soundtrack were a combination of photographs (mainly of pairings and small groups in public and more intimate settings), diagrammatic illustrations, cartoons of a genderless figure with a pronounced nose experiencing ostracization, and

²⁰ Is there a less radical format in the history of queer activism than Powerpoint?

collages of extracts from press and publications. Between 1975 and 1977, the kit was aired in a variety of contexts and locations, with screenings provided for university and polytechnic gay societies, women's groups, probation officers, clergy, the Family Planning Association, the Pregnancy Advisory Service, Samaritans groups, the ILEA youth workers' conference, and various chapters of CHE.²¹

As 'Homosexuals in Society' circulated, CHE began to receive requests from schools and colleges for the tape-slide kit. An internal CHE document, however, noted that the 'programme was totally inappropriate' for such settings, 'being for adult audiences where a gay panel was present' to introduce and discuss it.²² There were also some concerns from CHE members about the quality of 'Homosexuals in Society'. 'I cringe about it now when I see it', Tim Bolton-Maggs told me. 'It was groundbreaking. It was useful. It was used. People bought it: other CHE groups bought it and used it. And then we decided it wasn't enough.' At a 22 May 1976 meeting of the Tyneside CHE Education Committee, Bolton-Maggs proposed that a new tape-slide programme for schools, aimed at teenagers, should be produced; he suggested the title 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life', which was endorsed by the Committee. Discussion of this kit by the Committee resumed on 19 July, when attention was focused on *Homofili*, a Norwegian booklet on homosexuality that had been produced for use in schools.²³

Homofili was written by gay rights activist Karen-Christine Friele with input from the psychiatrist Astrid Heiberg. It was first published in 1972 by Forbundet av 1948, a Norwegian LGB organisation of which Friele was the head from 1966 to 1971. Financial assistance for the production of the booklet was provided by the Norwegian Department of

²¹ 'Tape/Slide Showings (Hirings & Local Screenings)', Newcastle University special collections, Tyneside CHE archive, CHE 03-06-13+14.

²² 'Tyneside C.H.E.'s New Tape/Slide Programme: Milestones in the Development of the Kit', 'History' Folder of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

²³ Tyneside CHE Education Committee Minutes, 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

Health and Social Security. Between 1972 and 1976, 42,000 copies of *Homofili* were sold.²⁴ A Tyneside CHE member who had moved to Bergen provided the Education Committee with a copy of the pamphlet. The short booklet frames sexuality as having social and emotional dimensions. It contains brief discussions of love and sex as means of communication, of the spectrum of human sexuality, of influences on the forms of sexuality, and of prejudice, ignorance and intolerance. That this material was sourced from Scandinavia is significant. As Jonathan Zimmerman identifies, in the 1960s and 1970s, to ‘friends and foes alike, Scandinavia remained a symbol of progressive, liberal-minded sex education.’²⁵ Sweden had become the first country to require sex education in schools in 1956; Denmark made the topic compulsory in 1970. Zimmerman, however, proposes a degree of caution in relation to the idealisation of Scandinavian liberalism: ‘the minimal instruction that students did get bore little resemblance to the candid, no-holds-barred spirit of the Scandinavian stereotype.’²⁶ Nonetheless, the obtainment and use of *Homofili* by Tyneside CHE demonstrates the ways in which British gay activists of the 1970s looked to publications, ideas, and discussions taking place beyond the country’s borders as potential models.

Shortly after the meeting to discuss *Homofili*, on 27 July 1976, Bolton-Maggs wrote a substantial letter to David Dancer of London CHE Executive, to report on the discussions taking place in the north-east and the plans being made. He urged the need for some market research: ‘admittedly, there are currently no CHE activists engaged in sex education fields, but I’m sure there are enough teachers who could find out just what is going on in their schools as far as sex education is concerned – do the teachers really use kits? Would they welcome something concerned with homosexuality?’ Bolton-Maggs referred to *Homofili* as

²⁴ ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’, Script booklet, n.p. This statistic also appeared in the advertising leaflets for the tape-slide kit.

²⁵ Jonathan Zimmerman, op cit, p 87

²⁶ Ibid, p 88

‘a sort of gay manifesto’: ‘Does CHE want to produce a statement like this?’, he asked. ‘In my own opinion it’s time that there was something to counteract horrible things like the [British Medical Association’s] Family Doctor booklet on homosexuality’. Should production of the new kit go ahead, he wrote, ‘then we feel that it is vital to have a teachers’ booklet with a *very* comprehensive bibliography and a certain amount of background – e.g. information about the legal situation, counselling, gay rights movements [...]. Whatever is produced for the pupils must be *illustrated*, interesting, easy to read, lacking in jargon and ABOVE ALL, CHALLENGING. Printing must be of a very high quality – appearances are all-important.’²⁷

With approval from CHE Executive, development of the new tape-slide began in earnest in 1977. A team of six contributors was assembled in late January, who began to work up ideas for the script. In early March, consultation with a group of teenagers took place to test out the relevance of the script ideas, and to discuss the presentation format that should be adopted. In mid-April the team attended a conference in Loughborough on sex education, collaboratively organised by CHE, The Albany Trust, the National Youth Bureau, and the Family Planning Association; conversations from the event fed into the evolution of the tape-slide’s form and script. A ‘pre-prototype’ of slides and a rough soundtrack was screened at the CHE conference in Nottingham towards the end of August. The production team expanded and the pre-prototype was modified; it was shown to Tyneside CHE members and then developed further. A prototype was completed in mid-December, and dispatched for ‘focus group’ testing to two schools, a youth group, the Health Education Council, and the Schools Council Health Education Project; feedback from the latter two only appeared in April 1978. The final version of ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ was completed by August,

²⁷ Tim Bolton-Maggs, letter to David Dancer, Newcastle University special collections, Tyneside CHE archive, CHE 03-06-13+14.

and had its first screening at a Tyneside CHE meeting; three days later it was shown at the CHE conference in Coventry. Manufacture of the kits was then set in motion. Bolton-Maggs stresses that, throughout the process of its creation, the tape-slide was a collaborative venture: ‘The great thing about it was that it was a team effort and there were lots of different people that the core committee could consult on all aspects of the project, ranging from its content to the production of the kits.’²⁸

Each completed edition of the tape-slide consisted of a cardboard box containing a set of 50 colour slides (the number of images chosen to fit the standard magazines of slide projectors), an audio cassette that ran for 20 minutes, and three A5 pamphlets: a copy of the script; a 40-page Teacher’s Guide; and a 20-page Students’ Booklet, a translation of *Homofili*, ‘designed to reinforce the tape/slide script in certain places.’²⁹ The pamphlets lacked illustrations, but the Teacher’s Guide, in line with Bolton-Maggs’ vision articulated to David Dancer, was a substantive piece of co-authored work that ended with a three-page bibliography and a list of supportive organisations to contact. A simple, clean design in cobalt blue and white was chosen for the cover of the booklets and the kit box. Every identical kit had to be assembled by hand by members of Tyneside CHE: folding the tape inlay, attaching numbered stickers to the slides, affixing the title of the kit to the box. On 21 September 1978, complimentary copies were sent out for review to publications including the *Times Educational Supplement*, *Education Guardian*, and *Audio Visual*. Distribution of the chunky kit boxes was handled by CHE’s central office in Manchester. Bolton-Maggs delivered unwieldy bundles of the kits by train: ‘I remember on one occasion arriving at Manchester Piccadilly, and one of these piles of boxes slipped out of its string so all of these boxes were strewn all over the platform...’

²⁸ Email correspondence with author, 23 July 2020.

²⁹ ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’, Script booklet, n.p.

[Image: Inside the 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' tape-slide kit box: three pamphlets, two boxes of slides, and an audio cassette. Courtesy of Tim Bolton-Maggs' personal archive.

Photograph by author.]

[Image: 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' pamphlets. Courtesy of Tim Bolton-Maggs' personal archive. Photograph by author.]

The script of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' covers similar ground to 'Homosexuals in Society', but does so in a more student-friendly manner. It introduces the notions of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality; it presents statistical information about homosexuality. Narrative strands emerge that focus on Sue, who has a girlfriend but is yet to come out to her family, and Dave, who is failing to confront his homosexuality and feels the need to conform to societal expectations. Gender roles and sexism, gay stereotypes and homophobia are discussed, as are the notions that homosexuality can be transmitted or expunged. ('One reason why people are afraid to accept homosexuality is that they think bringing it into the open will cause it to spread – like a disease. This idea is as stupid as thinking you could catch red hair from someone!') The connections between love and procreation, and the legal status of homosexuality, are touched upon. After spotting an advert, Dave phones Friend; he subsequently joins CHE. Clear messages end the narrative: ignorance breeds fear; fear breeds hate; hate breeds violence. As with 'Homosexuals in Society', the accompanying images are a combination of illustrations, collages, infographics (many of which feature gendered stick figures), and photographs. The illustrations use a clear line without shading, enhanced with watercolour washes. Towards the end of the programme, Dave moves from being an illustrated red-headed figure to one appearing as a real person in

photographs. The soundtrack features an array of voices, with northern accents to the fore, as well as some brief bursts of disco and rock music and sound effects.

[Image: 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life', slide 36. Courtesy of Tim Bolton-Maggs' personal archive.]

The launch of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' in Newcastle was marred by an error of decision. As a CHE summary document about the kit later acknowledged, 'our attempts to help a journalist friend of one of our members led to a 5-week exposure of the kit in the local press, resulting in the mobilisation of a petition by local Festival of Light members and a ban by Newcastle Education Committee.'³⁰ The journalist was Brenda Hickman; on 2 November 1978, a day after the invite-only unveiling of the kit at the Quaker Meeting House, a piece by Hickman appeared on the front cover of Newcastle's *Evening Chronicle*, entitled 'Film on homosexuality may be shown in schools.' Hickman had brought the kit to the attention of a representative of the Newcastle Education Committee, who diplomatically commented that 'the kit would have to be discussed by the committee before it was allowed into our schools. Parents might like a say in it as well. They may not want their children to see it.'³¹ This coverage occurred as CHE was beginning its own advertising and promotion campaign, with publicity leaflets for the tape-slide being sent to (amongst others) schools, colleges, youth organisations, counselling services, LEAs, and regional health centres, and a series of screenings set up across the country. Although CHE had expected the launch of the tape-slide to be controversial, Hickman's piece swiftly stirred up antagonisms between CHE, the

³⁰ 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' summary document, November 1979, p 1. 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

³¹ Joan Lamb, quoted in Brenda Hickman, 'Film on homosexuality may be shown in schools', *Evening Chronicle*, 2 November 1978, p 1

Schools Council, and Newcastle Education Committee, and provoked an unanticipated early wave of public reaction; the fracas swiftly expanded to a national scale and eventually ran for around eight months. As Bolton-Maggs later reflected, ‘It took so much of our time and energy coping with the situation – drafting statements and letters, trying to anticipate the next moves of our opponents, planning our own moves – that we had little chance to tell anyone else what was going on behind the scenes.’³²

The first bloom of press coverage and public responses only started to manifest a fortnight after Hickman’s piece. The *Evening Chronicle* of 15 November featured a homophobic letter under the title ‘Not for children’ (‘Is there no limit to the depths of depravity to which homosexuals will descend to achieve their sickening aims? [...] It is to be hoped that the Newcastle Education Committee consign this filthy film to where it rightly belongs, the nearest sewer!’).³³ On 17 November, a short item headed ‘Gay sex film upsets parents’ in the same newspaper revealed that a petition against the tape-slide was being assembled:

Mrs Slater who has four children said: “We all feel this teaching kit, no matter how discretely made, could open up areas of pornography to teenagers in the name of education. Although we haven’t seen the production, which was made by the Tyneside homosexual group, we feel it’s necessary to voice our protest now.”³⁴

Members of CHE phoned Mrs Slater on 18 November to find out what she was saying about the kit she hadn’t seen; they transcribed the conversation as potential ammunition. Letters from readers, mainly in support of the tape-slide, appeared in the *Chronicle* on 21 November.

³² Tim Bolton-Maggs, ‘C.H.E. Education Kit – The First 12 Months’, ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ summary document, November 1979, p 2. ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

³³ William Hardiman, ‘Not for children’, letter to *Evening Chronicle*, 15 November 1978. Unpaginated clipping, Newcastle University special collections, Tyneside CHE archive, CHE 03-06-13+14.

³⁴ ‘Gay sex film upsets parents’, *Evening Chronicle*, 17 November 1978. See also, from a week later, ‘Parents join homosexual film protest’, *Whitley Bay Guardian*, 24 November 1978. Unpaginated clippings, Newcastle University special collections, Tyneside CHE archive, CHE 03-06-13+14.

On 27 November, the piece in the *Daily Star* about ‘gay sex kits’ appeared. Chris Beer, Vice-Chairman of CHE, wrote an immediate response. The *Star*, he wrote, ‘[is] trying to give the impression that CHE is involved in an underhand and insidious attempt to infiltrate classrooms. In fact, the development of gay sex education material to give balance to schools’ sex education courses has been our stated aim for several years.’ Beer noted that the content of the tape-slide had been informed not only by *Homofili* but by ‘the authoritative Netherlands’ Government’s *Speijer* Report of 1969’, which stated ‘that sexual inclinations develop long before puberty.’ The kit, he concluded, ‘attempts to lessen the fear and loneliness of gay kids and the ignorance and prejudice of heterosexual kids.’³⁵ As Bolton-Maggs subsequently reflected, the *Star*’s coverage was a wake-up call: ‘it became obvious that the action was moving to a national level, so a proper press showing of the kit was needed.’³⁶

That press screening took place at 10.30am, Monday 4 December 1978 at the Scala cinema in London. Amongst many others, the conservative campaigner Mary Whitehouse, a key figure in the Festival of Light, was invited; the letter to her expressed hope ‘that you will wish to take this opportunity to see the kit for yourself, since we understand that you have recently publicly expressed reservations about the presentation.’³⁷ The London launch was covered by BBC Radio 4’s ‘The World at One’, in an item which included an anti-gay statement by Terry Casey, General Secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters; later in the day, Valerie Singleton introduced a piece on the tape-slide on the BBC TV *Tonight* programme. The following day, Newcastle Education Committee banned ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ on the grounds that it was technically sub-standard,

³⁵ Chris Beer, ‘CHE Replies to “Daily Star” Attack’, press release, 27 November 1978, ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

³⁶ Tim Bolton-Maggs, ‘C.H.E. Education Kit – The First 12 Months’, ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ summary document, November 1979, p 2. ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

³⁷ Mike Gibberd, letter to Mary Whitehouse, 27 November 1978, ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

contained inaccurate statistics, and included photos of two pupils from a Newcastle school. The multiple strands of this attack might have been an attempt to avoid being seen as homophobic, but the accusations were all open to challenge. Although the individual kits were assembled by hand, production of individual components was supported by skilled, specialised individuals and organisations: for instance, the slide illustrations were created by a professional cartoonist, and the booklets were printed by the Tyneside Free Press Workshop. The statistics included in the script were drawn from Kinsey's infamous reports. The pupils who were photographed were regular members of CHE and were not coerced into taking part. However, their inclusion in the kit's content was identified as an ethical concern: they were below the age of consent, and their depiction opened up the potential of them experiencing bullying and persecution. There was a brief threat of legal action from the Education Committee, though this did not escalate. The Newcastle ban of the tape-slide was picked up by the press: it featured in the *Evening Chronicle* on 6 December and in *The Daily Telegraph* the next day.³⁸

CHE attempted to marshal wider backing for the tape-slide through unions and political representatives. The Newcastle branch of the NUT passed a motion on 24 January 1979 deploring the ban; NATFHE (National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education) followed suit on 22 March. Letters were written to MPs of the main political parties. Some responses were supportive ('I am sorry to hear just how silly people can be. If matters come to a head, and there is anything possible at the Parliamentary level I shall of course do what I can.'), but others recognised that decisions about the provision of sex education lay with local educational authorities and headteachers, and thus that there was

³⁸ Tim Bolton-Maggs, 'C.H.E. Education Kit – The First 12 Months', 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' summary document, November 1979, p 3. 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

little they could do.³⁹ 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' was shown in the Houses of Parliament on 8 March 1979. The screening was arranged by Maureen Colquhoun, Britain's first openly lesbian MP. Representatives from CHE London attended; over 200 MPs and Peers were invited, though few turned up. Five months after the Newcastle veto of the tape-slide, Durham Area Health Authority also decided to ban it.

Despite the sustained adversity, the tape-slide was in many respects a success. By November 1979, 150 copies of the kit had been sold, including to local education authorities, area health authorities, schools and colleges, and gay groups overseas (the Italian activist group *Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano* [FUORI!] had ordered one before the tape-slide was formally launched). Loans of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' by groups and institutions across the country were substantial and consistent. Reviews and feedback were often supportive and constructive. A reviewer in *Visual Education*, for instance, noted that 'the great strength of the kit is how it demonstrates the normality of homosexuality and offers insight into the great, but unnecessary, suffering so many gays experience. [...] This and the fact that I know of no comparable teaching aid on the subject, makes the kit useful for any secondary school.'⁴⁰ In addition, the negative public responses were repeatedly countered by voluntary statements of support. 'One very gratifying thing', wrote Bolton-Maggs, 'was that so few of the supporting letters in the papers or on the radio had been solicited by CHE: they were all spontaneous and well-argued, whereas all the opposition was emotional claptrap of the most ignorant sort.'⁴¹

³⁹ 'Parliament and the Tape/Slide', 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' summary document, November 1979, p 6. The quote is from Keith Hampson (Conservative). 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

⁴⁰ Ros Hawkins, review of 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life', *Visual Education*, August/September 1979. Unpaginated clipping, Newcastle University special collections, Tyneside CHE archive, CHE 03-06-13+14.

⁴¹ Tim Bolton-Maggs, 'C.H.E. Education Kit – The First 12 Months', 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' summary document, November 1979, p 4. 'Homosexuality: A Fact of Life' box, Tim Bolton-Maggs personal archive.

The history of sexual emancipation is not teleological, nor is the history of sex education, despite what some rights organisations, activists, politicians and social historians may claim.

As Lesley A. Hall writes in relation to schooling,

there is a certain lack of narrative structure to any story that can be told about British sex education. It has not lost the plot, because it does not have a plot, just a sequence of rather similar events: studying it is like doing the time-warp, *deja-vu* all over again, Groundhog Day. Reading modern studies on the state of sex education in the UK, it is possible to wonder just how far we have travelled from the 1870s.⁴²

Or, in the present moment, the 1970s. Of course, each eruption of agitation around queer sexualities and schooling occurs within a specific political and cultural moment, and is shaped by its forces. In late 1978 and early 1979, as ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ was unleashed, various factors may have influenced its reception. The United Kingdom was on the cusp of electing Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, the political climate swinging back in favour of the right-wing. The politician Jeremy Thorpe, who had been leader of the Liberal Party between 1967 and 1976, was about to stand trial on charges of conspiracy and incitement to murder, accusations connected to a relationship he had with the former model Norman Scott (Thorpe was acquitted on all counts). A mainstream, commercialised, and highly visible form of gay culture was taking off, epitomised by the launch of Heaven nightclub in London in 1979. In addition, the overt influence and inspiration of models of practice from a wider European and Scandinavian context – Norway, the Netherlands – on

⁴² Lesley A. Hall, ‘In Ignorance and in Knowledge: Reflections on the History of Sex Education in Britain’, in Lutz D.H. Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, eds, *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe*, London, Routledge, 2012, pp 19-20

the tape-slide's content may not have sat well with those sceptical about Britain's recent membership of the European Economic Community (EEC).

When *Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin* became the focus of tension and confrontation in 1986, broader public awareness and fear of HIV/AIDS was peaking, contributing to a widespread climate of homophobia. As Jackie Stacey notes, 'Underlying this increased hostility was an increased pathologization of homosexuality, associating it with promiscuity, disease and a risk to both public health and morality.'⁴³ The infamous, doom-laden 'AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance' public health campaign was imminent. The main political parties in the UK were divided in their attitudes towards homosexuality, with recent small contributions towards the development of gay rights – the Greater London Council's publication of *Changing the World: A London Charter for Gay and Lesbian Rights* (1985), the low-key development of a funded but fragile infrastructure of spaces and organisations such as the London Lesbian and Gay Centre, the support by the Labour Party for a resolution to criminalise discrimination against LGB people – all associated with the left and attacked by the right. The period was marked, as Stacey notes, by legislative attempts to intervene in the regulation of sexuality and reproduction – attempts that would include the authoring of Section 28, which aimed to suppress the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools.⁴⁴

In 2019, when the No Outsiders programme was introduced, Britain had recently been divided by a Brexit vote (which led to a marked increase in reported racist and homophobic crimes across the country) and by a general election. It had witnessed the fragmentation and privatisation of parts of the school system, including the creation of academies operating outside of the national curriculum system (several of the schools involved in the Birmingham protests were part of the Excelsior Trust group of academies). New compulsory relationships

⁴³ Jackie Stacey, 'Promoting Normality: Section 28 and the Regulation of Sexuality', in Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, eds, *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, HarperCollins, London, p 285

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

education for primary pupils and RSE (relationships and sex education) for secondary students was announced by the UK government in April 2019, to be implemented from September 2020. No Outsiders, like other teaching tools advocating for a broader understanding of sexuality, had the potential to be controversial; that it was authored by a white gay man, Andrew Moffat, and introduced into schools with large Muslim populations only exacerbated that potential. That the far-right and anti-Islam Tommy Robinson, co-founder and former leader of the English Defence League, sided with the protestors in Birmingham, and argued in February 2020 for a campaign against LGBTQ “propaganda” in schools, is especially revealing of Britain’s current complex divisions, strategic allegiances, and polarised politics.

And yet, for all of the clear differences between the historical moments when there has been controversy around the sexual education curriculum in British schools, and the place of queer sexual identities and relationships within it, there are also marked similarities. Rhetorical tropes, for instance, resurface repeatedly. In 1999 and 2000, sustained debates about the potential repeal of Section 28 took place. As Joe Moran writes,

The parliamentary debates, public campaigns and media coverage of the Section 28 debate often focused on the ‘gay lobby’s crusade’ to make children ‘read textbooks promoting homosexuality’. If Section 28 was repealed, it was alleged, children would be ‘force-fed gay sex education’ through the use of ‘gay sex packs’ and ‘homosexual role playing.’⁴⁵

The ‘gay sex packs’ referred to here are redolent, of course, of the *Daily Star*’s ‘gay sex kits’. The phobic elements lodged in these expressions arguably involve not only the sex, but also the pack itself. Kits are quite rightly something to be reckoned with: they contain tools, which can be used to fix or amend. ‘Homosexuality: A Fact of Life’ was designed as a kit for

⁴⁵ Joe Moran, ‘Childhood Sexuality and Education: The Case of Section 28’, *Sexualities*, vol 4, no 1, p 74

teaching in schools; from the vantage point of our current political moment, the story of its marshalling by activists in the late 1970s equips present-day activists with a kit, with tactics to emulate, with a battery of tools. The recent interventions in relationships and sex education by the UK Conservative government contain liberal sentiments: ‘Pupils should receive teaching on LGBT content during their school years. Teaching children about the society that we live in and the different types of loving, healthy relationships that exist can be done in a way that respects everyone.’⁴⁶ But the presence of queer bodies, experiences, and teaching materials in British schools and schooling remains contentious and potentially incendiary; future fires will flare. This is the end of today’s lesson, but we’re not finished.

++

My thanks to Fiona Anderson, Tim Bolton-Maggs, Ian Graham, Laura Guy, Geraldine Hunwick, Nat Raha, Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, and Peter Scott-Presland. The research for this essay was funded as part of the ‘Cruising the 1970s: Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures’ project, financed by HERA and the European Commission.

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education-faqs>, 5 April 2019, updated 9 July 2020