

**Nancy Nangeroni**

# THE VIRTUAL Movement

**By Nancy Nangeroni**

The number of people identifying as transgender is relatively small. Every organizer of TG events knows that it takes an enormous amount of work just to gather a few hundred such people together in one place. Contrast this to the gay liberation movement, where thousands gather weekly at party events, and tens of thousands gather each year in virtually every major city for Pride and other events. In Boston, the Pride transgender contingent has yet to turn out more than about 50 people. In December of 1995, when 250 people turned out at a vigil for murdered transsexual, Chanelle Pickett, a show of hands of transgender folks was asked for. Fewer than a dozen people raised their hands to acknowledge being transgender. Though that number would no doubt be larger today, it was painfully obvious that either there are simply not very many transgender people out there or few are willing to be recognized as such.

Despite the embarrassingly slim numbers of people who will stand up and be counted, the transgender movement has gained a surprising-

ly high profile in straight news media, with favorable feature stories now in the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and "20 /20," as

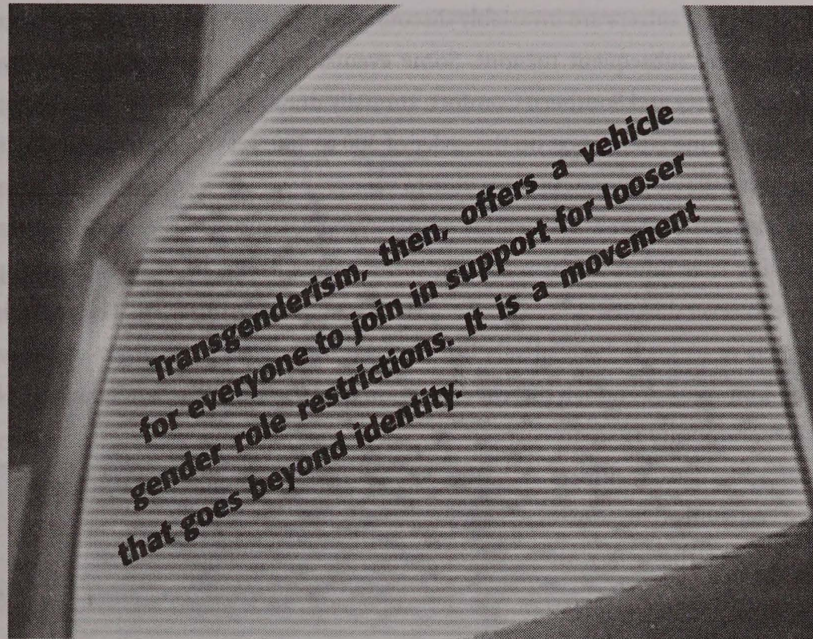
well as major publications abroad. Major gay publications now regularly carry transgender content, and the transgender movement is being hailed by some as the leading edge of queer activism. And yet, a gathering of 500 transgender people is still unheard of. How can this be?

There are at least two issues at work here. One is that to be transgender is to be even more different, more challenging to conventional norms, than to be gay or lesbian or bisexual. To be transgender—at least for some—is to be visibly, undeniably queer. Transgenderism is a potent catalyst, whether to upset or foster growth. The transgender person highlights an enormous blind spot in our culture—the presumption of a binary norm of sex and gender. The very existence of transgender people constitutes a potent critique of our gendered way of thinking. So it doesn't

take many TG folk to create quite a stir, as any such person can tell you. By itself, this effect might be sufficient to birth a movement, much as persons with disabilities succeeded in making some gains in recent years. However, there's another powerful force in play that services the transgender movement—the internet.

### Virtual Organizing

With transgender people relatively few and far between, TG folk that take the personal risk of making a public stand on behalf of their rights are rare indeed. The internet, though, makes it possible to connect these few, scattered people in a timely and efficient fashion. Where the gay liberation movement relied on phone trees to spread the word, the transgender movement relies on the internet. What's the difference? On the internet, one person can send a message to an unlimited number of others with the press of a single button. Each individual can tailor the incoming flow of information to meet their interests. When telephone was the primary means of fast communication, connection relied on an unbroken chain of individual effort. On the internet, a single individual can send a message around the world. In essence, each person on the net has at their fingertips the power of a print publisher: the ability to efficiently put words of their choosing in front of the eyes of many people.



Most of the leading transgender activists use the internet as an indispensable tool in their work. Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and Riki Anne Wilchins all used the net to exchange and hone ideas and arguments before taking them public. The first broad-based demonstration on behalf of a transgender victim of violence—the Brandon Teena demo in Falls City, Nebraska—started with an email from Riki and myself to the community, telling them we'd be there and asking for company. A number of mailing lists now circulate news rapidly around the world, allowing pro-transgender support to be mustered quickly and efficiently. Recently, transactivists in Buenos Aires were able to draw successfully on the support of transgenders and sympathizers around the world to bring pressure on the police there to end their systematic harassment of

“transvestites.” The net has allowed a concentration of attention on trouble spots, enabling activists to mount an effective defense of individuals and issues that their neighbors fail to support.

### Where Is Everyone?

When it comes to gathering transgender folk together in one place for a show of numbers, organizers are still more often disappointed than not, as numbers continue to be small, and growth seems elusive. For example, the first ever female-to-male (FTM) conference in San Francisco drew close to 400 people, but subsequent conferences have failed to surpass that number. Likewise, no other transgender gathering or organization of any sort has been able to sustain any kind of growth. Rather, what usually happens is that initial results are encouraging,

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but then organizers are invariably discouraged by a disappointing subsequent turnout. Some events, like the Texas T Party and Southern Comfort, annually draw relatively strong attendance, on the order of 300 to 400, yet exhibit little or no growth from year to year.

This oft-repeated scenario of initial numbers surpassing later numbers for recurring events seems likely due to several issues.

There seems to be relatively little word of mouth in the community. Though there is discussion over the net, the community is so dispersed and its members so accustomed to isolation that the effect of word of mouth publicity is much less significant than is usually the case. Closeted people don't talk about their pastime, and the vast majority of TG folk are closeted. Thus, the word of mouth that would normally fuel growth of a recurring event doesn't happen.

Publicity about an event, on the other hand, seems remarkably efficient, perhaps because of the enhanced targeting that the internet allows. Mailing lists make it possible for individuals to subscribe to an incoming flow of information that is closely tailored to their interests. Any individual can be better informed than ever about the kind of events that they might be interested in attending. Transgender folk on the net are highly likely to hear about an event of interest to them.

There is considerable attraction for transgender people—and perhaps all people—in attending an event the first time, when the uniqueness factor is high. It might even be argued that transgender folk, in pursuing a life's path of considerable uniqueness, are more attuned to the unusual than the general public, and hence more likely to attend first-time rather than recurring events. Indeed, it is quite typical for a transsexual to take par-

ticular pleasure in being the “first ever” at something, like the first ever TS race car driver, etc.

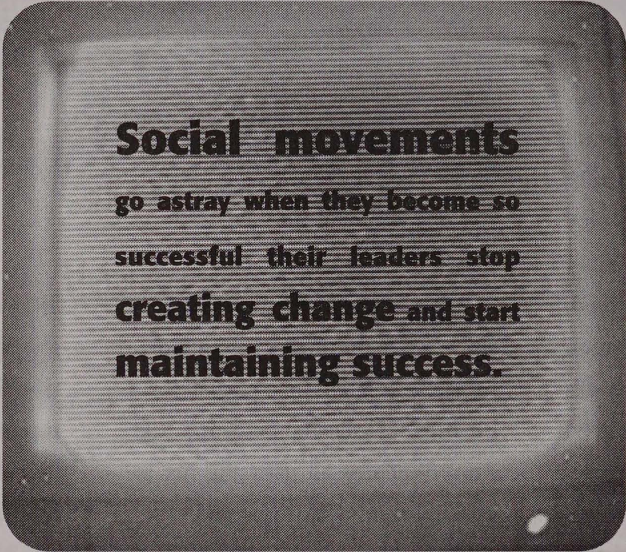
Successful conferences are all social events that focus on personal issues of transition, or the pleasures of transgenderism and/or crossdressing. The political efforts fare less well. The first National lobby day drew about 100 people, the second only 60.

Though this was surely due to a split between organizers of the event into two separate dates, the total attendance at both dates still numbered less than the initial effort. Likewise, the first of the demonstrations at sites of violence against transgender folk drew about 40 people, and, other than the unusual Chanelle Pickett vigil in Boston, other actions have failed to exceed that level of support.

Those not on the net are dependent on club newsletters and magazines like *Transgender Tapestry*, which are fairly good disseminators of scheduled events, but poor for notices about activist response efforts, leaving subscribers effectively “out of the loop” for activism, but included for social events, further buttressing the advantage the social events enjoy over political events.

## The Lure of Transgression

None of this, however, accounts for the burgeoning popularity of transgenderism in the media. Both in the media, and in the personal experiences of myself and others, it seems the majority of people are basically sympathetic to transgender folk. Indeed, many seem to have an appetite for the refreshment that gender transgression offers in freeing them from traditional thinking about gender roles. In the GLB communities, many activists from the early days of the gay liberation movement are stepping forward and expressing strong sup-



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port for the transgender movement. Some say that the gay movement got off track somewhere, and welcome the transgender movement for its refreshing take on the politics of identity, diversity and inclusion. As the groundswell of support for the transgender movement rises, the greatest power of the movement may come not from its leaders and their ideas, but from people behind the scenes who are supportive, whether writers, editors, reporters, hosts, publishers or publicists. These people play an essential role in giving the movement credibility, and are as much a part of the movement as Riki or Kate or James Green.

### Beyond Identity

The movement, then, is constituted not merely of people who themselves identify as transgender. There is a much larger number of people who are sympathetic to transgender concerns. Judging from the popularity of transgenderism in the media, and the relatively small number of people who themselves identify as transgender or allies, the number of sympathizers must be enormous.

There are allies, from teachers to therapists and doctors to bosses and co-workers to friends and families. Their support may spring from compassion for the struggles of others, or out of support for the greater freedom of gender expression that widespread transgender acceptance will bring to their own lives. Indeed, it is this latter effect which is probably responsible for transgenderism's media success—relief from the burden of narrow gender roles that society bestows. Its popularity speaks to a widespread discontent with such burden, as has long been argued by feminists the world over.

Transgenderism, then, offers a vehicle for everyone to join in support for loosening gender constraints. It is a movement that

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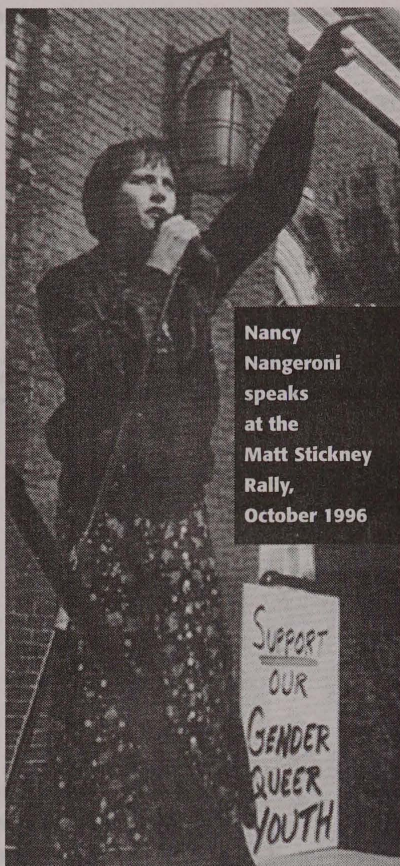
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goes beyond identity. By declaring itself an open movement, to which all are welcome, it made it possible for all people to join in as they wish, without having to declare a transgender identity.

Yet, by so doing, it can be argued that it has made itself a virtual movement, a movement of a society towards an ideal rather than of individuals towards a goal.

The internet's gift of enormous power to individuals affects the rules of political engagement, remolding the activist environment experienced by prior civil rights

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Nancy Nangeroni speaks at the Matt Stickney Rally, October 1996

photo: Mariette Pathy Allen

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organizers. Successful leaders today can work with a lighter hand. Deft net working outperforms the ability to whoop up a crowd. Economic and political power may be unavailable, but popular consensus is more accessible than ever. A constituency that identifies with the movement more as sympathizers than as personally involved forces us to define our challenge in a positive and constructive manner, rather than risk alienating supporters. Ongoing leadership demands skill—an ability to steer in the right direction. Leaders are not sustained through inertia or vested interest.

This virtual movement might be viewed as a highly sophisticated social organism. It provides the opportunity to quickly and effi-

ciently foster consensus for change on a global scale, without resorting to strong-arm tactics. Such tactics by previous social movements may have helped stimulate the backlash that we experience with the rise of the Radical Right.

## Creating Change

If all this is true, we are presented with the opportunity to craft a “new, improved” kind of social empowerment movement. Will we still need to pass protective laws and contest injustices with protests and so forth? Of course. Our methods can’t change overnight, any more than people can, and the movement responds best to a constellation of supportive efforts. But the emphasis is shifting. More people than ever before can gain access to our ideas. The impact of our work resonates to a much larger audience, one that stretches around the world. In the bright light of such enhanced public scrutiny, injustices fall faster than ever, and truth readily gains ground against ignorance.

For the transgender movement, the circulation of particular key ideas got things moving. One was basing the movement not on identity, but rather on a freedom to be won. This not only opened the movement to far greater participation than could ever be achieved by a movement of “transgender people,” it neatly finessed the “special rights” objection.

Second, gender transgressions are practiced by many people not

previously associated with transgenderism. Not only do transsexuals and crossdressers transgress established gender norms, but so too do gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, feminists, sensitive men and more. This shift in thinking cast the transgender movement as an extension of feminism, which was at the time stalled and seeking new inspiration.

As this movement continues, there will be more key ideas that take it forward, step by step. There will be a shift in people’s thinking, a shift that gradually changes our culture in fundamental and far-reaching ways. This shift will be the product not so much of political action, but rather by the circulation of new ideas that the majority find compelling enough to adopt into their belief systems, consciously or unconsciously.

Our challenge is to seed those ideas responsibly and constructively. Tonye Barreto-Neto says: “It’s fear of ridicule that keeps the transgender community so small. Transgenderism is about spiritual wholeness. It would be more popular than homosexuality if people weren’t so afraid of being ridiculed.”

Social movements go astray when they become so successful their leaders stop creating change and start maintaining success. It remains our pleasure to see how far transgenderism takes us before losing its heart to that sorry trap.

**Nancy Nangeroni is a transgender activist in Boston.**