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AP's Discouraging "Homophobia" is Discouraging Inclusion

**By The Reverend Irene Monroe
BC Editorial Board**

The editors at the *Associated Press Stylebook* have announced that they are "discouraging" use of the word "homophobia." The *AP Stylebook* is the widely used guide that media use to standardize terms and general usage.

Why should the LGBTQ community be in a kerfuffle about it? Because the editors made their decision without consultation with the nation's leading LGBTQ organizations, leaders, activists, and newspapers. That is a problem.

With an estimated 3,400 *AP* employees in bureaus around the globe, its suggestion could have a tsunami-like effect on how the world comes to understand, be informed about or dismiss discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people.

AP's online *Stylebook* defines "phobia" as "an irrational, uncontrollable fear, often a form of mental illness" and therefore should be expunged from political and social contexts, including words such as "Islamophobia" and "homophobia."

Preciseness in language is important, and yet language is a representation of culture. How we use it perpetuates ideas and assumptions about race, gender and sexual orientation. We consciously and unconsciously articulate this in our everyday conversations, about ourselves and the rest of the world, and it travels generationally.

What's in the word "homophobia"? A lot. The history and culture of not only discrimination, violence, and hatred toward LGBTQ people but also an irrational fear of us. It's this irrational fear that may not need psychiatric or clinical intervention but should nonetheless be aptly labeled as none other than a "phobia."

For example, there is the infamous bogus legal argument called the "gay panic defense." It's simply an excuse for murder in which a heterosexual defendant pleads temporary insanity as self-defense against a purported LGBTQ sexual advance.

Another example is the "ick factor." It's the revulsion some heterosexuals feel toward the way we LGBTQ people engage in sexual intimacy.

Altering the hearts and minds of these folks will take a while, if not a lifetime.

According Dave Minthorn, *AP* Deputy standards editor, who shared with *POLITICO* the word "homophobia... (is) just off the mark...it's ascribing a mental disability to someone, and suggests a knowledge that we don't have. It seems inaccurate. Instead, we would use something more neutral: anti-gay, or some such, if we had reason to believe that was the case."

It is my opinion that by keeping the word "homophobia" narrowly used and confined within a medical context is controlling. I feel that only a homophobic "word police" would utter such absurd advice. Moreover, it's also absurd for *AP* to think that their discouragement of the use of the word with absolutely no consultation with the LGBTQ community demonstrates anything but hubris and insensitivity. It also raises queries about *AP*'s political and social motives for doing so.

Just ask George Weinberg, the psychologist who coined the word "homophobia" in his 1972 book, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*.

"It made all the difference to city councils and other people I spoke to," Weinberg told journalist Andy Humm, who shared the quote with *The Advocate* and other media. "It encapsulates a whole point of view and of feeling. It was a hard-won word, as you can imagine. It even brought me some death threats. Is homophobia always based on fear? I thought so and still think so...We have no other word for what we're talking about, and this one is well established. We use 'freelance' for writers who don't throw lances anymore and who want to get paid for

their work. ... It seems curious that this word is getting such scrutiny while words like triskaidekaphobia (the fear of the number 13) hang around."

The word "homophobia" derives from a particular history and struggle for civil rights of LGBTQ people across the world. And it has become part and parcel of a universal LGBTQ lexicon that speaks truth to our reality.

The word has power and, unfortunately, deleterious effect. And part of our liberation is in our strength to call out acts of homophobia.

To suggest the press eliminate the word can not only diminish the scope of people understanding homophobia's wide range, but it can also diminish our scope of LGBTQ activists in our continued efforts to effect change.

AP now has control of the word "homophobia" and yet it's not theirs. Several mainstream newspapers are pushing back. (Newspapers, and media, are under no order to follow *AP* guidelines.) John E. McIntyre of the *Baltimore Sun* wrote in his column "Sorry, *AP*, can't go along on 'homophobia'" that the *AP* "ruling on this point is reasoned, principled, and wrong-headed." McIntyre points to the 40 year usage of the word "homophobic" and makes a practical point - "If the editors of the *AP Stylebook* wish to discourage the use of certain words simply because they can be misused or misunderstood, there ought to be a great many in line ahead of *homophobia*."

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. She is the Coordinator of the African-American Roundtable of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry (CLGS) at the Pacific School of Religion. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. She was recently named to MSNBC's list of [10 Black Women You Should Know](#). Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not-So-Everyday Moments](#). As an African-American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is irenemonroe.com. Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.



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