Publicly Private: 1950s Media Narrativization of the Medical Transition of Christine Jorgensen

Christine Jorgensen was the first person in the United States to receive gender confirmation surgery. Her medical transition was highly publicized in news media, which focused primarily on her aesthetic beauty and personal history.

News coverage emphasized the novelty of Jorgensen's medical transition, effectively removing it from its context in national and global trans history. There was a much greater emphasis on the medical minutiae of Jorgensen's transition, over the social context surrounding it. The Danish doctors who performed her operations refused to disclose the medical procedures performed on Jorgensen, which added to the mystery of her experience (*Evening Star,* 01 Dec. 1952, A-20). With few details given across multiple newspapers after her surgery, the articles demonstrate that interest in these details had persisted. Articles sometimes employed falsified headlines with medical terms, as did the 1952 article titled "Blonde Tells How Sex Was Changed," which only mentioned hormone treatments and surgeries in passing (*The Daily Record*, 6). The use of clickbait titles suggests the newspapers' intention to attract readers' attention, following their audience's demonstrated interest in those details. Jorgensen's transition then became paradigmatic: coverage of other people who medically transitioned made explicit comparisons to the "Christine Jorgensen case" (*The Northwest Times* 1953, 4). The transition of a Japanese man who was assigned female at birth was called the "reverse" of Jorgensen's case in several articles published in March and April 1953, only three to four months after the first articles about Jorgensen's transition (*Evening Star*, A-30; *The Northwest Times*, 4). His transition may have overlapped with Jorgensen's, which problematizes the juxtaposition of these cases; this was indeed the case for Charlotte McLeod, who was the second American woman to have gender

confirmation surgery. McLeod told *The Advocate* in 1954 that she had "planned for a long time to come to Copenhagen [for the surgery], making that long before the Christine Jorgensen case developed." More locally, there was also virtually no mention of Jorgensen's upbringing or any negative experiences pre or post transition: her comments were a variant of "I'm happy to have become a woman and I think many people who are unhappy as I was before, should follow my example," as quoted in multiple articles (*Evening Star*, 01 Dec. 1952, A-20). It is important to note that Jorgensen publicly and frequently regretted the publicization of her transition, and thus she may not have offered this information (*Evening Star*, 12 Dec. 1952, A-2; *The Daily Record* 1952, 6). Jorgensen was also white and upper-class, so the lack of coverage may be due to fewer negative events to report: at this time, transition technologies (including social transition tools such as clothing, hair, and makeup) were only fully available to white, upper-class people. Independent of contextualizing Jorgensen's transition with her own history, articles did not provide any historical context regarding recent developments in medical and social transition technologies in the U.S. or broadly the West. This suggests that the interest in Christine's transition experience, especially her post-operation experience, was not a primarily academic one. Journalism which presented Jorgensen's experience in greater context was much more prevalent in the decade following it: such a feature was published in *Uncensored* in 1967, fifteen years after her transition (19-20, 48-49). The interest of the audience in 1952 might be more comparable to the desires of contemporary reality show audiences, to see highly unrelatable realities. Thus, the focus on Jorgensen's novelty framed her experience as entertainment for a cisgender audience.

The coverage was largely supportive, even if persistent despite Jorgensen's desire for privacy; this suggests an audience that was genuinely curious about her experiences for their

novelty, with their intrusiveness being non-malicious, even if dehumanizing. That is, defining Jorgensen by the novelty of her experiences may have denied her complexity, agency, and privacy; but this effect was not intended. Moreover, Jorgensen's maintenance of her privacy was met with resistance from reporters, but not with undesirable speculations about her life or condemnation of her desire for privacy. Her refusals to comment were documented, but audiences were still regularly updated on her life in the present. For example, a 1953 article reporting that she had returned from vacation mentioned her protests: she "spoke only briefly to ship news reporters, and kept repeating 'I can't understand it; I'm yesterday's news'" (*Nome Nugget*, 17 June, 5). An article about her decision to reject "fabulous show offers" tacitly disapproved of it, yet still concluded with "she [Jorgensen] said the only thing she wants is to be left alone" (*Sunday Star* 1952, A-25). Updates in Jorgensen's entertainment career were especially common, as mentioned above, including dates and venues for current or upcoming appearances (*The Nome Nugget*, 04 Nov. 1953, 5). These reports were not accompanied by comments from Jorgensen, but rather served as lists of opportunities to see Jorgensen in the flesh. Most only advertised her appearance, not her acts, unless her set was related to her transition, through "a few Jorgensen jokes" or "a brief rundown on what happened to her in Denmark" (*The Nome Nugget*, 04 Nov. 1953, 5). Jorgensen was left wondering whether "people [would] attend to see her rather than [her work," lamenting, "now I will never know why I am successful—or if I am successful" (*Evening Star*, 12 Dec. 1952, A-2). By continuing to publicize and center her transition without her consent, newspapers made a spectacle of Jorgensen, one with demonstrably high entertainment value.

Overall, news publications gave a selectively positive portrayal and response to Jorgensen's transition. The lack of contextualization serves to obscure the more complex parts of

trans history, as well as the various ways trans people are marginalized, whether at the national or at the individual level. In conjunction with Jorgensen's portrayal as a white New York socialite with supportive upper-class parents, Jorgensen was held as the paragon of the trans experience (*Evening Star*, 01 Dec. 1952, A-20). By decontextualizing her experience, news publications could exploit statistical fallacies, such as conflating normalcy with frequency. Jorgensen's novelty made her a special case study, but the seemingly low prevalence of the trans experience also made her unfit as a symbol for trans advocacy. As mentioned before, there was little to no negative coverage of her transition, including disparaging speech, slurs, or tropes. All of the articles referred to Jorgensen by her name and with she/her pronouns, with most using her name assigned at birth and he/him pronouns to describe her when she presented as a man; with the heavy emphasis on the novelty of her transition, questioning the validity of her gender identity—thus, the reality of her experience—would be contradictory.

By contemporary standards, these articles would be considered to show anti-trans bias at some level, such as through referring to Jorgensen by he/him pronouns or by what would now be called her deadname. However, the intense focus on personal transition experiences, more subtly dehumanizing, has continued through the present. News articles contribute to the understanding of trans history through the lens of the majority-cis public, but not through trans autobiography. We can see the evolution of public understanding and discourse surrounding transness, in both content and language. There is a tautological relationship between public discourse on trans people and the self presentation and narrativization of trans people; it is difficult to analyze one without the other. Without more primary autobiographical sources, we have gaps in understanding of both individual cases and collective experiences and may create false paradigms from the words of others.

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