Backstage Politics: Gay TV Professionals and their Work

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ABSTRACT

While gay and lesbian images have been regular features of American television throughout the 1990s, the 21st Century delivered an unprecedented interest in programming designed specifically for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community. This paper examines 20 key media professionals at the emergence of this new "Gay TV" industry and describes the perspectives they hold on their work. Interview data demonstrates how these professionals have created production structures—relatively stable patterns of behavior—that play an important bridging role between their positions in LGBT communities and their careers. While there is evidence that Gay TV will promote social change, interviewees may be overestimating the value of their work by failing to recognize the parameters of this industry.

KEY WORDS: television; sociology; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) studies; culture production; homosexuality; media; communication studies;

1. Introduction

"This is the best it's ever been for queer TV" (Gay TV Professional).

In 2005, *Broadcasting and Cable*, a trade magazine for television professionals, declared the emergence of the Gay TV industry with headlines announcing, "Out of the Closet and All over TV," "Test Your TV Gaydar," and "Gay TV: Out and Proud Networks."[1] While gay and lesbian images have been regular features of American television culture throughout the 1990s, the 21st Century delivered an unprecedented interest in programming designed specifically for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community. While academics continue to debate the meaning and value of Gay TV images, this paper draws on in-depth interviews to examine the people working backstage to produce these representations. This is a story of how Gay TV professionals understand their work during the historical emergence of this new industry.

As media professionals who also identify as members of the LGBT community, my interviewees were pleased that their careers and sexual identities had converged, allowing them to educate audiences and other media professionals about gay life in the United States. In fact, all of my interviewees described their careers using both political and business terms—a strategy that constructs the television industry as culturally important and allows them to situate their work within the fight for LGBT equality. While the Gay TV professionals I interviewed overwhelmingly felt they were contributing to a larger social good, their careers in Gay TV situate them in a business, not a community-service organization. In response to this position, many of these professionals negotiate "who they are" with "where they are" by creating production structures—relatively stable patterns of behavior—that allow them to play an important bridging role between their positions in LGBT communities and their careers. While I share the belief that the business of television will promote social change, I also believe that many Gay TV players overestimate the value of their work by failing to recognize the parameters of this industry. In particular, there are no guarantees that Gay TV images can achieve equality for the LGBT community.[2]

2. Studying Gay TV

I am defining Gay TV as including any television content that contains regular or recurring representations of at least one person or character from the LGBT community. These representations may be scripted or not and the people featured within them might be actors or "real" LGBT people. While the new Gay TV networks (*Logo, here! Network, Q Television Network*[3]) focus entirely on making LGBT-themed TV content that is directly targeted to this community, some mainstream cable networks and broadcast networks also air content that qualifies as Gay TV, despite their target audience of both straight and non-straight viewers. For decades, academic analyses of LGBT television images revealed varied interpretations of the significance of these representations (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Becker, 2006; Burgess, 2005; Capsuto, 2000; Connolly, 2002; Dow, 2001; Farrell, 2006; Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Fouts & Inch, 2005; Gamson, 2005; Gross, 2001;

Herman, 2005; Raymond, 2002; Schiappa et al., 2006; Seidman, 2002; Sender, 2006; Shugart, 2003; Walters, 2001). While some scholars focus on the limitations of Gay TV images, others acknowledge that audience members find value in these images despite their shortcomings. Investigations of cultural texts and the audience reception of those texts are important components of a cultural studies perspective, but the political economy of media texts must also be examined (Denzin, 1992; Denzin, 1999; Gamson, 1998; Holtzman, 2000; Kellner, 1995). While political economy research generally focuses on systems of production and distribution, the people involved in those systems play a critical role; therefore, we need to hear from the people who directly shape those systems.

Curtin and Streeter (2001) write, **"**[t]he media are not a pre-given 'thing' out there, but are themselves a politically constituted set of institutions that develop in response to a complex array of forces" and they argue that any useful progressive politics of the media will not only investigate the content and response of media messages but will also seek to understand the logic of production that makes the media what they are in the first place (Curtin and Streeter, 2001, p. 226). After all, media texts are the results of social processes in which people "with identifiable interests, skills, and weaknesses" work together and produce a commodity for public consumption (Maxwell. 2001, p.7).

Grindstaff and Turow (2006) describe sociological research on the political economy of television as having a focus "on the regimes that rule, regulate, supervise, and otherwise influence the medium's content" (p. 106). One line of inquiry that falls within this broad research is labeled "the production-of-culture-perspective on television." They explain:

> In production-of-culture studies of television, the main concern is with the nature of the reality that is constructed and disseminated by the media, as well as with the processes by which this construction takes place. Questions of power center on who has access to the media, who/what shapes professional media practices and values, and how these practices and values promote certain versions of reality over others, questions clearly relevant to political-economy theorists. (Pp. 109-110)

Although this type of research generally seeks to determine how established power relationships securing the dominant group's interests are maintained through media images, examining the people involved in Gay TV production reveals the significant role LGBT creators and television executives currently hold. While previous work has claimed that disenfranchised groups lack control related to the production and circulation of media representations of them (Gross, 1995), in this new period of gay media visibility LGBT people are holding influential positions allowing them substantial power over the images they circulate. In many ways, the new Gay TV industry depends on the voices of this marginalized group. It is the owners of these voices—the people who create, shape, and control these Gay TV images—whose experiences serve as the basis for this work. In this unprecedented era of gay producers targeting gay audiences through gay networks and programming, how do the current Gay TV players think about issues of visibility and politics? How do they understand the impact of their images and the processes involved in their creation? To add to the existing literature and construct a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences that yield these highly debated images, we must explore the backstage players working within the political economy of Gay TV.

3. Methods and Sample

In total, I interviewed 20 key players working in the Gay TV industry between 2004 and 2006. Their job titles and experience ranged from executives and other employees at the three U.S. Gay TV networks who were working in capacities including production, original programming, advertising and affiliate sales, public relations, and creative departments; writers, directors, and producers of Gay TV content featured on mainstream or Gay TV networks; and directors from the LGBT media advocacy group GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.[4] Eight of my interviewees identify as women while 12 identify as men; 17 identify as gay or lesbian, and all but one of my interviewees identify as white, non-Hispanic. Since I conducted substantial follow-up interviews with six of my informants, I analyzed a total of 26 interview transcripts; slightly more than half (15 total) of these interviews were conducted over the phone while the rest were in-person. Interviews ranged significantly in length. One interview, with a particularly well-known industry professional, was quite brief and lasted only 20 minutes; however, the majority of interviews, including the follow-up interviews, were close to 60 minutes in length. Most of the face to face interviews occurred in the interviewee's office or a nearby conference room, while two took place in public restaurants. While I had a prearranged list of questions that served as a general interview guide, my interview style was "semi-structured" (Esterberg, 2002). Topics common to most interviews included: interviewees' experience and history of work in the TV industry, and specifically the Gay TV industry; the processes involved in bringing televised visibility to the LGBT community; interviewees' personal thoughts and knowledge of how

Gay TV industry professionals think about LGBT people, issues, and programming; interviewees' experiences with controversy and resistance while working in the Gay TV industry; and interviewees' perspectives of how their jobs relate to politics and social activism. All interviewees signed a Statement of Informed Consent and granted me permission to record our conversation. Most participants allowed their name and professional title to be used in my reports, but a few chose to keep their identities confidential. All interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for common themes using NVIVO software. Another source of data for this project includes field notes that were created while viewing videotaped events featuring Gay TV players describing their work.

The first series of videotapes originated from five panel presentations included in Q-Me Con 2006. Sponsored by Punkmouse, Q-Me Con 2006 was "the first-ever multi-day conference and expo designed specifically for industry professionals working in, or looking to break into, LGBTQ content creation for the burgeoning queer TV and new digital media arenas" (Punkmouse, 2006).

Secondly, The Museum of Television and Radio[5] presented "The History of Gays and Lesbians on Television" as the topic of their University Satellite Series seminar in March 2004. This particular installment highlighted "a panel of individuals who have made significant contributions to this area discuss[ing] the evolution of gay characters in the medium and the steps they took to bring greater attention to the topic" (University of Maryland, 2007).

4. Results

> I'm a believer in there's several ways to go about [promoting social] change. You can, protest from the outside and hope that someone on the inside heeds your call or you can work from the inside out and *Logo* has backing from Viacom and is on in so many homes and people don't have to subscribe to it and they are going to enact change in a brilliant way by just being one of the channels that people can click through and maybe it'll catch their eye. (Gay TV player, April 2006)

In her work on gay marketing, Katherine Sender (2004) challenges the widespread ideology shared throughout this niche advertising industry that their work is "business, not politics." Instead, she argues that power is inevitably involved in every business decision—who to represent, how to represent them, and what audience to target. Sender's analysis is in line with a sociological understanding of politics as power relations: we see any exercise of power, including attempts to maintain or change power relations, as being politically-based (Henslin, 2007). Based on my interview data, I argue that, as gay and lesbian-identified media professionals, the Gay TV players I spoke with recognize and enjoy the political aspects of their jobs because they share the belief that their work is beneficial to the LGBT community. Thus, they work to establish production structures that bridge their professional and LGBT identities. First, I will show how my interviewees see television as an influential force that can be used effectively to create community and promote respect and equality for LGBT people. It is in this context that Gay TV professionals imagine niche marketing for an underrepresented group to be "serving" them, not exploiting their market power, and they instigate and participate in various efforts to promote the quality and quantity of gay images on television in order to advance their desire for promote equality and challenge homophobic attitudes.

4.1 "Serving" while Profiting

My participants regularly described their belief that the Gay TV networks are, in fact, a realm in which serving the interests of the gay community is intimately intertwined with profit motivated business decisions. At Q-Me Con, a conference for professionals working in queer media, *here!*'s press director, Stephen Macias, described his work for the audience by saying, "For me it's a very hard thing to separate the political part and the activist part around the marketing and business part. I think that by the very nature of being LGBTQ in this world that we live [in] you can't … escape [the politics]." He said that people in the Gay TV industry work every day to "balance serving our community with making smart business decisions so we're still here next month…Doing the right thing and also making smart business decisions are not mutually exclusive" (Q-Me Con, 2006). In describing their work at *here!*, *Q Television Network*, and *Logo*, many interviewees emphasized what they saw as a positive effect of their labors—helping the LGBT community—and downplayed the profit-oriented nature of the business in order to construct their industry as culturally important in the struggle for sexual equality.

While catering to a gay market "reflects a growing tendency throughout the 20th century to segment potential consumers into ever more narrowly defined niche markets" (Sender, 2004, p. 58), my interviewees from the three Gay TV networks argued that there are important differences between programming for a culturally accepted group of sports or garden enthusiasts versus a minority population lacking respect and civil rights.

Through direct inclusion in representation and marketing strategies, these Gay TV players think of their networks as actively challenging the marginalized position of the LGBT community. Due to the social position of the target audience, Meredith Kadlec, Vice President of Original Programming at *here! Network*, described how resistance is not uncommon in this line of work.

> Our mere existence, I think, is activist: what we have to go through, the conversations that we have to have. You know, when Paul, the CEO, went out thinking of this as being a commercially supported network and he got the response that, 'oh, well, you know, you can't—these advertisers want your money but they…don't want anyone to know they're supporting you.' For us to have to endure conversations like that, for me to have to sit here and sometimes listen to pitches that are so homophobic even from gay people, all of that, you don't do that stuff unless there is something [greater]; obviously we're not doing it to make money. I mean yes we are to some degree, but if you're setting out to start a company that is going to be a money-making company probably doing a gay network is not going to be the thing that's at the top of the list. (August 2005)

Kadlec suggests that the constant battle to make a Gay TV network successful, including hearing homophobic scripts and other comments, fighting with cable carriers in conservative markets, or battling with advertising entities, all highlight the political nature of this industry; Kadlec sees its very existence as "activist" due to these constant power struggles. While making money is the primary reason these businesses exist, Kadlec acknowledges that there are easier ways to make money. Instead, she believes that there is a sincere and passionate desire to serve this particular audience. My interviewees acknowledged many reasons why the work they do is important; in fact, not one of the professionals I interviewed argued that their only goal was to accrue profit or make the business a financial success.

> Interviewer: So where does the passion come from? Making your business a success?
> *Logo* Executive: Well, no, no, not at all. If it were my business, if my name was [Viacom owner and Chief Executive] Sumner Redstone and yes the money was going into my pocket, I would say that. But honestly, the passion comes from the content, what this channel stands for. (May 2005)

As this excerpt suggests, these Gay TV industry players understand their jobs as contributing to a larger sense of social good. One network executive described her job: "it's really great to work in a place where it's an entertainment thing and it's a Hollywood thing and there's all the dealings with agents and doing all the typical Hollywood stuff, but underneath all of that is a sense of it being about something bigger" (Meredith Kadlec, August 2005). I asked a *Logo* Executive if he saw his network as "forging social change for the gay and lesbian community." His response was that the network was "not purposely saying we're going to change gay life [or that] we're going to change how Americans view gays. No, we're not setting out to do that. But, will that happen? Yeah" (Jon Sechrist, May 2005).

For several of the professionals I interviewed, televised stories and images of the LGBT community mark a turning point in cultural politics:

> Yeah, I mean I think that, you know, what, what we have found is that, for a lot of people across the country, the *here! Network* is about finally having a place at the table in a sea of, ah, television choices that depict every aspect, every niche aspect of the American culture except for the gay culture. (Stephen Macias, March 2006)

This mainstreaming approach to gay and lesbian liberation that focuses on the integration of gays and lesbians into bedrock American institutions, demonstrated though comments such as "a place at the table," was a common sentiment voiced by players in the Gay TV industry who felt as though this inclusion was an important step toward cultural validation. Interviewees commented on the variety of other niche markets that they believe were served before the LGBT community and generally acknowledged the symbolic importance of televised representations of minority groups:

> I think television is immensely powerful with the public, there's no question. I mean it goes back to a picture is worth a thousand words. People see something on television [and] they think that's the way it is. They think it's real; if they don't see a segment of society, in their mind it, that minimizes the presence or the power of that group. (Gay TV player, August 2004)

Another professional explained:

> It's so important because when you see characters like yourself on television, it's almost like you've arrived [and] there's an acceptance. (Jon Sechrist, January 2005).

I asked Meredith Kadlec why it was important for her to put LGBT representations on television and she replied, "Because they're images that I wanted… that part of it is just a fantasy come true. Um, but I think it's really important. It's so, um, self-esteem producing for people to see images of themselves" (August 2005). These perspectives are clear: my interviewees see representations of gays and lesbians on television as important for members of that community as well as non-members. In both cases, these stories and images validate a group's existence and demonstrate inclusion in society, television culture, and the marketplace.

My research participants did not see their work as exploiting the gay community or targeting them for their money; instead, they described their work as "serving" and "supporting" an "underserved" community. But in this industry, these two realms actually work hand in hand. Here, one professional who was employed in a creative and marketing capacity at a Gay TV network expressed his interest in "helping" different demographic groups:

> I really want to sort of help different segments…if you really find out what people want and you deliver [it] to them and you make it and you serve them without them asking you to then people are going to show up and people are going to buy what you're selling and people are going to be interested in what you're talking about because you found out what they wanted and you delivered them what they want. (Gay TV player, May 2005)

This interviewee takes great pride in his bridging role—such as knowing the tastes of his target demographic and "delivering" their desires to them—without their having to ask. In his example, the customer is satisfied because she is given exactly what she wants. Since other marketers might not have personalized their campaign or product so carefully, the customer is happy and is willing to come back for more. Of course, succeeding in the business world is more than just providing a service or product that pleases people: success is selling that product repeatedly and having those sales result in profit. Interestingly, attending to the company's business needs coincides with "serving" the audience, customer, or community because happy regular customers mean more profit. However, this Gay TV player describes his work as performing a service, instead of highlighting the financial benefits his business will enjoy as a result.

LGBT audiences are pleased when they see representations of their community that are three-dimensional and not based on stereotypical imagery. Most of my interviewees discussed the necessity of showing the diversity of the gay community and several discussed the challenge of representing a community with such variety within it. In other words, the Gay TV players I interviewed explained that they *were* concerned about the quality of images they create and reported a strong desire to represent a wide range of people and behaviors. Nonetheless, these professionals generally understood that there was something about the viewing preferences of their target demographic that differentiated members from non-members—in a sense, they essentialized gayness. One professional boasted that the strength of his network was that LGBT audiences will "just 'get it' from the second that it's on" (January 2005). For this interviewee, gay networks allow for a different type of representation than broadcast networks are able to provide:

> [A] lot of times we have to reduce ourselves to different stereotypes to communicate with people who may not understand us from the outside. And I think that's true throughout the history of entertainment. I mean, you have to reduce to the stereotype to communicate to the people outside your stereotype or outside the identity group that you belong to, right? I mean you have to in the mainstream. But when you say this is just for me, it then becomes a whole different world…Because you're not in the place for that. You're among friends, you know, and when you're among friends you do different things than when you are in public. And I really feel like network television is like being in public and cable television is like being among friends. Exactly and, you know, the audience, the audience that you share is your friend and, you know, when you're among friends you can be yourself and you can say things differently to your own audience than you ever would, that you would say, you know, when you're at the mall. (January 2005)

This professional argues that niche cable networks allow audiences to engage in specialized content that would not be featured on mainstream networks. By addressing audience members as participants in a unique community, this interviewee believes niche cable networks avoid stereotypical representations and create spaces that allow audience member to build deeper relationships with one another because they are communicating with "friends," not outsiders who are unfamiliar with their identities. Again, this is a strategy that is benefiting media corporations as well as the LGBT community: LGBT audience members are attracted to a Gay TV network "just for them," resulting in more subscriptions, program purchases, and advertiser dollars for the businesses.

Meredith Kadlec distinguished business from politics when she created a binary between budgets and fair and accurate representations of the LGBT community:

> Oh we definitely have a business decision aspect to what we're doing. We are really hard core about our budgets and we have to be very careful about all of that. But there is for sure that larger meaning to what we're doing and we have quarterly retreats…and we talk about what we're doing and where we're headed and a lot of it is that kind of broader, how are we doing with meeting our goals of being an authentic voice of the [LGBT] community? (March 2006)

In this industry, profits and budgets are related to the company's success in "being an authentic voice." If *here!* failed to interest gay and lesbian viewers by putting out inauthentic representations of their community, their sales would decline. I agree with Kadlec that representing this demographic fairly has a "larger meaning" due to its political nature and I'm arguing that the politics are inescapably part of this business.

One way *here!* executives support the LGBT community is through their efforts to hire talent who are openly gay. At Q-Me Con 2006, Kadlec spoke to an audience of writers and producers who were seeking information about pitching their work to LGBTQ cable broadcasters. She constructed her network, and others like it, as performing a service for gay creators: "Being a platform for what people want to say about themselves is one of the jobs of these networks. We're here to be an outlet and a voice for what you guys want to say about who we all are" (Q-Me Con 2006). In an interview Kadlec also told me that she looks for gay actors; she told me, "we have an out actress playing the other character already and we wanted to find another out actress to play the lead 'cause that would just be great, you know, support the community and we're really actively trying to support out actors because they just lose so much" (August 2005). She was surprised when 80 actresses answered the casting call:

> I was like wow, there actually are a lot of out actresses but nobody knows who they are. There could be a million diamonds in the rough out there who, because they made the mistake of being out early, didn't get very far and now we can find them. We can find great talent out there. (August 2005)

Actions expressly intended to "support the community" simultaneously help the network: first, gay writers and producers are encouraged to write stories about their lives and experiences, increasing the pool of scripts available for purchase. Second, actors who "come out" early in their careers have a notoriously difficult time securing on-screen employment in the entertainment industry; Kadlec's move to help them out because they "lose so much" also helps *here!* secure "diamonds in the rough" that no other studio would hire. This production structure, designed to serve LGBT actors, creates a competitive advantage in hiring and represents another bridging role between Gay TV networks and the gay community.

4.2 Promoting Social Change through Television

Like Kadlec, many of the people I interviewed described their own individual efforts to promote change on television by linking the LGBT community and media industries. For these professionals, these small, uncoordinated steps may not be "big activist agendas," but they do indicate that some Gay TV players are using their industry positions in order to advance their own political goals.

Fenton Bailey, one of the co-founders of the media production company, World of Wonder, explicitly acknowledged that his projects generally impart a message to respect and embrace, not merely tolerate, human individuality (August 2005). In other words, Bailey's work champions non-conformity and difference. Lee Rose, another writer, director, and producer of gay programming featured on various networks, argued that several of her television movies made a "bold statement" in today's culture wars: "I think [my work is] making a statement… you should be able to love whoever the fuck you want. Period" (August 2004). As co-founder of a new production company dedicated entirely to LGBT programming, Chad Allen described his goal of using the Gay TV industry to counter mainstream audience members' lack of knowledge and fear of gay people by providing them with access into the reality of gay lives. He recounted an experience:

> When people were lining up to vote against [gays and lesbians] in the last Presidential election, in the way that we saw them do, I looked at the faces of those people and my single thought was: they don't know me. You know? And if they did, they wouldn't be lining up that way. And I believe that to be true. I believe that there's one way to counter fear, and that's with knowledge. And the opportunity that we have through these [Gay TV] networks…there's now a listening audience for those of us who are willing to get up and say 'hey, this is who we are.' (October 2005)

GLAAD's Director of Entertainment agreed: "We know that when people see our stories on television and read about us in the newspaper, it changes hearts and minds; it's a proven fact that prejudice lessens when LGBT people are seen and treated as equals in the media" (Damon Romaine, September 2005).

Logo's founder, Matt Farber, echoed Romaine's words when he stated, "nothing's more effective in changing hearts and minds" than fair representations of the LGBT community (May 2005). The most powerful statement I heard came from Alexis Fish: "when *Q* can be seen in any market in any city, um, you know, I think we might save some lives" (September 2005). Clearly, for many of my interviewees, the political aspect of sharing stories and images of this community as well as messages of acceptance, respect, and inclusion are important elements of their work

Lee Rose described how Gay TV players must use particular strategies in order to promote their political goals. When Rose is involved in a project with an important message about tolerance or anti-discrimination, she puts herself in the position of the television audience and caters to their preferences:

> …you also have to be intelligent enough no matter what movie you're making that you want people to see it. You're not making it for your own, as a home movie. So, I know going into any movie I'm going to cast the biggest fucking stars I can cast or who I would want to see have sex because I know that that will reach the most people and that's what I want. I want as many people in the world to see it as humanly possible and especially if the message is a big one. (August 2004)

Rose applies her knowledge that people are drawn to attractive celebrities having sex on screen to ensure that the largest possible audience will watch her film and consume its message. In another situation, Rose battled with executives at a television network in order to promote the inclusion of an unashamed, unconcealed, representation of an LGBT experience on television. The following excerpt is from a conversation in which we were discussing the inevitable disagreement between a creative agent and the network executives who wish to shape content in particular ways:

> Interviewer: Do you think other film makers experience the same thing or do you think this is unique, or at least maybe more intense, because of the gay content in many of your pictures?
> Rose: …I think all film makers experience it, but I think if they're doing something that is just entertainment, you shouldn't fight so hard. Who gives a shit? You know it, then it's ego. If you're sending a message that could help a 15 year-old kid not commit suicide or tell their parents they're gay then you do have a bit more obligation to that movie. And you have to fight harder because if you don't, then who the fuck is fighting for it? And who's fighting for these kids? I know that sounds all very grand and I didn't even understand how big that responsibility was until *The Truth about Jane*. And I fought, and fought, and fought, and when they were going to do an ad campaign on television not saying what Jane's dilemma was, I said 'guys she could be fucking bulimic, now you're saying you're almost ashamed of what she is because you're not saying it in the ads?! And here's the deal, you need to say it in the ad in case there's a kid watching.'
>
> Farrell: Right, you need to get the audience there, to the show.
>
> Rose: Yeah, how would they even know to get there? And so, you know, I won that battle but boy it was hard fought and it unbelievable that I should even have to bring it up. (August 2004)

When the network planned to conceal that *The Truth about Jane* featured the coming out experiences of a young lesbian, Rose engaged in direct confrontation—even going so far as to suggest that the executives were homophobic—to ensure that the ad campaign would draw gay adolescents to her film. She differentiated this project from one that is "just entertainment;" instead, this film had an agenda to send a message affirming gay and lesbian identities and, therefore, needed to be appropriately labeled in such a way that would interest audiences who are in need of this lesson. Rose identified that her battle with the network was not egotistical, but rather a selfless tactic used on behalf of a marginalized population without enough allies. As gay-identified media professionals, many of the Gay TV players I spoke with use their positions to put forth particular images that are in line with their goals of serving the LGBT community. In other words, they balance "who they are" with "where they are" by thinking of their television industry work as politically benefiting the LGBT community. This certainly is a powerful opportunity given the marginalized status of this community, and, more specifically, an opportunity to promote their vision of social change.

4.3 On the Job Training

My interviewees also described their belief that the backstage processes of creating Gay TV can effectively educate other media professionals. In particular, they saw examples of how working among LGBT staff members and being involved with programming full of information and stories about the gay community can transform people with "homophobic" attitudes and increases their awareness and acceptance of non-heterosexual people and communities.

Q Television's signature programming included newscasts featuring issues relevant to the LGBT community that were aired live, often with celebrity commentators. Alexis Fish, *Q*'s former Senior Vice President, recounted how many of her straight production staff left their jobs at *Q* as "different people:" "I know the people working in the control room who had to sit and actually pay attention to the newscast, they came to me and they're like, 'I've learned so much'" (April 2006). Fish explained how many straight staff accepted positions at the gay network thinking that they would stay only "a couple of weeks" accepting the jobs primarily because they "needed the money," but many straight employees "absolutely fell in love with the people" and "they realized that a lot of their knee jerk reactions were absolutely homophobic" (April 2006). *Here!*'s Press Director, Stephen Macias, agreed that many of their production staff, who are primarily straight and principally employed through the sister company, Regent Entertainment (a general entertainment media company), also experienced similar conversions when they began projects with *here! Network*. Macias strongly agreed that he feels "the changing of hearts and minds is not only occurring through the television screen, [but] also occurring in the process of making it" (March 2006).

When speaking with Meredith Kadlec, *here!*'s Vice President of Original Programming, she explained how Hollywood is pretty gay-savvy but oftentimes, "it's the actors that are the issue." Although Kadlec works hard to hire LGBT actors, it is often impossible to cast entire series without heterosexual talent. One problem she has encountered in the past involves actors who misstep in press interviews with statements that are insulting to members of the gay community. For example, Kadlec relayed how a straight actress, who was playing a lesbian, told an interviewer that she prepared for her role of loving another woman by thinking about how she loved her dog (August 2005). Instead of making a parallel between her heterosexual attractions, she related same sex attraction to the love she had for her house pet. Recognizing the potential outrage the publicized interview might incur, *here!* now requires their talent—including actors, writers, directors, and even executives—to undergo extensive media training in which they learn proper terminology to "make sure that they're not inadvertently misstepping and referring to people, places, or things in the gay community in a way that is, ah, for lack of a better term, politically incorrect" (Stephen Macias, March 2006). Stephen Macias facilitates these employee training sessions to reduce the possibility that his staff won't say something on camera that

> [m]ight hurt some people's feelings or rub some people the wrong way. [For example] … you [should] talk about the 'gay community' as opposed to using the word 'homosexual' community… As a gay television network even though you're not a non-profit and you're not a civil rights organization you do actually have to be held accountable on some level to a different set of standards on something like the Food Network. (Stephen Macias, March 2006)

Indeed, creating programming for the gay community does take different knowledge than that which is required to make shows for the Food Network; after all, we all eat, we have been to restaurants, and food is an accepted—even embraced—part of American culture. Gay lifestyles and culture are not. Premium cable channel, Showtime, home of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, is not specifically a gay network despite the fact that two of its top rated shows featured casts of LGBT characters. While writing and producing *Queer as Folk*, Daniel Lipman often found himself in the position of having to educate network executives when they inquired about show content (Daniel Lipman, August 2005). His Executive Producer from Showtime, Pancho Mansfield, agreed that, since he is straight and therefore not a member of the particular gay community that is featured in *Queer as Folk*, he would often need to "take [the writers'] word for it" (Pancho Mansfield, August 2004).

Lee Rose, a writer, director, and producer of various television films featuring gay content, had similar encounters with network executives while creating *The Truth about Jane* for Lifetime. As a lesbian writing the story of a young girl's coming out experience, Rose became frustrated by the suggestions she received to shape the film in particular ways because "there was no one in that room giving me notes that understood the dilemma that Jane had" (August 2004). When executives criticized details in this story, Lee had to remind them that she was the expert:

> [A]nd I go, 'you guys, you know what? I'm gay; I don't think you are. And this is what happens when people come out and some people want them dead and some mothers can't fucking deal with it. And this is what happens. You don't even know so you're giving me notes in a vacuum just based on fear or lack of understanding or whatever. (August 2004)

Rose refused to budge, acknowledging that her film was couched in experience while the critiques from her network executives were not. She insisted that they trust her knowledge as more informed and allow her to take the lead uninhabited.

The Truth about Jane's ratings seemed to confirm that Rose knew what she was writing about: the film earned Lifetime the highest ratings in five years (Lee Rose, August 2004).In some cases, education is part of Gay TV professional's job description. As Head of Advertisement Sales at *Logo*, Jeff Elgart's job requires him to communicate information about the gay community to marketers who wish to target, or simply learn more about, this particular audience. Here, Elgart describes this role:

> I'm an educator. I'm the facilitator of information about the gay and lesbian community, communities, around America. [What] I'm doing in the beginning with marketers [is] to get them comfortable with who they're about to speak to and then we'll get into introducing them to *Logo*. (Jeff Elgart, January 2005)

While Elgart's job responsibilities include disseminating research detailing the gay and lesbian community so that marketers can effectively target this demographic, communicating information about a marginalized identity constitutes education. Marketers are simultaneously learning how to make money while becoming informed about a group of people they may not have previously known.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

My research participants repeatedly recast their work and its profit-generating incentives into an arena of social activism deserving greater legitimacy and respect. By framing their work as promoting social change and education, Gay TV players combat perceptions that they are exploiting the LGBT community by taking their money. Instead, they perceive their work as politically important and valuable for the gay community; this is a validating thought for them due to their own gay and lesbian identifications. But are all Gay TV programs as educational and political as my research participants believe?

At the end of the day, these Gay TV players were hired for their media backgrounds, not their activism. The Gay TV players I interviewed do not "mobilize constituencies," but rather they make their own decisions about how to best represent them (Doyle, 2005). While my interviewees report that their decisions include considerations of authenticity and the politics of representation, it is clear that they ultimately must also address business decisions including audience ratings and corporate sponsors. But these professionals are not just experts in television: through membership in LGBT communities, the majority is well-versed on gay culture as well. In fact, one unprecedented result of targeting a gay market is the significant control given to LGBT executives, producers, directors, writers, and actors. The personal lives of LGBT television professionals have become a valuable source of knowledge and experience for this industry. The fact that gay creators and actors are being acknowledged, targeted, and rewarded in both professional and monetary ways for their work shows a remarkable shift in power. There are clear parallels here with Zook's (1999) examination into the explosion of Black television content on the Fox Network in the 1980s and 1990s: niche marketing can sometimes create opportunities for minority groups to foster sub-cultural spaces.

I share my interviewees' perspective that the Gay TV industry promotes awareness of the LGBT community. Their stories suggest that straight employees at the gay networks are learning about the gay community and the issues we face, sponsors are becoming aware of this community, and mainstream network executives are forced to understand defamatory content. In addition, I believe that conferences for queer media professionals, like Punkmouse's Q-Me Con, have real potential to initiate and prepare up-and-coming Gay TV players for rich careers in this industry. As a professional space, Q-Me Con promotes networking opportunities and information sharing that will further allow these media professionals, who are overwhelmingly members of the LGBT community, to succeed. For example, many seminars engaged participants in business matters, such as how to pitch a project to the gay networks, how to market your content, or how to find distribution outlets. Moreover, other panelists debated the quality of representations or engaged in town hall-style forums allowing audience members to discuss their own analyses of these images. Conversations like these—that are occurring in professional spaces for the very people involved in making this content—hold a great deal of potential in terms of their educational value. Serious deliberation about Gay TV, its representations, and its effects suggests that this industry is not being taken lightly and I hope that media professionals continue to think critically about the products they are putting forth.

While my research participants were enthusiastic about the educational value of Gay TV images, I understand these images to be more complex than simply positive or negative. There are several important issues that need to be taken into account in a discussion of the significance of the new Gay TV images. First, I believe that it is unlikely that, in their current state, the gay networks will significantly influence the views of homophobic straight audiences, as suggested by several of my research participants. While *Logo* is available in many homes with digital cable packages, *here! Network* must be specifically purchased, making it doubtful that someone who does not accept the LGBT community will spend the extra money for access to this station.

Moreover, as a niche cable network, *Logo* is almost equally likely to only draw LGBT viewers, and straight audience members who already support the LGBT community, to their programming. If I am not interested in home improvements, I am unlikely to watch HGTV; if I am not concerned with headline news, I will not tune in to CNN. *Logo* suffers from the same situation: people will seek out *Logo*'s programming only when they are interested in its content. Homophobic audience members may flip through their channels and land on *Logo*, but I find it improbable that they would engage in *Logo*'s programming with enough interest to sustain long-term attitudinal change.

Fictional Gay TV programs that appear on mainstream networks may be better positioned to instigate the ideological shifts described by my optimistic research participants. In order to be lucrative, these shows must appeal to both gay and straight audiences to encourage a sizeable audience of interest to advertisers. To do this, mainstream shows with recurring gay characters usually include a number of heterosexual characters and storylines. Audience members who are not accepting of LGBT people may still be drawn to these shows by the straight characters they relate to, and will then consume LGBT programming without necessarily intending it. Fictional shows with at least one recurring gay characters can be influential when homophobia and social inquality are front and center of the storylines. Audience members must be introduced to the negative effects of discrimination and fear and see the straight characters support gay rights. I believe these storylines could promote homophobic audience members to consider their attitudes and behavior in a way that might promote greater understanding.

I believe that documentary-style content that delivers a variety of LGBT lives to the television screen is another worthwhile realm of programming when aired on mainstream networks. While "reality" shows are undoubtedly edited, this framing allows the creators to communicate, directly, the frustrations and celebrations of gay life in the United States. Documentary-style content can promote clear messages, as opposed to implicit suggestions. Many of my participants described their belief that homophobia stems from not "knowing" LGBT people. While visibility does not always equal "knowing," I do believe that having access to people's lives can demonstrate the unknown. In particular, documentaries are particularly effective in illustrating two concepts voiced by my research participants: (some) gay people are "just like straight people," while there is also a great deal of diversity within the LGBT community.

While I believe Gay TV programming on mainstream networks will be more effective at changing anti-gay perspectives, I find significant merit in the gay networks in relation to their ability to forge identities and communities. The most substantial impact, I believe, is on the self-esteem of young LGBT audience members who tune in to these stations to feel a sense of belonging and validation. While *here!* may be more difficult for adolescents to access due to its premium cable format, *Logo*'s inclusion in basic cable packages suggests that it is available in many homes. Programming on the gay networks has the potential to shape the very meaning of LGBT identities in terms of communicating political messages and creating sub-cultural connections. Just as the internet has served as a community forum for young LGBT people looking for acceptance, the gay networks can also serve as a meeting place for viewers who are looking for unity. Shared television viewing creates common experiences, which may serve as a foundation for personal relationships and greater self-esteem.

Gay TV undoubtedly reinforces identity categories and identity categories are tricky; fixed identity categories are "both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power" (Gamson, 1998, p. 223). Gamson explains:

> A sense of collective identification—that this is us, that we are each other—is personally and politically critical: it is an anchor, offering the comforts and resources of family and, at least in this political system, a foundation from which to organize and wage political battles. Identity requires stable, recognizable social categories. It requires difference, knowing where you end and the others begin. It thus makes good sense to do as gay and lesbians movements, have done: to build a quasi-ethnicity, with its political and cultural institutions, festivals, and neighborhoods…all of this solidifies the social categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian,' clarifying who 'we' are and are not. (p. 222)

By constructing the contours of "gayness," Gay TV also solidifies "heterosexual" as an identity category. Gamson notes, "it is exactly through the fixed, dichotomous categorization into apparently distinct species of gay and straight…that antigay, antibisexual, and antitransgender oppression is perpetuated" (p. 222). This suggests that muddying the categories is key to liberation—that pointing out their instability and fluidity and attacking the gay/straight divide is more powerful than seeking to equalize both sides through strengthening the gay community as a political force.

Unfortunately, Gay TV relies on recognizable gayness that stands in some sort of contrast to straightness in order to market itself. This undermines the ability of these industries to promote truly "queer" images. However, I think it is vital that Gay TV representations begin to move in this direction throughout the gay networks as well as on mainstream networks. Despite my criticisms concerning the gay networks' potential for dismantling homophobia, and despite my optimism regarding the possible effects of Gay TV programming on mainstream networks, the real problem with any conversation regarding images and audiences is that, "[r]epresentations come without guarantees; they cannot be counted on to produce specific effects, either positive or negative" (Doyle, 2005, p. 8). While media texts may encourage a "preferred reading," you cannot control the perspectives that people reach through their media consumption. Surely, some people will be changed in positive ways as a result of their Gay TV viewing, but there is no way to guarantee it. In fact, there is also potential that homophobic viewers become enraged at Gay TV programming, furthering their resentment toward this community. Young LGBT viewers may also become frustrated by the images they consume, leading to a lifetime of isolation away from LGBT communities. Simply put, Gay TV programming comes with no warrantees.

At Q-Me Con, *here!* Networks' press director, Stephen Macias, explained that he recognizes two schools of thought regarding the new Gay TV industry. While some people believe that this industry is promoting equal rights by creating visibility, others argue that Gay TV is actually harming the fight for equal rights by not creating a sense of urgency, or by creating a false sense of security that we are all equally protected under the law. I agree with both paradigms: this industry has potential to engage in political work through the images they put forth. However, if these images fail to remind people of the unequal status of the LGBT community, they could encourage complacency. While I believe the simple act of being on the air represents social change and political contestation, I also share the concern that Gay TV players will eventually become caught up in ratings and business models, forgetting about the reason they were interested in this work at the beginning. Gay TV images keep the LGBT community on the radar, but the stories must remind people about oppression, discrimination, and the wide range of lifestyles, social class statuses, racial/ethnic identifications, and other differences experienced within this one social group.

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[1] These headlines were pulled from the cover of *Broadcasting and Cable's* March 21, 2005 issue.

[2] In this work, I refer to the "LGBT community," "lesbian and gay community," and the "gay community" interchangeably. My research participants also vary their use of terminology, employing these terms as well as the "queer community" to refer to the same general group of people. When I say "Gay TV" or "gay community," my use of "gay" is not meant to exclude lesbians, transgender people, or bisexuals; rather, it is shorthand for a range of identities included in this marginalized community. I also employ "Gay TV" to be consistent with the colloquial terminology in popular culture and the television industry. In other words, my use of "gay" is not meant to be shorthand for "gay man/men," but shorthand for sexual/gender identity that is "not straight."

The LGBT community I reference in the following pages is not one, homogenous entity. Members of this "community" share only a non-mainstream sexual or gender identification, including the oppressed social status that comes with it. While some LGBT people experience a group consciousness, perhaps related to common language, symbols, media consumption, or ideologies, others may be more isolated from this culture and may not share any personal characteristics. Moreover, LGBT people differ by race, ethnicity, religion, region of the country, and a host of other social categories, suggesting that people experience their LGBT identities in a variety of ways.

[3] *here TV* has been available since 2002 in three formats: Video on Demand (VOD), Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD), and as a linear premium cable channel (Albiniak 2005). It is owned by Regent Entertainment. *Logo* is owned by Viacom and was launched in June 2005 as a basic, advertiser-supported, cable network. *Q Television Network* was on the air from February 2004 until May 2006, when the network shut down due to its inability to make payroll (Cullinane n.d.). *Q Television* Network was owned by Triangle Multi-Media.

[4] Throughout this paper, I use the professional titles for my participants that were current at the time of our interview(s). However, many of my participants have since changed jobs.

[5] The Museum of Television and Radio is now known as the Paley Center for Media.