

The Media: That's So Gay!

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Media is a phenomenon. It has intangible powers that reach the conscious and unconscious psyche of populations each and every day. It has the ability to make people cry, laugh, feel good, or feel bad about themselves and/or others. Television and other sources of media have a 'superhero-like' quality that many individuals rarely think about. Television, as well as other forms of media, has the unique ability to save lives. Minorities in the media are a far bigger issue than just being a *minority in the media*. It is about being accepted and a part of a world that may or may not see you as an equal. Being a part of mainstream or alternative media is not about the fame or glory, but about the decency of being included [rather than excluded] and saying you matter. According to Scott Seomin, "[w]hen a gay teen living in Iowa does not see himself represented in the media, a message is delivered that says, 'You do not count'" (qtd. in Epstein par. 3). Gay and Lesbian groups have been included, but for the most part excluded, in the media because they are seen as deviant individuals that go against the norm of society. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) representation in the media are labeled as one of the most controversial storylines in television shows because in the *eyes of the majority* men should not be attracted to men and women should not be attracted to women. However, what about the minorities who crave to be represented and have a positive role model to look up to in the homosexual community of mainstream media? Do their lifestyles not count because it is not accepted by the majority of television viewers, just because they may identify with a gender that should not coincide with their sex (according to the norms of society)?

Many gay and lesbian characters have an extremely positive effect on mainstream and alternative media, especially for adolescents. Seeing a homosexual character overcoming obstacles that they thought were impossible to face could be an incredibly exhilarating feeling for a homosexual adolescent, because perhaps a day ago that same individual contemplated

committing suicide for being called a ‘fag’. Television is an exceptionally powerful medium that the majority takes advantage of. They are over represented while homosexual adolescents and young adults struggle to find an identity in television sitcoms. Television shows are ‘ajar doors’ that can help the majority see the LGBT community as an equal vital part of society. Is it a shallow realization or a fact of life that a great amount of acceptance of ‘norms’ comes from sitcoms and television shows? Media only has as much power as society gives it, and in today’s society people treat and follow it like constitutional law. Whatever is viewed on television shows such as *Gossip Girl* and *Grey’s Anatomy* is conceived as how reality should and could be. Heterosexuals are no more important or better than homosexuals, but in viewing mainstream and alternative media one would think differently. Many homosexual actors and characters in television sitcoms have a positive effect on homosexual as well as heterosexual individuals. Many homosexual storylines teach ignorant people that homosexuality is not wrong and is nothing to ‘spectacle’ about, while teaching confused or the *out* gay and lesbian community that it is alright to be who they are and not give up on themselves and society.

Nowadays, there are arrays of television sitcoms with positive homosexual storylines. Broadcast television shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC), *House* (FOX), *Ugly Betty* (ABC), and *The Office* (NBC) have leading and/or supporting LGBT characters (“Where We Are on TV” 6, 9). However, these current shows have had a substantial path made for them that makes the transition to the homosexual storylines they portray easily accepted by the public. The show that astronomically increased gay and lesbian visibility on television was *Ellen* (ABC, 1997) starting Ellen DeGeneres. When Ellen ‘came out’ and announced her character, Ellen Morgan, was a lesbian, Ellen DeGeneres, also ‘came out’ as a lesbian in real life. It is difficult to fathom where many current sitcoms with homosexual characters would be or how they would be

accepted if Ellen DeGeneres did not break the barrier of homosexuality in mainstream media. In announcing that she was a lesbian “DeGeneres allowed herself to become a poster girl – not for lesbianism, but for honesty....DeGeneres risked her professional reputation for personal freedom” (Dow 123). Ellen came out for herself, to find acceptance and tranquility within her own world. She did not do it for the lesbian community, but for the sheer decency of moral honesty. In coming out to the public she did not out herself to gay magazines like *Out* and *Curve*. Ellen explained her feelings on her sexual relationships with women on *Oprah*, *20/20*, and *Time Magazine*, which are mainstream forums of media.

When Ellen announced she was a lesbian she established very clearly that it was to free herself, and not for ABC or the media. And interestingly enough, gay and straight fans respected the way she went about ‘outing’ herself. Ellen understood that her show was a sitcom based on a homosexual lead character for a heterosexual audience. DeGeneres fathomed the science of entertainment and did what she felt was right, not compromising her integrity in the process. However, even though ABC canceled *Ellen* after a season “[t]he coming-out episode more than doubled Ellen’s regular viewing audience, the show was renewed by ABC, and *Ellen* garnered an Emmy for best comedy writing” (Dow 128). *Ellen* was an excellent show that portrayed a positive lesbian coming out to her parents and friends. It treated the subject with sensitivity, comedy and shined a long overdue light onto the difficult situation (of coming out). But overall the most important factor to remember about this sitcom is it did not exploit her sexuality such as fitting into stereotypes (ex. promiscuous or having a sexually transmitted disease). *Ellen* was an entertaining sitcom above all else. It was not only an outlet for gay adolescents and adults, but an entertaining medium to enjoy whether homosexual or heterosexual. However, even though it was not an exclusively gay show it was a safe haven for many gay adolescents and adults alike.

Because *Ellen* was a popular, broadcast mainstream sitcom it was acceptable to watch without the fear of being judged. It taught the ignorant heterosexual crowd that homonormativity was a part of the norm of society. It showed the homophobic crowd that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle that is not so extreme from a heterosexual one. A show like *Ellen*, that opened the hearts and minds of mainstream America, does a great deal of good for teens frustrated at their wits end in figuring out and accepting their sexuality. According to Bonnie J. Dow:

A 1992 study of gay and lesbians youths, for instance, found that 64% of males and 50% of females said that their self-esteem was affected positively by coming out. Lesbian and gay youths are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers, and gays and lesbians account for 30% of all completed suicides among youths (Singer & Deschamps, 1994, pp. 76-77). If a show like *Ellen* can alter those statistics in a positive way, it deserves praise. (135)

Ellen DeGeneres, whether she realizes it or not, has saved lives through the quality of her entertainment. *Ellen* provides more than cheap laughs and corny life lessons. It provides potential gay teen suicide victims another chance at life. Where once they did not have a voice or an idea what or who to turn to, they found safety in a simple sitcom like *Ellen*. They saw a homosexual character and actress dealing with the same issues of coming-out time and time again, or for the first time and realized it is possible to do the same. Also, in witnessing the acceptance of the heterosexual crowd to Ellen DeGeneres, gay adolescents and young adults gained courage and hope that ignorant individuals would see that, like Ellen DeGeneres (and her character) they were just as *human* and a part of society as they were. “*Ellen* allows mainstream media to proclaim increased *visibility* for gays and lesbians as increased *legitimacy* for gays and

lesbians, in presumably social and political ways” (Dow 136). The sitcom has made great strides for the gay and lesbian community as it positively brought the community into the light of mainstream media. It introduced the LGBT community not as promiscuous deviants, but as human beings with everyday problems that dealt with various commonalities of life such as work, relationship, and/or home issues. While one cannot say Ellen DeGeneres ‘saved the gays’, it is important to know that she made the right steps in coming-out to the mass media. To exude such confidence as well as fear makes her a heroine for never backing down to homophobic remarks and staying true to her show and her loyal fans. A lot of what mainstream broadcast television (that has any homosexual characters) airs should accredit Ellen DeGeneres for breaking down a big wall of homophobia with such charisma and professionalism.

In this day and age, broadcast television shows aim at pleasing the *majority*, as most characters are Caucasian and heterosexual. Primetime on many broadcast networks have a lot of pressure to air socially acceptable dramas and comedies. However, in recent entertainment major broadcast network shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC) and *Modern Family* (ABC Family) have lead and supporting characters that are homosexual. According to Robert Mendez, senior vice president for diversity at the Disney-ABC Television Group, ABC and Disney believes, “diversity makes those shows much more interesting” (“Where Are We on TV” 19). There will always be something wonderful and ‘real’ about a diverse cast diverse many viewers can relate to. In particular, the medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* has a large ensemble of very talented actors and actresses. The drama series covers an array of diverse topics as well as a positive lesbian storyline. Dr. Calliope “Callie” Torres, played by Sara Ramirez who is Hispanic, recently ‘came out of the closet’ last season and has had to overcome tragedy after heartbreak and tragedy again. Dr. Torres, who was previously married to a man whom she

thought she loved, ended her first marriage in divorce. After a struggle to figure out her identity in the grand scheme of things, she realized she found comfort in her first girlfriend, Dr. Erica Hahn. However, this did not last long due to insecurities and differences. After more self discovery Callie found friendship, comfort, and love in a warm, caring Pediatric resident by the name of Dr. Arizona Robbins. Dr. Robbins was the first girlfriend Callie ever told her father (Carlos Torres) about, who is a man of ‘tradition’, God, wealth, and homophobia. Callie’s father, in discovering her new love interest was a woman and not a man, did everything he could to try and ‘turn’ her straight again (ex. he took away her trust fund, brought a priest to the hospital where she works, and forbade her siblings to speak to her). In a particular scene, Mr. Torres brings Callie’s childhood priest to speak with her about her ‘problem’ but instead she and her father erupt in a argumentative holy uproar. This scene is a great dose of reality because the LGBT community is constantly bashed for sinning and being fornicators who will be ‘burned in eternal damnation’. Gays and lesbians are always played against the ‘Bible card’ and are often told loving the same sex is wrong. The scene between Callie Torres, the priest, and Mr. Torres positively defends the LGBT community by using the same words of the Bible. Shonda Rimes, creator, head writer, and executive producer of *Grey’s Anatomy*, crafts this scene in a tense dimly lit hospital conference room as Mr. Torres *whips out* index cards and begins citing the Bible ‘at’ his daughter:

**Mr. Torres:** Leviticus: Thou shall not lie with a man as one lies with a female, it is an abomination

**Callie:** Oh, don't do that daddy! Don't quote the bible at me!

**Mr. Torres:** The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and the sin is exceedingly grave.

**Father Kevin:** Carlos, this is not what we...

**Callie:** Jesus: A new commandment that I give unto you, that you love one another.

**Mr. Torres:** Romans: but we know that laws-

**Callie:** Jesus: he, who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone...

**Mr. Torres:** So you admit it's a sin?

**Callie:** Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy! Jesus: blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God! Jesus: blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven! Jesus is my savior daddy, not you! And Jesus would be ashamed of you for judging me! He would be ashamed of you for turning your back on me. He would be ashamed. (Season 5 "Invasion")

In analyzing Callie in respect to George H. Mead's symbolic interaction theory, she is identifying herself through her significant other, Dr. Arizona Robbins whom has had an incredible impact on her. Before Dr. Robbins, Callie never stood up to her father and defended her honor and axiological views. She was a complacent daughter. Before Dr. Robbins, Callie's father was the significant person in her life. He was the figure who taught her to be strong. However, when Dr. Robbins became an important factor in her life, Callie was a new person interacting with her father in a very forthright manner. Lessons like this significant one in *Grey's Anatomy* go beyond the call for outstanding drama and entertainment; they stand up for homosexual individuals that are in similar or parallel situations. It gives them at least, if not strength, a path to follow or to see on mainstream television. To witness the confidence and fear Callie has for defending what she believes in, for the woman she has fallen in love with, is a refreshing scenario to analyze. Dr. Arizona Robbins like her girlfriend, Callie, is a strong and inspirational character for many homosexual individuals to look up to. In defending her girlfriend's honor Dr. Robbins explains what she values to Mr. Torres. As they both stared onto the morning sky of Seattle (Washington) from the hospital window Dr. Robbins explains:

...I was raised to be a good man in a storm. Raised to love my country. Love my family. Protect the things I love. When my father, Colonel Daniel Robinson of the United States Marine Corps, heard that I was a lesbian he said he only had one question.

I was prepared for "How fast can you get the hell out of my house?" But instead, it was "Are you still who I raised you to be?" My father believes in country the way that you believe in God. And my father is not a man who bends, but he bent for me because I am his daughter. I'm a good man in a storm. I love your daughter. And I protect the things I love. Not that I need too, she doesn't need it. She's strong, and caring, and honorable. And she's who you raised her to be. (Season 5, "Invasion")

This excerpt demonstrates, besides good entertainment, the openness any person can have about homosexuality like that of Dr. Robbins' Marine Corp. father. It is about loving 'the self' above all else. When television shows can accurately depict such character in standing up for homosexuality then, like *Ellen*, they should be praised. This relationship, besides the homophobic drama, is like any other heterosexual relationship. Winning the approval of the parents and protecting your partner is crucial in surviving to the next day.

Like broadcast television, cable television has positive depictions of the LGBT community that emanates reality and values that homosexual and heterosexual adolescents can learn from and feel included in. According to GLAAD's *Where We Are On TV* (2008-2009) there are 27 series with leading and supporting LGBT characters on cable. In cable television creators have a greater breadth of expression. In the world of media and cable, homosexuality is evident and expressive, even more so than *Ellen* in 1997 on ABC. Broadcast television is an important mainstream form of media, but a majority of adolescents are not tuning into *Lost* or *Grey's Anatomy* religiously because they truly relate to a lot of what is going on. Channels like Logo that specially cater to the homosexual audience, and Bravo that has always been a great supporter of sitcoms with gay and lesbian roles, are great outlets for homosexuals. Queer media on cable is critical to gay and lesbian individuals because broadcast channels have limitations that cable channels do not have to worry about. Cable networks like Viacom's MTV and The N

truly reach the essence of what it means to be an adolescent dealing with the trials and tribulations of life. They depict television shows that include topics like drugs, violence, love, and overall real life situations that happen to teens across the nation each and every day.

A television series, created by Tom Lynch, which has a phenomenal story line about the trials and tribulations of gay and bisexual teenagers, is *South of Nowhere* (The N). It is based in Los Angeles and follows Spencer Carlin (played by Gabriella Christian), who struggles with her sexuality, and Ashley Davies (played by Amanda Musgrave), who is an out bisexual that is 'not into labels'. The series began in 2005 and concluded in 2008, but still holds a strong presence on the internet and in other alternate sources of media. Spencer Carlin started the series as a bi-curious teenager from Ohio confused about every feeling she felt. As the show progresses Spencer becomes sexually attracted to and involved with her best friend Ashley Davies. Like any other (heterosexual) couple they go through their ups and downs. Viewers learn that young love is difficult and contains elements that can 'hit you from left field'. However, a homosexual, or in this specific case a lesbian relationship is more challenging to maintain because it is not genuinely accepted by society. As stated and supported by Spencer Carlin in the series *South of Nowhere* she exclaims, "I don't want to be tolerated, I just want to be loved. I want to be accepted." Sadly enough this is a commonly conjured feeling among gay and lesbian teenagers everywhere; the feeling of being different and just tolerated. "The encouraging thing about young queers on TV is that it shows kids that it's all right to be different" ("Degrassi: The Next Generation of Gay Teens on TV" par. 8). In analyzing Spencer Carlin through the social-learning theory it is evident that she learned her sex role when she moved to Los Angeles for Ohio. In the "Pilot" episode Spencer was introduced to the audience as a straight girl until she became acclimated to the diverse city of Los Angeles. The more Spencer began to identify

herself through her social surroundings the more people began to just ‘tolerate’ her. Not particularly Spencer’s case, but when tolerance becomes too hard to conceive hate crimes and sexual abuse takes center stage. According to a research overview of hate crimes and violence against LGBT people published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, “LGB youth report dramatically more sexual abuse than their heterosexual peers” and “more than half of LGBT people are concerned about being the victim of a hate crime” (Marzullo and Libman 7). Awful statistics like these are due to the lack of acceptance and understanding of the LGBT community. They are misunderstood because media is not taking a great enough risk in exposing society to positive gay and lesbian characters. Besides popular openly gay characters like Will Truman from *Will and Grace* how many other shows can say they have invested in, risked losing sponsors, and went over budget to air a show that stars a main or reoccurring homosexual character? According to *Where We Are On TV* the broadcast LGBT representation increased after three years (LGBT is now 2.6% of all scripted regular character series on broadcast TV), while on cable networks LGBT scripted regular character series went down from 40 programs to 32 (GLAAD 2). In response to the statistics GLAAD’s President Neil G. Giuliano stated, “This dramatic increase shows how far many networks have come in developing complex, multi-layered LGBT characters. Our analysis also shows where there’s still work to be done” (GLAAD 2). FOX has done a good job in integrating homosexual scripts into their network while CBS is still apprehensive about the notion.

Aside from mass media and television there is an alternative digital phenomenon that accepts the LGBT community. Alternative sources of media are becoming very big fads with people, in general, but it has been a positive safe haven to escape to for LGBT groups. With websites like AfterElton.com and AfterEllen.com bi-curious, closeted, an/or out people can

educate themselves, meet people of comparable interest or just get the latest gossip on the hottest 'it' guy or girl. It is a world for them, that respects them and even for heterosexual people because when it comes down to it, entertainment from any person of any sexuality is still entertainment. These websites and more help shy, frustrated, confused, angry, and depressed homosexual adolescents see that there are people out there 'just like them'. The feelings of wanting to commit suicide because society says you are not good enough to be alive can be helped, and not by just a doctor. These alternative sources are areas where support systems among members can be found and where gay and lesbian webisodes can be viewed for intrapersonal understanding or pure entertainment.

Webisodes or 'web episodes' are wondrous sources of entertainment. They are web series that people can watch on the internet whenever and where ever. Webisodes provide positive and alternative ways of viewing positive LGBT characters. A few miniseries that are worth mentioning is *Anyone But Me* and *3Way.TV*. *Anyone But Me* (created by Susan Miller and Tina Cesa Ward) is based on two teenage lesbians Vivian (played by Rachael Hip-Flores) and Aster (played by Nicole Pacent) who reside in New York City, but struggle to keep their relationship strong when Vivian has to move to Westchester. Like reality, the two girls go through times where they have to keep their relationship a secret and times where they are judged for being out lesbians. This web series is entertaining and a forum that lets adolescents know that there situation is real and is worth telling a story about. The chemistry and harmony Vivian and Aster have goes beyond the fact that they are lesbian, but to the heart of the situation, their love for one another. When media figures out that genuine love trumps societal differences, no matter what sexual orientation or gender, the world just might be a better place.

In contrast to *Anyone But Me*, another web series that is appealing to mention is *3Way.TV*. It is a more comedic take on the exposure of homosexuality, but an exciting one nonetheless. It is based on Siobhan (played by Maeve Quinlan), who is a heterosexual woman that lives with her three outlandish roommates, who are lesbians. While this web series may play into stereotypes it exposes who some lesbians really are in a tasteful manner. There is nothing wrong with laughing at yourself and the things you may do. Having a source in which that can be done is a great achievement. To expose all sides of sexuality is how society learns. Our society is one of curiosity and fear. While some want to know and accept ‘the others’ for who they are, most are too afraid to step outside the norm of society.

What is the norm of society? It is the intangible force that keeps ‘normal’ people in a box, purposely excluding ‘deviants’ such as the LGBT community, to better establish their normativity. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community deserve and have the right to be included in mainstream as well as alternative media. Gay and Lesbian characters have a positive influence on homosexual as well as heterosexual viewers, especially adolescents. It educates ignorant people that homosexuality is not a farfetched ill conceived attitude and gives homosexual individuals a place in the media. It is their world as much as it is anyone else’s. If a sitcom has the power to stop another gay teen suicide what makes it so bad? How can saving a life be so wrong? According to a blogger on the *South of Nowhere* forum “How has South Affected You?” they has been saved thanks to the show as they wrote, “I don’t even have the words to tell how this show has affected me, all [I] know is without it [I] don’t know where [I]’d be.” (onetree123). And for others *South of Nowhere* has given them courage as they wrote, “That Pilot episode of South where nothing even happened between them, gave me the courage to tell her how I felt finally. [And] now I’ve been with her for two years” (djh0m1eell). Shows

like *South of Nowhere* help families understand their homosexual adolescent. Without a doubt television is an extremely entertaining medium. As crazy as it may sound television can actually teach people how to be better human beings. How to love a little more and judge sexuality a little less can actually be a lesson learned through mass media.

In applause, all persons who are or portray a homosexual character in any form of media are heroes and heroines of society. They sacrifice their reputation and personal lives for the creative and actual representation of a minority that only desires understanding and equality. Adolescents and adults need to know that they are a part of and are represented in world. Everyone deserves to see themselves (figuratively) in mainstream and alternative media. The LGBT community is an irreplaceable facet of media, and there is nothing wrong in depicting the diversity society prides it's self so much on.

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