

# MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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## ***Further Off the Straight & Narrow*** *New Gay Visibility on Television*

Transcript

### INTRODUCTION

(montage)

[CLIP, “Dawson’s Creek”] *Voice: Ask me if I’m gay.*

[CLIP, “The Apprentice”] *Voice: Are you not a homosexual?*

[CLIP, “The Real World”] *Voice: Yeah, I am gay.*

[CLIP, CNN News] *Voice: I am a gay American.*

[CLIP, “ER”] *Voice: I am the chief of emergency medicine and I am a lesbian.*

[CLIP, “South Park”] *Voice: My goodness. There certainly are a lot of gay shows on television these days.*

**NARRATOR:** There has been an explosion of gay visibility on television in the United States since the mid-1990s. Mainstream society sees that gay and lesbian people exist in every sphere of life, and young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people no longer grow up fearing that they may be the only one. How do we make sense of this new television landscape? What shapes what we see and don’t see on our screens? And how do these images influence how we view gay and lesbian people?

[CLIP, “The Simpsons”] *(singing) Gay-O, it’s okay-O, tie the knot and spend all your dough.*

**HOWARD BUFORD:** We’re dealing in a country where our popular culture really rules. It’s a country where you don’t exist unless you’re on TV. And the very fact that we’re present on TV, in advertising or in content in the programming, makes us real.

I think that’s been a very affirming experience. Now, the imagery has not always been the best. It hasn’t always been the deepest. But the very fact that we were talked about openly and that we were portrayed was very, very important.

## GOING MAINSTREAM: Network Narratives

**[CLIP, “Ellen”]** *Voice 1 (female): Ellen, are you coming out or not?*

*Voice 2 (male): Yeah Ellen, quit jerking us around and come out already!*

*Voice 3 (female): What is the big deal? I’ve got a whole hour.*

**NARRATOR:** Until the mid-1990s, gay and lesbian lead characters on US television were almost nonexistent. Secondary characters appeared and were killed off once their usefulness as a plot device had expired. When Ellen Degeneres came out both as an actor and as the lead character on her sitcom “Ellen,” she opened a closet door for fuller integration of gays and lesbians on network television.

**LARRY GROSS:** In the past decade, since the mid-90s, there has been a remarkable shift in the appearance of gay people on television. The success of “Ellen” as innovating, as crossing a bridge, essentially made it easier for them to pitch or accept programs with gay characters and with gay themes.

**LISA HENDERSON:** “Ellen” was cancelled, and barely a year later “Will & Grace” was introduced. That’s a series that has had a much longer run than “Ellen” had, especially after the Ellen Morgan character, and Ellen Degeneres herself, had come out. So the question arises, what makes “Will & Grace” so viable in a way that “Ellen” was not?

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice 1 (male): Come over.*

*Voice 2 (female): Will, I can’t.*

*Voice 1: Come on, Grace. You know you want to.*

*Voice 2: Of course I want to.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** I think one of the reasons that “Will & Grace” is so easy on the mainstream audience is that it features this relationship between Grace and Will, which is a celibate relationship but is nonetheless the primary relationship of the show. And at the same time we get the relationship between Will, who is this kind of neurotic but very straight-laced, straight-acting homosexual, who is sort of offset by this very flamboyant, flamey character, Jack.

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice (male): Hey, roomie!*

**LISA HENDERSON:** In the character I love, we have Jack, who is kind of unrepentantly campy, sort of pretty easy on the political sensibilities of audiences across the spectrum, but he gets to stand for some very, very well worn figures in the history of mainstream representation of gay characters.

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice 1 (male): God, I had no idea you would be so kitten with the whip! Come on, let’s touch stomachs.*

*Voice 2 (female): Oh my lord, you are a complete freak.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** It surprises me sometimes that people don’t respond more explicitly to Karen as a kind of queer character, if by queer we mean sexually nonconforming by the standards of a middle-aged female widow and doing it in a very camp way.

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice 1 (female): I want a drag name. Give me a drag name.*

*Voice 2 (male): Ok, sugar. Here’s how you do it. Take the name of your first pet and the first street you lived on.*

*Voice 1: Shoo Shoo Fontana.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** But what I like about “Will & Grace” is what I like about the grand tradition of sitcoms, which is it presents a very queer family formation.

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice 1: Yeah, it is kind of nippy in here. Hey pops, why don’t you crank up the heat? The girls are in full salute back here.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** And then when Jack has his son that enters into the picture later on, it even queers it even more.

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice 1: What’s new with my son Elliot, you ask? Oh Boy!*

*Voice 2: Hey, how you doing? I’ll call you . . . or not.*

**LARRY GROSS:** The significance of “Will & Grace” in a way is more the fact of it than the content of it. They’re not very gay. They’re a kind of vaudeville gay. There is certainly no gay community. There’s no visible sex, at least not visible gay sex. So it really is in a sense performing acceptance rather than breaking any taboos or pushing the envelope in any important way.

**NARRATOR:** Even with their limits, sitcoms pave the way for more sustained images of gay and lesbian people. This encouraged network dramas to feature leading gay characters in more complex roles than in earlier decades.

**[CLIP, “ER”]** *Voice 1 (female): You’re straight and I’m not, and I’ve done this before and it didn’t work out, and I am not going to do it again.*

*Voice 2 (female): But I’m not asking for that from you. We’re comfortable together. We have a lot on common. We have fun together. (they kiss)*

**NARRATOR:** One of the most significant shows that featured a gay teen in a sympathetic way was “Dawson’s Creek,” which brought to the young audience a story of a high school student grappling with his sexuality.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** A classic narrative on a lot of network shows is this kind of coming out saga. And we see this in something like “Dawson’s Creek,” where Jack struggles with coming out and sort of dealing with all the teen angst of coming out.

**[CLIP, “Dawson’s Creek”]** *Voice 1: Ask you what?*

*Voice 2: The question! Ask me the question again! Ask me if I’m gay!*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** And even though this is a very common experience for those of us who come out as gay and lesbian, it tends to perpetuate this idea that that process is full of angst and despair.

**[CLIP cont’d, “Dawson’s Creek”]** *Voice 2: And as hard as you’ve tried to stamp it out and to ignore it, I have tried harder! I have tried harder than you to be quiet and to forget it and to not bother my family with my problem.*

**LARRY GROSS:** As recently as the early 90s, gay audiences looking for images and reflections in the screen, often found them in characters who were not explicitly or officially gay. Whether it was “Xena” or “Cagne and Lacey” or other characters where they could project or read out a gay subtext, now there is a gay text. You really don’t have to do that when the characters are presented as gay.

**[CLIP, “All My Children”]** *Voice 1: What am I going to do if she tells everyone that I’m gay?*

**LARRY GROSS:** Bianca on “All My Children,” Buffy’s lesbian sidekicks were a good example. There were a number of places where characters were presented as gay, and even more importantly where there was a little more, or sometimes a lot more, to their gayness than the angst of coming out.

**NARRATOR:** “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” offered a striking example of this new visibility, where gay characters are not throwaways but explore a relationship that is integrated into the story.

**[CLIP, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”]** *Voice 1 (female): No, I understand. You have to be with the person you love the most.*

*Voice 2 (female): I am.*

**NARRATOR:** The popularity of gay and lesbian characters encouraged the networks to integrate them into some shows, especially those targeting younger

viewers. Other shows, however, continue to drop in gay characters to boost declining ratings.

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** I think there's a great comparison to be made between the lesbian characters on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," which is just a wonderful show all together, and what we're seeing in "The OC," this sort of little lesbian arc that came and went conveniently around sweeps time. When you look at something like "The OC," what you really have there is a kind of gayness as aesthetic, as fashion statement, as phase.

**[CLIP, "The OC"]** *Voice 1 (female): So are you like a?*

*Voice 2 (female): No! I don't know. I just really like her.*

*Voice 1: Well, she is pretty hot.*

*Voice 2: We're still friends, right?*

*Voice 1: Of course we are. Come here. This isn't turning you on, right?*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** So I think you have this lesbian arc that I think unfortunately is not about a nod to a kind of real fluidity of sexualities and real deep experimentation. I think it is about a kind of sign of hipness.

**NARRATOR:** "The OC" continued a network tradition where bisexuals appear only as experimenting teens designed to titillate the audience.

**[CLIP, "The OC"]** *Voice 1 (male): Oh, by the way. Our exes are dating each other now.*

*Voice 2 (male): Think it's for real?*

*Voice 1: God, I hope so.*

**NARRATOR:** Here, as elsewhere, lesbian kisses prove reliably profitable while gay male kisses are still largely taboo.

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** One of the reasons I think that we've seen such a difference in particularly the paradigmatic kiss, the gay kiss, in terms of what we can see between women and men is because there's a grand tradition of girl on girl action in heterosexual pornography. There just isn't that analogous tradition of boy on boy action for men to watch as well.

**[CLIP, "Will and Grace"]** *Voice 1 (male): It's a crime against humanity!*

*Voice 2 (male): Jack, two guys didn't kiss on a sitcom. I don't think that warrants reconvening the Nuremburg jury.*

*Voice 3 (female): You seem pretty upset about one kiss.*

*Voice 1: Missing the point darling. By doing this they are sending a clear message that the way I live my life is offensive.*

*Voice 2: Jack, the way you live your life is offensive –*

**LARRY GROSS:** On American television, kissing is the metaphor for sex. When characters kiss we are led to infer, not always but often, the subsequent sexual encounter. And probably for that reason, whenever same sex characters kiss, there's a great deal of controversy. The controversy builds ratings, but it also signals the fact that this is contested territory.

**[CLIP, "Will and Grace"]** *Voice 1 (male): I just want to know how long I'm gonna have to wait until I can say two gay men kiss on network television.*  
*Voice 2 (male): Not as long as you'd think. (they kiss)*

**NARRATOR:** Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are welcomed on network television only when they conform to narrow sexual and social standards. Television shows often use class, race, and gender codes to signal which gays deserve the audience's respect.

**LISA HENDERSON:** If you want to be a good character, you'll need to conform in particular ways. And if you don't then you are going to be used as a bit of a joke. On "My Wife and Kids," Damon Wayans is playing a husband in a very well healed affluent suburban family whose wife is annoyed with him and throws him out of the house. And he goes to meet a friend at the bar, and he notices that this friend is chatting up an attractive woman. He approaches his friend and starts to chastise him for talking up this woman.

**[CLIP, "My Wife and Kids"]** *Voice 1 (male): This is a friend of mine. He's an idiot. He's just joking.*  
*Voice 2 (male): So now I'm a big joke to you. What about when we were floating on a raft in Negila and you told me that you loved me and wanted to commit to my life and be my life partner? Was it all lies? Was it the alcohol talking?*

**LISA HENDERSON:** What's hostile about this joke is that in the posturing he is a gold-digger. He is a scene-maker. He fails to play by the rules of the physical environment. And if you put those things together what you start to realize is that he is failing in the class markers of the queer worth.

**[CLIP, "George Lopez"]** *Voice 1 (male): Are you Lalo Montenegro?*  
*Voice 2 (male): Yeah.*  
*Voice 1: This may come as a shock to you, but I think you could be my father.*  
*Voice 3 (male): What do we have here? Two studs, and me with no hammer.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** Now switch to "George Lopez," where on this same week Cheech Marin played a character named Lalo Montenegro. His boyfriend is white and Lalo is Chicano. Their house is very stylish, much more so than George's own.

Lalo desires family and for just a while may have been George's father.

**[CLIP, "George Lopez"]** *Voice 1 (male): You know I wasn't as drunk as Benny was that night. I do remember what happened. You could definitely be my son.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** And so there the class markers of queer worth are in place. He is an attachment to a kind of familialism. He is an incredibly hard worker. He is upwardly mobile.

**[CLIP, "George Lopez"]** *Voice 1: We can't possibly have this discussion on empty stomachs. Bruschetta, bruschetta, bruschetta?*

**LISA HENDERSON:** Those are the class markers of queer worth which are the price of admission to being a good queer in the case of "George Lopez," and to being a dubious joke in the case of "My Wife and Kids."

**NARRATOR:** Gay and lesbian characters have become a regular feature of network television, but the demands for audience ratings and advertiser revenues produce a conditional visibility, where good gays conform to middle class norms of respectability. One genre that grants more latitude is reality television, where authenticity and sensationalism combine to afford more diverse images of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

## **MIGHTY REAL: Gays and Lesbians in Non-Fiction TV**

**[CLIP, "America's Next Top Model"]** *Voice (female): I want to be out. I'm gay, and I'm really proud of it.*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** Reality television has gone through a few phases, and we're in a relatively new one now. It seemed like at first it was mostly very early on occasional TV talk shows and occasional news reporting that was about the morality of homosexuality, and then people would debate whether they are for it or against it. Then it moved in the early 90s into period where it was very centered in tabloid talk shows, like Ricky Lake and Jerry Springer, where there was a weird sort of normalization of same sex relationships because they were thrown in the mix with every other kind of messed up relationship.

**[CLIP, "The Jerry Springer Show"]** *Voice (male): My point is, how can she not know her man was gay?*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** We moved from there to youth-oriented programming like "The Real World" and reality game shows like "Survivor," where it became a genre-staple to have gay characters.

**[CLIP, “The Real World”]** *Voice 1 (male): So have you been to gay clubs before?*

*Voice 2 (male): Yeah. All the time.*

*Voice 1: You’re not - are you homosexual?*

*Voice 2: Yeah, I’m gay.*

**LARRY GROSS:** From its inception, “The Real World” has built gay and lesbian people into its mix. From the very first show through the latest show, there have been one or occasionally two queer people on the show. And that has become one of its signature features. It’s become one of the ways, particularly for the young audience, that its reality is marked because unlike much of the mediated world that they see, this one includes the gay people that they know are part of the real world.

**[CLIP, “Survivor”]** *Voice 1 (female): Happy Birthday, Rich.*

*Voice 2 (male): Thanks, Suzie Q.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Reality shows tend to offer us more realistic portrayals of gay people. They’re still somewhat stereotyped. All reality shows stereotype who they cast. But with somebody like Richard Hatch on “Survivor,” his sexuality was pretty much incidental to the plot. Even though he wasn’t particularly likable, he was really effective, so the emphasis was much more on how he was going to play the game.

**[CLIP, “Survivor”]** *Voice 1: I’m good to go survival-wise. People-wise it will be a little more challenging.*

**[CLIP, “Sheer Dallas”]** *Voice 1 (male): There you go. Get it down. One, two...*

*Voice 2 (male): What are you doing, dude?*

*Voice 3 (male): Just hold it down.*

*Voice 2: What the hell is that, man?*

*Voice 3: It’s a gay rodeo. It’s panties on a goat.*

*Voice 2: A gay rodeo?*

**LARRY GROSS:** The so-called reality genre includes a great many quite manipulative and opportunistic programming decisions and combinations. Put certain people together and hope for sparks or maybe intervene in a way that makes sure there will be sparks. One of the examples of this is an episode of the program “Wife Swap,” in which a fundamentalist Christian African-American mother changes places with a lesbian mother from a lower class unapologetic lesbian household, and the conflict is both predictable and fairly hard to take.



**[CLIP, “Wife Swap”]** *Voice (female): I am extremely uncomfortable in this environment, but it is not a lifestyle that I am going to apologize for not agreeing with at all.*

**LARRY GROSS:** The hostility of the Christian wife and mother is undisguised.

**[CLIP, “Wife Swap”]** *Voice (female): I think you are very much according to the word of God and as I’ll be very, very clear, the word is depraved. And so I don’t want anyone of a depraved mindset around my kids.*

**LARRY GROSS:** And the vulnerability of the lesbian couple, and the lesbian mother, to this hostility is exactly what the producers wanted.

**[CLIP, “Wife Swap”]** *Voice (female): You’re really missing out on a lot of opportunity to learn from different families, and I did bring good things to your kids. (crying)*

**LARRY GROSS:** So they’re, in a way, performing a service of bringing what is a real social conflict in this country right now to the surface. Unfortunately, they’re doing it in a way that doesn’t really get very deep. It doesn’t really explore the issues. And it’s also transparently using it in a sort of sensationalistic fashion.

**[CLIP, “Wife Swap”]** *Voice (female): Why would I pretend not to be something that I am?*

**NARRATOR:** While “Wife Swap” showed a segment of American society fundamentally hostile to homosexuality, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” welcomed gay men and their consumer expertise into the very heart of the heterosexual family.

**[CLIP, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy”]** *(singing)*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** A great deal was made about “Queer Eye” and whether it was just perpetuating gay stereotypes, and I think a couple of things get lost in this argument. One is that the show for the first time really gave credit to gay men for doing what they’ve always done, which is to work in the style trades and to help people with their grooming and clothes and interior designs and so on.

**[CLIP, “Queer Eye . . .”]** *Voice: See the little light? I can actually get in there and I can see what I’m doing.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** Critics were very suspicious of “Queer Eye’s” promotion of a kind of hyper-consumer culture and its shilling for straight culture, both in terms

of the makeover targets of the show and also for the product lines that were so orgiastically included in every episode.

**[CLIPS, “Queer Eye . . .” montage]** *Voice: Have you ever been to ABC before?*

*Voice: Have you been to Paul Stewart before?*

*Voice: I brought you to Circuit City.*

*Voice: So this is the New York Health and Racquet Club.*

*Voice: All this is for my Kia.*

*Voice: White strips premium.*

*Voice: These are Tommy Hilfiger.*

*Voice: Steven Allen has all these great woven shirts that actually fit.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** But still there was something pretty captivating about seeing, first of all, gay men outnumber straight men on TV.

**[CLIP, “Queer Eye . . .”]** *Voice: Just keep it on the sides, all right?*

**LISA HENDERSON:** It was also pretty distinctive to see gay men, for the most part, being treated not just with respect and a kind of fondness but being needed.

**[CLIP, “Queer Eye . . .”]** *Voice: Seriously, what you guys have done and touched so many different aspects of my life and from the exterior to the interior, it’s just phenomenal.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** The other thing that gets lost is that here the gay men are being brought in to help the straight men become better husbands but also better workers, better professionals. And so here, it’s the straight men that are the problem who need to be fixed. It’s not the gay guys.

**[CLIP, “Queer Eye . . . “]** *Voice: Now aside from impressing Sandra, we need you to impress your superiors so you can get that next big promotion.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** When I see the fab five convening at the end of the program to watch the social success of the makeover guy they have helped, on the one hand I think they’re judges, sort of dishy, bitchy people who are going to adjudicate how well he performs. On the other hand, I am reminded of these histories of exclusion where gay people get to produce stylish environments for a party to which, frankly, their not invited.

**[CLIP, “South Park”]** *Voice 1 (male): You guys all turned gay too?*

*Voice 2 (male): Not gay, Gerald. Metrosexual.*

*Voice 1: What’s that?*

*Voice 3 (male): Just because a guy cares about how he looks and is in touch with his feminine side doesn’t mean he’s gay anymore.*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** It seems like on reality TV now you're starting to get the gaying of the straight person. Where on something like "Boy Meets Boy," the straight guys go into the closet and had to pretend to be gay and experience the pain of the closet.

**[CLIP, "Boy Meets Boy"]** *Voice 1 (male): I knew it was hard for homosexuals to come out of the closet. I didn't know to what degree until I did this show. I went to bed thinking about it. I woke up thinking about it.*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** All of the stuff that came out of them in the clips at the end was all about the learning experience, how much they learned about what gay life is like and how they're not that different from these gay men.

**[CLIP, "Boy Meets Boy"]** *Voice (male): What just kept me going was the bigger issue of what the show is really going to stand for, and that's bridging the gap between a gay and straight world.*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** There's two forces. There's the force that says we need to normalize gayness, and the way to normalize gayness is to show gay men as conventionally masculine and lesbians as conventionally feminine. But on the other hand, you've got this force to comfort people, to remind people, that they can tell the difference. And the way to tell the difference is by looking at the gender signs.

**[CLIP, "Boy Meets Boy"]** *Voice (male): I realized, who cares if anyone thinks I'm a little too feminine?*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** I do think there is a problem created for the culture as the mainstreaming takes hold. And that problem is, how do you tell the difference between gay and straight, and if you can't tell the difference, what happens to straight privilege?

**NARRATOR:** Since "The Real World" began including gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in their cast, gay participants have become a staple of reality television. While these shows feature gay people in a largely heterosexual world, premium cable channels attract niche audiences by offering a queer view of gay and lesbian communities.

## **A PIECE OF THE PIE: Segmenting Audiences**

**[CLIP, "Sex and the City"]** *Voice (male): Excuse me, but when did wild sex come back in style?*

**NARRATOR:** The past decade has seen a huge rise in the number of cable channels, all in search of programming and audiences. Subscription cable has proven particularly adept at attracting gay audiences as well as hip heterosexuals by offering challenging homocentric gay content.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** One of the reasons that premium cable channels like HBO and Showtime look so different from network television is that their funding basis is entirely different. Whereas with network shows, each show needs the largest possible audience it can get for advertisers. On premium cable, you're interested in loyal subscribers. So even if you only want to tune in to one show a week, if you're motivated to have that show, you'll keep subscribing from month to month. What this does is it both allows for but also demands much more adventurous and riskier programming because subscribers are going to want to find stuff on premium cable that they can't get anywhere else.

**LISA HENDERSON:** "Sex and the City" gave us a kind of cautious integration of gay characters and sensibility. Part of its gay sensibility was just in its air and in its water. But there were also characters who were friends like Carrie's friend Stanford.

**[CLIP, "Sex and the City"]** *Voiceover (female): With my one man out of town in Paris, I found time to have drinks with my other man.*  
*Voice 2 (male): I need your advice, but in order to get it I have to confess something.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** But then there was also Samantha as nothing if not a sexual experiment. When she started to desire a relationship, an attachment, rather than just a sexual connection, she hooked up with a woman.

**[CLIP, "Sex and the City"]** *Voiceover (female): Samantha decided if she was going to be gay, she'd be gay all the way.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** I had to hand it to "Sex and the City" when they had a fairly tight close-up on Samantha's face when she was going down on the Sonya Braga character who was famous for her sexual energy and prowess as a woman who ejaculated.

**[CLIP, "Sex and the City"]** *Voiceover (female): Samantha caused the very elusive female ejaculation.*  
*Voice (female): Was that good or bad?*

**NARRATOR:** While gay and lesbian characters existed in the largely heterosexual world of “Sex and the City,” the show nonetheless encouraged premium cable channels to offer programming that represented gay worlds.

**LARRY GROSS:** “Queer as Folk” took advantage of the opportunities provided by subscription cable to create a queer-centered world, to create a world of characters who were living within a gay community with for once the heterosexual characters being peripheral, when they were there at all.

**[CLIP, “Queer As Folk”]** *Voiceover (male): The thing you need to know is it’s all about sex. It’s true. In fact they say men think about sex every 28 seconds. Of course that’s straight men. Gay men it’s every 9.*

**LARRY GROSS:** Many people were struck - some favorably, some unfavorably - by the degree to which it was also sex obsessed, but that’s also part of the selling point of subscription cable. We show more sex and use dirty words, which you can’t get with broadcast. This was coming after a period of where it felt like the images of gay men that were out there were so sanitized and so desexualized that it came to me as a relief to see that they felt free to associate homosexuality with having sex, which people had seemed to feel like they shouldn’t say for a while.

**NARRATOR:** “Queer as Folk” was so successful with gay audiences that Showtime also brought to viewers a lesbian-centered series, “The L Word.”

**[CLIP, “The L Word”]** *Voice (female): Good morning.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** When “The L Word” debuted, it did from the outset deliver on a number of its promises, lesbians and lots of them, explicit lesbian sexual practice with its home network, Showtime, branding itself against the grain of broadcast television, which in its regulatory environment can’t really do. One feature of “The L Word” that makes people sometimes a little skeptical about it is the availability of its very feminized characters having sex together being available for a straight male audience. And I think “The L Word” wants every audience it can get. It wants its lesbian audience. It wants its straight women audience. It wants its bisexual audience. Lately it wants a transgender audience, and it certainly wants a straight male audience. And I’m kind of charmed by this recent character who has moved in with Jenny and Shane and is a slime bag.

**[CLIP, “The L Word”]** *Voice 1 (male): Hello, Mark here, asking the girls if they’re in. I’m about to show them that this is mainly about me, that I would never ask them to expose themselves if I wasn’t like willing to expose myself way more.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** He's sort of stringing the apartment up with hidden cameras without any knowledge on Jenny or Shane's part to document the lives, and especially the sex lives, of lesbians. And I received that as the producers' quite sly commentary on the availability of the program to a straight male sexual audience.

**[CLIP, "The L Word"]** *Voice 1 (male): I just finished taking down the last of the cameras. I pretty much had them all over the house. Jenny saw a tape I made of the two of you.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** What we don't see of course are less acceptable gays. We certainly don't see working class gay lives represented very much. What's interesting in something like "L Word" that's so funny is that here you have this glammed-up Hollywood life, but in fact if you look at the class status of some of these women, they're living lives that are at such discordance with what their incomes should actually be.

**[CLIP, "OZ"]** *Voice 1 (male): Thanks.*  
*Voice 2 (male): You need to do something about that tattoo.*

**NARRATOR:** One of the few places where viewers could find a complicated narrative of working class queer sexuality was in HBO's prison series, "Oz."

**[CLIP, "OZ"]** *Voice (male): I love you, Toby.*

**NARRATOR:** After "Oz," HBO continued to appeal to gay and straight audiences alike by integrating gay characters into programs such as "Six Feet Under."

**LISA HENDERSON:** Before there was "The L Word," there was "Six Feet Under," which is not strictly speaking a gay show but has running gay characters and a running gay relationship, an interracial relationship, between David and Keith.

**[CLIP, "Six Feet Under"]** *Voice 1 (male): Don't do this to me, Keith. This is not your high school reunion.*  
*Voice 2 (male): I'm sorry.*  
*Voice 1: This is not the time for you to be political.*  
*Voice 2: You think that's why I'm here? To be political?*  
*Voice 1: Would you keep your voice down?*

**LISA HENDERSON:** David and Keith, they're a struggling gay couple. One of the things I like about them is that they're not struggling around sex. Sex works pretty well, and even their sexual forays outside their relationship do not spell the death of the relationship, even when their relationship is on the rocks. It's not because of the sex.

**[CLIP, “Six Feet Under”]** *Voice 1 (male): I got a blowjob today.*  
*Voice 2 (male): You did not.*  
*Voice 1: I did.*  
*Voice 2: From who?*  
*Voice 1: From the plumber.*  
*Voice 2: White guy?*  
*Voice 1: Yeah, he was good with the wrench.*  
*Voice 2: You better not think you’re getting out of having sex with me tonight.*  
*Voice 1: OK, but I might need you to talk about water rams and hand snakes.*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** I think on “Six Feet Under,” the presentation of the interracial relationship was both a little bit reliant on stereotypes but also sensitive to actual differences when people come together from different backgrounds they experience.

**LISA HENDERSON:** Keith is a police officer by training, a sanctioned strong armor who blows it. He loses his temper and loses his job.

**[CLIP, “Six Feet Under”]** *Voice 1 (male): Fucking fags, man.*  
*Voice 2 (male): Keith. Keith!*  
*Voice 3 (male): Say it again.*  
*Voice 1: What?*  
*Voice 3: I said, say it again. Next time you call someone a fucking fag, you make sure that fag isn’t an LAPD officer. You got that?*  
*You understand me?*  
*Voice 1: Yeah.*  
*Voice 3: Now get your punk ass out of here, fucking bitch.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** We could have made Keith the conflict-averse upwardly mobile mild-tempered African-American character and David the hothead ex-cop. But the program didn’t. I can’t help but think sometimes they did that partly to do what TV often finds itself doing which is being brave by playing around a stereotype that has already been criticized. You know, once we’ve had the Huxtables, we can load Keith with rage and incompetence.

**[CLIP, “An Early Frost”]** *Voice (male): I have AIDS.*

**NARRATOR:** In the 1980s and early 90s, HIV and AIDS stories were so prevalent that they seemed to be the only way gay men could appear on television. Now however, American AIDS stories have all but disappeared.

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** One of the few places where HIV and AIDS still make it into the story line is in “Queer as Folk,” and there are actually several characters with HIV on that program.

**[CLIP, “Queer As Folk”]** *Voice 1 (male): Wait, Michael.*

*Voice 2 (male): What for?*

*Voice 1: I just want you to know I’m HIV positive.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** If HIV and AIDS narratives no longer dominate the fictional representations of gay men in particular on television, what these have been replaced by is gay parenting narratives.

**[CLIP, “Queer As Folk”]** *Voice 1 (male): Oh my god.*

*Voice 2 (female): Say hello to your son.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** It comes as a welcome relief in some ways because it replaces a lot of stories that were concerned with suffering and death with much more optimistic and future-oriented narratives. But it also gives the false impression that AIDS is no longer a serious health concern in the United States.

**NARRATOR:** All the premium cable shows that featured gay and lesbian couples developed baby plotlines in the 2000s. “Queer as Folk” complicated this by combining a gay adoption story with an AIDS story.

**[CLIP, “Queer As Folk”]** *Voice 1 (female): Hunter, are you ok?*

*Voice 2 (male): Christ, I think he hurt himself.*

*Voice 1: Coach! Hunter’s hurt!*

*Voice 3 (male): Don’t touch him.*

*Voice 4 (female): Get out of the pool, honey.*

*Voice 3: He’s got AIDS. Get out of there.*

*Voice 5 (male): Everybody out now.*

**NARRATOR:** These family plotlines share a similar normative bent - this idea that, look, gay families are just like heterosexuals. And about the only place we see a critique of this is in the figure of Brian in “Queer as Folk.” And he really takes his friend Michael to task for doing a kind of gay version of family values.

**[CLIP, “Queer As Folk”]** *Voice 1 (male): Listen to me.*

*Voice 2 (male): I’m listening.*

*Voice 1: We don’t need marriage. We don’t need the sanction of dickless politicians and pederast priests. We fuck who we want to when we want to. That is out god-given right.*



**NARRATOR:** With the success of “Queer as Folk” and other gay-targeted shows, television executives realized that gay audiences could be specifically appealed to by a niche cable channel. In June 2005, MTV’s parent company Viacom launched Logo, bringing viewers all gays all the time.

**[CLIP, “Noah’s Ark” advertisement]** *Voice 1 (male): Maybe make one of the characters gay.*

*Voiceover: The screenwriter.*

*Voice 2 (male): You always want to make it gay.*

*Voiceover: The Ivy Leaguer.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** We can see Logo as an inevitable outcome of two major trends going on at the moment. One is the increasing awareness of the profitability of gay audiences, and the other is the tendency to segment audiences in general into narrower and narrower lifestyle niches.

**[CLIP, television show]** *Voice 1 (female): How do you prove that you’re really gay?*

*Voice 2 (female): On paper.*

*Voiceover: And the Advocate interview with Sandra Bernhardt.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Originally Logo was going to be a subscription channel, and in fact they decided to make it part of the basic digital tier. An advantage of this is that it means it’s available to everybody. You can just stumble across it. A disadvantage though is its precise availability. It means that it is subject to the same kinds of regulations as other digital cable, and they also have to have advertisers. So this means that they have to play it a bit safer, as far as both political and sexual content is concerned.

**[CLIP, “Real Momentum” advertisement]** *Voice (female): Everyone thinks this is all about sex, but actually it’s about love.*

*Voiceover: “Real Momentum,” Saturdays at 9 on Logo. Anytime on Logo online.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** One of the things I think that’s happened that is interesting and troubling to some extent is a kind of new ghettoization of gay visibility, really locating rich and varied - to the extent that they’re rich and varied - gay characters in pay cable primarily. It’s HBO or we have “Six Feet Under,” it’s Showtime where we have “L Word” and “Queer as Folk,” and now we’ll have our “all gay, all the time homo station”, which should be fun but it’s also about a kind of re-ghettoization which of course we’ve seen with other minority groups.

**NARRATOR:** Cable television’s need to segment audiences and appeal to loyal subscribers has fostered new images of gay communities, at least for people who

can afford expensive cable fees. Yet even with these more complex stories, transgender characters are still scarce. Where is the T in GLBT representation?

## glbT: New Transgender Visibility

**[CLIP, “ER”]** *Voice 1 (male): Ms. Mitchell, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting, but I think I can explain to you why you’ve been so tired lately. You’re pregnant.*

*Congratulations. I think I got this.*

*Voice 2 (female): No you don’t.*

**LARRY GROSS:** Transgendered people are in many ways in the position of the next group that is beginning to be acknowledged. The T in the GLBT is starting to speak up, is starting to be seen. And as often happens it is first emerging onto the stage as a victim or villain. Whether it’s the murderous cross-dresser, a phenomenon Hollywood has been quite fond of, of which “Silence of the Lambs” may be the most egregious example but certainly not the only one, to the transperson as victim - Hilary Swank’s character in “Boys Don’t Cry”, and many others. And the role of victim in many ways has been the entry into being treated as human.

**[CLIP, “Nip/Tuck”]** *Voice 1 (female): Call me Sophia.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** One show that’s done a pretty good job of representing transgendered people is FX’s “Nip/Tuck,” in the character of Sophia. And what they’ve done there is actually take advantage of the context of a plastic surgeon’s office to really explore some of the issues facing transgendered people. And while they do it in a much more nuanced way than pretty much anywhere else we’ve seen, we still see transpeople as victims really, if not of overt hostility, at least of incomprehension and misunderstanding.

**[CLIP, “Nip/Tuck”]** *Voice 1 (male): You have some kiloids that have formed. We fight have to remove cartilage from your ear to correct the contour deformity.*

*Voice 2 (female): If that’s what it takes to fix this, ok. Can we talk about cost? I spoke to your partner on the phone. He said that your office, especially you, Dr. MacNamara, does free work sometimes.*

*Voice 1: I’m afraid pro bono on this type of operation is out of the question. We only do that type of work on people who have suffered accidents or birth defects.*

*Voice 2: Being one gender on the inside and another on the outside is a birth defect. Do you think I chose to look like this?*

**NARRATOR:** In 2003, HBO screened the first made-for-TV movie, “Normal”, that featured a man transitioning to be a woman, showing the resistance she meets from her family, colleagues, community, and church.

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** There was a made-for-TV movie a couple years back which was one of the first to deal with questions of trans-sexualism and transgendered identity. And while I think it was very important that it did so, and that it really showed that this is not some San Francisco anomaly, one of the things that was troubling about it was that it bought into, and I think advanced, a very narrow conception of how to understand transgendered identity. And that conception is a very biologically determined one. This idea that what it is to be transgendered or transsexual is to be born into the wrong body.

**[CLIP, “Normal”]** *Voice 1 (female): I’m a woman. I’ve known it all my life.*  
*Voice 2 (female): Oh my gosh.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** I think one could imagine an embrace of a kind of trans-identity that is about living in a place of ambiguity and a celebration of ambiguity, and not a resolution of that in favor of one or the other. You know what’s a good example of this is the arc that went on in “L Word” with Ivan and Kit, where Ivan was this transgendered character who was really romancing this punitively heterosexual woman, Kit.

**[CLIP, “The L Word”]** *(singing) Here I stand. I’m your man.*

**NARRATOR:** Given how strong the social pressures are to conform to one gender or the other, it is unsurprising that the earliest transgender images on television represented the experiences of those transgender people who feel trapped in the wrong body. “The L Word,” however, addressed struggles within the GLBT community over queer sexuality, gender expression, and transgender identity.

**[CLIP, “The L Word”]** *Voice 1 (female): Why can’t you be the butchiest butch in the world and keep your body?*  
*Voice 2 (male): Because I want to feel whole. I want the outside of me to match the inside of me.*

**NARRATOR:** Transgender people get more chances to speak for themselves in documentaries and reality shows. Even though these are still fairly rare, we get a much more 3-dimensional view of transpeoples’ lives.

**[CLIP, “Transgeneration”]** *Voice 1 (male): I’m the manager of Dressing Rebellion, and that is a troupe of Michigan State students.*  
*Voice 2 (male): Drag isn’t just men being women or women being men. It’s about gender performance. So it is about playing with gender.*

**[CLIP, “The Opposite Sex”]** *Voice 1 (female): When I finally decided that this was going to be my life, I started to make a lot of arrangements and plans. I started to hop on the internet, checking into hormone therapy.*

**LARRY GROSS:** At the moment we are likely to see the struggle of somebody going through a transition and of course the struggle of those around him or her in accepting this person who is not what they knew or thought. The next step, and it’s one that is predictable but not easily obtained, is simply being accepted for who you are.

**[CLIP, “The Opposite Sex”]** *Voice 1 (male): I was actually taken aback by that, that people refused to do business with her because of her transformation.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** One of the, for me, most enjoyable transgender images on television is actually "The Brini Maxwell Show" on the Style channel which is a makeover show or a home improvement show. And this is very unusual because her transgenerness absolutely goes without comment. But the show’s infused with a kind of arch camp-ness that throws gender in all senses into some kind of relief.

**[CLIP, “The Brini Maxwell Show”]** *(singing) It’s Brini, and look at Brini go. Voice 1 (male): And what I’m gonna do is I’m gonna start this up for you, and I would like you to put up some hair on this little guy. Try it first before I start it up. Good. Just like that. Voice 2 (female): So that’s our technique for furring the bear.*

**NARRATOR:** The glacial progress of transgender visibility reflects the social and economic conditions of queer representations. Transpeople are considered marginal to both the gay consumer market and the civil rights struggles that fueled the recent proliferation of gay and lesbian images.

## HERE AND QUEER: Gay Television in Context

**[CLIP, “The Sopranos”]** *Voice 1 (female): You personally, how do you feel about homosexuality? Voice 2 (male): I find it disgusting. Men kissing men, holding hands in the street. Every fucking TV show now, they rub your nose in it.*

**NARRATOR:** In the past decade, we have seen a huge increase in gay and lesbian images on television. How can we account for these changes and what impact do they have on American society?

**KATHERINE SENDER:** It's tempting to see the increase in GLBT images on television as part of some kind of natural evolution towards greater diversity, but in fact it actually reflects broader social trends. One is the news coverage of gay and lesbian civil rights activity, and the other is an increasing awareness of the gay market. And we see this playing out back in terms of television commercials but also in terms of programming content too.

**LARRY GROSS:** Since the early 90s, there have been a series of very public political struggles, many of which involve the resistance to gay peoples' entry into the most mainstream of American institutions. Beginning with the fight over the military in the early 90s, followed by a fight over gay men's inclusion in the Boy Scouts, which went all the way up to the Supreme Court.

**[CLIP, "CBS Evening News"]** *Reporter: The court must decide whether the Boy Scouts of America can bar gays from serving as troop leaders.*

**[CLIP, "NBC Nightly News"]** *Reporter: Until today, it was legal for individual states to at least try to legislate what went on in the bedroom. Not anymore. Homosexual conduct is no longer a crime.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** A lot was going on in 2003. Programs were coming on television yes, but the decision came from the Supreme Court in Lorency, Texas that overturned the 1986 decision in Vowers v. Hardwicke which upheld anti-sodomy statutes.

**[CLIP, "NBC Nightly News"]** *Reporter: The opinion by justice Anthony Kennedy said anti-gay conduct laws Are an invitation to subject homosexuals to public and private discrimination.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** In my home state of Massachusetts, the Supreme Judicial Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage as constitutionally protected.

**[CLIP, "CBS Evening News"]** *Reporter: Massachusetts may not prohibit legal marriages by gay and lesbian couples.*

**JOSHUA GAMSON:** I think that gay marriage moment was an important moment with consequences that we haven't yet seen or figured out. A lot of gay visibility is getting used to the existence of gay people. I think with gay marriage, it was just getting used to seeing two people of the same sex declare love and commitment to each other.

**[CLIP, "The Simpsons"]** *Voice 1 (female): Why don't we legalize same-sex marriage? We could attract a growing segment of the marriage market and strike a blow for civil rights.*

*Voice 2 (male): Yeah, them gay guys got lots of disposable income. I can serve fancy drinks and charge ten bucks a pop.*

*Voice 3 (male): Then it's settled. We'll legalize gay money. I mean, gay marriage.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** As gay people became more visible through civil rights progress, they also became more visible to marketers and became more appealing as a gay consumer market. So what we get is this really interesting parallel between visibility and the news and the growing recognition of the importance of the gay market in television programming.

**[CLIP, "The L Word"]** *Voice 1 (male): This is the one that we like best.*

*See our concept is we want to position you as gay Anna Kournikova.*

*Voice 2 (male): Hold on a second here, guys. What are you talking about? This is not something that we discussed. I don't think that-*

*Voice 3 (female): I love it, I love it. I want to be the gay Anna Kournikova. I do.*

**HOWARD BUFORD:** In a capitalist society, everything is so trade and commerce based, unless you're part of the commerce mix, you don't have a lot of value.

**[CLIP, Diet Pepsi commercial]** *(singing) Well you can tell by the way I use my walk, I'm a women's man. No time to talk.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** So we've seen a huge increase in the recognition of gay consumers since the late 1990s. And this has had a number of consequences. One consequence is that advertisers are much more likely to either implicitly or explicitly appeal to gay consumers in their advertising.

**[CLIP, Orbitz commercial]** *Voice 1 (female): Our hotel is amazing. Close to the beach and the view is magnificent.*

*Voice 2 (male): It certainly is.*

**HOWARD BUFORD:** The role of the gay market as trendsetters, and therefore influencing the rest of the market, is very key. So in that way, the marketing to the gay audience is really strategic in terms of the larger sales of the brand.

**[CLIP, Subaru commercial featuring Martina Navratilova]**

*Voice (female): What do I know about performance?*

**HOWARD BUFORD:** If you look at the use of gay celebrities as spokespeople, it very much mirrors the use of African-Americans as spokespeople say 15 or 20 years ago. There was a big fear that if you used an African-American spokesperson, then your product would become an ethnic product or a black product. That clearly has crumbled away. Some of the most successful

spokespeople in advertising now are African-Americans. Now we're seeing the beginning of that as far as gay celebrities are concerned. I think the best example of that is Ellen for the American Express advertising. But there are others. Coming up in a big way is Kian Douglas from "Queer Eye" who has signed a contract with L'oreal.

**[CLIP, L'Oreal commercial]** *Voice 1 (male): All it takes is a half hour and a sink.*

**HOWARD BUFORD:** It's good to be at that point, but we also have to understand that there's a certain stereotyping now that goes on with that. So what we're seeing now for gay men is they're the experts in home decoration and in personal grooming.

**LARRY GROSS:** The relationship between images in advertising and images in programming is kind of cyclical. As the spaces open by characters - "Will and Grace" and others - advertisers become more emboldened to include lesbian or gay references in their ads. And as those occur, program executives become more emboldened.

**[CLIP, "Will and Grace"]** *Voice 1 (male): That's not funny.*  
*Voice 2 (male): It's a little bit funny.*

**NARRATOR:** Gay and lesbian struggles for recognition in the most mainstream institutions of American society mean that television producers have less to fear when including them in their shows.  
What impact does this visibility have on audiences?

*[Clip, "Queer As Folk"]* *Voice (male): I thought you said you wouldn't be caught dead in a room full of 18-year-olds.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** One of the most important impacts of what a number of us have called the new gay visibility is going to be on young people. The significance of emerging and identifying oneself and emerging into a world of gay visibility, however attenuated that visibility but of "Queer Eye," of "Will & Grace," of gay marriage, of attacks on gay marriage. Of all of that stuff that's out there in popular culture now is a world so radically different from the world I emerged into and others older emerged into that we can't even begin to track the significance of that.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** It's not just gay people that are benefiting from increased GLBT images on television. Society in general can no longer escape the fact that gay people are part of everyday life.

They see this on the television that they are also increasingly unphased by the presence of gay people in their high schools, amongst their friendship networks,

in their classrooms, and so on. So I think one consequence of this is that as a result of increased television representations, people in general will take it for granted that gay people are part of their everyday world.

**NARRATOR:** In the conservative political environment of the 2000s, however, the increasingly visible presence of gay people on television and in public life has been met with much political and religious backlash.

**[CLIP, “Will and Grace”]** *Voice 1 (male): So you hate gays too.  
Voice 2 (female): Oh, Jackie. We only hate gays because that’s what’s in right now. Hating gays, hating evolution. It’s the new age of enlightenment.*

**SUZANNA DANUTA WALTERS:** There can be a tendency for us in the gay community to say, we’re here, we’re queer, we’re on TV, we’re even on reality TV, we’re fixing up the straight boys, we’ve got our “L Word,” we’ve got our glam shows. Let’s pack up our too-toos and go home. One important point to make is that today’s “Queer Eye” can be tomorrow’s queer gone. And I think it’s very possible that there can be a massive retrenchment. However, what gay visibility did in the 90s was not just get us on primetime, but create a public space, a public forum to comment on the moments when we’re closeted again.

**NARRATOR:** Television audiences today see a very different world of gay visibility from that of the mid-1990s. Gay and lesbian characters are not only tolerated, they are often welcomed, bringing to shows a hip and urban sense of style. Yet few images challenge conventional sexual identities, gender expressions, or family formations. Gay and lesbian characters are forced to assimilate into existing social structures that remain largely unchanged by their presence. If the bright star of gay sheath begins to fade, will we continue to see the television landscape in its different light?

[END]