

The Pitfalls of Positive Representation II

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There is no question that there is currently a relatively significant amount of LGBT characters and personalities on the small screen. However, many gay and lesbian activists/scholars have been lamenting over the fact that due to the cancellation of past shows which featured major LGBT characters, like *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, that the current state of LGBT characters on network television has not been as prolific since many of the current LGBT images are now featured in ensemble or recurring roles. While it is true the number of lead LGBT characters on network and cable television has decreased in comparison to previous years, I personally feel the current depictions of the LGBT characters are not only more visible in a multitude of program genres than ever before, but they are also for the most part less stereotypical, more psychologically well-rounded, and more representative of the rich diverseness within the LGBT community.

LGBT images are now more prevalent in daytime programming. There are real personalities such as Ellen DeGeneres, as well as numerous daytime dramas that include LGBT characters such as the gay male young adults, Noah and Luke on CBS's *As the World Turns*. ABC's *One Life to Live* also had a LGBT significant story with a male police officer who was coming to terms with his sexuality. Sitcoms were the first programs to include LGBT characters, mostly for comic relief, but many current sitcoms do a better job of showing the intricacies of the community, especially in shows like ABC's *Modern Family* and NBC's *The Office*.

Dramas are still the biggest genres with LGBT presences. I believe the diversity found within current dramas, despite the fact they are no LGBT lead characters, has been quite inclusive on multiple levels in terms of race, class, gender and even sexuality. Viewers can find a Latin gay male nurse on NBC's *Mercy*, a lesbian African-American Fed on USA's *White Collar*, a gay male police officer on TNT's *Southland*, an African-American male college student on ABC Family's *Greek*, a bisexual female Indian private investigator on CBS's *The Good Wife*, a gay male paramedic on NBC's *Trauma*, an animated gay couple on FOX's *American Dad!*, an eccentric African-American male on HBO's *True Blood*, a transgender teen on Teen Nick's *Degrassi the Next Generation*, and there are still the more typical depictions of gay white males in Fox's *Glee* and ABC's *Brothers and Sisters*. This list is can go on and on, which shows how the LGBT community can now be seen in less stereotypical ways and the rich diversity of the community is now more visible than it has ever been.

Interestingly, dramas aren't even the most diverse genre for LGBT images. That title belongs to reality television, which has long included LGBT images in its programming. However, some critics argue that reality TV promotes diversity more for sensationalism than for true multiculturalism. MTV's reality programming has received numerous accolades for its diversity, beginning with *The Real World* and continuing with shows, like *American Dance Crew*, *Paris Hilton's My New BFF*, *True Life* and *Making His Band*. In fact, the network became the first network, cable or broadcast, to be rated "Excellent" by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) in their annual National Responsibility Report, which evaluates LGBT images on network and cable television. However, many other networks have followed this formula with shows like CBS's *Amazing Race*, Bravo's *Work Out*, Lifetime's *Project Runway*, and CW's *America's Next Top Model*. Some critics feel this formula of always

including LGBT characters on reality programming can be detrimental because the focus is usually only on the participant's sexuality. However, regardless of the motives behind the integration of LGBT characters in reality programming, this formula has allowed for many diverse LGBT characters to be introduced to the American public.

It is also my belief that while LGBT depictions on television are more diverse than they ever have been, there is no question that major improvements are still needed in this area. According to GLAAD's National Responsibility Index, over 70% of LGBT characters on television are still gay white males. LGBT characters of color and certain sexual minorities are still underrepresented, especially Asian Pacific Islanders, transgender characters and bisexuals, particularly male bisexuals.

I think the biggest concern right now is many of the shows I have aforementioned that contribute to this new level of LGBT diversity on television have been recently canceled or are in their last seasons, such as *Greek*, *Mercy*, *Trauma*, *As the World Turns*, etc. So will the upcoming TV season continue this trend? If not, a large selection of LGBT viewers will struggle to find images that reflect their lives and communities.