

Getting Back to “So What?”

Julia Himberg, Arizona State University

I have turned to the “so what” question in my work on industry, culture, and sexual minorities to ask: how and where can we intervene in the teleological story of progress for LGBT Americans that dominates popular culture wherein the press, pundits, activists, and politicians alike commonly reference LGBT rights, especially marriage rights, as a *fait accompli*? With an unbroken run of more than 25 victories in state and federal courts in 2013 alone, for example, commentators describe an immutable trajectory that assumes legal and social equality are foregone conclusions. A key part of this consensus ideology is a persistent belief in media representation’s powerful place in sexual politics, especially for television because of the ways it remains embedded in the routines, rituals, and institutions of everyday life even as methods of distribution and consumption have changed. Although the TV programs, narratives, and characters held up as evidence change from year to year, TV’s “mainstreaming effect” on audiences is consistently used to explain widespread shifts regarding sexual minorities’ rights. While media scholars have thoroughly challenged this model of “television effects,” it remains a structuring element of culture, convincing a lot of people of a causal relationship between media visibility and shifts in public opinion.

Rather than dismiss these ideas as overly simplistic or inaccurate, I have been interested in the fact that although television forms the basis of many everyday discussions about LGBT rights, little in the way of sustained academic work has examined the relationship between sexual politics and the operations of the TV industry itself. In response, my first book project seeks to understand the process by which the television industry constructs and reinforces commonsense ideas about sexuality and identity politics. It also attempts to show how contingent this process is, constantly being worked and reworked in the industry’s daily operations.

Through a critical media industry studies approach, the book explores the role human agents and day-to-day events and institutional procedures play in the industry’s production of sexual minority representations. Instead of conceiving of above-the-line workers as only extensions of institutional interests, I start from a series of paradoxes: network executives are both activists (trying to increase LGBT media visibility) and businesspeople (concerned only with the profits, audiences shares, and the financial bottom line); marketers try to build niche outlets dedicated to under-represented minorities and simultaneously create homogenous, segmented audiences; market researchers offer television networks methods of customization and inclusion for sexual minorities and also turn sexuality into an effective marketing tool to draw high-quality audiences. Each case study looks at the connection of micro-level practices to larger industry objectives and regulatory environments, exploring a continuum of political activity within television. I argue that it is within this analytical framework that the ambiguity and complexity of processes including program development and their constituent production and marketing decisions become most apparent; attending to the means by which industrial goals and discourses are expressed by cultural workers and

industry operations reveals the myriad contradictions within television as a politics and culture-producing industry.

In detailing the ways that industrial forces contribute to the over-determined narrative about sexual politics, I try to identify constructive spaces for pragmatic intervention in larger cultural processes of representation and political power. I am fundamentally concerned with the attraction and traction of commonsense ideas about visibility politics on television. Rather than call for a return to the radical queer politics of earlier decades or bemoan the normalization and commodification of LGBT identities that offers up sameness as the only route to equality and political inclusion, I think we should be asking, in the current historical moment, what is the role of the television industry in creating and appropriating cultural systems of knowledge about LGBT sexuality and sexual politics? How do discourses of LGBT sexuality circulate among “above-the-line” workers? Within network programming and branding practices? Within industry regulation (or the lack-there-of)? How are constructions of sexual identities the deliberate (or unwitting) responses of the television industry to economic and political contexts? Put another way, today, as we reckon with the wholesale liberalization of the domestic and global media markets, how might we talk about sexual identity, which inevitably works within the logic of the market?

My purpose in presenting these case studies is to articulate a more inclusive address to assessing television’s representational politics. In calling for a more inclusive address, I mean an approach that works with the influence of commonsense ideas rather than arguing that they shouldn’t have any influence. I argue that we need to build conceptual bridges that help us more actively engage with the overwhelming flood of cultural declarations. The stakes are especially high because of the ways that other civil rights battles have been insidiously coopted and denied. That feminism has given way to post-feminism and that anti-racism has given way to post-racism are useful analogical discourses here. They demonstrate the urgency of the moment for sexuality and for the complex role popular culture plays in contemporary identity politics.