

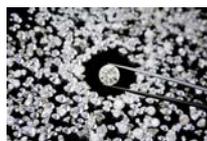
**Media portrayal of
lesbian, gay and bisexual audiences:**

**Key findings from interviews with
LGB organisations and representatives**

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Executive summary

Introduction

As a part of its ongoing programme of research into the representation of diverse groups, in 2010 the BBC conducted a study focused on the portrayal of lesbian women, gay men and bisexual people (LGB) in broadcast media. The findings from that study enabled the BBC to identify a number of key considerations to improve portrayal and representation of LGB people.

The BBC made a commitment to review the work two years later to ascertain whether it had moved forward in the eyes of audiences. As a part of the review, a range of expert organisations and individuals were invited to take part in follow-up research and in total nine in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews explored a range of areas from the role of media in portraying LGB people to perceptions of portrayal across different genres as well as further recommendations to the BBC going forward.

Key findings

1. The LGB experts feel that media plays a critical role in representing LGB people.

They believe that the portrayal of LGB people in media has two primary effects:

- a. Educating wider society. By increasing the visibility of LGB people on programmes, it is felt to raise awareness and increase familiarity which in turn can help to reduce fear or discomfort, possibly rooted in lack of awareness.
- b. Validating LGB people. Role models can play a powerful part in reassuring younger LGB people or demonstrating positive experiences or outcomes.

2. All broadcasters are believed to have a responsibility to represent the diversity of people.

However, there is thought to be an extra obligation on the BBC given the nature in which it is funded to be the standard-bearer and to push boundaries for the whole industry.

3. There is still thought to be insufficient representation of LGB people across media.

Although there has been a gradual degree of improvement in the level of representation of LGB people across all media, including the BBC, over the past ten years or so, there is a sense from the LGB experts that representation is still so unusual that it stands out when it is included and that LGB people are still relatively invisible, especially lesbian women and bisexual people

4. BBC radio is perceived the LGB experts to have a greater frequency of LGB representation compared to its television channels.

The participants believe that television is the main driver of perceptions yet it is felt to be lacking in adequate representation of LGB people. Online is felt to be an under-used platform for the portrayal of LGB people by the BBC and a missed opportunity.

5. There remains a call for a deliberate mix of incidental, overt and landmark types of LGB portrayal.

However it is felt there could be even more incidental portrayal on the BBC than is currently featured, and that this should pay attention to the broader context in which it is represented. The LGB experts also expressed that there should be more landmark LGB-specific programming, especially for young LGB people.

6. Where lesbian, gay and bisexual people *are* represented in the broadcast media, the LGB experts feel this representation still needs to reflect the diversity of LGB people, and to avoid stereotypes.

Within the limited amount of LGB portrayal that the LGB experts felt there to be, it was noted that the majority was the portrayal of gay men, particularly within drama. They felt there is little portrayal of lesbian women, and hardly any representation of bisexual people. In addition, where there is LGB portrayal, there is a feeling that it tends to be skewed toward younger, white and non-disabled LGB people.

7. Language and tone were not particularly salient issues for the LGB expert participants.

This was because other aspects of the portrayal of LGB people - particularly the lack of it - took precedence for them.

8. Participants agree that all genres have a role to play in representing LGB people and, when done effectively, are thought to be able to influence both the education and validation effects.

However, the genres most talked about were News & Current Affairs, Drama and Factual

News and current affairs: This is the genre that receives the most criticism from the experts. As a public service broadcaster and a standard bearer on moral issues, the BBC is asked to reconsider the way in which it is perceived to set up news debates with two extreme perspectives and to be more creative and nuanced in its presentation.

Drama: Using fiction to represent LGB people is considered to be a powerful tool in fulfilling an education role, especially given the potential for incidental portrayal in continuing dramas and soaps. There is consensus from these LGB experts that programme-makers should be bolder and ensure the focus of the output is the engaging storyline which is then brought to life through interesting and creative characters, some of whom may be LGB.

Factual: Factual programmes on both the BBC and Channel 4 in particular are perceived to have successfully incorporated incidental portrayal of LGB people. However, there is an acknowledgement that broadcasters could include a wider range of portrayal of LGB people in factual programming, for example in specialist factual topics such as History. The BBC is also noted by this group of LGB experts for the visibility of high-profile factual presenters who are also LGB.

There was also feedback, albeit less, about other genres.

Comedy: The biggest risk here, according to the LGB experts, is the portrayal of LGB people being the focus of a joke. However, if the author or source of the humour is LGB, this is felt to be more authentic or appropriate and so there is more acceptance.

Entertainment: LGB presenters who are there because of their talent as opposed to their sexual orientation are seen as role models by the participants. If referencing their LGB status can be achieved in subtle and appropriate ways, this is believed to be valuable in educating wider audiences. This was an area where lesbian portrayal was recognised as being visible.

Children's: The LGB experts feel that the BBC should seek to incorporate the portrayal of LGB people within programming targeted at children, to familiarize audiences through incidental portrayal from an early age as well as validating children who are going through their formative years and who may be LGB.

Sport: There was felt to be missed opportunities for the portrayal of LGB people here, particularly given the availability of expert and relevant LGB talent, for example in women's sport.

9. The LGB expert participants feel that the BBC should be more creative and bolder in how it represents LGB people across the range of genres and platforms.

Concerns were raised by the LGB experts that the findings and the intentions of the 2010 research have not been effectively communicated or shared with the creative community, particularly independent producers. There was also a sense that the BBC did not explicitly commit to changes as much as it could have following the research findings.

Introduction

Background

As a part of its ongoing programme of research into the representation of diverse groups, in 2010 the BBC conducted a study focused on the portrayal of lesbian women, gay men and bisexual people (LGB) in broadcast media [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/research/diversity_summaries_lgb.pdf].

The study aimed to find out how the BBC and broadcast media in general are perceived by audiences to be performing in this area and to identify how the BBC could improve where needed.

There were two broad elements to the study:

- large-scale qualitative and quantitative research among LGB and heterosexual audiences
- an online public consultation.

The findings from this study enabled the BBC to identify a number of key considerations to improve portrayal and representation of LGB people:

- Authenticity is crucial to improving portrayal of LGB people
- Genre sets the context for audiences' expectations of portrayal of LGB people and there are different lessons for programme types
- Platform also affects audiences' expectations of portrayal of LGB people offering us lessons for our content on-screen, on-air and online
- Intimacy in same-sex relationships can be difficult for uncomfortable heterosexual audiences, for some parents and even for heterosexual people who are more comfortable with portrayal of LGB people
- Language and tone are particularly important to LGB audiences; they expect homophobia to be challenged
- Role models play an important role for LGB audiences keen to see a greater range and diversity of on-air and on-screen LGB presenters, performers, journalists etc.

The BBC made a commitment to review this work two years later to ascertain if and how it had moved forward in the eyes of audiences. This report focuses on one element of that review: findings from depth interviews with LGB organisations and representatives, referred to as 'LGB experts' throughout the rest of this document.

Depth interviews

A range of organisations and individuals were invited to take part in this research and in total nine in-depth interviews with LGB experts were conducted. Some of these had been consulted as part of the 2010 research so this was an opportunity to gauge the extent to which they felt the research had begun to have any impact on BBC

content. Additional expert representatives were also included to ensure a range of perspectives could be taken into account.

Conducting interviews with experts enables the personal experiences of the individuals to be considered in addition to the weight of the voice which they represent.

Some individuals asked to remain anonymous, so only the role of the individual or the organisation consulted are highlighted below.

Organisations and representatives included as part of the research were:

- *Equity* – a trade union representing artists from across the entire spectrum of arts and entertainment
- *Families Together London* – a support group for parents of gay children
- *Galop* – a charity providing advice and support to people who have experienced biphobia, homophobia, transphobia, sexual violence or domestic abuse
- a Journalist specialising in gay issues
- a Journalist, Writer and Broadcaster
- *The Lesbian and Gay Foundation (LGF)* – a charity providing services and initiatives aimed at meeting the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual people
- a Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker
- *Schools Out / The Classroom* – a campaign group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans issues as they affect education and those in education
- *Stonewall* – an organisation working to achieve equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexual people

The fieldwork was conducted between 30 October and 15 November 2012.

The broad aim of the interviews was to explore perceptions of current media portrayal of LGB people across TV, radio and the internet in general and specifically across the BBC. The interview guide considered the following broad areas:

- Role of media in shaping society's attitudes towards LGB people
- Responsibility of BBC versus other broadcasters
- Perceptions of the amount of coverage
- Portrayal across different genres
- Range of diversity within the portrayal of LGB people
- Impact of the 2010 research and consultation
- Overall advice to the BBC

This report summarises the key themes within each of these areas identified through the depth interviews with LGB experts.

Perceptions of media portrayal of LGB people - key findings

The key findings from each area explored through the LGB expert interviews have been identified and summarised below. Verbatim examples are used where appropriate to illustrate the findings.

1. Role of media in shaping society's attitudes on LGB people

There is unanimous agreement that the media plays a powerful role in shaping attitudes about LGB people. This role is described by the LGB experts in two main ways:

- a) Education – the LGB experts feel that media outlets have a responsibility not only to educate and edify the wider society about LGB issues but also to demonstrate that LGB people exist and are part of society. By increasing the visibility of LGB people on programmes, it raises awareness and increases familiarity which in turn can help to reduce fear possibly rooted in lack of awareness.

"It has a crucial role in informing people because most people are not LGBT and most people don't know an awful lot about the complexities and severities of homophobia." (Journalist)

"It can't be underestimated the power of something as simple as portraying LGB people as someone you might bump into and has the same issues and same problems as you." (LGF)

"Seeing something on television, on drama or on the news or wherever, it cements those people as part of British culture, as part of the mainstream and not as stigmatised." (Journalist)

"Broadcast output is something that is shared with family and friends – more of a social experience. It could be reaching a family with an LGB child, provoke discussion or help someone to communicate because they've got that hook." (LGF)

"Is television a mirror – reflecting society the way it is - or is it a lamp – showing the way that things could be? It's a bit of both – if there's more acceptance of gay characters on television. TV can lull you into a false sense of security that the battles are won but without TV presenting positive role models then I think society would be a bit further back on the path towards acceptance." (Journalist)

"It has an educational role, part of the whole process of moving things on; if we are invisible in media or if only part of our community is presented then that has a very powerful and horrendous effect." (Schools Out / The Classroom)

- b) Validation – the LGB experts believe that media can play an influential role in helping LGB people feel that they are not unusual. This is felt to be particularly significant for younger people where they may be struggling more with identity issues and may feel isolated if there is no support network for them. It is here that role models can play a powerful part in reassuring them or demonstrating positive experiences or outcomes.

This is felt by the LGB experts to be especially important for LGB people living in more rural communities as it is less likely there will be LGB people they can turn to directly for guidance. Therefore, media serves as a key way through which they can see their lives represented with regards to their sexual identity.

“When LGBT people are growing up they are always isolated, they are for a certain period of time in the closet and alone. Therefore, what you see in the media is your main link to both other LGBT people and how you think the world is.” (Journalist)

“It’s important for young people growing up that they see positive representations and feel confident in who they are and confident that they are part of the wider society because their issues are important.” (Galop)

“I remember a BBC Schools programme about 30 years ago called ‘Seen’ – it was a film about two school boys and about how they fell in love and that story stuck with me for years and years and I still remember it now because it absolutely spoke to how I was feeling at that time...it validated me when I was at an impressionable age.” (LGF)

“It’s important for gay people to see themselves on television ‘cos that’s how you know you exist. If you’re a teenager in the Highlands of Scotland and you see other gay people’s lives it’s an indication that you’re not the only one.” (Journalist)

“The media clearly has a role in how young people learn to position themselves, socialise themselves. It also helps define how a community positions itself. Being rendered invisible, through lack of representation, is clearly hugely problematic.” (Equity)

“It’s particularly important for young people and people living in rural places – the urban situation is massively different. The internet has made a difference but there’s still an enormous role for media to play.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

2. Responsibility of BBC versus other broadcasters

All broadcasters are believed to have a responsibility to represent the diversity of people but there is felt to be an extra obligation on the BBC given the nature in which it is funded; the LGB experts believe that, as licence fee payers, the spectrum of the UK population is entitled to be represented across the BBC portfolio. There is also a sense that the BBC should set the quality and moral standard to which all broadcasters should aspire.

“They are public broadcasting – they should be the flagship, leading it.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“BBC can get lumbered with the responsibility but yes it has extra responsibility and should take a moral leap. If you work at the BBC you should aspire to make the world better. BBC can be nervous about appearing finger-wagging or didactic and can be misrepresented by the Daily Mail or Telegraph – it should be bolder.” (Journalist)

“There should be an equal responsibility on all broadcasters but because of the way the BBC is funded perhaps a more obvious need to make sure the people who are contributing are represented – a standard bearer.” (LGF)

“We are all licence fee payers – the black lesbian and gay person may be a minority within a minority but they have a right to have relevant representations.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

“There is a different responsibility on a public service broadcaster funded by the licence fee.” (Stonewall)

"If the BBC didn't set the cultural temperature I think other broadcasters would be less inclined to be as bold. For example EastEnders had gay characters in it long before Coronation St did which was an oversight on Coronation's part. When you look at the diversity in Coronation now it has become bolder. When you look at X Factor which includes the range of diversity of Britain (class, ethnic, sexual) these shows do really well. But they need the BBC to chivvy them along." (Journalist)

"The LGBT community has the same right to representation as everyone else in terms of the media. We pay as much for it, in terms of licence fee etc. To date we've received short-shrift." (Equity)

3. Perceptions of the amount of coverage

There is an acknowledgement from among the LGB experts that there has been a gradual degree of improvement in the level of representation of LGB people across all media, including the BBC, over the past ten years or so. However, there is a sense that representation is still so unusual that it stands out when it is included and that LGB people are still relatively invisible.

"[LGB people are] Integrated better. They are present in a lot of things now – less of a spotlight or an issue." (LGF)

"There is better representation on the BBC than say ten years ago but it feels as though it is static in last couple of years." (Stonewall)

"There has been a massive cultural shift over the last ten years. The BBC should have an active role rather than being a passive observer. Even in the last couple of years there is better coverage, in drama and lifestyle, that would be the genre that has moved the furthest." (Galop)

"Clearly, I go a-looking ... and still can't find much. Funnily enough, I think there's less than two years ago, not more as one might have hoped." (Equity)

Television is acknowledged to be the key driver of perceptions and is the platform that is particularly highlighted by the LGB expert participants as lacking in adequate representation of LGB people, for all broadcasters. However, BBC Radio is perceived by this group of individuals to have a greater frequency of LGB representation as part of its output. In particular, Radio 2, Five Live and BBC local radio are highlighted by these LGB experts as key stations that facilitate discussions about LGB issues. For the other BBC stations, Radio 4 was perceived to have few discussions about LGB-related issues and the experts weren't aware of any discussions of this nature on any other BBC radio stations.

The BBC website is felt to be an area that could be utilised more in representing LGB issues though greater care needs to be applied due to the permanence of online content.

"BBC Radio (Radio 2 especially Jeremy Vine, and especially Five Live) is slightly better in terms of the frequency of gay discussions than television." (Journalist)

"BBC Radio does a really good job of debating these issues – Five Live and BBC Radio Manchester in particular." (LGF)

"If you go onto the BBC website there's no gay section, no gay blog, no dedicated arena for gay news, gay commentary. Look at the popularity of Pink News and online to see the hunger and the thirst for this." (Journalist)

“For the internet there’s a risk because things stay there so it’s important that wording is right - when something is written down it has a certain kind of power.” (Galop)

4. Portrayal across different genres

The LGB experts believe that all genres should include representations and portrayals of LGB people. They feel that incidental portrayal within programming requires particular attention from broadcasters including the BBC, by including people who happen to be LGB rather than the focus of the particular output being the sexual orientation.

“There is less incidental portrayal – when I do hear gay references, it stands out because it’s so rare.” (Stonewall)

“I’d hate it if there was a gay in every programme – would look like they’re trying too hard. Monitoring would be interesting but must avoid the risk of making it reductive. Need to be vigilant and aware. Need to foster a climate of awareness across the BBC.” (Journalist)

“It’s not just about having a gay or lesbian person on-screen but how they’re positioned and the context they’re placed. I don’t see gay couples with families on telly.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

Different genres are acknowledged to play different roles in how they represent and portray LGB people. However, the genres most talked about were News & Current Affairs, Drama and Factual

4a. News and current affairs

The genre that receives the most criticism in its portrayal of LGB people from the LGB expert participants is News and Current Affairs. The way that LGB issues are discussed on news programmes, including the BBC, is felt to be unnecessarily and deliberately confrontational, giving too much time to homophobic viewpoints. As a public service broadcaster and a standard bearer on moral issues, the BBC is asked to reconsider the way in which it is perceived to set up these debates with two extreme perspectives and to be more creative and nuanced in its presentation.

“I was called recently by local radio in Kent about the B&B story asking who was right but it’s subtler than that – to set it up as who’s rights matters more is confrontational, reinforces homosexuals against religious people. Typical journalism – ‘let’s do conflict’. Why do we have to have these soundbites of ‘he’s right, I’m wrong’?” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“When issues are discussed on the radio and on television the BBC applies the same rules of balance to those issues as it would to certain other things. The BBC is selective about who it applies balance to – for example, if there’s an issue about racism, never do you have someone who is against racism pitted against someone who is for racism, it doesn’t happen. Whenever any gay issue is discussed they’ll put me, Peter Tatchell or Ben Summerskill on opposite someone who thinks that it is sinful and perverted and disgusting. This is only balanced if you deem a very extreme reactionary point of view as valid. The BBC needs to think very carefully about that.” (Journalist)

“It’s always pro-gay against anti-gay – the BBC is not holding authorities to account for the mal-treatment of gay people. I don’t see Jeremy Paxman quizzing a government minister about what they’re doing to tackle homophobic bullying in schools...Gay people are left to defend themselves, defend their rights against homophobes but the BBC is not going to people with

power and asking why aren't they protecting gay people. The BBC doesn't seem to care."
(Journalist)

"Portrayal on news is not that incidental. It is very much a story about 'somebody is gay'. It is often a platform given to shrill voices that are real minority voices within certain faiths and there is a tendency for antagonistic opposites. For example, a Stonewall rep will be up against an extreme voice. It sends the message that the shrill voices deserve that platform when there are voices that aren't being heard from the majority of people of faith who are supportive. It is a polarised debate which gives a platform to homophobic views." (Stonewall)

"When gay issues come up the BBC is usually quite careful about things, it gives a lot more coverage than ITV news. But it should widen its pool of people it calls upon and perhaps reconsider the gladiatorial / Punch & Judy set-up.. There is the misconception that including more nuanced debate means boring but it just means that the anchor needs to work a bit harder." (Journalist)

"To avoid gladiatorial confrontations you have to find great ways of commissioning great programmes which reflect much more interesting and insightful angles on contemporary issues. The BBC seems to be locked into this balance – locked into guidelines and that is right from a political perspective but it can be negative." (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

"There's a difference between being impartial which I know is difficult for the BBC and having a basic ethical view on something. I think there's an acceptance with things like the Equality Act for example of a level of equality for LGBT people but I think the BBC finds it's acceptable to create a debate with really extremely homophobic people as though 'here is the other view – gay people should have no rights' and by presenting it in that way it's like the BBC is saying 'this is a valid point of view'. I'm not saying that people don't have that point of view but to always go to some real nutter...? The BBC should be able to say 'we believe that homophobia is wrong – that's not us being political or partial, it's ok for us to have that standpoint'." (Galop)

"News programmes tend to cover issues relating to LGB in the old provocative ways still, i.e. the 'rent a bigots' still get to have their say. I'm thinking of gay marriage and how it's been covered and how David Cameron has slipped in the old fear of gay men in connection with paedophilia in the Jimmy Savile enquiry. Sunday morning programmes of a religious bent that I've seen on the BBC have included Peter Tatchell and Val McDermid in panels, but always outnumbered by the 'rent a bigots', so whilst portraying the voice of reason, they also tend to get drowned out."
(Equity)

In addition to considering the way in which LGB stories are presented, news and current affairs programmes are also encouraged by this group of individuals to broaden the range of LGB issues covered.

"I have noticed that even in the last year the guardian online has started covering stories that might have only appeared on the gay-specific news websites. I'd like to see some of those stories covered more by BBC news online – looking at integrating and seeing that our news is news." (Galop)

"Big stories are covered such as gay marriage or the religious stories but you never see any broader cultural current affairs stories such as from around the world such as in parts of Russia where gay people are being abused or taken away. In this country, issues such as gay-bullying, homelessness which is higher among lesbian and gay young people are not covered at all."
(Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

"There is a woeful under-reporting of gay issues; there is a sense that the BBC is not interested, whether it be homophobic violence, bullying, gay marriage, adoption, individual one-off events, the BBC is very patchy." (Journalist)

"The BBC doesn't go out of its way to pick up on national or international stories that relate to, or are of interest to, the gay community. Personally I go to LGB internet sites to get access to such news stories. The big story about the Olympics for me was that so few athletes, including Team GB, were actually out. There's been a lot of coverage recently of racism in football, but no

mention of homophobia or the FA's abortive attempt to raise the issue earlier this year. Homophobia in sport is a massive issue, so is sexism, and the lack of resources or media coverage of women's sports ... yeah, this is a lesbian issue because so many lesbians are involved in women's sport." (Equity)

"News should cover items of interest within the gay community as mainstream news and not to set it up as a battle between gay people and homophobes as if both are perfectly reasonable perspectives." (Galop)

4b. Drama

Fiction, and in particular drama programming is believed to be where broadcasters can be bold in their representations of different types of characters, including LGB people. Non-BBC drama series spontaneously noted for their good inclusion and dramatisation of LGB characters include *Six Feet Under* and *Downton Abbey*. A number of BBC series are also highlighted by the LGB experts for their inclusion of incidental LGB characters, notably *Dr Who*, *Torchwood*, *Holby City* and *Casualty*.

These dramas are seen to make nuanced references to LGB issues or individuals without that necessarily being the main focus of the programme. Using fiction to represent LGB people is acknowledged to be a powerful tool in fulfilling an education role as it enables programme-makers to ensure the focus of the output is the engaging storyline, which is then brought to life through interesting and creative characters, - some of whom may be LGB.

"The best depiction in drama of gay characters is in Six Feet Under which has not been surpassed. The reason this was so good is because they were shown as people first and foremost and you saw various issues relating to their orientation and their life but they were seen through the prism of any one else's issues rather than 'here are some gay characters'." (Journalist)

"Important that we don't present gay people as saints all the time or a particular kind of gay representation – they can do no wrong – that would make for a really boring character which is why Christian was good. This is a trap that drama used to fall into in the way that it used to with all minorities, you couldn't have a malevolent black character, or evil Asian characters. You do have to be careful with that because some of those representations are slightly more prominent, you do have to think carefully about the use of minorities in those roles because there are fewer portrayals of minorities." (Journalist)

"[In Downton Abbey]having the gradual storyline of Thomas the footman struggling with his sexuality against that backdrop was good especially as it gets such a big audience. Was clever to tackle it in historical settings – articulates struggles that are still happening now but do it in a much starker way. Holby and Casualty play an important role in incidental portrayal." (Journalist)

"Every so often in Dr Who there are characters who just happen to be LGB and it's something that the programme touches on quite a bit – it's never an issue and it's always just touched on, that's who they are and that's accepted. The Sarah Jane Adventures have covered it, mentioned more than once or twice about same-sex relationships and so on and that's great." (Journalist)

"Doctor Who quite often has a gay character in it but it isn't always an issue or the plotline – it's just incidental which has been quite nice." (Galop)

"Fiction plays a role in showing that being gay is normal and not unusual. But also about how gay people feel about themselves and making the community feel less 'other' by being seen to be part of things. It's an unusual enough occurrence and pleased to see some kind of reflection

that speaks to your kind of life that I will record a particular programme if I know there's a gay character in it." (Galop)

However, programme-makers are asked by the LGB experts to continue to be bold, and also to think carefully about the characteristics of central characters and the potential impacts of incorporating a diversity element.

"Too often a character's sexuality is still the be all and end all of that character, and once explored, writers don't know what to do with them." (Equity)

"LGB characters still unlikely to be the protagonist in anything, or even the side kick." (Equity)

"The drama of the trans-woman on Sky was intriguing – although it was dangerously near to 'if we have a murderer let's make them something or other'. On some levels it did matter and sometimes it didn't. But it was a brave piece and I don't think the BBC is being that brave – Lip Service was fairly tame. When you look at the risks that Sky programme took and Trans summer took [on Channel 4], Lip Service is limping along behind." (Schools Out / The Classroom)

4c. Continuing drama

The long-running 'soap operas' on both BBC and ITV are seen by the LGB experts to be successful vehicles for incorporating LGB storylines and developing interesting characters over time who happen to be LGB. These continuing dramas are seen as vital in portraying LGB people as most of the time the LGB characters are simply part of the cast with everyday issues and concerns and only sometimes might the fact that they happen to be LGB becomes central to the plot.

"Soap operas can be incredibly powerful; they have an amazingly important social job to do, educating and getting people to think about issues." (Schools Out / The Classroom)

"Christian and Syed was done well, done sensitively, a general gratitude towards that complex storyline. There is a feeling that in dramas on the BBC, gay people are rarely incidental, i.e. they are there because they are gay to explore the issues which is a little ham-fisted. The BBC should be able to deliver the best" (Journalist)

"There is a feeling that some of the characters in these dramas are afterthoughts – e.g. Ben Mitchell, they seemed to suddenly decide that he was gay, which lacks nuance. No excuse in a long-running soap where you can build things up gradually. People aren't stupid." (Journalist)

"A lot of good work has been done over the last few years within the main soap operas in portraying LGB people in an increasingly realistic way and not just the shock factor way." (Stonewall)

"Coronation St is a good example. They made a big play about Sophie in the beginning but now she's just part of the programme." (Families Together)

"EastEnders is excellent – also the diversity issue. It's all done very well. It's also very good when they show the helpline at the end." (Families Together)

"In fiction, media presents gay people as in the fabric of things and continuing dramas such as EastEnders really work hard to present people as part of a diverse British culture." (Journalist)

4d. Children's programming

The LGB expert participants feel that the BBC should seek to incorporate the portrayal of LGB people within programming targeted at children. This, it is believed, would facilitate the education role media can play in raising the awareness of LGB people and familiarising audiences through incidental

portrayal from an early age. In addition, incorporating representation within programming for children who are going through their formative years and who may be LGB is felt to have potential to help with the validation role that media can play.

“Best way to help is for young children from nursery age upwards to be exposed through children’s programming. Not all children have mummies and daddies, some people have two mummies. All aspects of diversity – black mother white father, father without a leg. BBC have to get their heads round creative programmes being done in a sensitive way. BBC has to grow up.” (Families Together)

“I’d like to see children’s TV including kids who are LGBT without it being an issue.” (Equity)

“The way that BBC divides up its children’s programming now does not cover the transition between 9 and 14 like Grange Hill used to. Where are the dramas for that age? Because of the strict delineation where children’s stops at 11 then young people’s – there’s nothing for the formative years or bridging programming.” (Journalist)

4e. Comedy

As with drama, comedy is a genre where it is felt that programme-makers can be bold in their depiction of characters, including LGB people. However, unlike in drama programmes where a potential risk is about not being bold enough with LGB characters, in comedy programmes the LGB experts feel that the biggest risk is the LGB portrayal being the focus of a joke or punch line.

It is also acknowledged that there is more acceptance of this by LGB audiences if the author or the source of the humour involving LGB people are themselves lesbian, gay or bisexual; this is felt to be more authentic or appropriate. If they are not, they can be perceived to be mocking LGB people as opposed to facilitating wider societal acceptance.

“A challenging place to do it, if done well it can be exciting but we’re often the butt of the jokes which is a problem.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“There’s always a danger with comedy that catchphrases can be taken and used maliciously but if the joke is originally being told by a gay performer or writer, the capacity for cruelty is complicated. So while I have less of a problem with Matt Lucas doing ‘the only gay in the village’, I think Horne and Corden’s gay war correspondent wasn’t on (leaving aside that it wasn’t funny) because neither of them is gay.” (Journalist)

“Because Matt Lucas was openly gay and was taking a stereotype to the nth degree it was just about acceptable – when it goes into the realms of the absurd it’s ok if it’s funny. It wouldn’t be good if that was the only representation then it would be a problem.” (LGF)

“I find the whole idea of the Only Gay in the Village really difficult ‘cos on the one hand I see why it’s funny but also it’s difficult ‘cos sometimes there really is only one gay in the village and their life is really awful and made a bit worse by that. There is something about where humour comes from and trusting where it comes from or an order for it to be funny.” (Galop)

4f. Factual

Factual programmes on the BBC and Channel 4 in particular are believed to have successfully incorporated incidental portrayal of LGB people. Lifestyle or factual entertainment programmes are seen as primary ways of providing positive portrayals by keeping the focus of the programme on, for example, a property

search, but including implicit references to the sexual orientation of the people involved.

“In non-drama terms, the best representation I’ve come across has been in people buying property programmes, such as Grand Designs, Escape to the Country, etc., and gardening shows, such as Gardeners World. Only last week, Channel 4’s Grand Designs covered a fantastic lesbian couple on the Isles of Skye – clearly well integrated into the local community, artistic, intelligent, achieving something through hard work and not much money. That programme alone probably provided six months’ worth of lesbian representation.” (Equity)

“Gardeners World coverage of gay male couples into gardening, clearly positive in that their being a gay male couple wasn’t an issue, referred to, but merely was.” (Equity)

“Incidental is easier in factual entertainment. Bake Off was great for incidental coverage – Sue and two contestants and showing their partners.” (Stonewall)

“BBC Four is good for incidental and gay coverage. There was a three-part series about marriage which included gay marriage. And a documentary about the HIV crisis in San Francisco.” (Stonewall)

“If there is a programme about couples struggling to pay the mortgage then one of the couples should be a gay couple – with the focus on the struggles in paying the mortgage rather than them being gay.” (Journalist)

However, as with news, the range of content used or explored within factual programming is felt to sometimes be too limited and not sufficiently broad or creative.

“The BBC has a vast history department but I see no depiction of gay history. Ian Hislop is currently presenting an Emotional History of Britain – where is the Gay History of Britain? Channel 4 has made documentaries about Alan Turing what has the BBC done? To have a period of a hundred years in which gay people have gone from being completely invisible and having no rights whatsoever and being thrown in prison to being out MPs and almost legal equality.” (Journalist)

“There has been an attempt on Channel 4 to recognise that Alan Turing was a gay man and how atrociously he was treated – there is much more that could be done about historical people who happened to be LGBT.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“Do a programme exploring how we get more LGB people to be out in sport. More exploratory programmes.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

4g. Factual and Entertainment presenters

Alongside the inclusion of incidental portrayal of LGB people or issues as part of the content of programming, factual programmes are also acknowledged as enabling LGB role models to emerge because of their expertise and skill, as opposed to their sexual orientation. The BBC is particularly noted in this area with the current visibility of high-profile presenters who are LGB. Although it is acknowledged that it may not always be appropriate for these presenters to reference the fact they are lesbian, gay or bisexual, if this can be achieved in subtle and appropriate ways then this is felt to be valuable in educating wider audiences as well as providing role models with which LGB people can identify.

“One of the things I like about the BBC’s depiction of LGBT people is the fact that it has a lot of excellent talent whether it’s Sandi Toksvig, Clare Balding, Evan Davies, Graham Norton, Nick Grimshaw, Sue Perkins – all these people hold prime positions where their sexuality is an aspect not the whole aspect, they’re very popular and they’re popular because of the fact they’re great broadcasters. That is very positive.” (Journalist)

“Sue Perkins, Clare Balding, Alice Arnold, Richard Coles, Evan Davies, Nick Grimshaw, Paddy O’Connell, Paul Gambaccini – good representation of gay presenters, role models.” (Stonewall)

“We don’t want to be tokenistic – don’t want it pointed out for the sake of it being pointed out but if a presenter can talk about something without it seeming like a big issue and can communicate things in a normal way then that’s fantastic – they are influential.” (LGF)

“It’s good that some of the presenting talent are out and that seems to have been improving in the last few years – the number of people who are comfortable with being out is growing so that’s good.” (Galop)

“The Olympics and Paralympics coverage, both with Clare Balding, was positive because she was so knowledgeable, competent, genuinely likeable and so well received by the British Public sick of the way the usual Sports presenters of football, non-Olympics sports, usually present male-dominated macho sports ad nauseum. My advice, get Clare Balding to chair A Question of Sport, and include equal coverage for women’s sports in terms of questions, guests and Panel Captains.” (Equity)

“Clare Balding was great in Olympics –open but not militant. It normalises gay people. She loves her job and is good at it and by the way she’s gay.” (Journalist)

“Though not everyone may know Sue is gay, the fact that gay people do and to see a role model such as her is great.” (Stonewall)

“Sue Perkins is omnipresent and that’s great.” (Equity)

“Sandi Toksvig probably more than anyone references the fact she’s gay in her programmes in the same way that straight people refer to their lives.” (Stonewall)

4h. LGB-specific programming

The LGB experts feel that programming targeted at young LGB people in particular can provide role models and tackle LGB issues in more direct and detailed ways. The perceived risk that they acknowledge, however, is that LGB people or issues are either ghettoised or not included in more mainstream programme and therefore broadcasters are asked to ensure that LGB-specific programming, regardless of genre, forms only a small part of the portrayal mix.

“The second series of Lip Service had one of the best written episodes I’ve ever seen, when the lead character got killed. Lip Service is also important in that Heather Pearce is an out actress, and thus an incredibly important role model for young lesbians.” (Equity)

“There are no shows for gay people, no current affairs shows, no magazine shows either on radio or television. The BBC used to have a gay magazine programme in the 90s hosted by Rhona Cameron and Richard Fairbrass. Often programme-makers say they don’t want to ghettoise it – they want to mix it up – that is a smoke-screen because the fact is they don’t cover those issues in the mainstream.” (Journalist)

“I’m all for the integration of characters and issues into mainstream drama but I would love someone to produce another gay drama like Queer as Folk because it had a huge impact, it was a fantastic piece of writing and a fantastic piece of television, really, really entertaining. I can’t remember anything since then – the girls have Lip Service but nothing for gay men.” (LGF)

“It’s good to have things targeted specifically at gay community as long as it’s integrated as well. There’s only a risk of ghettoising if that’s all that’s available – if they say well because we’ve got that we don’t have to have lesbians in any other programme or talk about issues.” (Galop)

5. Range of diversity within the portrayal of lesbian, gay and bisexual people

First and foremost the overall amount of LGB representation is felt by the LGB expert participants to be insufficient. Against this backdrop, they believe it is difficult to achieve adequate diversity as part of LGB portrayal and any additional representation is welcomed. However, the current portrayal across all genres and platforms is perceived to be skewed to younger, white, able-bodied individuals. Broadening the diversity within portrayal is felt to have the potential to introduce elements which can enhance the appeal for audiences by adding new dimensions of a character or storyline.

“The Heather Pearce thing [Lip Service] was interesting but was very white; clearly not my generation but it stirred a lot of interest and there was a positive response to that. I would have liked to have seen a more diverse group of characters as they were all able-bodied and only one black character.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“The BBC falls down here – it’s almost as if the BBC sees gay as an issue in itself, separate to other things. Age-wise it’s alright though I don’t see elderly gay people. It is missing a trick – there are the first generation of LGBT older people as a recognisable group of people and the BBC isn’t bothering to get their story. I want to hear elderly LGBT people talking about the Second World War or the beginning of the gay rights movement. The BBC should step in, not only because it’s the public service broadcaster but because they do for other issues.” (Journalist)

“It would be great to see a documentary on BBC Two or Four about men or women who come out in their 50s and how they deal with that – especially in the backdrop of an ageing population – those issues will come up. We do need to look at older gay people’s lives more.” (Journalist)

“There is a total absence of black gay experience on the BBC unless it’s in a negative or problematic fashion.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

“We did an exercise when I was in radio drama where we looked at the last year’s output and looked at how many black or Asian people or disabled people were commissioned or employed – a very sobering exercise and helped people get a sense of perspective. Targets on the other hand do not add to the substantive content of the programme – you can’t just put a lesbian or black face on for the sake of it – it would stifle the creativity and be detrimental.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

“I don’t think there is enough representation to be able to comment on the range of age. I have noticed more diversity in characters in last couple of years but I think that if you can name the programmes you’ve seen then that shows there aren’t enough.” (Galop)

“Lesbians over the age of 40 are pretty much absent from every area as (I believe) there is still the tendency to include lesbians as fodder for straight male viewers rather than lesbian viewers, to make them look a certain way, ie straight, girly, femme, rather than strong, assertive, butch. With so few representations of lesbians at all, it’s not unsurprising that there are few black or disabled lesbians” (Equity)

In addition to considering the wider protected characteristics such as age, ethnicity or disability, the representation of the separate groups – lesbian, gay or bisexual – is felt to be imbalanced and encompass a narrow range of portrayals.

5a. Lesbian women

Across fictional genres in particular, lesbian women are felt by the group to be relatively invisible compared to the level of coverage of gay men. However, it was acknowledged that lesbian women are represented in factual programming by a number of high-profile presenters who can offer positive role models for young gay women. Opportunities for these presenters to subtly reference their sexual orientation are welcomed by the LGB experts, but without detracting from the role they are carrying out.

"Within fictional world representations of lesbians is lacking." (Journalist)

"Lip Service is written by a lesbian/bisexual woman. This makes a huge difference. However, the episodes were directed by men and the majority of lesbian characters were played by heterosexual actors and this clearly impacts on the quality and integrity of the representation. Some of it was laughable. However, lesbians are grateful for any kind of representation. It should be noted that having Heather Peace in the cast was very important for the lesbian community as there are so few out actresses available to the community." (Equity)

"Being a lesbian in actuality, as a presenter, doesn't mean that these presenters talk about being lesbian or experiencing life as lesbian, in terms of their mainstream work. It's there, because they are lesbian, but they're more acceptable to mainstream audiences if they don't talk about it." (Equity)

5b. Gay men

Of the three groups (gay men, lesbian women and bisexual people), gay men are perceived by the LGB expert participants to be represented more, especially within fictional programming. However, the range of portrayal of gay men is felt to be too narrow, relying too heavily on outdated stereotypes.

"There seems to be a slight emphasis more on gay men and the BBC should be leading the way." (Journalist)

"Gay men seem to be so much better represented [than lesbians], although I'd say they get slotted into a camp niche and the diversity of their representation is consequently restricted." (Equity)

"Quite often gay men are portrayed as asexual, they camp it up but they don't kiss." (Schools Out / The Classroom)

"Gay male representation is improving, although camp gay men are still the norm, especially in comedy scenarios." (Equity)

5c. Bisexual people

This group of LGB experts feel there is insufficient coverage of bisexual people across any programming genre or platform. Programme-makers are asked to seek to understand bisexual people more in order to offer more informed and authentic representations.

"Of the small amount of bisexual characters on television the overwhelming majority are women because there's something titillating about a bisexual woman to a male audience in a way that there is not about a bisexual man." (Journalist)

"When they cover bisexuality they have to be careful not to just show a man being turned by a woman but that sexuality is on a continuum. There is a fluidity in both our gender presentation

and our sexual orientation which is not effectively talked about or explored in drama in a way that is not polarising people into unpleasantness.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“As a gay man I was uneasy when I heard about the Corrie storyline because it reinforces the notion that ‘you just have to meet the right woman’.” (Journalist)

6. Impact of the 2010 research

Although there is general acknowledgement by the LGB expert participants that it was good for the BBC to conduct and publish the findings of the study in 2010, there are some concerns that the findings and the intentions of the research and consultation may not have not been effectively communicated or shared with the creative community, particularly independent producers.

“The BBC needed to do it but I’m not convinced that it has perpetrated through to the programme-makers. There are things that programme-makers need to be cognisant of to take responsibility for who we are and how we communicate.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“I’m aware that senior managers are aware of the research I’m less aware of how producers and programme-makers are aware of it as well as the independent producers – how do you influence them and make sure they are holding the values the BBC would like to have represented? How do you measure the impact on the individual programme-maker? Where are they held to account to make sure they have considered it?” (Stonewall)

“There is now a level of awareness about portrayal particularly and a little more awareness around recruitment and talent but it hasn’t really changed the breadth and diversity of the experience of watching.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

Recommendations: overall advice to the BBC

The overriding piece of advice offered to the BBC by the nine LGB experts who were interviewed is to be bolder and more creative and in how it represents LGB people across the range of genres and platforms at its disposal.

The BBC is believed to need to ensure it understands fully why improving media portrayal of LGB people is necessary and the role it can play in educating wider society and validating LGB people.

“The BBC needs to think how it works with writers and producers and presenters in a way that is not hand-cuffing them but inspiring them. Be more adventurous and be diverse. Take cognisance of the fact that your job is to educate and entertain.” (Schools Out / The Classroom)

“The BBC needs to encourage those who commission as well as those who make the programmes and making sure that the findings of the previous research and this follow-up are widely-disseminated so that commissioners understand but also so that there is some serious thought given to how better equip programme-makers to consider these issues.” (Stonewall)

“Not to be complacent – always push forward and be challenging, constantly being vigilant, constantly questioning the portrayals that are there. You don’t want a token gay in every show though in continuing dramas you do need that because they are watched by such a vast audience – much more powerful vehicle for presenting a truthful picture of Britain.” (Journalist)

“It makes for more interesting television to see a rich tapestry of human life. I’ve never experienced racism but that’s not to say I’m not interested in a drama where it is a feature. Everyone has their own kind of angst or worry or concern which can be articulated through all sorts of different ways.” (Journalist)

“The BBC has to be braver, the BBC has to think more aggressively about this – there is a status quo issue within the BBC where sometimes the status quo can be very restricting to the creative process. Rather than saying we want more lesbian and gay people on screen, it should say we want a greater range of interesting stories as part of creative programming.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

“The definition of creativity is not just someone who is a good writer or a good actor or a good producer it’s about the range of talent across the diverse spectrum; you can only get the most creative talent if you have the biggest talent pool. There needs to be constant awareness and not just ‘let’s do this for six months and then go back to normal’.” (Theatre Director, Writer and Filmmaker)

“I was reading the conclusions [of the original report] and waiting for the bit that would say ‘And having heard all of these views our decision is..’ and it didn’t, it didn’t conclude with either ‘these people are so offended we’re not going to do this or we’ve heard this but we believe that the overall social reasons for doing are important and therefore it’s something we will continue to do. It wasn’t there and that’s what I feel is missing – an actual stand against.” (Galop)

About Solitaire Consulting Ltd

Clare Luke, the founder of Solitaire Consulting Ltd, is a multi-skilled research expert with experience in using a wide variety of methodologies across a broad range of media, diversity and policy-related issues for both clients and agencies.

Experience

- Collaborated with NatCen on the BBC's large scale qualitative research of the portrayal of age across the media: advised on overall approach and led on both the initial desk research and the expert interviews, incorporating the findings into the final report. (http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/diversity/pdf/serving_all_ages01022012.pdf#zo)
- Co-ordinated an extensive public consultation and engagement process for the BFI to inform their five-year strategy. Synthesised and analysed the responses and presented the findings to the BFI board. Consultation findings have been integrated into and reported as part of the final strategy. (<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-film-forever-2012-17.pdf>)
- Identified and reported on key themes from data from Ofcom's survey of communication users and prepared and published a segmentation report. (<http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/2012/11/which-type-of-communicator-are-you/>)

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