

Race, Gender & Sexuality in Production Studies

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Little academic work examines the relationship between sexual politics and the daily operations of the television industry. In response, my research attempts to do just that; I am drawn to questions such as: how do we productively engage with the deep-seated belief that diverse representations of sexual minorities on television lead to social and political change? More broadly, I ask, what is the role of the television industry in creating and appropriating cultural systems of knowledge about LGBT sexuality and sexual politics? As we reckon with the wholesale liberalization of the domestic and global media markets, how might we talk about television's relationship to sexuality?

Based on in person or phone interviews with TV producers, network executives, market researchers, LGBT media advocates, political consultants, and public relations experts, I explore a continuum of political activity within television. While critical of the institutions they work in, I grant agency to industry workers because if we are to understand the inner workings of the establishment we need to talk to those who work in it and learn what their principles, strategies, beliefs, and experiences are. For example, one of the most notable themes to emerge from my industry interviews was how much work remains strategically kept out of public view, even out of the view of corporate leaders. What I have described as "under the radar activism" proves to be progressive and in the service of marginalized LGBT communities. It is also work that in other ways meets the profit-based demands of business. Instead of conceiving of above-the-line workers as only extensions of institutional interests, I view them as paradoxical figures: network executives are both activists (trying to increase LGBT media visibility) and businesspeople (concerned with 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.

What Tim Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic term critical media industry studies offers a "helicopter" level view of the industry and its power structures. I draw on a similar model, but envision it less as the view afforded by a helicopter and more the view from a parachute that actually touches the ground, albeit for short periods of time and in relatively random places. The way my interviews occurred – through references and connections – meant that I was not necessarily able to "land" exactly where I wanted or that I could stay on the "ground" for as long I would have liked.

To extend the metaphor, I visualize my approach as looking *up* from my view on the ground. I therefore find the anthropological tradition of "studying up" useful because of the ways it examines individuals and institutions in positions of power precisely because of the cultural influence they wield. In different disciplines, this method has also been described as "mid-level" research and "studying sideways." In each case, though, agency lies in the experiences and interactions of industry workers, exploring the surprisingly elaborate ways television industry workers are involved in creating knowledge about sexual minorities. "Studying up" is based on

democratic principles; for citizens to actively participate in a democracy, they must be informed of how institutions operate.

By “studying up” I discovered surprising configurations of activism, advocacy, and capitalism. In the case of openly gay and lesbian industry workers, many in “above-the-line” jobs have been able to navigate and operate within the corporate media industry space in explicitly political ways, accruing agency through the patient building of relationships, coming out, and taking their own personal risks. Through this strategic maneuvering, industry workers create opportunities for LGBT political change by taking advantage of and exploiting resources that are available to them at higher levels of power.

We can learn a great deal about LGBT television and politics from grounded research that emphasizes relations of power at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels. This is also a type of grounded research that bears in mind the impact of broad regulatory structures, corporate operations, and ideological underpinnings among LGBT TV workers especially those who in some capacity consider themselves or work explicitly as activists. These are activists who are not free from industrial constraints or profit motives but who nonetheless have the capacity and often the desire to work effectively and powerfully within the system. Understanding how, under different conditions and for different individuals, this activism takes very different shapes, allows us to see the production of a more heterogeneous and less homogenous television culture. It is a space that perhaps offers opportunities for intervention in ways we do not often attribute to this commercial industry.