Audience Generations: Millennials, "Becomers," and Beyond
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In the spring of 2016, a series of deaths among female LGBTQ characters made waves in the social media sphere. The death of lesbian character Lexa on Th e 100 became the focal point of attention, leading to a campaign entitled "LGBT Fans Deserve Better" and the Lexa Pledge , both designed to hold creators accountable for reinforcing the " Bury Your Gays " trope. These events offer an opportunity to think through the following interconnected issues: the shifting expectations among millennial audiences regarding diversity in TV representation, the conflicts arising out of showrunners and audiences sharing the same social media playing fields, and the incorporation of identity politics into branding strategies.

To those of us who have been around the TV block a few times, Lexa's death was upsetting, but not surprising. My mind connected it immediately to the death of T ara on Buffy almost two decades ago (and of course the "dead queer" trope stretches farther back into Hollywood's history). Watching the reactions of young adult fans to Lexa's death prompts the question of whether a generational shift has occurred among those invested in LGBTQ representations. If you have grown up in the age of Glee, do you expect not only LGBTQ characters and stories as a matter of course, but also expect them to be happy? If so, Lexa's death may cut deeper than if you have reconciled yourself to expecting LGBTQ stories to end in tragedy. Similarly, we can see Lexa's death as something that brings audience generations together. Consider this tweet by Autostraddle editor Heather Hogan: " there are so few resonant lesbian storylines t hat my 37-year-old experience is the same as an 18-year-old's experience because they've gone back and watched everything that mattered."

The impact of Lexa's death was ex acerbated by The 100 writers' (false) reassurances regarding Lexa's fate. Venturing into f andom space, The 100 writer Shawna Benson reassured fans last fall that Lexa would be safe and her relationship with protagonist Clarke would develop, despite already known production circumstances that cut short Lexa/ Alycia Debnam-Carey's time on the show. Fans felt (justifiably) betrayed. During the fallout of Lexa's death, showrunner Jason Rothenberg interacted with fans and admitted that he had never heard of the "Bury Your Gays" trope. Eventually, Rothenberg posted a letter to fans, stating that "I am very sorry for not recognizing this as fully as I should have. Knowing everything I know now, Lexa's death would have played out differently."

As Myles McNutt has observed , the closer contact between fans and showrunners can render non-normative viewpoints more visible, but showrunners seem unprepared for or unaware of the consequences that come with encouraging fans. As creators invest in cultivating relationships with audiences that draw on fandom practices like shipping, the intent of increasing brand loyalty can backfire, as this spring's conflicts have shown. While the industry is eager to encourage social media engagement, and fans often happily go along, both production and fandom are complex communities that do not always understand one another. Audience generations play a role here, too: much like younger fans expect diverse representations, they have also grown up with access to producers and creators via social media, and don't shy away from making their voices heard, especially around issues of diversity (which can lead to the impression that fans are becoming "

entitled ”).

Going beyond social media, the media industry has begun to integrate cultural diversity into its branding strategies. As I have discussed elsewhere , channels like Freeform anchor their brand in diversity. A similar strategy developed after Lexa’s death, as companies like Clorox and Target as well as TV writers took the Lexa pledge, which states, among other things “that the Bury Your Gays trope is harmful to the greater LGBTQ community, especially to queer youth” and “[w]e promise never to bait or mislead fans via social media.” We can connect this to the generational shift regarding LGBTQ representation among young audiences: brands adjust their discourse based on what their consumers want (as long as it fits into their corporate goals). In other words, as young audiences take LGBTQ representations on TV as a given, some brands that advertise on TV adjust their positions on diversity to match consumer expectations.

Where does this leave us as media scholars? My approach falls between skepticism and cautious optimism: while the branded version of diversity is limited, it is a start, and I hope that younger audience generations will continue to push and protest to move media beyond their currently limited and too-infrequent portrayals of meaningful diversity.