Invisibility, Homophobia and Heterosexism: Lesbians, Gays and the Media

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The emergence of gay and lesbian studies as a field of scholarship commanding increasing attention (D'Emilio, 1992; Plummer, 1992; Heller, 1990) is a notable development, given that until recently openness about one's gay or lesbian sexual orientation commonly was cause for dismissal or denial of tenure. Gay and lesbian studies focus on "the cultural production, dissemination and vicissitudes of sexual meanings" (Abele, Barale, and Halperin, 1993, p. xvi). Informed by the struggle for gay and lesbian rights and resistance to homophobia and heterosexism, this field has an oppositional design—both straddling and challenging the oft-tightly drawn distinction between politics and scholarship. It is inherently an interdisciplinary field, with much of the work drawing on gay and lesbian history, sociology, and literary studies. Within communication and media studies, gay and lesbian scholarship has not been as visible as in some other fields, but growth has been steady. This article reviews the relationships between gays, lesbians and the media, and identifies the important issues that scholars in this field have raised, with a particular focus on film, television, news media, pornography, and audience reception and market impact.1

The basic question driving much of this literature is: How do media images and meanings create definitions of homosexuality, homosexuals, and the homosexual community, and what are the consequences?2 Implicit here is the awareness of the role of media in the formation of gay and lesbian identity, both at the individual level and at the level of community. In contrast to women, minority, and most other marginalized groups, gays and lesbians as youths or young adults have little or no help in understanding or defining themselves as gay or lesbian. Sexual orientation being fixed at a very early age, if not at birth, a gay or lesbian youth develops, or "comes out," in an atmosphere offering little or no information or role models (see Savin-Williams, 1990; Herdt, 1989). Although the negative stigma attached to homosexuality is reinforced both through interpersonal contact and the media, persons who are "coming out" search both the interpersonal and media environment for clues to understand their feelings and sense of difference. Thus, media images of homosexuality and the gay and lesbian community are often important sources of information. Whether the dominant media discourse defines homosexuality as a perversion, sickness or crime or defines it as

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a normal expression of human sexuality has a significant impact on how individual gay males or lesbians view themselves and their relationships to society.

Media are also significant to the unique development of the gay and lesbian community itself. Since 1969, when the Stonewall Riots in New York marked the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian movement, the gay and lesbian community has taken an increasingly proactive stance in defining its own character and nature (D’Emilio, 1983; Adam, 1987). More so than ethnic or racial communities that have long and established senses of communal identity, the gay and lesbian community is a rare social phenomenon: a community that is consciously involved in creating its own identity and purpose. Pioneering religious communities also do this. But rather than a unique religious vision, the gay and lesbian community organizes itself around a vision of sexuality and gender that is at odds with the dominant, heterosexual society. It is uniquely the product of a modern urban technological society which allows individuals to separate themselves from the power of family, religion, and community of birth and define new expressions of identity, sexuality, and sociality. An important goal of the gay and lesbian movement is achieving an affirmative visibility in the mainstream media while at the same time sustaining community media, such as gay and lesbian newspapers, magazines, and video.

FILM

The complex and long relationship between homosexuality and film goes back to the 1895 Edison short The Gay Brothers; the film of two men dancing shocked audiences with its subversion of conventional male behavior (Maglin, 1989; Russo, 1987). Of all the areas of lesbian/gay/media studies, the study of film has the most extensive and well developed literature, most of it in the context of cinema studies, with its focus on image. Book-length accounts by Russo (1987) and Tyler (1972) give the broad outline of changing film portrayals of homosexuals.

In the silent era and early years of talkies, explicit portrayals of homosexuals were not uncommon. Homoerotic images and behavior were used as comic devices (cross dressing, role reversals, or depictions of a “sissy man” such as the 1923 Stan Laurel silent The Soilers), as a form of erotic titillation (as in Marlene Dietrich’s kissing a woman in Morocco, 1930) or to depict deviance, perversion, and decadence (as in Cecil B. DeMille’s The Sign of the Cross, 1928). With the strengthening of the Production Code in 1934 and the injection of Catholic-based morality into Hollywood movie content, however, portrayals of explicit homosexual or homoerotic material, either positive or negative, were highly censored, although highly sanitized comic episodes of cross dressing (for example, Cary Grant in Bringing Up Baby, 1938) or effeminate men (for example, Franklin Pangborn) were allowed. Screenplays based on successful novels or plays with explicit homosexual content were rewritten with all references to homosexuality removed.

Thus, films made under the regime of the Production Code (from the mid 1930s to the early 1960s) rarely referred to lesbian/gay characters or themes. Although lesbians and gays were very much involved in all aspects of the Hollywood film production process, most remained closeted (see McGilligan, 1991; Mayne, 1991a). In studying films of this era, lesbian and gay film scholars focus on lesbian/gay subtexts often present in major Hollywood works. Generally the subtext was negative, as in Alfred Hitchcock’s use of implied homosexuality to heighten the evilness and alienness of his film villains (Russo, 1987, pp. 92–94; Hepworth, 1982; Miller, 1991; see also White, 1991). Yet occasionally gay and lesbian sensibility was presented affirmatively. As Babuscio (1977) and Dyer (1992) note, the gay sense of “camping,” or the ironic but playful exaggeration and subversion
of expected sex role behavior, was a strong subtext in many comic Hollywood films, including some Busby Berkeley musicals. Mayne (1991a), reexamining the work of Dorothy Aszner, the only female director working for a major studio in the 1930s and 1940s, notes that the female characters in the films of this closeted director denote an ironic inflection of heterosexual norms, suggesting a resistance to heterosexual expectations.

Certain major film stars of this period emerged as icons of identity for lesbian/gay film viewers (Clayton, 1988). Utilizing surveys of lesbians from the 1920s and 1930s, Weiss (1991) analyzes the probable impact on lesbian film viewers of the film images of Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Katharine Hepburn as "masculine" women. She concludes, "lesbian spectators have been able to appropriate cinematic moments which seem to offer resistance to the dominant patriarchal ideology, and to use these points of resistance...to, in some measure, define and empower themselves." Dyer (1986) notes the almost "intuitive" identification between Judy Garland and gay men of the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that her image projected "elements of difference within ordinariness, androgyny and camp" to which gay men quickly related. (See also Staiger, 1992, pp. 154–177).

As the power of the Production Code waned in the 1950s and 1960s, more explicit portrayals of homosexuality reappeared; yet homosexuality or homosexuals were rarely presented in a positive or even neutral light (Dyer, 1983). Following the line of feminist film criticism, which argues that in Hollywood films "women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to [heterosexual] male desire" (Kaplan, 1983, p. 7), homosexuality was equally silenced. Hollywood films occasionally treated lesbian sexual desire as an erotic complement to heterosexual male desire; but more often, it was a subversive threat, allowing women to be sexual outside the structure of male sexual dominance (Becker, Citron, Lesage and Rich, 1985; Williams, 1986; Pally, 1986). Gay male desire was subjected to heterosexual males' fear of their own sexual objectification and to the terror of the threatening possibilities of their own sexual desire. Homosexuality was portrayed at best as unhappiness, sickness, or marginality, and at worst perversion and an evil to be destroyed.  

In the post-Stonewall era of the 1970s and early 1980s, gay and lesbian political activists began to pressure Hollywood to end its consistently negative portrayals of gays and lesbians (Guthman, 1980; Montgomery, 1981, 1989). While homophobic portrayals of gays and lesbians continued as a staple of Hollywood fare (as in American Gigolo, Norman Is That You, Partners, and Cruising and more recently JFK, The Silence of Lambs, Basic Instinct, and, by omission, The Color Purple and Fried Green Tomatoes), the growing visibility of the nation's lesbian and gay community, and its demand to be taken seriously, spawned several movies with openly gay and lesbian characters. Making Love, Victor/Victoria, La Cage aux Folles, Consenting Adults, Kiss of the Spider Woman, An Early Frost, Lianna, and Personal Best were hailed at the time by both mainstream and some gay critics for their sympathetic portrayals of homosexuality (La Valley, 1982; Nelson, 1985). Yet, in retrospect, such films trivialized serious gay and lesbian concerns. They revealed no more about lesbian/gay reality and experience than the 1967 film Guess Who's Coming to Dinner did about the black experience (Picano, 1981; see also Richards, 1982; Sikov, 1982; DiCaprio, 1984; Watney, 1982; Williams, 1986; Weiss, 1986; Straayer, 1984). Even when gays and lesbians were presented in a non-problematic manner, the issues of gay/lesbian culture, community, identity, history, and oppression and discrimination are minimized or totally obscured, much in the same manner of "color blind" representations in the popular media of racial minorities (Weiss, 1986).
An international tradition of lesbian and gay film-making going back to Weimar Germany is also important. Included here is the work of noted filmmakers such as Jean Cocteau, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Jack Smith, Barbara Hammer, Andy Warhol, Andrea Weiss, Robert Epstein, Issac Julien, Todd Haynes, Derek Jarman, Pratibha Parmar, Tom Kalin, Gregg Araki, and Marlon Riggs (Dyer, 1990; Waugh, 1988; Russo, 1987, pp 247–323; Merck, 1986; see also Council on Social Work Education, 1984). Whether documentary, underground, experimental, or art films, these productions explored the complexity and richness of gay and lesbian life, focusing on gay and lesbian identity, sexual expression and desire, relationships, issues of race and class, and politics and culture. Many of them are showcased in gay and lesbian film festivals (Russo, 1984; Gever, 1991); a few of them, such as Times of Harvey Milk, Buddies, Tongues Untied, Paris is Burning, Edward II, The Living End, Poison, and Swoon, have achieved wider audiences. In response to the AIDS crisis, gay and lesbian health activists turned to the film and video media to create educational safe sex material and in the process have begun to address questions about the relationship between identity, sexuality and the cinematic medium (Juhasz, 1992; Patton, 1991a, 1991b).

Generally, mainstream Hollywood studios have avoided the subject of AIDS (Russo, 1989); perhaps that was for the best, because the independent films Parting Glances, Buddies (Rist, 1986), and Longtime Companion (Garfield, 1990) that deal with AIDS speak with a gay voice and deal more realistically and affirmatively with the impact of AIDS on the lives of gay men.

A body of lesbian and gay film criticism is also developing, as seen in the work of Russo, Dyer, Weiss, and others. One also sees a distinct line of lesbian and gay or queer film theory that, while drawing upon feminist theorizing, moves beyond the heterosexism implicit in such theory (see Doty, 1993; Bad Object Choices, 1991; Rich, 1992; Wyatt, 1993; De Lauretis, 1991, 1993; Mayne, 1991b; White, 1991; Dyer, 1991; Straayer, 1990).

The obstacles to the making and production of gay and lesbian affirmative films are enormous. In spite of all its surface tolerance and liberalism and the large presence of gays and lesbians, Hollywood film-making is traditionally very homophobic; for an actor, director, or other creative figure to be publicly identified as gay or lesbian often kills one’s career (Kilday, 1986; Hachem, 1987; Ryan and Whittington, 1991; Signorile, 1993). Yet, again reflecting the greater politicization of the gay and lesbian community in the 1990s, a number of gay and lesbian creative figures and movie executives have come out (Ehrenstein, 1992; Sadownik, 1991). How this plays out in Hollywood is difficult to assess, because in spite of the large number of gay and lesbian actors, few are willing to be open. It is ironic that at a time when mainstream Hollywood is beginning to approach a serious presentation of gay and lesbian reality, as reflected in the filming of Randy Shilts’ biography of Harvey Milk and of his account of the AIDS epidemic, none of the lead actors depicting gay and lesbian characters are themselves gays or lesbians, at least not openly. While it would be highly questionable today in Hollywood for a white actor to portray a black or other minority character, no one seems to question the appropriateness of having heterosexuals play homosexual characters.

**TELEVISION**

Not surprisingly, given television’s intimate relationship with Hollywood film-making and its need to program for a mass audience, TV treatment of lesbians and gays roughly parallels that of Hollywood film. Negative stereotypical presentations of homosexuality were inserted into television from its earliest days. Milton Berle, as a regular part of his popular variety show of the late 1940s and
In the 1950s, did a drag queen routine that he originally conceived as "a gay throw-away with a little lisp" (quoted in Hoy, 1981, p. 22). Tennessee Ernie Ford and Red Skelton also did drag queen routines and a 1957 live television production of Charlie's Aunt had Art Carney playing the masculine female lead. (Laermer, 1985). As a 1950s television equivalent of Franklin Pangborn, Frank Nelson regularly appeared on The Jack Benny Show and on I Love Lucy as the character Freddie Filmore, portraying everything from dress salesmen to a waiter, but always responding with a wild-eyed "Yee-e-es." In addition, many pointed gay innuendoes could be found in the relationship between Jack Benny and several male characters on his show, particularly his black houseman Rochester (Doty, 1993, pp. 63–79). Wally Cox, as the star of Mister Peepers, had his shy, unmanly character openly rhapsodize about bigger, stronger men. Occasionally television anthologies such as Playhouse 90, Naked City, and Alfred Hitchcock Presents cast a homosexual male character as a villain. In the early 1960s, a not-so-subtle gay subtext was used for comic effect. For example, the longing of Chatsworth Osborne Jr. III for Dobie Gillis provided a comic counterpoint to Dobie’s own search for the perfect woman. Phyllis Diller’s various uncles (portrayed by gay actors Richard Deacon, Billy DeWolfe, and Paul Lynde) in the The Pruitts of Southampton were television reincarnations of Hollywood’s “sissy man” portrayals.

In the late 1960s television began presenting a more explicit and serious, but still negative version of homosexuality. A 1967 hour-long report for CBS News on homosexuality was noteworthy for its compilation of all the negative stereotypes of gay men (it omitted mention of lesbians). Mike Wallace, in narrating the documentary, concluded, “The average homosexual, if there be such, is promiscuous. He’s not interested in, nor capable of a lasting relationship like that of a heterosexual marriage” (Laermer, 1985). Entertainment was equally based in stereotypy. A 1968 episode of N.Y.P.D. involved the police search for a blackmailer of gay men. In spite of the recognition of the victimization that gay men experience, homosexuality was viewed as perverse. As one bystander says of a gay man in the episode who commits suicide, “If he was homosexual, it’s easy to see why he would kill himself” (Russo, 1987, p. 224).

By the 1970s, with the gay and lesbian community achieving greater visibility in major urban areas, network television risked programming for greater social relevance. Thus, in 1972 ABC aired That Certain Summer, which had Hal Holbrook as a gay man, separated from his wife and son, living with his lover, and facing the task of telling his son about his homosexuality. The program did not show the relationship between the two men as intimate or loving; Holbrook’s character said he would be heterosexual if he could. But the program was noteworthy for its lack of stereotypical or judgmental presentation of gay male behavior (Russo, 1987, p. 222; Gould and Davenport, 1973; Gerson, 1977). Even an episode of All in the Family called into question a number of gay stereotypes by depicting a gay character as a masculine ex-football player (Hoy, 1981, p. 24).

The change in portrayal of gays and lesbians did not occur simply because the networks had a change of heart. The increasingly politicized gay and lesbian community of the 1970s began to organize to demand changes in network portrayals. In 1974 an episode of Marcus Welby showed a homosexual as a child molester and homosexuality as a treatable disease (even though the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual of sickness a year earlier). Alerted to the airing of the episode, The National Gay Task Force (NGTF, later the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force) instituted a letter-writing campaign protesting the negative portrayal of homosexuality. This caused four advertisers to withdraw.
from the program, and several affiliates threatened not to air the program. Although ABC aired the program, it inserted a voice-over introduction distinguishing homosexuals from child molesters (Laermer, 1985; Hoy, 1981, pp. 25–26; New York Times, September 28, 1974, p. 59). Shortly after, NBC withdrew an episode of Police Woman that dealt with lesbianism in a “sensationalistic and insensitive manner” and returned it to Columbia Pictures for editing (New York Times, October 11, 1974, p. 75).

After the Marcus Welby incident, the NGTF set up a media project to work for the change in portrayals of gays and lesbians in television. The NGTF created a nationwide network of local gay/lesbian media organizations to protest to local affiliates. As a result, it was able to work with the networks in minimizing negative portrayals of homosexuals and homosexuality. Responding to such efforts the National Association of Broadcasters Code Authority agreed to interpret the NAB Code to guarantee that gays and lesbians would be fairly treated. Although this agreement was not binding, the networks began consulting with gay groups before running a program portraying gays or lesbians.

As a result of efforts of the NGTF and other gay and lesbian media groups, gay and lesbian characters began to be introduced in prime time television, showing up in programs such as Barney Miller, Medical Center, Maude, Rhoda, and in docu-dramas such as Sergeant Matlovich vs. The U.S. Air Force. While they usually appeared in episodes that revolved around homosexuality, in programs such as The Bob Newhart Show and Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman, they were regular if minor characters (Hoy, 1981, pp. 22–30). Such presentations were greeted as signs of greater social acceptance. However, such portrayals merely provided a heterosexual view of homosexuality. Dramatic programming portrayed homosexuality as a problem disrupting heterosexuals’ lives and expectations. Comedy programming presented homosexual characters who, aside from a few stereotypical behaviors (e.g. a sharper wit, a little more effeminate or “sensitive” manner), were heterosexual in every other sense. Furthermore, most television portrayals focused on gay males; lesbians were scarcely visible (Moritz, 1989; Hantzis and Lehr, in press).

By the 1980s positive presentations of homosexuals in television programming were no longer exceptional. However, the emergence of AIDS and its implicit link with the gay male community, and development of conservative political-religious movements changed the context for homosexual representation on television. AIDS brought to the forefront the issue of gay male sexual behavior, an aspect of homosexuality that previous televised presentations of gays tended to obscure as too controversial. The Moral Majority, the Coalition for Better Television, and the American Family Association began to organize boycotts against sponsors of television programs that showed homosexuals in what they viewed as a positive light. Furthermore, competition from cable and video made the networks all the more concerned about alienating any significant portion of the audience (Moritz, 1989, 1992).

Trying to be responsive both to the demands of the gay and lesbian community and the religious right, and to the need to generate audiences, the networks have slowly moved ahead (Moritz, 1989, in press; Hantzis and Lehr, in press). Furthermore, non-network popular talk shows such as Donahue and The Oprah Winfrey Show have allowed gays and lesbians to speak out on their own behalf. In addition, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR),9 cable networks such as HBO, and public access cable have provided more exposure to gay and lesbian issues and concerns.

Yet, overall, in mainstream network television, which reaches the largest national audience and defines national pro-
gramming norms, the presentation of lesbians and gays is problematic. Furthermore, gays and lesbians rarely are presented as members of a larger homosexual community; gays and lesbians are secondary or occasional characters who exist primarily in a heterosexual environment. A regular network program with gay or lesbian main characters is far in the future. Also, daytime soap opera is very resistant to gay or lesbian characters and themes (Gross, in press).

Sexual innuendoes and sexual activity between unmarried heterosexual television couples are now routine and programs like Seinfeld deal with topics like masturbation. But overt display or discussion of physical and sexual behavior between homosexual characters is generally off limits; television homosexuals are de-sexed and without desire (Hantzis and Lehr, in press). Although gay and lesbian teenagers are the most isolated and under-served group with regards to the difficulties and issues they confront in dealing with their sexual orientation, adolescent homosexuality is particularly taboo on television (Kielwasser and Wolf, 1992). Overall, mainstream network television does not present gays and lesbians in the context of their own identity, desire, community, culture, history or concerns, but rather as woven into the dominant heterosexual metanarrative (Leo, 1989; Gross, in press).

Many accounts of homosexuality were constructed as morality tales, with the homosexual the negative reference point in a discourse that reaffirmed society’s sense of normality (Pearce, 1973). Homosexuals were easily signified as the “alien other.”

Starting in the late 1960s, lesbian and gay political activists began confronting repressive laws, police harassment, and discrimination. Gay and lesbian demands for equal protection began to be viewed as legitimate news, although the legitimacy of their demands still was viewed as questionable. National magazines such as Time (October, 1969) and Look (December, 1969) examined homosexuality in a less condemnatory way. A chronology of New York Times news story abstracts from 1969 to 1975 (New York Times, 1975) reveals that the majority of entries on homosexuality dealt with the issues of expanding rights and gaining greater social acceptance for gays and lesbians.

One focus of lesbian and gay activism was the media itself, the goal being to end homophobic portrayals of homosexuality and get greater affirmative visibility. In October 1969 when a San Francisco Examiner article referred to gay men as “semi-males” and “drag-darlings,” gays organized a peaceful protest demonstration at the newspaper offices that turned violent (Rutledge, 1992, p. 9). In December, 1973, a gay activist succeeded in disrupting a live broadcast of CBS Evening News, holding up a sign “Gays Protest CBS Prejudice” before the cameras (New York Times, 1975, [December 12, 1973], p. 94). Such continued protest persuaded the media to move beyond the negative stereotypes of the 1950s and 1960s (Kreidler, 1983).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s news coverage of the lesbian and gay community varied depending on the nature of the market and management (Pierson, 1982). The San Francisco Chronicle, viewing the politically active Castro district as another one of San Francisco’s diverse communities, hired an openly gay reporter and ran detailed stories on les-
bian and gay topics. *The New York Times*, however, serving a city with an equally large gay and lesbian population, refused to use the word "gay" in any of its writing, preferring instead the more clinical term "homosexual"; it continued to limit coverage of the lesbian and gay community. The major news networks, deferring to their national audiences, rarely touched the topic; when they did, as in the 1980 CBS Reports documentary "Gay Power, Gay Politics" on gay and lesbian political activism, they treated the gay and lesbian community as an alien presence with emphasis on sado-masochism, public sex and drag queens (National News Council, 1981). While some major news organizations (Time, CBS, NBC, and Knight Ridder) adopted policies in the mid-1970s prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, such policies did little to change the oppressive atmosphere for gay and lesbian news personnel. Furthermore, most news media professionals were uncomfortable and unfamiliar with homosexuality. One major problem was that the topic did not fit into any easily defined newsframe. Most news media were unwilling to give gays and lesbians the status and news frame of a civil rights movement or an ethnic or racial community. One common approach was to define homosexuality as a "lifestyle," an ambiguous frame that lacked political or socially relevant content and implied that sexual orientation was a choice.

Meanwhile, a distinct gay and lesbian media emerged in the 1970s enabling the gay and lesbian community to speak to their own needs and concerns. These outlets sustained and nourished a growing sense of homosexual identity and community. The homophile newsletters published during the 1920s and 1930s and again the national magazines like *One* and *Ladder* during the 1950s were small and reflected the philosophy of the homophile movement (see D'Emilio, 1983). Studies of the lesbian and gay press (Corzine, 1977; Winter, 1975) closely connect the rising gay/lesbian po-

litical activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s to the tremendous growth of the gay press. By 1976 there were 262 gay or lesbian periodicals in the U.S. (Corzine, 1977, p. 66) with a heavy concentration in the Northeast and the West; many of them were local newspapers or guides.

In the late 1970s these periodicals shifted from a focus on politics to a greater focus on entertainment and other topics. This reflected both the changing nature of the community and the greater reliance, particularly of the local gay press, on the advertising support of the growing number of gay bars and dance clubs. At first, their major audience was gay males, who constituted the major market for advertisers; however, in the late 1980s a number of publications aimed primarily at lesbians emerged; national publications like *The Advocate* began to broaden their scope to include greater coverage of the lesbian community. By 1987 there were 1,924 gay and lesbian magazines, newspapers and newsletters (Malinowsky, 1987).

In the 1980s the AIDS epidemic forced the mainstream media to confront the existence of a large and growing gay and lesbian community in this country. Analysis shows that mainstream media initially viewed AIDS as a disease reflecting gay men's "promiscuous and abnormal" sexual behavior and lifestyle. Even the gay press, fearful of any constraints on freedom of sexual expression, was at first reluctant to highlight the growing epidemic (Shilts, 1987). But in 1985, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* suggested that AIDS could be transmitted by "routine household contact." At that point, mainstream press began to take AIDS seriously and to report regularly on the epidemic.

Much of the early information issued by the scientific community was confusing, not coherently explaining the medical aspects of the disease. Still, the disease's association with homosexuals created a major problem for mainstream media. Studies of media coverage of the AIDS epidemic (Fain, 1983; Schwartz,

AIDS coverage produced an emergent definition of gay men in general. As a group they have always constituted a potential threat, insofar as non-normative sexual behavior has constituted a moral risk to society. However, that potential was now realized as a personal threat; moral outrage was individualized in the fear of personal contagion. Gay men now become the locus of that fear (1986a, p. 154).

A common media frame was to distinguish between the “innocent” victims of AIDS, who did not acquire the virus from gay sexual contact, and, implicitly, the “guilty” victims of AIDS, who did. Triechler’s (1987, 1992) analyses of mediated medical reporting of AIDS reveals how many of the stigmatizing myths about gay men were reproduced through supposedly non-biased, objective accounts of the medical aspects of the disease and how the continued view of AIDS as a “gay man’s disease” obscured the threat to women. Kinsella (1989) highlights the homophobic slant of much of the media coverage and details many of the problems and issues individual journalists and editors faced in covering the epidemic.13

Yet, if the 1980s coverage and depiction of the AIDS epidemic betrays strong evidence of homophobia and reluctance to deal with gay and lesbian life, AIDS did force the media to regard the gay and lesbian community more seriously and in a different light. Often mainstream media turned to the gay press for accurate and up-to-date information about the epidemic. As the enormity and significance of the AIDS epidemic became apparent during the 1980s, the gay community became the major battle site, to which reporters flocked to get a first-hand account of the epidemic. In the process reporters and their readers were exposed to a view of gay and lesbian life very different from the 1970s hedonistic stereotypes of gay life. Accounts of the fundraising, the patient care efforts, the political lobbying efforts for more AIDS funding, and AIDS education campaigns began to characterize the gay community far more than the “exotica” of gay and lesbian life. Particularly in large urban communities with gay and lesbian communities that were mobilized against AIDS, editors and other media professionals began to learn more about the gay and lesbian community and thereby became sensitized to the homophobic slant of much of their previous accounts. Professional news journals such as ASNE Bulletin, presestime, and the Columbia Journalism Review began to carry articles commenting on some of the more obvious examples of homophobic news coverage of AIDS, adding advice on how to avoid such bias (see Boodman, 1989; Rjordan, 1988).

Among other things, the epidemic dramatically affected media organizations’ attitudes about gay and lesbian topics and openly gay and lesbian employees. Media institutions had traditionally been recognized as homophobic (Pierson, 1982); until the 1980s an openly gay or lesbian journalist, editor, broadcaster, actor, film producer was rare. Yet, as more and more contact was made with the gay and lesbian community through AIDS reporting, and as many previously closeted gay media professionals contracted AIDS, it was evident that the gay and lesbian community did not exist only “out there,” like some foreign, exotic culture, but also had a very active, if closeted, presence in media organizations. Moreover, the political activism of groups such as Act Up (Beer, 1999) served to further educate media reporters how homophobia was woven into the government’s and media’s response to the AIDS crisis.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors issued a 1990 report noting the problems of gay and lesbian journalists
because of unchallenged homophobia and pointing out the failings of news coverage of the gay and lesbian community. The report attempted to educate reporters and newsmen editors about the concerns of gay and lesbian news professionals and the need for better reporting on gay and lesbian topics. As a result, many papers tried thereafter to provide better coverage of the gay and lesbian community. Signorile (1992) details the changes in the New York Times policy on gay and lesbian topics. The number of stories about the gay and lesbian community in The New York Times increased 65 percent from 1990 to 1991 and the paper began using the word "gay" instead of "homosexual." Currently, two major Miami television stations run periodic news features about the medical treatment of two self-identified gay news personnel, one who is HIV-positive and the other who has AIDS. The debate over the banning of homosexuals from military service was initially framed as a conflict between the homosexual community, represented as a highly organized interest group, and the Pentagon (Voland, 1991b). However, since the Clinton Administration has sought to lift the ban, the issue has been framed more as one of civil rights, with frequent reference to President's Truman's 1948 desegregation of the military.14

Thus, news coverage of the gay and lesbian community has changed significantly, particularly in large cities with large, visible, and active gay and lesbian populations. Gays and lesbians are often framed as a community, along with blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities within these areas; often the press conducts focus group interviews with representative gays and lesbians in order to improve coverage.

Yet the extent or benefit of these changes should not be exaggerated. In smaller and more conservative communities, the change in local press coverage is less marked; gay and lesbian press personnel still have difficulty in being open (Salomon, 1991; Palomo, 1992). The controversy over "outing" (Signorile, 1993; Gross, 1993) shows that the press still treats homosexuality as a very private and problematic issue, reflecting a homophobic assumption that being labelled gay or lesbian represents a derogatory, and possibly libelous comment. (Van Gelder, 1990; Mills, 1990; Gup, 1988). Even when the mainstream press attempts to represent the gay and lesbian community positively, it tends to "heterosexize" gays and lesbians by obscuring the distinctive aspects of gay and lesbian identity, behavior and culture the larger heterosexual society finds problematic, while highlighting more "comfortable" aspects.15 Again, the recent debate over gays and lesbians in the military shows how homosexuality has been recast as a civil rights issue. But this is accompanied by a new distinction between conduct and orientation, between being homosexual and acting homosexual. There is, thus, a refusal to frame gay and lesbian sexual desire as natural: Just as "good" blacks in the 1960s civil rights movement were not supposed to be angry or militant, "good" gay or lesbian soldiers are not supposed to be sexual. Furthermore, while many news organizations editorially oppose the ban, they are often quick to point out they do not "endorse the gay lifestyle." Such a homophobic rhetorical strategy implies that sexual orientation is a choice and that the gay and lesbian community exists outside the mainstream society, where only heterosexuality is normal.

**PORNOGRAPHY**

Ever since the 1970 report by the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, sexually explicit media representations16 have become controversial. Attempts to control and suppress pornography have come not only from traditional religious and conservative opponents, who perceive it as immoral, but also from feminists who see it as perpetuating the subjugation of
women. These debates rarely distinguish heterosexual pornography from homosexual pornography; the two are lumped together on the basis of their sexual explicitness and representation of sexual desire and the treating of people as sexual objects. Moreover, both homosexual and heterosexual pornography, whether in terms of its vast volume of output or in terms of the controversy it engenders, is organized around male sexual desire, and its production controlled by males.

However, gay male pornography, like gay male sexual desire, occupies a very different space in the sexual system of modern patriarchal society than heterosexual male pornography. Many of the feminist critiques of pornography are, in effect, critiques of a heterosexual model which defines the female as a sexual object existing solely for the pleasure and domination of men. In gay male pornography, while the construction of masculinity draws from a heterosexual masculinity, the object of sexual desire and pleasure is a man; here women are absent.

Homoerotic representation has as long a history in the history of Western art and literature as the homoerotic (Saslow, 1986; Grant, 1975). Waugh (1983; 1984), drawing upon the extensive film and photography collection of the Kinsey Institute, shows that in modern film and photography the production of homosexual pornography occurred simultaneously with the development of heterosexual pornography. Apparently most of the films were made for exhibition in brothels, photographs, for private consumption. Either way, demand was strong enough to insure continued production. Even the stag films of the 1920s-1940s, made for clandestine viewing by an audience of presumably heterosexual males, commonly included explicit homosexual activity. And while films tended to stigmatize this behavior for the covert or unconscious gay spectator, such scenes provided a sense of legitimation and visual pleasure (Waugh, 1992a). Waugh also notes that physical culture and photographic publications dating from the turn of the century had strong homoerotic overtones and helped develop a style of male erotic display that still continues (Waugh, 1992b). With the liberalization of the obscenity laws by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1950s and 1960s, gay male pornography began to emerge openly, first in magazines (De Stefano, 1990; Waugh, 1986) and later in film (Waugh, 1987). As Siebenand (1975) notes, it was in cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, with their large populations of gay males, that such films first began to be made and exhibited in public theaters. With the advent of video, exhibition became reprivatized. Since statistics and information about pornography tend to lump together homosexual and heterosexual pornography, drawing a precise picture of the current state of the gay male pornography industry is difficult.

While some gay males agree with feminist critics that gay and heterosexual pornography are equally destructive for their reliance on subordination and objectification (Stoltenberg, 1990), the dominant gay male opinion, at least that published (Bronsik, 1984; Dyer, 1989, 1992; Tucker, 1990; Clark, 1990; Waugh, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1992a) defends the positive aspects of gay pornography since it does not explicitly reproduce the gender relations predominant in a patriarchal heterosexual society. As Waugh (1985) notes, passive sexual behavior is often made desirable; often the active and passive sexual partners exchange roles in the same movie. Moreover, these films typically include scenes of non-genital physical affection such as caressing, kissing, and hugging. Waugh argues that depicting pleasurable male-to-male sexual activity subverts the patriarchal order "by challenging masculinist values, providing a protected space for nonconformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, encouraging many sex-positive values and declaring the dignity of gay people" (1985, p. 34).
Furthermore, gay pornography helps define and affirm gay male sexual desire and identity. While heterosexual male desire is expressed and depicted in many aspects of the media, explicit homosexual desire is typically invisible. For gay men coming out, homosexual pornography can also be a powerful source of information about sexual pleasure. A survey of the audience of a gay pornographic theater in Los Angeles found that most said they viewed gay films to become sexually aroused (Siebenand, 1975). More than half also said that the films helped them to become more accepting of their gayness; for viewers under 30, the films helped them find their identity, improve their sexual techniques, and bolster social-emotional relationships. Perhaps gay male pornography should not bear such a heavy burden in the development of identity and expression of sexual desire. But, given the unwillingness of the mainstream media, along with schools, churches and most families to provide accurate and affirmative information and role models, it is one of the few sources of information and images to which gay men can turn.

In this era of AIDS, pornography has assumed a major role in the reevaluation by gay men of their sexual behavior (Patton, 1991a, 1991b). In the mid 1980s, as a result of protest by many gay AIDS organizations about the depiction of unsafe sexual practices in many pornographic films, the major gay male pornography studios began incorporating safe sex practices in their videos. Organizations such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Network produced videos demonstrating that safe sex could be pleasurable. At a time when many gay men are either using safe sex or becoming celibate, gay male pornography can become not only a major outlet of sexual fulfillment, but also a re-affirmation of gay male sexuality.

Some negative aspects also are present. Gay male pornography can reproduce the heterosexual male discourse of masculinity; often, issues of power and control are embedded in the films. Hyperactive, genital sex is emphasized and the narrative of gay male pornography is generally organized around and ends with male orgasm (Dyer, 1992). While more films are beginning to include dialogue and to develop relationships between participants in more complex ways, the overwhelming depiction is still one of personal relations mediated entirely by genital sexual action.

In addition, gay male pornography, as with heterosexual pornography, tends to reproduce racial, ethnic and class stereotypes. The typical lead character is a white male of Northern European background. When characters from other racial or ethnic groups are introduced, they generally fit the stereotypical fantasies of white, middle class, European males. For example, Asian males are typically represented as passive sexual partners, submitting to white European males (Fung, 1991).

Like heterosexual pornography, male sexual desire is often idealized (Kinnick, 1989). Popular gay pornography is peopled with young and extremely physically attractive, overly well-endowed males. In both male heterosexual and homosexual pornographic magazines, the sexual object, whether man or woman, generally possesses atypical physical and sexual attributes; in contrast, female heterosexual pornography tends to represent men in a more normal manner, suggesting that the extreme idealization of sexual attractiveness is a central aspect of male sexual desire, both gay and heterosexual (Thomas, 1986).

Finally, while gay pornography subverts the modern patriarchal order by showing male-to-male sexual desire, such pornography often reflects a “gay ghetto” mentality (Waugh, 1985). Generally, gay pornography, both in its content and its privatized mode of consumption, does not challenge the larger heterosexist order. While it may help shape the expression of sexual desire and affirm one’s identity as a gay man, it
paints a symbolic world wholly without heterosexuals. The issues a heterosexist society presents to gays and lesbians, such as discrimination, repression and violence, are neither visible nor confronted.

There is relatively little lesbian pornography, most of it fiction; however, a small but growing number of videos is being developed by lesbian-owned production companies (Dorenkamp, 1990; Smythe, 1990). While lesbian pornography is not as extensive as gay male pornography, it represents as much, if not more of, a challenge to heterosexist, patriarchal notions of sexuality as gay male pornography, since it represents women giving and receiving sexual pleasure in ways not dependent on men. Within the feminist debate on pornography, lesbian pornography is highly controversial (Dunn, 1990; Richardson, 1992) with some feminists arguing that its sexual objectification renders it no different than male pornography. Even though it shows women giving women pleasure, lesbian pornography “colludes with, rather than challenging dominant discourses of sex which are fundamentally oppressive to women” (Richardson, 1992, p. 198).

Other lesbian feminists, however, dispute this feminist critique. Dorenkamp (1990) argues that lesbian pornography constructs an image of female sexuality that is apart from and not controlled by male sexual hierarchy; bringing such images out in the open, where they can present a public challenge and alternative, is important. Henderson (1992) examines two lesbian publications, the periodical On Our Backs and Pat Califia’s collection of fiction Macho Sluts, which move far beyond the kind of “vanilla sex” commonly found in female erotica and present a very wide range of lesbian sexual portrayals, practices and fantasies, featuring women in both active and passive, dominant and submissive roles.

In contrast to male pornography, these portrayals are free of coercion; the women characters consent to and control their sexual activities. Henderson argues that such accounts, by transgressing against the common notions of female sexuality (lesbian sexuality itself is transgressive), demystify sexual desire, separating guilt from pleasure, and transforming consciousness. In sum, in a society that is fiercely heterosexist and sexually phobic, and that denies gays and lesbians the knowledge of one of the most essential components of their identity, gay and lesbian pornography challenges this repressive system, opening sexuality up to desire, creativity and diversity.

**IMPACTS/AUDIENCES/ MARKETS**

The literature on the impact of media characterizations of homosexuality and gay and lesbian life, both on the general audience and specifically on gays and lesbians, is small but growing. While one can assume that negative media portrayals of homosexuality have helped maintain homophobic attitudes throughout this century, such a relationship has not received detailed empirical examination. However, Gross (1984), drawing on data generated by the Cultural Indicators Project, provides indications of some of the impact of negative media portrayals. He notes that increased television viewing is related to stronger negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians, even among viewers who describe themselves as liberal. Thus, heavy viewers of television, regardless of their political beliefs, tend to give the “television answer” when asked about homosexuality, showing the “mainstreaming effect” of the media.

Comparable research is not available for the 1980s and 1990s that factors in both the emergence of the AIDS crisis and the decrease of blatantly homophobic representations in the media. Yet public opinion polls suggest that while Americans do not support job discrimination against homosexuals (with the exception of jobs related to children), acceptance of gays and lesbians has not yet
increased appreciably (Moore, 1992). According to a 1993 New York Times poll, over half of the respondents said that homosexual relations between consenting adults are immoral and should be illegal; an overwhelming majority would not want their children to watch a television program with gay or lesbian characters (Schmalz, 1993). Many Americans apparently still believe that homosexuals recruit youths.

The impact of mainstream media portrayals of homosexuality on gays and lesbians themselves has likewise received limited attention. One important issue is the role of mainstream media portrayals in the development of gay and lesbian identity. Research on the relation between media and gender identity development, which assumes heterosexuality in all of the child and adolescent subjects, has been inconclusive (Durkin, 1985) and presumably family and peer group interaction and other forms of interpersonal socialization play a far more important role than do media. Yet the situation of a child with a homosexual orientation does not fit neatly into the generalizations about media and child development. Obviously, empirical research about childhood and adolescent homosexuality is impossible given society's homophobic unwillingness to acknowledge sexual orientation as fixed at an early age. Numerous anecdotal and biographical accounts by gays and lesbians note a awareness at an early age of being "different," an awareness they often did not understand and about which they received very little support or information from their family or peer group. The lack of affirmative information about homosexuality is particularly powerful during adolescence, when sexuality becomes openly acknowledged. Kielwasser and Wolf note that while gay and lesbian adults are appearing more frequently on television, adolescent characters on TV shows are consistently heterosexual. "The symbolic annihilation of gay and lesbian youth exhibited by network television in the extreme, and by most mass media in general, can contribute to a dysfunctional isolation that is supported by the mutually reinforcing invisibility of homosexual adolescents on the television screen and in the real world" (Kielwasser and Wolf, 1992, p. 350).

For gay and lesbian adults, the media are not much more helpful. O'Neil (1984), examining the role of mass media in the identity formation of gay males, found that media messages, particularly printed media such as books, magazines, and pornography, were important in the coming out process; both younger and older men actively sought out messages for information about gay life and identity. Most of the respondents found that messages about homosexuality were negative, which, in the early stages of their coming out, influenced their self-perceptions. However, as the respondents grew more certain of their sexuality and constructed a more affirmative life-style with other gay friends, lovers and institutions, they grew more selective in terms of what they might "use" from media portrayals of gays.

Cohen (1991) compared the differences in readings between a gay male audience and a heterosexual audience for Harvey Fierstein's teleplay Tidy Endings, that examines how a gay man's death from AIDS affected his ex-wife and his gay lover. Gay viewers read the text as a story about gay relationships, while heterosexual males saw it primarily as a play about AIDS. Furthermore, the gay male viewers were far more aware of the homophobic and heterosexist assumptions in many of the ex-wife's statements, while the heterosexual viewers were far less critical. Hemphill (1990) examined the response of black gays and lesbians to those In Living Color's "Men on . . ." comedy skits resolving on the camp portrayal of two black gay men. Several individuals expressed great pleasure in their realistic and funny depiction, while at the same time voicing concern and even anger that these skits will be misread by heterosexual white view-
ers, who do not understand the source and meaning of gay camp. Straayer's (1984) survey of lesbian responses to the film Personal Best uncovers a similarly complex reading, with the viewers both receiving pleasure from scenes depicting the emotional/physical relationship between the two main female characters, while being very aware of the heterosexism of the film and the fact that heterosexual males might enjoy the film in a more sexist way. This suggests that gay and lesbian viewers are able to read the media from the position of homosexuals, but with a simultaneous awareness of the likely dominant heterosexist interpretation.

To cope with the overwhelming heterosexist and homophobic bias of media content, homosexuals, not surprisingly, develop complex interpretative strategies different from heterosexual viewers. As Gross (1989) notes, the two primary strategies are resistance (or not participating in the media process) and subversion (or the appropriation of mainstream media content to give it a gay/lesbian affirmative meaning). Within the context of a cultural studies/reception theory approach, the interaction between gay and lesbian audiences and media texts has been studied by a number of scholars. As noted in the section on film, Weiss' (1991) study of the lesbian reading in the 1930s of the movies of Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn, Ellsworth's study of lesbian readings of Personal Best, along with Staiger's (1992, pp. 154–177) analysis of gay men's devotion to Judy Garland in the 1950s and 1960s are sophisticated attempts to understand how gays and lesbians have appropriated mainstream media texts to their own ends, even to the point, as with Personal Best, of rearranging the narrative. Henderson (1993) examines the complex appropriation by both gays and lesbians of Madonna. She notes the problematic nature of this process, citing Madonna's conscious appropriation of gay and lesbian discourse, behavior, and style to create a mega-star image with an appeal far beyond the lesbian and gay community. Such studies exhibit the wide range of efforts of gays and lesbians to use mainstream media products to articulate a sense of their own identity, struggles, and pleasures.

Another way that gays and lesbians have emerged as an explicit audience for mainstream media products is as a clearly defined upscale market for nationally advertised products. This market first was apparent in the late 1960s and 1970s as an audience for gay periodicals, most of whose advertising was for gay-owned services and establishments (Corzine, 1977). National advertising agencies in the early 1970s dismissed the gay market as problematic, given the lack of market data and the possible backlash against the advertisers appearing in gay publications (Battera, 1972, 1975). However, during the 1970s, advertisers and media producers became more aware of the gay and lesbian audience; by the early 1980s marketers and advertisers were beginning to take the homosexual market seriously (Business Week, 1979; Pendleton, 1980). In order to reach the gay male market, some advertisers used a bi-modal approach, constructing ads with homosexual subtexts very obvious to gay men, but unnoticed by heterosexual males (Merrett, 1988; Holland, 1977; Stabiner, 1982; De Stefano, 1985). In the late 1980s this approach became more pronounced, with the gay staff on national fashion magazines becoming more open; some mainstream fashion magazines ran feature stories directed at gay males (Yarbrough, 1992).

In the early 1980s gays and lesbians emerged as a statistical community, when data was collected on gay and lesbian consumers. Assembled by private marketing firms such as Overlooked Opinions, a company devoted primarily to developing the gay market, this data was highly skewed towards upper income, urban, educated white gay males between the ages of 25 and 50; it underrepresented women, minorities, lower in-
come groups and those gays not living in urban areas of the East and West Coasts (Cronin, 1993). To national advertisers, the gay community consisted of wealthy white males; it represented an important niche market for liquor, clothes, travel, tobacco, automobile and, reflecting the AIDS crisis, health services and products. Lesbians were not regarded as an important market, but in the 1980s, advertising directed at women showed certain lesbian subtexts (Clark, 1993).

To target this market, national advertisers began to look again at publishing in the national gay media. Prior to 1990 The Advocate magazine was the only national gay publication. Although national advertisers such as Absolut Vodka placed advertisements there as early as 1982, most national advertisers initially were reluctant to associate their products with a gay publication, primarily because The Advocate was considered too sexually explicit, given its photos, its classified section, and its advertisements for pornographic videos and sexual erotica. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in order to attract national advertisers the magazine was revamped. Classifieds and sexually explicit material was put into separate publications, while The Advocate itself focused on news, cultural and feature stories that would not be problematic for advertisers. Its success encouraged the appearance of other publications with a similar format, such as Genre (1991), Out (1992), 10 Percent (1992) and QW (1992). With the exception of Genre, a specifically gay male magazine, these magazines ostensibly appeal to a national gay and lesbian community. But it is the upscale gay male market that attracts advertisers. Deneuve, a glossy "lifestyle" magazine founded in 1991 for the lesbian community, has not attracted many national advertisers (Levin, 1993; Rodkin, 1990; Miller, 1992; Johnson, 1993; Carmody, 1992). Several local gay publications in metropolitan markets with a large gay and lesbian population also revamped their format in ways similar to The Advocate in order to attract national, regional, and local non-gay advertisers.

One advertising industry commentator happily notes, "The mainstream advertisers are legitimizing gay media" (Levin, 1993). But such "legitimation" is double-edged. Minority media have historically afforded marginalized groups the ability "to speak with their own voice." But as the economic logic of national advertising begins to drive publications aimed at the lesbian and gay community, the only voice being heard is that of an upper income, urban, desexed white male. While the gay male viewpoint has always dominated gay and lesbian community discourse, such domination is now doubly strengthened by dependence on advertising revenue. Even within the gay community, this disenfranchises men of color, lower income, the very young, the very old, those not living in the gay metropolitan meccas, along with the many different gay sexual sub-communities. The heterosexism permeating national media and advertising now affects the media of the gay and lesbian community, as magazines such as The Advocate remove material that might offend national advertisers or non-gay/lesbian readers.

Thus, national media appropriated artifacts and elements of style from the gay male culture (e.g. the Calvin Klein/Markey Mark campaign) and recontextualized them for a heterosexual audience at the same they continued to appeal to a gay audience. Meanwhile, major gay media, in order to achieve national status, adopted the style and heterosexist assumptions of the mainstream media. Magazines like The Advocate are acquiring the authority to define and speak for the community. Other publications still attempt to speak to the diversity within the gay and lesbian community, but these are often small, not well-distributed and poorly funded. The racial, class, and gender divisions that were so long obscured, due to the repression of all homosexuals, are now visible.
CONCLUSION

Much has changed in the relations between mass media and gays and lesbians in the last 25 years. Prior to 1969, when not invisible in the media, portrayals of lesbians and gays were blatantly homophobic. Today gays and lesbians are no longer in the media closet, either as images or, increasingly, as media producers; and the images themselves reflect greater tolerance. This was not brought about by more enlightened social attitudes. Rather, the activism of gays and lesbians in confronting and challenging negative stereotypes played a decisive role in the change.

Yet if the media today are no longer saturated with homophobic portrayals (although these do remain), the situation has moved to a higher level of subordination and repression. Homophobia has been replaced by heterosexism as the major component in the mainstream media's discourse about homosexuality and homosexuals. Heterosexism, defined as "a diverse set of social practices in an array of social arenas in which the homo/hetero binary distinction is at work whereby heterosexuality is privileged" (Plummer, 1992, p. 19), denies an acknowledgment of gays and lesbians in their own distinct reality and diversity. It subsumes difference within a larger heterosexual narrative about identity, personal relations, sexuality, and society. Aspects of gay and lesbian identity, sexuality and community that are not compatible or that too directly challenge the heterosexual regime are excluded. 20 This heterosexism is endemic in all aspects of society and its media, including the media of the gay and lesbian community. 21

The present task of gay and lesbian media scholars is to understand the role of heterosexism in all aspects of the media, from production to reception. The production process, both in terms of its technical, creative, and administrative aspects and in terms of the larger political economic context, must be examined to identify the process by which decisions are made to privilege heterosexist texts over texts that give voice to gays and lesbians. As Gross (in press) points out, while gays and lesbians play a very large part in the process of media production, an account of their role in the television and film industry (and news media) has yet to be written. The analysis of media texts must continue with an awareness that, while the blatant negative stereotypes of the past no longer consistently occupy daily media content, the more subtle images of heterosexually-defined homosexuality are equally damaging to affirmative gay and lesbian identity and politics. Gay and lesbian media themselves must be examined, not only to provide an account of their history and their role in the development of a gay and lesbian consciousness and community, but also to understand how, as these media enter the "mainstream," the economic and political pressure to conform to heterosexist assumptions about sexuality and the media increases, and the creative vitality and diversity of the community decreases.

Finally, the reception studies on gays and lesbians, though few, provide a start in understanding how gays and lesbians can live and create in a society that denies them their humanity. No doubt, some have been able to develop complex interpretive strategies for mainstream media texts that affirm their identity while blunting the heterosexist bias of the media. But, as Gross (in press) points out, we know very little empirically about the oppositional readings of gays and lesbians, much less the readings given by the heterosexual audience to gay or lesbian images. Commitment to any one methodological perspective is far less important than developing a body of knowledge that would have relevance in real life and that would strengthen an affirmative sense of identity and community in all its diversity and creativity.
NOTES

1Unfortunately this review does not deal with the important role of books, including works of literature (for example, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, 1927), non-fiction (for example, D.W. Cory, *The Homosexual in America*, 1951) and pulp novels in the development of lesbian and gay consciousness, particularly prior to 1969. Also omitted in this review is a discussion of comic books (Fraser, 1984; Mangels, 1988a, 1988b, 1989) and music (Hadleigh, 1991). For an overview of the development of American gay culture in the media and art, see Bronski (1984). For a general bibliography, see Volland (1991b).

2The social definition of homosexuality reveals the tensions inherent in social definitions of heterosexuality; see Fuss, (1991).

3For a study of sex-role reversals and cross dressing in Hollywood film from Chaplin to the present, see Bell-Meterieu (1985); see also Garber (1992).

4This paralleled a similar development in Germany, where the production of films with explicit lesbian/gay content such as *Anders als die Anderen (Different from the Others)* and *Mädchen in Uniform* was stopped by the coming to power of the Nazis in 1933; see Russo (1987, pp. 19–24); also see Dyer (1990, pp. 7–46).

5For example, Richard Brooks' 1946 novel *The Brick Foxhole* involving the murder of a gay man by a soldier obsessed with his own masculinity, was an early exploration of homophobia. In the 1947 movie version (*Crossfire*) the dead gay man was recast as Jewish and the subject of the film became anti-semitism; see Russo (1987, pp. 68–69).

6According to Russo (1986), of the 32 films with major homosexual characters from 1961 through 1976, 13 feature homosexuals who commit suicide, 18 have the homosexual character murdered by another character; the remaining homosexual character, a gay male, is castrated.

7However, AIDS did not avoid Hollywood. Meyer (1991) analyzes the shifting image of Rock Hudson, the 1950s symbol of American heterosexual masculinity. He was transformed in the 1980s into the image of the closeted homosexual, dead from AIDS, who betrayed America's fantasies of a safe and uncomplicated male sexuality.

8However, not all attention given to gays and lesbians was positive. The 1980 CBS documentary *Gay Pride, Gay Power* gave an alarmist depiction of the growing political presence of gays and lesbians, drawing upon many of the old negative stereotypes. A number of gay and lesbian groups, along with the Board of Supervisors and the Human Rights Commission of the city of San Francisco lodged a formal complaint with the National News Council, an independent professional committee composed of representatives from major news media and professional groups, and charged that CBS engaged in biased, inaccurate, and unfair reporting practices. After examining the documentary, the News Council upheld a number of the major complaints (National News Council, 1981).

9PBS and NPR, however, are not immune to homophobia, particularly when these networks, the recipients of United States government funding, come under attack from the religious right; see Benz, (1993); also see Browning, (1993, pp. 19–20).

10On the other hand, the ease which one can give programs such as *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* or *Laverne and Shirley* a queer/homosexual reading demonstrates that the politics of the gay subtext is still very much a part of current television; see Doty (1993).

11The one incident of explicit homosexual behavior, an episode of *Thirtysomething* that showed two gay men in bed talking, prompted several advertisers to withdraw (Guthman, 1990). The show was aired but was not part of the summer rerun series.

12Fearful of the charge of "recruiting,” gay and lesbian advocacy groups, including media groups, are generally reluctant to take up the cause of gay and lesbian youth.

13In the mid 1980s, as the press began to deal with the threat of AIDS to the heterosexual community, many media accounts tried to "de-gay" AIDS and make it a more respectable
disease. Part of this was expressed in the "innocent victims of AIDS" rhetoric. Other strategies were also used. In South Florida, for example, in the extensive press promotion of a large multi-city AIDS fundraiser that included Hollywood celebrities and $5,000 a plate dinners, the local press only once referred to gays, and that was about the "public antipathy" toward AIDS due to its close association with homosexuals; this in spite of the fact that South Florida has a very large gay population heavily affected by the epidemic, that gay men and largely staffed the AIDS organizations that put on the fundraiser, and that many of the contributors to this event were gay men themselves. The invisibility of gays and their efforts to confront AIDS was deliberate, as the local editors felt that any linking of the AIDS fundraiser to gays would lessen its chance of success with the "mainstream" community (Fejes. 1988).

Also, the first convention of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalist Association in the summer 1992 attracted 300 journalists, by December 1992 the association had 12 chapters and 600 members (Rosenkrantz, 1992; Robles, 1993). The association is currently conducting a survey on gays and lesbian in broadcasting.

Some gays and lesbians, however, view this as the correct strategy to win acceptance by the larger heterosexual society. Kirk and Madsen (1989) argue for a large, well-coordinated media campaign depicting gays and lesbians as nice, normal people and downplaying their sexual distinctiveness and diversity.

Dyer (1992, pp. 121-135) notes the implicit social class dimension between the words "pornography" (lower class) and "erotica" (upper class), with the latter used to describe explicit representations of sexual arousal but not climax. Following Dyer, we use "pornography" to refer to material whose primary aim is sexual arousal in the spectator.

Gay male magazines remain a major popular pornographic medium that includes both visual essays and fiction. These magazines, because of lower production costs, are more able to appeal to diverse segments within the gay male community and thus display a greater variety of physical types and sexual activity. With that exception, the comments made about gay pornographic videos apply generally to magazines: the two forms have considerable overlap.

An interesting example of how viewers re-interpret media texts is the writing of "Slash" fiction, based on popular television programs like Star Trek, Starbys and Hutch, Miami Vice, and others and written by fans of these shows. Typically Slash fiction revolves around a plot in which the strong friendship of two major male characters (for example, Captain Kirk and Spock) passes over to sexual desire and consummation. While such stories make explicit the homoerotic subtext often present in popular television, this genre cannot be defined as a gay male phenomenon. Most of the writers and readers of Slash literature are heterosexual, bisexual and lesbian women and it involves less an affirmation of gay male identity (many of the fictional male characters deny they are gay) and more an exploration by females of the boundaries of male desire. In some sense it roughly parallels the scenes of lesbian sex found in heterosexual male pornography (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 185-222).

Also, the 1990 United States Census began to report, for the first time, on same-sex co-habitation, and national exit polls during the 1992 presidential election attempted to identify gay and lesbian voters.

The only example of a mainstream media product that we can point to which was not blatantly heterosexist was the CNN live coverage of the April 25, 1993, Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual March on Washington. The speeches and entertainment, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the gay and lesbian community and its issues, were not edited for content.

Also, as Kielwasser and Wolf (1992b) point out, the field of communication education and research is not immune. Rarely do empirical researchers or textbooks take note of the existence of gays and lesbians; if they do, they treat it as an "unnatural" category (Lowry and Towles, 1989). Even within Cultural Studies, where one would expect a greater degree of awareness, authors like John Fiske (1989, pp. 95-114) analyse Madonna’s videos as a heterosexual text. As no mention is made of gay or lesbian viewers in Fiske’s chapters (1987) on the construction of masculine and feminine television texts, sexual orientation presumably
is not an important factor in people's viewing the media. The gay male viewers of Dynasty, no doubt, would disagree (Guthman, 1986).

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