Goran Madžarević
Universitat Autònòma de Barcelona
Departament de Comunicació Audiovisual i Publicitat

AUDIOVISUAL REPRESENTATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY AS A CONSEQUENCE OF DOMINANT IDEOLOGY BASED ON HETERONORMATIVITY

Abstract

Given the fact that reception of homosexuality is deeply influenced by the representation of LGBTQI persons, the present papers explores sociological and cultural, foundations of audiovisual representation of gay people in audiovisual media. In this regard, we will tend now to explain how homosexuality is represented in the media and what the effects of such representation are. The study supports the idea that meaning of an event does not exist outside representation. An event gets its meaning through the way in which it is represented. On the other hand, the mass media actually participate in the creation of the meaning in a modern society.

Key words: homosexuality, media, representation, heteronormativity, ideology.

Defining the concept of representation

If we understand representation as a concept and modern phenomenon tightly associated with the power of dominant social classes, it is necessary to track this concept from its origins. Starting with Gramsci's (1977) considerations of ideology in view of media representation, some theorists of cultural studies (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2005; Lash, 2007; Simon, 2003; Proctor, 2004) bring the concept of ideology to the fore saying that the effect of ideology lies in the fact that dominant groups tend to maintain the existing situation. The dominance of the powerful over the weak, presents versions of social reality by which the process of domination is natural. In short, the natural system of values is the situation as it is, and should be. Also, according to Barker (2000), the ideology is a map of meaning that, while apparently is intended to be a universal truth (p. 27).

Therefore, the question is how to associate the dominant ideology and media representation of LGBTQI. Perhaps, we should take into consideration the fact that according to Kellner (2004), the dominant perceptions on gender identity as socially constructed categories are directly related to the media, because the process of presenting and constructing the identity represents the basis of the media itself and media ideology (p. 434). The representation as a concept is actually a set of different phenomena, combining in its approach various disciplines such as sociology, social theory, political economy, literary theory, media studies, cultural anthropology, and philosophy (Hall, 1980). According to Hall (1997), who was the first to give a whole new meaning to the concept of representation: "The essence of representation consists in building connections between the concepts and the signs, whose aim is to use language to say something meaningful about the world, or to present the world in a meaningful way to other people" (p. 15).

Furthermore, Briggs and Cobley (2005) remind us that it was previously thought that the mass media gave completely authentic representation of the reality (the concept of media objectivity) and that the result of such authenticity, especially through television broadcast, is the trust of the audience in the media. The audience really believes that representation is always a reflection of the reality, and such belief precisely rests on the delusion of reality.

The representation indicates an active process of selecting, broadcasting, structuring and shaping: not just to transmit the existing meaning, but also to make that the things get the meaning (Briggs & Cobley, 2005, p. 307). That is why it is impossible to have only one interpretation of some events from the reality. The meaning of an event

does not exist outside representation. An event gets its meaning through the way in which it is represented.

Thus, the meaning of an event actually can't exist before the process of representation is initiated. The reality does not exist as an ultimate category before and independently from the human activity of its denotation. Since such denotation occurs in communication, the mass media actually participate in the creation of the meaning.

What's more, it seems that the easiest way to control the media is by energy, given that the media have become an important instrument for hierarchical homogenization of the regime. The media are in line with the ruling ideology - they support it. Although they are defined as means of information, their function has evolved into re-interpretative, and their originally conceived enlightening character has been replaced by mechanisms of manipulation that maintain order and meet the requirements of the market.

A careful and selective use of media forms, structure of power, can also create desirable models of gender roles and identities. The media are like a drive for social technologies of gender that represent central places in which discursive negotiation on gender occur.

The possibility of representing many aspects of reality necessarily gives rise to the establishment of relations of power in the distribution of social powers. In that scope, Edgar & Sedgwick (2005) argue that subordinate groups actively resist and respond to political and economic domination. In their opinion, the subordinate groups need not to be seen merely as the passive fools of the dominant class and its ideology (p. 165).

Furthermore, Proctor (2004) believes that the traditional concept of a passive audience in which powerful media literally injects the contents is rejected, recognizing the possibility that the audience can decode every message in a different way than the author uploaded. As we can notice and conclude, the culture cannot be an ideologically pure space; there is a constant struggle over the meaning among different groups and discourses. The production of meaning and representation is not a closed system, and for a message to have some effect, it must first be meaningfully decoded by the audience. This means that the audience actively participates in the discursive process of meaning-making within the media content.

Audiovisual media representation of homosexuality

Recognizing the importance of the media, Calzo and Ward (2009), identify multiple factors contributing to process of representation. One of the most significant among all these factors are likely to be the media,

which adolescents commonly name as a prime source of sexual information (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Detenber, Ho, Neo, Malik & Cenite, 2013; Ward, 2003). It is also sustained that media representation may be especially powerful in this domain (Calzo & Ward, 2009), and may be a principal source of information for the 40% of young people who claim not to know a gay person personally (Gross, 2002).

Representation, as it has been suggested before, is not just how the media represent the world, but also what kind of identity, cultural values and social relations they establish, or what systems, realities they accept and reject. Apparently, one of the dominant perceptions of sexuality is deeply marked by *heteronormativity*. According to Herek (2007), „normative heterosexuality or heteronormativity lies at the heart of heterosexism, and is defined as the antagonism between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The term heteronormativity summarizes queer theory's evaluation and analysis of the cultural dichotomy that determines social relations entirely in terms of heterosexuality-homosexuality" (p. 16).

By watching television, children in their earlier days, face the dominant system of heteronormative values prescribed by the society where they grow up. At the same time, they meet first generalizations, stereotypes and prejudices.

Heteronormativity as a standard of representation

Heteronormativity as a standard according to Pharr (1988) is white, young, heterosexual male who has access to education, employment, health care, etc. It is important to note that the standard does not necessarily reflect a majority, at least not in figures, but it represents those who have the capacity to use power and to control the others (p. 53).

In addition, Halberstam (2005) affirms that contemporary television supports and consolidates heteronormativity in representation of gay characters following well-established patterns based on binary nature of sex gender and sexuality. Consequently, some studies (Baunach, 2011; Golom & Mohr, 2011; Levina, Valdo & Fitzgerald, 2000; Wright & Bae, 2013) strongly suggest that not only do the media reinforce views of dominant heterosexual classes toward certain minority vulnerable groups, but it certainly also empowers social heteronormativity established and framed by social institutions such as law, educational and religious structures, gender, or political orientation, (Detenber et al., 2013).

Heteronormativity as a standard unambiguously correlates with Herek's (1992) previous perception that "the media serve as an institutional bridge between cultural heterosexism and the psychological heterosexism of

an individual" (p. 56). In that sense, according to Lewis and Gosset (2008), education is one of the key factors responsible for the level of acceptance of LBTQI persons. For Smith (2011), educational level, level of economic development and religiousness are the three most important factors that explain much of the acceptance of gay people. Countries with the highest level of support commonly have high levels of general development (e.g., higher per capital incomes and advanced levels of education). Developing countries and more religious countries express less approval (p. 11).

As a support, Detenber et al., (2013), argues that younger people with a higher level of culture and education are more likely to have positive and encouraging attitudes toward homosexuality. They are more tolerant, since the process of education enables individuals to be exposed to various perceptions, which ultimately encourages individuals to adopt social tolerance as a model of their everyday life. Taking the heteronormativity as a fact, wide-ranging studies have been done illustrating the role of the media in representation of homosexuality (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Detenber, et al., 2013; Herek, 2007; Golom & Mohr, 2011; Levina, Valdo & Fitzgerald, 2000; Robert & Lichter, 1988; Soto-Sanfiel, Ibiti & Palencia, 2014).

Conclusion

Recognizing the influence that the media have on individuals, the representation of LGBTQI people in the media became decisive in understanding an individual's attitudes toward this minority group, Levina, et al., (2000) argue that gay people constitute certainly one of the most invisible groups in society.

Moreover, Dawson (2015) indicates that particularly during the Second World War, queer characters were commonly represented as anti-social, criminal or mentally sick. Hypothetically, this could be a consequence of the fact that homosexuality is commonly perceived as a constant threat to overall modern society, given that the media desire an environment in which every person is expected to be heterosexual.

When a homosexual couple is represented on a film or even more on television, they are frequently the subject of jokes and stereotype. According to Calzo and Ward (2009), the most common way "in which homosexuality is portrayed on television is through a gay male character that is very showy and colorful, sexually violent and funny mainly because they comprise all of the stereotypes that people have about homosexuality" (p. 26).

In few uncommon situations when the gay people are not portrayed as a general threat, their sexual intercourse is still never depicted explicitly as an act of socially acceptable love.

As Levina et al., (2000) note, while heterosexual couples are frequently shown openly making love, the gay characters are not allowed even to touch intimately each other. Another way that according to Kennedy (1994) homosexuality is represented on screen is through, soap operas, melodramas soft news and talk shows that typically convey a very inaccurate, if not sensationalized, representation of gay life to the heterosexual viewer.

Although these findings suggest that directed exposure to homosexual characters appears to affect viewers' attitudes, to date no studies have documented whether everyday media exposure is associated with attitudes toward homosexuality. Drawing from cultivation theory, it is expected that frequent, regular media consumption would lead viewers to cultivate beliefs about homosexuality that coincide with those portrayed in the media.

If negative stereotypes dominate in the media consumed, regular exposure could make people less accepting, leading them to accept those unfavorable portrayals (Gross, 2002). However, as media content concerning homosexuality becomes more positive and diverse, it is possible that such shifts may be associated with greater attitudes of acceptance towards homosexuality.

Shah et al., (2005) affirm that mediated exposure to positive representation of homosexuality can lead to better public dialogue on social issues. With greater openness, more information on homosexuality can be presented to the public. At the same time, a diversity of viewpoints that may be presented will result in greater openness about a previously taboo topic, and is likely to lead to positive changes in representation (Shah et al., 2005). If such an influence does exist, Kalinic (2014) indicates that "it is understandable that minority and special interest groups would turn to the media as a pathway to representation and attention" (p. 36).

Furthermore, Procter (2004) believes that the traditional concept of a passive audience in which powerful media literally injects the contents is rejected, recognizing the possibility that the audience can decode every message in a different way than the author uploaded. As we can notice and conclude, the culture cannot be an ideologically pure space; there is a constant struggle over the meaning among different groups and discourses. The production of meaning and representation is not a closed system, and for a message to have some effect, it must first be meaningfully decoded by

the audience. This means that the audience actively participates in the discursive process of meaning-making within the media content.

As a final and perhaps the vital question is the dilemma whether the exposure to the media effects and influences our attitudes toward homosexuality, and if they really do, what are the effects? The answer unfortunately is not always simple and affirmative in spite of the fact that media representation, thanks to the specificity of its forms, themes, approaches and capacities to build narrative fiction, by definition, is constantly reviewing and exceeding the limits of the reality.

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Goran Madžarević

AUDIOVIZUELNO PREDSTAVLJANJE HOMOSEKSUALNOSTI KAO POSLEDICE DOMINANTNE IDEOLOGIJE ZASNOVANOJ NA HETERONORMATIVNOSTI

Apstrakt

S obzirom na činjenicu da je recepcija homoseksualnosti duboko pod uticajem reprezentacije LGBTQI osoba, ovaj rad istražuje sociološke i kulturne osnove reprezentacije gej osoba u audiovizuelnim medijima. U tom smislu, rad daje kritičko objašnjenje na koji način je homoseksualnost predstavljena u medijima i kakvi su efekti takvog predstavljanja. Studija podržava ideju da značaj jednog događaja ne postoji izvan predstavljanja. Događaj dobija svoje značenje tek kroz način na koji je predstavljen. Sa druge strane, masovni mediji zapravo učestvuju u stvaranju tog istog značenja kroz proces celokupne reprezentacije gej osoba u savremenom društvu.

Ključne reči: homoseksualnost, mediji, reprezentacija, heteronormativnost, ideologija.