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**GLBTQ Representation on Children's Television: An Analysis of  
News Coverage and Cultural Conservatism**

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**GLBTQ Representation on Children's Television: An Analysis of  
News Coverage and Cultural Conservatism**

by

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# **GLBTQ Representation on Children's Television: An Analysis of News Coverage and Cultural Conservatism**

by

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The invisibility of GLBTQ characters on children's television stands in stark contrast to trends in adolescent and adult television over the past decade. A deep cultural ambivalence exists as to whether or not sexual identities are appropriate topics for young children on preschool television programming. For example, a marriage between *Sesame Street* characters Bert and Ernie has been the topic of many petitions, political debates, and academic studies over the years. This analysis seeks to reconcile the cultural ambivalence through analysis of news coverage over the most prominent children's shows associated with latent and/or manifest GLBTQ content. New stories that make up the research sample are analyzed for "Anti-GLBTQ" logics, and placed in a broader discourse analysis of societal expectations for children's television, and what is considered to be appropriate content. The goal of this study is to draw greater attention to debates over how to best serve the educational needs of young children, and posits that the increasing numbers of children living under same-sex parented households are underserved by the children's television industry. The ambivalence by the industry seems suspect given prior, and well established efforts, of children's shows, such as *Sesame Street*, and the ability of educational programming to bridge cultural, class, and racial divides. This study represents a preliminary effort to extend the conversations about children's television content to be more inclusive of GLBTQ identities.

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## Introduction

Queer characters have appeared on adult oriented television and film in increasing numbers over the last the decade. This rise began in the mid 1990s and gained momentum alongside the same-sex marriage movement in the United States. Ron Becker writes in Gay TV and Straight America that “as recently as the early 1990s...viewers could likely spot only a handful of openly [GLBTQ] characters...after only a few television seasons, however, gay themed episodes and references to homosexuality were everywhere...”<sup>1</sup> The increase in GLBTQ visibility in prime time has added to greater diversity in the media, especially in media that targets older demographics. However, media targeted to children has not seen an increase comparable to adult programming with the visibility of GLBTQ characters. A distinct cultural anxiety exists about the idea of GLBTQ content for children, as evidenced by national news coverage on the perceived threat some individuals see in certain children’s television shows. For example, Reverend Jerry Falwell’s criticism of the show *Teletubbies* for what he thought was a subversive promotion of homosexuality through the show’s Tinky-Winky character. This anxiety follows what has been a consistent societal concern over children’s media content from the advent of film and television, onto modern day media platforms such as videogames and social

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, Ron. *Gay TV and straight America*. Rutgers University Press, 2006. Print. 37.

media. The continued debates about GLBTQ content on children’s television are merely an extension of this trend.

The cultural anxiety stems from a public perception that GLBTQ identity can only be depicted through sexual acts, which in turn, would be inappropriate for children. However, fixating on the sexual aspects of GLBTQ identity oversimplifies what is at stake when GLBTQ characters and themes are marginalized. Of course, children’s media should not include depictions of sex or explicit sexuality. However, at issue here is social role modeling and parenting. The invisibility of GLBTQ characters can be examined through consideration of gender modeling, in which children’s media often favors decidedly heterosexual conceptions of gender identity.

This study investigates news coverage of remarks about children’s media by news outlets and cultural commentators. The primary goal is to deduce what the coverage of perceived “gay agendas” in children’s media texts imply about social constructions of childhood in American culture.<sup>2</sup> How are these commentaries about queer or “gay agendas” in children’s media contextualized in larger ideological and institutional frameworks? And more specifically, what do remarks by cultural commentators appearing in news stories about the content of children’s media reveal about social norms and expectations of childhood?

Through analysis of selected news stories between 1993 through the end of 2013, I will interrogate the underlying logic of anti-GLBTQ content bias in children’s

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<sup>2</sup> See section on “Children, Media, and Developmental Theory”



media for the purpose of this study. News stories will be selected based on number of appearances across national and leading regional newspapers, with the top five most occurring stories over the course of 1993-2013 making up the sample.

Through discourse analysis, I intend to deconstruct the logic of the arguments of the commentators themselves, and place their politics in a broader cultural context.

“Anti-GLBTQ” content is defined as any heteronormative reasoning that argues against children being exposed to GLBTQ content and/or characters. Heteronormative logic, for the purpose of this study, follows the definition proposed by Didi Herman, in which heteronormativity “does not just construct a norm, it also provides the perspective through which we know and understand gender and sexuality in popular culture.”<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, any argument that constructs homosexuality as being deviant, or abnormal, is considered an “anti-GLBTQ logic.” Five of the most prominent children’s television shows were established as case studies that that inform the challenges that will have to be overcome for greater GLBTQ representation in the children’s media space.

The selected time period of the sample, 1993-2013 reflects the period in which major developments in GLBTQ civil rights thus far have occurred.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Herman, D. (2003). “Bad Girls changed my life”: Homonormativity in a women’s prison drama. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Following the passage of same-sex marriage in New York, over half the United States is now living in localities with same-sex marriage laws, this process started in 2004 with Massachusetts as the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. Because of the wide ranging state and federal benefits associated with marriage, marriage is being considered as a major marker of GLBTQ cultural visibility, but certainly there others.

sample is contextualized by gains in visibility that adult oriented television experienced, starting with the 1994 show *Daddy's Girls*, in which Harvey Feirstein became the first out full time cast member on a prime time show.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this study, the 1990s can be seen as a pivotal moment for gay visibility. This is also evidenced by the later successes of shows such as *Ellen*, and *Will & Grace*, in the following years after *Daddy's Girls*, which can be said to be the starting point at which television production companies began treating regularly appearing gay television characters with greater interest.

The contentious debates in Congress over the military allowing GLBTQ individuals to disclose their sexuality and the emerging gay marriage movement, typified by the passing of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, are noteworthy political events that kept GLBTQ issues ever-present in news media coverage. As Ron Becker writes in *Gay TV and Straight America*, “gay rights emerged as the defining civil rights movement of the early 1990s, and Americans watched while federal, state, and local governments debated a series of civil rights issues.”<sup>6</sup> Becker would continue to outline how the emergent cultural logic of multiculturalism of the 1990s coincided with a newfound emphasis on niche marketing in advertising. “Shifting discourses surrounding homosexuality intersected with the economics of niche marketing and network narrowcasting” resulting in an explosion of gay

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<sup>5</sup> [http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1994-09-21/lifestyle/9409200450\\_1\\_daddy-s-girls-moore-s-new-series-phil-buckman](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1994-09-21/lifestyle/9409200450_1_daddy-s-girls-moore-s-new-series-phil-buckman)

<sup>6</sup> Becker 37.

themed television and advertising.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Becker's work might suggest most, if not all, of these developments were limited to adult oriented media. The purpose of this analysis is to investigate the cultural logic behind anxieties over exposing children to GLBTQ content.

The first chapter summarizes the foundational theory for GLBTQ identity and representation in media, as well as brief discussions on past attempts at including GLBTQ characters on children's shows. In the following chapter, I will introduce my research methodology and present the sample findings. I will conclude the analysis in the third chapter by connecting the sample with the theory in the first chapter and develop concluding analysis on the three main concepts within my initial research questions; heteronormative constructions and expectations of childhood, as well as cultural resistance to GLBTQ content for children. It is my hope that a more nuanced understanding of GLBTQ invisibility and marginalization on children's television will contribute to research related to GLBTQ representation in popular culture. Ideally, this nuanced approach will speak to a broader cultural ambivalence to GLBTQ content that is neither decidedly conservative nor liberal. Instead, it reflects the state of representation and arguments for the inclusion of GLBTQ content and characters in media or popular culture for all audiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Becker 134.

## Chapter One: Theoretical Foundations

One of the most crucial elements behind the underrepresentation of GLBTQ characters in children's media, can be analyzed within the context of an established history of resistance to GLBTQ content in mainstream media outlets that preceded the boom for GLBTQ characters in adult targeted media of the 1990s. The pervasive element of this cultural resistance is the notion of heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity works to systematically privilege heterosexuality through construction of sexual hierarchies, in which homosexuality is socially constructed as a subordinate identity. Samuel Chambers, a political theorist at John Hopkins University has written extensively on queer social and political issues. In his book, The Queer Politics of Television author Samuel Chambers writes on heteronormativity:

*The world we inhabit is structured by the presumption of heterosexuality and partially determined by the dominant norm of heterosexuality. While this phenomenon often proves to be masked sometimes, sometimes seems invisible, and is often rendered unintelligible, we can witness it through a variety of cultural and political practices.<sup>8</sup>*

The phenomena that Chambers deems "presumed heterosexuality" is representative of heteronormativity at work, but it is also indicative of the larger normalizing characteristic of heterosexuality. It can thus be understood that heterosexuality is

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<sup>8</sup> Chambers, Samuel A. *The queer politics of television*. IB Tauris, 2009. Print. 34.

the dominant hegemonic position in American culture, in which homosexuality is constructed as heterosexuality's subordinate, or deviant opposite.

As Chambers argues, normalization of heterosexuality, through its dominant and highly visible position, renders homosexuality invisible. "The majority of television shows heteronormativity operates in the exact same way it does in society: invisibly. That is, we assume everyone is straight."<sup>9</sup> The institutionalized nature of heteronormativity is further exemplified by lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality." Rich theorizes heterosexuality as a "political institution" that has the ability to regulate behavior and desire.<sup>10</sup> Heteronormativity is then defined as the normative hierarchical function of gender in American society that empowers and reifies heterosexuality institutionally. Therefore, the dominance of "straight representation" in American media can be traced through an established cultural history of demonizing homosexuality, and the hegemonic pressure towards heterosexuality.

In her essay, "Night to His Day': The Social Construction of Gender" Judith Lorber focuses on developing an understanding of gender as a social construction with no real biological basis. She writes, "individuals are born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine or feminine."<sup>11</sup> Ultimately she points to how gender is essentially a performance that society continually

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<sup>9</sup> Chambers pp. 34-36.

<sup>10</sup> Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1986. Print. 313.

<sup>11</sup> Lorber.

reinforces. While Lorber admits that “physical differences between male and female bodies certainly exist” she points out how there are many perceived differences that would otherwise be meaningless if not for social conditioning classifying them as lesser. Lorber is effectively pointing out how some of these differences are no more than *perceived* differences that are created and maintained by social conditioning. That gender and sexuality are both heavily modified by sociality and social construction, undermines arguments for the dominance of heterosexuality. Thus, GLBTQ content is not necessarily harmful, following this logic, but merely perceived as a threat based on the heteronormative institutional privilege heterosexuality carries for not being considered culturally deviant.

### **Queer Theory and the Discourse of “Children”**

Queer theory has also theorized political models specifically addressing the use of children in political discourse. Lee Edelman in his book No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive writes on the use of the “future child” or America’s unborn children as a political symbol. Based on this symbol, Edelman theorizes the concept called “reproductive futurism” which further helps to outline the underlying logic of the opposition to the idea of GLBTQ content for children. Edelman argues the observance of “the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” in political debate illustrates “reproductive futurism.”<sup>12</sup> He constructs the symbolic power of the “future child” image as political means to

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<sup>12</sup> Lee Edelman. *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press, 2004. Print. 2.

“impose an ideological limit” on debate wherein the notion of unborn children, in other words, using children as political symbol for the unborn, places a conservative ideological limit on debate:

*The fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought. That logic compels us, to the extent that we would register as politically responsible, to submit to the framing of political debate-and, indeed, of the political field-as defined by the terms of what this book describes as reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity...<sup>13</sup>*

Opposition to LGBTQ characters on children’s media is often characterized in dialogue reminiscent of Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism.” The symbolic use of the “future child” image is also evident in comments like that of Jerry Falwell, who has argued that the show *Teletubbies* is an endorsement of homosexuality, in spite of the fact that the show’s scripts include no references to sex or sexuality. Falwell declared “as a Christian I feel that role modeling the gay lifestyle is damaging to the moral lives of children.”<sup>14</sup> To imply that children are to be “corrupted” by gay character representations on television exemplifies how Edelman’s concept of “reproductive futurism” works to exclude gay identity from conversations about

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<sup>13</sup> Edelman 201-202.

<sup>14</sup> “Gay Tinky Winky Bad for Children.” *BBC News*. BBC, n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2012. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/276677.stm>>.

diversity. Edelman writes that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.”<sup>15</sup> Pundits like Jerry Falwell argue that current and future children must be protected from depictions of gay identity, for the very survival of society is at stake by his logic.

In justifying anti-gay policies in the name of protecting children, such anxieties clearly reflect and reproduce notions of “childhood innocence.” However, according to Jennifer Mandel, arguments that rely on common sense notions of “childhood innocence” are deeply ideological. She argues “childhood is not simply a time of innocence—free from the social and cultural pressures of the adult world—but defined by historical trends and political agendas.”<sup>16</sup> “Childhood innocence” is then a rhetorical tool founded upon heteronormative assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality. The problem with such assumptions is that they are blind to the incredible difficulty in acting on desires to “wall off” children from their social and political environments. In fact, the notion of “childhood innocence” often gets conflated with heteronormative ideas that inflate the moral dangers of homosexuality representing a threat to children.

Samuel Chambers, who also drew from Edelman’s work in his analysis of the HBO show *Big Love*, offers a succinct explanation that reflects how childhood

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<sup>15</sup> Edelman 202.

<sup>16</sup> Mandel.



innocence is often a heteronormative construction. In The Queer Politics of Television he writes:

*When we bring into consideration the power of heteronormativity, we witness another crucial linkage...Queerness comes to stand for everything that rejects the future and the child; queerness is that which ruptures a faith in the future and a (political) commitment to the child.<sup>17</sup>*

The implication is that GLBTQ identities are conflated with reproduction in such a way that renders them inferior, or deviant, for lack of reproductive capacity.

Reproductive futurism exemplifies how ambivalence to greater GLBTQ visibility is often characterized by fears over the decline of heterosexuality, or perhaps more specifically, loss of heterosexual privilege.

Loss of heterosexual privilege is indicative of a unique cultural phenomena relating to citizenship and public debate. Berlant's concept of "infantile citizenship" offers a bridge to understanding about public debate is deeply heteronormative, as instanced by fears over loss of heterosexual domination. In her book The Queen of American Goes to Washington City Berlant theorizes that the measure of a nation is made through "pre-citizens," or abstracted notions of what a "live" adult is.

Therefore, in the latter half of the twentieth century, cultural politics have become concerned with "pre-citizens" whether they be fetuses or minorities according to

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<sup>17</sup> Edelman 183-184.

Berlant.<sup>18</sup> Politics of this sort imply that the state has a legitimate claim to protect future society, embodied by pundits like Falwell, who argue that GLBTQ representation has the potential to destroy society. Fears over loss of heterosexual privilege are not restricted to the commentary of Christian conservatives, but exist on both sides of the American political spectrum. As Heather Hendershot alluded to in her essay “Teletubby Trouble,” while liberal adults are vocal in their support of progressive depictions of gender, they are less comfortable with sexuality.<sup>19</sup>

Ideas of modern childhood can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. As Maire Messenger Davies writes in her book Children, Media and Culture, “children and their needs and woes also began to appear prominently in popular adult fiction.” Soon, children would become consumers in their own right with the development of children’s fiction. Emerging from this period, as Davies continues, childhood is constructed “as a vulnerable, dependent state in need not only of physical protection, and occasional strict discipline...but also of psychological understanding.”<sup>20</sup> These ideas of vulnerability are evident in the texts from the conservative commentators such as Falwell. Embedded in the notion that children’s moral lives are at stake, is the idea that children are vulnerable to moral corruption in their developing years. As the field of psychology developed further in the twentieth century, so did theories on children’s development. Davies argues “Freud,

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<sup>18</sup> Berlant, Lauren Gail. *The Queen Of America Goes To Washington City : Essays On Sex And Citizenship* / Lauren Berlant. n.p.: Durham : Duke University Press, 1997, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Hendershot.

<sup>20</sup> Davies 28.

Piaget and Bowlby, as with many other child psychologists, all emphasized the importance of early years. Developmental psychology shifted towards arguing that children are “highly malleable” and rapid learners very early from life.<sup>21</sup>

There have been a number of studies focused on gender and sexuality in regards to television targeted at young audiences. Kristen Myers argues in her case study “Cowboy Up!: Non-Hegemonic Representations of Masculinity in Children’s Television Programming” that representations of non-hegemonic masculinities in children’s television shows are quite common. Myers notes that the four shows she surveyed that there were “a variety of masculinities for audiences of children and adults. Hegemonic boy characters did exist...but most (88%) male characters tended toward a non-hegemonic, even feminized masculinity.”<sup>22</sup> For Myers, hegemonic boy characters present hyper-heterosexuality, effectively understood as overt declarations of heterosexual desire and or disparaging of homosexual desire. She goes on to cite Renold (2007) in arguing how this concept is an “important marker of hegemonic masculinity, even among children.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Latent and Manifest Content**

Doris A. Graber outlines the differences of manifest and latent content in her essay “Content and Meaning.” Manifest content is simply the content of the text itself, before audience reception, while latent content is derived from the meanings

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<sup>21</sup> Davies 45.

<sup>22</sup> Myers, Kristen. 2012. "'Cowboy Up!' Non-hegemonic Representations of Masculinity in Children's Television Programming." *Journal of Men's Studies* 20: 125-143.

<sup>23</sup> Myers 134.

as the audience understands them, personally through their own context. To use Graber's definition:

*They [television news stories] carry manifest meanings that are based on the dictionary. But they also carry latent meanings derived from the setting in which the message was expressed, the symbols and connotations embedded in the message, and the experiences of message senders and receivers.*<sup>24</sup>

As there are very few manifest examples of GLBTQ content in children's media, this is why differences in latent and manifest content are important. It is also important to consider research into children's developmental psychology in order to better contextualize the notion of children reading queer content on their own.

### **Children, Media, and Developmental Theory**

Stories involving potential harm to children have a well-established history in American news media. As Sharon Mazzarella notes in her book 20 Questions about Youth and the Media, "one of many common components in the cycle of moral panics has been the role of the press in perpetuating and fueling public concern."<sup>25</sup> GLBTQ content on television becomes a moral panic as its news coverage explicitly relates to the perceived moral lives of children. One might presume that there is an established cultural resonance with such fears given that mainstream national outlets have picked up the stories. The primacy of children in the arguments

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<sup>24</sup> Graber 144.

<sup>25</sup> Mazzarella 55.

themselves requires first understanding more clearly how children interact with the media.

Research on children both in how they interact with and perceive media illuminates why the content of children's media has been so prominent in cultural discourse. Most often these concerns are echoed in moral panics, Maire Messenger Davies writes on the history of cultural reception to the question over children's media content in her book Children, Media and Culture. Davies asserts, "in the mid-twentieth century, the domination of television as the major medium consumed by the populace, especially vulnerable children, led to more public concern than all other media."<sup>26</sup> Early concerns were over whether or not children would model violence and aggression if exposed to it on television. Later studies would focus on advertising as a source of concern.

Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, includes the "intuitive thought sub stage," that is, ages from four to seven, which are the target demographic in terms of media selection for this study. Children in this stage begin to realize their full cognitive potential, and show expansive curiosity. However, it is theorized that children at this sub stage do lack cognitive capacity to differentiate beyond a single variable, known as centration.<sup>27</sup> This concept is perhaps most exemplified by Piaget's well-known experimental task; wherein children in the intuitive thought

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<sup>26</sup> Davies 77.

<sup>27</sup> Rathus, Spencer A. (2006). *Childhood: voyages in development*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.

stage are unable to discern the same amount of liquid in a taller beaker from that of a wide beaker, choosing the taller beaker as having more liquid. Studies on how children develop their own personal sense of gender identity reveal that children begin to understand the concept of gender as toddlers, and will go on to form rigid constructions of gender as early as age five.<sup>28</sup> For most children, it is posited that basic gender identity is formed by age three, making the preschool television demographic a key point for intervention.<sup>29</sup>

There has been a considerable amount of research examining the relationship between gender and social modeling. As Kay Bussey and Albert Bandura find in “Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation,” children tend to model what they see. “Children develop the stereotypic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them.”<sup>30</sup> Children have a rudimentary grasp on gender concepts by age four, and can differentiate between culturally dominant notions of masculine and feminine:

*Children's ability to classify their own and others' sex and some knowledge of gender role stereotypes is all that is necessary for much early gender typing to occur. These categorization skills are evident in most 3- and 4-year-olds.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Martin, Carol Lynn, Ruble, Diane. “Children's Search for Gender Cues: Cognitive Perspectives on Gender Development” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Apr., 2004), pp. 67-70.

<sup>29</sup> Burgoon, Judee K., and Leesa Dillman. “Gender, immediacy, and nonverbal communication.” *Gender, power, and communication in human relationships* (1995): 63-81.

<sup>30</sup> Bussey K, Bandura A. 1999. Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychol. Rev.* 106:676–713.

<sup>31</sup> Bussey, Bandura 677.

Although, Bussey and Bandura are quick to point out that *knowledge* of gender stereotypes is not always necessarily linked to gender-linked conduct, “children’s preferences for gendered activities emerge before they know the gender linkage of such activities.”<sup>32</sup> Based on this observation it would seem that, children are able to recognize gender from quite a young age, and while they may not think about gender abstractly, existing social models, like those in the media, do potentially have some influence.

Given the evidence related to children’s cognitive development, which suggest that conceptions of gender are first conceived at any early age, and also highlights the importance of external examples in these early childhood conceptions. The importance of exposing children to simple examples of GLBTQ identity at an early age is worthwhile, if only for it’s capacity to provide children with additional external examples. So while explicit sexuality would be inappropriate, it is not presumptuous to posit that exposure to GLBTQ identity could have some educational value. This analysis holds that children’s media is an important point of intervention, following the innovative approach to developmental theory followed by L. S. Vygotsky. In “Problems of General Psychology” Vygotsky argues, “instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development. When it does, it impels or wakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development.” As Fred

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<sup>32</sup> Bussey, Bandura 678.

Newman and Lois Holzman point out in Lev Vygotsky Revolutionary Scientist, “rejecting the view that learning depends on and follows development, Vygotsky conceptualized learning and development as a dialectical unity in which...learning is ahead of or leads development.”<sup>33</sup> Following the developmental theory laid out by Vygotsky, even if children are not forming conceptions of sexuality at such a young age, the societal linking of sexuality to gender role modeling suggests that GLBTQ content would better serve children whom may realize their own queer sexualities later in life.

The sex-gender distinction has been a heavily debated topic in academia over the years, in disciplines from biology, to developmental psychology and the humanities. As previously discussed, gender and sexuality are highly dependent upon institutions and social constructions. Candace West and Don Zimmerman argue in “Doing Gender” that “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities.” For West and Zimmerman, it is important to distinguish between sex and gender, even if both can be thought of as socially constructed, writing “sex category presumes one’s sex and stands as proxy for it in many situations. Gender in contrast, is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, sex and gender are socially linked.

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<sup>33</sup> Newman, Fred, and Lois Holzman. *Lev Vygotsky (Classic Edition): Revolutionary Scientist*. Psychology Press, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. "Doing gender." *Gender & society* 1.2 (1987): 126-127.



One's sex, rightly or not, often informs their gender performance. Hence, it is possible to link GLBTQ content that is desexualized, like the example of same-sex parents, to a more diversified set of possibilities in terms of gender performance. Linking this to the developmental theory of Bandura and others, further illustrates that children may indeed benefit from such exposure given the pervasiveness of heteronormativity.

### **Regulation and Government Intervention**

From a regulatory perspective, the United States has an established history of laws and regulations that seek to control media content, from early obscenity laws, to the 'Hayes Code' of mid twentieth century America. In his book, The Celluloid Closet, Russo notes that much government regulation of media has specifically targeted homosexual content, whether it is in adult or children's media.<sup>35</sup> These regulatory trends affected most of the programming of the television market in the United States, and only become undone starting in the 1980s for film, and the 1990s for adult television. While adult media has seen an influx of GLBTQ characters and content, even dedicated GLBTQ shows targeting specifically GLBTQ audiences, with less attention paid to these developments on the part of mainstream news outlets.<sup>36</sup> Children's media remains under much more scrutiny, as evidenced by the

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<sup>35</sup> Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. Print.

<sup>36</sup> As previously noted, this was not always the case, it was only after the post 1990's boom that adult targeted GLBTQ media became more of a norm, and the release of GLBTQ specific shows in prime time began to receive less attention in mainstream media, despite likely having some Conservative resistance.

Congressional hearings over *Postcards from Buster* or the continued moral panic over violence in newer media, such as videogames. Didi Herman, first traced the usage of the term “gay agenda” to the conservative group Family Research Council in 1992.<sup>37</sup> The conservative commentators that will ultimately make up a part of my sample most often imply the existence of a sort of hidden “gay agenda” in their fears over various media texts “promoting” homosexuality and that children are unable to cope with any sort of GLBTQ content. However, educational programming for children has tackled complex issues before. Perhaps the most effective established body of work that substantiates the notion that children are able to learn complex cultural forms via educational television is the PBS show *Sesame Street*. In the following section, I will focus on *Sesame Street* as an example of how television can be used as an educational tool, and thus further highlight the importance of greater GLBTQ character visibility.

### **Public Television and Educational Programming for Children**

*Sesame Street* was created as a means to promote educational development goals in tandem with issues of social difference, based on the latest theories in children’s development. When the show was first created, the primary goal was to try to compensate for the social inequality of many inner city school systems compared to their suburban counterparts. As Jennifer Mandel writes,

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<sup>37</sup> Herman, Didi (1998). *The Anti-Gay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right*.

*Sesame Street strived to exemplify and create an egalitarian and more tolerant community both on screen and in actuality. Sesame Street's aim to educate disadvantaged urban preschool children and put them on an equal intellectual level as their middle-class peers when they entered grade school was central to the development and direction of the show.*<sup>38</sup>

While these educational goals started with race, they have expanded to include a more general multiculturalism. And while *Sesame Street*, has been successful by many accounts in its pedagogical approach. It can be argued that the efforts on the part of the show's producers, Sesame Workshop, have done so while deliberately ignoring GLBTQ issues of representation. For example, a marriage between *Sesame Street* characters Bert and Ernie has been the topic of many petitions, political debates, and academic studies over the years. The two muppets have often been read as a closeted gay couple because they live alone and shared a bedroom for most of the show's history. Public debate on the matter became so widespread that the producers of *Sesame Street*, The Sesame Workshop, issued a public statement proclaiming Bert and Ernie are only "puppets" and "have no sexual orientation," despite displaying numerous other human traits and characteristics.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, to argue that *some* political issues, such as GLBTQ issues, are not fit for children's television indicates heteronormative bias. This bias, exemplified in acceptance of

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<sup>38</sup> Mandel 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Bert and Ernie Are Best Friends*. New York City: The Sesame Workshop, 11 Aug. 2011. Print.

*Sesame Street's* educational goals that tackle race, gender, and class issues but resistance to representations of homosexuality.

Acknowledging that children are always implicated in the political and social hierarchal realities that implicate the rest of society at large, serves to emphasize how exclusion of gay identity is problematic given GLBTQ identity's increased visibility in other cultural institutions. Mandel argues, "*Sesame Street* turned to children not only to further democracy but advance [Martin Luther King Jr.] King's ideas of a beloved community by teaching future generations." Mandel goes on to highlight, "the limited availability of preschool education and the widening academic gap between low- and middle-income children... called for the creation of supplementary educational opportunities through the untapped medium of television."<sup>40</sup> Following the historical trends that necessitated the development of *Sesame Street* highlights implicit awareness of the social inequity of our many cultural institutions that children are placed in.

Another PBS show, *Postcards from Buster* offers a case study as to how Congressional oversight and controversy can hinder PBS' funding. In a special episode (Episode #133 -"Sugartime!") the main character Buster travels to Vermont and encounters a young playmate with two moms. The two Moms appear briefly onscreen, and Buster verbally remarks his surprise "Boy! That's a lot of moms."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mandel pp. 1-3.

<sup>41</sup> De Moraes, Lisa. "PBS's 'Buster' Gets An Education." *Washington Post* [Washington D.C.] 27 Jan. 2005, sec. C: 01. Print.

The *Postcards From Buster* episode provides an interesting case study because many markets refused to air the episode, and PBS quickly found itself under fire from the federal government. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings declared, "many parents would not want their young children exposed to the lifestyles portrayed in this episode." In this example the heteronormative ambivalence to GLBTQ representation is apparent, as the show *Postcards from Buster* evolved out of a federal education initiative called 'Ready-To-Learn.' The proposal request for the initiative is said to have called for:

*Appeal to all of America's children by providing them with content and or characters with which they can identify. Diversity will be incorporated into the fabric of the series to help children understand and respect differences and learn to live in a multicultural society. The series will avoid stereotypical images of all kinds and show modern multi-ethnic/lingual/cultural families and children.<sup>42</sup>*

Given that the 2010 census revealed an eighty percent growth in same-sex headed households in the USA, along with nearly a fifth of them raising children,<sup>43</sup> it would be difficult to argue how depictions of a LGBT family could not have some "appeal" to America's children.

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<sup>42</sup> De Mores

<sup>43</sup> "How Many LGBT Families Are There?" N.d. *Impact LGBT Health and Development Program*. Web. 18 Nov.

2012. <<http://www.impactprogram.org/youth/how-many-lgbt-families-are-there/>>.

Heteronormative logics that construct GLBTQ content as deviant and potentially corrupting, in tandem with dominant cultural expectations of children as a collective representation of future society have worked to limit GLBTQ representation in children's media. "Reproductive futurism" as a component of heteronormative hegemony on children's media, distinctly unique from that of adult media, explains why the increased visibility of the 1990s had little affect on diversity of characters on children's television. Presenting normative GLBTQ identity, which is a very diverse population, within multicultural education for children seems to be much more problematic for society compared to racial and ethnic diversity exclusively.

The goal of this analysis is founded on the notion that through the development of a sample of news stories from 1993-2013 that common histories of GLBTQ content resistance will be established. In the following chapter, I will introduce my research methodology and present my sample findings. Followed by a more detailed analysis of the results and the cultural implications in the concluding chapter.

## Chapter Two: Sample Findings

Through analysis of selected news stories between 1993 and 2013, I will examine the underlying logic of anti-GLBTQ content bias in children's media for the purpose of this study. News stories will be selected based on the number of appearances across national and leading regional newspapers, with the top five most occurring shows over the course of 1993-2013 making up the sample. Through discourse analysis, I intend to deconstruct the logic of the arguments of the commentators themselves, and place their politics in a broader cultural analysis that investigates their appearance in newspaper outlets specifically. "Anti-GLBTQ" content is defined as any heteronormative reasoning that argues against children being exposed to GLBTQ content and/or characters. Heteronormative logic, for the purpose of this study, follows the definition laid out by Didi Herman, in which heteronormativity "does not just construct a norm, it also provides the perspective through which we know and understand gender and sexuality in popular culture."<sup>44</sup> In other words, any argument that constructs homosexuality as being deviant, or abnormal is considered "anti-GLBTQ." Through selecting the five most prominent children's television shows, in the set time period, I hope to establish them as case studies and that inform the challenges to GLBTQ representation may face in the

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<sup>44</sup> Herman, D. (2003). "Bad Girls changed my life": Homonormativity in a women's prison drama. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20, 144.

children’s media space. Shows are ranked by number of times they appear in unique news coverage for a particular national or regional outlet.

The criteria for the selection of the sample is based on:

1. Stories and commentary that appear in news print media. Only organizations that lead distribution in their region, or national outlets in the top 5 among all nationally distributed newspapers will be considered.<sup>45</sup> The sample is limited to outlets in The United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. Internet exclusive outlets will not be considered (unless available in print at time of original story publication).
2. The news coverage can include either anti-GLBTQ logics by the reporter, or coverage of anti-GLBTQ commentator by public figures.
3. Media content under criticism must be targeted at children 3-7 years old, or “family” films with an MPAA rating no higher than “PG” and must be nationally distributed.
4. The anti-GLBTQ criticism may be based on manifest or latent GLBTQ content.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Statistics for distribution numbers to be codified with the Alliance for Audited Media’s annual reporting.

<sup>46</sup> See section on Manifest vs. Latent Content.



5. Commentary must include heteronormative logics and be explicitly related to the issue of children being exposed to GLBTQ characters or content through said media. “Heteronormative logic” qualifies as conflating GLBTQ characters and content as; deviant, harmful to children or society, or relating specific content of a children’s media text as espousing a “gay agenda.”

### **Contextualizing the Sample**

The selected time period of the sample, 1993-2013 reflects the period in which most major developments in GLBTQ civil rights thus far have occurred.<sup>47</sup> The sample is contextualized by gains in visibility that adult oriented television experienced, starting with the show *Daddy’s Girls*, in which Harvey Feirstein became the first out full time cast member on a prime time show.<sup>48</sup> For the purposes of this proposal, the 1990s can be seen as a pivotal moment for gay visibility. This is also evidenced by the later successes of shows such as *Ellen*, and *Will & Grace*, in the following years after *Daddy’s Girls*, which can be said to be the starting point at which television production companies began treating regular gay television characters with greater interest.

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<sup>47</sup> Following the passage of same-sex marriage in New York, over half the United States is now living in localities with same-sex marriage laws, this process started in 2004 with Massachusetts as the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. Because of the wide ranging state and federal benefits associated with marriage, marriage is being considered as a major marker of GLBTQ cultural visibility, but certainly there others.

<sup>48</sup> [http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1994-09-21/lifestyle/9409200450\\_1\\_daddy-s-girls-moore-s-new-series-phil-buckman](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1994-09-21/lifestyle/9409200450_1_daddy-s-girls-moore-s-new-series-phil-buckman)

The news stories were sourced from the LexisNexis database, one of the largest online database for legal and journalistic records in existence. The database allows for the search of key terms, which are generated by each record in the database. Thus, the parameters outlined in the introduction, translated well into programming of the database, making it an ideal choice for sample selection. Figure 1.1 reflects the results for searching the terms “gay children television,” which generated nearly 1,000 unique articles, of which 52 were articles directly related to fears over GLBTQ incursion into children’s media. “Gay children television” returned the most applicable results, and thus was chosen over other terminology. Of course, this limits the sample to television, as the search terminology would not prioritize other forms of media, such as film, for example. Variations such as “TV” are accounted for in the database, as any article with the “television” tag is also sourced under the “tv” tag. Figure 1.1 (see next page) is a table that illustrates a count of how many unique articles appeared for specific shows, the top five being shown in the table.

One of the more surprising results is the high ranking of the Australian children’s show, *Play School*, which had comparatively little exposure in the preliminary research for this study. However, the most widely disseminated story, was from the 1998 children’s show *Teletubbies*. Coverage of *Teletubbies* first appeared in the British press, with the Scottish based Daily Record, reporting

“TINKY WINKY 'OUTED'; Teletubby is gay menace says right-wing preacher.”<sup>49</sup> *The Irish Times*, also reported on the story, with the headline “Uh-ohhh! Tinky Winky's Sexuality Under Spotlight,”<sup>50</sup> that the British press first picked up the story is likely due to *Teletubbies* being a product of the BBC.<sup>51</sup> Although, the American press was not far behind, as *The Western Daily Press* ran the it's own version of the Tinky-Winky story, with the more subtle, “Tinky Winky is 'Outed' by Preacher” headline, all three of these first stories appeared on February 11, 1999. The following is a chart, which illustrates the top five most covered children's television shows, starting with *Teletubbies*, which had 17 unique stories.

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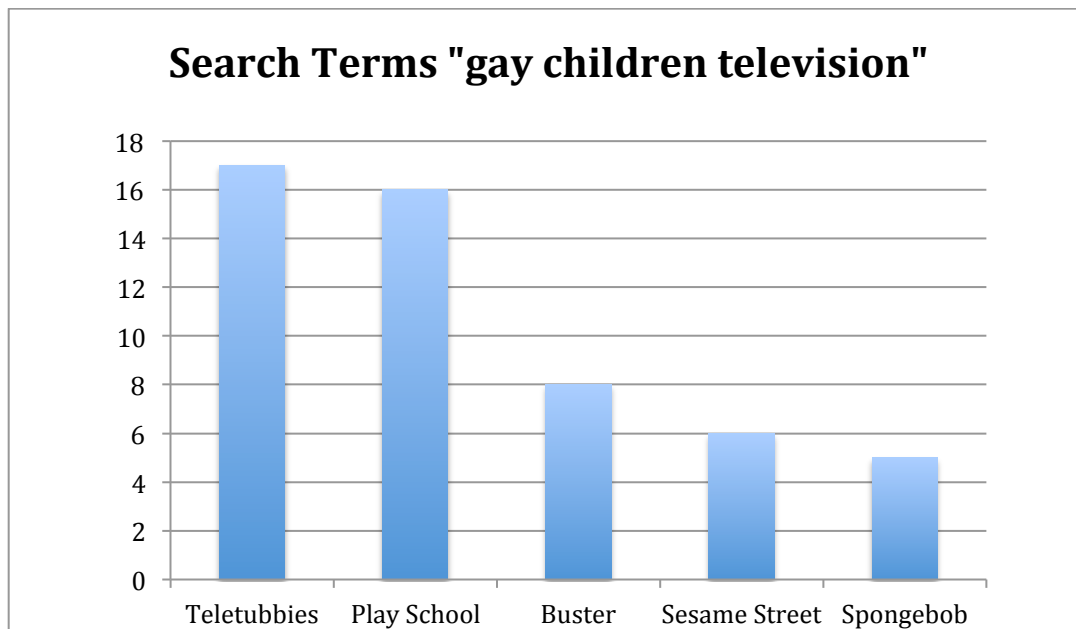
<sup>49</sup> Frew, Callum. "Tinky Winky 'Outed.'" *Daily Record* [Glasgow] 11 Feb. 1999: 20. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 18 Jan. 2015.

<[http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/returnTo.do?returnToKey=20\\_T21327531407/](http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/returnTo.do?returnToKey=20_T21327531407/)>.

<sup>50</sup> Lafferty, Elaine. "Uh-ohhh! Tinky Winky's Sexualit Under Spotlight." *The Irish Times* [Dublin] 11 Feb. 1999: 12. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 18 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21327518244&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=226&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21327518225&cisb=22\\_T21327518270&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=142626&docNo=247](http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21327518244&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=226&resultsUrlKey=29_T21327518225&cisb=22_T21327518270&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=142626&docNo=247)>.

<sup>51</sup> "Teletubbies." *Internet Movie Database*. Internet Movie Database, n.d. Web. 26 Jan. 2015. <<http://imbd.com>>.

Figure 2.1: Number of Headlines for search terms “gay children television”



The first articles on Tinky-Winky attribute the “outing” to Reverend Jerry Falwell, who wrote in the *National Liberty Journal* about Tinky-Winky promoting homosexuality, under the headline, “Parents alert: Tinky Winky Comes Out of the Closet.” *The Daily Record* quotes Falwell as arguing, “he [Tinky-Winky] is purple - the gay-pride colour; and his antenna is shaped like a triangle - the gay-pride symbol.”<sup>52</sup> Both the *Daily Record* and *The Irish Times* would quote spokesman from the production company behind *Teletubbies*, Itsy Bity Entertainment Co., as stating, “the fact that he carries a magic bag doesn't make him gay.”<sup>53</sup> However, *The Daily Record* went even further, carrying additional quotes from Itsy Bitsy Entertainment

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<sup>52</sup> Frew.

<sup>53</sup> Lafferty

Co. spokesman, Steve Rice, “to out a Tele-tubby in a pre- school show is kind of sad on his part.”<sup>54</sup> As news of Tinky-Winky’s outing continued to break, the story would appear across a multitude of news outlets:

Figure 2.2: Tinky-Winky Headline’s February 11-16, 1999

<u>Headline</u>	<u>Periodical</u>
“He's not straight-talking but is Tinky Winky kinky?”	The Herald (Glasgow), February 11, 1999, Pg. 3
'Tubby' Ache For Jerry Falwell; Religious Right Leader Sees Gay Threat in Children's TV Character”	Washington Post (Washington DC), February 11, 1999, Style Pg. C01
“Falwell ‘outs’ Tinky Winky”	The Journal (Newcastle), February 11, 1999, National News
“Hollywood Rips Falwell Over Teletubby”	San Jose Mercury News (California), February 12, 1999 Friday Morning Final Edition, Front; Pg. 2A, 265
“He’s OUTED”	The Bristol Post, February 13, 1999, seven, Pg.4
“Teletubbies: Deep Background U.S. Evangelist Jerry Falwell Doesn’t Know the Half of It”	The Globe and Mail (Canada), February 16, 1999 Tuesday, COMMENTARY; Pg. A15

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<sup>54</sup> Frew

*The New York Times* editorial section included a more positive spin on the story, with an entry headlined "Gay Teletubby? It Could Be the Best Thing on TV." With the reader arguing, "television-viewing recommendations are best left to concerned, educated parents who work day in and day out to raise children who are open-minded, compassionate and tolerant."<sup>55</sup> However, for the most part, most of the stories were simply reporting on Falwell himself, without any additional commentary. *The New York Times* editorial as well as the report out of the San Jose Mercury News, are the only coverage of the Tinky-Winky outing in the first week to make any mention of rebuffing Mr. Falwell.

The next most mentioned show in the sample search was the Australian show *Play School*, which stirred controversy in June of 2004 for depicting lesbian parents in one of the episodes. Coincidentally this controversy preceded a similar story in the United States with the show *Postcards from Buster*, which would come under criticism for the same reason, separated by only a matter of months. Coverage of the *Play School* controversy also coincides with another top result from the sample, *Spongebob Squarepants*, making the 2004-2005 period unique among the years spanned in the sample, as this two year period includes three of the top results from the initial survey. Beginning with *Play School*, an Australian show

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<sup>55</sup> Edmunds, Lisa. "Gay Teletubby? It Could Be the Best Thing on TV." *The New York Times* [New York] 14 Feb. 1999: 20. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 3 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21327518244&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=251&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21327518225&cisb=22\\_T21327518270&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=259](http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21327518244&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=251&resultsUrlKey=29_T21327518225&cisb=22_T21327518270&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=259)>.

developed for young children that emphasizes learning. Aired an episode in which lesbian parents shared stories of their home life and their young children, again similar to the infamous episode of *Postcards from Buster*. Below are a number of the headlines that appeared, while mostly limited to Australia, the results are unique as they seemed to dominate Australian media, receiving mentions in every major newspaper in the country. Relative to the United States and Britain, no other show in the sample has been able to capture such prolonged attention in a specific country/region.

Figure 2.3: Selected Headlines from *Play School* Coverage

<u>Periodical</u>	<u>Headline</u>
"Gay School Stoush Grows Children Show's Two-Mums Segment Opens Community Rift"	Hobart Mercury (Australia), June 4, 2004 Friday, LOCAL; Pg. 5
"Gay Story Furore"	The Daily Telegraph (Sydney, Australia), June 4, 2004 Friday, Local; Pg. 15
"Play School's Lesbian Tale Sparks Outrage"	Sydney Morning Herald (Australia), June 4, 2004 Friday, NEWS AND FEATURES; Pg. 3
"It's Gay School; Bannas, Bears, and a Girl with Two Mothers"	Illawarra Mercury (Australia), June 4, 2004 Friday, NEWS; Pg. 5
"TV Channel Rebuked Over 'Play School' Lesbians"	The Independent (London), June 4, 2004, Friday, First Edition; FOREIGN NEWS; Pg. 28
"Outrage over ABC's Gay School"	The West Australian (Perth), June 4, 2004 Friday, GENERAL; Pg. 3
"Two Mums One Too Many for Toddler TV, Aunty told"	The Australian, June 4, 2004 Friday All-round Country Edition, LOCAL; Pg. 3
"TV Lesbian Mums Provoke Fury in Australia"	Sunday Tribune, June 06, 2004, Pg. 19
"Play School's Two Mums Segment Was a Step Too Far"	The Age (Melbourne, Australia), June 11, 2004 Friday, NEWS; Opinion; Pg. 15

The coverage of *Play School* was limited to Australia, with only minimal exposure in British media. However, of note is a key difference in the reporting from

the Twinky-Winky coverage, is the much stronger emphasis placed on “public outrage.” This is especially evidenced by the headlines themselves, for example, London’s *The Independent* running the headline “TV Channel Rebuked Over ‘Play School’ Lesbians,” or Perth’s *The West Australian* running the headline “Outrage over ABC’s Gay School.” Stories made mention of the ire the show’s airing received from Australian politicians in particular, with health minister Tony Abbott quoted as saying “he would have been “shocked” to see such content on a children's show when his three daughters were younger.”<sup>56</sup>

In continuing with the 2004-2005 time period, the third most covered children’s show was the American made, *Postcards from Buster*. In similar fashion to the episode of *Play School*, the *Postcards from Buster* episode featured two lesbian parents, sharing their home briefly with the television audience. This also marks a brief pause in the protracted worldwide coverage of these stories, as coverage of the *Postcards from Buster* controversy was for the most part, limited to the United States, as will also be the case for *Sesame Street*. And unlike *Play School*, did not see wide circulation outside of the main national media hubs of New York and Los Angeles. However, what makes *Postcards* and *Play School* unique in the sample is the fact that they both included manifest GLBTQ content, while this still allows for the

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<sup>56</sup> Maguire, Tory. "Gay Story Furore." *The Daily Telegraph* [Sydney] 4 Jun. 2004: 15. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 17 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21327857936&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21327518225&cisb=22\\_T21327857911&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=244786&docNo=13](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21327857936&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T21327518225&cisb=22_T21327857911&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=244786&docNo=13)>.



perception of a certain “GLBTQ agenda” by way of conservative logic (i.e. the presence of gay characters/“lifestyle”) the outrage in both of these cases is not tied to a conservative preacher. Although, with *Postcards from Buster*, it would be Secretary of Education at the time, Margaret Spellings, who would become the face of the opposition to GLBTQ content in children’s media.

Coverage of the Buster story began in *The New York Times* on January 27, 2005 running the headline “Culture Wars Pull Buster Into Fray.” The article described how PBS would be pulling the episode from distribution, and mentioned Spellings denouncement of the episode. Also of note, was the initial response from PBS, also quoted in the article in which CFO Wayne Godwin was quoted as saying; “In fairness I would have to say a gay character is not one we would not include,” he said, and then clarified. “The fact that a character may or may not be gay is not a reason why they should or should not be part of this series.”<sup>57</sup> The following table reflects all the headlines that appeared, following *The New York Times* story.

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<sup>57</sup> Salamon, Julie. “Culture Wars Pulls Buster Into The Fray.” *The New York Times* [New York] 27 Jan. 2005: 15. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 19 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21393056967&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=526&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21393056913&cisb=22\\_T21393056982&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=547](http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21393056967&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=526&resultsUrlKey=29_T21393056913&cisb=22_T21393056982&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=547)>.

Figure 2.4: *Postcards from Buster* Coverage

<u>Headline</u>	<u>Periodical</u>
"'Gay' Row over Buster the Rabbit"	The Times, London, January 27, 2005, Home news; 22
"Children's TV Fears a Funding Flap After 'Buster'"	USA Today, January 31, 2005
"Controversial 'Buster' Episode to run on TPT"	Saint Paul Pioneer Press Minnesota, February 2, 2005, MAIN; Pg. A1
"What Has Floppy Ears And a Subversive Tale?"	The Washington Post, March 6, 2005 Style; D01
"'Buster' Sparks Sharp Dialogue"	Portland Press Herald, Maine, April 10, 2005, Pg. B1

While much of the coverage was exclusive to the United States, the fact that only two regional newspapers covered the story was striking, as local PBS affiliates would be left to decide if they wanted to air the episode of the *Postcards from Buster* episode. One might assume this would provide the story with a greater impetus for local coverage, however, this does not seem to be the case. It is noteworthy that the "Buster" controversy broke out just after the controversy over another children's show, *Spongebob Squarepants*.

Coverage of *Spongebob* began on January 20, 2005, just a week prior to the breaking of the "Buster" story. *The New York Times* ran a headline, "Conservatives

Take Aim at Soft Target.”<sup>58</sup> Coverage was also more widespread outside the United States, with *The Vancouver Sun* noting in their story,

*Critics say SpongeBob's complicity in the spreading of sin is proved by the knowledge that he is already a well-established gay icon -- supposedly because he holds hands with his sidekick, Patrick, and they like to watch an imaginary television show called The Adventures of Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy.*<sup>59</sup>

And unlike *Play School* and *Postcards from Buster*, Spongebob had a Christian preacher attached to the story, this time, Rev. James Dobson. Who was quoted as saying he was “enlisted” into doing a “pro-homosexual” video that included an appearance of the Spongebob character, among others. The video in question was actually just a video made by Nickelodeon for primary schools that advocated for tolerance of racial, gender, and sexual diversity.<sup>60</sup> However, Dobson would also link *Spongebob* to the character’s so-called “gay icon” status. Here again, the fears of GLBTQ content somehow corrupting children is very overt, *The Vancouver Sun* headline summing it up well, “Conservative Christian Groups Slam SpongeBob:

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<sup>58</sup> Kirkpatrick, David. “Conservatives Take Aim at Soft Target.” *The New York Times* [New York] 20 Jan. 2005: *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 19 Jan. 2015. <  
[http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21393056967&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=526&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21393056913&cisb=22\\_T21393056982&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=543](http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21393056967&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=526&resultsUrlKey=29_T21393056913&cisb=22_T21393056982&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=543)>.

<sup>59</sup> Leonard, Tom. “Conservative Christian Groups Slam Spongebob: Critics say character spreads homosexuality among children” *The Vancouver Sun* [Vancouver] 21 Jan. 2005: *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 3 Jan. 2015. <  
[http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21393056967&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=526&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21393056913&cisb=22\\_T21393056982&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=397199&docNo=545](http://www.lexisnexus.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lnacui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21393056967&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=526&resultsUrlKey=29_T21393056913&cisb=22_T21393056982&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=397199&docNo=545)>.

<sup>60</sup> Kirkpatrick.

Critics Say Character Spreads Homosexuality Among Children.”<sup>61</sup> Figure 1.5 illustrates all of the headlines from the coverage of *the Spongebob Squarepants* story.

Figure 2.5: Headlines for *Spongebob Squarepants*

<u>Headline</u>	<u>Periodical</u>
“Conservatives Taking Aim At Soft Target”	The New York Times, January 20, 2005 Thursday, Section A; Column 1
“Spongebob Squarepants too gay for U.S. Conservatives: Groups say ‘irresistable’ cartoon character spreading homosexuality”	Ottawa Citizen, January 21, 2005 Friday, Pg. A8.
“Conservative Christian Groups Slam Spongebob: Critics say character spreads homosexuality among children”	The Vancouver Sun (British Columbia), January 21, 2005 Friday, NEWS; Pg. A16
“Spongebob Feels the Squeeze”	The Daily Telegraph, London, January 21, 2005.
“Ready to Throw in the Sponge?”	The Washington Post, Washington DC, January 30, 2005. B07.

Spongebob and Buster would have some crossover coverage given that the two stories broke in within a week of each other, they did not seem to have much staying power in the public eye as far as news coverage.

And while the final show in the sample, *Sesame Street*, was technically the least covered show in terms of dedicated, unique instances of coverage over 1993-

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<sup>61</sup> Leonard.

20013. It was perhaps the most enduring, with the first story appearing near the beginning of the selected time period, January 30, 1994 in *The Toronto Star*.<sup>62</sup> However, the search did return results that made mention of the Bert and Ernie controversy, which preceded the sample time period. Results may also have been limited before 1994 as it coincides with wide adoption of internet and digital archival. Nonetheless, coverage of Bert and Ernie would continue intermittently all the way through 2014. With a headline appearing in the *Belfast Telegraph* as recently as July 2014, running the headline, “Bert and Ernie Gay? They’re Puppets. They Don’t Exist Below the Waist.”<sup>63</sup> The controversy is unique as some of the resistance to including GLBTQ content on *Sesame Street* comes from the producers of the show themselves, as opposed to conservative pundits decrying attempts at GLBTQ content.

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<sup>62</sup> Zekas, Rita. “Bible Belter out to out Bert & Ernie” *The Toronto Star* [Toronto] 30 Jan. 1994: *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 22 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21394159263&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=76&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21394159257&cisb=22\\_T21394159280&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=8286&docNo=85](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21394159263&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=76&resultsUrlKey=29_T21394159257&cisb=22_T21394159280&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=8286&docNo=85)>.

<sup>63</sup> Osborne, Simon. “Bert and Ernie Gay? They’re puppets. They do not exist below the waist.” *Belfast Telegraph* [Belfast] 10 Jul. 2014: *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 22 Jan. 2015. <[http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T21394159263&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=976&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T21394159257&cisb=22\\_T21394159280&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=400553&docNo=983](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lncui2api/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T21394159263&format=GNBFI&sort=DATE,A,H&startDocNo=976&resultsUrlKey=29_T21394159257&cisb=22_T21394159280&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=400553&docNo=983)>.

Figure 2.6: *Sesame Street* Headlines

<u>Headline</u>	<u>Periodical</u>
“Bible Belter Out to Out Bert & Ernie”	The Toronto Star, Toronto, January 30, 1994, Sunday,; Pg. C2
“Are Bert and Ernie Gay?”	The New York Times, February 6, 1994, pg. 6.
“Bert and Ernie Just Friends: Sesame St.”	The West Australian, Perth, August 15, 2011, pg. 3.
“I Now Pronounce you, Bert, and you Ernie...no, not going to happen”	The Globe and Mail, Canada, August 16, 2011 Pg. R1.
“Bert and Ernie Should Come out of Sesame Street’s Closet”	The Age (Melbourne, Australia), August 19, 2011, pg. 1.

Anti-GLBTQ bias is not limited to conservative Christian pastors, bias can come in many forms, and the Bert and Ernie example may just prove that. Much of the coverage relies upon The Sesame Workshop’s consistent denials that their puppets have any defined sexuality, because they are after all “just puppets.”<sup>64</sup> This can be considered bias as these same puppets are allowed to express gender, and other markers of identity, they can even catch diseases, as the South African version of Sesame Street includes a puppet character with HIV/AIDs. The enduring coverage of Bert and Ernie may also be indicative of their status as gay icons, while Tinky-Winky and Spongebob, may also be noted as gay icons, given that *Sesame Street* first

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<sup>64</sup> Quote from producer, appeared in several stories. See fn. 60-61.

began airing in 1968, it perhaps has a much more established following. Although as the *Toronto Star* Story shows, conservative Christians were not happy about Bert and Ernie either, as they cited Rev. Joseph Chambers as first voicing concerns about Bert and Ernie secretly being a gay couple.<sup>65</sup> In the final, concluding chapter, I will discuss the results of these findings in greater detail and establish more common themes among them as a means to illustrate common challenges that prospect of GLBTQ content/representation for children might face given such prolonged bias. I will then conclude with a discussion of what the future might hold for GLBTQ content on children's television programming.

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<sup>65</sup> Zekas.

### Chapter Three: Conclusion

Since the advent of children's television, fears over GLBTQ incursion into children's media represents one of the most enduring moral panics in the public eye. The continual questioning of *Sesame Street* characters Bert and Ernie's sexuality since 1993 perhaps best illustrates this as stories continue to appear as late as 2013. Over the course of the last twenty years, other shows would gain notoriety, sometimes over similarly latent GLBTQ content, as was the case for *Teletubbies* and *Spongebob Squarepants*. However, beginning in 2004, after major Western countries began legalizing same-sex marriage, the first attempts at manifest GLBTQ content in children's shows first occurred. The news media responses to the Australian show *Play School* as well as the American show *Postcards from Buster* offer insight into the difficulty of even brief representations of GLBTQ parents on children's television shows. These stories all share one commonality, the notion that GLBTQ content on children's television shows is somewhat corrupt, and that parents need to fear the potential moral dangers GLBTQ content exposure inherently carries. Figure 2.1 provides a snapshot of the coverage over the years for all five of the most covered shows.



Figure 3.1: Moral Outrage and Community Danger

Sesame Street	“Bible Belter Out to Out Bert & Ernie”
Teletubbies	'Tubby' Ache For Jerry Falwell; Religious Right Leader Sees Gay Threat in Children's TV Character”
Play School	“Two Mums One Too Many for Toddler TV, Aunty told”
Spongebob Squarepants	“Conservative Christian Groups Slam Spongebob: Critics say character spreads homosexuality among children”
Postcards from Buster	“What Has Floppy Ears And a Subversive Tale?”

The moral outrage may stem most vocally from self-identified Christian conservatives, Jerry Falwell being among the most famous, who died in 2007. Politically conservative Christian faith organizations have a long history of anti-GLBTQ leanings. While it is true that public hostility towards GLBTQ identified individuals has been on the decline in the new millennium, a study by Alison et. al. illustrates how this was not always the case, and is only a recent phenomenon. In their essay, “America’s Changing Attitudes Toward Homosexuality, Civil Unions, and Same-Gender Marriage 1977-2004” they find that starting in the late 1990’s public support began to slowly shift towards more acceptance of same-sex couplings, after decades of stable opposition. However, at the time of the study’s publication, 2004, they note that the majority of American’s favored civil unions over same-sex

marriage. They also note the continual opposition by religious organizations over the decades.<sup>66</sup>

Falwell himself, is the founder of Liberty University, rose to fame long before he started worrying about *Teletubbies*, as a member of the so-called “moral majority” of the 1980s. As Susan Harding writes in *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, “the cultural aperture and agitation of this community lasted most of the decade [1980’s]. Much of the action took place inside the language of fundamentalism...”<sup>67</sup> When Falwell first criticized *Teletubbies* in 1999, it was article appearing in the *National Liberty Journal* sponsored by Liberty University.

In the article, he notes that the character Tinky-Winky was intentionally created to be a “gay icon.” His comments take on more context perhaps, when considering an infamous quote Falwell would make in 2001 following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Appearing on the Christian news magazine show *The 700 Club*, Falwell said:

*I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ALCU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to*

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<sup>66</sup> Avery, Alison, et al. "America's changing attitudes toward homosexuality, civil unions, and same-gender marriage: 1977–2004." *Social Work* 52.1 (2007): 71-79.

<sup>67</sup> Harding, Susan Friend. *The book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist language and politics*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

*secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'*<sup>68</sup>

To single out Falwell's anti-GLBTQ leanings is only a part of a larger moral indignation over social developments in the United States in the 1990's and 2000's. And while Falwell's comments on *The 700 Club* earned him a fair share of notoriety, the results of this study illustrate is simply how stories over fears of GLBTQ content morally corrupting children resonates with the public, as evidenced by it's continual coverage in the media.

There are a number of potential reasons why GLBTQ corruption of children has such cultural resonance. Returning to Sharon Mazzarella's 20 Questions about Youth and Media, she identifies seven characteristics that have defined moral panics over the decades; namely, "adult's fears of losing control over 'vulnerable youth,'" the need for simple solutions, and "the perceived link to popular culture often grounded in a focus on manifest content."<sup>69</sup> Mazzarell'a third characteristic, the primacy of manifest content in moral panics, resonates with the fears over violence in children's media. Although, as *Play School* and *Postcards* show, fears over manifest content do exist in the realm of GLBTQ content for children. It may simply be that, there were limited, or possibly no examples of manifest GLBTQ content in children's television prior to the attempts in 2004. That the Christian right would be

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<sup>68</sup> Falwell, Jerry, and Pat Robertson. "The 700 Club." *The Christian Broadcasting Network* 13 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Mazzarella 49.

so strongly linked to moral panics attributed to latent content, may speak to the relative veracity and more all-encompassing moral agenda. For example, Falwell does not simply fear GLBTQ individuals, but political liberals, and feminism, among other cultural formations. In effect, Falwell leverages the benefit of broader national exposure on his perceived latent GLBTQ content in *Teletubbies* because of the wide dissemination it will receive from media outlets. As such, the other characteristics Mazzarella identifies, were also exemplified by the sample findings; “little or no actual evidence of a link between this content and the perceived problem of youth, a wave of often exaggerated press coverage, and government hearings.”<sup>70</sup> These characteristics appear most notably with the manifest attempts at GLBTQ content in children’s media with *Play School* and *Postcards from Buster*.

Research on adult oriented television exemplifies the primacy, and difficulty, of eradicating heteronormativity on television. Becker is quick to caution against conflating greater inclusion of gay characters on prime time as signaling the decline of heteronormativity. In fact, his research implies quite the opposite. Becker argues that the increased cultural visibility to GLBTQ Americans in the wake of 1990s rights movements caused heterosexuals to confront their own heterosexuality: “Straight Americans were increasingly forced to think about their own sexual identity” and the scripts of the new “gay friendly” shows reflected the anxiety over this confrontation:

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<sup>70</sup> Mazzarella 49.

*Most of these narratives focused on the mistaken sexual identities of ostensibly gay-friendly straight men, a pattern that suggests that the trope of the homosexual heterosexual revealed the particular anxieties of liberal heterosexual masculinity...As straight-panic narratives, then, the trope of the homosexual heterosexual focused on liberal straight men trying to figure out a way to assert their heterosexual masculinity in an era when gay men no longer served as their semiotic whipping boys.<sup>71</sup>*

Becker argues that it is unsurprising that anxieties would be observable through depictions of “liberal straight men” given the social status afforded to them through “the relationship between patriarchy and heteronormativity, between male privilege and straight privilege.” Ultimately Becker is outlining how the anxieties of upper middle class straight men brought forth by the political times reflected “ambivalence” to homosexuality, and concludes by observing: “aspirations to celebrate diversity could often coincide with fears about the loss of one’s privilege, and a sincere desire to support gays and lesbians could exist side-by-side with lingering prejudices.” By illustrating how easily depictions of gay characters can include veiled reifications of heteronormativity in the service of heterosexual viewers. Becker’s work exemplifies how difficult the task of eradicating heteronormative assumptions is within the context of television. In the following section, I will look at *Sesame Street* specifically as a means to make the case for

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<sup>71</sup> Becker 279-281.

GLBTQ characters on children's media, in consideration of the sample findings of this study.

The presence of so many queer readings of Bert and Ernie might suggest that *Sesame Street* is already effective in promoting tolerance. If the audience can 'read' characters as queer or gay in spite of content producers implying that readings are 'incorrect' – then the significance of readings of Bert and Ernie as a closeted gay couple indicate the shortcomings of multicultural narratives in terms of presenting GLBTQ identity. Given the comments by the producers of the show, they are indicative of a broader ambivalence on Sesame Workshop's part. Mark Simpson in his essay "The Straight Men of Comedy" muses on how readings of "buddy comedy duos" reflect cultural anxieties about sexual orientation. He writes "in the end both the fundamentalists can claim that Bert and Ernie, Laurel and Hardy or any of the other male comedy duos are 'gay', but this 'reading' is almost to miss the point – which is that they are not straight." While Simpson focuses on the comedic aspect of Bert and Ernie's relationship and goes on to note "male comedy duos can play with queerness because they exist in a space which pretends not to know what 'homosexuality' is, or at least this diagnosis doesn't apply since heterosexuality doesn't really exist here either." His latter assertion that sexuality does not exist in the comedic space is only a means to exemplify the very pervasiveness heteronormative anxieties over sexual orientation.

Perhaps Sesame Workshop's resistance to outing Bert and Ernie is not so much an aggressive act of opposition as a term like "resistance" might imply, but

instead reflection of a broader cultural ambivalence. An ambivalence that might be explained by the ease in which racial and ethnic diversity are presented in open multicultural narratives, these kinds of representations require very little explanatory dialogue because they are visual. Sexual identity, being much more difficult, if not impossible to codify exclusively through visual means, is left out simply because it is easier to do so.

Bert and Ernie truly are “just puppets” materially but they are also certainly political, just as the medium of television is political. Samuel Chambers outlines the political potential of cultural artifacts and asserts “the importance of cultural politics must then lie in particular political mobilizations.”<sup>72</sup> Considering Bert and Ernie’s political potential, the evidence would suggest it is quite high, illustrated by the consistent news coverage over the nature of the duo’s relationship and the petition to have them married. Marrying Bert and Ernie may very be a potential way to mobilize a movement towards greater GLBTQ inclusion. However, as the research also suggests, representation need not be tied to iconic characters to make a difference. Given that the news coverage that followed the airing of the episode of *Postcards from Buster*, in which the GLBTQ characters were only making a one-off appearance, was enough to generate public discussion on the matter. The problem is the anti-GLBTQ logic that pervades public discussion of GLBTQ characters on

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<sup>72</sup> Chambers pp. 6-11.

children's television, more so than a lack of potential avenues for integrating GLBTQ characters on current children's programming.

Attitudes may already be changing for the better, as states continue to legalize same-sex marriage and add GLBTQ protections to their civil rights laws. Yet what must still be overcome is the notion that GLBTQ characters are not appropriate for children. While overt sexuality is indeed inappropriate for children, this analysis illustrates how GLBTQ representations such as same-sex parenting can be an effective means for promoting GLBTQ representation. Furthermore, the need for a more inclusive dialogue over children's media content is further exemplified by the six million individuals who currently make up the population of same-sex parented households in the United States.<sup>73</sup> For as long as the residue of the societal belief that associates GLBTQ identity with moral corruption or deviance remains, there will be resistance to GLBTQ representation for children. Whether through perceived fears over the content of children's television, or not unlike the logic of the national marriage debate itself that posits same-sex marriage as an affront to heterosexual marriage.

While this research provides but a snapshot for a time period in which GLBTQ rights made many gains, from 1993-2013, there is already more recent evidence that attitudes may in deed be changing even further. On January 26, 2014 Disney Channel aired an episode of *Good Luck Charlie* that featured a same sex

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<sup>73</sup> Gates, Gary J. *LGBT Parenting in the United States*. Los Angeles: UCLA School of Law, 2013. Print.



couple. And the queer media watchdog group, GLAAD, found that the number of GLBTQ characters and stories reached an all time high in 2013.<sup>74</sup> A more inclusive media space for children may not be far off in the distance, and perhaps one day, a same sex parenting couple appearing on a children's television show will be worthy of no news coverage at all – just like straight parenting couples.

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<sup>74</sup> Dell'Antonia, KJ. "Waiting for Disney's First Gay Teenager." *The New York Times* [New York City] 27 Feb. 2014: n. pag. Print.

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