

Representations of Male Homosexuality in the Local Memphis News Media

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis sought to examine the local Memphis news media for the visibility of gay men and their accompanying representations. The study intends to note the visibility of gay men within the local media and analyze what these representations communicate about male homosexuality and its acceptance within Memphis-area society. Drawing on scholarship involving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) visibility and representations of groups of people in the media, specifically those involving gay men, this study posed a content analysis of the local Memphis news media for the inclusion of representations of gay male individuals. One daily broadcast from each of the four local networks and the daily issue of the city's most popular newspaper were surveyed for three separate, one week periods. The results of this study yielded a small number of contentious, but mostly unsurprising implications about the visibility of gay men within the local Memphis news media.

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## **Introduction**

For many years in America, the topic of homosexuality was almost completely taboo. The subject went unmentioned in public, families and religions swept the topic under the carpet, many gay individuals covered "in the closet," and even as recently as 2011, the U.S. military's official policy on homosexuality was "don't ask, don't tell." Yet over the past few decades, as more and more LGBT individuals have come to terms with their queer identities and opted to live their lives openly, the subject of homosexuality and representations of LGBT individuals have both increased dramatically within society. Accordingly, as their presence and visibility within society have increased, representations of LGBT individuals have also increased within the media. Aside from the increase in the presence of gay characters within fictional television programs, including on prime-time hits such as *Ellen*, *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Glee*, the visibility of LGBT individuals has also increased in news programming, as hot topics such as same-sex marriage, conversion therapy, and adoption of children by gay couples have all appeared in both the political and social arenas.

Though many LGBT individuals and allies have praised the increase in the visibility of LGBT individuals and issues within the media, numerous studies done throughout the years have indicated a number of issues within the presence of these same LGBT representations within the media. Studies have indicated that the appearance of fictional gay characters, including examples like gay male Will Truman from *Will and Grace* and Ellen DeGeneres' titular lesbian character in her sitcom, though appearing to accept and popularize LGBT individuals and their sexuality, actually undermine the progress of LGBT individuals in many ways by reinforcing stereotypes, traditional

gender roles, and even heteronormativity within society (Dow, 2001; Shugart, 2003). Similarly, in 2004 a study of the major national evening news broadcast on the three major networks of CBS, NBC, and ABC indicated similar findings about the representations of LGBT individuals within American news programming: though there is no question that the presence of LGBT representations within the media has increased, these representations are largely normalized in typically "straight" and heteronormative ways (Moscowitz, 2010). Unfortunately, these issues with the representations of LGBT individuals on television and in the media prevail even into the present day and continue to retain a large influence on society. Many misconceptions about LGBT individuals and the queer community can be perpetuated by the media and can dramatically influence the notions and ideas of those who are receiving the message, thus continuing to work against the efforts of the LGBT community to find acknowledgement and acceptance for its members within both the media and within the larger society.

For me, this is an alarming issue. As a self-identified member of the LGBT community, the visibility of LGBT individuals and their representations which exist within the media is of great importance to me and many other individuals like myself. The increase of the visibility of our community within the media, in both scripted and news programming, has allowed us in part to make many great strides towards acceptance and increasing our power within society. Many polls of the American people indicate rapidly changing attitudes in the last decade or so towards LGBT individuals and gay issues, with some results indicating that support for such ideas like same-sex marriage are held by over half of Americans (Pew Research Center, 2012). However, it seems like there could still be a much greater visibility and stronger representations of

LGBT individuals within the media. While the number of gay television characters has increased dramatically and even reached its highest numbers in television history (Oldenberg, 2012), it could also be argued that many of these characters still often appear as stereotypes, or merely as side characters with little development. Similarly, the majority of LGBT visibility and representations within the news media seem to appear mostly in conjunction with reports regarding gay issues and generally with only a neutral accompanying position. Strong visibility and accurate representations of LGBT individuals within the media are both crucial for those who desire a greater acceptance of homosexuality and queer individuals within society. My personal experiences, as well as my concern for the appearance, accuracy, and treatment of LGBT individuals in the media have led me to examine these representations within the media more closely, particularly the examples of gay men. Additionally, as a member of the queer community in an area of the country where many people and groups have often resisted and opposed the acceptance of homosexuality and LGBT individuals, I feel it is even more important for me to look at and examine the LGBT representations (or lack thereof) which surround me within my local media. Thus, I desire to examine and research the visibility and representations of gay men within the local Memphis media as my thesis topic. Specifically, I will look for the appearance and accompanying representations of gay men within the local Memphis news programming, both on television and in print media.

### *Research Questions*

This thesis and its accompanying research study are designed to be a content analysis of both the major daily local Memphis broadcast news media as well as the

major daily local Memphis print media. Each of these outlets will be examined for the visibility of gay men within Memphis' local news media and the representations of gay men that are offered within its stories and content. Specifically, the study will look for the clear presence of representations of gay men, as well as representations which could be understood (though perhaps not explicitly stated) as representing gay men. This survey of the local Memphis media will be completed over three periods, each consisting of one continuous seven day period. All of the content provided within that period will be examined and read for representations of gay men and what these representations communicate. The ultimate purpose of this study is to determine the visibility of gay men within the local Memphis news media and to examine what these examples of gay men drawn from within the local media communicate about the gay men which they purport to represent.

The previous research on representations of LGBT individuals in the media and the desire to examine the local Memphis news media outlets for the visibility of representations of gay men and what those representations communicate leads to the two questions posed by this thesis. The first question targets the content of the local televised Memphis news and the local daily newspaper and poses the following question:

RQ1: What are the representations of gay men which can be found within the local Memphis news media?

Additionally, this study seeks to analyze the representations of gay men found within the content of the local Memphis news in order to understand what these depictions of gay male individuals communicate and poses the second research question:



RQ2: What do these representations communicate about the nature of gay men according to the news reporters and editors?

### **Literature Review**

As homosexuality has become more generally accepted and acknowledged within American culture and as many more individuals of the LGBT community have become more comfortable with their sexuality and their visibility within society, the LGBT community's presence almost everywhere has increased, including within the media. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation has recently proclaimed that more gay characters are appearing on television now than ever before (Oldenburg, 2012) and numerous studies focusing on the presence of gay characters on television have been done in recent years. These studies have focused on a number of different issues involving the LGBT community and their representations in the media, including the process of coming out and the visibility of LGBT individuals (Dow, 2001), the presence of LGBT couples (Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009), and representations of both gay men (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Fejes, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Shugart, 2003; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2006) and lesbians (Dow, 2001; Herman, 2003). While these studies celebrate the growing trend of additional representations of LGBT individuals and characters on television and in the media, many of them also call into question the manner in which these individuals and characters are represented and whether they are actually advancing the cause of acceptance and equality for LGBT individuals in real life and society.

Many of the recent studies regarding the representation of LGBT individuals and characters on television indicate that though the visibility and number of these

representations is growing, they may not actually be advancing the acceptance of homosexuality within society. In the majority of the studies, the authors concluded that the representations of LGBT individuals they studied ultimately reinforced heteronormativity, more traditional gender roles, and both defined and normalized homosexuality through typical heterosexual frameworks (Holz Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory, 2009; Shugart, 2003; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2006). Many of these representations also perpetuate stereotypes about LGBT individuals, and often relegate them to supporting roles, outside of the main action and subtly undermining both their presence and visibility (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2006). Other ways that television representations of LGBT individuals are thought to be made to be palatable for society is by addressing their coming out and sexuality as a personal issue, rather than a social or political one (Dow, 2001) or by allowing them to serve as catalysts for the development of heterosexual characters (Shugart, 2003).

There are, however, exceptions to the many studies which decry the representation of LGBT individuals on television. Johnson (2004) praised Showtime's *Queer As Folk* for its use of 'gender hybridity' among several of its many gay male characters, arguing that the show "pushe[d] representations of queerness into a new space" in which they were not either traditionally masculine or feminine but a complex combination all their own. Similarly, Herman (2003) concludes in "*Bad Girls Changed my Life: Homonormativity in a Women's Prison Drama*" that the British drama presents lesbian sexuality as "normal, desirable, and possible" and unlike most shows featuring representations of LGBT individuals, presents a homonormative perspective in which alternate sexualities are acceptable and preferred.

More specifically, a great number of the studies regarding the visibility and representation of LGBT individuals have been done on the representations of gay males on television. These studies often focus on how the representations of gay men on television are constructed and the ideas that these representations communicate about male members of the LGBT community and their homosexuality. A great amount of the research focuses on how representations of gay men on television are constructed as stereotypical, and often in direct opposition of the traditional ideas of masculinity in order to reduce the threat of male homosexuality (Fejes, 2000; Ramsey and Santiago, 2004). The de-sexualization of gay men on television is another popular tactic often used in the construction of gay male representations on television in order to make male homosexuality more normalized and acceptable to audiences (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Fejes, 2000; Ramsey and Santiago, 2004; Shugart, 2003; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2006). Shugart (2003) also suggests other methods in which male homosexuality is normalized through their representations on television, notably by including them as a part of a heterosexual framework, such as the gay male/heterosexual female best friend dynamic, or by including traditionally masculine qualities within depictions of gay male individuals when they interact with others and particularly with women. The research regarding representations of gay men on television includes both fictional characters, such as Will Truman and Jack McFarlane from NBC's hit sitcom *Will and Grace* (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Shugart, 2003), and representations of actual gay men as from Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Ramsey and Santiago, 2004; Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2003).

The study of LGBT individuals and their representations within the news media, however, has been a more limited area of research. Mostly scholars have documented how news stories regarding gay issues have been framed in relation to an "anti-gay," heteronormative society through the history of television's "straight" news (Atwood, 2001; Bennett, 2001). Bennett (2001) examined the language used in relation to LGBT individuals within news stories through each decade from the 1950's to the 1990's, finding a range of characterizations of homosexuals, including representations of them as a social problem, a perverse threat to society, and as victims of abuse, disease, and confusion. Meanwhile, a more recent study by Moscovitz (2010) examined the visual narratives on network news programs regarding LGBT issues and individuals and concluded that though the visibility of LGBT individuals within the news had increased and become more accepted, their representations were still "dominated by conventional 'straight' perspectives" and "normalized and mainstreamed in typically heteronormative ways."

The previous research completed on the representations of LGBT individuals within the media provided a number of significant inspirations for the focus of this thesis. The overwhelmingly negative implications from the previous research on the representations of LGBT individuals in the media, particularly those regarding gay males, as well as the relative lack of research regarding representations of LGBT individuals within the news media were major foundations for the subject of this thesis and encouraged the questions posed by this study. Additionally, the recent work of Moscovitz regarding LGBT individuals and their representation in the major national news media was an important reference in the development of this thesis and the

questions it seeks to answer about LGBT representations in the media, though this study utilizes it on a smaller and more localized level.

## **Methodology**

To investigate the visibility of gay men within the local Memphis news media and the nature of their representations within local media stories, this study examined daily televised newscasts from four separate local news networks as well as the entire daily copy of the city's most predominant broadsheet newspaper. The study lasted for three one-week periods of seven continuous days. The first period lasted from Tuesday, November 27, 2012 to Monday, December 3, 2012, the second period took place from Sunday, February 10, 2013 to Saturday, February 16, 2013, and the third and final period was recorded between Tuesday, February 26, 2013, and Monday, March 4, 2013. Each day of the three surveys, one daily televised newscast from each of the four local news networks and the entire daily newspaper print were surveyed in their entirety for stories involving identified gay men, or for images, descriptions, or mentions of gay men in order to record their visibility within the local Memphis print news. Furthermore, the content of these news pieces were analyzed for representations of gay men and the manner in which they were depicted by the news reporters, photographers, and editors.

The four local news networks whose newscasts were analyzed included News Channel 3 (WREG), Action News 5 (WMC-TV), My Fox Memphis 13 (WHBQ), and ABC News 24 (WPTY). One daily newscast from each of the four local networks was included and surveyed throughout the three week-long study periods. The newscast selected from each network was the 10 p.m. evening news, the most highly-rated period

for the Memphis local television news market (Dowd, 2012). Each broadcast was viewed in its entirety, including promotions and advertisements for the visibility of gay men and the representations of them included in the local broadcast television news of Memphis.

The local daily newspaper analyzed during the survey periods was *The Commercial Appeal*, including all sections and additional included material. The standard sections which appeared in each edition of *The Commercial Appeal* which were included in the survey included the 'Front Page' section, 'Local News', 'Business', 'Sports', and the 'M' section (specially devoted to local Memphis interests). Additional sections which appeared in other editions of the paper included a 'Cars' section of the Classifieds on Saturday, a 'Careers' section of the Classifieds, the 'Homefinder' section of the Classifieds, a 'My Life' section, and addition sales advertisements and pullouts in the Sunday edition. During the first study period, a special news report called "Saving Frayser" regarding the poverty in Memphis was also evaluated. On each date of the three week-long study periods, the newspaper was read in its entirety, including any additional sections and inclusions for the visibility of gay men and the representations of them within the local print news in Memphis.

## **Findings**

### *Local television news*

The newscasts from each of the four local Memphis news networks were surveyed for the three week-long survey periods. Each of the three week-long periods

yielded twenty-eight newscasts and a total of over 16 hours of news programming.

Altogether, the three periods of the study totaled 84 newscasts and over 48 hours of news programming.

Incredibly, of the twenty-eight newscasts selected for observation during both the first and the second survey periods, none of them included news stories which focused on the topic of gay men or included representations of gay men within the stories. For these two survey periods, the visibility of gay men within the Memphis news media essentially did not exist, as not one representation or even mention of them was included within the telecasts. Furthermore, none of the broadcasts included any stories relating to homosexuality or queer issues and none included representations of any LGBT individuals at all. Without any depictions of gay men present within the broadcasts included in the first two parts of this study, none of the newscasts from the first two periods were able to be analyzed for content which demonstrated how gay men are represented within the local Memphis television news media.

However, during the third survey period, an unusual and complicated story involving the disappearance and murder of a mayoral candidate from Clarksdale, Mississippi, became one of the top headlines for the week of the survey period. This event and the news coverage of it qualified for examination by this study due to claims that the victim may have been a gay man. This story was covered by all four local news networks over several days during the third survey period and the findings from these stories were condensed, summarized, and analyzed below due to their overlapping nature and multiple commonalities.

A) "The Murder of Marco McMillian"

Prior to the beginning of this survey period, the story involving Marco McMillian had already been in the local Memphis television headlines for several days. A few days before, McMillian had disappeared and the story was investigated by police and reported by local news media quickly due to McMillian's status as a well-known local politician and mayoral candidate from the small town of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

On the first day of the survey period, Tuesday, February 27, 2013, the local news media stations all reported that a body had been found dumped in a waterway and it was believed to be that of McMillian. Additionally, the news stations also began to report that McMillian was considered by many to be "openly gay." Many of the news stories proclaimed McMillian to be a "good guy" who was running for mayor to make a difference in his hometown, and community members and friends seemed shocked and distraught at his murder.

The next day, Wednesday, February 28, 2013, brought additional, often conflicting developments in the case. One network (Fox13) presented a story describing McMillian as "brilliant," "promising," and "comfortable in his skin," while continuing to report that he was openly gay and even described an "increasing concern that he was killed for his sexual preference." Meanwhile, another network (ABC24) released a conflicting report including a statement from McMillian's mother that said he was not openly gay, he had not announced in public that he was gay, and that she doubted that he was killed because he was gay.

In the days that followed, the story of McMillian's murder fell lower on the totem pole of news stories, some days lacking any sort of developments whatsoever. However,



over the remaining days within the third survey period, the story points within the pieces on McMillian's murder changed significantly. More often, the stories lacked any sort of identification of McMillian as a gay man, and often even shifted the angles of the stories from victim-centered and focused on McMillian, to suspect-centered and focused on Lawrence Reed, the 22-year-old charged with McMillian's murder. Reed had been arrested previously in the week after being involved in a car accident while driving McMillian's SUV the day before McMillian's body was found. On Sunday, March 3, 2013, ABC24 ran a news story detailing Reed's story and featuring a number of soundbites from Reed's friend Kamilla Evans, claiming that Reed was "a good person," he was "there when you need him," and that she "didn't know why people [were] doing this to him." The same piece only included a brief soundbite in reference to McMillian, saying that he was "well-loved." Newscasts from the other networks also continued to cover the story, but also included nothing regarding McMillian's supposed sexual orientation and focused only on Reed's court hearing.

The story of Marco McMillian's murder fits within the bounds of this study and its focus on the visibility of gay men and their representations in the local Memphis news media, though its eligibility is almost questionable. Many of the news stories from earlier in the study period, stories which often explicitly identified Marco McMillian as an openly gay man, unquestionably apply to this study as the representations of McMillian included within those news stories are tied to images of gay men. However, that angle of the story was dropped partway through the study period with the release of the statement from McMillian's mother that he was not openly gay. These stories often included allegations from Reed that McMillian tried to get him to do "homosexual activities" but

never again went so far as to claim that McMillian was a gay man or connect him to the LGBT community. While I feel that the information relayed in these latter stories was important and still may have influenced the way that viewers thought of the story, of gay men, and the LGBT community because of the earlier information released, the stories which did not deliberately identify Marco McMillian as a gay man were not analyzed or included within this study.

The stories which did specifically identify or allege that McMillian was a gay male were analyzed for their representative qualities and what they communicated about gay men. The results from these news stories resulted in a number of mixed messages across the various telecasts and networks.

Interestingly, many of the earlier newscasts which identified McMillian as a gay man painted a positive image of him. Almost all of them featured various phrasings describing him as a good, nice guy whose murder left many people shocked. Some of the many adjectives used to describe McMillian included "brilliant," "smart," and "promising" as they praised his church and community involvement and many successes and accomplishments. Even when discussing his alleged homosexuality, the descriptions were mostly positive, using words and phrases like "open" and "comfortable in his own skin."

However, some of the later newscasts offer a different representation. Instead of identifying him as an open and proud gay man, they shroud discussions of his sexuality and leave it more ambiguous. These stories also often shy away from the severity of the crime. Incidentally, many of these reports also focus on the accused suspect Lawrence Reed, some even calling him a "good guy" and implying that he may have been the

victim of unwanted homosexual advances from McMillian. Later stories even seem to make hardly a mention of McMillian, focusing almost exclusively on the legal proceedings against Reed.

While this one news story provided an incredible increase in the visibility of gay men (or more specifically, one gay man) in the local Memphis television media, the mixed representations of McMillian make it hard to determine the resulting image of gay men from the stories and descriptions about McMillian. At first, he is hailed as a tragic victim: an out, proud gay man trying to make a difference within his community by running for public office only to be tragically cut down by someone else. While not differing much from traditional treatment of victims, the fact that many of the reports and stories denoted an admiration and pride for McMillian's alleged open sexuality and his desire to see change, all bathed in a positive light, is a contrast to the typical treatment of gay men within the media. Yet following the conflicting reports about his sexuality, much of that positive representation seems to vanish. Instead, McMillian's alleged sexuality seems to be shied away from or even perhaps outright hidden, like many of the more traditional images of gay men found within the media. The later focus on the accused suspect's story over McMillian's, the more positive accounts of Reed, and the minimizing of the crime and its severity all subtly support the more traditional, negative representations of gay men that are found in the media and even work to decrease the topic's visibility within the news programming.

Ultimately, this story and its accompanying news programming is a sort of mixed bag when it comes to the representations of gay men that the local news media supports in this instance. While at first the news stations seemed to support a more positive image

of McMillian and male homosexuality, this viewpoint is later reversed. In latter stories, the same stations settle into more traditional representations of gay men as their images are neglected, hidden away, and portrayed in a more negative light. Though this story was responsible for dramatically increasing the presence of gay men within the local television news media during the third survey period, the result seems to be a sort of double edged sword as these stories present conflicting representations of gay men that replace their own formerly positive images of a gay man with ones that are more negative.

#### *Local newspaper*

Seven consecutive daily newspapers from *The Commercial Appeal* were examined during the three week-long survey periods, for a total of twenty-one newspapers. Of the hundreds of stories and pieces compiled within these twenty-one print newspapers, only eight included references to topics regarding homosexuality, gay issues, or gay individuals. Furthermore, only three of these pieces made specific reference to a gay man or males and could be properly analyzed for content relating to the representations of gay men. Analyses of these three news elements appear below.

#### A) "Same sex couples win inheritance right"

"Same sex couples win inheritance right" is a story that was picked up from the wire services and appeared in the 'Front Page' section under the heading 'Briefly' on page 3A of *The Commercial Appeal* from Thursday, November 29, 2012, during the first survey period. It discusses a ruling handed down from the Supreme Court in Poland in

which LGBT individuals in same-sex couples were granted the right to inherit a deceased partner's property.

The piece also includes a representation of a gay man, in the form of the one involved in the Supreme Court case ruling, identified only as 'Adam K.' The man had brought suit against the city authorities in Warsaw for "denying him the right to stay in the city-owned apartment his partner had rented." Lower courts rejected the suit, but when the case was appealed, another court looked to the Supreme Court of Poland for interpretation. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Adam K, citing the country's Constitution and its guarantee for equal rights to all.

The story itself is very short, including only one hundred forty-two words, and ultimately does not allow for deep analysis of its representation of gay men. The story mainly presents the facts of the case and the Court's ruling, opting not to take a stance on the issue in either direction, for or against the ruling and the right to inheritance. Instead, the story simply reports that the Supreme Court of Poland reviewed the suit of a gay man to the right to inherit his partner's former living quarters and that the case was decided in favor of the man on the grounds of equal rights for all citizens from Poland's Constitution.

Though "Same sex couples win inheritance right" was not written or edited by a staff member at the *Commercial Appeal*, it was still selected from the wire services for inclusion in an edition of the local newspaper and includes reference to a gay man, therefore meeting the criteria for this study. While the piece can be included in the findings, the limited representation of gay male sexuality and the brief nature of the story do not allow for much analysis of the writing. The lack of a description or depiction of

'Adam K.' and any additional information or facts about him does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the representation of gay men as drawn by the news piece, as it does not offer a clear depiction or representation of gay men within its story. Additionally, the direct, factual reporting and lack of a discernible viewpoint regarding alternative sexualities or gay issues within the article also does not allow for deep analysis regarding the representations of gay men, despite their additional visibility within the local Memphis newspaper that results from this piece.

The only discussions regarding this piece's inclusion in the *Commercial Appeal* follow from the implication that an editor or other staff member at *The Commercial Appeal* selected this story over others from the wire services for print in the newspaper and any accompanying speculations about the reasons for doing so. However, it is difficult to establish any sort of reason for this given the lack of other news pieces about gay issues or LGBT individuals in the *Commercial Appeal* as well as the fact that the story comes from a foreign country and details an event unlikely to have a prominent impact in the United States or Memphis. Ultimately, though this article increases the visibility of gay men within the local Memphis news media, it does so on the smallest scale possible with little more than a mention of them, and also fails to offer extensive, compelling evidence with which to examine this representation of gay men found in the local Memphis news media or the implications that result from its appearance.

#### B) "No Merit Badge": A Letter to the Editor

"No Merit Badge" is a letter to the Editor which appeared in the Front Page sections of the *Commercial Appeal* on Monday, February 11, 2013, during the second

survey period. Sam Dawson of Bartlett penned the letter and though it represents an opinion of a reader rather than a journalist, it was still selected for inclusion within the newspaper by an editor and includes depictions of male homosexuality, thus qualifying it for analysis within the confines of this study. This letter to the editor is a reaction to President Obama's statement that gays should be allowed to join the Boy Scouts of America, which currently bars openly gay males from participation in their organization.

Dawson begins by calling President Obama's statement "the stupidest thing he has ever uttered." In the letter, Dawson further claims that allowing young boys to interact with those with homosexual tendencies will confuse them as to what is "morally right" because they are not old enough to understand what "homosexuality really means." He concludes by stating that Obama's position and allowing the youth of America to be subjected to "unnatural sexual behavior" is irresponsible and goes against "the moral values of the majority of the citizens of this country."

The letter is very brief, consisting of only five sentences and only one hundred twenty-nine words, though it certainly includes a number of clear ideas about gay men that can be interpreted into a broad representation of the group. Some of the descriptors used to address homosexual men within the letter include "unnatural" and "morally incorrect" and the piece also includes implications about what homosexuality "really means" and that the lifestyle is "all about" things that are very different from heterosexuality and normalcy, though it never specifically mentions what these depraved ideals are. Ultimately, the letter takes the position that exposing boys to homosexual men will confuse them as to what is "right."

Though this representation of gay men described within this letter is very minimal and lightly done, there is no question that this piece clearly takes a position on male homosexuality. The letter classifies gay men as unnatural, with definitive alternative morals and different ideals than the majority of people in America. Though this piece is one of the few from the study which actually includes a representation of gay men within the local Memphis print media, the representation and additional visibility that this letter offers is not a positive one. The letter's position is clearly heteronormative. Additionally, the language in this article seeks to separate the gay men from the rest of Americans by implying that their alternative lifestyle lacks morals and is about something which is not specifically identified in the letter, but is inherently wrong. Unfortunately, the visibility and the representation that this letter offers to gay men is not a positive one, and rather than promoting acceptance and empowerment of male homosexuality, it decries it in order to take a more traditional stance on the issue and to ultimately continue the oppression of gay men.

#### C) "GLAAD Award Honors Cooper"

"GLAAD Award Honors Cooper" is a brief article which appeared in the 'People' portion of the "M" Section of the *Commercial Appeal* during the third survey period on Monday, March 4, 2013. Though the piece is originally from a wire service, it was selected for inclusion within the Memphis newspaper by a local news editor and includes a representation of a gay man in the form of 'out' news anchor Anderson Cooper, and qualifies for analysis within this study. The piece discusses the announcement that gay



advocacy group the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination will be distributing an award for openly gay media professionals to CNN news anchor Anderson Cooper.

The story is very short, but actually does a great deal to advance the visibility of gay men within the local news media through the representation of Anderson Cooper. Cooper is a well-known anchor on cable news network CNN, who recently came out of the closet and openly admitted his homosexuality. Within this article, Anderson Cooper is described as a media professional who has "used [his] career[] to support gay, lesbian, and transgender people" and that he is open and happy.

Though this article about Cooper being selected as the recipient of this award is short and includes a thin representation of male homosexuality, that representation is clearly a more progressive, positive image of gay men. Cooper's representation within the newspaper includes that of gay man who has a successful professional career which he uses to advance causes which he cares about while balancing a happy private life that exists out in the open. Furthermore, the main point of the article is to discuss how Cooper is being awarded by a gay advocacy group for the work that he has done in the past and through his programming in order to further gay causes. This representation of a gay male: one who is open, successful, and happy, is not one of the more traditional representations of gay men that has been seen within the news media previously. Not only does the presence of this positive representation of a gay man reflect some of the shifting attitudes towards homosexuality and their acceptance within society, but it also aids both in the increase of the visibility and the offering of a different representation of gay men within the local Memphis news media.

## Discussion

This content analysis of the visibility and representations of gay men courtesy of the local Memphis news media yielded a limited, but varied selection of information to analyze for its images and viewpoints of male homosexuality. During the three one-week survey periods, only a small fraction of the forty-eight hours of televised news broadcasts across eighty-four newscasts from four networks included a representation of a gay man, and even then it was only in relation to a single news event. Of the hundreds of news articles from the twenty-one daily *Commercial Appeals* gathered during the three one-week surveys, only eight included mentions of LGBT individuals or issues and then only three of them yielded enough information to discuss the visibility of gay men and the representations of male homosexuality that these pieces communicate. These examples of gay male visibility and representations found within the local Memphis news media offer information from which knowledge about male homosexuality and its relationship with the local Memphis news media can be gathered, as well as an answer to the research questions posed by this thesis.

RQ1 asked what the representations of gay men that could be found within the local Memphis news media were. The study offered an answer to this question through the instances of three different representations of gay men. The first of these representations came in the form of Marco McMillian, an allegedly openly gay mayoral candidate from Clarksdale, Mississippi, who disappeared and was later found murdered. McMillian's representation was present within the television newscasts of all four local media stations, however it was not found in the local Memphis print media. McMillian's representation of gay men, which shifted as the news story changed after a period of

several days ran the gamut of differences. At first, McMillian was lauded as a brilliant, good, open man who looked to make a difference in his community until he was cut down by another, yet later the representations of him within the news stories involving his case shifted as the claims of his homosexuality became contested and the depictions of him were replaced by those of his alleged murderer. The other two clear representations of gay men found within the local Memphis news media both came courtesy of the *Commercial Appeal*, though they exhibited very different representations of male homosexuality. The depiction of gay men which appeared in Sam Dawson's Letter to the Editor, "No Merit Badge" was one of a traditional and dark nature: that gay men are depraved individuals engaged in unnatural sexual activities and devoid of moral wisdom. Yet, Anderson Cooper's representation of a gay man in "GLAAD Award honors Cooper" is a far cry from that, as Cooper is depicted as a successful openly gay professional individual committed to a cause that he deeply supports and being happy in his life. These two representations appear as sharp contrasts to one another, and when paired with the shifting and varied representation of Marco McMillian, provide an answer to RQ1 that consists of three different representations of gay men which appeared in the local Memphis news media during the survey periods of this study, and all suggest different viewpoints about the idea of male homosexuality. These differing viewpoints and answers to RQ1 create an interesting and complicated answer for the second research question posed by this content analysis.

RQ2, which posed the question of what these representations of gay men communicate about male sexuality according to the news reporters and editors of the local news was answered by the study, but this answer is very contentious and does not

provide one overwhelming idea about how male homosexuality is communicated by the local Memphis media, as each of the three representations of gay men identified by the survey signifies a different message.

The representation of McMillian ultimately communicates a sense of fear for gay men and a threat to their presence and visibility. Overall, this news story implies that though those who are out may be happy to feel free to be who they are, the world can be a dangerous place for them as they go against the grain, perpetuating the idea that fear should lead one to keep their homosexuality hidden and out of the public eye. The story takes the action away from gay men in a sense, because while it allows them to make the decision for themselves about their sexuality and their own openness about it, it does not promise them protection for their beliefs or even equal treatment as other individuals. Conversely, the Letter to the Editor which appears in the *Commercial Appeal* blasted the male homosexual lifestyle, communicating that there are few things in this world that are more unnatural or morally wrong than the lifestyle of gay men and that these deviant actions must not be allowed in order to prevent the confusion and corruption of children in our nation. Alternately, the representation of Anderson Cooper in the *Commercial Appeal* communicated the opposite. His image indicates that male homosexuality is something that is becoming more widely accepted within our country, and this representation furthers the idea that a gay man is capable of living an open life, having a successful job and being happy without having to hide who he is or whom he loves.

As each representation of gay men found in the Memphis news media seemed to communicate a different message, this makes it difficult to establish the underlying message about male homosexuality that exists in the Memphis media. While one of these

representations was much more progressive regarding male homosexuality and indicated positive ideas about gay men and their visibility, the others representations were more traditional and favored eliminating or shrouding male homosexuality within the media and our society. The contention between these representations makes it very unclear about what the position of the local Memphis media is on gay men and male homosexuality. From these representations, it is not effectively determined if male homosexuality is something that should be accepted and welcomed into our media and society, or if it is something that should still be condemned or hidden away out of the public view. Unfortunately, these differing viewpoints, while answering the research question, do not give a concrete opinion about the overall position of the local Memphis news media and which representations are correct in regard to gay men and male homosexuality.

## **Conclusion**

The representations of gay men found by this study in the local Memphis news provided a considerable amount of insight into the visibility and communication of male homosexuality in Memphis media and society. These images of gay men presented within the local news signify that gay men are not totally invisible within the local Memphis news market, but that their presence is occasional and generally only occurs in response to a major news story involving gay men or gay male celebrities. Visibility is often thought of as a positive ideal, but some of the representations of gay men from this study may call that into question.

Additionally, the representations of male homosexuality found within the local Memphis news media as a part of this study were quite the mixed bag, with each of these representations offering a different viewpoint about male homosexuality to accompany it. Two of these representations generally seemed to present negative and more traditional viewpoints of gay men. One representation seemed uncertain about its ultimate position on male homosexuality, but at the least seemed intent on avoiding the subject or hiding it away. Another representation decried gay men and male homosexuality outright, calling it both immoral and unnatural. The final representation took a completely opposite stance on the issue, not only accepting male homosexuality, but even going so far as to communicate that it is possible for a gay man to be open about his sexuality, and still have a prosperous and happy life. Between these three differing viewpoints, it is difficult to hypothesize the message that these representations of gay men are communicating to those exposed to the local Memphis news media, as well as the impact that these representations are creating within the Memphis community and its members.

The conclusions of this study leave plenty of room for additional research within the areas of visibility and representation of LGBT individuals and their connections to the local Memphis news media. Other studies could further examine the same questions as this study, though perhaps more in-depth by watching every newscast from all four local news stations or by expanding the print media included in the study beyond just the *Commercial Appeal*. Each individual station or print medium could also be examined individually to determine how each particular news organizations communicates homosexuality and gay issues to their audience and compared to reveal similarities or differences between the sources. Another excellent subject for future analysis in the vein

of this study would investigate the connection between LGBT representations on the local news and public opinion, as well as the influence that the local media has over gay issues and the potential resulting social and political impact. Furthermore, this study only indicates the results of a survey of the gay male representations within the local Memphis news media, but alternate studies could examine the representations of other LGBT individuals within the Memphis news media, including groups such as lesbians, bisexuals, asexuals, or transgendered. Of course, because this study only focused on the Memphis media market, representations of LGBT individuals within the news media could be examined in a different local market and might reveal very different viewpoints and representations of homosexuality and LGBT individuals.

Ultimately, this thesis revealed some interesting information about the visibility of gay males and their representations within the local Memphis news media. The survey and content analysis indicates a surprising and concerning inconsistency in both the presence and visibility of gay males in Memphis' local TV news broadcasts and print media, as well as what these representations suggest and communicate about male homosexuality. The mixed results from this study also set the stage for further research to be completed in the future regarding the topic of representations of male homosexuality in the local Memphis news media as well as the impact that these images of gay men have on the Memphis community. These topics involving the presence of homosexuality and representations of LGBT individuals both within our society and within the media are likely not going to vanish anytime soon and neither are those individuals who have come to be accepting and open of their sexuality. With any luck, the results of this study and others like it will only encourage further discussion regarding the acceptance of

homosexuality and other alternative sexualities, positive solutions to the many gay issues in the social and political areas, and the role that media plays in the progression of the public's attitudes towards new ideas.



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