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# Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences

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# Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences

## **Abstract**

In the summer of 2003, gays were big news in the United States and Canada: the U.S. Supreme Court overturned sodomy laws in all states, the Canadian government decided to award marriage licenses to same-sex couples, and Gene Robinson was confirmed as the bishop of New Hampshire, making him the first openly gay and partnered Episcopalian bishop in the Anglican church. The television show that catalyzed the national imagination was Bravo cable channel's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a makeover show in which five gay men worked with the raw material of a stylistically and socially incompetent heterosexual in order to "build a better straight man."

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Dualcasting

### *Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences*

*Katherine Sender*

In the summer of 2003, gays were big news in the United States and Canada: the U.S. Supreme Court overturned sodomy laws in all states, the Canadian government decided to award marriage licenses to same-sex couples, and Gene Robinson was confirmed as the bishop of New Hampshire, making him the first openly gay and partnered Episcopalian bishop in the Anglican church. The television show that catalyzed the national imagination was Bravo cable channel's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a makeover show in which five gay men worked with the raw material of a stylistically and socially incompetent heterosexual in order to "build a better straight man."<sup>1</sup> A measure of the show's success was its spoof spin-offs, including three episodes of *Straight Plan for the Gay Man*, and a special episode of *South Park*, "South Park is Gay!"—all of which aired on Comedy Central. Bravo also ran an original gay-themed dating series, *Boy Meets Boy*, which led into *Queer Eye*. For a channel formerly known for its signature show *Inside the Actors Studio*, this assertively gay-themed programming seemed a happy moment of serendipitous timing. Yet the broader context of the fragmentation of mass television audiences across increasing numbers of channels and Bravo's own history of programming gay content help to make sense of why the channel was a major player in 2003's "summer of gay love."<sup>2</sup> This chapter considers the deployment of gay-themed programming on Bravo as an example of a new approach to attract a fragmented and volatile audience, hitherto loyal to the Big Three networks, to niche cable channels. Did Bravo's executives position the channel as the de facto gay channel in the gap left by MTV and Showtime's stalled dedicated gay cable channel, Outlet (see Freitas, in this vol-

ume), or was gay-themed programming like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Boy Meets Boy* part of a broader strategy to appeal to audiences, gay and straight alike?<sup>3</sup>

Bravo's gay-themed shows of 2003 arrived at a unique moment in U.S. television history that saw a confluence of two cultural trends, one industrial, the other representational. From a television industry standpoint, as the number of channels available to the average television household increased from ten in 1980 to ninety in 2003, the Big Three broadcast networks experienced a significant erosion of their audience, seeing their shared prime-time rating drop by half in the same period.<sup>4</sup> As Joseph Turow observes, in the early 1980s advertisers began to consider cable as a means to reach the dissipating audience,<sup>5</sup> the Big Three networks consequently suffered a decline in ad revenue from 98 percent to 46 percent of total advertising bought on television between 1980 and 2003.<sup>6</sup> The smaller broadcast and cable channels enjoyed a growing share of advertising revenue. Fox, UPN, and the WB won almost 11 percent of advertising income by 2003, and the ad-supported cable networks combined took 36 percent of television ad revenues.<sup>7</sup> The smaller channels not only offered an alternative and cheaper means to reach audiences, but also were focused on a highly targeted one: from their inception, cable channels such as MTV, Lifetime, and BET offered fare designed to attract young, female, and African-American viewers, respectively. Cable executives scheduled programs designed to signal to viewers within a particular demographic and lifestyle niche that there was a special relationship between the channel and that niche, as well as to signal to advertisers that the channel had efficiently separated the desirable group from those viewers outside the target market.<sup>8</sup> But cable channels must navigate a narrow line between signaling a niche appeal and retaining large enough audiences. In order to be included in the Nielsen Cable Activity Report, the cable equivalent to the broadcast television ratings, a cable channel has to be available in at least 3.3 percent of U.S. television households and to generate a minimum 0.1 rating in those households (approximately 100,000 households). In the increasing competition for audiences in the 1990s, cable channels "couldn't afford to see themselves as so targeted as to fall below Nielsen's radar. On the other hand, they were aware that with the proliferation of offerings they needed advertisers and viewers to go to their format because it had a distinct personality."<sup>9</sup> Like its cable competitors, Bravo had to develop programming that signaled a niche appeal, but could still garner large enough audiences to gain advertiser attention.

Seismic shifts in audience activity were paralleled by profound transformations in television representations. Since the mid-1990s, gay and lesbian images have proliferated on broadcast network, basic cable, and premium cable channels. Gay and lesbian (though rarely bisexual and almost never transgender) characters are now not only tolerated but often welcomed on U.S. televisions: NBC's *Will & Grace*, for example, drew an average weekly audience of 16.8 million viewers in the 2003–2004 season.<sup>10</sup> The reality television genre has been particularly hospitable to gay characters: MTV's *The Real World* has included at least one gay, lesbian, or bisexual participant in almost every season since its debut in 1992, and, with the exception of dating shows (but sometimes here, too), gay members are a regular part of the “diversity” of reality competitor line-ups. Indeed, Larry Gross argues that gay participants are not incidental but fundamental to the realism of reality television: “Whereas, as recently as the early 1990s, the inclusion of a gay character would typically be the focus of some dramatic ‘problem’ to be resolved, today, particularly for programs that aim at coveted younger viewers, it seems that the presence of gay people is a necessary guarantor of realism.”<sup>11</sup>

The relative ubiquity of gay and lesbian characters on reality-TV shows reflects the expectations of a genre that demands diversity and conflict among participants, as well as a long history of gay activist agitation towards media visibility. Especially since the Stonewall Riots of 1969, gay activists have put much emphasis on media representations of gays, pressuring producers to show the world and isolated gays that other gay people exist, and campaigning against the most egregious stereotypes of homosexuals as pathological, criminal, and pathetic. The AIDS epidemic challenged many people to come out to their families and colleagues, increasing the number of people who were aware that they knew gay people and encouraging more openly gay and lesbian media executives to lobby for more and better representations. President Clinton's attempt to lift the ban on gays in the military, though failed, nevertheless made homosexuality a topic for national debate. Watershed shows such as *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Queer as Folk*, *Sex in the City*, and *Six Feet Under* brought new, likeable, and increasingly complex gay and lesbian characters to prime-time broadcast and cable television.

Perhaps most significant in the growing presence of gay-themed programming was the development of the gay market, which was in formation by the late 1970s and rapidly consolidated in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Gay and lesbian consumers went from a marginalized and largely stigmatized group

to a desirable marketing niche in this period, with two distinct effects for television programming. First, gay marketing taught media producers of all kinds that there is a potentially sizable gay and lesbian audience for their programs, as well as emphasizing (usually by exaggeration) the affluence and loyalty of that audience. Second, the construction of the ideal gay consumer as not only wealthy but trend-setting was so successful that advertisers wanted to be associated with the gay market in order to appeal to *heterosexual* consumers. By including gay and lesbian characters in shows, programmers and advertisers could reach two distinct audiences: gays and lesbians in search of people who look (sort of) like them and heterosexuals attracted to the hip cachet of gay taste. Television executives hoped to attract a sizable combined audience with lots of money and cultural capital, an audience apparently primed for advertisers' messages.

These two trends—the dissipation of audiences and the proliferation of gay images—are separable in theory only. In practice, the rise of increasingly differentiated and consolidated target markets and the tailoring of program content for niche media and are entirely interdependent. Turow describes two perspectives on the fragmentation of audiences across media channels. One version argues that the technological and industrial changes that facilitated hundreds of television channels led to an inevitable process of segmentation of the audience, as viewers went in search of varied fare. The other perspective argues that media fragmentation was a response to, not a cause of, audience fragmentation. The civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the women's and gay rights movements highlighted identity affiliation and politics in unprecedented ways. According to an *Advertising Age* editorial, in the 1970s America seemed "split asunder into innumerable special interests—gray power, gay power, red power, black power, Sunbelt and frostbelt, environmentalists and industrialists . . . all more aware of their claims on society."<sup>13</sup>

The truth, however, lies somewhere between these versions; marketers did indeed respond to identity movements, but as audiences showed they were willing to be organized into newly distinct segments, media producers made increasingly concerted efforts to both consolidate and further split those segments. Cable television proved especially agile in this process of segmentation: because revenues come from both cable distributors that pay the cable network for content and from advertisers buying space on shows, cable networks can afford to target smaller niche audiences than the mass demanded by the much more expensive broadcast networks. Cable also has a tradition of cheap programming, showing reruns in syn-

dication and developing inexpensive original programming, such as reality shows and documentaries, that do not necessitate paying high salaries to writers and actors. Cable TV is thus ideally placed to appeal to narrow segments of the overall audience in small but select groups as a target for advertisers.

Cable has also been able to afford to take more risks with gay programming than the broadcast networks can, because of its different sources of revenue and types of regulation. Cable can be less concerned by advertiser backlash, because cable channels have an additional source of sponsorship from distribution and subscription. Cable channels are not subject to the same FCC regulations on content as the networks, allowing them to take greater risks with controversial content. Premium cable channels like HBO and Showtime have pushed the envelope on gay themes, modeling a television environment more friendly to gay characters and viewers. Bravo's gay-themed programming of 2003 thus reflects not a brave attempt by a cable renegade to bring gays to basic cable, but a confluence of existing industry, marketing, and representational trends that made the channel ideally placed to develop gay television.

Indeed, *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* were not Bravo's first shows to feature gay content, but continued the channel's history of gay-themed programming. Bravo executives had commissioned a number of short-run, reality-format, gay- and lesbian-themed shows in the early 2000s: *Fire Island* (2000), *Gay Riviera* (2001), and *Gay Weddings* (2003) had built small audiences before *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* appeared in 2003. Bravo had also profiled openly gay and lesbian celebrities, such as k.d. lang (1996), and celebrities popular with gay and lesbian fans, such as Cher, whose much-advertised retirement concert was rerun on Bravo as a lead-in to the premier episode of *Queer Eye*. Bravo continued this run of gay-themed reality shows with a short-lived spin-off, *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl*, in 2005.

Bravo's gay-themed programming also reflects the channel's changing affiliation within the television industry: NBC's parent company, General Electric, purchased Bravo from Cablevision Systems Corporation in November 2002, wanting to "improve the network's cable presence and give [NBC] another outlet for programming."<sup>14</sup> *Queer Eye's* executive producer David Collins admitted being nervous that NBC would find the show, already in development, too controversial, and cancel it: "We thought for sure it was all over . . . We thought 'OK, that was fun. We got to make a pi-

lot, and it's going to stay on the shelf."<sup>15</sup> Instead, NBC executives were enthusiastic about *Queer Eye*, seeing it as one of a number of new shows that would help to change Bravo's reputation from its "artsy," "highbrow" tradition to something "edgier" and more youth-oriented.<sup>16</sup> By doing so, they hoped to shift the dominant demographic from older viewers (in early 2003 half the audience was over fifty) towards a younger population.<sup>17</sup> As one industry insider said, Bravo had been perceived to have "a 'Masterpiece Theatre' kind of audience, and the perception [among Bravo and NBC executives] is that there's more to offer."<sup>18</sup>

The debut of *Queer Eye* and its lead-in, *Boy Meets Boy*, two weeks later, created a flurry of press activity, much of which addressed the prospective audience Bravo was after. As Bravo President Jeff Gaspin said, "Does this mean that Bravo is becoming a gay network? Absolutely not. . . . Not that there's anything wrong with that." He continued, "On the surface [the program block] might seem designed for gay audiences, but it's really not. . . . When we discussed our advertising plans for how we are going to promote it, the first group of people we are going to promote it to are women [aged] 18 to 49."<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, Gaspin said, "We have had success with gay audiences in the past . . . but the primary audiences for these shows will be women. We don't sell a gay audience to advertisers."<sup>20</sup> With one exception, all the articles about the show in the trade and popular press duly emphasized that women (presumably heterosexual), not gays or lesbians, were the primary audience for the shows. Only one article talked about the show's potential to market products, like the Fab Five's chariot, a General Motors Yukon Denali SUV, to gay consumers: "GM officials say the biggest draw for them for *Queer Eye* is that it features top-shelf brands, such as Thomasville Furniture and Ralph Lauren, and [General Motors], with its 'professional grade' image, fits nicely into that mold."<sup>21</sup> This was a rare acknowledgement of an advertiser's wish to be associated with gay consumers' "professional grade"—read "affluent"—reputation, and of the value of that association for product placement on a show that profiles gay taste.

Gaspin insisted that Bravo has a "dual target" for their gay programs; gay audiences were considered a "secondary priority to female viewers," and three-quarters of the advertising budget for both *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* was allocated to attracting women audiences.<sup>22</sup> One television commercial for *Queer Eye*, for example, asked, "Ladies, is your man an embarrassment? . . . Is his place a pig sty? Meet five gay men out to make over the world one straight guy at a time." A marketing representative



from Bravo saw the additional spending as justified: women “wouldn’t gravitate as naturally to ‘Queer’ or ‘Boy’ as gay viewers would.” She continued, “Women, as a broader target, are not as easy to convince to see these programs. . . . Communication in the gay community is such that [gays] would find their way to these shows quickly.”<sup>23</sup> Bravo executives also acknowledged that gay viewers were harder to target through conventional advertising venues, so they adopted other methods to raise the profile of the shows, including distributing 44,000 whistles at gay pride parades in New York and Los Angeles with “*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*” on one side and “Bad style really blows!” on the other.

Gay audiences, then, were not Bravo’s primary target for their gay-themed shows, for a number of reasons. First, sexual identification is not included in mainstream ratings data, meaning that it is hard to sell a gay audience to advertisers. As a senior vice president for marketing and advertising services at NBC said, “Gay men are not measured by Nielsen [Media Research] . . . Women 18 to 49 is a more saleable demo[graphic].”<sup>24</sup> Second, at an estimated 5 to 6 percent of the adult population, gays represent a much smaller potential audience than women ages 18 to 49 do. Third, just as women 18 to 49 will inevitably have a diverse range of viewing habits and tastes (a diversity that is the lifeblood of niche cable programming), gay and lesbian audiences also have highly variant preferences: simply including gay characters or participants on a show is no guarantee of winning a large sector of the gay audience. A glance at gay-niche print media bears this out: few gay and lesbian magazines have managed to achieve circulation rates higher than 100,000, even though the GLBT-identified population numbers in the millions.

*Boy Meets Boy* is an especially interesting example of where gay-themed programming, even when produced by gay personnel, might not necessarily appeal to gay audiences. The show’s premise—a gay *Bachelor* dating show with the “twist” that some of the suitors were heterosexual—was especially controversial, despite its producers’ claims that it was a “sociological experiment” designed to teach the heterosexual participants (and their audience counterparts) about the stress and pain of hiding one’s “true” sexuality.<sup>25</sup> Executive producer Doug Ross speculated that “adding straight guys to the dating pool . . . will bring straight viewers to a show that might otherwise have attracted only a gay audience.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, the deceptive strategy—revealed to the show’s leading man only midway through the series—risked alienating gay viewers who, like the gay “bachelor” James, felt manipulated by what seemed like a particularly

homophobic twist. Bravo focused its efforts on reaching women, then, because women constituted a larger, measurable, and therefore more desirable audience. Further, because gay viewers were hard to reach through conventional advertising, because they would watch the shows anyway (Bravo executives hoped), and because they might prove a more critical or fickle audience, there was less incentive to actively court them.

Finally, Gaspin's refutation of the suggestion that Bravo was becoming a de facto gay channel reflects a conventional industry distancing from too close an association with gay consumers, and a related claim that marketing should be a matter of "business, not politics."<sup>27</sup> Emphasizing Bravo's courting of the female audience makes obvious business sense, but also avoids thornier questions about the politics of developing a gay niche channel.

Understanding why gay and lesbian viewers were only a secondary target for Bravo's gay-themed offerings is an easier task than understanding why women are a primary target. Why produce gay-themed programming if you are not primarily interested in reaching gay audiences? This strategy seems to go against a common-sense assumption that people watch shows that portray people somewhat like them—that there is a direct, if aspirational, identity connection between audiences and characters. When Bravo produced shows that featured gay men, it went against this assumption and instead tapped into long-standing associations both between gay men and sophisticated consumption and between gay men and heterosexual women in order to appeal to a sizable female audience.

In different ways, *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* endorse the adage that gay men are women's best friends. In *Queer Eye*, the Fab Five are the on-screen women's proxies, making over their mates on the show and transforming them into better romantic and domestic partners. The Fab Five also help female viewers train their menfolk, either by example, when women audiences can get their husbands and boyfriends to watch, or by passing on tips female viewers can then use to reform their men. The Fab Five, with their tart critiques and camp rejoinders, manage to achieve more than any amount of womanly nagging can do. *Queer Eye* makes explicit what has been a common assumption for decades: that gay men are uniquely positioned to guide those around them through the intricacies of domestic and style matters. As Lisa Henderson writes, the show's "stereotypical possibilities exist because gay men have had historical access to the style trades when others were denied them, because that is where they could be safely sequestered as inverts among women."<sup>28</sup> Because of

this historical professional association between gay men and women, gay makeover experts are ideally positioned to be the conduit for a feminized, and female-audience-friendly, training of heterosexual men.

Making a space for the women audience in *Boy Meets Boy* is a harder task. How can heterosexual female viewers insert themselves into an improvised script that involves men courting other men? The appeal to straight women in *Boy Meets Boy* comes from the strategic deployment of carefully regulated manifestations of gay masculinity, the inclusion of a number of “closeted” heterosexual men among the suitors, and the presence of James’s female best friend, Andra. As Joshua Gamson notes, all the participants in the show are normatively masculine—there are no sissy boys here. Gamson quotes the eventual winner, Wes, who says, “There have always been these stereotypes of gay men not being athletic, gay men not being masculine . . . and this show blows that out of the water.”<sup>29</sup> All the contestants are fit and muscular, well groomed, stylish, and charming. The discovery that some of them are in fact heterosexual only adds to the appeal: it may be said that all the best men are gay, but if you can’t tell the gay ones from the straight ones, some of those gay-ish straight men might be available as romantic partners for women.

Andra is the straight female audience’s on-screen proxy, a reversal of the classic model of the gay man as the straight woman protagonist’s sidekick. Discussing *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, James Allan describes the role of George, played by Rupert Everett: he “gives Jules [Julia Roberts] support and advice and is there for her when her romantic machinations fail. But he has no storyline of his own, nor does he have any romantic or sexual life that the audience knows about.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Andra’s role is to facilitate James’s selection process: she does crowd control, taking a group of guys out while James gets to know the others; she investigates the guys to assess their sincerity, values, and suitability; and she offers advice to James before the weekly elimination ceremony. Crucially, however, Andra is not James’s sexual competitor. After the reveal of the “twist,” when we learn that in fact some of the suitors are heterosexual, it is Andra, more than James, who expresses shock, betrayal, and outrage on her best friend’s behalf. She does not show delight, at least publicly, at the opening up of romantic possibility that the twist affords her—no hint of “Yummy! Some for me!”

It is not surprising, then, that Bravo’s emphasis has been on gay men, and not lesbians. Because of gay men’s historical association with taste and fashion, their status as straight women’s best friends, and their availability as objects of desire (however unattainable), gay men are a more attractive

draw for heterosexual women audiences than lesbians would be. Further, as I elaborate elsewhere, lesbians' lower average household income and a historical association between lesbian-feminism and anti-consumerism makes lesbians less desirable or recuperable within a model of ideal consumption (Showtime's lesbian drama *The L-Word* notwithstanding).<sup>31</sup>

With *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* Bravo thus skillfully harnessed the reputation of gay men as experts in conventionally feminine image professions and the tradition of special friendships between gay men and straight women to the newly popular genre of reality television. Bravo reworked two types of reality-TV programs—dating and makeover shows—that were already popular with women; for example, women make up 71 percent of both *Bachelor* and *Bachelorette* audiences, and 67 percent of *Extreme Makeover* audiences.<sup>32</sup> The channel did so with a twist (twists themselves being a staple of reality television): many of the principal participants were gay. The generic conventions that both *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* deployed put less familiar protagonists into very familiar formats, involving the least necessary stretch for heterosexual audiences to understand, identify with, and enjoy the programming: the genre is familiar, even if the sexuality of the participants may be less so.

Bravo's strategy of offering women audiences entry points into the gay-inflected worlds of *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* proved successful in boosting the channel's ratings and shifting the demographic profile of its audience. Between the first quarter of 2003, before Bravo's "summer of gay love," and the same period in 2004, the channel increased its total viewership by 75 percent, and went from number 30 in cable ratings for the Tuesday evening slot to number "one, two, or three—depending upon what FX or MTV had on against *Queer Eye*," according to Jeff Gaspin.<sup>33</sup> The show averaged 1.77 million viewers in its first year, "small by broadcast standards but an increase of 634 percent over the pre-*Queer Eye* average in that time slot."<sup>34</sup> In addition to boosting ratings in that prime-time segment, there was also a "halo effect": as more viewers tuned in to see the Fab Five, they were successfully courted for shows such as Bravo's staple, *Inside the Actors Studio*, and reruns of *The West Wing*, newly purchased from sibling network channel NBC. Bravo was also successful in attracting more affluent and younger viewers, increasing the median annual income of its audience from \$61,429 to \$65,952, and lowering its median age from 50.8 years to a more advertiser-friendly 45.3 years.<sup>35</sup> And advertisers were indeed impressed. According to *Advertising Age*, Bravo increased its upfront commitments from advertisers for the 2004 fall season by 100 percent over the

previous year.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, however, there is no ratings information in the popular or trade press suggesting how successful these shows were with women.

Bravo's executives may have been less concerned to reach gay audiences than to build audience ratings and to shift its demographics from an older audience to a younger, female one, but gay-themed programming was nevertheless central to this strategy. Because gay characters and participants on television shows in general (as opposed to reality TV in particular) are still somewhat unusual and contentious, gay-themed shows get more media attention than similar shows do. Christian fundamentalists play their predictable part in stimulating controversy: invited to comment on *Boy Meets Boy*, a spokeswoman from the Traditional Values Coalition asked, "What's next, 'Boy Meets Sheep'?"<sup>37</sup> Bravo tapped into a strategy used before by advertisers looking to increase the profile of low-budget campaigns: by including gay content, with the notoriety this inevitably brings, a campaign will get extra, free publicity. Indeed, some companies get a great deal of press attention for ads that are never or rarely broadcast. *New York Times* advertising columnist Stuart Elliott explained to me that a 1998 Virgin Cola television commercial that showed two men kissing during a commitment ceremony "never ran. Nobody ran it. A lot of times they'll put a gay theme in an ad because they know it'll be controversial, and they know it won't be accepted and then they get a lot of publicity, . . . you know: 'Virgin Cola redefines cutting edge.'"<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Bravo capitalized on the still-edgy reputation of homosexuality to gain a great deal of press attention for the channel.<sup>39</sup> When *Adweek* asked president Jeff Gaspin how advertisers reacted to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, he said, "It was the title more than anything that scared them. The title was a statement, and one of our goals this year for Bravo was to get people talking about it."<sup>40</sup> Once the show was successful, its gay themes were not "an issue at all" for advertisers, according to Gaspin.

Bravo also tapped into particular characteristics associated with gay men to appeal to audiences, to advertisers, and to product-placement sponsors alike. The formation of the gay market since the 1970s consolidated the ideal image of the gay consumer as a trend-setter, an image Bravo deployed to get a younger, hipper audience. *Queer Eye* most aptly puts this reputation to work, where the Fab Five draw upon stereotypes that gay men "naturally" have impeccable manners, enviable cooking skills, and great taste in clothes, hair, and interior design. Not only is this image appealing to heterosexual women in search of advice about how to

improve their menfolk, but it is also appealing to advertisers, who want to associate their products with gay male consumers' reputation for copious, high-end shopping. Because gay men are assumed to have not just great taste, but also abundant disposable income, too, Bravo simultaneously tapped into a class-specific appeal associated with affluence. Channel executives wanted to keep their "highbrow reputation," while also appealing to younger audiences with more "popular" fare. But because reality television is cheap to produce, uses non-actors, and tends to be preoccupied with domestic and feminized concerns, reality shows risk bringing a lowbrow reputation to the channel. Using gays, with their upscale associations, helps deflect the trashy shadow of reality television. One article makes explicit the device of using gay men as a prophylactic against the taint of cheapness that comes with the reality genre: "*Queer Eye* . . . plays into the reality-makeover trend, but the Bravo twist is to do the show with gay men styling straight ones. 'We don't want to become low rent with the programming we do,' Mr. Gaspin says. 'We don't want to become common.'"<sup>41</sup> If reality TV is a "low-rent" genre, gays come to the rescue with their high cultural capital and abundant incomes. Like the British queen, the Fab Five don't carry money; many products are acquired in the process of a day's frenetic shopping, but prices are never discussed, affordability is never considered, and cash never changes hands. Practically, this is because the goods are donated as part of companies' product placement strategies; getting a product on the show increased some companies' sales by more than 300 percent.<sup>42</sup> But the effacement of the financial transaction as part of the makeover has the added effect of implying such abundant wealth that no one needs to ask awkward, embarrassing questions about money. Bravo thus tapped into the association between gay men and affluent, high-class style in order to attract audiences to cheap reality programming without risking the "low-rent" association that reality makeover shows have.<sup>43</sup>

Gay content has therefore not been incidental but crucial to Bravo's success. Of all basic cable channels, Bravo has most aggressively pursued the strategy of using gay-themed programs to appeal to a range of audiences, not just GLBT-identified ones. By linking the channel's content with characteristics consolidated by gay marketing—that gay men are trend-setting, affluent, female-friendly, and newsworthy—Bravo shed some of its staid reputation to become "more relevant and current" to the affluent, younger audience it sought.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, however, Jeff Gaspin repeatedly resisted the charge that Bravo was becoming "the gay

channel.” In one article, for example, he clarified: “I don’t think people think of *Queer Eye* as a gay show. I think people think it’s a show with five gay leads.”<sup>45</sup> In another, he discussed future programming plans:

I do think it’s important that we have a mix of programming, and if we did another gay-themed show, then the accusations that were made against the channel six, seven months ago—that Bravo was a gay network—would resurface. At the time, I was trying to manage that. At the same time, I didn’t want to back off—it would counteract everything we were trying to do. By no means do we want to abandon the gay audience that’s coming to Bravo . . . but I do want to service a broader audience.<sup>46</sup>

This is a very different model of niche programming than that of Logo, Viacom’s new channel targeted at GLBT viewers. In contrast to Logo’s strategy of gay narrowcasting, which requires that a large proportion of a relatively small target market be attracted to shows and watch advertising, Bravo is “dualcasting”: targeting two specific audiences, gays and women aged 18 to 49, with the same shows. Given the struggles PrideVision, Canada’s dedicated gay cable network, has faced in amassing a large enough subscriber base to become profitable, such dualcasting tactics might prove necessary to make gay television financially viable.

Using gay content to dualcast to two distinct audiences not only has been essential to shift Bravo’s audience demographics and increase the channel’s profile, but is also part of a larger strategy of diversification by NBC. As audiences dispersed across a range of television channels and other media, the Big Three networks could no longer simply carve advertising revenues up among them. Most media companies have responded to the profound shifts in consumption patterns by acquiring an increasingly diversified portfolio, purchasing competitors so that even as viewers choose ever more segmented media, all slices ultimately come from the same company pie. NBC is far from unique in this strategy. On the contrary, Viacom, for example, owns CBS and UPN broadcast networks as well as a broad range of cable channels, including MTV, VH1, and CMT music channels, Nickelodeon, Spike TV, Showtime, Sundance, and Logo. General Electric, traditionally wary of overextending itself in the volatile world of media and entertainment, held back from this approach and focused its efforts on building the profitable NBC network and its news-oriented cable channels CNBC and MSNBC. Emboldened by its success with Bravo, purchased in 2002, GE acquired 80 percent of Vivendi’s remaining

holdings in September 2003, forming the new NBC Universal company that now included the cable channels Sci Fi, Telemundo, Trio (a pop-culture channel replaced early in 2006 with mystery-themed Sleuth), and USA Network, as well as Universal's movie and television studios and theme parks. Tellingly, Bravo president Jeff Gaspin was promoted to president of NBC Universal Cable Entertainment. Such a diversification strategy allows NBC Universal to offer viewers a broader range of gay-themed fare, with the very popular but safe sitcom *Will & Grace* airing on NBC to the more experimental and cheaper gay-themed reality shows like *Queer Eye* and *Boy Meets Boy* shown on NBC's baby sister Bravo. Like other media conglomerates, NBC need not fear the dispersal of audiences to cable when those cable channels are owned by NBC's parent company; indeed, NBC encouraged viewers to seek out *Queer Eye* on Bravo by airing a half-hour version of one episode in the summer of 2003.

Once Bravo has capitalized on the publicity and halo effect that its gay-themed shows have brought the channel, it remains to be seen if executives will remain committed to gay content. Bravo's post-*Boy Meets Boy* reality show, *Manhunt: The Search for America's Most Gorgeous Male Model*, drew an interested audience from—once again—both gay male and heterosexual women audiences. After *Manhunt's* first episode, *Entertainment Weekly* declared Bravo “the gayest television network of all time. Approximately half an hour into this *America's Next Top Model* knockoff . . . the 16 hottie contestants go tandem skydiving. In Calvin Klein underwear. To the tune of ‘It's Raining Men.’”<sup>47</sup> But the *Queer Eye* spin-off, *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl*, survived only a few episodes, sunk by uncharismatic hosts and poor ratings. *Straight Girl* aside, though, dualcasting has clearly proven successful for Bravo, as well as Bravo's parent company, NBC Universal. And if dualcasting is the way to garner large enough audiences and sufficient publicity to be seen as successful by cable's modest standards, GLBT audiences may not care that they are not the primary focus of programmers' attention. Yet however much they offer, dualcasting approaches might leave gay viewers wondering if they are just Bravo's new best friend, as we saw with the explosion of one-season characters on a slew of shows after the success of *Will & Grace* in the late 1990s (for example, Malcolm on *Beggars and Choosers*, Ford on *Oh, Grow Up*, and George on *The Profiler*, all unmemorable shows from the 1999 fall season). The channel offers no guarantees that once gay programming has successfully boosted ratings and shifted audience demographics, gay characters and topics won't simply be sidelined, especially as the success of *Queer Eye* has



waned in the fall of 2004, with ratings for the show dropping by 40 percent compared with the previous year.<sup>48</sup> Bravo's gay programming strategy may be an example, then, of the fragility of gay representations in a commercial television marketplace, in which sizable audiences are the non-negotiable bottom line for programmers in a medium so expensive to produce. Once the novelty has worn off for heterosexual viewers—and perhaps for many gay ones too—Bravo executives have no necessary loyalty to develop new gay topics for their shows. It may be that an ongoing commitment to gay-themed programming will need to come from a dedicated gay cable channel such as Logo. It remains to be seen, however, whether Logo will offer sufficiently diverse programming to appeal to a large enough audience to be profitable, and thus whether it can afford to provide a sustained television environment committed primarily to GLBT audiences.

## NOTES

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2. Stuart Elliott, "Stuart Elliott in America," *Campaign*, August 15, 2003.
3. This chapter is based on analysis of more than forty popular, gay, and trade-press articles about Bravo's gay-themed shows and segmentation strategies, and on an analysis of all 2003–2004 episodes of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Boy Meets Boy*, as well as some episodes of *Gay Weddings*. The author thanks Paul Falzone for his research assistance.
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5. Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
6. Papazian, *TV Dimensions 2004*, p. 38.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Turow, *Breaking Up America*, 55.
9. *Ibid.*, 103.
10. Bernard Weinraub and Jim Rutenberg, "Gay-Themed TV Gaining a Wider Audience," *New York Times*, July 29, 2003.
11. Larry Gross, "The Past and the Future of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies," *Journal of Communication* 55 (2005): 520.
12. Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
13. *Advertising Age* editorial, 1981, quoted in Turow, *Breaking Up America*, 40.

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15. Michael Giltz, "Queer Eye Confidential," *Advocate*, September 2, 2003, 43.
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23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Lisa de Moraes, "A Dating Game with No Straight Answers," *Washington Post*, May 28, 2003, C7.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Sender, *Business, Not Politics*.
28. Lisa Henderson, "Sexuality, Cultural Production and Foucault/Conjunctures," paper presented at the *Sexuality After Foucault Conference*, Manchester University, UK, November 29, 2003, 5.
29. Joshua Gamson, "The Intersection of Gay Street and Straight Street: Shopping, Social Class, and the New Gay Visibility," *Social Thought and Research* (2005).
30. James Allan, "Fast Friends and Queer Couples: Relationships between Gay Men and Straight Women in North American Popular Culture, 1959–2000" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2003).
31. Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, chapter 6.
32. "U.S. Ratings: American Network Scorecard," *World Screen News*, October 27, 2004, <http://www.worldscreen.com/> (accessed October 27, 2004).
33. James Hibberd, "Bravo's Gaspin Talks Content; Net President Discusses What's Ahead," *Television Week*, December 1, 2003; Bill Keveney, "Bravo Has Eye for 'Straight Girl,'" *USA Today*, April 7, 2004.
34. Keveney, "Bravo Has Eye for 'Straight Girl.'"
35. Abby Ellin, "Bravo Learns to Make Noise and Have Fun," *New York Times*, July 5, 2004; Hibberd, "Bravo's Gaspin Talks Content."
36. Claire Atkinson, "Cable vs. Broadcast Fight Thaws Out, a Bit," *Advertising Age*, June 14, 2004.
37. De Moraes, "A Dating Game."

38. Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 122.
39. As a rough measure, a Lexis-Nexis search of major papers that included “gay” within five words of “Bravo” in 2002 yielded only 8 hits, compared with 144 hits in 2003.
40. “Q&A: Jeff Gaspin on the Spot,” *Adweek*, December 22, 2003.
41. Whitney, “Bravo Stretches.”
42. Ellen Florian, “Queer Eye Makes over the Economy!” *Fortune*, February 9, 2004.
43. It is not the participants’ sexuality alone that brings this highbrow reputation to reality shows, but the association between queerness and a particularly affluent image of the gay male consumer. Working class queers’ participation in an earlier incarnation of reality TV, “trashy” daytime talk shows, affirmed, rather than elevated, these shows’ lowbrow status, as Joshua Gamson skillfully demonstrates in *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
44. Hibberd, “Bravo’s Gaspin Talks Content”; Keveney, “Bravo Has Eye for ‘Straight Girl.’”
45. Hibberd, “Bravo’s Gaspin Talks Content.”
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