

LGBTQ Media Images and their Potential Impact on Youth in Schools

J. B. Mayo, Jr.

The media, in its many forms, commands a substantial amount of power over how our youth view, interpret, and understand the world. Print and video advertisements, television, cinema, and online marketing send distinct, purposeful messages that are consumed by young audiences every day. Not only do youth receive these messages, but they also transmit them to others in various peer groups, reflecting their personal interpretations and understandings. Adolescents, for example, are heavily impacted by the fashion trends and hairstyles they see adopted by young TV and music personalities, which are subsequently commercialized to reach broad audiences. More to the point, young people of all genders are impacted by media images that reflect culturally accepted definitions of beauty and “proper” expressions of femininity and masculinity. The influence of media, however, can be refocused by powerful teaching to bring about a variety of educational outcomes.

In this article, I offer a short overview of how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) people have been framed in television and cinema, indicating how this framing has changed over time. I also examine the possibilities that are created for young people when one historic photograph is reimagined and viewed from a queer perspective. In an era that has been defined largely by marriage equality, the demise of the military’s *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell* policy, and the securing of other LGBTQ rights, this reimagining of an iconic photograph has strong implications for young people as they examine and possibly rethink modern-day norms. Finally, teaching resources are provided to help youth view, interpret, and understand media in ways that lead to positive educational outcomes.

Representations of LGBTQ People in Film and on Television

Long before LGBTQ characters became

popular on television and were, in some cases, celebrated on hit shows like *Will & Grace*, *Ellen*, *Glee*, and *Modern Family*, “the bullying and bashing of LGBTQ people were common themes in popular communications ..., including film, television, magazines, fiction, comics, popular music, etc.”¹ Until the late 1980s, most LGBTQ characters in film were stereotypically presented as confused young people who did not conform to their perceived gender identity: boys who were not “manly men” and girls who were not “womanly women.”² Vito Russo tells us that these transgressive protagonists were often bullied, both verbally and physically, by their teachers and by their classmates, neglected by their families, and left alone to feel exclusion and guilt for who they were or how they felt toward their significant others.³ These marginalized characters sent a clear message to young audiences about the consequences of deviating from heterosexual expectations. Even nonconforming adult char-

acters were unsafe, as seen in Ang Lee’s 2005 Oscar-winning film *Brokeback Mountain*. The main character, Jack Twist, does not survive a brutal assault, supporting a well-established norm in films with multiple gay (or in this case bisexual) protagonists: “At least one of the protagonists ‘has to die.’”⁴ With few exceptions,⁵ even current media uphold a strong bullying narrative, depicting the hardships of LGBTQ teens pushed to committing self-harm, including suicide. *Moonlight*, the 2017 Oscar winner of the coveted Best Picture Award at the 89th Academy Awards, is no exception, but the national conversation is shifting in that the one bullied is now often viewed with sympathy and compassion.

Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” Project on YouTube has surpassed 50 million views worldwide. Over 50,000 user-created videos have been produced by activists, media personalities, politicians (including former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton), celebrities, corporate executives, and institutions such as Google, Facebook, and the World Bank.⁶ Though critics have voiced strong opposition to the idea that LGBTQ youth have to wait for their lives to improve, the Project has expanded with the release of a book, *It Gets Better*, along with the sale of merchandise to support foundations assisting LGBT youth.⁷

At the same time, recent and current primetime television and cable networks depict a host of LGBTQ characters liv-



Young American sailor kisses a woman in a white dress in Times Square on V-J Day, August 14, 1945 (Alfred Eisenstaedt)



Brian J. Clark/The Virginian-Pilot

Petty Officer 2nd Class Marissa Gaeta, left, kisses her girlfriend of two years, Petty Officer 3rd Class Citlalic Snell at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek in Virginia Beach, Va., Dec. 22, 2011.

ing in a variety of situations. *Glee*, the award-winning primetime comedy/musical that ran from 2009–2015, for example, chronicled the everyday ups and downs of teens and young adults in diverse relationships that represent youth across the LGBTQ spectrum; and *Modern Family*, the Primetime Emmy Award winner for Best Comedy from 2010–2014, highlights the lives of an extended family, including a gay male couple with an adopted daughter. *The Fosters* features a lesbian couple raising a large family of biological, adopted, and foster children. *Orange Is the New Black* focuses on a bisexual protagonist who is incarcerated in a minimum-security prison; other inmates include lesbians and a transgender woman. *Transparent* relates the often-hilarious yet sensitively portrayed account of a father and his adult children following his decision to transition from male to female.

Billions, a Showtime television drama that is loosely based on the activities of a crusading federal prosecutor of financial crimes, stars Asia Kate Dillon who plays a non-binary gender analyst named Taylor Amber Mason. This character is considered to be “the first gender non-binary character on a mainstream television show.”⁷⁸ Across all of these examples, a wide range of messages is being sent to and received by youth about what is “normal” and acceptable in today’s society. What would happen if teachers expanded the meaning of “normal” by offering alternative representations? Let’s look at an example of a familiar historical photograph and how it might be used in the social studies classroom.

Practicing Inquiry with LGBTQ Images

The story behind “The Kiss.” Soon after the bombings of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki in August 1945, the United States declared victory over Japan in World War II. V-J Day celebrations erupted across the country when U.S. citizens realized that the war in the Pacific had come to a close. One such celebration took place at Times Square in New York City, the backdrop for a famous photograph taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt showing a young American sailor kissing a woman in a white dress. Various titles “V-J Day in Times Square,” “V-Day,” and “The Kiss,” the photograph was published in *Life* magazine a week after it was taken on August 14. Several “kissing” photos were taken that day, but Eisenstaedt’s image, purported to be the result of a spontaneous celebration, reached iconic status over the years.

New versions of “The Kiss.” Eisenstaedt’s iconic photograph represents many themes that are relevant to



Sgt. Brandon Morgan, right, kisses his partner, Dalan Wells, in a helicopter hangar at the Marine base in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, upon returning from a six-month deployment to Afghanistan, Feb. 22, 2012.

(AP Photo/David Lewis)

Citlalic Snell of Los Angeles. The crowd screamed and waved flags around them.¹²

The couple had met during training school, where they were roommates prior to dating. They had been in a relationship for two years at the time of the photo. Snell commented, “We did have to hide it a lot in the beginning ... but we can finally be honest about who we are in our relationship, so I’m happy.”¹³

In a similar photo, Marine Brandon Morgan is depicted embracing and kissing his boyfriend, Dalan Wells, upon his return home. After posting the photo on his Facebook page, the image went viral, receiving more than 15,000 “likes” and 3,000 comments. One such comment read, “You made my day! Thank you for your service and congratulations on your love. This is what we’ve been fighting for.” Another person wrote, “I am glad that you are safe at home and with the person you love. Thank you for your service to this great country of ours. Be happy and stay safe.”¹⁴ In response to the outpouring of attention, Morgan replied:

To everyone who has responded in a positive way, my partner and I want to say thank you.... Can’t believe how many shares and likes we have gotten on this. We didn’t do this to get famous or [any]thing like that. We did this ‘cause after 3 deployments and four years knowing each other, we finally told each other how we felt. As for the haters, let ‘em hate....

We are the happiest we have ever been, and as for the whole PDA and kissing/hugging in uniform ... it was a homecoming[;] if the Sergeants Major, Captains, Majors, and Colonels around us didn’t care ... then why do you care what these random people have to say? In summation, thank you for your love and support. Good night all, and Semper Fi.¹⁵

social studies classrooms. Teachers have used the image as part of instructional units on World War II, particularly Life on the Home Front in the aftermath of victory. It can also be used to discuss U.S. military and civic duty. When used uncritically, however, it can promote a heteronormative view of American history. One could imagine the two individuals in the photo falling in love (in fact, some students might assume the two were already dating) and eventually getting married, having children, and living their pre-ordained American dream.⁹ But what would happen if students are introduced to other versions of “The Kiss?” What are the implications of viewing two female sailors or two male marines engaged in a similar display of affection toward each other? How might they interpret and understand these images?

The Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act was signed by President Obama in 2010

and took effect in September 2011.¹⁰ The law allowed gays and lesbians to serve openly in the U.S. military without having to hide their queer identity, and it effectively put an end to the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, which since 1993 had officially banned “out” gays and lesbians from serving in the military.

Only three months after the new law was officially implemented, a historic event took place at a Navy base in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Two women sailors became “the first [same-sex couple] to share the coveted ‘first kiss’ on the dock after one of them returned from 80 days at sea.”¹¹ As reported that day by NBCNews.com,

Petty Officer 2nd Class Marissa Gaeta of Placerville, California, descended from the USS *Oak Hill* amphibious landing ship and shared a quick kiss with her partner, Petty Officer 3rd Class

The images of same-sex military couples discussed here offer students new visions of what it means to live in an inclusive, pluralistic society. The analysis of such LGBTQ images raises questions about the impact of policies such as the Don't Ask Don't Tell Repeal Law and their connection to the broader social issues of equality and discrimination. Teachers can support student inquiry by asking questions such as these: (1) How are the Don't Ask Don't Tell Repeal Law, marriage equality, and other LGBTQ rights related? (2) How do these images reveal that heterosexist assumptions about the people who join the military are inaccurate? (3) How do these images challenge stereotypes about who LGBTQ people are, what they look like, and how they behave? (4) How do these images challenge the concepts of *masculine* and *feminine* you were taught when you were growing up? Addressing assumptions, challenging beliefs and stereotypes, and analyzing

current issues are important aspects of critical media literacy.

Critical Media Literacy and Social Studies Education

Teens in the United States spend roughly eight hours per day engaged with media, and more than that, if multiple sources of media are being used simultaneously.¹⁶ Film, television, print media, and the Internet lend themselves to inquiry—the process of asking meaningful questions, finding information, drawing conclusions, and reflecting upon student learning. And social studies classrooms can offer safe, educational, and supportive spaces for thoughtful, guided discussion and student empowerment, using a wide variety of media.

Media can be incorporated into LGBTQ-related instruction by:

1. Teaching media literacy directly (learning how messages are

constructed, biased, and used; interpreting their meaning; identifying individual and social meanings);

2. Guiding students in constructing their own media-based messages (blogs and video expressing their identity and values; developing connections and communities; sharing coming out stories; creating communication for social action); and
3. Teaching through media (connecting media to the curriculum; supporting student socialization; encouraging citizenship and challenging homophobia/heteronormativity).

Jeffrey Hawkins provides several examples on how to incorporate LGBTQ-themed films in history classes from specific historical periods—*Gods and Monsters* for World War I, *Bent* and the *Imitation Game* for World

Figure 1. Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages

When engaging in critical analysis of any media message, it's useful to ask some, or all, of the following key questions for media analysis:

About Authorship, Purpose and Economics

- Who made this?
- Why was this made, and who paid for it?
- Who was this made for (and how do you know)?

About Techniques and Content

- What messages are conveyed?
What techniques are used to communicate each message, and why?
- What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt?
Implied?
- What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

About the Context and Credibility

- When was this made? Where or how was it shared with the public?
- Is this fact, opinion, or something else?

- How credible is this? What are the sources of information, ideas, or assertions?

About the Audience and Impact

- How might different people interpret this differently?
- Who might benefit from this? Who might be harmed by it?
- What is *my* interpretation of this, and what do I learn about *myself* from my reaction or interpretation?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to this?

These questions are particularly useful when introducing the concept of media literacy to a group or class of students, or when first using a new media resource in the classroom.

SOURCE: www.projectlooksharp.org/Resources%202/12BasicWaysBooklet.pdf.

War II, and *A Single Man* for the Cold War.¹⁷ Meanwhile, these two websites—the Critical Media Project (www.criticalmediaproject.org/resources/bibliography) and Project Look Sharp (www.projectlooksharp.org)—are useful for teachers educating about LGBTQ identities and social justice issues. The engaging historical and current media on these websites are ideal for student learning. The questions in Figure 1 provide a framework to aid teachers in developing their own media-related lessons. They address the media’s historical and cultural context, accuracy and credibility, and effects on others, while also encouraging civic action.

Project Look Sharp provides a well-constructed unit on the Gay Liberation Movement placed within a larger set of units on social justice. It addresses gay history, affirmative and negative views of gays, and homophobia. A wide variety of media types are incorporated into the unit’s activities and assessments. The website also contains a media literacy primer, “12 Basic Ways to Integrate Media Literacy and Critical Thinking into Any Curriculum,” identifying the Core Principles of Media Literacy and a wealth of instructional strategies for teachers.

Resources from GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) provide background information on LGBTQ representations in the media—“Where We Are on TV, 2015 Report” (www.glaad.org/whereweareontv15) and “2015 Network Responsibility Index” (www.glaad.org/nri2015), for example. These are useful for teachers who incorporate a critical analysis of popular images into the curriculum. The Center for Media Justice (MAG-NET Media Action Grassroots Network <http://mag-net.org/>) guides action against stereotyping and misrepresentation through a highly developed media justice network. These resources complement media analysis to support student civic action. Websites such as the Center for American Progress (www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/)

can also help teachers to integrate LGBTQ current events into the curriculum and address social justice issues. Media can communicate in powerful ways, confronting and challenging us. It can allow us to visualize new realities and connect us to new communities. It can be a tool to communicate who we are and what we stand for.

Conclusions

Reimagining “The Kiss” (or other heteronormative media examples) through a queer perspective provides students with a societal mirror, reflecting the changing attitudes toward LGBTQ people, whether they are military personnel or others. With the assistance of thoughtful instruction from their teachers, perhaps students will conclude that our nation is becoming a place where differences are not just tolerated, but accepted as the new inclusive norm. Analysis and discussion of media may serve to affirm the identities and lives of LGBTQ people. Though various media (movies, television, print media, and the Internet) continue to promote the inevitability of one’s “straightness,” more inclusive choices will encourage students to push back against taken-for-granted truths. For all students in social studies classes that use more inclusive images as part of a larger unit or lesson, they will see evidence of a changing social landscape, where it becomes much more difficult to rely on old assumptions and narrow interpretations of “truth.”

Notes

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2. Ibid.
3. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).
4. Padva, 108.
5. *Carol* (2015). This film follows two women from different backgrounds as they navigate their undeniable attraction in 1950s New York. The story highlights the resilience of the heart in the face of change.
6. It Gets Better Project, www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/

7. Meg Hlousek, “‘Pink Politics’: Negotiation of LGBT Identity through Politics and Popular Media,” *2010–2011 Penn Humanities Forum on Virtuality* (Philadelphia, 2011): 4.
8. Curtis M. Wong, “‘Billions’ Star Tells Ellen What It Means To Identify as Gender Non-Binary,” *Huffingtonpost* (March 21, 2017), www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asia-kate-dillon-ellen_us_58cfff631e4b0ec9d29dda02b.
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13. “Women Sailors Share First Gay Kiss in US Navy,” *The Telegraph* (December 22, 2011), www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/north_america/usa/8972431/Women-sailors-sharefirst-gay-kiss-in-US-Navy.html.
14. Rosenbaum (2012).
15. Ibid.
16. www.criticalmediaproject.org/about/site-overview.
17. Jeffrey M. Hawkins, “Breaking Out and Going Beyond the Celluloid Closet: LGBTQ Media for the Social Studies Classroom,” *Social Education* 81, no. 3 (2017): 159–161.

J. B. MAYO, JR., is an Associate Professor of social studies education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on the impact of *Gender & Sexualities Alliances (GSAs)* in middle and high schools and finding ways to create and implement *LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum in the social studies*. He can be reached at mayo@umn.edu.