



How the Media Has Helped Change Public Views about Lesbian and Gay People

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In the United States and beyond, few shifts in public opinion have been as rapid and widespread as attitudes about lesbian women and gay men. In our recent work, we explore how the media has contributed to this major change. Our research shows that the media can play a transnational role in shaping political attitudes towards sexuality and minorities in general, especially affecting the views of more impressionable, younger individuals.

Virtual Contacts with Gays and Lesbians

Information that flows through media – via television, movies, music, books and many other channels – encourages contact and communication between groups and even across national boundaries. Gordon Allport, an influential psychologist, is often cited in scholarly research for his *contact thesis* – which, put simply, says that under the right conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the best ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups. Building on this idea, we argue that “imagined contact” even with characters in a TV show can change perceptions of outgroups. The central question driving our study is: Does the specific nature and context of a nation's media influence attitudes towards homosexuality?

Increases in representations of gay people in news, television, and movies started in the 1990s – prominently exemplified by Ellen DeGeneres's coming out on mainstream American television in her portrayal of Ellen Morgen in the ABC-sitcom, *Ellen*. Portrayals of lesbian women and gay men have continued to increase over the two decades since they were featured in popular shows like *Will and Grace* and *Modern Family*; and these portrayals have and recently spread to shows for teenage audiences such as *Glee* and *Teen Wolf*. Beyond entertainment, the news media has also increasingly covered gay rights as such issues have become politicized. In 2014, networks from Russia Today to Al Jazeera extensively covered the gay rights debate surrounding the “anti-gay Sochi Olympics.” Although this shift in media visibility was pronounced in the United States and Western Europe, our data suggest that the influence of the media is not contained by national borders. Media portrayals of new issues and previously marginalized people are an understudied dimension of the ways ideas, values, and principles are spread – transnationally as well as within countries.

In an increasingly interconnected world, we hypothesize that effects from virtual contacts through media exposure to portrayals of lesbian women and gay men should hold cross-nationally, depending on the national media outlets willingness to transmit portrayals. We expect media effects to vary by age cohort since younger audiences in their impressionable years are more likely to have shifted their views in line with new information transmitted since the 1990s. These audiences are less likely to have formed firm opinions about gay and lesbian people.

Why Media Matters Especially for Young People

We test our theory using the combined World Values and European Values Surveys. In a cross-national, multi-level analysis of individual attitudes, our work demonstrates that both media pervasiveness and press freedom are related to more liberal attitudes among young people. We believe that these young people's exposure to gay and lesbians in the media coincides with contacts younger people have with gay and lesbian people and issues through other avenues of socialization. However imperfect media portrayals of gay people may be – and however poor a substitute for personal contacts – the media does introduce new debates and new frames of reference about homosexuality across multiple domestic contexts.

Our findings have implications for our understanding of how contact with diverse groups shape people's beliefs and values. They suggest that the effects of contacts with an outgroup involve more than just face-to-face interactions. Researchers, advocates, and policymakers, and producers should take into account how cultural contact through media can shape opinions and values, even across national borders. Television, film, radio and the Internet remain powerful socializing mechanisms through which younger generations come into contact with previously invisible minorities.

In making our case, we do not wish to minimize the contributions of direct, interpersonal contacts to processes of attitude change. Indeed, our data may show joint effects from media contacts and personal contacts. Another route for change may have occurred as new media portrayals increased the interpersonal visibility of gay and lesbian people and the likelihood that they would come out and openly reveal their identities to friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

Importantly, we are not arguing that enhanced visibility generated by the media always improves the lived experiences of gay and lesbian people. It depends on the context and exact media content. Media portrayals may arrive in contexts already somewhat open to gay and lesbian people, or in contexts where discrimination and hostility hold sway. In addition, given media portrayal can highlight more or less sensational or controversial aspects of gay life, and indeed often neglects the broad array of issues experienced by members of this diverse community.

Larger Implications

The takeaway of our research is that as the liberalization of attitudes towards gays and lesbians has occurred in many countries across the globe since the 1980s, change has been encouraged in part by communications climates – within and across nations – that allow for the free transmission of minority viewpoints. Yet gaps in tolerance and freedom of expression remain between free countries and those that restrict the sharing of controversial content or minority viewpoints. To close gaps in tolerance and cultural change, movements and leaders must encourage various forms of media to tell more accurate stories about lesbian and gay people. Promoting a more inclusive and representative depiction of queer people in the media may expand tolerance toward all kinds of stigmatized minorities, even across national boundaries.

Our findings support the claim that free media are essential for advancing gay rights and suggests that media freedom may need to precede efforts to secure gay rights legislation. In corners of the globe where homosexual rights are still highly contentious, both personal and virtual contacts conveying positive images of lesbians and gays can lead to constructive change.

Read more in Phillip Ayoub and Jeremiah Garretson, "**Getting the Message Out: Media Context and Global Changes in Attitudes toward Homosexuality**" *Comparative Political Studies*, 50, 8, (2017): 1055-1085.