

REPRESENTATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA OF THE WALLONIA-BRUSSELS FEDERATION

In the continuum of the plan for diversity and equality in the media which it coordinated, the CSA (Higher Audiovisual Council) published in 2013 the findings of a qualitative study on stereotypes linked with sexual orientation conveyed by television and radio programmes popular with young people (12-30 years of age) in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

Method

The study is founded on the simple observation that one of the factors conducive to evolution of attitudes to homosexuality is knowing a person of one's direct acquaintance who professes it. In our present-day societies, this phenomenon cannot be instanced without taking the effect of the media into account. The media too help determine the way our paradigms of human relations and interactions are built up. Thus it is instructive to analyse how the programmes of the television channels and radio frequencies active in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation with the most viewers and listeners among adolescents and young adults present homosexuality: Is it mentioned? Which complexion is placed on it? Which social models are given prominence?

Over three consecutive months (October 2012 to January 2013), slightly more than 250 sequences referring to homosexuality were pinpointed in the programmes of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation's television channels and radio stations popular with young people, irrespective of genre (fiction, information, amusement...) and origin (local and foreign productions).

Their analysis specifically dealt with the interactions and the social roles which can influence representations of homosexuality. Informed by critical analysis of speech, it set out especially to identify the representations of homosexuality in the media (concept or subject, fictional or actual character, peculiarities of the character...), to analyse the paradigms of social relations and interactions associated with them (type of interaction, stereotypes, patterns of opposition or integration, diversity of profiles...), to analyse the effects that develop from the target audience's reception of these paradigms (importance of the role, positive or negative role, resemblance to the target audience...), to evaluate these effects in the light of the context of reception, both media-specific and societal (Belgian media context, specificity of the programme, social and political context, heteronormative model).

Findings

The conclusions of this research demonstrate in particular that :

- The relational models acted out on the screen are comparatively varied: young people are exposed to several representations of homosexuality, some stereotyped and reductive, others closer to the complexity of real-life situations.
- Programmes purchased abroad are chiefly where homosexuality is presented, as also, though more sporadically, in informational programmes modelled on the foreign news, namely in this instance the debate surrounding gay marriage in France during the reference period.
- Sports broadcasts did not address the question of homosexuality at all.
- Still being broadcast on our screens, the fiction of the 1980s and 90s reflects a highly stereotyped image of homosexuality, in contrast to the present-day American or French series in which homosexuals are generally accepted: they live as couples, participate in community events and undergo trials. They may also hold a foreground role. From a narrative standpoint, the presence of gay characters, essentially male, is justified by raising homosexual concerns (coming out, adoption, difference...).
- Several reports on the topic have been broadcast in the informational programmes, featuring the French debate about gay marriage. The personal testimonies elicited register homosexual viewpoints. As happens in the representation of all forms of diversity, when a gay is canvassed it is often to talk specifically about questions relating to homosexuality. Moreover, these positive representations tend to shape a narrative in which difference is the reference point: the fact that homosexuals are different is the reason for talking about them.
- Phone-in radio, a favoured spot for adolescents to have, and hear, their views aired, reveals speech patterns which are stereotyped in the extreme, even hateful or homophobic, and insult is commonplace in them. Despite the mentorship exercised by the comperes to tone these remarks down at least to humorousness if not reasonableness, phone-in presents itself as an outlet for "norm-referenced" representations of sexuality. This is also where the difference with LGBT radio programmes lies; these are open to all audiences without stigmatising one community to another's detriment.

The treatment of homosexuality has two further cross-cutting features:

- Recurrence of humour about homosexuality, played on in comedies, infotainment or jokes (on radio). Very often the homosexual's part in the joke, where difference is the device, is to be the butt instead of sharing in it.
- Where several representations in both fiction and information highlight a naturally integrated homosexuality, accepted in the universes presented, they nearly always portray it in a mode of isolation.

The full study is available (in French) at this address: <http://csa.be/documents/2045>.