

# TUNED OUT

The BBC's portrayal of  
lesbian and gay people



**Stonewall**

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lesbian and gay people

by Katherine Cowan & Gill Valentine





# Contents

<b>Introduction by <i>Ben Summerskill</i></b>	5
<b>Summary</b>	6
1. How does the BBC portray gay lives?	8
2. The positive power of television	13
3. The negative power of television	15
4. What do heterosexual people think?	18
5. Is the BBC value for money?	22
6. What the BBC should do – recommendations	24

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## Introduction The UK's invisible licence-payers

Television is a powerful medium. With almost 25 million households in possession of a TV licence in the UK, television has the capacity to educate, inform, include and challenge millions of individuals. Even in a multi-channel age, the BBC's terrestrial stations retain powerful audience shares, with 24 per cent of viewers watching BBC One and 10 per cent tuning into BBC Two.

Government actuaries now estimate that six per cent of the adult population is lesbian or gay, thus 1.5 million licence-fee paying households are likely to be gay too. This means that gay people are contributing almost £190 million every year towards BBC programming, with more than £90 million of their money specifically funding BBC One and BBC Two.

Stonewall wanted to investigate how gay people and their lives are represented and portrayed on the BBC. We wanted to find out how lesbians and gay men felt about this reflection, and how this impacts on their daily lives. We also wanted to discover how heterosexual audiences perceive gay life as a result of what they see on television, and how television affects their attitudes towards gay people.

This report also analyses the performance of the BBC's flagship channels against its remit as a public-service broadcaster and its stated aims of being responsive and accountable to licence-fee payers and of reflecting diversity in its output.

The stark conclusion of the major monitoring exercise featured in this research – of 168 hours of prime-time television on BBC One and BBC Two – is that gay licence-fee payers receive astonishingly poor value for money. At a time when the BBC is seeking renewal of its Charter, it seems difficult to sustain the argument that 1.5 million households should be expected to continue making such a substantial contribution to channels on which their real lives are hardly reflected, and which are often punctuated with derisive and demeaning depictions of them.

In recent years, the BBC has made strenuous efforts to make its programming more reflective of Britain's minority ethnic and disabled licence-fee payers. We hope that in 2006 and future years the BBC will consider adopting for the first time the same sense of obligation to Britain's lesbian and gay licence-fee payers.



### **BEN SUMMERSKILL**

Chief Executive, Stonewall

## Summary

Stonewall set out to investigate how gay people and gay life are represented and portrayed on BBC Television.

This research project explored key questions about the power of television and about the BBC in particular and its relationship with Britain's lesbian and gay communities. It asked:

- How does the BBC portray gay people's lives?
- Does television have a positive or negative impact on gay people's lives?
- What impact does the portrayal of lesbians and gay men have on heterosexual people?
- Does the BBC challenge homophobia, or does it reinforce it?
- Do lesbian and gay licence-fee payers get value for money?

The research included both a quantitative study of the content of BBC One and BBC Two during eight weeks – 168 hours, of prime-time viewing between 7pm and 10pm – and qualitative research from focus groups of both gay and heterosexual viewers. The focus-group research used the programme monitoring data as a starting point and explored the impact of television on the daily lives of gay people. It also explored how well the BBC meets its responsibilities to the licence-fee payer and to the diversity of its viewers.

**During 168 hours of programmes, gay lives were represented positively for just six minutes**

### KEY FINDINGS

- Gay people and their lives are five times more likely to be described or portrayed in negative terms than in positive ones on the BBC. Gay lives were positively and realistically represented for just six minutes and depicted in negative terms or contexts for 32 minutes out of 168 hours of programming.
- During 168 hours of programmes there were 38 minutes of gay references, both positive and negative. This represented 0.4 per cent of broadcast time in 49 separate instances and included openly gay characters or personalities, direct and indirect references to gay people and gay sexuality, use of gay stereotypes and innuendo.
- Gay life is disproportionately over-represented in entertainment programmes, including game shows, chat shows and comedy. The majority, 72 per cent, of individual references to gay sexuality were made during entertainment programmes,

**Gay lives are five times more likely to be portrayed in negative terms than positive ones.**

despite entertainment comprising just 14 per cent, of all programmes monitored.

- Lesbians hardly exist on the BBC. Where gender was specified during a reference to gay sexuality, 82 per cent were about gay men.
- Lesbian and gay issues are rarely tackled or even mentioned in factual programmes. These programmes, including consumer shows and documentaries, made up over half, 54 per cent, of all programmes monitored, yet only three per cent of all individual gay references appeared within this genre.

### FURTHER FINDINGS

- Gay people are often used as the subject of jokes on the BBC. Over half, 51 per cent, of all gay references were designed for comic effect. Most of these revolved around stereotypes of sexually predatory or camp and effeminate gay men.
- There are almost no examples of homophobia or homophobic preconceptions being challenged in BBC programming. It is far more usual to see implied gay sexuality used as an insult or as a way of undermining someone.
- The BBC relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes in its portrayal of gay people. It seems reluctant to present lesbian and gay people in everyday scenarios, such as stable relationships or family life.
- Heterosexual audiences would welcome more documentary programmes about lesbian and gay contemporary social issues such as civil partnership or the age of consent legislation, as this would help them to understand lesbian and gay lives.
- Both gay and straight audiences feel that the BBC has a responsibility to serve and represent gay licence-payers, and to challenge homophobia, but that this is not happening.
- The majority of heterosexual viewers first became aware of or encountered lesbians and gay men through television. They argue that achieving empathy between the gay and heterosexual communities is the most effective way to challenge bigotry and prejudice.

**14% of BBC airtime is devoted to entertainment  
72% of gay references occur during these programmes**

■ Heterosexual viewers do not believe it is desirable or appropriate to exclude or censor representations of lesbian and gay sexuality.

■ Straight people think that there should be more documentary programmes about lesbian and gay contemporary social issues, but they also recognise that documentaries should not focus only on the negative aspects of gay lives.

■ The BBC was singled out by focus-group participants as the broadcaster that has been least successful in capturing the realities of gay life. It was also regarded as broadcasting the least sophisticated representations of lesbians and gay men.

■ Both gay and straight people feel that the BBC needs to represent a more diverse range of gay identities, lifestyles and communities in its entertainment programmes and to break away from clichéd stereotypes. The BBC should also provide more coverage of lesbian and gay issues in news and documentary programmes.

**54% of BBC airtime is devoted to factual programmes**  
**3% of gay references occur during these programmes**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The BBC should:

1. Commit to mirroring its race and disability policies and practices in relation to sexual orientation.
2. Take urgent steps to address the low-level homophobia almost endemic in television and radio outputs.
3. Commit to ensuring that when gay people appear in programmes, their inclusion is natural and realistic, rather than sensationalised.
4. Commit to the inclusion of developed lesbian and gay characters in some drama and soap operas on BBC One and BBC Two.
5. Seek to provide balanced, unsensational coverage of gay issues in news and current affairs programmes.
6. Commit to the inclusion of six per cent of lesbian and gay contestants in game shows.
7. Start communicating and consulting with lesbian and gay licence-fee payers about their perceptions and experiences of the portrayal of gay people in BBC output.
8. Commit to providing lesbian and gay licence-fee payers with "value for money".

# 1 How does the BBC portray gay lives?

- During 168 hours of BBC programming, gay life was positively and realistically depicted for just six minutes.
- The BBC relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes when portraying lesbian and gay characters, and very rarely represents gay issues within factual programmes.
- Where gay people are referred to on the BBC, they tend to be used for comic effect or entertainment value. Gay characters are rarely developed or afforded the plot-line importance of their straight counterparts.
- When the BBC does portray gay people, it is unlikely to reflect the variety of the lesbian and gay communities. Ethnic minority gay people and gay people with disabilities are not seen.
- The BBC rarely challenges homophobia and consistently allows its presenters to perpetuate negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men and gay sexuality.

## 1.1 ANALYSING OUTPUT

This research project set out to examine how gay lives are represented on BBC Television. A decision was taken to concentrate on the BBC because it is publicly funded and attracts the largest share of viewers. The research team measured exactly how much gay life was portrayed on the BBC's two main channels, BBC One and BBC Two, over a two-month period. It then went on to examine, through eight focus groups set up across the country, how both gay and heterosexual people respond to the quantity and quality of the coverage.

**14% of BBC airtime is devoted to entertainment**  
**72% of gay references occur during these programmes**

To find out how representative an average night's TV viewing is of lesbian and gay people and their lives, the researchers watched and recorded BBC One and BBC Two from 7pm until 10pm, every other night for eight weeks, analysing 168 hours of programmes.

Each programme was analysed for anything of lesbian and gay interest, including the depiction of gay life and gay issues, openly gay celebrities or characters, passing references to lesbian and gay people or sexuality, use of gay terminology or insults, gay stereotypes and homophobia. Gay references were identified as being positive when they were unbiased

Examples of many negative references included a joke on *The Lenny Henry Show* about a gay man being arrested for being gay, but being let off by a gay judge, accompanied by a camp limp-wristed gesture.

and balanced, and not relying on clichéd stereotypes. References were recorded as negative where gay sexuality was depicted as a problem or an insult.

The researchers found gay lives were openly and positively portrayed for just six minutes during those 168 hours, representing 0.06 per cent of programming. These six minutes covered 19 separate instances in 15 different programmes and included a lesbian couple participating in *The National Lottery Come and Have a Go*; singer Rufus Wainwright on *The Culture Show* talking about his experience of coming out as gay; and two male characters falling in love in a sub-plot of the wartime drama *Born and Bred*.

Gay lives were five times more likely to be referred to, or portrayed, in negative or pejorative terms, with the research team recording 32 minutes of negative output. Examples of the negative references included a joke on *The Lenny Henry Show* about a gay man being arrested for being gay, but being let off by a gay judge, accompanied by a camp limp-wristed gesture; a reference in *Porridge* to a sexually predatory gay prison group, Equal Rights for Poofters; and two workers on *Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood* overheard joking that the slaughterhouse floor has had "more balls on it than Elton John's chin".

The research found a disproportionate depiction of lesbian and gay issues, in comparison to programme type by broadcast time. Despite the fact that 54 per cent of programmes were of a factual nature, only three per cent of gay references occurred during these programmes. Only 14 per cent of programmes were entertainment programmes, yet 72 per cent of gay references featured in those shows.

## 1.2 HOMOPHOBIA ON THE BBC

The negative output recorded included examples of implied gay sexuality, in particular the implication that a man might be gay, used as an insult or a way of undermining someone. This negative output was found in 30 instances broadcast in 22 different programmes. In *The Weakest Link – Celebrity Chefs*, Anne Robinson repeatedly used gay innuendo to belittle

contestant Reza Mahammad, asking: “What do you do in your restaurant? Just mince round?” and “Is Reza more puff than pastry?” Finally, she asked him: “Reza, before you go, and bear in mind that this is a family show: what’s the strangest thing you’ve ever put in your mouth?”

The research team found the implication that being gay is negative and undesirable in a range of programme types. In the documentary, *How We Fell for Europe*, an interviewee described how politicians used to liaise in the toilets of Westminster, but strongly emphasised that nothing “improper or unseemly” happened – a clear but unnecessary reference to gay sex in public toilets.

On *A Question of Sport*, following a montage of clips of sportsmen kissing, Ally McCoist, who featured in the montage, appeared embarrassed and was quick to point out that he was not instigating the kiss – in other words, that he is not gay.

*In The Weakest Link - Celebrity Chefs*, Anne Robinson repeatedly used gay innuendo to belittle contestant Reza Mahammad, asking: “What do you do in your restaurant? Just mince round?” and “Is Reza more puff than pastry?”

### 1.3 GAY PEOPLE AS A COMIC DEVICE

While lesbian and gay people and issues are under-represented in BBC programming, they are proportionately over-represented in entertainment programmes, including comedy, chat shows and game shows. The majority, 72 per cent, of the references to gay sexuality were made during entertainment programmes, despite entertainment comprising just 14 per cent of all programmes monitored.

Lesbian and gay people are often used as the subject of jokes, and over half, 51 per cent, of all individual gay references were included for comic effect. Most of these revolved around the stereotypes of gay men as either sexually promiscuous or camp and effeminate.

There was a strong recognition from both the gay and heterosexual focus groups used in this study that the BBC uses gay people for entertainment, as camp figures of fun or to add shock value to soap operas or dramas, rather than to represent the lives, or serve the interests, of gay licence-fee payers.

The focus of much BBC programming, particularly on BBC Two, is on comedy. During the eight weeks monitored, examples from a number of comedy shows were captured for their references to gay issues. *The Robinsons*, *Porridge*, *Dead Ringers*, *The Lenny Henry Show* and *Have I Got (Old) News for You* each made at least two jokes hinged on gay sexual orientation.

The BBC uses gay people for entertainment, as camp figures of fun or to add shock value to soap operas or dramas, rather than to represent the lives, or serve the interests, of gay licence-fee payers.

### 1.4 NORMAL LIVES

It was rare to find gay people and issues depicted in factual programmes on the BBC’s terrestrial channels, such as documentaries and consumer shows. During the monitoring, 54 per cent of programmes broadcast were factual and yet only three per cent of references to gay people and gay issues occurred in these programmes. Seven gay references were found in six different factual programmes, out of a total of 112 factual programmes broadcast during that period.

There were only two examples totalling one minute and three seconds where lesbians and gay men were depicted in conventional scenarios – such as with a partner, expressing affection or with family – in which their sexual orientation is clear, but is not the focal point or the cause of a crisis. Nor was it common to see homophobia challenged either as part of a fictional story-line or in response to the views of real people.

The focus-group participants perceived that the BBC rarely represents people in soaps or dramas who just happen to be lesbian, gay or bisexual as part of “everyday” story-lines. Rather, if there is a gay character, the story-line usually focuses on their sexuality, particularly related to problematic issues of “coming out”. This implies that being gay is negative, which can distort heterosexual people’s understanding of gay lives and have damaging consequences for some gay people.

I don’t think gay people are represented very well on TV. I mean they’re always home wreckers or something like that and it doesn’t set a very good impression of gay people... there’s never a happy couple... It’s always something bad happening.

Darren, 19, rural area

The programmes that have been broadcast are the mad, bad gay world, you know it’s very crazy...lots of crazy things happening and I don’t think it necessarily portrays the fact that you can have a quiet normal life and relationship.

Fabio, 27, Cardiff

Focus-group participants argued that gay characters are rarely developed in BBC soap operas. The characters are usually one-dimensional in that their sexuality completely defines their identity or role, little is known about their past, they do not have stable sexual relationships or partnerships (often they do not have a sexual relationship that is represented at all) and the characters are relatively short-lived. Once their “coming out” or other major sexuality-orientated story-lines are over, they are commonly written out of the programme.

There are tens of thousands of characters on television, who can be lots of things, they can be good at their job, they can be bad at driving, they can be lots of other things. If you are gay, you are the **gay** character...the **gay** who has had a car crash, the **gay** who can't deal with work...I do think that that's very damaging, this kind of idea that you're not allowed to be, you know, somebody who just goes home, and puts on your slippers.

Pete, 41, Cardiff

Something else that I've noticed with the soaps is that they do a story-line about the gay person coming out, and then get rid of them, but in real life gay people don't just come out and then disappear, do they?

Leo, 17, rural area

The participants felt that superficial gay story-lines are introduced into soap operas by all television channels to boost viewing figures as part of their ratings wars. They noted as a component of this strategy, that broadcasters often collaborate with tabloid newspapers to sensationalise forthcoming soap opera gay story-lines, which often have little substance.

## 1.5 STEREOTYPES

The focus groups felt overwhelmingly that the BBC does not represent the variety of real gay lives or identities. Rather, both lesbians and gay men are portrayed in clichéd stereotypes.

Gay men are stereotyped in one of two ways. The first, as very camp and effeminate figures of fun, is the most common image and has a long history in terms of BBC entertainers such as John Inman in *Are You Being Served?*, Larry Grayson in *The Generation Game* and more recently Julian Clary in the *National Lottery* programme. The second stereotype sees gay men portrayed as promiscuous and unable to hold down a stable relationship, or as people ridiculed for promiscuous sexual behaviour. Taken separately, these items are not necessarily offensive, but the lack of overall balance is.

When there are gay people in soaps or whatever, then they're always portrayed as a typical gay person, a stereotypical gay person, like the really camp person and things like that. That's not always how it is but that's all we see.

Darren, 19, rural area

You've got to be camp to be a gay man, haven't you? You know you can't be Joe Bloggs walking down the street and be gay, you've got to be camp according to the images that they portray.

Chloe, 29, Derby

Being a gay man [on television] is ... being crazy and partying all the time and shagging around and never settling down, and not having anything else going on in your life except being gay.

Fabio, 27, Cardiff

The BBC One series *Cutting It*, which featured heavily during the eight weeks of monitoring, portrays the epitome of a stereotyped gay man in the character Shane. He embodies a range of stereotypes: a hairdresser, he is very camp, bitchy, misogynistic, superficial, irresponsible and incapable of coping in a crisis. In one scene he is seen hosting a party with his new boyfriend, at which he announces their plans to move in together and have a surrogate child. In the next scene, their relationship is ending, due to revelations about his promiscuous past. The other characters' lives and relationships are portrayed much more seriously – reflected even in the backing music used.

## 1.6 THE ABSENCE OF LESBIANS

Both the gay and heterosexual focus groups recognised that lesbians are much less visible on television than gay men. When they do appear they are also stereotyped in two ways – either as masculine women, for example in a sketch on BBC Two's *Dead Ringers*, or as glamorous or very feminine women, such as BBC Two's *Tipping the Velvet*. The heterosexual focus groups argued that the latter is used to serve heterosexual men's fantasies.

This phenomenon, of an acceptable or palatable form of pseudo-lesbianism, was illustrated during the monitoring period by Jeremy Clarkson on BBC Two's *Top Gear*. He used lesbian sexual fantasies as a metaphor to describe his enthusiasm for a particular car as a child: “Now this, for me, when I was little, was like, kind of, Jordan and Cameron Diaz in a bath, together...”

Jeremy Clarkson on BBC Two's *Top Gear* used lesbian sexual fantasies as a metaphor to describe his enthusiasm for a particular car as a child: "Now this, for me, when I was little, was like, kind of, Jordan and Cameron Diaz in a bath, together..."

The invisibility of lesbians was also highlighted by the monitoring data. Where gender was specified within a gay story-line, 82 per cent of specific references were about gay men and more than a third, 37 per cent, of these references were humorous. Lesbians and bisexual women were rarely referred to and were more than twice as likely as gay men to be the subject of a joke. There were no lesbian or bisexual female characters in any drama shows recorded during the monitoring period.

**Lesbians have a much harder time at the minute than gay men and haven't had anywhere near the amount of coverage or exposure they ought to have had.**

**Matt, 24, London**

During the 168 hours monitored, lesbians were referred to in positive and non-stereotyped ways for just one minute and 10 seconds. This consisted almost entirely of a lesbian couple competing on *The National Lottery Come and Have a Go*. All contestants are interviewed for one minute, but the interview with the lesbian couple included only one very brief reference to their relationship ("You're partners, you met three years ago") after 34 seconds. By contrast, the contending heterosexual couple, of a similar age, were asked to comment on a range of aspects about their six-month relationship, including joint finances, how they met, their mutual attraction and first impressions, which constituted their entire interview.

## 1.7 THE BAD GUYS

Focus-group participants noted that one of the most common ways that lesbian or gay relationships are represented on television is in terms of a real lesbian or gay man seducing a heterosexual character. Such portrayals implicitly set up a distinction between the "bad" corrupting or dangerous real gay character and the "good" innocent heterosexual character who is led astray. Often the gay character is a trusted friend who abuses that trust.

**54% of BBC airtime is devoted to factual programmes**  
**3% of gay references occur during these programmes**

Viewers perceive a significant difference between the ways that heterosexual sex, lesbian sex, and sex between gay men is represented on television. The gay focus groups argued that lesbian sex is only ever shown on television because it titillates heterosexual men's fantasies. Sex between gay men is virtually never represented because, they suggested, it is regarded as more threatening and therefore taboo.

**The lesbian story-lines are more overtly sexual than homosexuals, it's almost as if the gay sex thing is a lot more taboo than the lesbian sex thing, so if you're going to have a period drama ... there'll be a lot more bearing of flesh and obvious sexual references. It often seems to have been put in for titillation.**

**Paul, 38, heterosexual, Leeds**

It seems that gay men are palatable to heterosexual audiences only when they are desexualised, either because they are camp or as single men in safe pseudo-heterosexual relationships with heterosexual female friends. These arguments were vindicated by the views of some of the male participants in the heterosexual focus groups who joked about "girl on girl action" but stated that they did not want to see any form of intimacy or sexual contact between men on the BBC.

## 1.8 WHO ELSE IS MISSING?

Both stages of the research found little evidence of a broad portrayal of gay lives. Focus-group participants could recall very few, if any, portrayals of bisexuality, disabled gay people or gay people from minority ethnic groups in BBC dramas and soap operas. No examples were found during the 168 hours monitored. The groups also struggled to think of programmes in which the diversity of lesbian and gay identities had been represented beyond typical stereotypes.

When gay people appear on quiz or other light entertainment shows it is normally only the "acceptable" face of the gay community – white, middle-class, non-sexual couples – that is featured. These programmes reproduce a narrow representation of gay lives, rather than a realistic representation of the variety of gay identities, communities and lifestyles.

Viewers were aware that lesbians and gay men are rarely portrayed as successful professionals in normal, stable jobs; as contented middle-aged people; or as young people. Some participants argued that the BBC needs to introduce realistic lesbian and gay characters into children's dramas.

Most gay people are not actually portrayed as really intelligent people who can look after themselves.

Sian, 18, rural area

I've racked my brains, I can't think of any TV representation of a sort of middle-aged... ordinary lesbian.

Marie, 47, Cardiff

The BBC rarely represents gay relationships in normal or everyday ways. In particular, there is a lack of tenderness or real intimacy – as opposed to sex – between gay characters or any depth to, or emotional development of, gay relationships. Several focus-group members criticised the BBC because when it does depict a gay character, it usually focuses on an individual gay character and does not portray the gay scene or other aspects of lesbian and gay community life.

Despite the BBC's stated commitment to representing the UK's nations, regions and localities, portrayals of gay life are usually situated in major cities, particularly London and Manchester. Viewers noted little representation of gay lives in rural or suburban communities and provincial towns, where the experience of living openly as a gay man or lesbian can be more difficult because of the lack of a gay scene and because in small, less cosmopolitan places gay people are more invisible and vulnerable to homophobia.

I don't think the regional gay people are portrayed that well on television, I think that... a lot of the programmes only feature urban gays.

Simon, 43, London

## 1.9 IMPLICATIONS

Gay innuendo was broadcast across a range of programmes in spite of the BBC's editorial guidelines advising that language that causes most offence includes abuse relating to sexuality. These guidelines are also clear on avoiding offensive or stereotypical assumptions:

"We should avoid offensive or stereotypical assumptions and people should only be described in terms of their disability, age, sexual orientation and so on when clearly editorially justified." *Editorial Guidelines – The BBC's Values and Standards* (June 2005).

It is less the presence of gay characters in entertainment programmes that matters than their relative invisibility in other genres.

"We should avoid offensive or stereotypical assumptions and people should only be described in terms of their disability, age, sexual orientation and so on when clearly editorially justified." *BBC Editorial Guidelines*

The fact that more than half of gay references were found in comedy creates a clear problem. Not all of these jokes were offensive, but the absence of any balanced debate or portrayal of gay life elsewhere on the BBC is a cause for concern. This current leaning towards only acknowledging gay life in the context of comedy encourages the perception that gay people are strictly figures of fun. This is not an appropriate message, particularly for young people watching the programmes.

It is less the presence of gay characters or entertainment programmes that matters than their relative invisibility in other genres.

Ironically, the dearth of gay features or story-lines appears to make audiences keen to follow any story involving gay men or lesbians, even if these stories potentially heighten homophobia rather than challenge it. This indicates that the BBC could utilise this public interest to emphasise positive images of lesbian and gay lives.

Television is changing, and nudity and implied sexual activity are common parts of mainstream programming. For example, listings now include factual programmes designed to help couples improve their sex life and sex is more visible in mainstream drama. Yet this relaxation of boundaries about sexual activity has not been extended to the portrayal of lesbian and gay sexual activity.

The BBC's negative coverage of gay people in most circumstances appears to be in stark contrast to its stated ambition to represent Britain's diverse communities.

## 2 The positive power of television

- Television is one of the most powerful influencing forces when it comes to tackling prejudice – more so than newspapers, friends, religious or political beliefs.
- Television can help lesbian and gay people come to terms with their sexuality and identity.
- Television has a role to play in connecting different communities, and connecting people within communities to each other, including gay people.

### 2.1 TELEVISION TODAY

Television has a role in everyone's lives. It can educate, inform, reflect and challenge. It can bring communities together, introduce new trends and ideas, and place social issues at the forefront of public consciousness. Television can, and does, have a positive influence on people's experiences and attitudes.

Television is one of the most powerful influencing forces when it comes to tackling prejudice

Previous research commissioned by Stonewall (*Profiles of Prejudice*, MORI 2003) found that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are one of the most likely social groups to elicit prejudicial views. Further Stonewall research (*Understanding Prejudice*, 2004) found that gay people also experience significant rates of benign prejudice, including stereotyping. Television, however, is one of the most powerful influencing forces when it comes to tackling prejudice – more so than newspapers, friends, religious or political beliefs (*Profiles of Prejudice*).

This section of the report explores the ways in which television can have, and has had, a positive impact on the lives of lesbians and gay men. It also looks at the messages that television sends to the whole community about gay lives.

In all the focus groups, participants acknowledged the role and influence of television.

I think the box is more important. Flash an advert up and within 24 hours the kids are saying it in the playground. It is such a powerful medium that we do need positive images out there.

Jess, 33, Derby

### 2.2 COMING OUT

Television programmes and characters have helped some gay people to recognise their own sexuality, or come out, for the first time by providing information about being gay. This has enabled them to begin to understand their feelings, and to appreciate that it can be acceptable to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Some of the research participants described associating with particular television characters at key moments in their lives. For example, one man described how a programme helped him to recognise his sexuality and call off his wedding, while a young woman described coming out at the same time as a character in the ITV programme *Bad Girls*.

Several participants described how television programmes depicting gay characters made them feel less isolated.

It's, like, you feel that you're not alone, it feels like there's somebody else out there who's like you and that's great, that's really good and it helps people. They can think, I'm not so weird after all. I think that really helps in a way.

Sita, 26, London

Talking about television programmes with "gay" content can also be a subtle way for a gay person to evaluate the attitudes of their friends or family members towards lesbian and gay sexuality without indicating or giving away their own sexuality. Through conversations about gay television storylines lesbians and gay men can assess whether it is safe to come out.

I mean *Queer as Folk* was kind of the first major gay programme at school, you know, that was a way of discussing with your peers their thoughts... and I definitely used that as a gauge of what people's thoughts were and how people would react to what they'd been seeing.

Nathan, 22, Edinburgh

Television is particularly important to young people and those living in rural areas or provincial towns, where they are isolated from significant gay communities and may not encounter gay people in their everyday lives. Participants in gay focus groups described how, as children or young people

struggling with their own sexuality, they secretly watched television programmes with gay characters or about gay lives with the sound turned down or in a bedroom so that their parents would not know what they were doing.

**I think generally when you're coming out and when you're younger you really crave images and representations that you can identify with, even if you don't identify directly with them.**

Ali, 30, Cardiff

### 2.3 CHALLENGING PREJUDICE

Television can also help to change general social attitudes. Both gay and straight participants suggested that television has helped change public attitudes towards lesbian and gay issues. This is particularly the case where straight characters have been portrayed as accepting gay characters, and in shows where straight people come to know and develop emotional connections with a gay character over time.

Some participants claimed that when they have come out, television programmes with gay content have helped them to negotiate their sexuality with heterosexual family members or friends. Programmes achieve this by acting as a source of information or resource to enable people to explain their identity to straight people and to challenge their ignorance or fear of gay sexuality.

Others felt that gay characters, even if they weren't particularly likeable, provided a means of opening discussion about gay issues.

**[Referring to the gay character Daffyd in the BBC programme, *Little Britain*] I notice that generally ...in conversations with straight, work colleagues,... it's made them more open about talking about myself, a gay man and my partner. And that's been quite an interesting thing to see. It's a very extreme character which you don't particularly like, but it has provided a forum for people to talk about things a bit more.**

Simon, 43, London

Focus-group members felt the portrayal and exploration of gay issues within broadcast media play a crucial role in challenging stereotypes and educating society about different types of people. Participants also argued that positive changes in social attitudes in turn have led to, or facilitated, wider legal changes in gay people's rights. It was felt that television can play a key role in changing people's opinions and attitudes.

### 2.4 CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Stonewall's research also found that television plays a particularly important role in connecting real-life everyday lesbian and gay communities, and particularly lesbian communities, who experience a greater degree of exclusion from the general gay community.

There is a culture among many groups of lesbians of watching programmes together, for example the BBC's *Tipping the Velvet*, Living TV's *The L Word* and ITV's *Bad Girls*; talking about episodes or characters from these programmes in the pub; and recording them for circulation among the local lesbian community.

Lesbians also read lesbianism into programmes, and identify with assertive female characters on television, such as *Juliet Bravo* and *Cagney and Lacey*, even when these programmes never give any indication that these characters might be gay. In this sense the meanings of programmes are not determined by broadcasters and passively consumed by viewers; rather the audience can actively project their own meanings and readings on to what they watch.

**I think programmes like *The L Word* and like *Ellen* are important. Lesbians get together to watch those programmes...sit down in a pub and play these shows, and it's a good way to meet new people and just an easy way to connect with people.**

Pari, 27, London

There are discussion forums on the Internet, and some fan clubs, for many lesbian-identified television programmes. These include programmes with lesbian characters or ones that star actresses who are lesbians in real life, as well as programmes with characters who are appropriated as lesbians, such as ITV's *Bad Girls* and Channel 5's *Xena Warrior Princess*.

### 2.5 IMPLICATIONS

Gay visibility in the media is extremely important to gay people. Lesbians and gay men rely on the media to provide information and affirmation, and representations of themselves. This can sometimes lead to gay people seeking positive affirmation of their lives from sources that are not even overtly lesbian or gay, indicating a need for more robust lesbian and gay role-models.

Furthermore, better portrayal of gay lives within the broadcast media could be a useful means of achieving better understanding between heterosexual and gay people and could help diminish prejudice.

## 3 The negative power of television

- Negative portrayals of gay people on the BBC can have a greater impact on the viewer because there is not a significant level of positive coverage to counteract this view. As only 0.4 per cent of total programming tackles gay issues, it is disturbing that approximately 80 per cent of these references are negative.
- There is a direct relationship between gay stereotypes on television and harassment, which is not something that just affects lesbians and gay men. It also has consequences for heterosexual people who are perceived to be gay, based on stereotyped assumptions.
- Casual homophobia on television impacts on peer group cultures and can incite verbal or physical harassment towards, or hatred of, gay people. Left unchallenged, it perpetuates the notion that homophobia is acceptable.
- Focus groups pointed out the BBC's inconsistency. It would not tolerate presenters making racist comments but lets them get away with homophobic remarks.

### 3.1 NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Stonewall research reports, *Profiles of Prejudice* and *Understanding Prejudice*, both highlighted the persistence of homophobia in the UK. They established that there appear to be both direct and indirect links between television representations of gay people and the incidence of prejudice towards, and in some cases actual harassment of, lesbians and gay men in everyday life.

Stonewall's focus-group research illustrates clearly how television can have a positive impact on personal and social perceptions of lesbian and gay issues. Equally, however, television has the power to evoke negative responses to lesbian and gay people and part of the focus-group work looked at the impact of negative images.

### 3.2 CLOSETING AND ISOLATING

Gay sexuality is often presented negatively by the BBC. Stonewall's monitoring showed that it is five times more likely to be portrayed negatively than positively. Gay people are often portrayed solely in terms of illness and death, or unstable and troubled identities. The monitoring also showed that when the BBC did portray gay people or characters, they tended to be in crisis, such as a murdered gay couple on *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, or completely chaotic and unreliable like the character Shane in *Cutting It*.

The focus-group research found that these portrayals can deter people from coming out because they recognise that for some people, including their parents and friends, this is the only depiction of gay sexuality with which they will be familiar.

*At school it was a case of you watch TV, come back the next day, you have a good gossip about it, and our closer friends, they used to go, "Oh did you see that lesbian thing? Oh my God, that was so disgusting". They'd go on about that.*

*Sian, 18, rural area*

This fear is reinforced by the fact that television itself also commonly represents coming out as gay as a drama or crisis that has negative consequences for gay characters, and in which being gay is seen as shameful. Such images can exacerbate some gay people's fears that if they come out in real life, they too will lose family, friends, homes, jobs or encounter violence.

For heterosexual family members negative television images can also make them fearful, anxious and stressed about what the future might hold for a gay child, sibling, cousin or grandchild and may deter them from being open about their relative's sexuality with others. In these ways television therefore plays a part in restricting the freedoms of lesbians and gay men.

*When I came out, my mother's reaction and her experience really of gay people...had been what she'd seen on television. It was either your really camp fluffy, Are You Being Served? "I'm free" or you were tortured dark souls...her reaction was a real fear that that's how it would be.*

*Rupert, 30, Edinburgh*

Television stereotypes can contribute to the isolation of young lesbians and gay men. Some of the focus-group participants described how they expected lesbians and gay men to look like the clichéd portrayals that are represented on television. One 19-year-old gay man described how as a child he expected all gay men to be camp and, because he did not meet any camp people in his everyday life, he assumed that there were no gay people in his town and therefore felt

completely isolated. It was only when he saw *Queer as Folk* on Channel 4 that he realised that there are other gay identities and ways of living a gay lifestyle.

### 3.3 INFLUENCING PERCEPTIONS

Gay men described how the television stereotypes of camp entertainers have real consequences on how their heterosexual colleagues and acquaintances expect them to behave. This can affect their actual behaviour and identities at work and in social situations.

A lot of entertainers are gay and therefore gay people are entertainers, you know and you're slightly in that situation where [you say], "yeah I am the party animal, I am the funny guy ... coming up with jokes and talking about penises in work...".

Fabio, 27, Cardiff

Many gay men also find that they are pulled into heterosexual women's social networks. It was noted that this appropriation led to an assumed degree of intimacy, where men are expected to talk frankly about their experiences, particularly their sexual experiences.

Girls at work, if they find out you're gay, suddenly have this inappropriate familiarity with you about sex.

David, 27, London

Television stereotypes of lesbians also have an impact on lesbians' everyday lives. Reference to, or discussion of, glamorous lesbians is sometimes used by heterosexual men to fuel sexual innuendo towards, or to sexually harass, women in everyday life.

You know when you're walking down the street with your girlfriend and holding hands and you just get guys turning round and stirring and saying, "Can I come home with you?".

Tanya, 33, London

This direct relationship between television stereotypes and harassment is not something that affects just lesbians and gay men, it has consequences for heterosexual people too.

One young lesbian described how the television stereotype of the more masculine lesbian influenced her own identity. To be a lesbian she felt she had to dress and act like lesbians on television. This in turn led to her being identified as gay by peers at school and being subject to homophobic harassment.

When I was growing up I always noticed that I looked at girls more than boys, but I never actually knew what it was until I watched TV. Then, because of the way it was all dramatised I thought that's how I had to be, and I ended up cutting my hair really short, and basically dressing in a different way, talking differently... and I got a lot of harassment for that. I suppose if it wasn't portrayed like that on TV, I would have had less of a hard time when I was a younger person.

Sian, 18, rural area

This direct relationship between television stereotypes and harassment is not something that affects just lesbians and gay men, it has consequences for heterosexual people too. Television portrayals lead heterosexual people to make assumptions about what lesbians and gay men look like, which can lead to homophobia being extended to heterosexual people who "look gay". For example, heterosexual women with short hair are often assumed to be lesbians, men who are effeminate in their mannerisms or dress are accused of being gay because they fit the stereotype. Perpetuation of stereotypes, frequently in a negative way, contributes to an overall increase in discrimination.

### 3.4 REINFORCING PREJUDICE

Negative portrayals of gay issues can have a disproportionate impact on the viewer because there is very little to counteract this view. As only 0.4 per cent of total programming on the BBC features gay issues, it is highly significant that approximately 80 per cent of these features are negative, unrealistic, stereotyped or homophobic. If the overall inclusion of gay issues increased, the manifestations of homophobia via humour would not have the same impact on the perceptions of lesbians and gay men. It is the absence of any other gay references that means that comedy can cease to be funny, and can start to be offensive.

While *Little Britain* did not appear in the eight weeks of monitored programmes, the London group appreciated the representation of Daffyd for its irony, but the joke was not

shared by focus groups living in less metropolitan places. Place matters. There are clear differences between the way gay people think about, and experience, the impact of television programmes on the basis of the communities in which they live and work. Participants from the rural focus groups and those in Derby and Wales described deeply entrenched homophobia in their home communities.

*When Little Britain came out, that didn't really help me at all because where I lived, when I was at school, there were only three streets, so I was literally the only gay person in the village, so Little Britain didn't really help me because I got bullied something rotten when that came out.*

Leo, 17, rural area

*Wales is predominantly rural, and therefore in a lot of ways the role of media is arguably more important. I mean I grew up 20 miles from Cardiff and it could have been 2,000. There's a deep horror in a lot of Welsh communities of homosexuality, and deep mistrust, deep fear of it.*

Pete, 41, Cardiff

The BBC was criticised by the focus groups for allowing television presenters such as Jeremy Clarkson and Anne Robinson, and radio presenters such as Chris Moyles on Radio 1, to make regular homophobic comments on their shows. It is not unusual, for example, to hear Jeremy Clarkson unfavourably describing cars as gay. One episode of *Top Gear*, which was repeated twice during the monitoring period, included a disparaging reference to Department for Transport ministers, Alistair Darling and Stephen Ladyman, as "Darling and Manlove", using implied gay sexuality as an insult to criticise their transport policies.

Throw-away comments like this may seem fairly innocuous, but participants argued that casual homophobia matters. It is a form of prejudice. It contributes to a public culture in which the degradation of gay people is regarded as acceptable, which may in turn have consequences for individual lesbian and gay men's sense of self-esteem, confidence and therefore mental and physical health.

*They've [the BBC] maybe got to pull up on allowing people to use sexuality as an insult, because that goes straight into the schools and it gets reinforced.*

Beth, 21, rural area

Focus-group members were aware that casual homophobia on television may also incite verbal or physical harassment towards, or hatred of, gay people. Left unchallenged, it perpetuates the notion that homophobia is acceptable. Particular concerns were expressed about the impact of everyday homophobia being broadcast on the BBC on children's peer-group cultures. An example of this was captured during the monitoring in an episode of *My Life as a Child*: an 11-year-old describes his much younger brother as "a bit gay", and is told by the brother to "get lost you gaylord".

Previous Stonewall research – *Safe for All* (2001) – has documented extensive homophobic bullying in schools of both lesbian and gay young people, and heterosexual young people whose identities are misread as gay because they fit lesbian or gay media stereotypes. Homophobic bullying in schools ranges from the verbal and the indirect to physical violence, with the word "gay" being the most common term of abuse in the playground. Several focus-group participants described their own experiences of being bullied or their awareness of local school and youth club cultures of homophobia. Most of the focus groups made the point that the BBC would not tolerate its presenters expressing racist comments in the way that they are allowed to get away with homophobic remarks.

*When I walk past the school at the end of my road, I hear all the kids calling each other dyke and poof because it's become the last acceptable form of playground abuse. If you're a teenager in that environment, that can be devastating and it can affect your education and your self-confidence and the whole direction of your life. These kids are learning it from somewhere.*

Tanya, 33, London

### 3.5 IMPLICATIONS

The potential negative impact of television appears to be generally unrecognised by broadcasters, but it can further contribute to endemic prejudice. In the past, Stonewall and other campaigners have attempted to bring this type of homophobia to the attention of the BBC. The response so far has been unsatisfactory and there generally seems to be a failure to recognise the problem or to take it seriously.

The BBC appears not to consider the impact of its output in relation to the lesbian and gay community, in spite of its own editorial guidelines.

## 4 What do heterosexual people think?

- Straight people do not believe it is desirable or appropriate to exclude or censor representations of lesbian and gay sexuality.
- They argue that achieving empathy between the gay and heterosexual communities is the most effective way to challenge bigotry and prejudice.
- Straight people think that there should be more documentary programmes about lesbian and gay contemporary social issues, and they also think that documentaries should not focus only on the negative aspects of gay lives.

### 4.1 INFLUENCING OPINIONS

Gay programmes and the portrayal of gay lives do not just have an impact on gay people, nor are they watched only by gay people. Clearly heterosexual people also turn to the media for information and education. They are influenced by what they see and are shaped by the attitudes that the media reflect. It is therefore crucial to understand the impact that gay programming, or the lack of it, has on the heterosexual community and its attitude to lesbians and gay men.

Part of this research project included gathering the views of heterosexual people through focus groups. These focus groups raised broadly the same issues as the gay focus groups. They identified that stereotypes, such as the camp or promiscuous gay man and the masculine or glamorous lesbian, were prolific within broadcast media. Furthermore, they recognised that gay characters were often introduced for titillation and shock value to boost ratings. Often these characters are not integral to the programme, nor, more importantly, are they developed.

These focus groups also noted that lesbians were generally invisible in mainstream programming.

You don't see it as much. Men can dress up as drag queens and be outrageous and stuff like that, whereas women don't, so there isn't sort of the entertainment value as there is for a bloke.

Kasie, 21, heterosexual, Sheffield

The stereotypical image of the lesbian, you know, Doc Marten boots and very sad dour sort of, like, face, just that kind of unattractive essentially.

Sabola, 31, heterosexual, Leeds

There is a strong affection for camp performers, who are regarded as part of a long tradition of gay people sending themselves up. These personalities are acceptable and indeed have a strong family following, because they are not regarded as sexual or sexualised and are therefore seen as safe and non-threatening to heterosexuality.

### 4.2 STEREOTYPED VIEWS

Several members of the heterosexual focus groups indicated that some straight people dislike programmes which they implicitly understand to challenge or threaten heterosexuality. These include programmes in which presenters are understood to have an agenda to promote their own sexuality and programmes in which physical intimacy between gay men is explicitly stated or demonstrated. Television programmes where gay men are seen kissing, touching, having sex, or being in bed together can be unpopular.

The same views were not expressed in relation to lesbians. In contrast some of the men joked about wanting more "girl on girl action". These views highlighted the different meanings in the ways that lesbians and gay men are stereotyped on television. Gay men and masculine lesbians are regarded as threatening to heterosexuality and heterosexual men, whereas glamorous lesbians are embraced as part of heterosexual men's sexual fantasies and are therefore implicitly heterosexual.

Christina Aguilera...did a song called *Beautiful* and in that video two men kissed and I remember seeing that on TV and being very shocked by that to the point of being actually somewhat disgusted by it, and you know I've never really considered myself to be really homophobic. If it was a heterosexual couple, well that's everyday, you know, that's the sort of norm, but two, you know two women or two men started kissing, it's like, that's unusual, therefore alarm bells start ringing in the head. That doesn't fit with normal sort of things.

Sabola, 31, heterosexual, Leeds

The heterosexual focus groups were not offended by lesbian and gay characters in programmes such as *Little Britain* or by lesbian and gay entertainers such as Graham Norton. They were not necessarily entertained either because in contrast to traditional camp entertainment they did not always understand the jokes and cultural references.

Several heterosexual participants expressed discomfort about, or disgust at, some of the ways gay men's sexuality is featured on television. There was also concern that older people were more likely to be upset by, or prejudiced about, the gay content of television programmes. This view was not actually expressed by any older people themselves. Others argued that gay sexuality should not be featured before the watershed when children might be watching.

However, the focus groups did not believe it desirable or appropriate to exclude or censor representations of lesbians and gay sexuality. Most heterosexual people were pragmatic about lesbian and gay issues on television, recognising that with the choice of channels in the digital age no one has to watch programmes which they find offensive.

#### 4.3 PROGRAMMES THAT CHALLENGE PREJUDICES

The majority of heterosexual participants became aware of or first encountered lesbians and gay men through television. They acknowledged that lesbians and gay men are more visible on contemporary television, in soap operas and light entertainment, than during their own childhoods. This emerging presence has made them more aware of gay lives and is helping to change their own attitudes and understanding, as well as bringing about wider social change.

The more accustomed you get to seeing references to gay people and how you should deal with it, and how we should approach it...I think then our perceptions will change, slowly and the BBC and television does mediate that process.

Sabola, 31, heterosexual, Leeds

Even gay television programmes that make straight people feel uncomfortable can still implicitly shift awareness and understanding. One focus-group participant, a builder, described how his workmates, while professing to be revolted by the Channel 4 programme *Queer as Folk*, were regular viewers who could discuss the details of the story-lines and characters.

*Queer as Folk*, it's disgusting, have you seen it? At work it'd be two hours talking about those characters and what they're doing and that, "I can't believe they did that" and you know so on and so forth...you get in a situation where you've got a load of hairy-arsed blokes talking about what that man did to another man, "he shouldn't have done that, he should have split up with the other guy first".

Gary, 31, heterosexual, Leeds

It was more of an issue when I was younger, people were frightened of gay people, things like that and I think when I first met one of the lads that I know who's gay, I was quite shocked that he was really funny. I think that stuck in my mind, because people had always made them out to be not nice people.

Abigail, 39, heterosexual, Leeds

Famous television presenters or entertainers who come out have played an important part in changing some heterosexual people's attitudes towards lesbian and gay sexuality. George Michael's interview on *Parkinson* on the BBC, in which he was very open and forthright about his sexuality and relationships, was cited several times as having a big impact on individuals' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men.

I think fictionalised characters perhaps don't always sway you greatly, I think what stuck more in my mind is people that you know, know through a part of the entertainment industry, particularly some musicians and singers, coming out...you grow up with George Michael prancing around and he's got beautiful women around him and naturally you assume he's heterosexual and then you [think]... oh God, I didn't realise that, he's gay.

Paul, 38, heterosexual, Leeds

#### 4.4 WIDENING ISSUES

The heterosexual focus groups argued that there should be more documentary programmes about lesbian and gay contemporary social issues such as civil partnership or the age of consent legislation to help them to understand lesbian and gay lives. One of the focus groups commended a BBC Two documentary *Sad to be Gay*, which followed a gay man, David Akinsanya, through therapy because he wanted to become heterosexual. These viewers claimed a greater insight into the issues and they made them more understanding of, and sympathetic towards, lesbians and gay men. However, some gay viewers found the piece negative.

This was the only example of factual gay programming which participants identified, mirroring Stonewall's monitoring research which found only three per cent of all gay references within factual programmes.

*Sad to be Gay was the only thing that I've ever really seen that really gave you a proper insight into what it must feel like coping with everybody else's idea of who you are. Because all the other programmes just make it up, they'll just give it really a superficial sort of edge, I think, and just make it sort of really one-dimensional, like to be gay is all about having sexual acts.*

Naomi, 30, heterosexual, Leeds

The heterosexual groups also recognised that documentaries should not focus only on the negative aspects of gay lives such as identity struggles or AIDS, but should also feature positive aspects of gay culture. This would tie in with the BBC's commitment to reflect the UK's diverse communities, and would provide a more balanced depiction of gay life.

It is these kinds of programmes that enable heterosexual people to connect emotionally with lesbians and gay men and recognise similarities between heterosexual and gay lives.

Heterosexual people welcomed the mainstream inclusion of lesbian and gay couples on light entertainment programmes such as quiz shows and DIY programmes. One group gave an example of a lesbian couple who were included in a series about weddings. The groups suggested that they would like to see more programmes where gay people were seen as being normal or having normal lives and relationships, rather than programmes that highlighted lesbian and gay men's sexuality or sex lives or their differences from heterosexuality.

*I think it would probably be better if they did actually just show them having a relationship, like they show everybody else having relationships and breaking up and just showed an everyday way of living.*

Abigail, 39, heterosexual, Leeds

*I think if they showed...a gay couple, how they go about getting a house, mortgage, insurance, recognised as a couple and just did it in a little snippet like that, less sensationalised and just sort of like, well, they're just like us.*

Gary, 31, heterosexual, Leeds

Overall, heterosexual people do not think that the BBC should depict lesbian and gay issues solely in specialist gay programmes. They argued that the segregation of gay issues in this way would not promote understanding between heterosexual and gay communities, and would allow homophobic views and values to go unchallenged. Lesbian and gay people also need to be assimilated into mainstream programmes more effectively – although reservations were also expressed about token lesbians and gay men appearing in every programme. Comparisons were made with the way the representation of minority ethnic groups on television has evolved.

#### 4.5 INFLUENCING REAL LIFE

Heterosexual participants who know people who are lesbian and gay say that television has not changed what they think of them or how they relate to them. However, there was some joking that they now know more about their sex lives having seen lesbian and gay sex depicted on television.

Some heterosexual participants described how seeing gay characters on television has made them more aware of what lesbians and gay men "look like" and they therefore claim to have found it easier to assess the potential sexuality of people they meet in real life. For example, one participant described how his family thought that his brother might be

Factual programmes can enable heterosexual people to connect emotionally with lesbians and gay men and recognise similarities between heterosexual and gay lives.

gay but rather than risk asking him, they compared him to gay people from the television, to see if he had anything in common with those representations.

Television is kind of an extension of what would be the old community, whereas people would go and chat to the person next door or whatever, people now watch the telly, so that's their connection with the world. They feel like they almost know these gay people on TV. In the same way they'd be gossiping about the man next door, they're now gossiping about the funny man on the telly.

Den, 27, heterosexual, Sheffield

Unlike the majority of the gay focus groups, most of the participants in the heterosexual focus groups were not offended by television and radio presenters who regularly make homophobic jokes and comments. These groups emphasised that it was only fun and that political correctness must not be allowed to get out of hand. However, some of the heterosexual participants did not agree and shared the concerns of the gay focus groups that repetitive or significant homophobia on television might be reproduced in schools and so is potentially damaging to children and young people.

#### 4.6 IMPLICATIONS

As Stonewall's report *Profiles of Prejudice* found, achieving empathy between communities is potentially the most effective way to challenge bigotry and prejudice. Television can play a major role in doing this.

The BBC seems insufficiently aware of the perception among gay and straight licence-fee payers of homophobia in its output. It also seems insufficiently aware of the distress caused by unchallenged low-level bigotry and the appearance that homophobia might be an acceptable form of prejudice.

## 5 Is the BBC value for money?

- Six per cent of the BBC's licence fee revenue is paid by gay people – a sum of almost £190 million each year towards BBC programming, of which more than £90 million goes specifically towards BBC One and BBC Two, yet lesbian and gay issues are reflected in only 0.4 per cent of programming.
- The BBC was singled out by focus-group participants as the broadcaster that has been least successful in capturing the realities of gay life, and which broadcasts the least sophisticated representations of lesbians and gay men.
- Both gay and straight people feel that the BBC needs to represent a more diverse range of gay identities, lifestyles and communities.

### 5.1 POLICIES ON PAPER

According to the BBC's annual report 2004/2005, the broadcaster aims to "enrich people's lives" and put "audiences at the heart of everything", while celebrating diversity. In its various policy statements, it also emphasises the importance of its licence-fee payers, and the obligation it has to reflect and represent its audiences.

The BBC's latest editorial guidelines set out the corporation's values, including its commitment to "impartiality and diversity of opinion". It notes that in practice this must mean that a wide range of opinion is reflected and that "no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under-represented".

Gay people pay almost £190 million each year towards BBC programming, £90 million of which goes specifically towards BBC One and BBC Two. Many gay people do not feel that the BBC reflects their real lives or needs, and they do not feel they receive value for money as licence-fee payers.

Not only gay people, but heterosexual people too suggested the BBC has a responsibility to serve and represent lesbian and gay licence-fee payers.

Most focus-group participants felt that the BBC was too conservative in its approach to gay issues, showing safe, one-off, gay programmes such as *Tipping the Velvet*. Most programming was not seen to reflect a mainstream lesbian

Not only gay people, but heterosexual people too suggested the BBC has a responsibility to serve and represent lesbian and gay licence-payers.

and gay presence in society, nor to capture the realities of the lesbian and gay scene. One person described the BBC as the "caveman" of broadcasting.

**If you put the BBC against Channel 4, it's just like the caveman**

*Sita, 26, London*

**We're not up there nearly enough as we should be, considering most ... you know we all do pay.**

*Tanya, 33, London*

### 5.2 POLICIES IN ACTION

The challenge to the BBC is to ensure there are appropriate representations of lesbians and gay men on television. As previous sections of this report have indicated, representations of lesbian and gay lives on television, such as coming out, are not necessarily positive. Mostly they are negative and reinforce stereotypes and prejudice. Improving the representation of gay people on television is not therefore about just increasing the number of times lesbian and gay lives are featured, rather it is about improving the nature, quality and realism of these representations.

The BBC was particularly singled out by research participants as the channel that has been, in their view, least successful in this respect and as broadcasting the least sophisticated representations of gay lives.

**I think, there's not that much [exposure] on BBC, I think BBC has a lot less than the others have.**

*Simon, 43, London*

During the eight weeks of monitoring, there was footage of Elton John, Graham Norton, Julian Clary, George Michael and Freddie Mercury, all entertainers. However, the focus groups believed that, as a public-service broadcaster receiving significant funding from its gay audiences, the BBC should represent gay issues in more positive, mature and explicit ways (on children's programming as well as adult-orientated programmes). One focus group also suggested that the BBC should provide more post-programme support such as telephone helplines when sensitive issues are covered.

### 5.3 REFLECTING COMMUNITIES

Both the gay and straight focus groups felt that the BBC needs to represent a more diverse range of gay identities and lifestyles in its entertainment programmes and to break away from clichéd stereotypes. Lesbian and gay characters in soap operas need to be developed in more depth and to be shown in stable, long-lasting relationships in which their sexuality is an incidental part of their role in the soap, rather than the prime focus of their story-lines. There is also a desire for more gay people to be included as participants in light entertainment family, or couple-based, game and quiz shows.

**Don't be afraid to actually have positive gay characters, ie, ones who have relationships. If you're making a drama, for example, commit to the development of a character, give that character multi-dimensions, make them the same as every other character in the programme and don't make being gay the main issue of that character. Make it be about their employment or that they've found out their mother's having an affair.**

Stanley, 62, Edinburgh

Both gay and heterosexual people believe the BBC should provide more coverage of lesbian and gay issues in news and documentary programmes. In particular, it was felt that the BBC could better cover key issues such as civil partnership.

The Scottish focus group illustrated the importance of this potential role through an example of events surrounding the Scottish Parliament's repeal of Section 28 (Section 2A) of the *Local Government Act 1988* banning the so-called promotion of homosexuality in schools. During the legal process Brian Souter, a businessman, funded an aggressive campaign to try to prevent the repeal. His campaign stirred up vicious homophobia that the group felt was not adequately acknowledged or challenged by the BBC, with its stated commitment to impartiality. BBC news coverage more generally was criticised for only showing extreme or stereotyped images of gay people in its coverage of Gay Pride.

**It's up to the BBC to educate those who don't know. I mean the classic one, the partnership rights, that is one that I will discuss with a lot of my colleagues and straight friends and none of them understands, it's just lack of information.**

Simon, 43, London

**Age of consent nearly just passed us all by when it was reduced to 16. It's things like that I think that are more impactful...letting everybody know about it.**

Jess, 33, Derby

The focus groups criticised the London-centred and metropolitan coverage of lesbian and gay lives in the BBC's fictional, factual and news programmes. There is a need for more recognition and coverage of gay issues at a local and regional level because what it means to be a lesbian or gay man can be experienced very differently in rural areas, or provincial towns and suburbia compared to cosmopolitan cities such as London.

There was a belief that the BBC must not broadcast homophobic programmes and must respond to the homophobia of its presenters without losing a sense of humour.

**Radio 1, Chris Moyles, is fuelled on homophobia. The whole thing is fuelled on homophobia, gay characters who are brought in and treated like zoo exhibits, the constant references, some veiled, some overt, to homosexual traits, acts, some of which is then passed on as postmodern irony, though it's of course equally as damaging, no matter how it's delivered. I mean I really do believe that Radio 1, which is completely aimed at a teenage market, has a responsibility to be better than that.**

Pete, 41, Cardiff

It was generally acknowledged that the BBC has developed robust strategies for dealing with racism. These are not matched by the corporation's responsiveness to Britain's gay population.

### 5.4 IMPLICATIONS

The BBC *Statements of Programme Policy 2005/2006* makes particular reference to *Sad to be Gay* and the audience rapport held by Graham Norton. These represented a tiny part of programming.

There appears to be little evidence that the BBC provides value for money for the £190 million it receives from lesbians and gay men – six per cent of its income. When asked to identify a piece of gay programming from the BBC, the gay licence-fee payers picked *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, despite the fact that this was first broadcast on BBC Two in 1990.

## What the BBC should do – recommendations

### **Stonewall has developed a number of recommendations for the BBC:**

1. Commit to mirroring its race and disability policies and practices in relation to sexual orientation.
2. Take urgent steps to address the low-level homophobia almost endemic in television and radio outputs.
3. Commit to ensuring that when gay people appear in programmes, their inclusion is natural and realistic, rather than sensationalised.
4. Commit to the inclusion of developed lesbian and gay characters in some drama and soap operas on BBC One and BBC Two.
5. Seek to provide balanced, unsensational coverage of gay issues in news and current affairs programmes.
6. Commit to the inclusion of six per cent of lesbian and gay contestants in game shows.
7. Start communicating and consulting with lesbian and gay licence-fee payers about their perceptions and experiences of the portrayal of gay people in BBC output.
8. Commit to providing lesbian and gay licence-fee payers with “value for money”.

# Methodology

Stonewall researchers watched and recorded BBC One and BBC Two from 7pm-10pm every other night for eight weeks, between May and July 2005. This generated 56 evening sessions of peak-time viewing, totalling 168 hours. Programmes were monitored for anything of gay interest, including lesbian and gay people, gay characters or story-lines in fictional programmes, gay themes or features in factual programmes, use of gay terminology or insults, homophobia and mention of anything related to gay sexuality. The resulting data, both qualitative and quantitative, was analysed thematically.

Stonewall held eight focus groups – six with lesbians, gay and bisexual people and two with heterosexuals – to explore the issues raised by the analysis of BBC programmes. Of the lesbian and gay groups, four were mixed gender groups, one group was women only and one group men only. The ages of the focus-group participants ranged from 17 to 73 years old. One focus group was drawn from a rural youth group whose members ranged from 17 to 21. The remaining focus groups were carried out in several contrasting locations: London, Leeds, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Sheffield and Derby.

The focus groups discussed how lesbians and gay men are represented on television; the influence of television programmes on individuals and communities; and feelings about the BBC and how it compares with other channels. Images from a range of television programmes, actors and presenters, and a selection of clips from BBC programmes were used to facilitate the discussion. The focus-group research took place between September and October 2005. All the discussions were recorded and the tapes were transcribed and analysed using conventional techniques.



Design: *Hart Design*

Editing and Production: *Working Week Communications*

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# TUNED OUT

The BBC's portrayal of  
lesbian and gay people