

Jacobs, Laura, and Cecil Meeusen. “Coming Out of the Closet, Also on the News? A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Patterns in Visibility, Tone and Framing of LGBTs on Television News (1986-2017).” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2020, pp. 1-25.

Hatty Nestor, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

1 What is it to be recognized, to be made visible? Is the representation of visual material solely dependent upon the media, or is the framing of LGBT people always fraught with questions of inequality and injustice? In their article, ‘Coming Out of the Closet, Also on the News? A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Patterns in Visibility, Tone, and Framing of LGBTs on Television News (1986-2017)’ (2020), Laura Jacobs and Cecil Meeusen map the framing of LGBT people in Flanders, Belgium. Informed by recent arguments against discrimination towards homosexuality (Gerhards 2010; Hooghe and Meeusen 2013), and LGBT representation (Redman 2018), Jacobs and Meeusen interrogate the visibility of LGBT people in Belgian mainstream media.

2 Belgium was the first country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003 and serves as a ripe case study to map the shift both in cultural attitudes to LGBT representation and the prominence of such visibility. The authors demonstrate, with their longitudinal analysis of over thirty-two years that the representation of LGBT people in the news has steadily grown. For Jacobs and Meeusen, then, cultural representation is a paradoxical, socio-political issue, that can be examined through data analysis. In that regard, the representation and (mis)representation of LGBT citizens is an ethical quandary, and raises questions of grievability (cf. Butler 2009). Therefore, the representation of LGBT people illuminates pre-existing social tensions. Thus, it can be argued that if the lack of representation equates to an unprogressive cultural context, and that an increase in representation can influence mainstream opinion towards marginalized people (Moscowitz 2010).

3 Broadly, the longitudinal analysis of television presented by Jacobs and Meeusen functions as a refined insight into previously uninterrogated representation within the news. This longitudinal analysis collates and interrogates decades of LGBT representation on television in Belgium. Following theories of parasocial contact hypothesis (Ortiz and Harwood 2007), and intergroup contact theory (Tropp 2011), Jacobs and Meeusen differentiate between ‘passive’, and what they coin ‘active representation’ to discern between modes of recognition in the news. This representation, they argue, offers the possibility of building more tolerance towards LGBT individuals, as they are “taken seriously” (6): Within passive representation, for example, homosexuality is talked about; within active representation, LGBT individuals

are asked to join the debate. Thus, active representation has the power to reformulate public opinion on LGBT individuals (Sink and Mastro 2017). In sum, the authors attribute the change of in-person approaches to LGBT citizens to the widespread influence of mass-media (Schiappa et al. 2006; Sink and Mastro 2017).

4 In that sense, there is always a disjunct between news imagery and real-time encounters. As Joyce and Harwood (2014) query: What is the difference between seeing LGBT people on screen and talking one-on-one with LGBT people in reality? (Joyce and Harwood 2014). To approach this question, the authors make a thoroughly informed, data-driven inquiry into the correlative relationality between media representation and reality as well as the societal implications for Flanders that this correlation entails. Via a 2002 data from the European Social Survey (ESS), the article proves that Belgium is one of the most tolerant countries regarding homosexuality. For instance, in 2016, 88.2% of “respondents say they either agree or totally agree that lesbians and gays are free to live their lives the way they wish, compared to 78.3 percent in 2002” (Jacobs and Meeusen 2020). Furthermore, within Belgium’s television, a lack of media representation can lead to a phenomenon coined “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman 1978). This occurs where the media does not subvert representational inequalities but instead marginalizes LGBT people further. This precondition of recognition conflates social reality notions, which may portray homosexuality as a mental disorder, or as an abnormal lifestyle (Alwood 1996; Hart 2000).

5 Furthermore, Jacobs and Meeusen discuss disparities within LGBT identification, as well. For example, gay men tend to receive more visibility than transgender people and lesbians (McInroy and Craig 2015; Vanlee et al. 2018). Using VRT (Vlaamse Radio en Televisie) to analyze Flanders, the authors importantly note the portrayal of homosexuality as a socio-political issue in all its facets. Their findings conclude that homosexuality was the topic of 464 news stories across 32 years, of which 38.6 percent of the news stories have a negative tone. As Jacobs and Meeusen write, “[n]ews about LGBTs is still mostly negative in nature, although negativity is of course generally a well-documented feature of news” (Jacobs and Meeusen 18). Thus, Jacobs and Meeusen achieve with their study recognition of LGBT citizens through academic discourse, to counter the underrepresentation they face within mainstream media.

6 In this sense, what is most compelling about the study is how Jacobs and Meeusen discuss how a rise in visibility and representation equates to a 'positive' portrayal of those in question. The authors have therefore succeeded in producing a comprehensive study on the direct correlation between LGBT representation, visibility, and societal opinions about homosexuality. Thus, the article makes contingent the importance of visibility concerning

marginalization. The article confronts an overlooked aspect of LGBT representation in Belgium's news television and formulates a thorough response to LGBT citizens' representation in Flanders. Therefore, Jacobs and Meeusen expose the political quandary of representation, demonstrating the potential for congeniality shifts.

7 Yet there is always purposeful political use in remaining wary of the under- and misrepresentation of LGBT individuals. As the authors note, “[o]nly in half the stories about homosexuality, representatives from the LGBT community are given a voice” (Jacobs, Meeusen, 18). Therefore, this article demonstrates that to be recognized and represented is an act of political framing and that misrepresentation leads to further disempowerment, prejudice and marginalization. The authors therefore declare staging LGBT individuals in order to truly shift representational focus within media coverage.

Works Cited

- Alwood, E. *Straight News: Gay Men, Lesbians and the News Media*. New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames Of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London, Verso, 2000.
- Gerhards, Jürgen. “Non-discrimination towards homosexuality: The European Union’s Policy and Citizens’ Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in 27 European Countries”. *International Sociology*, 2010, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 5–28.
- Joyce, Nick, and Jake Harwood. “Improving intergroup attitudes through televised vicarious intergroup contact: Social cognitive processing of ingroup and outgroup information.” *Communication Research*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2014, pp. 627-643.
- McInroy, Lauren B., and Shelley L. Craig. “Transgender representation in offline and online media: LGBTQ youth perspectives.” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2015, pp. 606-617.
- Moscowitz, Leigh M. “Gay Marriage in Television News: Voice and Visual Representation in the Same-Sex Marriage Debate.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2010, pp. 24-39.
- Ortiz, Michelle, and Jake Harwood. “A social cognitive theory approach to the effects of mediated intergroup contact on intergroup attitudes.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2007, pp. 615-631.
- Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp. *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact*. New York, Psychology Press, 2011.

Redman, Shane M. "Effects of same-sex legislation on attitudes toward homosexuality."

Political Research Quarterly, vol. 71, no. 3, 2018, pp. 628-641.

Sink, Alexander, and Dana Mastro. "Mediated Contact with Gay Men as a Predictor of Modern

Homonegativity: An Analysis of Exposure to Characters Appearing on Television

Between 2000 and 2015." *Communication Reports*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2018, pp. 78-90.

Tuchman, Gaye, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benet, eds. *Heart and Home: Images of*

Women in the Mass Media. New York, Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. pp. 3–38.