

From Minority to Mainstream: Channel 4's Queer Television

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Since its launch in 1982, Channel 4 has operated under a remit that demands that it serves the “tastes and interests not generally catered for” by other UK broadcasters.¹ Owing to a professed “commitment to diversity,” C4 has ostensibly sought, in the decades since its inception, to make provision in its programming for under-represented groups, including ethnic and sexual minorities.² The requirements of queer audiences have been, as a result, better addressed by C4 than by any other terrestrial channel. While gay content has far from saturated its schedules, and while an inventory of the gay-themed items it has showcased since the early 1980s may, rather dispiritingly, still be produced with relative ease, C4 has at least attempted to articulate a response to the viewing needs and desires of an increasingly visible queer community, if only by acknowledging that such a community exists and should be represented in a percentage of its shows.³

In the years since its inception, the channel has allowed for greater gay, lesbian, and bisexual visibility than its terrestrial competitors in both its fictional and documentary output. Channel 4's *Brookside*, conceived as a “grittier” alternative to ITV's long-running *Coronation Street*, featured both the first gay character in a UK soap opera, from 1982 to 1987, and terrestrial television's first pre-watershed lesbian kiss, in 1993. In 1989, C4 first broadcast *Out on Tuesday* (later simply *Out*), the first magazine-style program on UK television dedicated exclusively to the exploration of gay and lesbian issues, which ran until 1994 and was followed, in 1995, by *Dyke TV*, a mixed season of films, documentaries, and other lesbian-themed programming. Indeed, from the early 1990s onwards, gay, lesbian, and queer-themed programming appeared more and more frequently on Channel 4, often at more audience-friendly hours than before. The serialised adaptation of Armistead Maupin's San Francisco-set *Tales of the City* (1993), produced by the Channel 4 Corporation and featuring an array of queer and transgender characters, debuted on C4 in May 1993, in an evening timeslot presumably designed to capitalise on the success of Maupin's novel. Later that year, C4 also delivered *Camp Christmas*, a festive variety and sketch show hosted by out musicians Andy Bell and Melissa Etheridge and featuring contributions from gay, lesbian, and queer celebrities as disparate as Stephen Fry, Pedro Almodóvar, and Martina Navratilova. Though largely improvised and experimental in format, and though no such concept has since been implemented on any channel in the years since its transmission, *Camp Christmas* again served a useful purpose in allowing for an increased queer and LGBT visibility and media presence. Since 1998, queer material has proliferated on C4, from its staged “Coming Out Party” for lesbian comedian Ellen DeGeneres (1998) to shows like *So Graham Norton* (1998), fronted by an openly gay man, and *Big Brothers* (2000), which showcased over the years an array of queer contestants.

This article focuses primarily on three of Channel 4's recent, high-profile queer-themed shows: *Queer as Folk*, *Sugar Rush*, and *Skins*. It aims to examine the shows individually with a view to assessing their contribution to the post-1997 television landscape, and to investigate their relationship both to the channel's brand identity and to more nebulous but still ongoing changes to the British cultural climate regarding sexuality and sexual difference, and focuses particularly on the idea of cosmopolitanism as a recurring theme in Channel 4's contemporary queer programming.

Queer as Folk

In April 1999, C4 launched *Queer as Folk*, an eight-part series focusing on the personal lives of three gay men, set in and around Manchester's gay village. The program began with a warning, a pre-transmission voice-over alerting the viewer to the "sex with a capital 'S' and some very strong language" contained over the course of its thirty-minute run-time, born out by the explicit depictions of sexual activity which followed. Subsequently hailed by C4 as the "highlight" of the year's dramatic output, *Queer as Folk* attracted what the channel claimed were "thousands" of calls and e-mails commenting on its content.⁴ Some professed themselves shocked at the show's embrace of unbridled gay sexuality. Most expressed a kind of awe at the risk which C4 had taken in screening the show in the first place.

To a large extent, sex proved to be the program's most memorable and groundbreaking feature. *Queer as Folk* defined itself through its documentation of homosexuality as sexual act, through its correlation of queer identity with men fucking other men and enjoying it. That the sex it presents as emblematic of the urban gay male experience occurs exclusively between toned white men in their teens and twenties is incontrovertible; that the old, the overweight, and the non-Caucasian feature nowhere on the queer erotic landscape that it maps is similarly evident throughout the course of its two-series stay on C4. Unlike the other queer-themed programs which went before it, however, *Queer as Folk* delivered, as Sally Munt has argued, a kind of queer sex notable for its total absence of shame:⁵ explicit, stylized, and sometimes illegal sex performed frequently and, crucially, altogether unapologetically.

The "explicit" component of *Queer as Folk's* sex was delivered even within the opening ten minutes of the series' first episode. Before definitively establishing either character details or narrative trajectory, it presents sex: Stuart giving a handjob in an alleyway; Nathan ejaculating over Stuart's wrist; the two of them naked and fucking; the three principals, Nathan, Stuart, and Vince, delivering sex-themed monologues direct to the camera. Glyn Davis notes that "the amount of sexual activity in *Queer as Folk* diminishes across the episodes," and certainly, bar one graphically rendered threesome in the third episode, later shows failed to convey what sex remained in anything like the detail of the first.⁶ In this respect, the first episode functioned as the program's mission statement, delivering on the promise of the pre-broadcast warning and firmly equating queerness as a concept with specific sets of unavoidably sexual activity.

Sugar Rush and Skins: queer youth television in the 21st century

Post-*Queer as Folk*, Channel 4 has delivered a significant proportion of its queer and sexually-diverse programming content via what Davis terms the "youth television" format. *Sugar Rush* and *Skins*, like the channel's young adult comedy-drama *As If* (2001) and to a lesser extent the ongoing youth soap *Hollyoaks* have dealt overtly with sexual minority issues. Both featured queer and sexually ambiguous characters in central roles; both foregrounded frank discussion of queer sexualities, if not always articulating the practice thereof visually. Crucially, both assimilated queer plots and concepts into broader narrative threads: integrating homosexuality into their wider thematic frameworks and, in doing so, working to blur the distinctions between "queer," "youth," and "mainstream" television.

First shown at 10:50 p.m. on C4 in 2005, and subsequently on C4's young adult-oriented subsidiary channel E4, *Sugar Rush* documented the sexual and romantic obsession of a fifteen-year-old Brighton lesbian, Kim, with her mostly straight best friend, Sugar. Adapted from a novel by Julie Burchill and broadcast in two series each comprising ten 30-minute episodes, the program was billed by C4 as a "riotous exploration of what it means to be young, horny and queer in 21st-century Britain."⁷ Stylistically, it bore many of the hallmarks of a youth television which David Oswell describes as "ironic, critical and sassy"⁸: a cynical voice-over, deployed by Kim to convey her sexual confusion, contempt for her family, and increasing desire for Sugar; rapid-fire editing, and an almost-monochrome opening title montage set to Blondie's spiky "One Way Or Another" and reminiscent of the title sequence of ITV's not dissimilar *Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged 13 and ¾* (1985). The music the show employed only augmented its youth television status. Featuring contributions from then-new bands like Jet, The Black Velvets, and The Faders and covers of older material by contemporary artists (notably the Nouvelle Vague renditions of Depeche Mode's "Just Can't Get Enough," The Undertones' "Teenage Kicks," and the Buzzcocks' "Ever Fallen in Love?"), the soundtrack, subsequently released as a CD collection, was aimed squarely at a younger

viewing and listening audience—one familiar with the bands and singers in question, if not with the less recent songs or their original provenance.

Perhaps understandably for a show featuring such young protagonists at its heart, *Sugar Rush* was concerned, at least in its first series, less with queer sex than with mostly unfulfilled queer desire. The show placed emphasis was placed on Kim's *solo* sexual activities, rather than her sexual interactions with other girls, underscoring a more general commentary on the frustrations resulting from thwarted teenage sexuality. The opening scene of the first episode, for example, shows her fantasizing about kissing Sugar while masturbating with an electric toothbrush; her masturbatory habits, in fact, go on to form one of the recurring jokes of the show. The much-anticipated sex with Sugar, when finally it occurs in the last episode of series one, is implied rather than actually demonstrated. On the run from the police with a stolen credit card, the pair check into a luxury hotel room, take a bath together, flirt, and tacitly discuss the likelihood and desirability of sex between them taking place. Sugar rubs Kim's crotch with her foot; Kim responds, "Don't, not unless you mean it," Sugar counters by touching her further... only for the shot to cut away to a scene ostensibly set the following morning, as the two of them sleep naked and clearly post-coital in the bed. Conversely, if series one was principally about the containment of *unexpressed* queer desire, series two was rather more about its release. Now seventeen, Kim is highly sexually active, hooking up with both an older woman, Anna, and the woman who becomes her girlfriend, Saint, a sex-shop worker who introduces her to the delights of strap-ons and similar sex toys: the frustrations which beset her throughout the first series supplanted by the dilemmas which result from her often unsophisticated navigation of her queer sexual identity.

Both the queer fantasies and adolescent lesbian sex which *Sugar Rush* foregrounded were normalized, however, through direct contrast with the romantic and sexual dysfunctions of the show's heterosexual characters. The myriad failings of Kim's straight family, friends, and acquaintances serve to throw her comparatively functional sexual behavior into sharp relief. Her mother, Stella, is routinely unfaithful to her father, Nathan; their attempts in the second series to rekindle their ailing sex life result in an ill-advised visit to a swingers' club, ironically supplied by Saint's company. The many men in Sugar's life are shown as violent, exploitative, sexually-aggressive, or a combination of the three; Sugar herself displays little to no quality control in her romantic judgments, becoming embroiled in sexual misadventure after sexual misadventure throughout the duration of the series. The show's most stabilizing influence, in fact, appears in the form of a gay male couple: Kim's neighbors, Dave and David, respectable monogamous men who successfully parent a teenage son and happily dispense advice on property maintenance to Nathan and Stella, who characteristically begins an affair with the handyman they recommend. Heterosexuality, then, is far from the gold standard to which all characters within the program's narrative should aspire. Rather, it is exposed as an insecure and potentially dangerous institution from which they (and, by extension, the show's audience) might be wise to deviate.

Like *Sugar Rush*, *Skins* adopted a cynical and calculatedly postmodern approach to sexuality and gender politics in rejecting the grand narrative of heteronormativity. Broadcast first on E4 and then C4 throughout early 2007 (with a second series planned for 2008), it focused on a mixed-gender group of sixteen- to eighteen-year-old A Level students in Bristol, and featured queer characters in major roles throughout its run. Two of its eight lead characters, in fact, exhibit markedly queer behavior: Maxxie, a self-identified young gay man out to friends and classmates throughout the college, and Tony, a narcissistic, controlling, and stereotypically sociopathic "bad bisexual" who, as his girlfriend notes, "fucks everyone...including boys." Both are shown to be attractive, sexually active teens. The series one episode, "From Russia with Love," in fact, has them engaged (briefly and abortively) in a sexual encounter, albeit one that shoots them (presumably on account of the young age of the actors involved) from behind and from the waist up. His girlfriend passed out on the bed beside them, Tony offers Maxxie oral sex; the boys strip, and Tony falls to his knees before Maxxie stops and pulls away, informing him, "You've finally found something you're not actually good at." Interestingly, and somewhat indicative of the indifference with which all the show's characters regard queerness, Maxxie's regret immediately after the incident derives not from Tony's gender, but from his own imagined promiscuity and ethical transgression: he worries not that people will care that he fucks other boys, but that he will be perceived as "a slut," and judged accordingly. Potentially hurtful sexual behavior, not benign sexual identity, is the matter likely to incur judgment: character judgment within the show's narrative, being elicited on the basis of communally-decreed teenage ethics, rather than Judeo-Christian morals. In this respect, *Skins* was and is a queer show indeed, a point made more explicit still by its theme tune, featured heavily in its E4 and C4 promotional

slots: a remix of queer punk band Gossip's "Standing in the Way of Control," written in response to the Bush administration's denial of gay marriage rights to U.S. citizens.

Astonishing, however, is not the queerness of its content per se, but the multi-platform aggression with which a teen show as explicitly queer as *Skins* was and continues (as of 2008) to be marketed, even by a minority interest channel like C4. The program serves as a near-perfect example of what John Caldwell terms "convergence television," in that it is broadcast not only on the terrestrial and digital television channels C4 and E4, but "across the borders of both new technologies and media forms," specifically on the internet.⁹ Caldwell suggests,

The most effective websites for TV succeed by keeping viewer-users engaged long after a series episode has aired, and this requires greatly expanding the notion of what a TV text is. Shows accomplish this through at least six online strategies: "characterised" proliferations of the text; "narrativised" elaborations of the text; "backstory" textuality; "metacritical" textuality; technological augmentations; and merchandising augmentations.¹⁰

Skins' web presence adopts all six of these strategies and more, to varying degrees. The *Skins* website, a microsite of Channel4.com, features competitions, mp3 downloads, and a link to a mailing list which delivers "free stuff" to its subscribers every week. Episode guides, trailers, and interviews with the cast are also available, as are links to the show's profile on the social networking site MySpace and a customized forum that allows fans to discuss characters and the events of previous episodes and speculate about what might happen later in the series. MySpace-style profiles for each of the major characters, written from a first-person perspective, feature under the site's "Us" section, and offer the dedicated viewer an opportunity to learn more about them: Tony, for example, describes "himself" as "16th, going on 17th century" in outlook, identifies his favorite food as potatoes, favorite film stars as Humphrey Bogart, Jack Lemmon, and Steve McQueen, and the "coolest thing [he's] ever done" as "naked sledging." Past episodes are available for live streaming via 4's On Demand service, while ten-minute "unseen" episodes, never shown on television, are also available online, and serve to flesh out and augment the plots of the regular episodes broadcast. Most recently, another short episode, titled "*Skins* Secret Party Special," was broadcast via the show's MySpace page, and a Christmas-themed special aired on the official program website. Such emphasis on convergence strategies inevitably signals C4's acknowledgement of what Caldwell calls "television's current and final transfer to digital technology and digital content."¹¹ Similarly, the Channel 4 Corporation's use of multimedia platforms underscores its commitment to meeting the viewing requirements of its technology-savvy key demographics: "16-34 year olds and [middle class] ABC1s."¹² The sheer volume of extra-textual material surrounding *Skins* the program, however, suggests a desire on C4's part to transplant the show out of the minority-viewing arena and into the mainstream, so normalizing and embracing its queer content as just another facet of contemporary youth culture.

Cosmopolitanism

The narratives of all three shows, moreover, share what might be termed a cosmopolitan perspective. The term "cosmopolitan," as Ulrich Beck defines it, refers to an environment in which a number of outlooks and modes of living may coexist or to an individual capable of understanding and processing these potentially contradictory modes of living: one who allows for "the clash of cultures and rationalities within [his or her] own life, for the presence of "the *internalised* other."¹³ The "cosmopolitan perspective," for him, is

an alternative imagination, an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of others. It puts the negotiation of contradictory cultural experiences into the centre of activities: in the political, the economic, the scientific, and the social.¹⁴

The cosmopolitan experiences offered by *Queer as Folk*, *Sugar Rush*, and *Skins* are twofold. Textually, they present their audiences with a selection of queer characters who interact with and are, to a greater or lesser extent, integrated into the (predominantly heterosexual) wider community, and so suggest a degree of cosmopolitanism on the part of this community which may or may not exist in reality. Extra-textually, they provide the same audiences with vehicles through which to experience an "alternative way

of life” (in this instance, a queer one) vicariously, so allowing them to feel themselves cosmopolitan. If it is assumed that the practice of cosmopolitanism involves, as it does for Jon Binnie and Beverley Skeggs, not only “a particular attitude towards difference” but “access to a particular form of knowledge” which allows one to “appropriate and to know the other and generate authority from this knowing,”¹⁵ it is clear how programs like these might incite feelings of cosmopolitanism on the part of the viewer. As windows into (admittedly fictitious) gay subcultures, they offer the very “access” upon which this appropriation is contingent.

Queer as Folk’s cosmopolitanism is as much a question of geographical locale as of characterization. Its gay men are cosmopolitan, not simply because of their sexuality, but because of their association with Manchester’s Canal Street, a queer/ cosmopolitan zone in and around which much of *Queer as Folk* takes place. The program situates a significant proportion of its action within the bar and nightclub culture of “the village,” drawing on several real-life “brands” with immediate, if queer-specific name recognition: Via Fossa, Manto, the New Union, and the clubs Cruz 101 and Essential. The Canal Street area, as seen in

Queer as Folk, is “a utopian hedonistic gay male space, absent from violence, tolerant and cosmopolitan,” designed principally for use by these gay men but open, equally, to sympathetic heterosexuals like Vince’s mother Hazel. Within this space, as the response to Nathan’s climactic denouncement of a homophobic classmate in the New Union demonstrates, the only intolerable “difference” is intolerance of diversity, a disavowal of the cosmopolitan doctrine. Christian Hobbs, exposed as a homophobe and a bully, is asked to leave the premises; having transgressed, he is no longer tolerated in a queer, cosmopolitan space. His ejection serves to illustrate a broader point: within the show’s narrative, those who reject cosmopolitanism are cast squarely in opposition to freedom of sexual expression, to social diversity, and to the modern multicultural world. They are, in Beck’s words, its “enemies.”¹⁶

Like Manchester, Brighton is famously queer, serving a large lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and playing host to a large number of gay bars, clubs, shops, and support groups. *Sugar Rush*’s cosmopolitanism is as a result similarly linked to its location. Kim’s coming out inevitably takes place against a backdrop of queer arenas: the Clit Club, Munch Box, and an ex-gay youth group whose existence could only ever be justified in a town with a significant queer population. Unlike Canal Street, however, these arenas are not ghettoized, but rather shown as interwoven into the fabric of contemporary Brighton life. For the show’s purposes, Brighton itself is a sexualized cosmopolitan arena wherein queerness is not an aberration, but another mode of normality. So Munch Box, an evidently lesbian-themed sex shop, is situated proudly and unapologetically along the high street and not tucked away inconspicuously down a dark and concealed alleyway; so Kim is shown in the first episode of series two as able to cruise and pick up women like Saint along the pier- front on a weekday afternoon. Bristol, the purported setting of *Skins*, is conversely not renowned for the vibrancy of its gay nightlife or for the militancy of its queer activism. The young characters, however, create their own cosmopolitan enclave, articulating their cosmopolitanism not through protracted discussion of queer issues, but through laissez-faire acceptance of sexual difference. Maxxie’s homosexuality, for example, is never negatively evaluated by any of the lead characters and indeed is rarely commented upon in the early parts of the show, except in the context of a “big gay night” out he organizes with his straight friends in the first episode of the series. Only in the episode “From Russia with Love” does his sexuality manifest as an issue to be addressed, and only then when it conflicts with the religious beliefs of a Muslim character, Anwar. Anwar, in fact, is positioned throughout the episode as the outsider, the “enemy” of cosmopolitan in his inability to accept Maxxie’s queerness. Hurt and saddened by his friend’s attitude, Maxxie seeks solace in the company of Tony and mutual friend Sid, while Anwar is forced to deal with his homophobia alone; later, filled with righteous anger, Maxxie verbally attacks a cowed Anwar for the conflict vis-à-vis queerness, which derives from his faith. His homophobia, rather than Maxxie’s homosexuality, is the narrative problem that must be resolved—as it is when, in the last episode of series one, he embraces his friend’s queerness, and the pair reconcile.

Branding and marketing

The intersection of youth sexuality and cosmopolitanism within C4 and E4’s queer program roster makes perfect sense when considered in the context of the Channel 4 Television Corporation’s brand identities. The public service broadcasting (PSB) remit for C4, articulated most recently in the 2003 Communications Act, encompasses

the provision of a broad range of high quality and diverse programming which, in particular—

(a) demonstrates innovation, experiment and creativity in the form and content of programmes;

(b) appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society;

(c) makes a significant contribution to meeting the need for the licensed public service channels to include programmes of an educational nature and other programmes of educative value; and

(d) exhibits a distinctive character.¹⁷

As Georgina Born observes, however, the need to meet the demands of this remit is not the only imperative underlying the Corporation's programming decisions.¹⁸ As a commercially funded broadcaster, Channel 4 must also seek funding to secure its future existence: to make programs, it must also make money. In order to invest in material, and so continue to air the requisite "high quality and diverse programming," it must generate revenue by attracting advertisers and, in order to appear attractive to its sponsors, it must demonstrate a sustained appeal to specific demographic groups. It is therefore necessary for the Corporation to target these groups and market itself to them according to their perceived desires and demands.

Channel 4's key audiences, 16 to 34s and the educated middle classes, are catered for as of 2007 by three main channels, each with a specific brand identity:¹⁹ More4, which provides "provocative, thought-provoking and entertaining programming" for the "smart, upmarket, sophisticated [...] affluent, well-travelled, cultured, image-conscious and socially active viewer"; E4, "aimed at 16-34s and mainly focusing on entertainment"; and the original terrestrial C4, which aspires to attract a mix of viewers from both the liberal intelligentsia and the youth markets.²⁰ Youth viewers comprise a significant percentage of Channel 4's overall audience. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that, through a variety of market research strategies, the Corporation has sought to divine information about certain lifestyle and ideological aspects of youth culture, so as to better inform programming decisions and speak more directly to its younger viewers through its broadcasting.²¹

Born posits two assumptions on the part of Channel 4 about these younger viewers: first, that they "desire above all entertainment programming," and second, that for them, "'minorities' are no longer meaningful social categories."²² The Corporation itself also deems 16- to 24-year-old ABC1s "the highest spending consumers in the UK," identifying them as among the groups "most valuable to advertisers."²³ Collectively, these three hypotheses are significant in terms of C4 and E4 program content. Taken at face value, young audiences' rejection of any 'minority' status would extend to an assimilation of queer behavior, if not queerness as an ontological category, into their conceptions of the normal and the everyday; same sex desire, by this reckoning, is to younger viewers an altogether routine occurrence, ethically indistinguishable from heterosexuality. It might also suggest more relaxed attitudes to sexual fluidity on the part of the 16 to 24 market than in their older counterparts. Similarly, the identification of this market as consumerist, as most likely to have and spend a high disposable income (often on costly "new technologies") implies the further assumption on the Corporation's part that young Britons might very well wish to see this consumerism reflected back at them in their chosen viewing:²⁴ that they, as serious consumers of stylish, modern, but non-essential goods and services, might favor television characters and program scenarios with which they can identify.

Queer as Folk especially only promoted the image of Channel 4 as a risk-taking and cutting-edge corporate entity. Lizzie Thynne notes that,

the series played an important role in the attempt to rebrand Channel 4 and provides an interesting example of how 'gay' is being extensively reconstructed in some sections of the popular media as no longer a despised identity but a sexy, popular one...The didactic approach [to queer issues] is now rejected [by Channel 4] in favour of a more crossover address-programmes which focus on gay 'lifestyle' rather than identity politics and can appeal to a diverse audience.²⁵

She also notes that the gay male sexuality performed within *Queer as Folk*, and subsequently *Skins*, was also rather more marketable than both heterosexuality and lesbianism, in that it

[had] the advantage of being unencumbered by the politics of feminism and is already associated with stylish clubs and music, available for consumption by the young and hip audiences that the channel covets. Unlike ITV, the audience of which is older, it doesn't need to worry about 'old ladies' who might switch off. The realistic depiction of sex between women is already so heavily coded as pornographic for a straight audience, or as asexual because of its rejection of conventional femininity and/or the lack of a penis, that it presents some problems in terms of consumption. Gay men's sexuality is more easily appropriated as pleasurable and provides a daring spectacle with which [its chief executive can] establish Channel 4 as the rebel channel in opposition to the plethora of more restrained, paternalistic or 'safe' channels, none of which, [they claimed], would have broadcast [it]... From a marketing point of view it is not of great consequence to Channel 4 if a minority is offended, whether because of identity politics or moral disapproval.²⁶

This “appropriation” of gay masculinity is safe, not only because it generates the kind of controversy apt to increase ratings among the coveted youth market, but also because it allows for the integration into the viewing schedules of, as Thynne says, a relatively apolitical queerness.

Her insinuation that “the politics of feminism” are incompatible with the cultural logic of consumerism is particularly pertinent when considered in the context of *Sugar Rush*. The construction of Kim's character is not so much feminist as “Girl Power” in nature. Popularized by English pop group the Spice Girls in 1997, the term “Girl Power” was subsequently entered into the OED as “a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism,” a far cry from the predisposition to collective action exhibited by, in particular, the third-wave feminists of the 1990s. Jessica Taft identifies Girl Power as “safe” and essentially apolitical in makeup, in that it poses no threat to consumer capitalism. One of the four meanings of the term as it is understood in contemporary culture, she claims, is “Girl Power as consumer power,” Girl Power as a “softer, sexier” alternative to feminism which emphasizes “beauty and appearance” and so functions to better sell specific kinds of products: clothes, cosmetics, and any other accessory which might augment the individual girl's appearance, and so better “empower” her.²⁷ Kim, Saint and the various other young lesbians populating the *Sugar Rush* landscape are all empowered similarly. All wear cosmetics and suitably fashionable clothes; all sport enviably coiffed hair. Tellingly, all tend towards the feminine end of the aesthetic spectrum: a radical re-imagining of south coast lesbian subculture given that, as Sally Munt among others has noted, the “real” Brighton plays host in equal parts to the butch, the femme, and the androgynous.²⁸ In this respect, despite its lesbian bias, *Sugar Rush* has a great deal in common with gay male-oriented shows like *Queer as Folk* and *Skins*, ideologically, if not in the specific kind of queerness on which it focuses, and sought to establish a core audience among young and, crucially, *consuming* girls and women.

The Channel 4 Corporation's understanding of 16 to 24s as fundamentally cosmopolitan and consuming leads and has in the past led directly to its commissioning of programs like these, programs that demonstrate cosmopolitan and/or consumerist ethics. Born points to an essential tension between the Corporation's desire to appeal to youth markets and a PSB remit which stipulates that it must meet the demands of minority audiences.²⁹ Contemporary gay-themed and queer youth programming, however, go some way towards resolving this tension, bridging the gap between commerce and PSB by providing enhanced queer visibility within commercially-oriented shows, which young viewers might actually want to watch.

Institutional Change

The many policy and legislative shifts regarding sexual diversity ongoing in Britain since the mid-1990s contributed to a cultural climate wherein queer sexualities were regarded as more normal than aberrant, and one in which queer-themed television could be produced and commissioned without great controversy. In part because of their impact, queer programming was fast infiltrating mainstream broadcasting from the late 1990s onwards. The modernization project instituted by Tony Blair's New Labour government has been reflected, however, not only by Channel 4's programming output, but also by certain institutional changes within the Corporation between 1997 and 2007. The selection of Michael Jackson, a New Labour supporter, as chief executive in 1997 marked an important step towards greater gay and lesbian media visibility. Historically, Jackson had demonstrated sustained commitment to the

promotion of an equal opportunities agenda. During his time as controller of BBC2, for example, he not only chaired the equality-led Directorate Implementation Group, but he instigated the commissioning of “sophisticated academic research...both about the representation of ethnic and other minorities on screen, and about the responses of different minority audiences to those representations.”³⁰ Under his leadership, as he later remarked, C4 played a part in orchestrating

*a fundamental shift in the relationship between television and its audiences...Twenty years ago television didn't honestly reflect society. Channel 4 was launched in 1982 to give a voice to those who were under-represented on the three channels which then existed. In 2001 the 'minorities' of those times have been assimilated into the mainstream of society.*³¹

C4, under Jackson's aegis, broadcast more queer-themed material than ever before, and frequently marketed this material to non-minority audiences. *Queer as Folk*, he argued, “was enjoyed equally by gay and straight viewers,” its broadcast participating in the process by which queer became “mainstream.”

Ron Becker, writing on American networks in the 1990s, endorses the idea that television can actively participate in the assimilation process. Gay material on prime time, he suggests,

*[doesn't] simply reflect the era's anxieties about the relationship between the majority and the minorities, the normal and the abnormal, the center and the margin. It no doubt [contributes] to them—not only because millions of people [watch] these programmes but because millions more [talk] about them.*³²

Jackson's appointment, secured by the Channel 4 Corporation's board of directors in agreement with the secretary of state for media, culture and sport (then, as of 2nd May 1997, the openly gay New Labour MP Chris Smith) signaled the start of a period of transformation for Channel 4.³³ It was recognizably the point at which the Corporation began the move away from what Jackson termed “a 1960s liberal agenda” and towards a more nebulous ideological position which, like the government's, encompassed both free market values and the promotion of cultural diversity.³⁴ Instructed by his predecessor Michael Grade to make radical changes within the Corporation, Jackson took it as his mission to create television which “honestly [reflected] society” and which acknowledged the “sea change in social values and the way individuals identify themselves within society,” which he perceived as having taken place in Britain since C4's creation in 1982.³⁵ The Britain of the late 1990s, as he saw it, was “more cosmopolitan, less polarised” than it had been in the early 1980s. As he put it, again, rather echoing Blair: “the ‘minorities’ of those times have been assimilated into the mainstream.”³⁶ Moreover, he opined just prior to his departure from the chief executive post in 2001, C4 had “contributed to that change in society by taking a unique role in encouraging and provoking debate and diversity.”³⁷ Regarding the notion of inclusivity as it applied to minority groups and individuals, there is little to distinguish Jackson's stance from the government's, in that both sought to provide space for the marginalized within the mainstream, for ultimately economic ends: New Labour through the enforcement of gay-positive legislative changes, and Jackson through the execution of a programming agenda which granted marginalized groups much-needed visibility, with a view to attracting viewers among both the marginalized groups themselves, and the (white, heterosexual) “cosmopolitan” majority well-disposed to seeing such minorities represented.

The appointment of Mark Thompson as Jackson's successor in 2001, however, marked a temporary return to the “1960s liberal agenda” from which Channel 4 under Jackson had begun to distance itself—although under Thompson, queer visibility formed only a small part of this agenda. Previously the controller of BBC Two, Thompson took C4's public service broadcasting remit seriously, committing to strengthening it as Georgina Born notes through “a renewed focus on diversity, creativity, originality and risk-taking.”³⁸ His focus, moreover, was firmly on the Corporation's main terrestrial channel, rather than subsidiary channels like E4. Delivering the MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 2002, he vowed that “the biggest single contribution to innovation...and creativity” would come from C4, though he did concede that the future of television would very likely “be broadly based across platforms and media.”³⁹ Under Thompson's leadership, Channel 4 placed minority concerns back at the forefront of its programming policy.

Thompson's stay at Channel 4, though, coincided with a related series of highly significant cultural-political events: the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and subsequent media focus on the “radicalization” of

young British Muslims. Inevitably, these events impacted upon C4's commissioning logic, to the extent that an increased proportion of its "minority programming" quota was met by shows that engaged with religious and minority-ethnic themes. Post 9/11, the Corporation deemed audiences more likely to tune into programs which explored the relationship between Islamic and Western cultures. Cultural diversity under Thompson, therefore, equated to more programs about Islam and Muslim Britons, but significantly fewer about queers. Bar the acquisition in 2002 of U.S. import *Six Feet Under*, which featured in a lead role a gay male character in an interracial relationship, Channel 4's queer program content between 2001 and 2004 was negligible. Conversely, Islam-themed programs proliferated. 2002 offered viewers *House of War*, which documented a four-day conflict between American forces and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the *Muslim and British* season (encompassing shows like *Culture Clash*, *The Hidden Jihad*, and *Mum, I'm a Muslim*) and a serialized adaptation of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, a comedy-drama exploring Anglo-Asian, and especially Anglo-Islamic, relations in twentieth century Britain. 2003 likewise yielded series like *The Hajj*, which followed a group of young British Muslims on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Anglo-Asian focused *Second Generation*.

The Communications Act 2003, passed during Thompson's term as chief executive, served to strengthen Channel 4's PSB remit, both explicitly and through its establishment of Ofcom, which upon replacing the Independent Television Commission as British broadcasting's regulatory body was granted the power to fine and reprimand the Corporation, should it deviate from this remit. For Andy Duncan, who succeeded Thompson in 2004, the terms of the remit were best met through increased focus on digital platforms; the needs of minority groups were entirely simpatico with the commercial needs of the Corporation. Unlike Jackson and Thompson, Duncan's background lied in marketing, rather than media production. His last position prior to 2004 had been at the BBC where, as director of marketing and communications, he was credited with assisting the expansion of Freeview, the UK's free-to-air digital operator; earlier successes, while working in advertising at Unilever, included the re-branding of Pot Noodle and the launch of I Can't Believe It's Not Butter. Speaking of Channel 4's expansion into further digital markets through the re-launching of E4 as a free-to-air, rather than a subscription channel, the introduction of More4 in 2005 and the compatibility of digitization with public service demands, Duncan said,

I don't see the digital revolution as an attack on Channel 4's power as a public broadcaster. I see it as a fantastic opportunity to build on what Channel 4 has always done: stimulate, infuriate, debate, create. The difference is that we're doing it in many more ways than just via broadcast these days, because we have to engage with the public wherever they are.⁴⁰

Like Jackson, Duncan supported (and continues to support, as of 2007) the mainstreaming of queerness and advocates that part of Channel 4's public service demands be met through the assimilation of minority identities into non-minority programming. His tenure as chief executive has thus far seen commissioned a number of mainstream, heavily-marketed programs with prominent queer characters, notably *Skins* and the award-winning *Shameless*, whose ensemble cast features a young gay male character embroiled in an interracial, intergenerational, extra-marital affair. The U.S. imports commissioned since his appointment have followed a similar assimilationist logic, with *Desperate Housewives*, *Nip/Tuck*, and *Ugly Betty* all carrying queer characters in significant secondary roles. He outlined this commitment to assimilation in 2006, arguing,

Since the beginning, Channel 4 has made a point of revealing, exploring and celebrating difference. Once narrowly categorised as "catering for minorities," diversity is now absolutely integral to our output and one of our most distinctive points of difference from other services.⁴¹

His position tallies with minor alterations in UK broadcasting legislation since 1990. The Broadcasting Act 1990, though pushed through parliament by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government with a view to further privatizing British television, nevertheless stipulated "that Channel 4 programmes contain a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by Channel 3."⁴² The Communications Act passed by the Blair government thirteen years later similarly outlined Channel 4's public service obligations. Its wording, however, revealed subtle differences in government attitudes to the Corporation, and to British television broadcasting more generally. Where previously C4 had been obliged to provide programming "not generally catered for by [the commercial]

Channel 3,” now it was deemed necessary only for it to “[appeal] to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society.”⁴³ For those responsible for the later legislation, “minority” had ceased to function as a separate or meaningful category; groups formerly regarded as minorities, like queers, had ostensibly been absorbed into the wider “culturally diverse” Britain. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Duncan had ceased by 2004 to regard sexual and other minority viewers as constituting in and of themselves discrete audiences with needs and requirements specific to their minority statuses.

It is worth taking note of one anomaly in Duncan’s otherwise fairly seamless assimilation of queer sexualities into the mainstream schedules, however. In 2007, he oversaw the commissioning of *40 Years Out*, a season of programs commemorating the 40th anniversary of the legalization of homosexuality in the UK. Among the shows featured were *A Very British Sex Scandal*, which dramatized the infamous pre-Wolfenden trial of Edward Montagu and Peter Wildeblood for gross indecency, and *Clapham Junction*, a single drama centering on the lives of a group of young and young-ish gay men written in response to the homophobic murder of queer barman Jody Dobrowski on Clapham Common in 2005. Both shows were overtly political, in that both engaged directly with policy and legislative issues surrounding homosexuality: the legalization of sex between men, and the need for specifically queer-themed hate crimes legislation, respectively. Moreover, by foregrounding homophobia in two very specific forms, both served to underscore the differences in lived experience between queers and heterosexuals, rather than facilitating further assimilation and integration through emphasis on their similarities.

From minority to mainstream

The years between 1997 and 2007 have seen, then, a marked increase in the volume of queer presence on C4 and its subsidiaries, as well as an increase in the diversity of queer identities and experiences broadcast. From the relative scarcity of queer material in its early days, to the explosion in visibly queer images in its programming post-1998, to the Duncan-era elision of on-screen sexual difference through the integration of queer themes and characters into mainstream shows, Channel 4 has documented—more than any other terrestrial broadcaster—recent changes in attitudes to sexuality and sexual orientation within British society. Its PSB remit has of course necessitated that it meet the needs of sexual minorities, while as discussed above, post-2003 alterations in the nature of this remit have provided scope for it to reconfigure its conceptions of what constitutes “minority,” and so allowed it to more smoothly assimilate queerness into its schedules through a plethora of non-specifically queer programs. In this respect, Channel 4 and its programming policies regarding minority provision serve as useful barometers for the British cultural negotiation of homosexuality. In the 1980s and early 1990s, during the years of Conservative government, queer-themed television unequivocally constituted minority interest programming, if only because Conservative government policy and rhetoric of the time sought to cast gay, lesbian, and bisexual Britons as “minority” individuals, at odds with the general, heterosexual populace in their sexual behavior, and probably their politics. From the election of New Labour onwards, government policy and subsequently print media focus shifted away from the marginalization of queers towards a greater respect for sexual diversity, albeit a respect resulting in part from the economic contributions made individually and collectively by queer Britons.

Stuart Hall, among others, has identified television as an interpretive medium, one which generates meaning only through the active participation of the viewer. Television production and consumption are, for Hall, necessarily interrelated activities; queer-themed television becomes queer, by his account, not only through the intentions of its producers, but through queer readings on the part of its audience.⁴⁴ With this in mind, it is useful to return to John Caldwell’s work on convergence television, and particularly the “online strategies” implemented by Channel 4 to encourage specific queer-positive readings of its LGBT-themed programming by its viewers, and so further assimilate queerness into the cultural mainstream.

Though neither as detailed nor as elaborate as the *Skins* site, the *Sugar Rush* website nevertheless contains, as discussed earlier in this chapter, a great deal of information pertaining to youth sexuality. The opening page provides links to a number of sections dealing with the “issues” covered over the course of the show: “Coming Out,” “Sexuality Q&As,” “Being Bisexual,” and so on.⁴⁵ Several of these offer advice on the theme of sexual confusion; in keeping with Duncan’s queer assimilation line, this advice tends towards reassurances about the “normality” of queerness. The “Coming Out” page counsels its (presumably fairly young) readers that,

*being gay...is a minority pursuit. But don't ever forget that, while there may be more of them than us, it doesn't mean that being straight is 'normal'...it's just very common. So don't worry. Being a gay man or a lesbian (gay women get an extra name all to themselves!) or bisexual isn't good or bad, right or wrong. It just is.*⁴⁶

In the context of the *Sugar Rush* site, such counsel serves two purposes: firstly, to reinforce Channel 4's public service credentials by providing help and guidance on social issues, and secondly, to position the same-sex desire, so prevalent within the show, as something unremarkable, in and of itself. Those interested in the show are therefore encouraged to "read" its lesbianism as not all that different from heterosexuality, the only discernible difference being the "commonality" of the one versus the relative infrequency of the other; they are themselves primed to adopt what is an essentially assimilationist position on sexual identity. The absence of any such links on the *Skins* site, of course, also speaks volumes about the Corporation's stance on assimilation, and is in a way the logical extension of an extra-textual discourse that emphasizes the unremarkable nature of non-hetero sexualities. So unremarkable is queerness in the context of *Skins* that it has ceased to be remarked upon in its surrounding promotional materials; paradoxically, queer identity is normalized through erasure, through the absence of any special attention.

The extent to which Channel 4 has contributed to the mainstreaming of queerness in contemporary British society is inevitably subject to debate. Following his departure from the chief executive post in 2001, Michael Jackson surmised that

*over the past 18 years there has been a sea change in social values and the way individuals identify themselves within society. Channel 4, I believe, by way of its original remit has contributed to that change in society by taking a unique role in encouraging and provoking debate and diversity...In a more cosmopolitan, less polarised Britain, the way people see themselves and their place within society has changed. Channel 4 has had its hand in this change by airing more progressive ideas.*⁴⁷

This claim, of course, smacks somewhat of self-aggrandizement, of Jackson congratulating himself for his perceived accomplishments. The idea that Channel 4 might have "had a hand" in the social changes that occurred between 1997 and 2007, however, is not easy to dismiss, and is perhaps best illustrated by the initial success met by *Queer as Folk* in 1999. The show performed spectacularly well in ratings terms, consistently reaching between 3 and 3.5 million viewers—quite a feat, considering its late-evening timeslot and C4's 10 percent audience share. Beyond that, though, it provoked a huge amount of coverage in the press, with particular attention paid to its sex scenes. Alan McKee observes that, in addition to becoming "a central part of the queer mediasphere," it "became part of a wider public debate in the United Kingdom about the...government's plans to equalise the age of consent for queer and straight sex."⁴⁸ While no direct correlation should be drawn between *Queer As Folk*'s success and the eventual lowering of the age of consent in 2000, the media attention generated by the show saw its underage sex storyline mentioned frequently in newspapers in the context of the age of consent dispute—to such an point that the actor playing Nathan, Charlie Hunnam, was invited—though he declined—to participate in a parliamentary discussion on the subject. That an actor should be considered suitably informed as to contribute to a complex political debate is in itself remarkable; that the program from which the actor originated should be pointed to as justification for legislative change, more so. All this rather substantiates Jackson's claims pertaining to the show's cultural significance, and likewise Glyn Davis' assertion that the show served as "an important landmark in the history of British political television," "explicitly [narrativizing] some of the political issues continuing to affect lesbians and gay men in Britain in the late 1990s...and thus [reminding] viewers of the unequal status afforded to non-heterosexual individuals in the UK."⁴⁹ Moreover, it helped to pave the way for Channel 4's commissioning of other gay-themed programs, its positive critical and audience receptions serving as a kind of proof of the legitimacy of queer television and its ability to attract viewers. *Metrosexuality*, *Sugar Rush*, and *Skins* all followed where *Queer as Folk* had led. All were, as Davis suggests, "indebted in some sense to the inroads made by *Queer as Folk* in terms of what would be accepted by television producers and audiences."⁵⁰ All, perhaps most significantly, "have, in their own ways, continued the battles for complex forms of queer representation."⁵¹

About the Author

Natalie Edwards recently completed her PhD at the University of Nottingham. Her doctoral thesis examined gay, lesbian and queer visibility on contemporary British terrestrial television in the context of both broadcasting industry policy and the recent UK government legislation on social inclusion and sexual citizenship.

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