



Canadian Television

by Jennifer Burwell

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The portrayal of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer people in English Canadian television programming has been sporadic. There have been several significant appearances of glbtq characters on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's national public broadcasting system.

The recent advent of PrideVision, a digital cable television network with a mandate to air glbtq Canadian content, will certainly lead to an increase not only in the presence of gays and lesbians on television, but also in the number of shows developed for a glbtq audience.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

Perhaps because it is a public broadcaster with a mandate to inform and enlighten as well as entertain, CBC has aired more television programs with glbtq content than Canada's other national network, CTV.

CBC's *Degrassi Jr. High* (1987-1989), part of the youth-centered *Degrassi* series, dealt with abortion, single parenthood, sex, death, racism, AIDS, feminism, and gay issues as situations that the characters had to work through within the serialized narrative structures, while avoiding the "topic of the week" feel that is endemic to the genre. One episode, for example, featured the pre-adolescent character Caitlin discussing lesbianism with her English teacher, Miss Avery.

A spin-off of the *Degrassi* series, *Liberty Street* (CBC, 1995-1996), featured Billy Merasty as Nathan Jones, a gay native ex-bicycle courier. The producers of *Liberty Street* went on to create *Riverdale* (CBC, 1997-2000), with gay character George Patillo.

In early 2003, CBC announced that gay playwright Michel Tremblay will write Quebec's first television show to feature an on-going gay relationship, *Le Coeur Découvert*.

Comedy

In the 1990s CBC's Ivan Fecan programmed an hour of adult comedy that preceded Canada's national newscast each Thursday.

Gay and lesbian characters, content, and liberation politics were also contained in the satire of sketch comedy series *CODCO* (1987-1994, Tommy Sexton, Greg Malone, Cathy Jones, Mary Walsh, Andy Jones) and *Kids in the Hall* (1989-1995, David Foley, Bruce McCulloch, Kevin McDonald, Mark McKinney, and Scott Thompson).

All four members of *CODCO* frequently cross-dressed and traversed gender. Their pointed satire took aim at regional differences, national assumptions, and gay codes. The show had a recurring "Queen's Counselors" sketch about two fey, gay Newfoundland lawyers.

The more outrageous *Kids in the Hall* had a penchant for drag, gender-bending, and pro-homo skits, featuring Buddy Cole; The Sappho Sluggers (a lesbian softball team); Running Faggot--a new folk hero; and Dracula, a gay aesthete with a taste for rough trade. The show both satirized and celebrated glbtq culture, and ended up developing a loyal cult following.

Under the rubric of comedy, a number of special presentations of lesbian comedian Elvira Kurt and gay comedian Gavin Crawford (who also created *The Gavin Crawford Show* for the Comedy Network in 2000) were produced and aired on Canadian television in the 1990s.

Documentaries and Reality Television

Canada has a strong history of documentary filmmaking, and since 1992 the National Film Board (NFB) has produced seventeen glbtq-themed films. Several have aired on Canadian television: David Adkin's *Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth* (1993) and Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie's *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992) are but two award-winning examples.

The Life Network's "reality" television program, *U8TV: The Lofters* (2001-) follows the lives of eight young adults living together in a loft. The first season featured Mathieu Chantelois and his boyfriend Marcello and bisexual Valery Gagne. Chantelois now hosts the internet television show *So Gay TV* that has also been adopted by the new PrideVision TV network.

Public Access Television

Public access channels in Canada's larger urban centers have also created programming for the glbtq community. *Cable 10%* (1995-2000, renamed *10%-Qtv* in 1997) premiered on Rogers Community Television in Toronto and aired for six seasons in southern and eastern Ontario. Produced entirely by volunteers, *Cable 10%* lacked the production values of network television, but did chronicle queer love, families, and communities, exploring issues of diversity, religion, politics, arts, and culture.

Similarly, Vancouver's *Outlook TV* now offers glbtq current affairs television programming produced entirely by volunteers on Shaw cable 4 (British Columbia).

Toronto's CHUM (City TV) presented *QT-Queer Television* (1998-1999), a weekly program about gay, lesbian and trans cultures. Hosted and produced by Irshad Manji, *QT* grew directly out of the success of *Q-Files*, also hosted by Manji and broadcast on Toronto's Cable Pulse 24. *QT* was concurrently broadcast on the Internet in fully streamed video via *planetout.com*. Although the television program lasted for only two seasons, the episodes are still available online.

QT's emergence paralleled the increasing visibility of the gay and lesbian (especially gay male) market as a significant demographic. Since 1992, the glbtq community has become increasingly desirable to marketers because research demonstrated that they had disposable income, were trend-setting consumers, and were more likely to try new products than the rest of the population.

Niche programming and television networks devoted to the glbtq community have developed in Canada, as they have in the United States.

PrideVision TV

PrideVision TV was launched on September 7, 2001 and is touted as the world's first Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender television network to broadcast twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The network is licensed by the Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to provide television service targeted to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

The network is guaranteed distribution through Cable and Direct-To-Home satellite companies that provide digital television services in Canada. Two and one-half million households are expected to have access to digital channels in Canada, though the numbers who have subscribed to PrideVision is still unknown.

PrideVision TV offers a range of programming, dealing with subjects ranging from current affairs, documentaries, health and fitness, lifestyle, and finance to relationships, music, cooking, and travel. Entertainment programming includes popular movies and comedies from around the world, Canadian drama, arts programming, biographies, and variety shows.

Among the offerings of PrideVision TV is *Shout!* (2001-), a weekly current affairs program, dealing with the ongoing concerns of the glbtq community. Indeed, PrideVision TV opened its studio in the heart of Toronto's "gay ghetto" to promote the network and facilitate audience interaction on *Shout!*

PrideVision has also developed a travel show titled *Bump!* (2001-). Its two hosts travel the world in search of fascinating glbtq human-interest stories. *Bump!* presents a new location each week, delving into the local social scene.

Another new program, *The UnderCovers* (2001-), offers live phone-in sex advice. It takes viewer e-mails and phone calls from the glbtq community. PrideVision also airs popular glbtq dramas and comedies, such as *Gimme Gimme Gimme*, *Undressed*, *So Graham Norton*, and *Metrosexuality*.

Although an emerging network, PrideVision's mandate to air Canadian content should give cause for optimism to Canadian gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered filmmakers, producers, directors and performers.

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