Gay TV Channel Can Target Ignored Issues

By Peter M. Nardi

SHOWTIME AND MTV recently announced joint plans to create a cable station targeted exclusively to gays and lesbians. One already exists in Canada, PrideVision TV, but this would be the first U.S. channel.

Although cynics might quip that this could result in 24 hours of Broadway musicals, the potential for developing imaginative and informative quality programming is great.

We have entered an era in which “narrowcasting” has replaced the old idea of “broadcasting” — that is, where media once produced content for “one size fits all.” Today, with segmented markets and more sophisticated research pointing to variable buying power of different demographic groups, the media — from magazines, television shows, movies and radio to Web sites — have subdivided into very specific targeted content. On cable television alone, there are channels devoted exclusively to African Americans, women, animal lovers, Christian fundamentalists, house and garden folks, sports fans, people who like to repair old houses and those struggling to cook exotic meals. Why not gays and lesbians?

The best research suggests that between 5 percent and 10 percent of Americans identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Certainly, there are more who actually engage in same-sex sexual behavior but who have yet to label themselves as gay or lesbian, not to mention many others who consider themselves bisexual. Factor in families and friends of lesbians and gay men who might watch to learn more, and a large pool of potential viewers is available.

In addition, research studies conclude that gays’ and lesbians’ spending power is high. Commercially, this is an audience many companies seek out, as demonstrated by the number of ad pages in the leading gay magazines such as Out and The Advocate and various mainstream marketing campaigns by companies such as Ikea.

Some might argue that this kind of segregation is not needed. The goal is to integrate our lives openly into the everyday world, not retreat to a cable closet. Might a gay cable channel result in lesbian and gay content being removed from the mainstream shows as networks turn down movies, plot lines and news items with a distaste to “send it to the gay channel” ghetto? Some feel we have achieved visibility since most commercial network TV is already gay-friendly. There are lesbian and gay characters and plots on “Will and Grace,” “The Ellen Show,” “NYPD Blue” and many other sitcoms, dramas and reality-based shows. Cable TV has exhibited more daring and arguably more realistic gay programming with “Queer as Folk” and lesbian and gay stories in “The Real World,” “Sex and the City” and “Oz.”

But can we really be satisfied with the current gay and lesbian content on mainstream network TV? These commercial shows rarely develop in-depth analyses and focused discussions about matters of concern for gays and lesbians. News shows, documentaries and commentaries primarily take the heterosexual perspective, failing to account for the different ways of understanding the world around us.

For example, rather than describing the inability of gays and lesbians to form civil unions or achieve comparable partnership rights, mainstream media poke fun at gay marriages or conduct ceremonies among their occasional gay characters without a hint of the political or religious oppression that really exists. Gay and lesbian characters are almost always shown isolated, outside the context of their circle of friends, surrounded instead only by straight workers or family. Sure, Will and Jack are there to make us laugh, but where is the programming that shows how gays and lesbians depend on their friendships for strengthening and maintaining their identity, and that uncovers how many Wills, Jacks, and Ellens are fired at their jobs for being gay?

What has to happen, then, is for gay cable TV to avoid trivializing the content, as so much commercial does. The creative people at MTV and Showtime have to trust gays and lesbians to tell their own stories and not impose the kinds of limited views that network television has of gays and lesbians. Here is a potential venue to air festivals of quality gay films, educational documentaries about our history and probing stories about those who overcome oppression. Biographies can uncover the material left out in mainstream profiles, news shows could report the stories that go untold in the dominant media, the Gay Games might actually be part of the sports coverage for a change, and culture shows would review the lesbian and gay books, art, and music ignored by others.

Gay and lesbians and their circles of friends and relatives are a diverse group of people of different ethnicities, ages and social classes. The programming must go beyond stereotypical images as if there were only one type of gay man or lesbian.

Gay cable TV is not simply anotherfad or “special right,” but a real opportunity to provide entertainment and education to millions. It is symbolic of the struggle by gays and lesbians to get our voices heard and our images seen as we experience them, not as others construct us. It is our way of achieving the dignity and equality all people deserve.