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Problematizing Transgender Visibility in Talk Show Interviews

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Problematizing Transgender Visibility in Talk Show Interviews

Overview and Rationale

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in transgender visibility in mainstream media. In a review of transgender highlights in 2014, *Rolling Stone* identified several milestones in transgender media visibility including Amazon's new show *Transparent* joining Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* as internet-based television shows featuring transgender characters, Laverne Cox gracing the cover of *Time* magazine featuring the headline "The Transgender Tipping Point," and Janet Mock's "putting Piers Morgan in his place" during her interview on *Piers Morgan Tonight*. Without a doubt, this increase in mainstream visibility marks an important time for the transgender community. That being said, as the last example of Piers Morgan's interview of Janet Mock suggests, this representation is not always positive, productive, and responsible. This lesson is designed to foster critical engagement with mainstream media transgender representation, specifically talk show interviews with transgender guests.

Talk show interviews are particularly interesting media to engage with on these topics for several reasons. First, these talk shows tend to engage with a wide range of guests on a wide range of issues and experiences, whereas a show like *Transparent* is focused on transgender issues and experiences in particular. This is significant in that it suggests a talk show could provide a wider audience. GLAAD, the leading organization in LGBT media representation notes in their 2014 Media Reference Guide, "[A]ccording to a 2013 Pew poll, only 8% of Americans say they personally know someone who is transgender. . . [W]hen a stereotypical or defamatory transgender image appears in the media, the viewer may assume that all transgender people are actually like that; they have no real-life experience with which to compare it." Additionally, talk show interviews purport to represent real experiences in contrast to the fictional tales in shows like *Transparent* or *Orange is the New Black*. Taking these characteristics together, talk show interviews with transgender guests have great potential to serve as an audience's introductions to the "real" experiences of transgender people.

The overall arc of the lesson is first to have students uncover for themselves the problematic nature of a Barbara Walters' interview with transgender teenager, Jazz, which is representative of many, but not all, talk show interviews with transgender guests. The segment of Laverne Cox on the *Katie Couric Show* particularly problematizes the emphasis on transgender bodies and should help students identify problematic elements in the first interview. The second half of the lesson is dedicated to identifying and envisioning best practices in this type of journalism using resources published by GLAAD as well as an interview with Janet Mock on the Melissa Harris-Perry Show that could serve as an exemplar of a positive, productive, and responsible interview. Ultimately, the goal of this lesson is for students to critically engage with stakes and ethics of transgender media representation.

Key Terms

Depending on the prior knowledge of students and the teacher, this lesson can incorporate a more nuanced transgender vocabulary. However, that is not necessary to the lesson. The basic vocabulary required includes:

Transgender – “A term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. Transgender is a broad term and is good for non-transgender people to use. ‘Trans’ is shorthand for ‘transgender.’” (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2014)

Transition – “The time when a person begins to live as the gender with which they identify rather than the gender they were assigned at birth, which often includes changing one’s first name and dressing and grooming differently. Transitioning may or may not also include medical and legal aspects, including taking hormones, having surgery, or changing identity documents to reflect one’s gender identity. Medical and legal steps are often difficult for people to afford.” (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2014)

General Timeline

This lesson has two major parts, approximately one hour each. The parts can be divided across multiple class sessions depending on class scheduling.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Part 1: Talk Show Interviews with Transgender Guests

- A. Begin by playing both segments of Barbara Walters’ interview with transgender teenager Jazz. Teachers should provide minimal background about the segments (i.e. the segment was aired on ABC in 2013). Teachers should not set up the segments or provide students with particular things to look for. (15 MINUTES)
 - a. Part 1: Transgender at 11: Listening to Jazz
 - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJw3s85EcxM>
 - b. Part 2: Transgender at 11: ‘I Want Boobs!’
 - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VH4kbybo60Y>
- B. The first part of the discussion focuses on what viewers learn about transgender folks based on the interview with Jazz (15 MINUTES)
 - a. Based on only this interview, what would you say are the most important things to know about transgender people?
 - i. Gather as many student responses as possible to this question. Subsequent questions as well as critiques of the interview will refer back to student responses to this question.
 - b. What did Barbara Walters focus on in her questions?
 - i. Highlight for students the focus on Jazz’s body
- C. Next play the segment of Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera on the Katie Couric Show from January 2014. (5 MINUTES)

- a. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/07/laverne-cox-carmen-carrera-katie-couric_n_4555080.html
 - i. Video is embedded within article
- D. Use the second video to open up critiques of the first interview (10 MINUTES)
 - a. What was Laverne Cox's critique?
 - b. For classes looking to delve deeper into the seeming cultural obsession with transgender bodies, Dean Spade's (2013) "Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender" would be an excellent reading to bring in the medicalized component of the focus on bodies to complement Cox's critique.
 - c. With Cox's critique in mind, what were some of the problematic elements in the Barbara Walters' interview?
 - i. Encourage students to be specific, not just "she asked about Jazz's body." What, specifically, did Walters say?
 - 1. Students may say that Jazz was willing to answer the questions about her body. If so, point out the subtler details that suggest Jazz's discomfort. For example, in one clip Jazz refers to "the P word," clearly avoiding saying "penis." Walters, however, refers to Jazz's "penis" several times.
 - d. Within these discussions it is important not to reaffirm a preoccupation with transgender bodies, particularly genitals. To avoid this, ask students what else they learned about Jazz that could have been elaborated on in the interview instead of repeated questions of the body. For examples, what are her hobbies? How could aspects of the segment such as the discussion of Jazz's crush be reframed in such a way that does not focus on Jazz's body?
 - i. This is a way of humanizing Jazz. She cannot be reduced to her genitals.
- E. After explicating the problematic nature of the first interview, close Part 1 with a discussion of the stakes of this kind of visibility. (15 MINUTES)
 - a. Over the past few years, the number of transgender guests on talk shows has steadily increased. These shows have the potential to reach wide, mainstream audiences, audiences that may not have prior knowledge of transgender people. The first segment of the Barbara Walters interview, for example, has been viewed on YouTube over 4 million times. With this background in mind, what are the dangers of interviews like the one conducted by Barbara Walters?
 - i. An example could be that the public sees the kinds of invasive questions Walters asked and think that those are acceptable to ask of any transgender person they meet.
 - ii. Reference back to Laverne Cox's critique that this preoccupation with the transgender body distracts from pressing social injustices.

Part 2: Envisioning Responsible Transgender Representation

- A. Look at the media reference guide and other resources published by GLAAD to identify best practices of covering transgender stories. GLAAD is the leading GLBTQ media organization, and their reference guides are the most cited by other GLBTQ groups.

Prior to distributing these guides (links to originals below) explain that GLAAD's work is the standard in the field. While GLAAD's documents provide important guidelines in transgender media representation, that they are one of the only widely circulated guides makes critical reading of the guides of the utmost importance. Have students read through the guides, then discuss. These readings could also be assigned to read before class. (20 MINUTES)

- a. Links to readings
 - i. GLAAD Media Reference Guide – In Focus: Covering the Transgender Community - <http://www.glaad.org/reference/covering-trans-community>
 - ii. GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender Issues - <http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>
 - iii. Transgender 101 - <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/trans101>
 - iv. Tips for Allies of Transgender People - <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>
 - v. Transgender Resources - <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/resources>
 1. This last link is a list of organizations and other resources. This can be distributed to students for future reference
 - b. What stands out from these resources?
 - c. What should be added to the guides to help members of the media avoid doing harm and to have a positive and productive influence?
- B. Next, show the segment of Janet Mock on the Melissa Harris-Perry Show. Frame this as an example of positive and responsible media representation of a transgender person. (7 MINUTES)
- a. Link - <http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/not-enough-of-our-stories-are-being-told-133656643761>
- C. End with a discussion addressing the following questions to synthesize the lesson. (30 MINUTES)
- a. The discussion questions provided here are intentionally broad. First have students get into pairs or small groups to discuss their responses. Then have each pair or group report back about highlights of their discussion to guide the group discussion.
 - i. What are the stakes of transgender media representation?
 - ii. What are the responsibilities and obligations of members of the media in transgender representation?
 - iii. How can we be critical media consumers and allies to transgender people in the way we view these representations?

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Biography

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