Homosexuality on Television:

The Heterosexualization of *Will & Grace* in Print Media

*By Marisa Connolly*
Culture, Communication & Technology Program
Georgetown University
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Introduction

He’s single, successful and good-looking. She’s independent, strong-willed and attractive. They’d make the perfect couple, except for one teensy problem--he’s gay, she’s straight.

Such is the premise of NBC’s Will & Grace, a half-hour situational comedy in its fifth season that serves two purposes. First, the show attempts to explore a totally platonic relationship between two best friends of opposite sexes. Secondly, the show features two gay male leads with polar-opposite personalities in order to destigmatize the representation of the homosexual man. The show has been one of NBC’s most successful since its debut, garnering both critical and public praise for its portrayal of homosexuality as just another aspect of the lives of the four main characters.

However, in order to make a show with such controversial subject matter palatable for the masses, both scriptwriters and the mainstream media have taken to talking about the show’s two leads more like a romantic couple rather than a pair of best friends. For the purposes of this paper, “couple” will refer specifically to a romantic pairing. This metaphor, which plays out on screen in both word and action, also carries over into the language used to describe the show and its characters in mainstream print media. Metaphors that misclassify this relationship can make a television show with a gay male lead easier to digest for the viewing audience, but it can also have negative effects on the inroads the show has made in making homosexuality more acceptable on mainstream television.
This paper will explore the extent to which reviews in mainstream print media reflect the heterosexual undercurrent apparent in *Will & Grace*. Common representations of homosexuality on television will be explained, followed by an examination of how *Will & Grace* heterosexualizes the relationship between the two lead characters. Finally, the paper will examine how those metaphors translate into print media, and how that translation affects the viewing public.

None of this discussion is meant to demean the accomplishments of *Will & Grace* as the first vehicle to tackle homosexuality naturally in prime time. However, it is important to evaluate the discourse about an important program such as this one, in order to understand how the public uses old metaphors to make sense of new representations that push the envelope of what has been previously accepted.

**Background**

During television’s 1997-1998 season, viewers watched as ABC’s *Ellen* became the first television show ever to feature an openly gay lead character—Ellen Morgan, played by actress/comedienne Ellen DeGeneres. The actress timed her personal coming out with the coming out of her character amidst an onslaught of controversy, protest and criticism from right-wing conservatives such as Jerry Falwell. Initial viewer and public reaction to Ellen’s revealed sexuality was positive. But as the season continued and the episodes continued to delve into Ellen’s self-discovery and the hardships she faced as a lesbian in today’s society, the audience slipped away while criticism continued, forcing ABC to cancel the program at the end of the season.
TV critics and reviewers attributed the failure of *Ellen* not to the public’s inability to embrace an openly gay character, but more to the show’s almost preachy overtones in the episodes following Ellen’s initial coming out. The consensus among scholars was that *Ellen* was too political and didactic, containing “veritable lessons in queer socio-politics.”¹ As a result of the negative feedback and criticism with which ABC had to deal, it seemed unlikely that any network would be willing to take a risk with a homosexual character again anytime soon.

**Will & Grace: More Accessible Homosexuality**

However, in September 1998, NBC launched *Will & Grace*. Created by writers Max Mutchnick and David Kohan and directed by James Burrows (of *Cheers*, *Friends* and *Frasier* fame), the program featured the first openly gay male character in a lead role on prime-time television. The move was risky—airing a program like *Will & Grace* so soon after *Ellen* crashed and burned could have plunged the show and the network into boundless controversy.

But NBC was confident that *Will & Grace* would be a more successful vehicle for an openly gay character for a few reasons. First, the show did not focus around a homosexual man’s coming out, but rather homosexuality as a way of life. There was no pilot episode that depicted Will coming to terms with his sexuality; although flashback episodes have explored this moment in Will’s life. Will’s homosexuality has been a given from the very beginning of the series. Additionally, the character of Will was not portrayed with any common stereotypical “gay” behavior. The final reason NBC could

be more confident in the show’s success was that the producers threw a heterosexual woman into the mix.

The show revolves around Will Truman (Eric McCormack), a young lawyer living in New York City who just ended a seven-year relationship with another man. His best friend, Grace Adler (Debra Messing), is an interior designer who, in the pilot episode, leaves her fiancé at the altar. The two friends had dated in college, until Will revealed his sexuality to Grace, and they’d been the best of friends ever since.

The relationship between Will and Grace was based on the real-life friendship between Mutchnick, who is himself openly gay, and his friend Janet, who is straight. Mutchnick and Kohan wanted to explore the male-female relationship dynamic “when sex doesn’t get in the way,” but they also wanted to present a more true-to-life representation of a gay man in Will, who is good looking, successful and less effeminate than most stereotypes.

They balanced that representation with the addition of Will’s friend Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes), who is flamboyantly gay and serves as comic relief along with Grace’s assistant, Karen Walker (Megan Mullally). The combination of all four players created an aesthetically pleasing representation of single life in New York City, and resulted in a much less controversial success for NBC.

The show debuted in a Monday night timeslot, moved to Tuesdays after it showed promise and ended up in the coveted “Must See TV” line-up on Thursday night before its first season had even ended. It garnered critical praise from both mainstream sources and homosexual interest groups. GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) hailed the show for its portrayal of two different representations of gay men.
The show even found itself competing for the same advertising dollars as ABC’s *Dharma and Greg*, a program based on the lives of a heterosexual couple. It seemed that mainstream society had grown to accept the gay community on its television programs.²

**Criticism from Other Sources**

In the years since *Will & Grace* premiered to great success on NBC, so soon after the negativity swirlled around *Ellen*, media critics have tried to understand why the show did not come under the fire of public outcry. The overwhelming consensus is that though *Will & Grace* has been monumental in bringing homosexuality as a reality into the living rooms of houses around the world, it “negotiates with the dominant culture by making the most important relationships between the two gay characters heterosocial and quasi-heterosexual.”³ It has been clear since the show’s first season that the most important relationship has been the friendship between Will and Grace. Though the program is about a homosexual male and his heterosexual best friend, scripts and comic devices have often made it seem that Will and Grace were the perfect heterosexual couple, separated only by sexual orientation. Battles and Hilton-Morrow present this situation as yet another example of delayed consummation — a plot line that puts off the match up of the leading male and female characters in order to keep the audience tuning in on a weekly basis. Will and Grace are often positioned as a couple, as well as subject to the barbs of Karen, who often chides their bickering or displays of affection with lines like “Oh, just climb on top of each other and get it over with already!”⁴

³ Keller, 123.
⁴ Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 93.
It is this placement of Will and Grace as a heterosexual couple almost destined to be together that seems to be the reason for its widespread appeal and lack of criticism from right-wing groups. Even though the show contains openly gay and sometimes raunchy humor, provided by Jack and Karen, according to Battles and Hilton-Morrow, this behavior is shown as almost infantile, playing to a familial relationship among the four characters. Karen and Jack are the children to Will and Grace’s parental figures.\(^5\) That fact alone plays into the inherent heterosexual relationship between gay Will and straight Grace.

**Media Representation**

Since *Will & Grace’s* first season, print media and other forums have run many reviews, criticisms and praises for the program. In looking at the representation of homosexuals in this program, it became clear that these reviews may look at the relationship between Will and Grace similarly to the way the relationship is portrayed on the program itself. Specifically, to what extent does the print media heterosexualize the characters? Focusing specifically on the language used to describe their friendship, does the print media use words like “couple,” “romance,” and “sexual tension” when they comment on Will and Grace? Do they use any metaphors or comparisons to past television couples that carry a heterosexual connotation?

Television reviews in print media sources play a large role in creating the general buzz around a show, as well as contribute to the total viewership of a program. If these reviews are presenting the relationship between Will and Grace as heterosexual, they

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\(^5\) Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 97.
could be responsible for detracting from the audience’s understanding of the show as an exploration of a homosexual lifestyle.

Of course, the media would not be entirely to blame for any misrepresentations of the relationship between Will and Grace — the writers of the program have come under some degree of fire for keeping Will out of any real romantic relationship with another man. The media can only comment on what is presented to them in a weekly episode. This paper explores how much of that veiled metaphor of heterosexuality translated itself into the print media.

Methodology

In order to analyze the extent to which the print media perpetuates the idea that *Will & Grace* depicts a successful homosexual television vehicle because it masquerades Will and Grace as a quasi-heterosexual couple, this study examined certain metaphors and phraseology used in various articles and reviews in newspapers during the show’s lifetime. Because the show has been on the air for five seasons at the writing of this paper, it has accumulated quite a bit of press. Therefore, in order to make the research more manageable the search was limited to two time periods: articles written in U.S. newspapers and magazines during the show’s first season – 1998-1999, and articles written to commemorate the show’s fifth season and 100th episode—September 2002 through December 9, 2002. A new television program always receives much media attention in its early days in order for producers to introduce the show, its characters, and its premise, but also so television critics can make their opinions known on whether the program will be a success or a flop. *Will & Grace* was a product of NBC — whose
“Must See TV” line-ups are among television’s most successful — and it featured the first homosexual male lead on American television; therefore print media pieces filled with character description and analysis were easy to find during this time period.

In addition, looking at articles written around a commemorative event like a sitcom’s 100th episode is a helpful way to monitor the changes in media perception of the show between its first season and its current one. Have the metaphors changed with the show’s writing as the years have gone by?

The articles used in the analysis were located using two different news index sources: Lexis-Nexis and EBSCO Host through Academic Search Premier. Searches for “will & grace” in Arts & Sports News/Entertainment News from September 1998 through June 1999 turned up over 200 matches. A search from September 2002 through December 2002 turned up about 124 articles. Filtering out the one-sentence blurbs and weekly ratings reports, the data set included 27 articles that could be classified as reviews, trend stories and actor interviews, each of which used in some way the metaphors and phraseology discovered in the analysis. These articles also came from all over the country, in papers as large as the Washington Post to smaller papers such as the Bergen County Record (New Jersey).

In the analysis of these articles, it is important to note that many articles written during the first season of Will & Grace highlighted and discussed the same criticisms of the show explored in this paper. The metaphors and language used as examples here are separate examples of metaphors or language used by the media to describe the relationship between lead characters Will and Grace, and have nothing to do with articles or sections of articles that use this language to further discussion about the show’s
interpretation of homosexuality. To do so would obviously have skewed the analysis in one direction.

Findings

Research has uncovered a few common metaphors used by print media to describe the relationship between Will and Grace as heterosexual. In each instance the form the metaphor takes is different. Sometimes the metaphor appears in one sentence as a one-time comparison or description; in other examples it permeates the entire paragraph like a literary device, perhaps repeating one word or playing off the creation of a mental image earlier in the paragraph. The metaphor use also differs between simple word choice and the writer’s personal opinion. Word choice tends to reflect what the writer has seen in that evening’s particular episode. A review that carries the writer’s opinion of the show as a whole, and not simply one specific episode, tends to tie everything it critiques to the larger picture of the show as a whole. When the writer’s opinion colors the review, the metaphor can set a tone for the entire article, focusing on Grace, for example, “still harboring hopes for a man who has his eye on other men.”

Specifically, three metaphors occurred frequently within the data set. Two focus explicitly on making Will and Grace’s relationship heterosexual, while the third is a more general classification of relationships between gay men and straight women and how print media relates to them. Following are several examples from the data set where each metaphor demonstrates how these metaphors are used in each article.

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The “Romance” Metaphor

Many reviews during the first season have classified Will and Grace’s relationship as a “romantic” one, using words like “love,” “lovers,” and “romance” when describing what these characters mean to each other. The use of a metaphor involving “love” in some way is not out of the ordinary to describe these characters. After all, the show is meant to explore a strong platonic love between a man and a woman. Similarly, most writers are quick to point out, subsequently, that it is “not that kind of love.”

However, the reader is often set up from the beginning of the review to think that Will and Grace are just another couple. For example, the first part of the previous example reads, “Will (Eric McCormack) and Grace (Debra Messing), they’re in love.”

The problem with using such romance-heavy terminology in describing Will and Grace is that it cements the characters into a position of physical, romantic love. There have been too many sitcoms to count that have focused on a pair or group of friends that did not hinge on this idea of subliminal love. In a program that is trying to make the relationship between these four people seem as mainstream as possible, it takes away from that idea to continuously refer to the obvious love Will and Grace share for one another.

The “romance” metaphor also tends to make much more of the physical nature of Will and Grace’s relationship. For example, an article in The Nation makes this reference: “Grace has already moved in, at his insistence, as his new roommate, which will give them many opportunities to hug each other after they’ve resolved whatever

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7 Drew Jubera. “Ready or not, it’s time for fall season to open.” Atlanta Journal and Constitution 21 Sept. 1998: 01C.
antics come between them …”9 This quote is a good example of how the author’s opinion colors the metaphor used. Here, the writer is clearly making the hugs between Will and Grace more romantic than they are perhaps intended to be, labeling certain experiences “excuses” to hug.

Entering into the fifth season, the “romance” metaphor has not disappeared. Another article in The Boston Globe compared Will and Grace’s gay-straight relationship as “a sexless love affair”10 This metaphor takes “romance” to another level by marking it as forbidden love, and brings even more complex connotations to the relationship.

Another example of the romance metaphor was paired with the second major metaphor, which will be described in the next section: “Do Will and Grace love each other? Clearly. They live together; they depend on and bicker with each other; they share their hopes, desires and neuroses; they praise, criticize and tease each other relentlessly.”11 Each one of these behaviors is associated with the state of being in love. Again, there are many kinds of love that can be described in this way, but the writer of this review makes it clear he is referring to only romantic love between a man and a woman.

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8 Jubera, 01C.
The “Couple” Metaphor

The example above segues nicely into the “couple” metaphor. The review follows that quote with a segment from that week’s episode in which Will and Grace are fighting in public and a stranger mistakes them for a married couple:

‘We’re not married!’ Grace fires back. ‘And I’m gay!’
Will snaps.

‘Well, if you’re not married, and you’re gay,’ the man says, nodding toward Will, ‘what the hell’s all this about?’

What, indeed.12

It is obvious, from the last line of this quote, that the writer of this review has a clear opinion that Will and Grace should be a classical heterosexual couple. Many times, Will and Grace are described as “the perfect couple,” with only one major barrier keeping them apart: “Will’s gayness is the only thing that stands between the devoted pair and lifelong happiness.”13

A second example of this insinuation: “They are the perfect couple. But they aren’t lovers, nor will they be.”14 With no real label for a platonic relationship between a heterosexual woman and a homosexual man, it seems as though writers can only refer to the characters by the strongly marked word “couple,” risking the romantic connotation. The only label writers seem to be able to come up with is “perfect,” idealizing to some extent the relationship between these two characters as something that neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality can completely emulate: “the perfectly committed no-

12 Ibid, 106.
13 Katz, 32-34.
commit couple,”15 and “the boy and the girl are too perfect for each other to ever get it on.”16 This kind of idealization leads to the ultimate end in coupledom, that Will and Grace belong together: “Naturally, the show puts them together. More importantly, it makes us believe they belong together.”17

Some uses of the metaphor even go as far to suggest that Will’s gayness is something that he can “get over,” in order to bring Will and Grace together in the end:

They are, in short, a perfect match except that they are sexually incompatible and there is a strange but unmistakably romantic tone to the show. Is it possible that the producers actually want viewers to hope, unconsciously, that these two terrific and very good looking people will, eventually, somehow, overcome that little sexual, uh, glitch?18

The “Odd Couple” Metaphor

Some writers, however, have made an attempt to put a different label on the relationship—a new spin on the term “couple” which works well for developing a trend in popular culture that seems to enjoy pairing homosexual men with heterosexual women. Just before Will & Grace hit television airwaves, Hollywood had made a few movies following this formula. First coined in an article appearing in Entertainment Weekly, the “Odd Couple” metaphor relates Will and Grace, and other gay man-straight woman relationships to the opposites attract relationship between the characters on the original Odd Couple television show: “Gay men and straight women are to the ’90s what Oscar

15 Jubera, 01C
16 Katz, 34
17 Robert Bianco. “16 new series premiere this week, NBC’s ‘Will & Grace’ leads the lineup.” USA TODAY 21 Sept. 1998: 1D.
and Felix were to the ’70s.” In the first season, this metaphor does not exactly speak to the heterosexual nature of Will and Grace’s relationship, because Oscar and Felix were two same-sex friends, but it does seem to make the idea of homosexuality friendlier to the viewing audience, which is, again, one of the major criticisms of *Will & Grace* as a groundbreaking television program. Another example of the “Odd Couple” metaphor: “If only she’d had a pal like Will Truman, half of television’s latest odd couple in ‘Will & Grace’ …”)

The motivation behind the word “odd” in this metaphor, however, raises a few questions, and begins to mark where the mainstream media has stopped feeling the influence of the show’s scripts and intentions. From the beginning, Mutchnick and Kohan were trying to create a show about homosexuality that made it more mainstream, blending homosexual and heterosexual life into one seamless world. Marking Will and Grace’s relationship as “odd” is not something one could believe Mutchnick would find acceptable. The “odd” can only really refer to the neuroses and behaviors of the “bickering, superficial, relationship-impaired foursome,” and not to the social status of their relationship.

But later repetition of the metaphor makes a few changes. Rather than specifically relating Will and Grace to same-sex friends Oscar and Felix, the “couple” part of “Odd Couple” starts to take on comparisons to other television pairings: “They rank with some of TVs classic couples, including Sam and Diane [*Cheers*], and Oscar

21 Gilbert, 2002, N1
and Felix.” The most interesting aspect of this morphing of the “Odd Couple” metaphor is now we have Will and Grace paired with one of television’s most well-known pair of frustrated lovers—Sam and Diane from James Burrows’ Cheers. In season five, Will and Grace are not considered “odd” as much as they are considered “fated” never to be together, yet always to be together, as good friends.

Conclusion

The consequences of metaphors like the ones discussed above still carry heavily on the future of Will & Grace. To date, the show is still one of NBC’s most popular, holding down the 9 p.m. timeslot in the “Must-See TV” lineup. Megan Mullally, Sean Hayes and Eric McCormack have each gone on to win supporting and lead acting trophies, respectively, and the show itself earned the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2000. However, Will’s character has yet to have a serious on-screen romantic relationship with another man comparable to those of Grace, and a more recent plot line has revolved around Will and Grace’s attempts to have a child together.

If the program continues to push Will and Grace together with pseudo-romantic overtones, then the print media will most likely continue to discuss the characters’ exploits with heterosexual metaphors. The media can only represent the images, words and storylines a television program shows them. Perhaps a look at the metaphors used to describe the relationship between supporting players Karen and Jack would turn more favorably towards a platonic gay man-straight woman relationship, but until the show changes its name to “Karen & Jack,” the emphasis will be on Will, Grace and the love that almost constantly seems to speak its name.

22 Gilbert, 2002, N1
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