

## Gideon Who Will be 25 in the Year 2012: Growing Up Gay Today

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We need to reconsider ways of thinking about queerness based on the experiences of pervasive invisibility in order to comprehend the experiences of today's and tomorrow's kids, growing up in a culture that acknowledges queerness and does so by attempting to integrate it into the commercialized array of cultural products, niche-marketed demo slices and voting blocks. Much LGBT [pre-queer] theorizing presupposed invisibility and rare stereotypic representations as a limiting and distorting condition of growing up. What do we say now about growing up with reasonably common news and entertainment presence and with the opportunities for exploration and contact offered by the Internet? One way is to deny the meaningfulness of identity and theorize the problem away. But most kids are still experiencing isolation and vulnerability in enemy territory, and for them these admittedly problematic media images are far from trivial psychic/cultural resources.

This is one of those “half empty, half full” stories. It's not the worst of times, and it's certainly not the best of times, but the story I'm interested in here is one of remarkable progress as well as often depressing challenges. In the 1976 film by Alain Tanner (written with John Berger), *Jonah Who Will be 25 in the Year 2000* (*Jonas - Qui Aura 25 Ans en l'An 2000*) a character notes wistfully that “men wish history would move as fast as time.” Well, history rarely grants that wish, but the past half century has witnessed a transformation in the circumstances of gay people in the United States, and much of the rest of world, that would have been unimaginable at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The magnitude of the changes I am thinking of was dramatized to me when, in late 2000, the 12– year–old son of a colleague of mine told his mother that he is gay. Gideon told his mother that he had known this since he was around six years old, and that he was telling her now because he wanted to see the American version of *Queer As Folk*, that was about to debut on the subscription cable channel Showtime.

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### That Was Then

"The most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person is when they proclaim their gayness — to self, to other, to community. Whilst men and women have been coming out for over a hundred years, it is only since 1970 that the stories have gone very public" (Plummer, 1995, p. 82).

The experience of coming out is at the center of the story I am concerned with here, that is, the experience of coming to terms with an identity that is not what everyone — parents, peers, preachers and teachers, even oneself — expects, or welcomes. All too often, even today, to quote early Gay Liberation activists Andrew Hodges and David Hutter, we learn to loathe homosexuality before it becomes necessary to acknowledge our own (1974). In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even in the first decade or so following Stonewall, young men and women came to this realization in an environment of pervasive public and private condemnation.

Among the earliest appearances of the topic of homosexuality on television that I have located is a 1966 local Miami news report on a crackdown on homosexuals in the city's parks. The program includes the appearance by police vice officers before an audience of 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The officers warn the embarrassed and uncomfortable teenagers of the dangers of becoming involved with adult homosexuals, lest they "become queer" and their lives "become a living hell." [Click on the image below to see clip of the program — the quality is poor but the message is clear].



The occasional encounter with a queer image or actual person would likely be greeted with undisguised hostility. Around 1972, when he was ten, Aaron Fricke's mother warned him that a man might ask him up to his house and, "If I went, terrible things would happen to me. The man might cut me up into little pieces. When I asked her why someone would do this to me, she paused and said, 'Because they are what you call homosexuals.' She had no idea what impact that admonishment would have on me" (1981, pp. 17–18). Fricke had by that age begun to consider that he might be gay, but now he knew he was, "in the eyes of my mother and many others, something more vile."

Growing up gay meant coming to terms with a stigmatized sexuality in an environment of public invisibility. Although U.S. society was increasingly dominated by broadcast media — television was well ensconced in the nation's living rooms and was rapidly over-shadowing other forms of public culture — we were rarely to be seen on the tube or, for that matter, on the pages of newspapers, or at the movies. Lesbians and gay men were usually ignored altogether; but when we did appear, it was in roles that supported the "natural" order. Gay people made it on stage, in the roles generally offered to minorities, as villains or victims. In unfriendly shows queers were a threat to be contained; in friendly ones, we sparked surprise that someone apparently *normal* could be, gasp!, gay, and offered the *real* characters the opportunity to demonstrate tolerance. The familiar stereotypes were always present, if only implicitly, as when gay characters were depicted in a carefully "anti-stereotypic" manner that draws our attention to the absence of the "expected" attributes — thus setting up the surprise or joke. Richard Dyer has pointed out that, "What is wrong about these stereotypes is not that they are inaccurate." They are, after all, often more than a little accurate, at least for some gay people, some of the time. Dyer continued, "What we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the 'ideal' of heterosexual society (that is, taken to be the norm of being human), and to pass this definition off as necessary and natural" (1977). Sexual minorities are not, of course, unique in this regard — one could say the same for most media images of a non-dominant groups. But our general invisibility makes us especially vulnerable to the power of media images (Gross, 2001).

Despite the rapid advances gained by the gay liberation movement in the 1970s — advances real enough to spur a fervent backlash that continues until the present — most queer teens were only dimly aware of the changes being advocated and even achieved, mostly in a few large cities. The daily experience of queer youth remained one of public invisibility and private isolation.

#### **"I'm scared to death."**

As late as the early 1990s the reality of this experience was illustrated by the responses of audiences to a soap opera story-thread. In the summer of 1992, the daytime TV serial *One Life To Live* (OLTL) began what was at the time the longest and most complex television narrative ever to deal with a lesbian or gay character. When Billy Douglas, a high school star athlete and class president, confides to his best friend and to his minister that he is gay, he sets off a series of plot twists that differ from the usual soap opera complications in that they expose homophobia and AIDS-phobia and thus offer the characters — and the audience — an opportunity to address topics that daytime serials, along with the rest of U.S. mass media, have generally preferred to ignore.

Billy Douglas was played by Ryan Phillippe, in his first professional role, and he found himself at the center of a great deal of media and audience attention. He received an unusually large amount of mail even for a good-looking young soap opera actor (see Gross, 1996). Even more unusual was the fact that so many of the hundreds of letters he received during the months that he appeared on OLTL came from young men, most of whom identified themselves as gay — in one interview Phillippe reported getting two thousand letters, adding that "a good 45 percent . . . from homosexual teenagers" (Mallinger, 1993, p. 14). Among the most frequent expressions were those of isolation from family and friends, and desperation:

"My favorite scene was when Billy told Joey that he was gay. I like this so much because it was like a scene from life. Ever since this storyline began I have not been able to think of anything else, but what's going to happen next . . . I feel the same way your character does about my parents finding out. I'm scared to death about that happening, because my family doesn't like gay people. I just don't want my family to hate me or be embarrassed or ashamed of me. I'm writing this letter to you because I think you can relate to what I'm talking about. Ryan, I would like to know if we can become pen pals."

"I'm 19 years old and I live in XX, Colorado, and I'm gay. This is the first time I have ever told someone that. . . . Some of my closest friends say prejudiced things about gays and it hurts me very deeply because I am pretty sure they would have nothing to do with me if they knew about me. I hope that you aren't like that in real life; I'm pretty sure that you aren't but one never really knows . . . If it's alright with you maybe we could write each other every so often? I would really like that!!"

"I begin this letter by being blunt and upfront. I am a 22-year-old homosexual male... Life has been so hard for me. I've tried suicide, I was threatened with expulsion from my high school, I ran away and I was nearly stabbed by some people at my college. Storyline may be fiction, but mine was not — it was an ugly reality. I write this letter in hopes I can get help and need any advice you can give me. Ever since I was 13, I've been scared and alone."

While it is not difficult to imagine that an African American, Asian American or Latino actor would get letters from teenagers who identify with and appreciate their representation of an under-represented group on the public media stage, it is inconceivable that they would receive letters like the ones quoted above, let alone similar letters from adults:

"Your performance has been 'right on.' I am a happily married, successful father of two teenagers (one, your age, equally good looking as you) . . . You see, I lived the character you are playing, and still live it, although in the 'closet'. I've never been a victim of homophobia, because no one knows I'm a life-long, born-that-way homosexual, comfortable with who I am, but not comfortable with living as a gay person. Still your character has created an empathy in me, because I can relate so well to your character. You are doing a service to millions of people, whether you know it or not, just by bringing the subject to a mass audience. Keep up the good work. Sorry, I can't sign this letter."

### **This is Now**

Over the past three decades the circumstances facing queer youth have changed radically. Due in part to the AIDS epidemic, which revealed how true the saying "we are everywhere" really is, gay people have overcome many of the last vestiges of public invisibility. Today, few can remain unaware of the existence of lesbian and gay people, and young people grow up reading words and seeing images that previous generations never encountered. By the final years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people entered the ranks of our culture's permanent cast of characters, even though rarely in leading roles and almost never permitted to express physical affection. We can confidently expect to show up as the subject of news stories, even some that do not presume that our existence is controversial or that simple equality is a special right, although the current same-sex marriage struggle pretty much

guarantees a flood of these stories for the foreseeable future. And, in a further demonstration of the emergence of gay people onto the American landscape, we are receiving the ultimate recognition that this country can bestow: being included in advertising. Gay and lesbian Americans have been identified as a certifiable market niche; one well-heeled enough to warrant targeted ads. In a tribute that makes explicit what was long unacknowledged, Madison Avenue has partnered with Hollywood to enlist the *Queer Eye* to educate Straight Guys in the fine points of self-improving consumption.

Those growing up queer at the turn of the new century are facing new circumstances, both good and bad, as well as the familiar challenges of the past. In their 1993 study of gay youth in Chicago, *Children of Horizons*, Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer, defined four age cohorts of gay people in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Their first cohort comprised those coming of age after World War 1, and their fourth cohort came of age in the era of AIDS, since the early 1980s. Unlike previous cohorts, this fourth cohort includes a "great majority (who) come of age self-identifying as gay or lesbian, and thus expecting not only to live their lives openly, but to tell all their family and friends, and their employers, of their desires and lifestyles" (1993, p. 12). A decade later it's clear that a fifth cohort has emerged, a generation of queer youth who have come of age in the era of media visibility and of the Internet. Thus, while much remains the same, much has changed.

We need to reconsider ways of thinking about queerness based on the experiences of pervasive invisibility in order to comprehend the experiences of today's and tomorrow's kids, growing up in a culture that acknowledges queerness and does so by attempting to integrate it into the commercialized array of cultural products, niche-marketed demographic slices, and political voting blocks. Most lesbigay (pre-queer) theorizing presupposed invisibility and rare stereotypic representations as a limiting and distorting condition of growing up. What do we say now about growing up with reasonably common news and entertainment presence and with the opportunities for exploration and contact offered by the Internet?

One option is to deny the meaningfulness of identity and theorize the problem away. The 1990s were also the era of what British social scientists Paul Flowers and Katie Bustin call the "metropolitan blossoming of both queer theory and queer politics." But, as they point out in the context of their interviews with young gay men in Northern England, while these theories "shatter and fragment the apparent unity of ideas of gay identity," the stories told by "these working class men all articulate a distinct and familiar coming-out story" (2001, p. 61). The story is one of isolation, vulnerability and deception, followed, if they are lucky, by telling others, self-acceptance, and connection to a community.

Today's stories start at a younger age. Savin-Williams summarized a body of research on the stages of the coming out process conducted over more than two decades and concludes that ages at which these "developmental milestones are reached . . . have been steadily declining from the 1970s to current cohorts of youths . . . awareness of same-sex attractions has dropped from the onset of junior high school to an average of third grade" (1998, p. 16). Interestingly, while my colleague's son came out to her at 12, he told her he'd known he was gay since he was six. Savin-Williams attributes this reduction in the age of self-definition to the "recent visibility of homosexuality in the macro culture (such as in the media), the reality of a very vocal and extensive gay and lesbian culture, and the presence of homosexuality in their immediate social world" (1998, p. 122).

Coming out earlier is hardly a guarantee of smooth passage. Most kids still find themselves growing up in enemy territory, in a country where heterosexuality is the love that needn't speak its name, because it's taken for granted, and where *gay* is a term of abuse to rival *faggot* or *queer*. But in contrast to the experience of most kids in the past, there are ways to fight back, and public schools have become battlegrounds of new civil rights struggles.

A young man named Jamie Nabozny made news in 1996 when he successfully sued a Wisconsin school district for failing to stop the anti-gay abuse he suffered for years. Other pupils realized Nabozny was gay when he was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. In later years a classmate pushed him to the floor and simulated raping him as other pupils watched; another time he was knocked into a urinal by one boy while another urinated on him. When he sought help from the principal, he was told "boys will be boys." During another assault 10 students surrounded Nabozny while a student wearing boots repeatedly kicked him in the stomach. Nabozny attempted suicide several times and, like many gay teen-agers in similar situations, he dropped out of high school. But Jamie Nabozny also fought back in federal court, and won. The school district agreed to a \$900,000 settlement. "That case opened the floodgates to lawsuits — and, perhaps more important, to *threats* of lawsuits — from other gay students who said their complaints about harassment had been ignored. School officials saw the potential for liability" (Jones, 1999).

More common than lawsuits has been the emergence of supportive organizations within schools, starting in 1984 with the founding of Project 10 in a Los Angeles high school, and growing slowly for the next decade. In the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's killing the number of gay-straight alliances (GSAs), as most of these groups are named, rose dramatically, reaching approximately 750 nationwide by 2001 (Platt, 2001). In November 2006, more than 2500 GSAs were registered with the national organization GLSEN, or Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/chapter/home/index.html>). The clubs often meet resistance from school officials, but they have an effective weapon, courtesy of the religious right.

In 1984, in order to force public schools to permit Bible study clubs, Senator Orrin Hatch spearheaded the passage of the federal Equal Access Act, which makes it illegal for a school to ban some extracurricular clubs if it allows others. In 1995, when the Salt Lake City Board of Education refused to permit a GSA to meet at a public high school, they were forced to ban all extra-curricular clubs. Salt Lake City stuck by its principles, and sacrificed the interests of all students in order to deny gay students the right to a club, before finally relenting in 2000; in other localities as well the Equal Access Act has served to open school doors to GSAs (Platt 2001; Barovick, 2000). In November 2006, the ACLU filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of Yasmin Gonzalez against the Okeechobee, Florida school board for refusing the 17-year-old high school senior's request to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance. School superintendent Patricia Cooper, who refused to comment to the Associated Press, told the *Florida Baptist Witness*, "My position was then and remains that we are an abstinence-only district, that our clubs are primarily dealing with curriculum or curriculum-related clubs and organizations, and we would decline the request" (Associated Press, January 2, 2007; [http://www.sptimes.com/2007/01/02/State/Lawsuit\\_challenges\\_at.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2007/01/02/State/Lawsuit_challenges_at.shtml)).

The existence of GSAs is an important achievement but even 2500 schools are only a small fraction of the nation's local schools, and LGBT students remain at risk of harassment and bullying. In many ways, of course, the growing visibility of gay people and the political prominence of gay-related issues probably contributes to the hostility directed at LGBT folk, especially in school environments where "Gay" — meaning stupid or worthless — has become an epithet of choice. In April 2006, GLSEN released the results of a survey of over 1700 LGBT students between the ages of 13 and 20. Three-quarters of the students had been taunted as "faggot" or "dyke" and over a third had experienced physical harassment on the basis of sexual orientation. Nearly one-fifth had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation and over a tenth because of their gender expression (<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/chapter/library/record/1927.html>).

### Queer Teens as Demographic Niche

The changing circumstances of gay people in the 1990s led quite predictably to the emergence of media products not only produced by gay people themselves, which after all had been the case since the start of the gay liberation movement (then called the homophile movement) in the 1950s, but targeted at segments not previously addressed so directly. Notable among these are gay youth, who have been generally avoided — both as customers and subjects — by media wary of the accusation of "recruiting" or seducing the innocent.

*XY*, a San Francisco-based magazine for gay male teens was founded in 1996; by 2002 it boasted: "We sell over 60,000 copies per issue and have more than 200,000 readers from all over the world. Our average reader age is 22, according to our last reader survey, and *XY* is officially targeted toward 12–29 young gay men." The magazine's 24-year-old editor told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "I don't think there's a magazine in the country that means more to its readers. I say that because we're dealing who specifically with a demographic of gay teenagers who are not living in L.A. or New York, or some place where being gay is accepted. There's really no other forum for them to read about that experience" (Vaziri, 1999). The magazine's price — \$44 for a one year subscription (\$55 for a subscription to the spinoff photo-only *XYFoto*) — might be a deterrent to many in the magazine's target audiences.

If the success of magazines for lesbian and gay teens is limited by steep prices and prying parents the Internet offers most young people readier access and greater privacy. The website for *XY*, in fact, offers much more than enticements to subscribe to the magazines or buy back issues. Like so many websites these days, *XY* offers the opportunity to chat live with other "members" and to peruse the personals section.

The section called *Bois* (a term also now used by young FTM transfolk, but here referring to boys) contains personal "profiles" — called "peeps" — submitted by young men after they submit their name, e-mail address and their age (the site pledges that complete privacy will be maintained). In August 2002, there were 13,559 profiles listed on the site, by March 2004 there were 92,440, many of them containing photographs of the person. Scanning through the lists — it is possible to specify location and to limit oneself to seeing profiles containing pictures — it is clear that the listings are far from evenly distributed across the United States and beyond. Still, the numbers are often impressive, as is the geographical

dispersion. Alabama listed 637 peeps, 35 with photo, Montana had 127 (63 photos), whereas Los Angeles boasted 2284, 1461 with pictures. Outside the United States the patterns are probably predictable, with Toronto offering 565 peeps (358 photos), London 251 (138 photos), and Australia 408 listings (182 with photos). Leaving the English-speaking world the numbers fall off, as would be expected. There are 123 listed in Germany (64 with pictures), 35 in France (12 photos, and some of these would appear to be older than the target age), 24 in Japan (15 photos) and only 12 in China (3 pictures).<sup>2</sup>

There is also a link on the home page labeled "I want to die" that takes you to a page addressed to those who are considering suicide: "XY Cares about you. If you are thinking about Suicide, please read this first . . ." followed by a lengthy statement written from the perspective of someone who's "been there" and offering links to additional resources [<http://www.xy.com/xycontent/suicide/xy-suicide.php>].

While there is no lesbian equivalent of *XY*, the most successful lesbian magazine, *Curve*, includes on its website extensive "personals" listings, with and without photographs, that specify ages beginning at 18 and going up to 90. In December 2006, asking to see the listings for "lesbian women aged 18–25 (the youngest category available) in California" yielded 500 listings, all with photographs.<sup>3</sup> In the section called "community" discussions are posted under many group and topic headings, including "Baby Dykes — Youth Hangout."<sup>4</sup>

Sites run by magazines are only the tip of the Internet iceberg, however, when it comes to opportunities to post personal ads and engage in conversation. Despite a slant toward the interests of those old enough to get into bars and spend more money, the major gay websites appear to be accessible to gay teens. *PlanetOut*, the largest commercial gay site, boasts more than 600,000 personal ads that seem to range from 15 to the early 60s, is likely to attract the attention of many teenagers looking for information, connections and for many, no doubt, sex. There are, in addition, sites specifically developed for gay youth, such as *OutProud*, *Oasis*, and *Mogenic* (located in Sydney), that combine support,

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<sup>2</sup>Today the site is closed to non-members, which makes it more difficult to count the numbers without posing as a teenager.

<sup>3</sup>Searching for "lesbian women 70 and above in California" yielded 54 listings, 12 with photographs.

<sup>4</sup>A message posted in June 2004 demonstrates how such sites serve to provide young lesbians with support and information of the sort not readily available in their offline environment: "Hey yall im a newbie to this site. i thought i'd check it out b/c the ads in my curve mag always has their site plastered on it. Im 16 and im going to be a junior in a small town in wisconsin. mickey: last year i started something exactly like a GSA... We call it Spectrum and instead of just LGBT issues we cover alot of other minorities too.. pretty much a diversity club. This last year we were just feelin our way through things b/c we are in such a small town. there was so much rejection and name calling but next year we're going full blown into the activism and education part. we're going to do events such as Day of Silence, No Dissing Week, and stuff like that. A good link to check out is <http://www.glsen.org> its got everything you need to know about GSAs. I love that place. I hope that answered ur question. Lauren: I so know how you feel with the small town coming out thing. We have about 4,500 people and everyone are really ignorant and dumb. its cool though because i have quite a few gay friends there so im not alone.. my best friend and i came out to each other on the same phone call.. if u wanna chat just send me a message or something ..."



counseling, and information with news and links to other youth-oriented sites (Addison and Comstock, 1998).

### **Growing Up Gay in Cyberspace**

In contrast to the world of earlier decades young people grow up reading words and seeing images that previous generations never encountered. However, despite the dramatic increase in the public visibility of gay people in nearly all domains of our public culture, most young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people still find themselves isolated and vulnerable. Their experiences and concerns are not reflected in the formal curricula of schools or in our society's informal curriculum, the mass media. For these teenagers the Internet is a godsend and untold thousands are using computer networks to declare their homosexuality, meet and seek support from other gay youths.

"Does anyone else feel like you're the only gay guy on the planet, or at least in Arlington, Texas?" When 17-year-old Ryan Matthew posted that question on AOL back in 1995, he received more than 100 supportive e-mail messages (Gabriel, 1995). The stories that flew through the ether in the early days on the World Wide Web made all too clear that the Internet could literally be a lifesaver for many queer teens trapped in enemy territory:

- JohnTeen Ø (John Erwin's AOL name) is a new kind of gay kid, a 16-year-old not only out, but already at home in the online convergence of activists that Tom Rielly, the co-founder of Digital Queers, calls the "Queer Global Village." Just 10 years ago, most queer teens hid behind a self-imposed don't-ask-don't-tell policy until they shipped out to Oberlin or San Francisco, but the Net has given even closeted kids a place to conspire. Though the Erwins' house is in an unincorporated area of Santa Clara County in California, with goats and llamas foraging in the backyard, John's access to AOL's gay and lesbian forum enables him to follow dispatches from queer activists worldwide, hone his writing, flirt, try on disposable identities, and battle bigots — all from his home screen (Silberman, 1994).
- Kali is an 18-year-old lesbian at a university in Colorado. Her name means "fierce" in Swahili. Growing up in California, Kali was the leader of a young women's chapter of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She was also the "Girl Saved by E-mail," whose story ran last spring on CNN. After mood swings plummeted her into a profound depression, Kali — like too many gay teens — considered suicide. Her access to GayNet at school gave her a place to air those feelings, and a phone call from someone she knew online saved her life. Kali is now a regular contributor to Sappho, a women's board she most appreciates because there she is accepted as an equal. "They forgive me for being young," Kali laughs, "though women come out later than guys, so there aren't a lot of teen lesbians. But it's a high of connection. We joke that we're posting to 500 of our closest friends" (Silberman, 1994).
- Jay won't be going to his senior prom. He doesn't make out in his high school corridor the way other guys do with their girlfriends. He doesn't receive the kind of safe-sex education at

school that he feels he should. He can never fully relax when he's speaking. He worries that he'll let something slip, that the kids at his Long Island high school will catch on. He'd rather not spend his days at school being beaten up and called a faggot. It's not like that on the Internet.

- "It's hard having always to watch what you say," said Jay, which is not his real name. "It's like having a filter that you turn on when you're at school. You have to be real careful you don't say what you're thinking or look at a certain person the wrong way. But when I'm around friends or on the Net, the filter comes off." For many teenagers, the Internet is a fascinating, exciting source of information and communication. For gay teenagers like Jay, 17, it's a lifeline. The moment the modem stops screeching and the connection is made to the Net, the world of a gay teenager on Long Island can change dramatically. The fear of being beaten up and the long roads and intolerant views that separate teens lose their impact (McAllester, 1997).
- Jeffrey knew of no homosexuals in his high school or in his small town in the heart of the South. He prayed that his errant feelings were a phase. But as the truth gradually settled over him, he told me last summer during a phone conversation punctuated by nervous visits to his bedroom door to make sure no family member was listening in, he became suicidal. "I'm a Christian — I'm like, how could God possibly do this to me?" he said. He called a crisis line for gay teenagers, where a counselor suggested he attend a gay support group in a city an hour and a half away. But being 15, he was too young to drive and afraid to enlist his parents' help in what would surely seem a bizarre and suspicious errand. It was around this time that Jeffrey first typed the words "gay" and "teen" into a search engine on the computer he'd gotten a few months before and was staggered to find himself aswirl in a teeming online gay world, replete with resource centers, articles, advice columns, personals, chat rooms, message boards, porn sites and — most crucially — thousands of closeted and anxious kids like himself. That discovery changed his life (Egan, 2000).
- Without unfettered access to the Internet at Multnomah County Public Library, 16-year-old Emmalyn Rood testified Tuesday, she might not have found courage to tell her mother she was gay. "I was able to become so much more comfortable with myself," Rood told a special three-judge panel weighing the constitutionality of the Children's Internet Protection Act. "I basically found people I could talk to. I didn't have anybody I could talk to in real life." In the summer of 1999, Rood was a freshman at Portland's Wilson High School confused about her sexual identity but eager to learn. Today, she is attending a Massachusetts college and is a determined plaintiff in a lawsuit aimed at scuttling the new federal law, which she said would have hindered her search (Barnett, 2002).

Similar accounts abound, not only in the U.S. but in many other parts of the world. Sometimes, as in the case of Israeli gay teenagers interviewed by Lilach Nir, on-line discussions offered them contact and confirmation unavailable to them in their "real" environments of smaller cities, rural villages and kibbutzim. While one of the clichés of computer mediated communication is that one can hide one's true

identity, so "that nobody knows you're 15 and live in Montana and are gay" (Gabriel, 1995), it is also true, as Nir's informants told her, that in their IRC conversations they "are unmasking the covers they are forced to wear in their straight daily lives" (Nir, 1998).

In the past few years, social networking sites such as Friendster, Facebook, and MySpace have attracted millions of "members" and have become the hottest phenomenon in the growing universe of online communities. On Nov. 11, 2006, there were 33,745 "gay, lesbian or bi" groups on MySpace, according to the website, and 3000 were listed. Of these, the largest, "Support Gay Marriage" (founded in July, 2004) had 102,446 members. The most recent, "Gay Kids: you can just like hook up or do w/e with gay kids on MySpace," had been formed that day, and had one member.

For LGBT youngsters, however, MySpace might not be entirely a safe space. On *Curve's* "Baby Dykes – Youth Hangout" bulletin board, there was a discussion in August 2005 about the dangers of being open on MySpace:

*A: man... I've gotten in real shit on Myspace... My warning is be careful what you say because you never know who's watching.*

*B: What do you mean by that, because i have some stuff on mine that could be a little incriminating. Did u get in trouble w/ good old johnny law???*

*A: nope.... try good old parents... not much difference, though... 😊 My best friend's sister's best friend told my step-sister's mother some things I said online and my step-sister's mother's husband stalked me on Myspace... One day a folder full of everything I said on it showed up on my front door... and I had stayed home sick... FUN*

*C: On Myspace, since pretty much anyone from my school and sports teams etc can look me up I put that I was straight, just because if I want someone to know I will tell them myself. And I also erase my internet history so as to not let the parents know I am on a site such as this. 😊*

*D: I know how Myspace can get you in trouble. So many people have one now, and sooner or later (if you blog) some secrets can get around. Whoopsie. 😊 I've learned to be very careful what I write there. I only write exactly what I'm feeling in my secret livejournal that's not all that live. 🙄*

### Beyond The Anecdotes

The stories recounted above, and others readily found in news accounts, can be seen as exceptional or extreme instances. However, there is a certain amount of more representative data on the role of the Internet in the lives of queer kids. In September and October of 2000, an online survey was conducted by two of the largest websites serving lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth: OutProud, an arm of The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, founded in 1993 to provide advocacy, information, resources and support to in-the-closet and openly queer teens through America Online and the Internet, and Oasis Magazine, which has been published online since December 1995. The survey, authored by OutProud Director Chris Kryzan, was advertised on the two

sponsoring sites as well as on several other youth-oriented websites and, as it turned out, two sites devoted to gay and lesbian erotica. The survey was completed by 7884 respondents, of whom 6872, aged 25 or under, constituted the primary sample.

The survey permitted respondents of any age to complete the form, thus hopefully discouraging older respondents from presenting themselves as younger in order to participate. Obviously, respondent age, like anything else queried over the Internet is subject to falsification, but there seems little reason to imagine that many people would be moved to spend an average of 38 minutes pretending to be something they're not. Nearly 60% of those beginning the survey completed it. As the researchers discovered mid-way, slightly more than half of the respondents (60% of the males) entered the survey-site from an erotic stories site targeted at gay males; however, there are no systematic differences in respondents corresponding to the point of entry. This pattern does, however, tell something about the importance of erotic content sites for gay youth, who aren't likely to find similar erotic material in mainstream media, as well as giving further evidence of the centrality of pornography to the appeal of the Internet. For queer youth, of course, pornography is often the only available source of the sort of sexual imagery and information widely available in the media for heterosexual youth.

While the respondents clearly do not constitute a probability sample from which one can generalize about queer youth – and, indeed, no such sample can ever be obtained for gay people, who remain largely hidden from the survey researcher's sampling frames – the size and diversity of the group does offer illuminating insights into the lives of queer youth and their relationships to the new communications technologies that came into the world as they were being born. Most (77%) of the respondents were from the United States, with the next largest number from Canada (8%), the UK (5%), and Australia (4%); 72 other countries contributed fewer than 1% each. In general, few differences seemed to follow from geographical origin, suggesting that many of those responding from other countries might not have been of local origin (e.g., children of diplomats or overseas businessmen). A somewhat similar, more qualitative survey was conducted by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (Hillier et al., 2001).

The sample of respondents included 5310 males, 1412 females and 150 who identified as transgendered. The median age of the respondents was 18 (the mode was 17), and the median age reported for realizing that they were gay was 13; the median age of accepting that they were gay was 15. There were significant correlations between their reported position on the Kinsey scale (0 = completely heterosexual, 6 = completely homosexual) and the age of becoming aware of their sexuality (-.06) and the age of accepting their sexuality (-.20). That is, the more strongly they identify as gay, the earlier they recognized and accepted their sexual orientation (these correlations are controlling for gender). Needless to say, causality may run in either direction.

As would be expected, this is a group of young people who are familiar with the Internet: nearly half of those 16 and under and two-thirds of those 20 and over had been online for at least three years; fewer than 10% had been online less than one year. Over 90% of respondents reported going on line at least once a day, nearly half said several times per day. About 50% reported spending more than two

hours online each day. The usage figures reported in the survey put these young people well above the average of 9.8 hours per week found in the 2001 UCLA Internet Report, *Surveying the Digital Future*.

The most frequent activities online included: looking at specific sites, 28% (males more than females cited this — presumably this includes the erotica site from which so many respondents came to the survey); chatting, 24%, and e-mail, 20% (these two were cited by females more than males). Unspecified surfing absorbed 20%, reading message boards, 2%. Downloading music, the Recording Industry Association of America would be relieved to learn, only accounted for 5% of reported time.

Given the makeup of this sample it would be expected that their online experiences would be related to their sexuality. Two-thirds of the respondents said that being online helped them accept their sexual orientation, 35% that being online was crucial to this acceptance. Not surprisingly, therefore, many said they came out online before doing so in “real life” — this was much more the case for males 57% — than for females — 38% — and more for those who had spent more time online.

Connections online sometime lead to real life meetings: about half of the respondents report such meetings, and 12% of the males (but only 4% of the females) said they met someone off-line for the purpose of having sex. About a quarter of both males and females met someone “with the hope that we might become more than friends.” In general, a quarter of the respondents said that they met the people they’ve dated online. A large majority — 83% — report having enough knowledge of STDs to follow safer sex practices; nearly a third cite the Internet as their primary source for this information.

Queer youth often feel isolated and rarely have access to a supportive queer community in their vicinity. Sixty percent of the respondents said they did not feel as though they were part of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community; but 52% said they felt a sense of community with the people they’ve met online. Mass media, even minority media, do not necessarily provide a great deal of contact and support for these young people. Only 47% have bought a gay or lesbian magazine, and only two of these, the *Advocate*, the largest U.S. gay magazine, and *XY*, for young gay males, are read by as many as a fifth of the sample. Even fewer report familiarity with *Oasis*, the longest running online magazine for queer youth.

A frequent concern regarding the isolated and vulnerable situation facing many queer youth is that they are peculiarly vulnerable to suicide and, indeed, it is commonly reported that the rate of attempted and completed suicides is disproportionately high among this group. A 1989 study on youth suicide commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was widely interpreted to reveal that at least a third of all successful teen suicide is by gay teenagers (<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/fact3.htm>). Among the online survey respondents, 40% of the females and 25% of the males reported seriously thinking about suicide sometimes or often; 30% of the females and 17% of the males said they had in fact tried to kill themselves (the median age for these attempts was 14). For queer teens the Internet can often be a lifeline: 32% of the females and 23% of the males say they’ve gone online when feeling suicidal, so that they would have someone understanding to talk to. Among those who report frequent suicidal thoughts, 53% of the females and 57% of the males say they’ve gone online for this reason.

### The Prom We Never Had

While American viewers were wondering when Will would get a date, let alone get laid, Britain's Channel 4 made television history in 1999 with something completely different. *Queer As Folk* centers on three gay men in Manchester who spend most of their non-working hours in the bars of Manchester's trendy gay neighborhood. The three men include two 29-year-olds — Stuart, a sexy, heartless Don Juan who wants to "die shagging," and Vince, his shy best friend, hopelessly yearning to shag Stuart — and Nathan, a golden-haired 15-year-old who is bursting out of the closet. In the first episode, Nathan is picked up (or vice versa) by Stuart, and we are shown the boy being introduced to rimming and anal sex.

At least as much as the explicit sex *Queer As Folk* was a novelty for mainstream media because the dramatic lens was focused on the gay characters and their world, with only token straight characters, and no effort made to explain things to, or wink at the audience. "Most of the gay drama we've had on British television has dealt with big statements: victimization, the political agenda, AIDS," Channel 4's head of drama Gub Neal said to *The New York Times*. "But this group of characters doesn't think they're victims at all. They're not even aware that they're a minority. They simply exist and say, 'Hey, we don't have to make any apologies, and we're not going away.' The series has given us a chance to simply reveal gay life, to some extent, in its ordinariness" (Lyll, 1999).

It didn't take long for the series to attract Hollywood's attention, and Showtime began to produce an American version, set in Pittsburgh. "I thought this show was unique," said Jerry Offsay, Showtime's president of programming. "I had never seen characters like these on television. The characters were unapologetic, they lived their lives the way they wanted to. There were great twists and turns and reverses in the storytelling. This show will be as edgy as any television series has ever been in America." Edginess has its limits, however. Unlike the British Nathan, who is 15, in the American version the youth, named Justin, is nearly 18. "The boy is on the cusp of being the legal age," said Tony Jonas, one of the executive producers of the series. "The idea is, kids who are seniors in high school are being sexual. We can't deny that. It's the reality" (Weinraub, 2000).

High school seniors are, indeed, being sexual, and their sexuality is at the center of the peculiarly American fertility ritual known as the senior prom. The prom is officially defined as a celebration of young love and coming of age, but for many teens it is a painful reminder of social hierarchy and exclusion. For queer teens, even more than most, the high school prom is likely to be an occasion for suffering rather than joy, and most queer adults probably look back on their high school prom — if they went at all — as a low point of their high school years. But there are exceptions.

In 1981 Aaron Fricke went to federal court to force his high school to permit him to bring a male date to his senior prom (Fricke, 1981). The court case, and the prom, drew national attention, and in subsequent years many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth have braved parental, peer and official disapproval in order to participate in their preferred fashion in this rite-of-passage.

In bigger cities across the country there are special proms for queer teens: In May 2003, Denver held its 10<sup>th</sup> Queer Prom in a local college student union. "Most of the kids who attend the prom come

from the Denver area, but we see people from all over the region — Wyoming, Utah, Montana,” says Julie Voyles, director of youth services at Rainbow Alley. “We’re the biggest GLBT youth group in the Western states, and for a lot of the rural youth we’re it” (Kennedy, 2003). Other teens follow in Aaron Fricke’s footsteps, although they rarely need to go to court these days. Some of them even run for prom queen or king, and sometimes they succeed. Seventeen-year-old Catherine Balta wanted to be prom queen of Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Nebraska because if her fellow Lincoln High seniors elected her prom queen, it would prove she was accepted. And if an out lesbian could be prom queen, “I just felt it would be something that would be cool for everybody” (“Prom tiara is more than a crown,” *Omaha World Herald*, June 6, 2003, p. 1b), and elected she was, wearing a mismatched tuxedo with a red fedora over her short hair. Brenda Melton, president of the American School Counselor Association told *Newsweek/MSNBC* that “it has become almost commonplace in urban and suburban areas for a student to bring a date of the same sex to the prom — and that in most schools, it’s really no big deal” (Scelfo, 2003).

After Gideon’s mother told me about his coming out, and the reason for it, I offered to tape *Queer As Folk* for him, and I subsequently passed on copies of the program.

The final episode of the first season — the series turned the British eight-episode series into an open-ended soap opera that ran for five seasons — climaxed at Justin’s high school prom. The creators of the program, Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman — two gay men who are life as well as work partners, gave their fictional 18-year-old a prom that would fulfill every queer high school boy’s fantasy. Having gone to the prom with his straight female best friend, Daphne, Justin is surprised when 30-year-old Brian appears, gorgeous in a tuxedo. The crowd clears a space in the center of the floor, the band begins to play “Save the last dance for me,” spotlights shine down on the couple as they twirl and spin, ending in an extended romantic kiss. Immediately following this, in the parking garage, a high school bully comes up behind and hits Justin in the head with a tire iron. Brian knocks the bully out, and cradles Justin in his arms. The season ends with Brian sitting in a hospital corridor, holding a bloodied silk scarf [see video clip by clicking on the image below].



**Queer as Folk (US)**  
**Season 1**  
**Finale**  
**6/24/2001**

Here, in a dramatically effective nutshell, we have the situation of queers in America today. We are able to live our lives openly and fully to a degree that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago, and at the same time we are targeted for gay-bashing, whether in high school parking lots or by Republican and Democratic politicians who wish to deny us full equality as citizens. History may not move as fast as time, but I trust that Gideon will live in a freer world by the time he reaches 25.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>In December 2006, at 18, Gideon was in the cast of a new musical, *Spring Awakening*, that opened on Broadway to rave reviews. Gideon played a gay teen who kisses another boy.



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