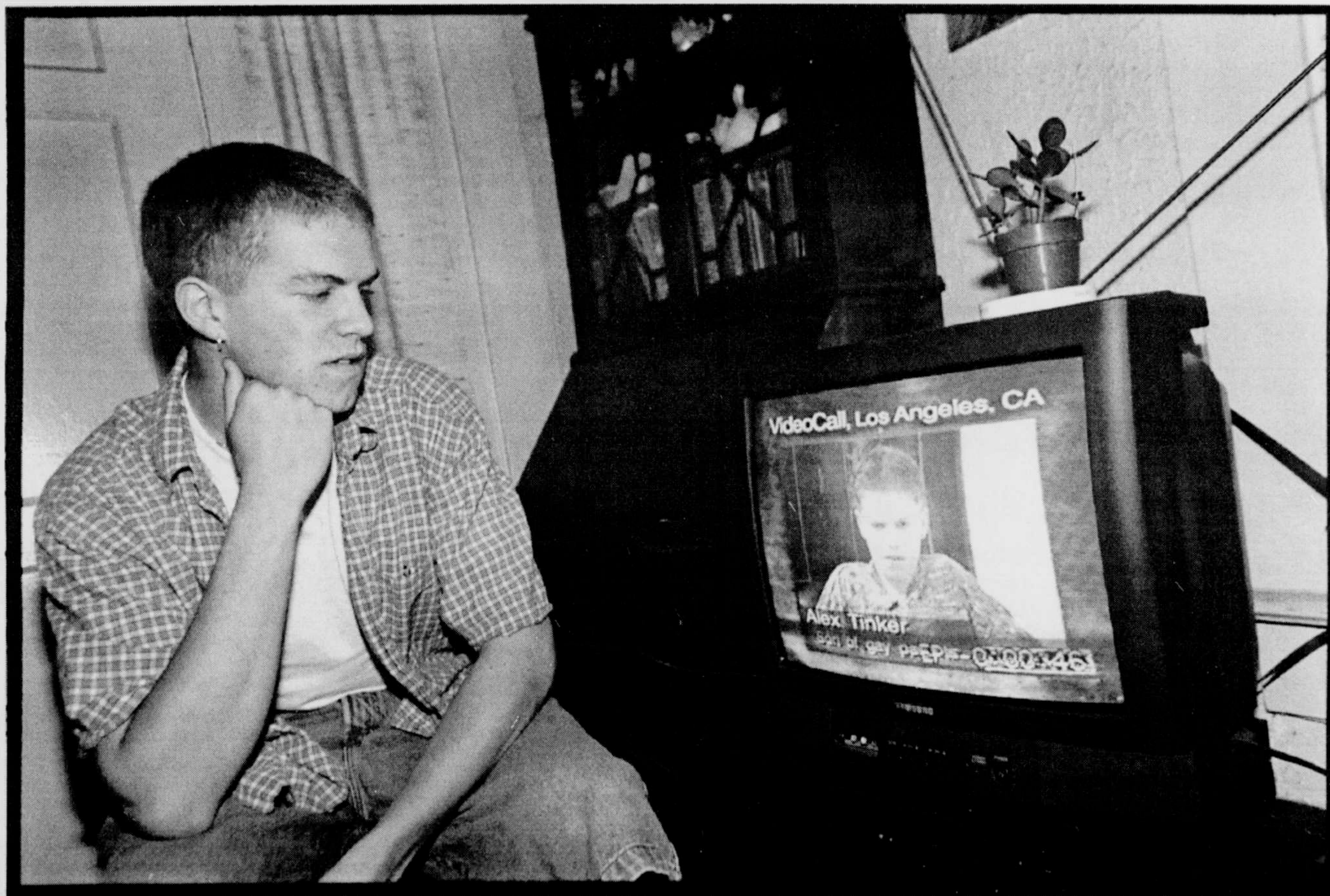


# CAN WE TALK?

Television talk shows: justly-maligned tabloid sensationalism or justifiable tactic to introduce queer issues into the cultural discourse?

BY PATRICK COLLINS • PHOTOS BY LINDA KLIEWER



Alex Tinker's appearances on television talk shows may have been traumatic, but he says he'd do it again if given the chance

Once upon a time, in a not-too-distant past, a grand icon of pop culture promised us something that seems to have been absorbed into the national consciousness: 15 minutes of fame.

Andy Warhol may be dead and gone, but talk television and its distant cousin, talk radio, are apparently here to stay. And what they offer to guests and hosts alike is widespread, public exposure.

Peer into the national salon known as television, and what you will likely find is ordinary lives coaxed and massaged and cajoled into something worth watching. Guests burst into tears, fights break out, faces turn red and the audiences erupt—whether in approval or dis-

gust is anyone's guess. An array of family-based dysfunctions are hot topics for the talkies, as are bad habits, personal obsessions, secret crushes and, of course, the perennial ratings-booster: queers.

Gail Steinberg, executive producer of *Ricki Lake*, says her show was the first not only to include queers but to incorporate them as well.

"Gays and lesbians should be included in a first love reunion show," she says. "Or a show about why my son or daughter wants to drop out of school. There are shows that are specific to gays and lesbians, of course, but there are a number of topics where a gay point of view should be expressed as part of the larger whole. We've been the vanguard in doing that."

Steinberg says she and her staff come up with ideas for shows in any number of ways. Viewer mail is a big source, she says, as are the audience-combing sessions that take place during each taping.

"People's lives are a great source," she says.

People often ask her why someone would go on national television and talk about their personal problems. The reason, says the producer—whose credits include *Donahue*, *Geraldo*, *The Montel Williams Show* and *CBS This Morning*—is elementary.

"When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, everyone had a nuclear family," she says. "People used to sit on the front porch and talk through their problems. That's not available

anymore, so people have turned to television."

She adds: "We're like the electronic neighborhood, and we take people's problems very seriously. Lots of times we've hooked people up with resources in their hometowns."

Bonnie Tinker, a Portland activist who has appeared on a number of shows, including *Ricki Lake*, says, "You hear the criticism that talk shows are sensationalist, but what that means is that they cover topics that shouldn't be spoken out loud."

Tinker hosted her own radio call-in show for four years on a Portland-area station.

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