Reality and Perception of Feminism and Broadcast 1968-1977:

_The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Alison Owings, and the Experience of Second-Wave Feminism in Broadcast News_

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This thesis titled

*Reality and Perception of Feminism and Broadcast 1968-1977:*

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Alison Owings, and the Experience of Second-Wave Feminism in Broadcast News*

by

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Abstract

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This thesis examined the media portrayal of liberation and feminism in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (*TMTMS*) during second-wave feminism and contrasted it with the real-life experiences of Alison Owings, who worked in broadcast news at the same time. Interviews with Owings, Susan Brownmiller (a prominent feminist) and Treva Silverman (the primary female writer for *TMTMS*) were conducted, Owings’s personal files were mined for primary source documents from the period, and numerous popular and scholarly books and articles addressing the impact of *TMTMS* were studied. It was found that Owings’s feminist conscience grew steadily through the 1970s and spurred her to take action to address discrimination against women in her profession. The arc of development of *TMTMS* rose at the beginning with the influence of two burgeoning feminists, Silverman and actress Valerie Harper, but the final years of the show worked to trivialize and contain its limited feminist message.

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The author expressed deep and sincere appreciation for the participation of Alison Owings in this project, she is a talented writer and a gracious hostess. Appreciation is also expressed for the work that she did in broadcast in the 1970s to help open up the field to women and make the profession face up to its biases.

Susan Brownmiller has worked tirelessly on behalf of women, and was most gracious with her time and input in her phone interview. Thanks to Treva Silverman for sharing her stories of breaking barriers in comedy writing that have allowed women to access a field – the field of humor – which was formerly reserved for men (and bearded ones at that).
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Chapter 1 – Women in the Media: Behind the Scenes and Center Stage

Background

The decade of the 1970s witnessed a sea-change in gender role perceptions and relations in the American workplace. Although women had been moving steadily into the workplace throughout the twentieth century, a stereotype persisted in the social consciousness of the nation that the proper place for a woman was in the home. This stereotype was reinforced by television shows such as *Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-66), but from 1960 to the middle of the 1980s the number of so-called “traditional families” made up of a working father and stay-at-home mother with their children dropped from sixty-two percent to ten percent of American households.¹

Drastic changes in women’s position in society preceded what became known as the second wave of feminism. The first wave, or women’s suffrage movement, culminated in national passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which gave women the right to vote in elections.² The shortage of males of working age due to conscription into the armed forces during World War II resulted in an unprecedented number of women taking jobs outside the home, especially in fields formerly reserved for men. During this time, women’s clothing and hairstyles changed to accommodate their more active, professional roles. With the return of the soldiers following the war, women were encouraged to return to the home and once again keep house and care for children.³ There was a push for a return to more domesticated fashions and pursuits for women. Although middle-class, suburban households were not the predominant living unit in the 1950s, they dominated television portrayals of families. Media gave social approval and created value for that particular lifestyle.⁴
The 1950s saw an idealization of the nuclear family in which dad worked, mom stayed home, and their two or three children found everything they needed in the safe embrace of the family and the community. In reality, many women felt stifled by their limited roles as housewives, unfulfilled by housework, and desperately unhappy. Many women felt they had no identity distinct from their families, and some even turned to prescription medications in order to combat tedium and depression. Middle-class women were overeducated for housekeeping and bored with their limited engagement in the world.

Women kept moving into the workplace throughout the 1960s for a variety of reasons. They began marrying later, or not at all, more went through a divorce and had children out of wedlock, and some just wanted the satisfaction of putting their educations to use by pursuing a career. The publication of Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963 gave a name to the malaise that was affecting so many women who were working as housewives or were in low-paying, low-prestige jobs receiving minimal reward. Something was fundamentally wrong with the second-class way that women were treated in society, and women soon followed the Civil Rights movement in demanding acknowledgement of the problem and striving for solutions. The women’s movement exploded into the 1970s and ultimately impacted women across the nation and the world.

The struggle for suffrage was only referred to as the first wave of feminism after the rise of the second wave followed the stir created by Friedan’s book. Women who had agitated for the vote had hoped that other substantive changes would accompany it and had not envisioned the minor effect that such a profound gain would ultimately have on
women’s position in society. In the late 1960s, women still struggled to escape abusive marriages, take out mortgages, hold credit cards, wear clothing suited to their environment, or be seen as serious contributors to the intellectual life of the nation.

Author and feminist Susan Brownmiller shared the manifesto of a group of New York City feminists in a 1970 *New York Times* article on feminism: “Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants and cheap labor. We are considered inferior beings whose only purpose is to enhance men’s lives.”

With representatives of slightly more than half of the population beginning to question the accepted premises of male superiority and female submissiveness, something was bound to happen. The feminist movement quickly broke into two distinct branches: the older working woman who wanted equal opportunity and pay in the workplace, and the younger more radical woman who wanted everything in male/female relationships to change. The first group was represented by the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the other by as many unique gatherings as could summon five or more members. Brownmiller addressed this: “The women who started NOW were achievement-oriented in their professions. They began with the employment issue because that’s what they were up against.”

A two-tiered attack on the status quo became a hallmark of the women’s movement. The first goal was access to jobs, education, and promotions, without which there could be no access to power and influence in the working world. It was understood that more ephemeral changes in perceptions and imaging of women could only occur
after women had gained influence and control within the system to affect content and policy.\textsuperscript{15}

The two objectives spawned two approaches to accomplishing change. In the fight for jobs and equal access, the arena became the courtroom as women sued their employers for sexually discriminatory practices in hiring and pay. NOW also used petitions-to-denial license renewals in order to force broadcasting outlets to hire and promote women and to alter their portrayals of women to reflect a more equal status in society.\textsuperscript{16} On the more personal and interpersonal level, women began meeting to discuss their feelings of inadequacy brought on by being consistently treated as second-class citizens. Lucy Komisar stated in her article on feminism for the \textit{Saturday Review} in 1970: “At the center of the feminist critique is the recognition that women have been forced to accept an inferior role in society, and that we have come to believe in our own inferiority.”\textsuperscript{17} In order to change those feelings of inadequacy, women engaged in a personal practice referred to at the time as “consciousness-raising.” The goal was to become aware of the tools of women’s oppression and to begin to remove the barriers to equality that existed within women’s own heads, such as low self-esteem and acceptance of the status quo.\textsuperscript{18}

While the second approach brought conflict and tension primarily within the home, the first approach (legal action to fight workplace discrimination) took place solidly in the public sphere. Traditionally male-controlled venues were forced against their will to give up a measure of control to the rising wave of female employees.\textsuperscript{19} One of the most entrenched institutions under male control was the media, noted Allan Neuwirth in his history of taboo-breaking television: “From their very beginning, most
 mediums of mass communications have been owned and controlled by men. . . . In the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement began to stir, and suddenly the testosterone-fueled domination of the industry was challenged.”\(^{20}\) It would be an uphill battle to break through the male walls of resistance, and none of it would prove easy.

**Research**

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of a woman, Alison Owings, who worked in broadcast news from 1968 through 1977 and compare and contrast it to her fictionalized counterpart on mainstream, popular television, Mary Richards of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (*TMTMS*) which ran for seven seasons from 1970 to 1977. Sex roles and expectations were changing, and it was a confusing time for everyone involved. On one episode of *TMTMS*, Mary’s neighbor Rhoda admitted to having a date with a stewardess. Mary corrected her by pointing out that males were called stewards, to which Rhoda retorted, “I’m not sexist!”\(^{21}\) Depictions of women were changing on popular television, while changes were slowly being made in the content of news and the treatment of women and their concerns in the news media.

Media is essentially a conventional endeavor, heavily invested in being well-liked in order to gain sponsorship in the form of advertising.\(^{22}\) In the 1960s, while blacks were marching for equality and demanding inclusion in the mainstream of society, they remained minimally represented on television and then only in fairly non-threatening ways.\(^{23}\) Even within the Civil Rights movement, the goal was obtaining equal rights for black men, not women, and female civil rights activists were routinely excluded from high profile events in favor of featuring male leaders.\(^{24}\)
Women came into the media game with a large investment in opening up the job market and securing equal promotions and equal pay, only to meet open hostility, resistance, and occasionally confusion. Men as well as women had been socialized with 1950s’ values. Women were expected to spend no more than a couple of years in the job market and then marry and start a family. In the workplace, the assumption of male superiority provided solid reasons for men to be paid more, promoted over women, and hired into a wider variety of jobs.

Gains were made by women in the 1970s in jobs and promotions, and the second wave of feminism undoubtedly had a great impact on women’s perceptions of themselves and their options in life. Other forces impacted women’s choices as well; access to birth control, abortions, education, and broken gender barriers in formerly all-male careers meant that women could delay marriage and childbirth, plan for having a family, achieve an education that would give them access to top jobs in their fields, and work as firemen and heavy equipment operators alongside men.

What started as specialized women’s programming on television expanded to potentially appeal to people across the spectrum. New television role models were born, some jiggly, such as Wonder Woman and Charlie’s Angels, some less so, such as Maude and Roseanne and Murphy Brown. Young girls began to deride the excesses of feminism as they grew up in a world that seemed to offer them myriad choices and opportunities. The wall had been breached, and the wave had more or less torn it from its foundations.

Or had it? More than thirty years after the struggle for women’s rights the job and media landscapes present a mixed picture. From Mary Richards living on her own and working to support herself in a newsroom to Carrie Bradshaw working as a sex columnist.
for a big city paper and sleeping her way through numerous attractive, available men in
the city, one can ask, “Is this progress?” Was the goal for women to become like men or
to simply have access to all aspects of society on the terms that suited them? In 1963, a
woman made fifty-nine cents for every dollar earned by a man. By 2009, that gap
narrowed to seventy-eight cents to the dollar. That is progress, but is it the end result
strived for by feminists many decades ago? In 2010, Wal-Mart Corporation is facing a
class action lawsuit by 1.5 million women claiming discriminatory hiring and
promotional practices, mostly justified with the same rational from the 1970s; women are
not making a career, just a little spending money.

Sex role stereotypes in the media were one of the primary points that feminists
argued against. Women and men both should be portrayed as nurses, as well as doctors,
on popular television. While there have been numerous depictions of non-traditional
women that have been wildly successful, there is one emotional note that belies the
progressiveness of some of the most recent female-led programming. That is the primacy
of the issue in most of these women’s lives of finding a man. There is a necessary
element of selfishness in the fight for equality of opportunity, but it may have been taken
too far in the depictions of late twentieth and early twenty-first century media role models
such as Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw, who are known primarily for their wardrobes,
their emaciation and their neuroses.

A 2009 study of face and gender emotion found that an angry face was most
likely to be rated as being male while a face showing happiness mixed with fear was most
likely to be rated as female. The expectation persists that men can use anger as a
socially acceptable tool to gain their objectives while women become unfeminine when
using expressions of anger. They are expected to be accommodating, happy with their position, and potentially fearful of causing displeasure or censure. Oddly enough, it was that quality of fearfulness and accommodation that contributed to making Mary Tyler Moore in the role of Mary Richards so beloved by the viewing public of the 1970s right up to the present day.\textsuperscript{35}

So why is it important to study the perceptions and realities of a bygone era in media? History moves forward, but not linearly. It moves in waves, each generation partially defined by their reaction to an earlier one. The gains of feminism are visible all over the western world, and so too are the pervasive throwbacks to a different sensibility. Young girls reading \textit{Wuthering Heights} might find it sappy and hopelessly outdated but think nothing of devouring the vampire sagas of the \textit{Twilight} series in book and movie form, despite the wilting Victorian dependency and helplessness of the main female character. “The more the change, the more it is the same thing,” noted Alphonse Karr\textsuperscript{36}

An ancillary corollary might be that the study of history, while not assuring that it will not repeat, might help in negotiating the ebbs and flows of the process. This is why it is important to examine the experiences of a woman such as Owings, who worked primarily behind the scenes in the news media in the 1970s to impact perceptions and portrayals of women. How were her experiences mirrored and co-opted by the media in the process of depicting the life of a single woman working in news on \textit{TMTMS}? These questions are significant as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century with a major economic depression, the highest unemployment rates since 1983, and more women functioning as the primary wage-earner in households hit hard by downturns in factory production and construction.\textsuperscript{37}
*Research Methods*

*TMTMS* aired from the fall of 1970 to the spring of 1977. The first six seasons have been released on DVD, beginning in 2002, and were watched in order from the premiere to the end of season six. Season seven is not available for mass distribution, so references to episodes from that season relied on synopses provided in *Love Is All Around: The Making of The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Episodes which contained material relating to workplace feminist concerns and male/female exchanges and confusions were transcribed by the author.

Treva Silverman, a writer and occasional executive producer of *TMTMS*, was interviewed by telephone from her home in California on August 16, 2009. The interview was recorded and excerpts of it transcribed by the author. Many of her comments and stories dealt with the larger attitude toward women in the entertainment business at the time that she was writing. Her first professional writing job was in 1963 for Carol Burnett’s show on CBS, *The Entertainer*. While working there she was asked by an aspiring male writer how she had become a variety show writer. On finding out that she could type, he intimated it must have been that qualification that got her the writing job because a woman certainly could not have been funnier than him.

When Silverman was invited to a screening for writers for a new show, *The Monkees*, in 1966, she was the only woman writer amidst 200 bespectacled, bearded male writers. After moving to Los Angeles, she had a writing partner who was male and recalled a major interview where she was asked, “Treva, you write the stories, and Peter, you write the jokes?” Her stories of sexual harassment included being pitched a new series by a married writer, who then tried to hug and kiss her. She flatly rejected his
advances. She also told of a famous network head who watched a pilot that she had written and then turned to face her, put his leg between her legs, and suggested they “get to know each other.” She did not get to know him, nor did she land the job.41

Because TMTMS was pivotal at the time it premiered, there are numerous books and articles that deal with the way it came to be, the experiences of working on the show, and the effect it had on the viewing public. Even after thirty years, articles are still appearing in scholarly journals and popular newspapers referring to TMTMS. The recently released DVDs of the first two seasons included bonus discs with interviews with the writers, producers, and stars as well as several episodes of commentaries that shed light on behind the scenes experiences. Numerous websites about television and television history contain material about the show, and according to the comments on some of the sites, it is still surprisingly popular despite the amount of television that has been produced in the intervening years.

The experiences of Owings’s work in news broadcasting were shared through personal interviews at and near her home in Marin County, California. The interview took place in four sessions over two days and was recorded. Owings had written a couple of newspaper articles and given interviews about that time period of her life for topical coverage. Some of the most valuable resources were the files she had kept of inter-office memoranda, personal correspondence, and personal writings from 1970 through 1977. These were copied and used as primary research documents.

At the time of the landmark WRC-TV sexual discrimination lawsuit of which Owings was a part, media coverage was ambivalent. The suit was decided in favor of the women plaintiffs in 1972 and its effect felt in media organizations everywhere. Not only
were women hired into positions that they had never held before, but so too were blacks and Asians. The lawsuit was studied and written about in feminist writings as well as in more main-stream publications. Over the next twenty years women moved into some of the top positions in broadcasting, especially in front of the television camera, and they wrote about their experiences in newsrooms navigating the hazards of discrimination in the 1960s and 1970s. These resources were mined for relevant material. Articles and books dealing with second-wave feminism and its goals and philosophies also were examined for this thesis.

**Literature Review**

Much has been written about the effects of media representation on society and on society’s ability to affect the representations available in the media. Media has changed considerably since the 1970s with the advent of unlimited time for programming on cable stations, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and increased programming on demand. But the fact remains that much of America gets its information about how the world is and how it works from media programming: talk shows, sitcoms, soap operas, crime dramas, sporting events, advertising, news programs, and comedy shows. In 2000, Elayne Rapping recounted a college student’s admission that he learned news about the world from *Law and Order*, and a large number of young people tune in to Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* to catch up on events. Rapping stated what most social scientists already know: “Television is, quite simply, the most powerful cultural form in history. What it tells us about the world is, for most people, what is taken for reality.”

Todd Gitlin put it this way in his chapter “Prime Time Ideology” in *Television: The Critical View*: “Commercial culture does not manufacture ideology; it relays and
reproduces and processes and packages and focuses ideology [italics in the original].” Gaye Tuchman pointed out that mass media authoritatively communicated the same message simultaneously to all social classes in a one-directional flow of information, much like the church teachings of the Middle Ages. She also credited mass media with performing two tasks: reflecting dominant social values and attitudes, and acting as “agents of socialization, teaching youngsters how to behave.” Therefore, the fact that few women were seen in 1970s television programming reinforced the message that women were not important. Furthermore, since the women who appeared did not seem to be professionally competitive with the men on their programs, the portrayal of these women’s failures moved into the area of trivialization. Judith Lemon’s 1978 content analysis of women on prime-time television found that men were dominant in most televised interactions, including shows that featured a female star.

Although demands for increased representation of women and minorities resulted in higher visibility for those groups, the depictions worked to sanitize and circumscribe any radical aspect associated with either feminism or civil rights. Bonnie Dow maintained: “One of the projects of an ongoing feminist critique must be to examine how women are devalued in the process of cultural representation.” George Gerbner saw television as the common culture and the means to maintain the established social structures: “As such, the main function of culture is to cultivate resistance to change. It functions to make people accept life as good and society as just, no matter how things really are.” This has direct bearing on the study of fictional versus real life experiences of liberation, feminism, and working life in broadcast, and makes some sense of the
extremes of accommodation Mary went to on *TMTMS* in comparison to Owings’s consistent agitation of behalf of women.

In his article, “The Dynamics of Cultural Resistance,” Gerbner discussed the political management of social movements through common culture, which is synonymous with television. The first tactic is resistance to change, and the second is the use of images to reinforce the status quo. Under resistance are the tactics of discrediting, isolating, or undercutting, while images (or stereotypes) are reinforced in order to encourage the isolation of deviants from normal society. This study will be looking at how stereotypes were used in *TMTMS* to discourage deviance, and how Owings confronted stereotypes in her work in broadcast news. The maintenance of the status quo, protection of the standing social order, and the inclination to sterilize and co-opt the least threatening aspects of a movement seeking social change are tools of control.

Gertrude Joch Robinson noted in 1978 that the media went through three phases in the coverage of the feminist movement. It was initially ignored, and then allowed conditional, limited access, and finally trivialized and co-opted. Donna Halper documented this process in her 2001 book, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting*, which discussed the historical coverage of feminism in the media from the 1960s through the 1970s. Second-Wave feminism was launched by the publication of Friedan’s book in 1963, but it was not until 1970 that the first mainstream magazine article on feminism was published.

At the time of the 1968 protest of the Miss America beauty pageant, the media deigned to take notice, and to poke fun. The serious protest involved the discarding of traditional symbols of beauty, including false-eyelashes, curlers, high heels, and bras into
a “beauty trashcan.” The protesters were denied a fire permit and scrapped their original plan to have a bonfire, however, a reporter using the original press release in writing her preview of the event for The New York Post speculated about a potential symbolic “bra-burning.” Thus was born the derogatory epitaph used by the media to describe feminists for years to come. Even Walter Cronkite gave in to expressing his exasperation when he quoted Sigmund Freud on air on the inability to know what women want, despite researching them for years.

The early coverage of the women’s movement was awash in negative stereotypes, from insisting that women couldn’t get along with each other to calling women’s liberationists unfeminine and self-hating. The media fought back against the pressures women’s groups were putting on them to change. Newsweek was sued by forty-six of its female researchers in 1970 for discrimination under the Civil Rights Act, but the media kept insisting that American women were so well off, it was incomprehensible that they had anything to complain about. One Time expert professed that the problem was in encouraging women to attend college. He opined that marriage was made for one and a half full human beings, implying that women should remain the half person for the good of the family.

The International Women’s Year was proclaimed in 1975, but the gains women had made in hiring, promotions, and coverage slowed moving into the 1980s. The women who were hired had no room for error, and the media tended to portray feminism in a negative light. Many women who agreed with equality in the workplace and equal pay for equal work would stop short at declaring themselves to be feminists. By 1980, conservative backlash against the excesses of the 1970s was taking root. The women’s
liberation movement had made gains for women in the workplace, but they were
overwhelmed by the counter revolution which opposed abortion and homosexuality, and
blamed the poor (mostly women) for their plight. In 1986, both *Newsweek* and ABC-
TV did features that warned of the negative cost feminism had incurred on the family,
and on women’s chances of marrying and having a family.

Feminists held that control over naming conventions conferred power; as in
emphasis on marital status (Mr. for men, Miss or Mrs. for women depending on marital
status), emphasis on women’s first names (Hillary for a female presidential candidate, but
Obama or McCain for the males), and abbreviation of a label which changed the
associations with a word and made it cute instead of serious (“Lib” or “Libbers” for
Liberation). The National Organization of Women’s members were particularly
committed to impacting the depictions and references to women in the media, drawing a
meaningful correlation between how women were portrayed in the media and their
subsequent treatment in everyday life.

The second wave of feminism’s resistance to the perception that women were
here to assist and please men ran directly contrary to many dearly held beliefs, and not
just among men. Most of American society had accepted women’s status as second-class
citizens who were reliant on men for everything, particularly their social identities.
They were valued within their narrow roles as wives and mothers, and it was generally
assumed that most women had no interest in the feminist movement of the late 1960s and
Susan Douglas described the media’s attack on women’s liberation:
Time and again the media emphasized that members of the women’s liberation movement were completely out of touch with, hostile to, and rejected by most American women, when, in fact, many women’s attitudes toward feminism were much more complicated and were constantly moving toward support.\textsuperscript{63}

She conceded that pop culture depictions of liberated women were a kind of compromise between opposing factions. They also were a handy and effective tool for managing a revolutionary and threatening movement. \textsuperscript{64}

Rapping felt that women should remember that second-wave feminism “did in fact change the world. . . . Feminists’ attacks on the male-run media . . . literally shook the foundation of the entire industry.”\textsuperscript{65} Owings was there when it was happening, and was involved in several profoundly representative actions with long-reaching effects for sexual equality. Mary was there, too, and she became a beloved symbol of the changes society was going through in the war of the sexes. Neither woman had it all, nor were they perfect examples of liberation. One was behind the scenes, the other center stage. And they both had an impact.

Notes

\textsuperscript{5} Collins, \textit{When Everything Changed}, 16-17.
17 Ibid., 56-59.
9 Horowitz, “Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie.”
14 Ibid., 132.
18 Ibid.
25 Interview, Alison Owings, January 31-February 1, 2009.
26 Interview, Susan Brownmiller, February 17, 2009. Brownmiller recalled, “Our Union Shop Steward actually said to me, ‘You girls are supposed to work here for two years and then get married.’”
18

32 Ibid., 114. Palmer noted, “When women complained about the pay disparity, managers were quoted as responding, ‘God made Adam first’ and ‘Men are here to make a career, and women aren’t. Retail is for housewives who just need to earn extra money.’”

33 See Horowitz, “Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie;” and Orenstein, “What Carrie Could Learn from Mary;” and Rapping, “You’ve Come Which Way, Baby?” 20-22. Horowitz refers to a Time Magazine article from 1998 asking if feminism was dead, “In a satirical play-on-words, the magazine mocked narcissistic feminism with a headline which re-worked the ubiquitous feminist handbook, Our Bodies, Our Selves. It asked: “Want to know what today’s chic young feminist thinkers care about? Their bodies! Themselves!” Rapping stated that media images of women have degraded since the 1980s into strong, successful women with meaningless, shallow, obsessive lives, leading her to lament, “it’s as though we have won the battle, but lost the war.”


39 Ibid., 206-15.

40 Interview, Treva Silverman, August 16, 2009.

41 Ibid.

42 Interview, Owings.

43 See Patricia Bradley, Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 237-38; and Hosley and Yamada, Hard News, 106.


48 Ibid., 13.

50 Stevens, “T.V. as Static as Ever.”

51 Dow, *Prime Time Feminism*, 103-4.

52 George Gerbner, “The Dynamics of Cultural Resistance,” in Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benét eds., *Hearth and Home*, 47.

53 Ibid., 46-9.


59 Ibid., 231.


61 Perlman, “Feminists in the Wasteland,” 413.


64 See Serafina Bathrick, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and at Work,” in Joanne Morreale, ed., *Critiquing the Sitcom: a Reader* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 182; Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 194; and Bonnie Dow, “Hegemony, Feminist Criticism, and The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” in William L. Nothstine, Carole Blair, and Gary A. Copeland, eds., *Critical Questions: Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 103. Dow says this about the process of co-optation: “Generally, hegemony or hegemonic processes refer to the various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses. . . . In this process one protects the dominant ideology from radical change by incorporating small amounts of oppositional ideology.”

Chapter 2 - The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Feminism and Media

Introduction

From its premier in 1970, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show (TMTMS)* was a breath of fresh air on network television. The executives at CBS had realized that the era of slapstick hillbilly comedies was over as the young, expanding, urban demographic began to swarm to television content that mirrored their experiences.¹ And although more women had been entering the workforce throughout the 1960s, you would not know it to turn on a television set. Mary Richards, the main character of *TMTMS*, changed that.

Allan Neuwirth described the process in his book on taboo-breaking television, “Slowly, the image of the ‘new woman’ began to emerge, and she was bright, self-reliant, and every bit the equal of her male counterpart . . . even if she wasn’t necessarily equally compensated.”² Many women watched *TMTMS* because it looked more like their lives than those of a genie, a witch, or the wacky wife of a musician.³ Mary had bad dates, close women friends, occasional bad hair days, and frustrations with her co-workers.⁴ This at least resembled the working woman’s world of the 1970s.

It is enlightening to look closely at the portrayal of women in the workplace that *TMTMS* gave to popular culture. Her place of employment within a journalistic enterprise was telling as media was finding itself in direct conflict with many of the goals of the women’s liberation movement. The first suit filed against a broadcaster under the Equal Employment Act of 1970 for sexual discrimination in hiring and promotional practices was filed against a local station in Washington D.C.⁵ News gathering and reporting was supposed to be impartial, even holding or espousing strong political opinions was frowned upon within the news business.⁶ However, media coverage was extremely
powerful and not just the manner and tone of coverage, but the mere fact of it, could have profound effects on public opinion. This had just played out dramatically in relation to the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War, but the home front had just moved a little bit closer to home. What access or barriers did women encounter when working in the news business? Most importantly, how was the popular media conveying the messages of feminism and women’s rights to the television watching public?

The second wave of feminism was permeating every aspect of life in the 1970s, and the situation comedy was considered by many in the entertainment business to be the “perfect vehicle to reflect what was going on in society,” according to Jay Sandrich, who directed the bulk of the shows. How the show was created, how it portrayed a modern “liberated” woman, the portrait drawn of Mary as a professional woman, and the roles she played at her workplace contributed to the media representation of the feminism that was playing out in society at the time. Much of the humor on the show resulted from the fact that all the rules of the game had changed, and no one was certain of anything when it came to interactions between the sexes.

*TMTMS* was extremely well liked over the course of its run, peaking in popularity in its third season when it was ranked ninth most watched show in the Nielson Ratings, and garnering ratings in the top twenty for five of its seven years in production. It was originally slated to run on Tuesday nights on CBS, opposite the popular ABC show, *The Mod Squad*, and in between *Green Acres* and *Hee-Haw*, a position which might have ensured its early demise. It was the newly hired Fred Silverman who insisted on putting the show on Saturday night where it had a chance of being seen. In its second season it was paired with the more controversial situation comedy, *All in the Family*. Not only
was *TMTMS* popular with young urban dwellers but it reached across the divide and appealed to a wide spectrum of people, including a majority of the twenty-five to fifty-year-old female viewers.\(^{10}\) Critical acclaim for the show came quickly and consistently, in the first year the show won four Emmy Awards for Excellence in television programming and by the end of its seven year run the show had garnered a total of twenty-nine of the awards.\(^{11}\)

*TMTMS* addressed serious inter-gender issues such as the empty nest syndrome, the divorce of Mary’s boss, marital fidelity, equal pay for equal work, discrimination, and sexual harassment. But how did it fundamentally reflect on the feminist movement of popular culture? How did it illustrate the stages of acceptance from ignoring to ridiculing to co-opting the messages of the second wave women’s movement? As Bonnie Dow pointed out in the introduction to her 1996 book, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*, “it is, of course, vital to know ‘what really happened,’ but it is also illuminating to know what popular culture told us was happening: that is, how the ‘meaning’ of feminism was (and still is) translated into public discourses that are being consumed by millions of Americans.”\(^{12}\) What message was the public consuming about the impact of feminism on the workplace, and women’s changing role?

**Background on TMTMS**

The show was created by the Mary Tyler Moore production company as a vehicle for Moore by her husband, Grant Tinker. He brought in two young writers, Allan Burns and James L. Brooks, to produce the show and write the initial episode, and they set about to give Mary a character that would be real, not just a caricature of a thirty-year-old
They also lived in the 1970s, which meant that they were immersed in the spirit of the times, which included feminism. One of them had just gone through a divorce (which was becoming more common), and they wanted to write Mary as a divorcée. That proved too controversial for the network, and Tinker recalled the former president of CBS’s comment: “We program for the people we fly over.” Middle America was largely not divorced at the time, but it was changing demographically. Serafina Bathrick described *TMTMS* as “television’s first serious concession to a changed world where middle-class daughters leave home, earn their living, and remain single.”

Writer Alan Burns commented later that they had “caught that wave that was just beginning to happen, which was all about feminism.” An article in the *New York Times* in March 1970 by Susan Brownmiller admitted, “Women’s liberation is hot stuff this season, in media terms.” In his 2004 book, *Deciding What’s News*, Herbert J. Gans noted that while the 1960s had been about racial relations, the 1970s’ largest division was between the sexes. A large part of the humor that found its way into the show was derived from the uncomfortable juxtaposition of the new demands being made by women on the old ways of doing things. The writers did not intend to be controversial but rather to place a real person into a situation that more women found themselves in – an era where all of these questions of access and equality were being discussed – and then see what came of it.

The vehicle of the situation comedy had been largely static since it grew out of the variety show format and became a staple of radio programming in the 1930s. The emphasis was on entertainment through the use of gags and jokes and situations in a safe, homey environment. The 1970s marked a transition in television toward more realistic
characters, honest debate, and relevant topics. Other shows that premiered in the 1970s, such as *All in the Family* and *M*A*S*H*, were built around characters and challenging events that provided humor and also invited conversation among viewers. The decision to place *TMTMS* in a newsroom was a break from the tradition of family comedies and helped give the show a realistic, contemporary feel, and it has been widely acknowledged that the work family of Mary’s news station, WJM, served to function as the first workplace family on network television.

It must be noted again, though, that it was never the intention of the creators of the show to be overly controversial. A well-known Hollywood axiom of producer Gary David Goldberg, which was quoted in Steven D. Stark’s book on influential television, stated, “A series is like a dinner guest. If you’re scintillating but you open a wound, you won’t get invited back. You must be non-threatening.” The creation of a “liberated” career woman in Mary contained all kinds of caveats. She was not single by choice but rather was jilted by her fiancée, which was sympathetic and not aggressive. She worked a crummy job with no power, and barely scraped by on her salary – except for her extensive designer wardrobe, which would become a character in and of itself over the course of the show’s run. Even the lyrics of the song for the opening credits reinforced how non-threatening and tentative she was:

> How will you make it on your own?
> This world is awfully big, and girl this time you’re all alone,
> But it’s time you started living,
> Time you let someone else do some giving,
> Love is all around, no need to waste it,
> You can have the town, why don’t you take it?
> You might just make it after all. (2x)
Mary was referred to as a “girl” although viewers found out in the first show that she was thirty years of age. Because she was a woman, even at her age we were worried that she might not “make it.” But she “might.” According to TMTMS writer, Treva Silverman, to be single at thirty in the 1970s was to be a “total, untouchable pariah.”

But Mary was just a lost little girl, all alone and vulnerable in a big scary world, not particularly threatening or controversial despite her “liberation.” She would probably get invited back to dinner.

A “non-controversial controversy show” was the description Mary gave to her neighbors, Rhoda and Phyllis, of her documentary about sex in “The Birds . . . and, um . . . Bees” (original airdate September 18, 1971) and that was the theme adopted in the TV Guide coverage of the premiere of TMTMS. Moore was described as a happily married woman and a mother, who portrayed America’s favorite housewife in The Dick Van Dyke Show (1960-66) and would now be performing the role of a liberated, single, career girl in her new situation comedy.

Moore admitted in her 1995 autobiography, After All, that she was never a feminist and had been taken care of first by her father and then two husbands until her second divorce near the end of the run of the show, “I had never experienced any of the situations around which TMTMS had been based.” When she explained the premise of the show to her mother, Moore tried to forestall her objections by explaining that feminism was about women not being taken care of and standing on their own feet. Her mother responded by exhorting her to “just remain a lady, will you?” Her character certainly did remain a lady, as John Javna noted in his 1988 book on sitcoms, “You might call ‘Mary’ a sugar-coated revolution. . . . Mary Richards was a ‘nice girl.’”
One big innovation that *TMTMS* made was in hiring more female writers than any other show of its time. Drama had occasionally been written by women, but comedy hardly ever.\(^{33}\) During the seven years it ran, thirty-seven of the 168 episodes were by women, and in the 1973 season women wrote one-third of the scripts accepted for the show.\(^ {34}\) The breakthrough female writer for the show, Treva Silverman became the first woman to win an Emmy for comedy writing in 1974. She felt immense pressure to be good not just for her own sake, “it was very scary for me, because I kept feeling, ‘God, if I fail, I fail in the name of all womanhood.’”\(^ {35}\) In addition to accepting scripts from women, the producers were genuinely willing to have input concerning sexism in the scripts, and in the first years of the show, the women writing were more and more willing to give it.\(^ {36}\)

**Mary Richards as a “Liberated Woman”**

Liberation was a catch phrase drawn from the feminist movement which described someone who lived on her own and supported herself with her work effectively freeing herself from the direct influence and control of men. According to a paper presented by Jo Freeman in 1970 to the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, *The Women’s Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structures and Ideas*, the first core concept of sexist thought defined by the women’s liberation movement had to do with the relative importance of men’s work compared to women’s work. The second claimed that women’s identities were defined by their relationships to men, and Mary’s choices to live alone and work to support herself placed her outside of her relationships with men.\(^ {37}\)
In the first episode of the *MTMTS*, Mary’s ex-fiancée, whom she had supported through medical school, was dispensed with and she was seen to be helping herself by refusing to settle for an unsatisfactory relationship.\(^{38}\) However, within the episode the emphasis in the women’s discussions centered on her relationship rather than on her new job. When Mary attempted to share the news about her new job as the associate producer at WJM, her neighbor, Phyllis and Phyllis’ daughter, Bess, interrupted her with the juicy tidbit that her boyfriend was coming to visit. That news was most valuable for Phyllis’ daughter, who shared it with another neighbor, Rhoda. How liberated can a person be who continues to be defined only by her relationships with men?

Mary’s new urban world was quickly overrun with other men who vied for her time and attention. Beyond the dates that she frequently went on, her co-workers at the news station were ready and willing to fill in as her authoritative father (Lou Grant), her problem child (Ted Baxter) and her brother (Murray Slaughter).\(^{39}\) The newsroom family that replaced the actual family on traditional sitcoms effectively worked to keep her in the traditional role of nurturer and problem-solver. Julie D’Acci found that the sitcoms of the 1970s “often produced contradictory and troubling representations of femininity and ‘independent’ women, and most of the social issues raised were domesticated – that is, they were represented as contained and resolvable at the level of the family.”\(^{40}\) Mary took the traditional role of nurturer in her dealings with the men at her work. In place of *Leave It to Beaver*’s June Cleaver serving cookies to all the participants in that week’s conflict, Mary comforted distressed characters, smoothed over rough moments and effectively served the function of the old woman while theoretically representing a new woman. She played a role that contained feminism in a safe, sanitized version of liberation.\(^{41}\)
Mary was a default liberated woman still hankering to get married and have a family. When asked by her boss, Lou, if she had ambitions beyond being assistant producer, she answered casually, “Well, you know, just wife and mother.” Marriage was disparaged by Phyllis as “a certain amount of sacrifice, unselfishness, denying your own ego, sublimating, accommodating, surrendering,” but still a state that she would wish on her friend. As a result of disastrous dating, Mary stayed single throughout the seven years of the show and, according to Susan Crozier’s 2009 article, “Making It After All,” she became “that self-conscious phenomenon of liberal feminism, the career woman, by default.”

The song lyrics for the opening credits changed in the second season as Mary settled into her role as a liberated woman and a “career gal”:

Who can turn the world on with her smile?  
Who can take a nothing day, and suddenly make it all seem worthwhile?  
Well, it’s you girl, and you should know it,  
With each glance and every little movement you show it,  
Love is all around, no need to waste it,  
You can have a town, why don’t you take it?  
You’re gonna make it after all (2x)

From wondering how she would make it on her own, to crediting her with most of the good feelings in the world, this “girl” suddenly seemed much less tentative and much more successful. The lyrics assured the viewer that far from possibly making it, she was certain to “make it after all.” Unfortunately for Mary, making it did not include gaining power at the station, equal pay, or even escape from condescension, at least not without a significant struggle. In “I Gave at the Office” (original airdate December 8, 1973) Mary was subjected to serious disrespect by Lou. When she went into Lou’s office with a legitimate concern he addressed her with sarcasm. When she asked him to stop being
sarcastic and take her seriously, he continued being extremely sarcastic. She tried one more time to convince him to treat her seriously and he responded by taking the defensive and accusing her of criticizing him. Her liberation was anything but liberating, and she traded one form of oppression (by her ex-fiancée) for another (by her boss).

It is the nature of situation comedies to poke fun at human foibles. Situation comedy personalizes the real tensions that are a part of everyday life and Bathrick claimed that they “encourage us to ‘fit in’ and even enjoy our efforts at doing so.” Mass media also has been described by Gaye Tuchman as a means of transmitting basic lessons about social life to the masses, in much the same way that the stories depicted on stained glass windows in medieval cathedrals taught values to illiterate peasants. Continuity of transmission of the stabilizing force of dominant values may be even more necessary during times of rapid social change. Feminism may have been permeating the outside social world in the 1970s, but it was too radical a concept for the networks to embrace, much like divorce. With its focus on internal measures of self-worth, feminism called into question commercialism, which was and is the lifeblood of the medium. According to Judy Kutulas, “workplace sitcoms mainstreamed the most centrist version of feminism possible. . . . By modeling an attainable goal, one consistent with capitalism . . . workplace sitcoms, with their mass-market definition of the liberated woman, provided millions of women with a way of being modern.”

Feminism was the ugly step-child of liberation, which was viewed as a clean, wholesome, American innovation with Mary as its poster child. She was the opposite of all that popular culture feared and hated about feminists. Rachael Horowitz saw her as “a
sweet ‘girl’ who was smart and pretty. . . . Not only was she humble and soft-spoken, but
she looked pretty good in a tight sweater, mini-skirt and knee-high boots."51 In fact,
director Jay Sandrich commented in on the 2002 DVD release of the first season of the
show that “Mary’s legs and rear end were famous all over, and we didn’t want to mess
with that.”52 In Where the Girls Are, Susan Douglas stated that television feminism set
clear boundaries between “the acceptable and the deviant, between the refined and
grotesque, between deserving ladies and disorderly dogs,” and feminists were portrayed
in the media “as ugly, humorless, disorderly man-haters in desperate need of some
Nair.”53 Kutulas felt that the media portrayal of feminist ambition clearly elucidated the
sentiment of “I’m not a feminist, but. . . .”54

Although TMTMS opted for a non-controversial version of women’s liberation, it
would never have survived its first season if it had not made the accommodations that it
did. Its likeable, non-threatening lead character helped secure popular acceptance of
alternative identities for women.55 Mary grew in assertiveness through the run of the
show and confronted sexism and job discrimination while experiencing the gamut of the
comedy of errors that arose from the changing social rules governing interactions
between the sexes.56 By season four she petitioned for and gained some power in her job,
being immediately asked to fire the sportscaster, who was a sexual predator and a male
chauvinist. He pushed himself on her physically on the assumption that she had invited
him to lunch to have a romantic rendezvous and then was incredulous that she thought
she could fire him, “No broad is gonna fire Ed Cavanaugh, how about that?” To which
Mary responded, “Ed, you’re fired. A broad just fired you.”57
Gradually through the first four years of the show, changes in attitude occurred as Mary learned to assert herself more in the office, to demand equal pay, and to tell off the Happy Homemaker when she tried to steal Phyllis’ husband. She never left her role as primary nurturer to her newsroom family, and her liberation was defined relative to the traditional place of women in a nuclear family or, in this case, the surrogate workplace family. She may have worked in a newsroom, but in structure it still resembled greatly the traditional nuclear family, and her role remained firmly in the domestic feminine sphere.

She was a product of conditioning and a prisoner of her gender, due in part to her bad luck with romance. Murray stated the unspoken rule in season one of the show, “My wife says married girls don’t like to go around with single girls.” In spite of this, her consistent rejection of obviously inferior romantic prospects made Mary a positive role-model for liberated women. She affirmed that it was reasonable not to settle for deeply flawed relationships just to have one and that demanding fair treatment in the workplace was not unladylike. According to Horowitz, TMTMS “gave radical principles a moderate face, and made single, working life a viable option for everyday American women who watched Mary Richards on TV.”

Mary Richards’s Working Life

Optimistically, the liberation of Mary from conventional female pursuits set an example for television viewing women everywhere to emulate. Realistically, they were already making the choices she faced; pursuing a career before marriage, not settling for less than an equal partner in marriage, and delaying childbearing or foregoing it all.
together. Now, however, “career gals” could see themselves reflected in the popular culture, but the reflection was more than a little disappointing.

Mary was hired in the newsroom of WJM with no experience in broadcast or journalism. Toward the end of the first show, her new boss, Lou, showed up at Mary’s apartment drunk. When she commented that she did not know why he was there, he mentioned that his wife had left town and would be gone for a month.

Mary: Now I know why you’re here. Oh, yes, Miss Associate Producer. He said he’d find something for you to do. You certainly didn’t get the job because of your personality.

Lou: You know, you’ve got a great caboose.

Mary: There it is. You got the job because of your great caboose.

It turned out that Lou missed his wife and wanted to write her a letter, but the seed of doubt was sown. Why did Mary get the job?

Mary commented at times that she knew she served the function of the station’s token woman and sometimes felt that she was succeeding at work based on her personality rather than her skills. Three episodes over the course of seven seasons of shows dealt with her attempts to learn to write adequately. In season four, Lou tried to cheer her up by telling her that he had hired her because she was right for the job and also because she was nice, dressed great and was well-liked. When Mary was suspended from her job at WJM for a mistake that she had made in “Better Late . . . That’s a Pun . . . Than Never (original airdate February 2, 1974), she started to look for other work. She described why one manager rejected her: “He said I was too attractive to have around. He said he thought we’d be too tempted.” It was clear that Mary was an attractive, slender, accommodating version of the single girl, who represented a media interpretation of the
“saleable” version of the liberated feminist of the day. Susan Douglas described how the show “spoke powerfully to women yet domesticated feminism at the same time.”

The typical family of situation comedy was replaced in TMTMS with the workplace grouping. Mary held “a real Ms. job,” according to Rhoda, the kind that Gloria Steinem wanted her to have. It may have seemed that way to a professional window dresser at a department store (Rhoda’s job), but Mary found it difficult to convince many viewers that she was anything more than a “glorified secretary”. Bathrick noted that Mary’s struggle to have an impact on the work at her job rather than just on the newsroom social life left her “separated from the powers of authorship in the newsroom and from the policy-making work that is involved in editing and shaping television news.” When she was finally promoted to producer in season five, the new title came with little else:

Mary: Mr. Grant, let me just get one thing straight. I’m gonna be a producer, but I’m gonna have the same responsibilities, the same job, the same no office and I’ll be doing the very same things I have been doing?

Lou: Right.

Mary: Well, well, well, I hope I can handle it.

Even after being associate producer of the evening news for almost two years, when asked what an associate producer did, Mary was reduced to offering a derivative definition: “Well, it involves a lot of, um, associating.” When she was first hired, she was offered the position of associate producer since the secretarial job that she came to apply for had been filled. She was thrilled with the title, despite the fact that it paid $10 less a week than the secretary’s job. For $15 less a week, Lou offered to let her be a producer. No, she demurred, associate producer was all that she could afford. In season
two, her position in the newsroom as a “token woman” was referred to explicitly.\textsuperscript{76} She felt she was making it on her personality, she was regularly shown off by the station manager as the “woman executive” and even anchorman Ted Baxter, who was not overly sharp, derided her writing ability when she was forced to fill in for Murray during a writer’s strike.\textsuperscript{77}

While Mary may not have had much responsibility, she was valued as a core member of the newsroom family. Toward the end of season one, she found acceptance when she went out for a drink with four men from work and her boss proposed a toast, “It sure is good to be out drinking with the boys.”\textsuperscript{78} While she had a title and a job, she also had a father figure in the rough mannered Lou. Whenever she had a problem or a question, he was there to solve it and he protected her from the world and fixed things when she bungled them. His oversight reinforced the notion that she did not have the skills to do an adequate job at her work but was serving as the station’s “woman executive” for cosmetic reasons.\textsuperscript{79} His constant guidance reassured the viewer that someone male was there to look out for the heroine, who couldn’t really “make it on her own.”\textsuperscript{80}

When Mary demanded a pay raise of $50 a week in order to make the same amount of money as her male predecessor, the raise was not given because she deserved parity but rather because she told Ted off and Lou was amused and impressed by this.\textsuperscript{81} No matter what small gains she appeared to make through her years in the WJM newsroom, none of them came because of her merit. She consistently needed Lou to make it right. A quintessential example occurred in “I Was Single for WJM” (original airdate March 2, 1974), when she insisted on going to a singles bar on her own to do
investigative journalism. A swinging single pushed himself on her at the bar and asked, “What are you afraid of?” She responded, “I’m an adult woman, I’m perfectly capable of taking care of things myself.” At this point, Lou turned to the guy from where he had been eavesdropping on his other side, threatening him, “And if she’s not, I am,” effectively undercutting her assertion of liberated independence and self-reliance at her job.82

As the show progressed through the 1970s, it began to address some of the pressures that working women were experiencing in the real world. Mary wore skirts exclusively for the first two seasons in a northern city in record freezing temperatures. Even when the men she worked with entered the newsroom taking off scarves and hats and galoshes, Mary still came to work in hose and heels.83 When she wore slacks to work in season three, Lou told her, “Mary, don’t wear pants in the office anymore” and was challenged by her for his sexism. He recanted, “What difference does it make what you wear as long as you do your job, right? It was a purely arbitrary, pig-headed demand . . . and yet . . .”84 This struggle against sexism in dress codes was playing itself out in workplaces across the country. In a 1970 article on feminism for the New York Times, Susan Brownmiller described how feminists took jobs at Traveler’s Insurance Company to infiltrate and agitate. They were fired in short order for “such infractions of office rules as wearing slacks to work.”85

On a more profound level, sexist hiring practices were acknowledged in “And Now, Sitting in for Ted Baxter” (original airdate November 13, 1971) as Lou interviewed people to replace Ted as anchorman while he was on an extended vacation. One of the interviewees was a woman, whom Murray assured Mary that Lou would never hire as an
“anchorman.” As Mary defended her boss’ fairness, the interviewee strode out of his office with a look of disgust on her face, again reinforcing Mary’s status as token, as well as her relative acceptance of that status. She did not protest, or discuss with Lou his obvious sexism, and it wasn’t until several seasons later that she began to assert herself with him in minor ways.

At the launch of season three in 1972, the issue of equal pay for equal work was addressed much as it had been in real life in 1971 by the filing of several pivotal lawsuits against news agencies for discrimination. In “The Good-Time News” (original airdate September 16, 1972) Mary determined that her predecessor had made $50 a week more than her even though the newsroom staff admitted that he had been terrible at the job. When confronted, Lou dismissed her obvious anger because he “figured it was one of those woman things.” When asked why her predecessor had made more money, he confirmed that it was because he was a man. It had nothing to do with her work, just her gender. This led to an exchange between them that was virtually textbook feminism. She asserted that two people doing the same job should be paid the same amount of money, and he countered with the excuse that men needed more because they had families to support. She was stumped, but only momentarily, and returned to the office with an “ah, ha!” that echoed those moments experienced by other women in jobs who were paid less than their male co-workers based solely on their lack of dependents. “Financial need has nothing to do with it because in order to be consistent with what you’re saying you’d have to pay the man with three children more than the man with two children, and the married man more than the bachelor, and Mr. Grant, you don’t do that.”
While the staff may have felt that Mary was terrific at her job of associate producer, several episodes pointed to her feelings of being under qualified for her job since she had never trained as a journalist and illustrated her attempts to improve herself by taking writing classes. One of her efforts ended poorly when she received a C+ on a paper from the teacher who was dating her. He told her it was a C paper, but his romantic interest in Mary had influenced him to add the plus. She tried to get honest feedback on her writing from her co-workers, but she was treated like a cute child who could do no wrong, rather than as an adult woman seeking constructive criticism. In Bathrick’s view, she “cannot get either genuine encouragement or fair criticism from any one of them, and this is because she is a woman. The issue of authority is here explicitly related to authorship, and . . . within the institution of journalism, a woman may mediate but not make the news.”

When Lou was promoted to program director in season three the question of his replacement arose. Mary made a point of telling him not to consider her for the job and was roundly taken to task by her neighbor, Phyllis, who said it was her duty to take any promotion: “This isn’t just you reaching to the next plateau, it’s us.” Mary objected that she was not sure being the head of the newsroom was a woman’s job. On the next day she was upset that Murray had been given the position. She asked Lou, “It’s not because I’m a woman, is it?” to which he quipped, “Of course it is.”

When Mary started to receive local recognition for producing documentaries, Lou realized he could no longer ask her to do some of the menial things that he had expected of her routinely in the beginning, such as bringing him jelly donuts every day. When he found the coffee pot empty, she offered to make some, but he declined since she was an
associate producer and “we got this memo from personnel about how you treat women different and don’t give them those crummy little jobs, like women are supposed to do.” When Mary said that she did not mind, he quickly assumed she disagreed with the memo as well. Actually, she admitted, she suggested it.  

**Roles Mary Played**

The role of Mary on a show that bore the lead star’s name illustrated the trivialization of the basic concerns of the main thrust of the second wave of the women’s movement. Mary was shown as liberated because she lived on her own and supported herself through work, but in most other respects, she was an example of how feminism could be co-opted and sanitized, resulting in minimal gains for women in any arena but pay and job opportunity. Some advances were made during the run of the show in the way women’s issues were addressed, but even bigger steps backwards left the show lacking any positive social commentary or forward-thinking portrayals of women by the media.

Mary’s defining characteristic was her acquiescence. She rarely put herself forward, and when she did she was typically put in her place by the end of the episode. When the host of the Happy Homemaker show, Sue Ann, accused her of being “aggressive and unfeminine” by competing with a man, it was funny because Mary was so obviously neither. But that was the precise criticism that had routinely been leveled at feminists. As she gained confidence through the seasons, various rejoinders were used to make fun of the growing feminist movement. The ultra-feminine Sue Ann exhibited extremes of competitiveness as the only other non-secretarial female employee at WJM, criticizing Mary for a competitiveness that Sue Ann herself displayed, “I’m
proud that you haven’t been disheartened by those who murmur that you’ve sacrificed your femininity to your ambitions.” Mary’s femininity was never in doubt, and her reputation for superior fashion sense conveyed a clear consumerist value for women looking to emulate her success.

A recurrent subject for episodes of *TMTMS* was Mary’s numerous boyfriends throughout the series, and a reference to her use of the “pill” in season three implied that she was sexually liberated. According to Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, this was a big part of her appeal to viewing audiences: “Mary was decent and sexually free, a wedding of two traits that made her a modern woman appealing to viewing women of all ages.” Sexual liberation was used in media as a stand in for actual, measurable change in women’s situations. A woman could live independently, support herself, have sexual relations at her own discretion and still be passed over for promotions and paid less for equal – and often more – work. Kutulas described the phenomenon:

> On workplace sitcoms, as elsewhere in the popular culture, sexual liberation became the less-threatening substitute for other kinds of power because it reinforced women’s traditional role as consumers. Liberation became a commodity, fanned by the Virginia Slims cigarette advertisements exhorting “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.”

This pseudo-radical representation of a single, liberated woman actually varied only cosmetically from earlier incarnations of television women. Mary was more of the same nurturing, non-confrontational, nice girl, mother figure with “the best legs in local TV” that had dominated portrayals of women in media since its inception. She represented a clean, wholesome, accommodating, single woman who was mostly willing to put up with the blatant sexism displayed by her co-workers, and indeed, even like them despite it. Feminists may have thought her appearance on prime-time television
demonstrated the profound effect they were having on culture as a whole, but it came to little of substance in the end.¹⁰³

The medium of television thrives on controversy but only the safe kind. It holds a distorted mirror up to society that turns revolutionary thought on its head and ends up reinforcing the status quo.¹⁰⁴ Mary served as the butt of the joke when she was given any real responsibility beyond that of motherly mediator.¹⁰⁵ The result was a confirmation of traditional values and a rigid social order in which women fit neat categories and performed roles that, while moderately expanded to include work, remained extremely narrowly defined and immutable.¹⁰⁶ She may have “made it after all” but she is portrayed until the end of the series as unhappy in her singleness and living vicariously through her workplace family.¹⁰⁷

Over the run of the show, two of Mary’s female neighbors, Rhoda and Phyllis, moved on to their own series. In their place she gained two other women acquaintances, Georgette and Sue Ann, who were extreme caricatures of femininity as defined by males.¹⁰⁸ Rhoda had been insecure but was a firm friend and adventuress at Mary’s side. Phyllis had many faults, but was an involved parent and complicated in her domesticated frustration. Georgette, however, was an extreme version of the accommodating female who wished for domesticity, while Sue Ann spoofed the ultra-feminine woman who fancied herself a sex object and found validation only in being seen as one.¹⁰⁹ Neither of them demonstrated any feminist consciousness at all. That menace had been co-opted and contained, and the last few seasons saw woman – in the person of Mary – effectively put in her place.¹¹⁰
During the last three seasons, Mary was sexually harassed by the anchorman, obsessively adored by the news writer and went on a date with her boss.\textsuperscript{111} One episode in the final season of the show showed all three of those men drinking together and telling their fantasies of marrying her and what married life would be like.\textsuperscript{112} Thus she, and by extension women in general, was returned to her safe role as an object of desire and not of competition.

\textit{The Feminist Conscience of TMTMS}

In a 1970 article on feminism for \textit{The Saturday Review}, Lucy Komisar pointed out the effect that developing a feminist consciousness had on the way women perceived media: “Everything takes on new significance. . . little things that never seemed important before.”\textsuperscript{113} Writer Treva Silverman commented on the 2005 DVD of “the Birds . . . and, um . . . Bees” (original airdate September 18, 1971) when Rhoda asked if a cute teenager was married – in effect making herself look desperate for male attention – that she never would have written that line years later and that by 1974 that was not how women felt about themselves.\textsuperscript{114} Silverman reported that she specifically tried to keep sexism out of the scripts, and the producers were willing to listen to her input and change the scripting.\textsuperscript{115}

Despite this willingness, most of the production staff knew very little about feminism beyond what they had read and seen in the media.\textsuperscript{116} Mary Tyler Moore had the cushions of fame, money and marriage to shield her from job discrimination and childcare scarcity. The one person on the set who had read all of the feminist texts and “had her finger on the pulse . . . of what was going on out there,” according to director
Sandrich, was Valerie Harper, who played Mary’s best friend and upstairs neighbor, Rhoda.\textsuperscript{117}

In the context of \textit{TMTMS}, the character of Rhoda took some of the heat that was typically directed at feminists. Dow claims “much of Rhoda’s positive function in \textit{Mary Tyler Moore} arises from her ability to make the wry comment about a woman’s position that is seconded by Mary but would not originate with her.”\textsuperscript{118} She was overweight and homely, obnoxious and abrasive, a loud mouth who did not know when to stop – all the things that Mary was not. In season one, Rhoda cracked a joke about Phyllis: “If she keeps on the way she’s going she’s gonna give overbearing, aggressive women a bad name.”\textsuperscript{119} The character of Rhoda ended up being feminized through her relationship with Mary; eventually losing twenty pounds, winning a beauty contest, dressing more stylishly, and wearing more make-up. However, Harper constantly watched for inadvertent sexism in scripts and would either suggest that Moore ask that a line be changed or would ask for the needed change herself.\textsuperscript{120}

The characters of Lou Grant and Ted Baxter were written to be sexist, male chauvinist pigs for humor’s sake, but many of the sexist attitudes they expressed were shared by real life men. Ed Asner, who played Lou, admitted in the commentary to the 2005 DVD of the second season that he had been a male chauvinist and worried sometimes when the script that he had to play was written by a woman. He did not feel that women could write men as well as men could, but was not particularly concerned about the opposite scenario.\textsuperscript{121}

In another special feature of the DVD of the second season, “Eight Characters in Search of a Sitcom”, Asner commented, “By my treatment towards her [Mary] I showed
that a male chauvinist is not necessarily evil.”122 This is a poor excuse for refusing to change attitudes and behaviors that substantially and negatively impact half of the human race, but it mirrors the message that the public derived from TMTMS. Women should tolerate and accommodate those lovable sexists at their workplace because, after all, they are not evil. Kutulas stated “sitcoms . . . provided safe opportunities for rebellion but ultimately reinforced the status quo. Thus, women’s challenges on television inevitably ended in amusing failure.”123

Notes

3 Referring to the 1960s’ situation comedies, “I Dream of Jeannie,” “Bewitched” and the 1950s’ “I Love Lucy.”
5 Interview, Alison Owings, January 31-February 1, 2009.
6 Interview, Susan Brownmiller, February 17, 2009.
13 Neuwirth, They’ll Never Put That on the Air, 97.
14 Asner and Gold, “She Turned the World On with Her Smile.”
15 Neuwirth, They’ll Never Put That on the Air, 101.

Curtis, “Love is All Around.”


“Love is All Around,” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 2002 DVD - Commentaries, Season 1, Episode 1.


Horowitz, “Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie.”

Krozier, “Making It After All,” 56.


Margaret L. Finn, Mary Tyler Moore, Actress (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1997), 67.


Horowitz, “Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie.”

Stark, Glued to the Set, 111.


“Love is All Around.”


Douglas, Where the Girls Are, 205.

See Interview, Owings; and Interview, Brownmiller; and Bathrick, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” 181.


“Love is All Around.”


“Thoroughly Unmilitant Mary.”

“Some of My Best Friends Are Rhoda.”


“I Was Single for WJM.”


“Who’s in Charge Here?”


“I Gave at the Office.”

“The Boss Isn’t coming to Dinner,” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 2002 DVD, Season 1, Episode 21, original airdate February 13, 1971.

“Some of My Best Friends Are Rhoda.”

“I Gave at the Office.”

“The Good-Time News.”


“I Was Single for WJM.”


Brownmiller, “Sisterhood is Powerful.”

“And Now, Sitting in for Ted Baxter.”

“The Good-Time News.”


“Room 223.”


“I Gave at the Office.”

Gallery, “Just Some Friends,” 73.

“What Are Friends For?” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 2009 DVD, Season 5, Episode 10, original airdate November 16, 1974.


Newcomb and Alley, The Producer’s Medium, 205.


See Crozier, “Making It After All, 55; and Horowitz, “Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie.”


Bathrick, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” 177-78.

Newcomb and Alley, The Producer’s Medium, 204.

Horowitz, “Mary, Roseanne, and Carrie.”


“Mary’s Three Husbands,” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, unreleased DVD, Season 7, Episode 21, original airdate February 26, 1977.


Neuwirth, They’ll Never Put That On the Air, 115-16.

Ibid., 114.

Ibid., 115.

Dow, Prime-Time Feminism, 46.

“Assistant Wanted, Female.”

Neuwirth, They’ll Never Put That On the Air, 114-15.


Chapter 3 – Riding the Wave: the Evolution of a Broadcast Feminist

Introduction

The 1960s was a turbulent decade in American history. The idyllic façade of the 1950s had cracked open to reveal serious, seething social concerns running through the fabric of political upheaval. A face-off in Cuba, a slain president, a decreasingly popular war, and social turbulence made a busy time for those in news. The drama of the struggle for civil rights, anti-war protests, youth rebellion, and a nascent women’s liberation movement changed the face of TV, radio and print news coverage.

Thanks to the first wave of feminism, women had acquired the vote on the ratification of the 19th amendment to the Constitution in 1920. The second wave of feminism began in the middle of the 1960s around the time of the publication of Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, and built through the 1970s as women organized and agitated for greater equality under the law, equal hiring practices and equal pay. It ended around the time of the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982.¹ The second wave was building as more and more women entered the workforce in the 1960s and found that while they could vote in elections for public officials, discrimination based on sex was routine and the American Dream still did not include them anywhere but in the kitchen.²

Large scale protests, such as the freedom trash can at the 1968 Miss America Competition (where women threw away instruments of oppression such as high heels and false eyelashes) and the sit-in at the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in the same year (to force the changes in the content of the magazine,) were meant to capture media attention and cause people to rethink the status quo.³ However, mass media had grown entrenched in their
way of thinking and were not at all prepared to equitably address the concerns of women. Control of all forms of media were securely in the hands of white, middle-class males, many of whom had little interest in welcoming women into their virtually exclusive “boy’s club.” While high profile events made the women’s movement impossible to ignore, they also tended to invite stereotypical trivialization of what was portrayed as a radical, fringe element of womankind. It would take slow and steady pressure on the part of individuals and women’s groups, along with a good dose of government legislation, to begin to change the composition and assumptions of the white, male hierarchy in media.

Media went through roughly three stages in the process of adapting to and absorbing the messages of feminism -- exclusion, trivialization, and acceptance -- according to Gertrude Joch Robinson’s 1977 study of women and media. Exclusion occurred during the time leading up to the late 1960s as women were habitually confined to very stereotypical roles within the news media and their concerns about discrimination ignored or simply not expressed. They worked as secretaries or researchers and were given occasional positions designing and delivering “soft” news focused on women’s issues.

This is the story of one woman who worked in broadcast news during the trivialization phase. It describes her increasing realization of the sexist nature of the treatment of women in broadcasting, her growing awareness of the need for systemic change, and her transformation into an agent of that change. It was as a result of the work of the early media feminists that trivialization of feminist concerns gave way to acceptance. Those feminists, who were in transition from complacency to directed action, became aware of the necessity of a two-tiered approach to accomplish their goal of equal
representation in the highly visible media world. The first goal was to obtain equal access, jobs, and pay. The second, more long-term and ultimately more powerful, goal was to materially influence the content of the news to eliminate gender bias and accord women and their accomplishments equal respect in the media.

Alison Owings worked in broadcast newsrooms in Washington, D.C., and New York City, from 1967 to 1977, beginning with her first job until her departure to write a book. She was chosen for reasons of accessibility to the author, and because, while not the “first” woman in most of these newsrooms, her story gives insight into the experiences of the few women who were breaking across the gender barriers of the time. It is important to remember that there were numerous individuals who were involved in the difficult process of opening up the media to opportunities for women even as they themselves were attempting to make a living. Ultimately, feminism was about personhood, the full recognition of women as capable, goal-driven, talented, and not always accommodating, people. Not all of these individuals were the first in their fields but all of their efforts were crucial to advancing women’s access to the broadcast media.

This time period saw the cresting of feminism’s second wave as women filed suit against their television stations and print newsrooms under the equal employment regulations of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC). Owings’s own growth as a newswoman mirrored her awakening as a feminist. Her experiences struggling to be allowed to write news, to help other women access meaningful jobs in broadcast news, and to change the media’s portrayal of women as different and less than men, reflected the awakening cultural awareness in the nation of gender-based inequality. She and her
fellow activist journalists helped put the “broad” in broadcast and opened up a new era of possibility for women in broadcast news production.⁸

Owings’s Story

To be a woman coming of age in the 1960s was a heady experience. Owings had been the editor of the high school paper in Berwyn, Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia, and she chose to attend American University because of its location in Washington, D.C. She came to journalism with high aspirations. “I really went into journalism to make the world better,” she said at an interview in February 2009. The options her mother had had at her age were either marriage, or spinsterhood and a likely career in teaching or as a secretary. Owings’ mother felt she might have made a compromise by marrying and raising children, and she expressed regrets.

“[O]ur mother was very, very funny and smart, and she told me once she thought she had wasted her life,” Owings said. She felt that her mother really wanted her daughter to have a chance to get an education and pursue a career, and noted that her parents never talked to her about marriage. It was assumed that she would get a college degree and a job. She spent her junior year studying abroad in Freiberg, Germany, and could not wait to get out into the world. “Marriage to me was a ticket to anonymity,” she said.⁹

Owings graduated from college on a Friday in 1966 and started a job on the following Monday. It never occurred to her not to work to support herself after watching her parents work so hard to put her through college. So she took a job as an editorial assistant at Congressional Quarterly where she was finishing an internship, and within a year she was offered a job as a researcher at the Democratic National Committee. This assumption of her party affiliation took her aback. She had been raised in a moderate
Republican household, but she sorted through the issues in her mind as she considered the job offer. She was against the war in Vietnam, supported civil rights, and her boyfriend was a Democrat. “Ok, I’m a Democrat,” she decided, and took the job. She left within the year because of the Democratic Party’s support for Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War and went to find another job in the Washington area.10

From 1967 to 1969 Owings worked at the ABC television network in Washington D.C. for what was called DEF (Daily Electronic Feed) as an assistant, preparing and sending stories to various local affiliated stations for broadcast. “Women were always assistants,” she said, noting the frustration with the lack of mobility and responsibility in her job which made her feel like a glorified secretary. This was the late 1960s, it was an eventful time to be in news and she wanted to be writing it. She was obedient and well behaved and found herself training her replacement bosses, who were sent from New York to cover when the regular boss was out. She kept pestering him until he finally asked the New York office about letting her write news. Predictably, the word came back, “New York says women can’t write news.”11

Owings remembers the late sixties and early seventies as embodying the vanguard of feminism. Young working women were educating each other about their frustrations with societal limitations and stereotypes of women. Despite this, she recalls wearing the fashion of the day, mini-skirts, to work. “There was a dress code at ABC, and women had to wear skirts, no matter how cold it was,” she said. So she dutifully wore slacks under her skirt to work in the winter and then took the slacks off once she arrived. She recalled the day that another woman came to work in slacks and all the women held their breath. Nothing was said to her about it. The next day Owings herself wore pants to work, and
she remembers being nervous about it, but it went unremarked. Slacks were apparently now acceptable. Change was in the air.12

Owings was bored and frustrated by the limitations of her job and wrote outside pieces for The Washingtonian, hoping to get noticed as a writer. But she recalled enjoying the feeling of being on the inside of the boys’ club at ABC and being treated like a “little sister in mini-skirts.” She did not really think about how demeaning and sexist the male behavior was until later. A female intern at her next job at local station WRC-TV in Washington once complained to Owings about being pulled down into the cameramen’s laps and she told the intern they “were just having a good time” and suggested that she “get over it.” That memory horrifies Owings now.13

She felt that her role at ABC was to provide cute comic relief along the lines of Goldie Hawn on the variety show “Laugh-In.” The men with whom she worked would tease her and play pranks on her, such as the time that they lifted her tiny butterscotch FIAT Spider up onto the curb while she was working. “It was sort-of thrilling to be on the inside, I felt privileged to be in the guys’ club,” Owings recalled. She was cute and a little ditzy, and the guys were not shy about making remarks around her such as “there go four cats in a sack” about a well-endowed woman walking down the street. She may have felt like part of the club, but she discovered over the next few years how little women were truly welcomed.14

In 1967-68, a large engineers’ strike occurred at ABC News, but the studio cameramen told Owings that she should not go out on strike with them. She was not sure how, but they knew how little money she made and they were sympathetic that she really needed it to survive. They even taught her how to run the camera; pan up, down, zoom,
out. She was a scab, with their blessing, and ran a live camera for the Sunday morning news during the strike. She thought, “This is so easy, and these guys are getting paid what?” She recalls having a revelation of sorts, “I worked so much harder than these guys. I remember being shocked at how easy a man’s job was.” She commented on this at the time, but another person pointed out that a cameraman also had to fix the camera if something went wrong. Then, someone else chipped in that a different union did repairs. The job of running a camera really was that easy.15

By 1969, people in broadcast news in Washington were beginning to know who Owings was. She was offered an on-air position at a local PBS station but turned it down to become associate producer of the documentary series “Perspective” for WRC TV, the local NBC affiliate. The other associate producer for the series was a black man, but the rest of the news staff was male and white. She helped produce a documentary on women’s liberation that the producer called “You’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe” in reference to the hotly contested cigarette advertising campaign of the era for Virginia Slims, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.” The controversy was over the use of the word “baby” to describe a grown woman. She also helped produce a documentary focused on soldiers’ protest of the Vietnam War that resulted in her involvement in a former soldier’s court martial, testifying for the defense.16

The most exciting and gratifying piece of her women’s liberation story for Owings occurred inadvertently. She was with George Lindsey, a senior producer for the "Perspective" series, when they decided to stop at the bar, “Off the Record,” in the basement of the Hay-Adams Hotel across from the White House for lunch. The bar is an old institution in Washington, with dark woodwork, a quiet stateliness, and a reputation
as “Washington's best place to be seen and not heard.” Upon entering, they noticed the White House press secretary and a senior Washington Associated Press correspondent talking quietly in a booth. However, the waiter kept insisting on seating them in an ugly, fluorescent-lit anteroom. When they pressed to sit in the main room he told them with no apology, “Women are not allowed in there.” Owings was stunned.

Back at the newsroom an idea was born. A week later a soundman fitted Owings with a large recording apparatus which she carried like a purse, its controls hidden by a large silk scarf she had knotted on the strap and a small microphone was concealed inside her open necked blouse. Then she returned to the bar and again attempted to be seated in the main room. She was extremely nervous because she considered herself well behaved, and this subterfuge was not something that came easily to her. Donna Halper, in her history of women in broadcasting put it this way, “[W]omen historically had been trained to make the best of things . . . a neurotic woman complained, while a good (normal) woman accepted her lot in life with a smile.” There was a point to be made, however, and Owings remembers listening to the tape and hearing her voice crack as she requested seating. She was not recognized and quickly received the same welcome from the waiter, this time on audiotape. The sting operation was a success.

When the program aired on WRC, one of the viewers was a woman who happened to be the head of the ABC: the D.C. Alcoholic Beverages Control board. She was not amused at the policy of excluding women from the hotel bar and threatened it with immediate revocation of its liquor license should it continue the discrimination. It grudgingly changed its policy and sent word to the news station that Owings should never again darken its doorway.
Owings enjoyed her job at WRC and felt she was one of the lucky women who was getting to do something she loved. It was true that few women had good jobs at WRC, but it never occurred to her to be rebellious. She was obedient and well behaved but knew that other women did not have her relative status in the station. The majority of them were secretaries and there were some in sales and personnel. “Personnel was a graveyard for women,” she recalled. Then, Secretary’s Day arrived and one of the women from the personnel department came around and put a single rose on each woman’s desk courtesy of management. Owings declined the flower, explaining that she was not a secretary. The woman replied, “Well, that’s all right, you’re a woman.”

Owings is still confused about why men were so slow to hire and promote women. In 1969, the station had hired its first female reporter, Cassie Mackin, who was constantly harassed for the way she dressed and other things she did not do like “the guys” did them. There were no guidelines for women in the newsroom, they were making it up as they went along and struggling mightily just to have a chance to prove themselves. Patricia Bradley’s 2003 book concerning media’s effects on feminism noted: “In its 1973 figures, the FCC found that 22 percent of commercial station employees were women, but just 6 percent of them held jobs in high-paying categories. Of the women employed at commercial stations, 75 percent were employed in office and clerical jobs.”

Owings recalls that there was egregious sexism against the women who wanted to join a union, and many jobs were posted as “Men Only” positions despite federal legislation that banned that practice. Furthermore, women were often not informed of job openings until the position had already been filled by a man. When a job in press and
publicity was vacated by a woman at WRC, several female employees “pitched for the position” to the department head only to be told that “he would have to fill the position with a ‘professional,’ who would be a man.” Bradley put it this way, “For most women broadcasters, to be a female in the business was to work the hardest, be paid the least, and to be treated with ridicule.”

In 1970, several female employees at WRC conducted a survey of the women at the station, and the results were signed off on by forty-four women. The women then presented their concerns to the management about the sparse hiring of women, their lower pay scales, and the limited opportunities for advancement. One of the leaders of this group was Mary Catherine Kilday, a preppy, proper, Catholic girl, who looked conservative but who harbored radical tendencies under her pressed wool suits and matching purse and pumps. In a 1999 article in the *Washington Post* memorializing Kilday Judith Mann wrote, “Mary Catherine and Alison Owings barely knew each other. . . . Kilday mentioned that the 50th anniversary of women’s suffrage was coming up and that it would be good to look at how women were faring at WRC. Owings agreed. It was a moment that would revolutionize broadcasting.”

Owings attended the main meeting with the male management and later circulated a “famous” memorandum castigating the higher ups for their put-offs and belittling of the women’s concerns. She felt that the female employees had been ladylike and reasonable, and yet they had been basically ridiculed. She was becoming less likely to accept sexist treatment and was starting to realize that if something was going to change she was going to have to do it: “Being denied a seat at the bar kind of led to other actions.” Her report on the meeting with the management of WRC was dated October 6, 1970, and addressed
to all female employees. It infuriated the station manager.32 One manager was quoted in
the memorandum as saying that he;

would not admit to any discrimination at the station and said repeatedly
‘if’ any exists. . . . He said there are ‘undoubtedly areas in which there can
be increased female participation,’ and said later regarding women in
traditionally men’s jobs such as stagehand work, there might be some
female judo graduates who’d qualify.33

Mann wrote, “They met with management and found hostile stonewalling. ‘The
situation kept getting more and more inflamed,’ said Owings. ‘What they never
understood is we would have settled for common courtesy and decency and fairness, and
they seemed to think we wanted everything.’”34 Owings remembers the male managers
becoming more intransigent as the women began speaking their minds, which, in turn,
made the women angrier. She later wrote to a friend, “[W]ith me, (as opposed to Mary
Catherine, who never wavered) there was an initial amount of doubt about what we were
doing. We were all cautious, and Lord knows, I was too.”35 After numerous discussions
among the women at the station, they made plans to move ahead.36

Kilday retained Gladys Kessler as legal counsel for the lawsuit that became a
landmark in the fight for women’s rights. Kessler later became a district court judge for
the District of Columbia, but Owings remembers her in her white go-go boots and pink
nails helping them prepare their case. Everything for the filing of the lawsuit was done in
absolute secrecy and planned to perfection as an example of how women could work
together given the right motivation. The day and time for serving papers were chosen
carefully and support from the National Organization for Women (NOW) was in place.37
Bradley noted that “women in news organizations large and small risked their careers by
participating in internal women’s committees that agitated for change by all means necessary – from meetings with management to lawsuits.”

Mackin was torn about participating in the class action lawsuit because she was one of those who had supposedly “made it” by becoming a reporter at WRC. NBC took this opportunity to promote her to the network, but she saw through its ploy. She told Owings that she felt the company was using her by promoting her as a token female, and she worried about her job, but she threw caution to the wind and signed on to the lawsuit anyway. Mann noted, “Women were scared of losing their jobs, their influence and promotions. . . . ‘Once you became known as a feminist . . . you did not have the same opportunities to advance as you did before. There was a real price to be paid by the women who had the courage to put their names to those charges.’” However, there was a “collective sense of purpose,” according to Owings. The wave was cresting, and it was hard to resist the ride.

On March 2, 1971 Owings and Kilday used their lunch break to serve papers to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC), and the Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC), charging WRC and NBC with job discrimination based on sex. It was “really thrilling” by Owings’ account, “I was trembling . . . we knew we had done something nice girls don’t do, but we felt it had to be done.” As they zipped around town in her Spider, their lookouts from NOW were stationed on street corners with instructions to deliver the news releases at 1:00 p.m. to all of the major news outlets in Washington. They made it back to work and acted as though nothing unusual had
happened. “It was the best lunch hour of my life,” Owings enthused. The phones started
ringing within minutes of their return.42

When the news hit the station, the men were dumbfounded. They had just
discovered that their kittens had teeth and claws, and they were not afraid to use them.
Newswoman Marlene Sanders recalled, “[W]omen were supporting each other to find a
public voice to advocate change. Women were starting to discover the power of
collective action.”43 The article in the Washington Post detailing the sex discrimination
lawsuit filed against WRC appeared on page 48 in the “leisure section” of the paper on
March 4, two days after the actual filing and press release.44 Meanwhile, the lawsuit was
all over the airwaves that evening, and there were denials of wrongdoing from
management. “Noblesse oblige,” Owings called it. The unions had been specifically
targeted for their exclusionary policies, but they were used to being the good guys. It was
unexpected, and they were caught with their pants down.45

The lawsuit was settled in January 1973 in favor of the women, requiring the
station to change its discriminatory hiring and promotional practices of women and
blacks. By this time, Owings had taken a job offer from local station WNBC in New
York City and moved to Greenwich Village, even though she was suspicious of the
network’s motives in promoting her because of her involvement in the lawsuit. In New
York, she worked as a news writer, associate producer and reporter at the local television
station for two years and was responsible for bringing Kilday, who had spearheaded the
WRC lawsuit, to the station to be an outside agitator and tell the story of the WRC action.
The women at WNBC were highly receptive to the story and decided to file their own sex
discrimination lawsuit, which WNBC settled out of court agreeing to give back pay to
underpaid female workers and start promoting women. Owings was proud of being the “active agent” in the second lawsuit, even though she felt in the end that the women had gained more financially and less in terms of increased hiring and promotion.  

Owings loved the craft of reporting and writing the news, but she was not from New York and had little interest in its local news. She learned that CBS was hiring through a female acquaintance, a producer of the *Today Show*, and jumped at the opportunity to return to network news. She was hired at CBS to work as a pool writer for whatever show needed her. During her four years with the network she wrote fairly consistently for the mid-day news with Douglas Edwards and the weekend news with Dan Rather. But she also found herself writing for Bob Schieffer, Charles Kuralt, Ed Bradley, Morton Dean, Hughes Rudd, Roger Mudd, and Walter Cronkite. Owings recalled preparing for her first time writing for the *CBS Evening News* by reminding herself, “What’s 20 million viewers, more or less?” The senior news writer, who had the national beat, strolled into the newsroom on her first day writing for Walter Cronkite. He looked at her, paused, and said in a low tone: “A woman has no place in a newsroom.” She made it through that first day and many more times writing for “Walter” as she was asked to call him, but there were moments of self-doubt.  

This was the era of Affirmative Action, and Owings was never quite sure if she was in the newsroom on her own merit. The difficulty in hiring based on quotas is combining skill and training with race and sex, and she had seen it go badly wrong in several cases. Sally Quinn was tried out as a co-anchor for the network morning news in 1973 with great fanfare and publicity only to fail spectacularly. Owings felt Quinn had not been trained for the job and was not surprised that she did not last long. She later
wrote, “On a public level, you didn’t want to mess up and taint All Womankind. And on a private level, you never were convinced you were hired because you were good.”49 She also remembers a male Chinese-American reporter who was “dreadful.” All of the networks were lining up to fill their quotas in any way they could.

Owings had suspicions when she realized she had been hired as a news writer at a network news station but had never been asked to take a writing test. She also knew that CBS was the only network that had not been sued for sex discrimination. She later wrote, “I occasionally wondered if I had been hired as a sop to the sisters at the barricades.”50 So, she took her courage in hand and approached the executive producer, Sandy Socolow, who had hired her, and asked him if he had been under pressure to hire a woman when she applied for the new writing job. He admitted that yes, there had been some talk about having a woman writer, but added that everyone was “glad you worked out.”51

According to Owings’ recollection, in the 1970s women’s liberation was everywhere and it was a great time in network news. The men who ran the network were all married with children and generally lived in the suburbs, and the younger women were generally unmarried and lived in the city. Putting together a newscast was a flurry of activity and often the workers would go out for a drink afterwards to wind down. It was a “very supercharged atmosphere.” During Vietnam and Watergate, there was a collective sense of purpose among those working in the newsroom; things were changing rapidly and it was exhilarating to try to keep up.52

Owings began to make a name for herself at CBS as the resident feminist. She had sent a memo while at NBC, suggesting that it discontinue the use of “Mrs.” from descriptions of women in their news stories, and she wrote a proposal for a weekly
women’s program that would focus on topics of interest to women, such as employment, finance, child raising and education.\textsuperscript{53} In July 1973, she wrote to the \textit{New York Times} sports editor, suggesting it refer to female athletes by last name only.\textsuperscript{54} She had become one of the activists who, as Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons wrote in \textit{Taking Their Place}:

[D]eveloped other strategies to pressure managers in print and broadcast media to reevaluate news and feature coverage – and advertisements – to determine if they offered fair, non-stereotypical treatment of women as opposed to diminishing the contributions of women and their influence on society.\textsuperscript{55}

Now working at CBS, she began questioning some of the assumptions typically made by the male writers and anchors.

In a letter to CBS producer Bud Lamoreaux on May 25, 1975, Owings responded to charges that she took “an advocate position on some news stories” on two different references to female newsmakers:

I recall once objecting to a piece Sandy Polster had written about Golda Meir, when she was still Israeli prime minister. His second reference to her was ‘the 78 year old grandmother. . . .’ He and [news editor John] Merriman finally agreed that Meir’s grandmotherhood had very little to do with her address to the Knesset, which is what the story was about.\textsuperscript{56}

She likewise questioned Rather’s second reference to the first woman who climbed Mount Everest as a “wife and mother.” She wrote, “Sir Edmund Hillary would not, I’m sure, be referred to as ‘husband and father’ in that manner, and that’s my point: the unequal manner in which newsworthy men and newsworthy women are treated.”\textsuperscript{57} She said she was “gentle but stubborn” in her efforts to raise the consciousness of sexism among her fellow workers, even in the face of their anger and accusations.
When writer Anaïs Nin died in 1977, Owings informed the newsroom of her death but Scheiffer and the other men in the newsroom teased her that no one knew who Nin was. She felt vindicated when another woman, an assignment editor, ran into the newsroom and shouted, ‘had they heard the news of Nin’s death?’ Now, with a confirmation that the death was of interest, Schieffer capitulated and included the story in the broadcast.58 Kilday’s message in her first anniversary note of the WRC lawsuit had become a part of Owings’ sensibilities:

Also, let us not forget, as we fight for the rights due us by law and justice, that we work for a very powerful medium. And this medium, through its situation “comedies,” newscasts and commercials (as well as through its hiring and promotion practices) is contributing daily to the stereotyping and subjugation of all women.59

On Saturday evenings Owings would go home after working on the “CBS Weekend News” and relax by watching the “Mary Tyler Moore Show.” Moore’s character, Mary Richards, was working at a local news station in the series, but Owings found that she had more in common with her than a career. Both had their own apartments, a job in news (although Owings was unclear what Richards actually did at the station beyond run errands for Mr. Grant and type), and other single girlfriends. In fact, living in New York City, Owings joked that she had “lots of Rhodas” in her life. She especially liked the character of Ted Baxter and had known a few local anchors who were similarly foolish, however, it was the character of Murray that Owings identified with the most. She saw him actually writing stories and running interference between the news anchor and the rest of the world, and that looked a lot more like her life than Richard’s did.60
After four years at CBS, and despite accolades for her script writing for “Vietnam: A War That Is Finished,” Owings was beginning to feel “a bit like a cog.” It was 1977 and she had been developing an idea for a novel about feminism and adultery and wanted to leave the country and try her hand at being a writer. She was involved in an unhappy romance and did not seem to be going anywhere in her career - - “I was never tapped . . . the air was getting kind of thin” - - and she had to make her own way. Notice was given to the network, but she did not tell anyone that she was leaving, with the exception of Cronkite. She remembered sitting in his office and reciting her carefully rehearsed speech: “I don’t want to do that which will get done if I’m not there to do it.”

Owings moved to Spain and rented an old farmhouse from a German woman who shared her stories of living under the Third Reich, precipitating the writing of her first book, *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich*. She eventually settled in California after returning from Spain, met and married her husband, Jonathon Perdue, currently works as a freelance editor and writer, and is doing research and interviews for a book on Native Americans. She went back to New York City for several years in the late 1970s and early 1980s on a freelance basis to write news for some of her former anchors, including Kurlalt, Rather, and at NBC, for Tom Brokaw.

Her home in Mill Valley, California, looks back at the skyline of San Francisco, where she’s spent the last thirty years. But she still talks about her days working in broadcast news as though they were yesterday. That time seems to have been crucial in forming the independent, fair-minded, and still ladylike woman that she is today. Her worldview was formed in the crucible of second-wave feminism, which touched many young working women’s lives and changed them irrevocably:
I found 2 main issues that kept me going, unalteringly, I could say. One was that unless you believe in reincarnation, there seemed to be no way a woman would ever be, say, a video tape editor or stage manager or prexy [sic – colloquial for president] of NBC news. And since we all presumably have but one time around, that unjustness really made a difference. Secondly, we were not a private, closed, just-us-and-the-stockholders industry. We had influence going into the proverbial millions of living rooms. We were The Press. . . . Freedom of speech and all. And we had an obligation, therefore, to be accurate, to report not only the news, but the whole sociological gamut, and said gamut, we knew, did not mean emphasizing the broads (the commonest word in television newsrooms) and exploiting The Woman.  

**Implications**

One of the effects of the resurgence of activist feminism in the 1960s and 1970s appears to have been a generation of women who chose career over family. Sanders wrote, “Those struggling with the issue now are part of the first generation of TV newswomen who were brought in when the FCC added women to the Equal Opportunity rule in 1971. They have often delayed having children or did not have any at all because of the intense struggle to prove their worth in the workplace.”  

Owings remarked that many women that she knew in that time period never married or had children, because “women were determined to have good jobs” and sometimes family was not something that they prioritized. She noted that the next crop of working women began to address the question of how to balance family and work. CBS producer Joan Snyder remarked in a lecture, “If you did go somewhere where there might be an opening, they would say, ‘You’ll only get married and run off.’ And you would practically have to take a vow of chastity and obedience.”  

Herbert Gans noted in 1979, “If the primary national division featured in the news of the 1960s was between the races, that of the 1970s has been between the sexes.” Society in general was forced to adapt to a new sexual sensibility as a result of the
introduction of the birth control pill and the legalization of abortion. The parameters of liberation were by no means easily set. Women were growing up with different expectations than those of their mothers but finding themselves thwarted in their ambitions for meaningful work and career advancement.

Susan Brownmiller, a writer and well-known feminist, worked as a researcher at Newsweek in 1964 and recalled being told by her boss, “You girls are supposed to work here for two years and then get married.” She was hired at ABC News in New York City as a news writer in the late 1960s but admitted to feeling stymied there. “Guys said strange things like, ‘You’re lucky you have a man’s job.’” But she did not feel lucky, she felt frustrated and out of place. She was one of the replacement bosses sent down from New York to oversee Owings’s at ABC, the one who first encouraged her to ask for more opportunities and challenges from her work. They are still friends today.68

New ideas or movements have a difficult time making the impression on the media that they would like to have. According to Robinson, the study of media access allows the process to be broken down into three general stages; including ignoring or excluding, remarking and trivializing, and accepting and co-opting. She further stated:

[T]he media in any society have at least four general functions, among them to purvey basic societal values that tend to support existing viewpoints and institutional structures. This tendency to harmonize differences and mold a common outlook is as often as not achieved by not reporting what are perceived as deviant outlooks rather than according them mention in the public discussion agenda. By filtering out the new, the controversial, the challenging, conflict is dampened and change is slowed.69

The feminists of the time were aware of this problem. At first they could not get any media coverage, but when it came, it was not unbiased or respectful. Halper noted, “[M]en commentators were often snide or sarcastic in coverage about the new women’s
liberation movement. . . . Women did not rip off their bras and burn them. . . . Yet the mainstream media would persist for years in making the women’s movement synonymous with angry women who burned their bras. It is little wonder that most feminists refused to talk to the press, even shunning the female reporters sent to cover their sisters. Often women who did not support the movement were converted by the process of exploring the issues and writing about the struggle for equality.

The process of changing the way women and women’s issues were covered in the media was a slow one, brought about partly by the pressure of women working in media to re-examine stereotypes much as Owings had done at her stations. Most feminists realized that it was a two-part struggle: first get the jobs and control and then it would be possible to attempt to change the content of the messages. According to Halper, the media did not give up without a fight:

The coverage of the women’s movement frequently used terminology like “extreme women’s libbers” and “radical feminists;” it implied that certain angry women were manipulating impressionable younger women (after all, a common myth was how easily led women were) and imposing rage and hostility where none needed to be, since after all, most women did not really want to be “liberated.”

It would take years of gradual change to have an impact on the portrayal of women’s liberation and legitimate women’s concerns. Simply according women the serious consideration reserved for the exploits of white males was not immediately possible. Beasley and Gibbons noted the discrepancy, “Whereas reporters had examined the political message underneath the Yippie spoofs, they just glanced at the surface of the women’s actions and used them to illustrate how silly women were. The press treated women’s liberation much as society treats women – as entertainment not to be taken seriously.”
This struggle for respectability was predicted by the women who were fighting sexism in the workplace, and they saw clearly that media did not seriously address women’s issues partly because women had no presence or power. Owings remarked on reviewing it that the *Washington Post* had placed their article about the sex discrimination lawsuit at WRC in the leisure section, probably because the paper didn’t know what to do with serious news about women. In 1970, as these issues of influence and control of media and media portrayals were being discussed seriously among women, one of the women at WRC wrote a perky little parody piece to celebrate the 50th anniversary of women’s suffrage that congratulated the executive editor of the *Washington Post* on his forty-ninth birthday. It was written in the non-serious, condescending style often used to feature women in news, and the author commented that Mrs. Bradlee “appreciates the extra effort he [Mr. Bradlee] takes to maintain his youthful looks and figure despite his busy, busy day.”

Gladys Kessler, the lawyer who represented the women of WRC in their sex discrimination lawsuit, commented on the occasion of Kilday’s death, “In hindsight, I see more clearly how correct she was about the link between hiring and programming. You now see programs on family and children’s issues you would not have seen twenty or thirty years ago. That’s because you have women employed throughout the hierarchy of television.” Owings put it another way:

> [A]t first we concentrated on the old talk-about-what-effects-them-most approach. Jobs and job opportunities. It wasn’t until their consciousnesses were raised about their own discrimination that the slightest inroads were made into the issue of TV’s and radio’s product. . . . Perhaps had an earlier emphasis been put on the product, it would have had more effect on it, but all in all I doubt it. Unlike newspapers, where it’s not that difficult to set up guidelines . . . the TV bureaucracy is almost out of reach unless you control it. I’m talking about soap opera content, decisions on what kind of
news stories to cover, as well as saying “gals” on the air. So maybe today jobs, tomorrow the network, is the only way.76

The final stage, or acceptance and cooptation of feminism is arguably still going on or has melded into third-wave feminism. Women and women’s issues are very visible, and second-wave feminist Brownmiller is pleased to be able to turn on MSNBC and watch a competent female news anchor, Rachel Maddow, sitting down with female experts in many different fields for intelligent and informative discussions on numerous topics.77 In the early 1990s, television sitcom journalist Murphy Brown chose to have a child out of wedlock, which set off a reaction by conservatives spearheaded by then Vice President Dan Quayle that filled the White House switchboard and the nation’s news outlets with rancorous discussions of the single parenthood “life-style choice.”78 Sex in the City has taken the idea of a “liberated” revolving door of love and sex to the point of absurdity and still left its heroines wanting something more.79 The women of The View are catty, brisk, ribald, and even sometimes risqué in the name of delving deeply into the issues and events of the day.80 Have women achieved full integration? They are certainly more visible. Their concerns are being discussed. They hold more, though not an equal number of, positions of power in the media. And many of them could not begin to imagine what it took to step outside of the bounds of acceptable, ladylike behavior and take on the status quo. As Owings recalled, “We knew we had done something nice girls don’t do, but we felt it had to be done. The station was aghast. They felt betrayed, and we wanted to say, ‘Well, you wouldn’t listen to us.’”81

The efforts of the women of broadcast appear to have born fruit in the form of more opportunities for women in media and more coverage of topics of interest to women. The second wave of feminism fought trivialization by the established order in broadcast news, and the women of WRC were deadly earnest when they had shared their
survey with the bosses: “We are approaching this topic with the utmost sincerity and seriousness, and are hopeful that we will be received in a similar fashion.” Their hopes were not immediately realized for the kind of equal job satisfaction that men were experiencing. Those gains would take more time and a gradual shift in the composition of the newsroom and media in general. The use of lawsuits and dogged persistence in effecting change and moving into a phase of acceptance resulted in a new dynamic for working women beyond the media. This was the enduring and long awaited news, the inclusion of the “broad” in broadcast.

Notes

7 Elliott Parker, “Riding the Airwaves,” at https://ls2.cmich.edu/cgi-bin/0A2=AEJMC;ehz47w;19961209110631-0500 (accessed on January 11, 2009).
8 See Alison Owings to Lucy Komisar, n.d., in possession of the author.
9 See Interview, Alison Owings, January 31-February 1, 2009; and David H. Hosley and Gayle K. Yamada, *Hard News: Women in Broadcast Journalism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987), 119. The authors describe Jessica Savitch’s attempt to find work at Ithaca College’s radio stations, she was told no, and an appeal to a faculty advisor brought the response “there is no place for broads in broadcasting.”
10 Interview, Owings.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
18 Interview, Owings.
19 Ibid.
21 Interview, Owings.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
26 Interview, Owings. Owings related that she knew a woman who said that this included a suggestion by one shop steward in New York to one would-be audio engineer that she would get a job if she'd have sex with him.
28 Bradley, Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 225.
30 Interview, Owings.
32 Interview, Owings.
33 Memorandum, Alison Owings, “To: All Female Employees; Report on Meeting with Management,” October 6, 1970, in possession of the author.
34 Mann, “Risking a Career to Transform a Workplace,” C15.
35 Alison Owings to Lucy Komisar, n.d., in possession of the author.
36 Interview, Owings.
37 Ibid.
39 Interview, Owings.
40 Mann, “Risking a Career to Transform a Workplace,” C15.
41 Ibid.
42 Interview, Owings.
45 Interview, Owings.
46 Ibid.
Ibid.


51 Interview, Owings.

52 Ibid.


54 James Roach, Sports Editor of New York Times to Alison Owings, response to her letter, July 9, 1973, in possession of the author. Response reads: “We have given much thought to using only last names, male or female, but we haven’t gotten around to it yet. We have a style book and the style calls for the use of Miss Goolagong or Chris Evert or Mrs. King. When a person becomes sufficiently famous, we sometimes make use of the first name. A writer will refer to Miss Goolagong as Evonne or to Willie Mays as Willie. Perhaps I am wrong, but I think most of our readers would find it jarring to have us use simply Court or Evert or King.” That was much the same rational for keeping women off air in radio – that listeners would not respect their voices, when audience surveys showed no such preference for male voices over female.


56 Interview, Owings.

57 Alison Owings to Bud Lamoreaux (cc: Dan Rather), May 25, 1975, in possession of the author. Owings went on to say, “I just think the arbitrary clichés tend to stereotype women, and CBS.”

58 Interview, Owings.


60 Interview, Owings.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Alison Owings to Lucy Komisar, in possession of the author.

64 Sanders, *Waiting for Prime Time*, 17.

65 Interview, Owings.


Memorandum, “To: Some Women; Turning Tables,” no author, November 13, 1970, in possession of the author. The full text is worth reviewing for contrast between the way that women’s news and men’s news was typically communicated. “The 50th Anniversary of women’s suffrage was also the birthday of Benjamin Bradlee, the Post’s executive editor. In recognition of this sounding juxtaposition, some members of the Style section have prepared the enclosed news bulletin – Ben Bradlee, slim, attractive but complex executive editor of the Washington Post is 49 years old today, but he doesn’t look it. How does he manage to combine a successful career with the happy homelife he has created in his gracious Georgetown home? In an interview today, pert, vivacious Mr. Bradlee revealed his secret. He relaxes after a day of whirlwind activity of the newspaper world by whomping up a batch of his favorite pecan-sauerbraten cookies for his thriving family. Father of seven, youthful-looking Mr. Bradlee quips, ‘I enjoy working for the Washington Post, but every family needs a strongly based home life. Sometimes,’ he sighs, ‘I almost wish I could work part time. After all, the public’s trust in the newspaper is great, but all my azaleas are dying.’ What does Mrs. Bradlee think of her debonair husband’s flair for journalism? ‘I think it’s great,’ she said. ‘Every wife should let her husband work. It makes him so well rounded. Now he has something to talk about at the dinner table.’ She appreciates the extra effort he takes to maintain his youthful looks and figure despite his busy, busy day. Mr. Bradlee loves his work, but he is aware of the dangers involved. So far he does not feel that he is in competition with his wife. ‘When that day comes,’ he says with a shudder, ‘I’ll know it’s time to quit.’ Mr. Bradlee’s quick and easy recipe for pecan-sauerbraten cookies appears in tomorrow’s bulletin.”

75 Mann, “Risking a Career to Transform a Workplace,” C15.
76 Alison Owings to Lucy Komisar, in possession of the author.
77 Interview, Brownmiller.
81 Mann, “Risking a Career to Transform a Workplace,” C15.
83 Interview, Owings.
Chapter 4 – Mary Richards Compared to Alison Owings

Introduction

Television is virtually ubiquitous in modern American culture with the majority of homes having at least one set and many homes having more sets than people. With the average consumption of television in America growing from three hours to about five hours a day in the last forty years, television images have had an impact on how people perceive the world around them. Beyond entertainment, Americans learned important social lessons from mass media. News media, as well as entertainment media, constantly present a version of reality that directly influences viewers’ construction of reality. A bias has been demonstrated among heavy television viewers toward believing that men are more likely to make news, more involved in world events, and more worthy of attention. And the predominance of men as reporters, writers and editors helped define news programming according to widely held stereotypes about subjects of interest to women, despite evidence to the contrary.

The golden age of issues television was undoubtedly the early 1970s. Hillbilly comedies and suburban family sitcoms of the 1960s were replaced with situation comedies that appealed to growing, affluent, urban audiences. Situational comedy was a way to broach sensitive subjects without engaging in possibly alienating preaching. The Mary Tyler Moore Show (TMTMS) was the first workplace comedy, and it was non-threatening because the title character was single, feminine, and accommodating even if she was liberated in lifestyle. It spoke to young, female viewers without confronting the core issues of feminism. As Kutulas saw it: “The difference was crucial, for liberation
was gender-neutral, consumer-friendly, and built community. . . . Liberation, thus, was safe enough for television, while feminism was not.”

*TMTMS* was not created in order to advance a point of view. It was a star vehicle for Moore, and the youthful writers happened upon an idea that had great resonance in society at the start of the 1970s: liberation. Women were “making it on their own” in the world of work, and journalism had been an area where – in limited numbers – women had been succeeding for decades. Although Mary worked in news, it was at a low-rated station in a mid-western city in the far reaches of America. The news that WJM reported on a daily basis was not world-shaking or faith-shaking, and the characters of the show had freedom to pursue friendships and relationships outside of the world of work. Thus was the workplace family of *TMTMS* born.

Alison Owings grew up in the 1950s and 1960s with the wholesome, non-threatening, family-values television shows common in those days. With the encouragement and high expectations of her parents, however, she aspired to an education and a career rather than a marriage and motherhood. She was part of a growing movement of women who chose a career and liberation over dependence on males for their subsistence. During her years in broadcast, she was influenced by the burgeoning women’s movement, encounters with other women who were frustrated with the status quo, and her experiences of discrimination in the workplace. She felt that she was progressing in her career, but she advocated on behalf of other women who had not had her opportunities. Society was changing rapidly, and women like Owings became instruments of change in the context of a medium which reached most Americans on a daily basis: the news.
In the 1970s, televised news was vitally important to a nation still reeling from an internal struggle with civil rights, a losing war in Vietnam, multiple political assassinations, and the shadow world of political ambition. Owings admitted that it was a heady time to be in the news, and keeping the public informed felt immediate and important. The newsroom staff were comrades-in-arms who reported, wrote, and announced the news in a rapidly changing world and under intense pressures, and strong bonds were forged in the newsroom crucible. She felt that the relationships she formed in that intense environment were some of the strongest of her life.¹¹

**Similarities**

*TMTMS* was clearly created to entertain while broadcast news had a different mandate. However, both influenced the perceptions of viewers in significant ways. Although women already made up 30 percent of the workforce, Mary’s appearance on prime-time television codified a woman’s choice to live alone and pursue a career.¹² Owings’s first forays into journalism began immediately out of college when she shared housing with other single girls in the Washington, D.C. area. Mary lived in her own efficiency apartment with another single girl as her upstairs neighbor. Owings felt she was playing the part of the ditsy, cute, blond while working at ABC direct electronic feed in the late 1960s, and she enjoyed her status as one of the guys and a “little sister in mini-skirts.”¹³ Mary was pleased to be referred to as one of the boys in her first year working at WJM news when she went out for a drink with her co-workers after the news broadcast.¹⁴ Women were entering areas they had been excluded from in the past, and it was a new and exciting feeling to win inclusion into a formerly exclusive world.
Mary landed a job as associate producer of the news at a local Minneapolis station and Owings took a job as associate producer of documentaries at WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. Both women appear to have been hired partly on the basis of gender, although Owings’s qualifications made her a good candidate for her job. She and the other associate producer of documentaries were the only woman and only black man involved in the production of the news at the station when she began work. Mary was the only woman in the newsroom, and the WJM weatherman, Gordy, was the only black man at the station. The issue of racial stereotypes was gently mocked in “Assistant Wanted, Female” (original airdate November 21, 1970) when Mary’s neighbor Phyllis took a job at the station and regularly assumed that Gordy was the sportscaster because he was big and black.15

Both Mary and Owings typically wore skirts to work in 1970 despite cold winters and snow.16 Both women challenged the dress code convention for women by wearing slacks to work, Owings in the late 1960s and Mary not until 1972.17 One of the big stories of women’s challenge to the traditional right of organizations to mandate apparel came in 1970 when pantsuits became popular. A manager at CBS sent a memorandom insisting that female employees not wear slacks, which prompted virtually all of the women at the station to come to work on the next day in pants. The story made the New York Times and the rule was rescinded.18 This trend was referred to humorously at the beginning of season three in 1972 when Lou told Mary not to wear pants to the office and was chastised for his sexism.19

Owings commented repeatedly in interviews for this thesis that she was always polite and hard-working. Even when she started to push for women’s employment, equal
pay, and advancement, she remained polite but firm. Mary’s trademark quality was her
politeness and accommodating manner, but she also learned to assert herself for issues
that she felt were important, such as equal pay for equal work. One of her related
characteristics was her nervous laughter whenever she ventured out of her comfort zone,
which was often. Owings recalled taking a tape recorder into an all-male bar in the Hay-
Adams Hotel for a sting operation highlighting sexism and later listening to her voice
break on the tape because she had been so scared of being discovered in her spying.20

One of the most radical elements of TMTMS turned out to be the relationship that
Mary formed with her neighbor, Rhoda.21 They spent numerous nights at home together,
going on bad dates together, supported each other through various work and family-
related upsets, and talked about everything. Female leads of shows in the past had been
dependent primarily on their husbands for this kind of support, and even the late 1960s
female-led comedy show That Girl depicted the lead as reliant on her fiancée and
father.22 This assumed dependence was what feminists were combating when they
recommended that women form groups to support each other and share their experiences
in order to learn from them.23 Mary’s relationship with Rhoda was unique on television,
and it drew fans in droves. Not only were they both living alone and supporting
themselves, but they were talking about it and laughing through the rough stuff. This was
revolutionary.

Owings had a similarly supportive relationship with Mary Catherine Kilday, who
had been brought up properly and dressed conservatively but was interested in pushing
for rights for women. She co-owned a house with another woman in Washington, D.C.,
which was unusual at a time when women typically had difficulty obtaining a mortgage

or a line of credit. Kilday initiated the actions at WRC-TV in Washington that led to the 1971 filing of a lawsuit for discrimination in hiring, promotions, and pay. Owings and Kilday filed the suit and the latter was brought to the local NBC station in New York several years later by Owings to organize the women there to take action against their stations for discrimination in hiring, pay and promotions.\(^2_4\) One of the criticisms leveled against feminists by men was that women were unable to work together.\(^2_5\) However, when the WRC lawsuit was filed, Owings and Kilday worked with members of the National Organization of Women (NOW) to strategically position them outside of all of the local news outlets with press releases about the filing. At one o’clock, just minutes after Owings and Kilday returned from their run around the city to file the suit, the press releases were delivered and the phones at the station started ringing. This was a good example of how women could work together given the proper motivation.

Another common perception that both Mary and Owings encountered in their working lives was that women did not know what they wanted. The real problem was that women wanted things that they had not been permitted to have in the past, and this set up strong tensions. Lou expressed his confusion about the women’s movement when he discussed his wife’s plans to go back to school:

**Lou:** Imagine my wife wanting to improve herself by going back to school. And at her age [43]. She doesn’t want to be a housewife anymore. So what is she taking in college? Home economics. She’s going for her masters, then her PhD.

**Mary:** Mr. Grant, that’s terrific. What’s the matter with that?

**Lou:** Well, for one thing, I don’t want us to be introduced as Mr. and Dr. Grant. Women, they don’t know what they want.\(^2_6\)
Actually, his wife was pretty clear about what she wanted, but it was at odds with what he wanted and what he had come to expect of women and women’s roles. Lou’s refusal to acknowledge his wife’s wants was a factor in their divorce later in the show’s run. In referring to the women’s liberation movement, Walter Cronkite went on record citing Sigmund Freud’s famous quote that even after studying women’s souls for thirty years he still did not know what women wanted. This was a common problem in the debate over women’s rights. Many older, privileged males declared that women had it easy staying at home and being taken care of, while many women felt torn because they agreed with the points that feminists were making but did not want to be seen as radicals. Lou’s wife told him that she wanted to be something other than just a wife and mother. Owings’s mother expressed regrets about being a housewife. Both women had spent most of their adult lives being defined by their relationships to their husbands and their children.

Mary was a fashion icon in her time, modeling many of the latest fashions especially in the early days of the program. Her wardrobe was chic, close fitting, colorful, and flattering to her slim figure. Even with a burgeoning consciousness of the unfair burden put on women to be all things to all people, fashion was still immensely important, especially in the workplace. Owings recalled that everyone, even the women who were thinking about feminism, wore tailored, fashionable clothing to work. She remembered an exquisite pair of wool slacks that she bought when she worked in New York City and speculated that she might still have them in storage. Women who looked good and wore nice clothing had an easier time being accepted by the mainstream establishment, and consequently, of having their input heard. Gloria Steinem became the
popular media go-to feminist over other less well-groomed women, precisely because she was attractive and well dressed.30

Both Mary and Owings crossed picket lines, Mary during a union workers’ strike at her news station and Owings during an engineers’ strike while she was at ABC. Owings was encouraged to continue to work by the strikers since she made so little money that it would hurt her too much to stop working. It was as a result of crossing the picket line and learning to run a camera for the news segments that she began to comprehend the discrepancy between women’s work and men’s work as well as between relative compensation.31 Mary was called “a dirty, rotten scab” by Rhoda but persevered in crossing the picket line full of her co-workers and friends because it was her job as a member of the management at the station. Murray made an interesting comment on the way that media presented union actions when he asked: “Why are we always the heavy? It’s always ‘management’s offers’ but ‘union’s demands.’” Ultimately, the show ended humorously when Mary wound up holding Gordy’s picket sign while he defended her against other union hecklers who were insulting her. At one point during the strike, Mary had to step in to write the news, causing Ted to moan, “That girl’s no news writer” to which Lou responded, “Ted, it all balances out.”32

Both Mary and Owings fielded sexist comments in the workplace. Owings was told “women can’t write news,” overheard the comment “a woman has no place in a newsroom,” and, when another woman was hired as a writer at CBS, heard a man comment, “here comes another one.”33 Mary was called “the best legs in local television,” sexually harassed in the workplace, and told that she had mistakenly hired a girl to do a boy’s job,
**Ted:** Mary, what did you do? How could you make a mistake like that?

**Mary:** What mistake?

**Ted:** The new cue card boy. Didn’t you realize she was a girl?

**Mary:** Yes, Ted, I did. She was quite candid about that during the interview.

**Ted:** But everyone knows it’s not a girl’s job. That’s why they call it a cue card boy. . . . Come on, Mary, have a heart. I can’t work with a girl cue card boy. . . . I don’t feel right when I make certain kinds of jokes during the commercial break when a girl’s around.

**Mary:** Well, Ted, if you don’t feel right, then don’t make them.³⁴

Mary and Owings confronted the issue of equal pay. Higher pay for men was considered justified because they had a family to support and women did not need as much money.³⁵ When first hired at WJM, Mary asked to be given something to do: “I’d like to be a little bit busier.”³⁶ Owings was bored and frustrated at ABC as an assistant and wrote freelance articles on the side.³⁷ Both women chose to remain behind the scenes in their respective newsrooms. Mary showed herself obviously uncomfortable in front of a camera in one episode, and then appeared incompetent when she auditioned for an on-camera news segment.³⁸ Owings turned down an on-air position at the local public television station in Washington, D.C. when she took her job at WRC.

A major theme in much of the feminist literature of the time centered on women serving as hard-working examples and breaking down barriers not just for themselves but for “womankind.” The primary female writer for *TMTMS*, Treva Silverman, felt that her rise in the field of comedy writing put pressure on her to succeed for womankind.³⁹ Mary was a reluctant feminist whose housewife neighbor, Phyllis, pressured Mary to try for her boss’s job in “Who’s in Charge Here?” (original airdate September 30, 1972). Mary
demurred that she was not sure if being the head of a newsroom was a woman’s job, but Phyllis insisted it was her “duty as a woman to take whatever you can get.” She claimed that there was no such thing as a woman’s job or a man’s job but was flummoxed when she asked Mary and Rhoda to name a job that a woman could not do and Rhoda quipped, “Female impersonator.”40 When Mary did not get the job because she was a woman, Phyllis found it an “affront to all womankind” but Mary admitted to being glad that she did not get the job because Murray was “absolutely miserable.” Phyllis responded, “Yes, and it’s always a man who gets those opportunities.”41

Owings commented she felt that she pushed for women’s rights for the good of all women, not just herself. She found herself in a position to have some influence on how the news was being presented, and she made every effort as “resident feminist” to change the standard way of presenting women and women’s concerns.42 In a 1997 article for the *San Francisco Examiner*, she recalled, “Being a news-writing woman in the 1970s was a lonesome and emotionally precarious situation. On a public level, you didn’t want to mess up and taint All Womankind. And on a private level, you were never convinced you were hired because you were good.”43

The issue of why both women were hired for their jobs comes up more than once. In “Love Is All Around” (original airdate September 19, 1970), Mary was hired as associate producer, even though Lou had thought he would hire a man for it.44 Was there pressure to hire a woman into management? Or would the unglamorous position of secretary not do for a sitcom starring a major talent? Either way, Mary was referred to as a token woman more than a few times through the run of the show, and since she had no background in journalism, the inference was that she was hired for her good looks, her
“spunk,” and her gender. Lawsuits for sexual discrimination in hiring and promotions had already visibly hit Newsweek and Time, and many broadcast stations were under great pressure to accommodate the FCC’s anti-discrimination policy by hiring women and minorities. Mary was exhibited as the station’s “woman executive,” she was asked to do an on-air editorial because the station manager had “been under a lot of pressure to use women on the air,” and she was interviewed by the local newspaper’s television columnist precisely because she was the only woman in the newsroom.

When Owings was hired at WRC, she was the only woman working in the newsroom. Later, when she moved to the NBC station in New York City she was one of just a few women at her level. She was hired as a pool writer for CBS news without a writing test, which she later realized and questioned. CBS was the only network that had not been sued for discrimination, and its top management set a tone that encouraged affirmative action in hiring women and minorities. Owings had her fears confirmed when she asked her boss if they had been specifically looking for a woman when she was hired, but she went on to prove her skill and her worth as a member of the newsroom team.

Owings recalled the perils of affirmative action, which sometimes resulted in people being hired who were not good at their jobs, specifically Sally Quinn, who was hyped as the new, female anchor at CBS, and then bombed spectacularly. Savvy Rhoda suggested that women could fail as well as men: “What if ‘us’ does a rotten job and gets herself fired?” Mary attempted her own ground-breaking on behalf of women when she hired a female sportscaster over the objections of her boss. Unfortunately, the swimmer
whom she hired refused to cover violent sports such as football and ended up being fired by Mary.51

During her four years at CBS News Owings often wrote for a mid-day news segment hosted by Marlene Saunders which ran five minutes and was titled, “News with a Woman’s Touch.”52 In the fifth season of TMTMS, “A Girl Like Mary” (original airdate December 14, 1974) featured the introduction by WJM of a short editorial piece on the evening news titled “News From a Woman’s Point of View.” When Lou proposed the new addition, Murray and Mary pointed out that every other news station in Minneapolis already did a similar piece, but auditions still were held for the on-air woman’s position. The newly hired host of the segment chatted with Mary at the end of the show and they agreed to go out for drinks. When Ted walked through the newsroom, the new woman greeted him, “You probably don’t remember me.” Lest anyone think that Ted was only sexist, he responded almost without looking at her, “Of course I do. You’re the black one.”53

The pressures of feminism were felt at Owings’s stations and at the fictional WJM newsroom setting of TMTMS. Owings went through great changes from her beginnings as an assistant at ABC when she did not mind the playful teasing of the newsroom boys to being the resident feminist at CBS News, who questioned the second reference to the prime minister of Israel as a grandmother. Mary’s changes were smaller, more personal, and ultimately more acceptable within the context of a conventional medium. Her character was partly influenced by the events of the early 1970s, the mood of feminism that was in the air, her friendship with the outspoken and opinionated Rhoda, and her occasional struggles against discrimination at her job.
She took particular delight in the advancement of women, especially in the face of the obvious chauvinism displayed by her boss and the station anchorman. In “What Do You Do When the Boss Says ‘I Love You’?” (original airdate February 3, 1973), WJM hired a new station manager. Lou asked his name, and Mary replied with a smile, “His name is Barbara Coleman.” In “Lou’s First Date” (original airdate November 3, 1973), Lou asked Mary who won the broadcaster’s “Man of the Year” award. On hearing it was Lucille Harris, he surprised her with his remark, “Lucille Harris, Man of the Year. Good choice.” But Ted demanded, “Who stole the award from me this year?” and was confused by her answer. “That sounds strange . . . I wonder why his mother called him Lucille?” and then speculated that perhaps he was gay. On being told Lucille was a woman, Ted was relieved, “I’d much rather have a woman be Man of the Year than some guy named Lucille.” Mary’s rebellions were minor, such as suggesting a memorandom about treating women less subserviently, while Owings’s had profound impact long after she was gone.

Much of the feminist sensibility of TMTMS, as muted as it was, came from actress Valerie Harper and writer Silverman. Their arcs of change resembled Owings’s in progressing more and more deeply into a committed relationship with the women’s movement and a dedication to change. The enlightenment on feminist issues that Harper, Silverman, and men and women all over the country were gaining informed the development of Rhoda’s character over the first four seasons of the show, when she left to have her own show. She developed confidence and stopped looking to marry any man who crossed her path. In the commentary for “The Birds . . . and, um . . . Bees” (original airdate September 18, 1971), Rhoda asked about an eighth-grade friend of Phyllis’s
daughter, “Is he married?” In the accompanying commentary by Silverman, she stated, “I never would have written that line years later, by 1974 that wasn’t how women . . . felt about ourselves.” Thus, while Mary and Rhoda both outgrew their initial hankering after matrimony, Owings admitted to never wanting to marry for fear that she would become anonymous.

**Dissimilarities**

The most striking difference in the experiences of Mary and Owings is that one is history and one is fiction. It has been pointed out that the way social changes are portrayed to the general society has a profound impact on the extent of their impact. Owings’s name is known to a few people, especially those who worked with her in broadcast, but Mary’s name still rings bells for most people over the age of forty as well as many younger people. She is the quintessential image of the liberated woman of the 1970s, and it is telling to see how the messages of workplace feminism were translated into television.

Mary worked at a low-rated, local news station in a mid-western market. She had opportunities to leave, being offered a higher status and paying job at another station in one episode and receiving a suspension in another. Both times she chose to stay at WJM for the camaraderie of her workplace family, actually bursting into tears while begging Lou for her job back in “Better Late . . . That’s a Pun . . . Than Never” (original airdate February 2, 1974). In “WJM Tries Harder” (original airdate January 5, 1974), she dated an anchor from a bigger, more successful local news station and realized that her own station’s quality was deficient. Owings started at a national news service, where she was bored and underutilized, and then progressed to producing local news documentaries.
in the nation’s capital. From there she moved to New York City and local news before taking a position writing for a major network that was highly respected for its news. She preferred to work in national news since she was not from New York and had little interest in its news. Mary only left WJM in the last episode when she (and everyone but Ted) was fired, preferring to stay with her “family” instead of taking higher-paying or more challenging work. Owings left her position with CBS news when she started to feel “a bit like a cog” and found the air getting thin.

Owings had studied journalism at American University and always had a passion for writing news. Mary did not finish her college degree, and it was never made clear what she had studied while there. Owings had training that prepared her to write, produce, and edit news, while Mary was given duties that resembled those of a secretary, ordering paper clips and fetching coffee. She even did her boss’s laundry when his estranged wife refused. Owings was a respected professional who may initially have been hired at CBS for her gender but who earned the respect of the people around her. Mary was most likely hired for her gender but had to fight for every bit of responsibility and respect that she received. Several episodes focused on her attempts to learn the craft of writing, but she never succeeded. It was a running joke on the program that Mary might be a producer, but she could not write; perhaps she was just making it on her personality, as she once speculated. Other factors may have included her willingness to do laundry, solve romance problems, and order donuts for the newsroom staff.

Owings was an active agent in the filing of two lawsuits for discrimination, one against the local Washington, D.C., station and one at a local NBC affiliate in New York City. At both stations she felt that she had a good job with a measure of prestige but was
taking action on behalf of the other women, who were stuck in personnel and working as secretaries. Mary seemed to accept her token status at the station as a fact and did not challenge Lou’s refusal to consider a woman as a temporary replacement for Ted. She enjoyed the notoriety that went with her status as the only woman in management and only challenged the status quo when it became clear that it was affecting her personally, as in the case of pay or producer duties.

Mary’s minimalist rebellions mostly dealt with personal issues: her choice to have a job, live alone, date a variety of men, sleep over with some of them, and gently tease Lou and Ted for their sexist assumptions. Owings’s rebellions had an impact far beyond her work world. The sexual discrimination lawsuit at WRC was a national landmark in the struggle for recognition of system discrimination. Gentle pressure on her co-workers for coverage of news of interest to women in a manner that was gender neutral changed attitudes and impacted the way news was written. Owings also used the power of the media to effect change in the larger community by forcing the sexual integration of a Washington, D.C. institution, the bar at the Hay-Adams Hotel. Mary made the journalistic sacrifice of going to jail to protect a source, but her action had no impact outside of its effect on herself and her co-workers.

The act of naming confers great power. During the twentieth century, there was a transition from a formal form of address as the norm between co-workers of different stature to a more informal use of first names. Mary insisted on calling her boss Mr. Grant throughout the series. There were occasional attempts on her part to call him Lou, typically when she was trying to assert herself, but they always ended with her uncomfortable laugh and a return to tradition. She explained it to an interviewer this way,
“I could call him Lou if I wanted to, he just seems more of a Mr. Grant.”
Although she saw him through a divorce, frequently had him over to her house, set him up on dates, and even dated him once, Mary continued to afford him the position of respect and power that addressing someone with a title and their surname implied. Numerous references during the run of the series reinforced Lou’s relationship to Mary as a father figure, particularly a figure of authority and control.

Owings recalled that on her first day as a replacement writer for Walter Cronkite’s CBS Evening News, “after hearing me pipe ‘Mr. Cronkite’ more than once, he muttered, ‘Walter’ to me.”
Thus, on her first day of working with a giant in the world of television news she was on a first-name basis with him. And although some of the other workers did not feel that she belonged in the newsroom, she worked on an equal footing with them.

Owings admitted to having had “lots of Rhodas” in her life when she lived in New York City. When the news day ended, most of the men would catch a train home to the suburbs and their families while the single women would go out for dinner or drinks or meet up with a boyfriend. However, her best friend in New York was married and she maintained contact with several of the women with whom she worked even after leaving New York.
In a MTMTS episode written by two men, Murray told Mary that his wife said married women did not hang around with single ones. While that may have been a common perception of the nature of women’s relationships, Owings’s experience was otherwise.

Rhoda was the kind of friend whom you could count on and talk with about anything. After she left at the end of season four to start her own show the quality of
Mary’s female friends changed drastically. New writers were brought onto the show who looked at women through a different filter, and fewer and fewer episodes were written or produced by women. By season six one of her primary female companions was a woman who insulted her and competed with her every chance she had, even while accepting her hospitality and help with problems. From caring, supportive Rhoda to conniving and abusive Sue Ann was quite a change in the portrayal of women’s relationships.\textsuperscript{76}

Owings went on dates and had relationships with men at the time, but her focus when talking about her days in broadcast news was exactly that: the news. She felt that there was “serious sh-- going down” and it was thrilling to be in the middle of reporting it. It was “grown-up stuff,” and she felt a “collective sense of purpose.”\textsuperscript{77}

Some of the serious nature of news reporting and its relative stature in society in the 1970s shone through in early episodes of \textit{TMTMS}, including; the news strike in season two, the hiring of a female station manager who professed her attraction to Lou in season three, and Mary’s refusal to reveal her source for a story at the beginning of season five, which resulted in a stay in jail.\textsuperscript{78} However, the last two seasons focused more on family and relationship issues for Mary’s co-workers, such as weddings (Ted), anniversaries (Murray), adoption (both) and childbirth (Ted). Mary’s stories focused primarily on her dating or helping the people around her struggle with their personal problems.

Silverman, the most prolific female writer for the series, posited that “each of the characters was created to have a conflict, with Mary in the middle.”\textsuperscript{79} Owings wrote the news when she worked at CBS while at WJM in Minneapolis Mary mediated the lives of those around her. Owings followed an arc of development that saw her move from
acceptance to questioning to action for her own benefit but also for what she perceived to be the greater good. Mary’s big development arc began with her move to the city, landing a job, and renting an apartment. It took her to some minor questioning in relation to her status in the newsroom, and it left her solidly accepting the sexism in her workplace and accepting her role as nurturer and caretaker.

Notes


4 Ibid., 125-6.

5 Ibid., 123.


10 Interview, Alison Owings, January 31-February 1, 2009.

11 Ibid.

12 Bathrick, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” 156.

13 Ibid.


19 “What Is Mary Richards Really Like?”

20 Interview, Owings.

21 Bathrick, “*The Mary Tyler Moore Show,*” 176.

22 Ibid., 158-59.


24 Interview, Owings.


26 “The Boss Isn’t Coming to Dinner.”


29 Interview, Owings.


31 Interview, Owings.


33 Interview, Owings.


36 “Love is All Around,” *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, 2002 DVD, Season 1, Episode 1, original airdate September 19, 1970.

37 Interview, Owings.


Interview, Owings.


“Love Is All Around.”


See “The Good-Time News;” and “What Is Mary Richards Really Like?”


Interview, Owings.


“Who’s in Charge Here?”

“What’s Wrong With Swimming?” *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, unreleased DVD, Season 7, Episode 4, original airdate October 16, 1976.

Interview, Owings.


Alley and Brown, *Love Is All Around*, 41.


Interview, Owings.


Interview, Owings.

Ibid.


“The Boss Isn’t Coming to Dinner.”

Interview, Owings.


Interview, Owings.

“Will Mary Richards Go to Jail?” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 2009 DVD, Season 5, Episode 1, original airdate September 14, 1974.


Interview, Owings. “And That’s the Way It Was, Walter.”

Interview, Owings.


Bathrick, The Mary Tyler Moore Show,”176-77.

Interview, Owings.

See “Thoroughly Unmilitant Mary;” “What Do You Do When The Boss Says ‘I Love You?’” and “Will Mary Richards Go to Jail?”

Alley and Brown, Love Is All Around, 41.
Chapter 5 – Television Feminism, Fact and Fiction

Marketing

Feminism was a big deal in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. There was a feeling of excitement for the new possibilities that were beginning to open up for average American women in terms of access to credit, jobs and education. Trepidation at the changes that were occurring was also pervasive. Traditional housewives began to feel that they were being criticized for choosing family over career. It was a confusing time, with many strong feelings being generated over the push for equal rights for women, and the confusion was mirrored in the media.

Todd Gitlin pointed out in his 1976 article on the ideology of television that societies work to reproduce themselves and their conflicts within the familiar structures of those societies. Television is one of the modern methods that our society uses to process and absorb ideological changes within it.¹ George Gerbner went further in his 1978 article on the dynamics of cultural resistance by pointing out that the medium of television is not used selectively but rather collects a large, homogeneous, national audience. It becomes the social glue cementing the national identity across a diverse and scattered country, thus serving a cohesive function that used to be the purview of religion.²

Gerbner went on to say that culture is self-replicating of the accepted and established structures, and as such, its main function is to resist change.³ Lauren Rabinovitz called this resistance “Ms.-representation” in her 1999 examination of television’s treatment of feminism. She maintained that feminism’s challenge of traditional cultural categories of behavior based on gender has been “so ambiguously
presented on television that it lends itself to a range of political interpretations. In general, feminists have found themselves disappointed outside of a few lonely exceptions with portrayals of women on commercial television. The feminist movement of the 1970s forced media to confront its biases, but the public gains in the areas considered “fairness” issues eclipsed many of the more personal goals for which the movement strove. Media in the twentieth century gave women airtime on popular news shows (mostly if they were young and attractive) and it portrayed strong, successful women in fictional shows (many of whom spent money compulsively and obsessed over relationships). Judy Kutulas opined in 2005 that television “does not create gender norms, but it is a vital part of any cultural conversation about them, providing both a frame of reference and a forum where social contradictions can be explored.”

Women’s liberation began to spread beyond academic and radical circles in the mid-1960s, and its influence increased as it gained recognition in the popular media in 1970. Susan Brownmiller pointed out in an article explaining feminism for the New York Times Magazine that her women’s group had met only four times when they received a phone call from a representative of CBS asking them to be filmed for a news segment with Walter Cronkite. They discussed the offer and then declined. Bonnie Dow wrote in her book about television and feminism that “the debut of Mary Tyler Moore and a wave of media attention to women’s liberation in 1970 marked a qualitative shift in public consciousness of the presence of an organized feminist movement.”

Gitlin described Mary as a good girl who was independent but acquiescent and non-threatening to average Americans. Her story resonated because it reflected people’s desires to find meaning in their jobs and to have a workplace “family” like Mary’s. He
posited that “television appeals less by mirroring statistical reality than by working and satisfying plausible desire.” Media commentary on feminism was dismissive in the early 1970s, but it supported women’s desire for equality in the workplace. However, women found that equality did not mean complete equality but rather token equality. In a *Newsweek* item in the media section of the magazine in 1971, the “new breed” of female news reporters was heralded. The descriptors included: vivacious, svelte, stunning, and a “blonde who favors pink muu-muus.” Despite the progress women were making in newsrooms, a reporter from San Francisco described it thus: “Everybody’s got a woman. It’s like having a dog.” While Owings questioned her hiring as a writer at CBS news without the usual writing test, Mary accepted her token status as simple fact. While Owings fought legal and professional battles for access and influence over content in the interest of serving “womankind,” Mary battled only for her own advancement and personal equality. Real women were joining Owings in fighting sexism in the workplace, but at the fictional WJM it was a source of wry amusement.

Hugh Downs commented in a magazine article in 1972 that it was the nature of commercial television not to venture far into either end of the spectrum of opinion or behavior because its survival depended on avoiding offending its financial supporters. In her memoir of her progress through the industry, broadcast newswoman Marlene Sanders recalled being told by Reuben Franks that “television doesn’t set trends, it follows them.” In combination, it would seem that television only follows trends to a point well within the level of comfort of the mass market audience and the advertisers.

Television producers and advertisers are interested in reinforcing women’s identities in relation to their products. Women on television dress expensively, wear
make-up, and emphasize physical attractiveness because affirming traditional women’s roles is vital to the maintenance of women’s identities as consumers. Including limited feminist discourse in television programming was a way of appealing to an important demographic: working women. For Owings, the struggle was the kind of news presented and the way in which women were portrayed in the news. In Mary’s case, the struggle was to show a woman of thirty who did not rely on a man for survival. Both the real and fictional working woman succeeded in large part because they kept their voices down and remained feminine even while challenging tradition.

Mediating Convention and Change

The media’s selection of a postergirl to represent the woman’s movement highlighted the importance of commercial appeal combined with substance. Betty Friedan had written the book, *The Feminine Mystique*, that was considered the catalyst for the second wave of feminism, but although she was well-dressed and lady-like she was not young, hip, or beautiful. Gloria Steinem was all of those things as well as intelligent and glamorous. Many women admired her because she fought for women’s rights and remained feminine. Gail Collins put it this way in her 2009 book, *When Everything Changed*: “Steinem translated the sometimes raucous and disturbing language of a movement in full bloom in a way the nervous nation could relate to.” She mediated between convention and change in such a way that there was still room for consumerism, despite the fact that the magazine that she helped found, *Ms.*, chose to operate without commercial advertising.

What Mary and Steinem had in common was their marketability. Like Mary, Steinem became an effective champion of change precisely because she was attractive,
well-spoken, and thoughtful. Both were the compromise that the media could accept – representatives of liberation who appealed to men and were non-threatening.\textsuperscript{20} Much as Mary was constantly put in her place by the paternal Lou Grant, Steinem was dismissed by the media at times in the way reserved for beautiful women who dared to assert themselves. Talk show host David Suskind called the women’s movement ridiculous and added that he could not decide whether he wanted to kiss Steinem or hit her.\textsuperscript{21} Apparently, listening to her respectfully was not an option.

Owings was similarly attractive, intelligent, and willing to work within the established structures of the broadcast newsroom. She was able to have an effect precisely because she was perceived as non-threatening by the male establishment, and she was good at her work. She recalled teasing in the workplace between the male and female workers, but her input was listened to and considered regarding references to women as housewives and grandmothers and the importance of the news of Anaïs Nin’s death.\textsuperscript{22} She, too, mediated between convention and change.

Mary was easy to like. She was the kind of steady, pretty, even-tempered girlfriend many women would like to have, and she was funny.\textsuperscript{23} Many women like her ended up in the workforce when the traditional route of marriage and family let them down. They had no map to this unfamiliar territory in a man’s world, but Mary helped show them a way. She was a token woman who succeeded in the male workplace because she adopted traditional, idealized, female roles. On \textit{TMTMS} she was contrasted with the other female characters that were more typically dissatisfied and sought fulfillment through men. The message was that happiness was found through compliance with the status quo of male domination, not resistance to it.\textsuperscript{24}
Authorship Mattered

Whether it was news or the fictional content of the ubiquitous medium of television, who wrote it made a difference. In the early 1970s, the vast majority of news writers, reporters, and editors were male, and women wrote only 2 percent of all television series scripts. Describing the characteristic bias of mass media in its portrayals of women, Judith Lemon pointed out that Mary was shown in a way that undermined the strength of her liberated character. She had the title of associate producer but the visual depiction of a secretary. In a script written by Treva Silverman for the first season of the show, Mary and Rhoda discussed their frustration with being constantly questioned about their single status. Mary lamented, “I could discover the secret of immortality, and they’d still say, ‘Look at that single girl discovering the secret of immortality.’” Words mattered, and the fact that a working woman of thirty could expect to be called a “single girl” in a news reference reflected the dominant practice of the time. News was written by men who called women “girls” and referenced their marital status. This was the practice that Owings and other women working in news were struggling to change.

By the time Owings left CBS in 1977 to write a book, she felt she had as much effect on the world of broadcasting as she could. Her sentiment was that she did not want to keep doing something that anyone with similar skill and training could do. She wanted to make an impact, and to do that she needed to leave news. She had run up against the classic feminist conundrum: even though women had been allowed into the men’s club, the rules and practices remained essentially the same. The agenda of the news was set by a male sensibility, and many women’s concerns were still considered “soft” news or
simply unworthy of air time. When Mary hired a female sportscaster in season seven, she challenged the traditional way of covering sports by focusing on non-violent sports such as swimming over violent sports like football. Mary was forced to fire her because the issue for feminism was whether women could gain access to the same places men could, not whether they could change the values system that they found in place once they arrived. Both Mary and the sportscaster gained access but neither were allowed to challenge the conventions of the all-male world that they entered.29

Bias in news away from women’s interests was a result of mostly male reporters and editors. Men considered news that they were interested in as most newsworthy and presumed it was universal. Research has shown that men accept caricatures of the sexes as valid.30 Women were confronted with double messages: told to be assertive but not too assertive. The traditional stereotype that women were by nature kinder and gentler than men put them at odds with a system that demanded much stronger qualities in order to advance.31 Stereotypes that were reflected in TMTMS were of men as aggressive and competitive and women as passive and nurturing.32 Sue Ann and Georgette were extreme caricatures of women as seen from men’s point of view.33 Much of the humor of the show came from the challenges to those stereotypes in the characters of Rhoda, Sue Ann, and Murray. Each of them displayed characteristics associated with the opposite gender: Rhoda was aggressive, Sue Ann was competitive, and Murray was nurturing.34

In 1986, nine years after Owings left CBS, women were only eighty-four of 1,650 daily newspaper publishers, owned 4 percent of broadcast station groups, and filed 16 percent of network correspondent news stories. In the same year, nine years after TMTMS went off the air, women directed only five out of 100 network television movies and 348
of 3,000 television programs. Although laws had changed to assure access to jobs for women, most programming was still written and produced by men, and women were still held to a higher standard in the workplace and criticized for behaviors that were considered positive in men. In 2009, angry faces were still identified with maleness, and the combination of happiness combined with fear in an expression was most closely correlated with femaleness. Modern television shows with innovative portrayals of women, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Sex in the City, were developed, directed, and written primarily by men. Women may have come a long way, but they still did not share equally in the production of either news or entertainment.

TMTMS was considered innovative in its use of female writers for many of its episodes. Comedy was traditionally written exclusively by men, and the stereotypes that men associated with women were common. Examining the portrayals of female relationships written by men provides insight into the way women were valued. Before there was Mary, there were Bewitched and I Dream of Jeannie, where women’s magical powers were contained and only permitted to be used for housework or to solve men’s problems. Mary continued this tradition as she contented herself with a mediocre job at a mediocre station while she helped everyone solve their problems week after week. She had moved into the workplace, but her role remained much the same as the onscreen women that preceded her.

The influence of the women writers on the show became most obvious in their absence. In seasons one through four, from six to nine of the twenty-four scripts annually produced were written by women. Season five had three and a half (co-authored with a man), six had two and a half, and season seven had no scripts by women. Rhoda, the
feminist conscience of the show, left after season four, and Silverman, the primary female writer for the show, wrote her last two scripts in season five. The hiring of David Lloyd in season four led to his prolific script writing for the duration of the show; he penned thirty shows, and co-wrote the farewell show. Lloyd recalled, “The year I joined, Jim [Brooks] and Allan [Burns] wanted to increase the influence of the other female characters, and so Sue Ann was used more and I found myself writing a lot of her stuff.” In the process, he developed Sue Ann into an extreme caricature of a hyper-feminine working woman, who constantly belittled Mary and competed with her for attention. This male stereotype was not realistic according to women in the workplace, who reported that their working relationships with other women were supportive and helpful. Even his portrayal of Mary clung to established stereotypes, such as when Georgette asked her what she would do if she told her that she was going to get married there in Mary’s apartment. “Vacuum!” she shouted, as though the biggest thought in her head at this news would be the cleanliness of her floor.

The last three seasons of TMTMS had a different sensibility than the first four. Stereotypes were much more in evidence as male writers and producers presented how they perceived women’s relationships without the mediating quality of women’s input. Susan Silver, who wrote five shows in the first three seasons, commented that she wrote from real life – a woman’s point of view – because that was what she knew. She also noted that the men on the show thought she was uniquely original:

They thought all my stories were incredible, just really original, and I realized then that men have different experiences, and all the stories that I came up with I think most women could relate to because it had happened to us in our lives. But to them it was all new. Up until that point there were so few women writing that our perspective hadn’t been shown and they thought I was a genius.
In Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown’s book about the making of *TMTMS*, Lloyd denied any involvement with feminism and added that his predecessor, Silverman, “had a lot of ideological axes to grind.”\(^5\) In actuality, Silverman’s scripts dealt humanely with numerous issues of interest to women, including divorce, sex education, beauty standards, aging, being single, infidelity, and dating.\(^6\) Not one episode demonstrated a strident feminist approach to any issue; in fact, several of them could be considered sexist in their own ways when looked at from a later perspective. In his writing, Lloyd took the sexist attitude displayed by Lou and Ted and enhanced it. In the creation of a strong, successful woman journalist such as Mary’s Aunt Flo, Lloyd gave her masculine characteristics such as her tweed suit and her gruff voice, which made her seem the exception to women achieving success, not the rule. He also had Ted declare that women should be gentle and refined because if God had wanted them to be pushy and arrogant [like Aunt Flo] he would have made them men.\(^7\)

Just as male domination of the news set the tone and chose the focus, so, too, did the all-male writing, producing and directing staff of *TMTMS* toward the end of the series’ run. Gone was the woman’s perspective, the genius of a female writer like Silver or Silverman. While the writing was still excellent, it was distinctly biased, reflecting how men perceived women much more than how women really were. The three episodes written completely by women in the fifth season addressed the topics of fidelity, jealousy, and commitment. The many episodes by males included: Mary modeling a skimpy “fashion” dress; the men betting on football; Mary dating a handsome ski instructor with whom she had nothing in common for his physical attractiveness; Sue Ann in fierce competition with another woman at the station who wanted to replace her; Ted
deceitfully convincing the staff of the building that he and Mary were having an affair; and Phyllis being ordered by her husband to cut back on spending. With her credit cards gone and not able to land a job, Phyllis was utterly depressed until Mary came to cheer her up and Phyllis realized that she was still better off than Mary because she had a husband. Alley and Brown compared it to another show’s plot and described it as “reinforcement for the notion of male wisdom and economic authority,” although they noted the irony when Phyllis’s husband died suddenly and she landed a job as she started her new series.

Mary’s move to a new apartment at the beginning of season six was precipitated by her dissatisfaction with her life, in an episode written by Lloyd. Owings’s dissatisfaction with her static position at her workplace led her to leave her secure job and the country to live in Spain and write a book. Mary’s dissatisfaction led to her move to a generic, high-rise apartment where she had no close friends but only needy visitors. Alley and Brown point out that “the move merely serves to remind us that the old format – home and work – has been set aside and now all of Mary’s friends work at WJM.”

Lloyd’s next script concerned Murray expressing his love for Mary, despite his status as a married man and father. Mary rejected his advances while maintaining his friendship. Office entanglements were quite common in the real world. Owings commented she did not know how many marriages survived the divide between the wives in the suburbs and the single, working women at the station and many people whom she knew in broadcast were divorced. One highly visible casualty of the rift between the women at work and the women at home was the marriage of Ben Bradlee, the editor of
the *Washington Post*, who divorced his wife of eighteen years to move in with columnist Sally Quinn (the failed CBS woman anchor) in 1974.52

Lloyd’s third script of the sixth season introduced Mary’s Aunt Flo, described as a “globe-hopping, name-dropping journalistic success.”53 Immediately, Aunt Flo and Lou began to compete, suggesting that successful women were insecure, competitive, and could not work well with others. Another male writer who joined the show for the last two seasons was Bob Ellison, who later stated that he did not believe *TMTMS*’s reality involved a conscious attempt to speak for women: “By the time I got there all the writers and producers happened to be men. That didn’t seem to make a difference.”54 He might not have thought so, but he was looking at it from a traditionally male point of view.

Gaye Tuchman pointed out that the television industry was solidly reflective of prevailing American values, whether or not they reflected reality: “Dominant American ideas and ideals serve as resources for program development, even when the planners are unaware of them, much as we all take for granted the air we breathe.”55

Ellison did comment that his work on the spin-off show, *Rhoda*, was a different matter. He recalled social and political messages on that show were more pronounced, and there were numerous conferences about certain expressions or lines that needed re-written. “I think it was because Valerie Harper was, and still is, more active in world affairs than Mary. And Valerie does a lot of analyzing.”56 This description sounds much more like the Owings of CBS than the Mary of WJM. Owings worked constantly to have an effect on the way that women were presented; Mary presented the character that she was given by the predominantly male script writers. Mary was good at what she did, but
she did not question the assumptions of the day, or the status quo, and neither did her show.

Ellison was responsible for two shows in the last season in which fantasy and flashbacks were key. In show business, this is typically a sign of desperation on the part of writers, but the form of the fantasy show was particularly telling.\(^57\) In “Mary’s Three Husbands” (original airdate February 26, 1977), Lou, Ted, and Murray had a drink after work and shared their fantasies of being married to Mary. Serafina Bathrick interpreted this episode as an expression of men’s need to put women into positions in which male authority still reigned.\(^58\) In Murray’s fantasy Mary was a pregnant flower-child who waited on him as he worked at his writing, gave birth quietly in another room in order not to disturb his work, and presented him with the new baby while he effused: “What a woman!” Ted’s fantasy was of Mary as his new bride, and Lou’s of Mary as a life-long partner but not as a sexual object: “When we were first married you were like a daughter to me, and it seemed unthinkable. Then you were like my sister, and now you’re like my mother.”\(^59\) Nowhere in any of the three men’s thoughts was Mary an equal, a co-worker, or a brother-in-arms in delivering the news; rather the male adulation of Mary comes as a response to her nurturing, supportive, and cheerful manner in the face of any crisis.\(^60\)

Owings wrote and produced news for male-dominated broadcast media corporations. She also grew in her understanding of how women were treated, portrayed, ignored, and belittled at her workplaces as well as in the wider world. She wrote letters to the *New York Times* about gender references, helped bring discrimination lawsuits at two broadcast stations, and suggested programming that focused on areas of concern to women, which would be completely crafted by women right down to the camera.
operators. She made this pitch in a proposal for a weekly women’s news program to her superiors at the local NBC station in New York City where she was a news writer, reporter, and field editor in 1972-73. The proposal included focusing on subjects of interest to women, particularly their economic status, including: “employment, finance, child-raising, education, . . . women’s images of themselves, historical perspectives, women’s ‘images,’ mass media, the arts, and society.”61 Owings wrote in 1972 that she “could be utilized as [the] resident feminist” and use a multi-faceted approach to covering subjects concerning women, a “shockingly underreported field.”62 She never backed down from her position as an advocate while still succeeding and advancing in her chosen field of news writing and reporting.

**Women’s Relationships with Women and Men**

As women became a greater presence in media in the 1960s they ran solidly into negative stereotypes. FM progressive radio stations started talking about social issues but retained old-fashioned ideas about women. Although the male founders of progressive radio supported women’s sexual freedom of choice they refused to promote them to positions of authority.63 An early 1960s television show featuring women’s issues played to the stereotype that women were naturally antagonistic and loved gossip. Women with strongly opposing views were invited onto the show, *Girl Talk*, in hopes of spurring a “cat fight” (as it was known then).64 Kutulas found that television women of the time “were supposed to be all things to all people – sexy (but not too sexual), competent, sweet, kind, and nurturing. They brought culture and class to the workplace, like the flowers on Mary Richards’s desk.”65 And when the mainstream media finally began acknowledging the women’s movement in 1970, male reporters and anchors expressed
puzzlement at the idea of women working beside men when they could not even get along with each other.66

Suzanne Pingree and Robert P. Hawkins maintained that “the mass media in general, and the news media particularly, are constantly presenting us with symbolic messages about what ‘reality’ is like, and we use these messages in constructing our own images of reality.”67 Regardless of women’s feelings on women’s liberation, the news media portrayed it as a lost cause because women could not work together. By emphasizing actual divisions in the movement (between the older, conservative members of NOW and the younger, radical feminist groups), the conclusion was drawn that women were incompetent and back-biting.68 This attitude was reflected in the portrayal and development of the relationship between Mary and Sue Ann. As the seasons progressed, their bickering and sniping became meaner, and they presented a typically male version of female interactions in stark contrast to the mutually supportive relationship between Mary and Rhoda.

This catfight image of women’s relationships, while prominent in the news media in the early 1970s, was not born out by the experiences of the women working in the news.69 Brownmiller helped Owings put herself forward at ABC, Owings was told about the job opening at CBS by another woman who worked in news, and CBS’s first woman correspondent, Nancy Dickerson, was reported to be very gracious and supportive of other women starting out in journalism.70 A media-reported feud between established newswoman, Barbara Walters, and the experimental Quinn was disproved by the latter’s testimony.71 However, the perception of women as competitive and backstabbing
persisted and was reinforced by portrayals such at the one on *TMTMS* between Mary and Sue Ann.

As liberation became more accepted, the workplace contained more insults and sexual objectification. Later television characters’ hair and fashion were widely imitated, and sexuality in the workplace helped them get ahead. In the days of Mary and Owings, some sexual teasing occurred, but the societal rules of politeness still held. Mary was sexually liberated, she dated numerous men, but she was not routinely treated as a sexual object at her workplace and she did not need to use her sexuality to get ahead. Owings was a news writer at CBS who had professional, working relationships with her male co-workers. She also dated, but her focus at work was on writing, editing, and producing news. Catherine Orenstein’s comparison of *TMTMS* with the late twentieth-century show, *Sex in the City*, noted that Mary “had cool clothes and plenty of suitors, but also story lines, a grouchy boss and male friends,” while the more recent show was retrograde in “its preoccupation with snagging a man” and the depiction of women as “vapid, materialistic and hysterical.”

Owings felt something of the excitement inherent in choosing a non-traditional path when she focused on her career over matrimony and a family. In her 2008 article “A Reparative Reading of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*,” Susan Crozier described it this way: “The woman alone in the city represents the still-tenuous possibility of a viable social existence outside of the normative structures of the nuclear family.” Owings recalled with wry amusement that every year single girls from CBS were invited to the home of Walter Cronkite for a Christmas party, but they were forbidden by Mrs. Cronkite to bring a man who was not their husband or fiancé. Mary was not bitter, a spinster, or
one of the guys. Many young girls looked to her as a role model on how to pursue a career, deal with romance, and suffer fools. Young girls saw a new idea of how their lives could be. Kutulas suggested, “Mary Richards became a cultural symbol, like June Cleaver before her, a shorthand representation of what liberation meant for women.”

While Mary succeeded on these levels, her relationships with men at her job were patently traditional. She was supportive, nurturing, submissive, and apologetic in the workplace. She filled the roles of sister, daughter, and mother and reinforced the dichotomy between women’s relationships in the home and at work. Her message to future woman workers was that they would be valued in the workplace if they acquiesced and accepted the established power structure. Owings admitted to being meek and accepting until the women at WRC were ridiculed by the management for presenting their concerns. She was likewise galvanized to work for change by being refused service at “Off the Record” in Washington, D.C. She pursued change and acceptance for women on their own terms, while Mary represented a working woman limited to family stereotypes.

Mary was a member of a workplace family while Owings had a workplace and co-workers. As the seasons progressed, Mary lost the separate private sphere of her apartment to her workplace family and began to spend all of her waking hours with her co-workers. However, Owings moved jobs and cities, establishing work relationships and maintaining friendships outside of work.

Bathrick observed “feminist critics have long noted that women in journalism are frequently isolated or infantilized by their all-male co-workers.” Mary did not suffer isolation but was consumed by her familial work relationships. Owings was a “little sister
“in mini-skirts” at ABC when she was still in her early twenties, but she moved on to work on a more even level with her male co-workers. However, she did suffer isolation when confronted with entrenched sexism. When the senior writer for Cronkite commented that women had no place in a newsroom, Owings recalled: “My nascent smile frozen, I wordlessly went back to my work. It was not as if I’d lost confidence. But I had lost that component so essential in newsrooms, among other places: the feeling we’d all help each other. . . . Being a news-writing woman in the 1970s was a lonesome and emotionally precarious situation.” Real life sexism was not a running joke that could be simply dismissed as harmless as it was with Lou and Ted. It had teeth, and they left marks.

**Conclusions**

Owings was in the thick of second-wave feminism, both in the workplace and in her personal life. She challenged the status quo and explored alternatives, demanding the same of others around her. The arc of development of her feminist consciousness began as accepting of sexism in the workplace and in media representations of women and rose steadily, with several catalyst moments, to result in her departure from broadcasting in favor of expressing her unique voice.

Mary was thrust into liberation from a traditional place as a fiancée, who expected to stop working when she was married. She accepted the status quo and her place in it, accommodating those around her and mediating some of the public fear of “liberated” women. Harper and Silverman, actress and writer for the show, both experienced arcs of development that resembled Owings’s. Both of them moved on from the show and continued to develop their feminist consciousnesses in relation to the world of television. The character of Mary grew as well but in fairly limited ways. She learned to assert
herself by demanding producer duties to match her title. She went to jail to protect a source, but she had to be bullied into it by Lou. She teased her co-workers about their sexism without seriously asking them to change. Her arc of development rose at the beginning of the show as she established herself as liberated and rose as she pursued her limited career, but it never rose far. It was revealed in a later revisiting of Mary and Rhoda that Mary finally married after the show ended, thus safely returning her to a traditional place.\textsuperscript{83} Her liberation was confined to circumstances, and safety was always found in the traditional family relationships of her work.

Owings’s arc of development occurred on the personal level and continues to this day. Her consciousness-raising brought her to a different level of understanding of women’s place in society and the struggle for equality. Mary’s arc of development mirrored that of media and society as it worked to contain and co-opt feminism in order to secure the status quo.

The stages of resistance to social change that Gerbner ascribed to media were born out in the portrayal of Mary as a “liberated” woman. While appearing to embrace change, the show was actually a late acknowledgement of a well established trend toward women in the workforce. This followed the original strategy of ignoring the growing women’s movement, which was succeeded by condemnation and trivialization.\textsuperscript{84} Regardless of the best intentions of the creators, \textit{TMTMS} actually served to trivialize feminism. The technique of discrediting was exemplified by the obnoxious, unattractive character of Rhoda, who symbolized much that was wrong with feminism and needed to be brought back to tradition through her relationship with the feminine Mary. Isolating was accomplished through the depiction of Mary as the token woman in the workplace.
Mary’s role as nurturer for her workplace family and her antagonistic relationship with the only other professional woman at her work accomplished the undercutting of any meaningful feminist message in the show. Gerbner went on to state:

[W]hen women . . . are shown as independent, adventurous, or powerful, they are portrayed as enforcing rather than challenging the laws that oppress them. . . . [T]hey are accepted into the ranks of power provided they act on behalf of the rules designed to protect the interest of the majority groups. And even then they usually need to be rescued by male partners.

Women and minorities gained higher visibility on television in the 1970s, but their characters and situations helped limit their impact on perceptions. Only cosmetic changes were made, and the mainstream ideology remained solidly intact. This illustrated the final phase of co-optation of social movements – giving liberation Mary’s face took much of the punch out of the concerns and demands of feminists, who were seeking substantive change. Rapping reminded women that “Mary Richards of the Mary Tyler Moore show, obsequious and maternal as she was, was nonetheless a victory symbol for feminists.” She was the media concession to a changing world, a rather likable and non-threatening concession.

**Backlash**

By 1980, a conservative backlash against the excesses of the 1970s was taking root in American society. The women’s liberation movement had made gains, but they were absorbed into the counter revolution, which opposed abortion and homosexuality and blamed the poor (mostly women) for their situations. The early 1970s had seen great pressure in media to hire women, but it took lawsuits to force the change. The president of CBS, Arthur Taylor, had supported the improvement of women’s situations at the company, but when he left in 1976 inertia set in and the rates of gains lessened for
women at the network.\textsuperscript{90} Broadcast media did not act, but rather reacted, to the women’s movement. Equality for women was not achieved, and the pressure to change lessened as the gains that were made were slowly co-opted by media.\textsuperscript{91} Even fourteen years after the International Woman’s Year,” many of the same issues remained.\textsuperscript{92}

Mass media continued into the 1980s portraying feminism as a fringe movement, causing many women who agreed with feminist issues, such as equal access and pay, to shy away from being identified with it. Several news outlets, including \textit{Newsweek}, the \textit{New York Times Magazine}, and ABC produced special reports in the mid-1980s looking back at feminism. They all reported that it was dead and that its only effect had been to bring women unhappiness and frustrate their chances at marriage and a traditional family life.\textsuperscript{93} Linda Ellerbee noted in 1989 that there were fewer women on the air than in 1975 and suggested the attitude among management had become that “nobody really cares about women’s issues anymore, and we’re not scared anymore.”\textsuperscript{94} She posited that power is never given up voluntarily, and Marlene Sanders noted “the pressure is off, nobody cares, and the boys are running things again.”\textsuperscript{95}

In 1978, Gerbner described the backlash as “a counterattack on the women’s movement as a social force for structural change.”\textsuperscript{96} Mary was married now, Owings was living and writing in Europe, and women had hit a plateau in terms of substantial gains in media. Martha M. Lauzen compared the results of her 1998-99 study of the top prime time shows on television and the incidence of women behind and in front of the camera to a similar study done in 1990-91. The results were the same: there had been no progress for women.\textsuperscript{97}
Sanders discussed the backlash against feminism in her book, *Waiting for Prime Time* (co-authored by Marcia Rock). She described a fading of effort over time and the stress associated with the push for equality, maintaining that the commitment did not fade but that women became worn down and weary of the battle.\(^98\) There was also the fact that gains had been made, and women assumed that they would continue without as much effort on their parts.\(^99\)

Activism declined after women accomplished the early gains of the 1970s, and the advent of the Ronald Reagan administration brought efforts to dilute affirmative action and equal opportunity. The message was clear that punishment would only come for overt, egregious instances of discrimination and low level sexism and racism would be ignored.\(^100\) The argument was put forth in response to feminism that women chose their roles at work and home because they came naturally.\(^101\) Donna L. Halper maintained in her book, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting*, that it was no surprise that many women learned the lesson that it was best to tolerate the unequal situation and put up with some hostility and sexism from their coworkers in order to keep their jobs.\(^102\) That was the message delivered by *TMTMS* in the final stage of media sanitation and co-optation: that the price of being a liberated, working woman was accepting the workplace as it was, complete with the lovable sexism and the paternalism of co-workers.

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**Notes**


3 Ibid.


13 Ibid.


22 Interview, Alison Owings, January 31-February 1, 2009.

23 Discussion with the author’s mother, February 5, 2010, in The Woodlands, Texas. She was a single, working mother in the 1970s who identified with Mary Richards, especially because she was funny throughout all of her struggles.

Questions: Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 111.


27 “Divorce Isn’t Everything,” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 2002 DVD, Season 1, Episode 4, original airdate October 10, 1970.

28 Collins, When Everything Changed, 258. “It was an enormous victory in 1970 when Ben Bradlee, the editor of the Washington Post, told his reporters to stop using words such as ‘blond’ or ‘divorcée’ or ‘grandmother’ to describe women in news stories.”

29 Dow, Prime-Time Feminism, 42.


31 Halper, Invisible Stars, 258.


34 Douglas, Where the Girls Are, 208.

35 Ellerbee, “Still Waiting to Break Through ‘Glass Ceiling.’”

36 Halper, Invisible Stars, 231 & 258.


41 Ibid., 66.

42 Ellerbee, “Still Waiting to Break Through ‘Glass Ceiling.’”


44 Alley and Brown, Love Is All Around, 55.


46 Ibid., 222.

47 Ibid., 68.

48 See “You Try to be a Nice Guy,” The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 2009 DVD, Season 5, Episode 21, original airdate February 8, 1975; “The System,” The Mary Tyler

49 Alley and Brown, Love Is All Around, 196.
50 Ibid., 199.
51 Interview, Alison Owings, January 31-February 1, 2009.
53 Alley and Brown, Love Is All Around, 200.
54 Ibid., 74-75.
56 Alley and Brown, Love Is All Around, 75.
57 Ibid.
58 Bathrick, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 180.
59 Ibid., 180-81.
60 Douglas, Where the Girls Are, 208.
62 Alison Owings, Memorandum, Owings to Hanna, no title, October 24, 1972, in possession of the author.
64 Ibid., 199
68 Douglas, Where the Girls Are, 186.
69 Ibid., 226.
70 See Interview, Susan Brownmiller, February 17, 2009; Interview, Owings; and Halper, Invisible Stars, 204.
71 Bradley, Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 243.
76 Bathrick, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 179.


Ibid., 179.

Ibid., 167.

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Ibid., 50.


Ibid., 122.

Ibid., 123.


Ellerbee, “Still Waiting to Break Through ‘Glass Ceiling.’”

Ibid.


Halper, Invisible Stars, 254.

Sanders and Rock, Waiting for Prime Time, 132.

Ibid., 134.

Ibid., 138.

Dow, Prime-Time Feminism, 38.

Halper, Invisible Stars, 235.
Owings shared with me her files from her days at WRC in Washington, D.C., through her time working at CBS News. Included were interoffice memoranda about the concerns of the women about discrimination, personal notes to and from various people in the offices, and copies of the documents submitted to management before the lawsuit at WRC. There was also a copy of the original press release written by the women of WRC and distributed by members of the National Organization of Women.

They also contained the humorous satirical piece about the birthday of Benjamin Bradlee that is reproduced in full in the notes of Chapter 3.

Many thanks to Owings for keeping such files, and for sharing them with this researcher.

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