

A NECESSARY MEDIUM

The Mary Tyler Moore Show and Media Portrayal of the Second Wave Feminist Era

*While lauded, at first glance, for being a wholeheartedly feminist and progressive television show, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* struck a balance between progressive second-wave feminism and traditional family values that allowed it to become popular and ultimately influential in modernizing the American public's view on women's equality.*

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Scene from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1977)
Source: CBS Television

Robin Morgan stood, surrounded by a dozen other women, in front of a Freedom Trash Can. She and many other women associated with the New York Radical Women—a new organization aimed at furthering the feminist cause—had gathered to protest the popular, nationally televised Miss America Pageant taking place in Atlantic City that day. One of many that had been set up for the protest on that September day, the Freedom Trash Can was meant to be a means through which the frustrated women could discard the items that were, in Morgan and her colleagues' opinion, instruments of female oppression, just like the pageant itself. Morgan and her fellow protesters stood with copies of *Playboy*, high heels, and even eyelash curlers, ready to toss them away. Morgan herself clutched a bra in her left hand as she cheered on her fellow protesters.

While organizers of the protest had, of course, aimed to gain recognition in the media by staging the event, the media attention that resulted from the protest was in many ways unfortunate for the Women's Liberation Movement. In the days after the protest, photographs of the Freedom Trash Cans were run in various news outlets with reports that the women had lit the contents of the cans on fire, burning their

bras in protest. Despite the existing debate over whether or not bras were actually burned that day, the media coverage of the event created the "bra-burning" stereotype that portrays women's rights activists as dramatic fanatics who take symbolism for their cause to a new height.¹ This method of describing feminists is still used today and became a symbol of Second Wave Feminism.

The Miss America Protest of 1968 was only one notable example of a situation in which the media affected the public's perception of an issue—in this case, women's rights. The protest, though, did mark a turning point where, in an age of fierce traditionalism and social conservatism, the Women's Liberation Movement and Second Wave Feminism went public and began to change the national perception of the entire Women's Movement and women in general. Depictions of independent women by the media were either nonexistent or largely negative before 1970. Before 1968, the media used news and fictional media such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to promulgate the traditional concept of the ideal woman as solely a good wife and mother.¹ Then, after the 1968 Miss America Protests, women began to push what they felt was their inferior social status into the public eye more and more, though they were met with harsh criticism by the media. However, in 1970, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* introduced America to Mary Richards, the single, independent working woman who loved her way of life. Scholars such as Vanderbilt University Professor of Women and Gender Studies Bonnie J. Dow argue that, despite its premise of female empowerment, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was not as wholeheartedly feminist as it is often perceived and instead promoted traditional social values.² However, when examined more closely, it becomes clear that the balance between femininity and confident independence in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* removed some of the stigma surrounding independent, working women, aiding the Second Wave Feminist movement and encouraging more women to seek equality and enter the workforce.

FEMINISM: AN OVERVIEW

To understand the effect of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the context of Second Wave Feminism, it is essential to under-

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stand what defined Second Wave Feminism in the context of the Women's Movement as a whole. There are, to date, three major feminist movements, ever-evolving but each with its own characteristics. First Wave Feminism encapsulates the traditional view of the Women's Movement; Susan B. Anthony and her colleagues led the fight for women's suffrage in the United States and worked to ensure that women were given basic legal and moral opportunities, most notably the right to vote and the right to own property.³ The First Wave Feminist movement spanned almost a century but ultimately achieved the first step in achieving equality of the sexes.

Second Wave Feminism emerged at roughly the same time as the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the social conditions most notably defined in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. While women, by this point, had basic legal rights in the United States, they were consistently relegated to traditional, less visible social roles and primarily charged with taking care of home and children. Women of the Second Wave Feminist movement were concerned with elevating the social and professional statuses of women to be equal to those of men.⁴ They often rejected all traditional social convention regarding women in order to attempt to place themselves on the same level as men.

Third Wave Feminism has emerged in the last two to three decades, advocating for a more flexible approach to the female role in society. The wave advocates for a woman's empowerment in whatever way she chooses, be that as a conservative mother, as a high-powered career woman, or as a combination of the two.⁵ The wave also embraces changing perceptions about gender and sex identity. It is Second Wave Feminism that fueled the Miss America Protest and, seemingly, the premise of the *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Mary Richards, as an independent working woman, seems to embody many of the goals of the Second Wave Feminist movement.

THE DICK VAN DYKE SHOW AND THE STATUS QUO

Before the beginning of Second Wave Feminism, the immense popularity of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* made it a prime example of American opinions on family values during the traditional 1960s. The program, throughout most of its run, enjoyed top-20 placement on the Nielson ratings. The traditional Petrie family, in which Mary Tyler Moore played the role of loving wife and mother, remained the centerpiece of the show during its five years on television. In quite a few episodes, entire storylines focus on Dick Van Dyke's character Rob's concern about Tyler Moore's character Laura going back to work or underperforming in her duties as wife and mother. For example, in the episode "To Tell or Not to Tell," Laura, who had been a dancer before she married Rob, attempts to go back to work temporarily after being invited by a friend to dance on an *Ed Sullivan Show*-type program. Rob balks at the suggestion, unable to handle the idea that Laura

may be absent from her usual role.⁶ Rob is not the only one uncomfortable with Laura working; when Laura is offered a permanent position dancing on the television show, she turns the offer down, telling Rob, just as she did when he proposed to her, "I don't want to be a dancer. I want to be your wife."⁷ Rob is portrayed as being entirely in the right throughout the episode, and Laura as the person in the wrong. The message communicated is clear: a woman's priorities should be her husband and her family, not a career. In today's terms, such an attitude would be considered sexist. However, during *The Dick Van Dyke Show's* run, such a family dynamic was normal.



Scene from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* of Mary Richards (1977)
Source: CBS Television

Socially accepted sexism was evident behind the scenes as well as on screen. Despite the fact that Mary Tyler Moore would later prove herself a comedic force on the show, her talent was actually discovered by accident. Sheldon Leonard, one of the producers for *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, said of hiring Tyler Moore, "she looked like a nice, attractive Westchester housewife with good legs. And she had good timing."⁸ To the producers and directors of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, it mattered very little that they were hiring an unknown, untested actress; Mary Tyler Moore's physical appearance was evidently what made her suited for the role. As Vince Waldron explains in his book *The Official Dick Van Dyke Show Book: The Definitive History and Ultimate Viewer's Guide*, it was not until later that Leonard and the rest of the staff realized that Tyler Moore was a talented actress, comedian, dancer, and singer.⁹ The continuity between treatment of women in the working world and its portrayal on television at the time speaks to the culture surrounding gender during the 1960s; the accounts given by former *Dick Van Dyke* associates suggests that the practice of treating women as inferior beings in a professional setting was a pervasive status quo.

DICK VAN DYKE'S STATUS QUO ENDURES: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MISS AMERICA PROTESTS

The idea that women should choose family over career was not just a value promoted in fictional media during the

1960s. News coverage of Second Wave Feminism and the Miss America Protests shows that this value truly dominated media coverage into the 1970s and the beginning of the era of the New Left. *New York Post* journalist Harriet Van Horne was one of the first to cover the protests, directly referencing “a bonfire in a Freedom Trash Can” that allowed women to burn their bras in protest of the Miss America Pageant’s values while making her argument against the protesters.¹⁰ Her harsh criticism of the Miss America protesters was based on her conviction that the protesters were simply bitter that they could not find a suitable husband to cherish more than their independence. Van Horne wrote:

My feeling about the liberation ladies is that they’ve been scarred by consorting with the wrong men. Men who do not understand the way to a woman’s heart, i.e., to make her feel utterly feminine, desirable and almost too delicate for this hard world... No wonder she goes to Atlantic City and burns her bra.¹¹

With Van Horne’s widely-circulated article, this lasting image and standard criticism of the Second Wave Feminist movement was solidified.

in reality a myth, but takes the significance of the myth and the protest that sparked it a step further. Dow asserts that regardless of any falsified coverage of the event, the attention garnered in the news media “put women’s lib on the map.”¹⁵ Though much of the media attention the Women’s Liberation Movement got at the time was negative and stereotyped, it at least brought attention to the cause.

THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW: A NECESSARY MEDIUM

In discussing *The Mary Tyler Moore Show’s* effect on the American attitude towards gender roles, Dow is correct in that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was not a wholeheartedly, radically feminist production; it does bear characteristics that suggest a connection to the television industry’s hegemonic agenda. Regardless of how *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* fits on the mainstream-to-radical spectrum, though, it had a substantial influence on American women and the American public as a whole. Motivations aside, the show struck a balance between showcasing independent women and retaining the traditional values with which the contemporary

“... the show struck a balance between showcasing independent women and retaining the traditional values with which the contemporary American public was comfortable.”

THE BRA-BURNING MYTH

The problem with this lasting portrayal of the feminist movement is that there is dispute over whether the news media’s portrayal of the Miss America Protest provides an accurate characterization of the women who protested on that day in 1968. Various sources discussed the burning of bras by protesters that day; Van Horne, for example, was inspired by *The Wall Street Journal* and *Newark Star-Ledger*, which reported before the demonstration that protest organizers had promised, among other forms of demonstration, the burning of bras in a demonstration inspired by the burning of draft cards by Vietnam War protesters.¹² While Morgan, when interviewed about the event, did admit that protesters had *considered* burning the trash cans, both participants and eyewitnesses of the protests deny ever actually lighting anything on fire.¹³ Morgan reported that Atlantic City’s mayor had discouraged any actual burning, so the women instead opted to execute a “symbolic burning” using the Freedom Trash Cans.¹⁴ The last-minute change of plans catalyzed substantial confusion and the creation of the bra-burning myth, as the editorial articles took the pre-protest news article’s reported fact and dramatized it. It did not matter that no woman had actually burned her bra in Atlantic City that day; the image alone sparked a lasting stereotype. Vanderbilt Professor of Women and Gender Studies Bonnie J. Dow agrees with Campbell that the image of the “bra-burning feminist” is

American public was comfortable. This balance—a gradual and subtle introduction of independent women and feminist values rather than a fierce promulgation of feminism—seems to have been exactly what the Women’s Movement needed to introduce to the country at the time.

MARY CHALLENGES THE STATUS QUO— OR DOES SHE?

The Mary Tyler Moore Show premiered amidst great criticism of feminism and independent women by the American public and the American media. The show’s very premise centered on a young woman who leaves her small-town home and fiancé to pursue an independent life and career in the big city. While such a theme may seem common in today’s society, it was a shocking move on the part of the show’s producers to pursue the storyline as the defining aspect of the show. Mary Richards, played by Mary Tyler Moore of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* fame, moves in with an old friend and goes out into the city to try to get a job on her own, confident that she will succeed.¹⁶ From the very first episode, the show’s overarching theme of a working woman challenges the widely held values in contemporary society that formed the traditional depiction of women in the media.

Despite the forward-thinking objective of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Bonnie Dow is correct in pointing out that the

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show is not actually as wholeheartedly feminist as it is considered by many today. By First Wave Feminist standards, though, Mary is the ultimate feminist; she has the right to work, vote, and handle business transactions like renting an apartment. Mary just does not embody everything for which Second Wave Feminists advocated. She may be a confident, compelling young woman, but she does not escape sexism and oppression by her male peers. Even more, that oppression is not seriously objected to or addressed, but remains unacknowledged. When Mary interviews for a job at a television station, for example, she is asked two main questions: “How do you type?” and “Are you married?” Her interviewer and future boss, traditional middle-aged male Lou Grant, asks for barely any other information. Even more, he hires her based on her “spunk,” threatening to fire her if he decides later that he does not like her.¹⁷ Grant sees nothing wrong with either his course of questioning or his disclaimer regarding firing Mary at his will. The characters on the show generally show less respect for Mary than they would for a male in the same position. It is not the inherent incorporation of chauvinist perspectives that makes the *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s feminism imperfect; critics like Dow discount its feminism because the show fails to seriously confront or abhor the male-centric attitudes depicted. It is possible that, when written, the screenwriters did not realize that interactions such as Mary’s job interview were sexist, or left sexist interactions untouched as a way to mitigate the liberal feminism of the show’s premise. However, it is also possible that the screenwriters incorporated sexist interactions without strongly condemning them in order to accurately portray the situation that women would have faced in the workplace at the time. Considering that the feminist cause certainly involved highlighting a problem in order to fix it, such a motivation on the part of the screenwriters of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* would have made the show a feminist work.

Outside of the workplace, Mary faces criticism from more traditional characters. All of Mary’s existing friends, including her ex-boyfriend, are convinced that Mary’s desire to live an independent life is just a phase and that she will soon decide to return home and live out the traditional life she had previously planned to live. Mary’s friend and landlord Phyllis, in particular, simply assumes that Mary’s career is an interim occupation until she finds a suitable husband for whom she can give up her career.¹⁸ To Phyllis, there is no question of Mary’s ultimate goals; it is unimaginable that Mary could not be looking for marriage and a family. Phyllis represents the widely accepted, traditional viewpoint in American society, which embraced the status quo seen in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and news reports covering the Miss America Protests.

MARY’S ANTIFEMINISM SPARKS FEMINIST CHANGE

Dow argues that these aspects of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* made it a less effective contribution to the feminist cause. She argues that the series was too moderate because it included

traditional family and gender values, and that this moderate approach undermined Mary Richards’s feminism.¹⁹ However, the moderate, subtle nature of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* had exactly the opposite effect on the feminist cause. Before *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, independent women were condemned as overdramatic, feminist “bra-burners.” Second Wave Feminism was a radical movement and was met with contempt by a great deal of society. Mary Richards, however, showed the relatable side of feminism. She was an incredibly endearing character, both to her fellow characters and to her viewers, as can be seen from the immense and lasting popularity of the show. Mary struck the balance between traditional femininity and modern feminism.



The Petrie family from *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (Fall 1963)
Source: CBS Television


Over the course of the show, Mary becomes the de facto wife and mother of her “office family,” which is almost exclusively male. Indeed, Mary holds a job throughout the show’s run, receives a promotion, and garners acclamation from her co-workers; she is an independent working woman. However, Mary is also caring, giving, and generous. She embodies a great deal of the qualities regarded by traditionalists as necessary for attractive, feminine women. Mary Richards is not a radical, unrecognizable new species of woman; she just applies the same values that the American public respected and strived to achieve to a different situation. While Dow argues that this fact compromises the feminist values on which the show should be based, it instead made it possible for the public to respect newly emerging feminist values. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s feminism is certainly subtle, but its subtlety and balance is what allowed it to be effective.

Just as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* embodies basic First Wave Feminist concepts, the bridge between work and femininity in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* can also be interpreted as a step beyond the Second Wave Feminism of its time. The show's portrayal of Mary as a woman who can have both a successful career and fulfilling personal relationships is actually much more representative of the Third Wave Feminism that would emerge nearly twenty years after the show's end. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* does not portray Mary as exactly the same as her male coworkers, which would have promoted the Second Wave Feminist value that women should be equal to men in all ways. Mary is a Third Wave hybrid of traditional feminine values and Second Wave independence, and this hybrid proves appealing to and persuasive for audiences.

EFFECTS OF THE FEMINISM OF THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW

The effect of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* subtle brand of feminism can be seen in later years. Examining even the progression of the show itself lends insight into changing perspectives of women in the media. The final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* involves the firing of the staff that viewers had grown to love. Despite the darker theme of the episode, one joke stands out. Corporate decides to fire the staff, but the company's CEO tells the group "I'm gonna have to let the rest of you guys go."²⁰ The following scene centers on Mary suggesting that, as a woman, she had in fact not been fired. She calls Mr. Coleman and finds that he had "especially" meant to fire Mary.²¹ Here, Mary's gender serves as a good-humored joke where the audience and other characters can laugh with Mary instead of at her. While she does single

herself out from the men she works with, she does so casually and matter-of-factly, in good humor. No one in the office is offended by her using her gender in her favor, and no one dismisses her idea. Even more, it is soon revealed that, in the eyes of her superiors at the network, Mary's gender did not set her apart from her male coworkers; although she is fired, she is fired along with the men and even considered one of them. Such treatment is much more in line with the goals of the Second Wave Feminist movement: complete equality, without professional differentiation on account of sex.

Helen Gurley Brown, author of the book *Sex and the Single Girl* and longtime editor of *Cosmopolitan* had once faced criticism for her feminist views on the modern women. In 1975, however, Brown openly stated that *Cosmopolitan* was "aimed less towards the family and more towards the modern young women. She can have a husband and children, but she doesn't live through them. We treat her as her own person, very involved in life."²² *Cosmopolitan* survives to this day as a mainstream magazine; it was able to survive throughout the 1970s despite such a forward-thinking message. This fact, along with numerous other instances of feminism in the media, shows that feminist beliefs have become an inevitable and integrated part of American society and culture. Clearly, things have changed in the post-*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* world, and the societal changes that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* brought in contrast to traditional media productions like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and the public outrage surrounding events like the Miss America Protests helped to further this progress. 

Endnotes

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- [2] Bonnie J. Dow, "Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and The Mary Tyler Moore Show" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 264.
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- [4] Rampton, "The Three Waves of Feminism," 2014.
- [5] Rampton, "The Three Waves of Feminism." 2014.
- [6] "To Tell or Not to Tell," *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, November 14, 1961.
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- [15] Dow, "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology," 135.
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- [20] "The Last Show," *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, March 19, 1977.
- [21] "The Last Show," 1977.
- [22] Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2004) 7.