

Epilogue

What the 1970s Can Teach Us about Feminist Media Reform

The women discussed throughout *Producing Feminism* created and supported groundbreaking television productions, helped keep networks running, and improved a host of workplace conditions for women in television. Yet their contributions have largely been forgotten. Attending to their labor and reform efforts therefore honors their legacies and enlarges our understanding of television and the women's movement. Along with this type of recollection, which is central to feminist historiography, considering the impact these women had on television also raises larger questions about the nature of feminist interventions in media: What do we imagine feminist media activism to be? Where and how do feminist politics manifest in media industries?

Asking these questions about the 1970s poses challenges, primarily because of our collective assumptions about the influence of the women's movement on media. During the many years that I worked on this project, when my health care providers, the person who cuts my hair, people who sat next to me on planes and trains, friends of friends at parties, and other relative strangers learned that I was writing a book about television and feminism in the 1970s, they would invariably recount a personal connection to the topic. Even if they were not born or were very young during the time of the women's movement, people were quick to name a beloved television character or program that, to them, expressed progressive gender politics.

Perhaps more than any other program, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and its protagonist, Mary Richards, have come to stand in for the triumph of feminism. In memorializing the actor Mary Tyler Moore at the time of her 2017 death, the *New York Times* hailed her as someone who "incarnated the modern woman," and

FIGURE 24. *Mary Tyler Moore* super-fan Oprah Winfrey interviews Moore in a replica of the WJM-TV newsroom built on the set of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, May 29, 2008.



author Jennifer Keishin Armstrong recounted how Moore “became a feminist icon as Mary Richards.”¹ Numerous high-profile TV showrunners, producers, and creators, including Oprah Winfrey, Tina Fey, Lena Dunham, and Rachel Bloom, have credited Mary Richards as the inspiration for their depictions of female independence and, in some cases, their own career achievements. Of these women, Winfrey expressed the most-pronounced fandom; over the years and as recently as in a 2020 Instagram post with Fey, Winfrey has paid homage to the program, describing Moore’s depiction of Richards as “an inspiration to us all” and as a model for her own personal and professional aspirations.² On *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey recreated the show’s opening credits, shared photos of her own fashion choices modeled on Richards’, and had a replica of the WJM newsroom and Mary’s apartment constructed on set to host a cast reunion.

Such strong attachments to a program or fictional character attest to the continued circulation and staying power of representation. Recalling these images offers emotional and personal satisfactions as much as insights about television history and feminism. I suspect feminist scholars are similarly compelled as they return to hallowed television content from the era. I, for one, am not immune. My early career journal article on *Wonder Woman* (ABC/CBS, 1975–79) and *Isis* (CBS, 1975–77) was rooted in childhood associations between the programs and my own awareness of women’s empowerment.³ Yet as we continue to mine the meaningfulness of such television programs and make sense of our affective and sentimental attachments to them, linking feminist impact on television so powerfully to content overshadows other ways that women’s liberation made inroads into television.

The ways we tell stories about feminism have consequences. As Clare Hemmings argues, histories and theories about feminism are filtered through “technologies of the presumed,” primarily academic narratives and institutionalized means of knowledge production and dissemination. This process should not be taken to mean that certain scholars, authors, and voices are more or less correct, per Hemmings. Rather, the value of investigating “collective repetition” lies in understanding the “production and reproduction” of such repetition.⁴ The prevalence of thought that correlates the influence of the women’s movement on television with representation not only defines what happened in the recent past

but also defines what meaningful feminist media activism is and how it registers in the present.

CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST MEDIA REFORM

Producing Feminism centers on women who challenged sexism through the workplaces of corporate network headquarters, local stations, public broadcasting centers, independent production companies, and network production departments. Their stories illustrate how institutional changes happen within historically specific conditions. They also suggest ways that feminist tactics can be adapted for different times and situations. Whether pooling material and intellectual resources, calling for more adequate reproductive health care coverage, creating mentoring relationships, building coalitions among workers, or insisting on dignity as well as economic parity in the workplace, actions represented in *Producing Feminism* tell us something about the possibilities of feminist workplace activism. At the very least they remind us that such activism is possible, and at most they model the means of achieving feminist goals within and beyond a particular industry.

A number of events have emerged since the 2010s that attest to the need for continued feminist reform of workplaces, media and otherwise. Widespread public knowledge of criminal conduct by Harvey Weinstein in 2017 amplified activist Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement. This intensification of the #MeToo movement has been identified by numerous feminists as a "watershed moment" that requires critical engagement in order to affect meaningful change. As journalist Sarah Jaffe argues, knowledge of widespread abuses potentially "unites women across a broad number of workplaces" and reorients feminism away from an "obsession with cracking glass ceilings and 'having it all,'" since even the most-powerful women are not immune from abuse.⁵ Other analyses of #MeToo complement Jaffe's by emphasizing the need for collectivity and radical challenges to material and structural conditions. Shelley Cobb and Tanya Horeck contend that to counter violence and mistreatment of women workers, we must "carefully unpack the systemic and institutionalized histories that continue to produce and sustain the conditions for gendered power imbalances and oppression."⁶ They also warn against misguided optimism: we should "not assume that the new visibility of feminist arguments about gendered inequality in the workplace will necessarily lead to the long-term structural changes so desperately needed."⁷

Rather than change priorities in light of #MeToo revelations, feminist media reform at the most prominent and influential levels continues to focus on visibility, generally measured by an increased presence of women on-screen and improved gender representations. These priorities are enunciated and reinforced through public-facing means: in celebrity interviews, acceptance speeches, and performative gestures at awards shows and in industry publications, reportage, and think pieces. Although not inconsequential or without value, contemporary image-based reform



FIGURE 25. A high-profile moment at the Seventy-Fourth Emmy Awards for feminist media reform: Geena Davis (center), alongside CEO and chair Madeline Di Nonno (right), accepts the Governor's Award and highlights the efforts of the Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media. Shonda Rhimes and Sarah Paulson (left) presented the award. Television Academy/NBC, September 14, 2022.

depends on the individual actions of industry players. It assumes that media companies can and will accept responsibility for sexism. It also imagines that images, decontextualized from their means of production, rectifies the problems of the industry.

When Geena Davis took the stage at the 2022 Emmy Awards show to accept the Governors Award on behalf of her eponymous institute, she called attention to the continued sexism in the television industry and described the type of reform it required. This type of public appearance has become typical for Davis, as the work she does on behalf of the Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media has been recognized on numerous awards stages and promoted in countless interviews and speeches Davis gives on behalf of the Institute. With its celebrity representative, corporate support, and research relationships with educational institutions and tech companies, the Institute sets the priorities of contemporary feminist media reform. Its considerable resources and the lack of other well-funded organizations focused on women in media mean that the Institute carries disproportionate weight in current conversations about gender equality in media.

Because of her celebrity and her authority as an industry insider, Davis is a foremost ambassador for feminist media reform, and she is given a platform to articulate the problems of and solutions to sexism in the media industries. As Vicky Ball and Melanie Bell argue, women's status in television and film production is "poorly understood and subjected to critical silence which is only occasionally interrupted by bouts of liberal handwringing when the *Palme d'Or* list is announced."⁸ By granting Davis a forum at the Emmys, the Oscars, and other high-visibility events, the film and television industry can signal concerns about sexism. Yet typical of the flimsy self-critique described by Ball and Bell, these periodic reminders about the industry's gender problems are isolated and short-lived. By promoting

easily enacted and achievable improvements to images of women and girls, the Institute assuages concerns about how the industry should deal with its sexism and offers solutions that are tolerable to it. Suggested remedies sideline complex and critical discussions of women workers; their systematic marginalization; and corrective, radical challenges to industry operations.

With its trademarked slogan, “If she can see it, she can be it,” the Institute aims to achieve quantifiable gender equality in representation. It prioritizes tools ranging from relatively simple checklists that screenwriters can use to check biases to the high-tech Geena Davis-Inclusion Quotient (GD-IQ), all of which promise to measure inequalities objectively and accurately. The GD-IQ is, as the Institute boasts, a “revolutionary tool,” the “first automated software tool to measure screen and speaking time in media content.”⁹ The precision of the automatic detection software promises to “calculate content detail to the millisecond” and excise human coding errors. The resulting data is presumed to reveal the flaws of representation in a given program, film, ad, or video game and, in turn, to prompt those responsible for such content to adapt and improve their gender politics.

The Institute’s particular investment in and definition of female empowerment are built and reinforced through relationships with other institutions. Collectively, their vision of media reform stresses representation. Ties to the University of Southern California, Google, LEGO, and Procter & Gamble offer the Institute resources, authority, and technological aptitude.¹⁰ Conversely, the contributions of scholars and software designers at these institutions are shaped by the agenda of the Institute; their research and design projects are influenced accordingly. The final point in this chain of institutional investments exists in the very media companies whose products the Institute analyzes.

The goal of image reform is intertwined with the Institute’s cultivation of industry-friendly relationships with media executives and creators. In her 2019 acceptance speech for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award, Geena Davis characterized executives at film, television, and video game companies as sympathetic to feminist principles. According to Davis, “to a person,” they thought that sexism had been “fixed.”¹¹ “They felt a responsibility to do right by girls and they thought they were,” Davis asserted, and concluded that “lack of awareness is the problem.”¹² As a remedy, the Institute focuses on the product of these companies—the image—rather than production, labor, and infrastructure behind images. This focus, not coincidentally, avoids systematic critique or analysis of investments and motivations rooted in maintenance of power. Other approaches are not just off the agenda, they are actively critiqued by Institute leaders. In a presentation delivered at a faculty seminar at the Television Academy in 2019, the Institute’s CEO and chair, Madeline Di Nonno, noted that, unlike “a lot of academics,” “we never shame and blame.”¹³ The Institute shares its findings about problematic or nonexistent female representations “in a private, collegial way,” as they indicate on their website.¹⁴ The need to gain the trust

of media owners and executives justifies this approach—“because if we’re going to talk to a major studio or business unit, and they are going to reveal to us their challenges,” Di Nonno argues, “we are not going to expose it in public.”¹⁵

In the current arrangement between the Institute and the industry, negotiations and persuasive moments happen privately and among individuals. This relationship is based on a presumption that media companies want to change and that the creation of a more inclusive product is the solution to the industry’s sexism. By this logic, educating industry players with power will, in turn, improve images of women. This approach calls to mind institutionalized diversity efforts that, by design, fail to provoke meaningful reform. The promise to neither shame nor blame secures the Institute’s continued access to centers of power and sets expectations for change at the level of what Sara Ahmed identifies as “good practice.”¹⁶ Through “good practice,” media companies, executives, and creatives can distinguish their efforts from the bare necessity of “compliance” with legal protections against discrimination and unequal opportunities; they instead enact a “set of practices that enable an organization ‘to look good.’”¹⁷ In the Institute’s approach, “good practice” corresponds with not just the performative nature of diversity work (i.e., looking good) but also an effective outcome (i.e., feeling good). Simply encouraging media executives to do better replaces actionable, accountable critique and structural change with what Ahmed calls the “performance of good feeling.”¹⁸ When Davis urged the audience at the 2019 Academy Awards to convert supporting and ensemble characters from male to female by simply crossing out and revising their names in scripts, she cheerfully promised them, “It’s simple. It’s fun.”¹⁹

Compared to media reform efforts of women production workers in the 1970s, the Institute’s efforts lack robustness, complexity, and efficacy. First, the Institute does not occupy the relationships women had and exploited with men in power, as the women’s network groups and other “borers-from-within” did. Instead, as a nonprofit company situated outside media companies, the Institute operates with less insider knowledge and influence. This means more tenuous contact with media executives, less proximity to them, and fewer points of contact with them. Second, the private nature of negotiations shields industry leaders from critique, unlike the very public ways that women’s groups aired the problems of the industry. Actions taken by the women’s committee of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) in 1973 demonstrate the impact of insider knowledge and industry accountability. The committee gathered and analyzed protected guild information on women’s employment figures and provided trade publications with the results, which then became public. In doing so, the women of the WGA produced indisputable evidence of sexist hiring practices that “publicly shamed networks and production companies, establishing a template that would be used by other industry professionals, particularly those organizing within their guild, for generations to come.”²⁰ Finally, the Institute’s reform goals focus on images, while the worker-oriented reform of the 1970s holistically dealt with hiring practices as well as representation

and concerned itself with the experiences of work for women on sets and in writers' rooms, offices, and boardrooms.

The limitations of the Institute's approach to media reform bear summation here. Merely seeing something does not translate to access or lack of institutional barriers. Emphasizing improved representations as the panacea for sexism in media overlooks media workplaces as spaces of exploitation, disempowerment, disrespect, and danger for women and other marginalized workers. Privileging discussions of contact with executives and high-level creators imagines that production workers on the whole and, more specifically, those at less visible levels bear no influence over images or could not be helpful allies. Postulating that powerful media players merely need educating about sexism uncritically assumes that they are not invested in maintaining a system of inequality. Overall, the Institute fails to heed feminist guidance in the aftermath of #MeToo: that meaningful solutions to gender inequalities must contend with structural and historical conditions of oppression and exclusion rather than visibility alone.

WORKER-ORIENTED REFORM: WAYS FORWARD

In 2021, seventeen years after it was founded, the Geena Davis Institute started to pay attention to workers in the form of a report, *Behind the Scenes: State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writing*. The Institute partnered with the Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity (TTIE), an offshoot of Women in Film (WIF), which had been publishing this report annually since 2019. TTIE advocates for inclusion of and improved working conditions for historically marginalized and underrepresented writers in the industry, and the organization itself is composed of queer, BIPOC, disabled, and women writers. Partnering with TTIE is a crucial step in enlarging and complicating the Geena Davis Institute's univocal approach to reform. TTIE offers the Institute a way to tether their priorities of representation to media workforces and to consider how the conditions of media work could afford more meaningful and diverse representations. TTIE lobbies for the importance of "creating more opportunities for accurate and authentic storytelling" along with the goal of "increasing inclusion and improving working conditions for all TV writers, in particular those from underrepresented communities."²¹

Significantly, TTIE's reports do not rely solely on demographic employment statistics. When they do call upon statistical data, they foreground its limitations and the ways it can be manipulated or misinterpreted. In their 2021 *Behind the Scenes* report, TTIE indicated that data "seems" to reflect increased employment for underrepresented workers in television writing, but this information is "somewhat skewed by 'clustering,' where shows that focus on underrepresented communities are staffed primarily with writers from that community." This report also notes that "many rooms still do not include any Disabled, Deaf, LGBTQIA+, or age 50+ lower-level writers."²²

TTIE's reports also provide evidence offered by workers to illustrate intolerable conditions and structural problems within workplaces. For example, the 2021 report indicates, in the wake of #MeToo, a rise in "covert forms of harassment and bullying" that "are creeping into the workplace, especially with the shift to virtual rooms."²³ Exclusionary practices are also understood as historically and context specific. Since the start of the Covid pandemic in 2020, TTIE found that hiring decisions have been "risk-averse" (i.e., stories that feature white leads and are written by "proven" overrepresented writers). Finally, the reports include concrete action plans to rectify workplace exploitation, abuse, and hostility. They describe what allyship for overrepresented workers looks like; how unpaid work involved in development and competitive pitching ("bake-offs") thwarts inclusivity; and the dynamics of gaslighting and microaggressions, tokenism, lack of agency, and lack of retention efforts in workplace cultures. The 2022 report broke down these action items for specific industry players: Networks/Studios/Streamers/Production Companies, Showrunners, Agents/Managers, and Guild/Unions.²⁴

TTIE's emphasis on workers' experience and their cautionary outlook on data echoes concerns of feminist reform efforts that are threaded throughout *Producing Feminism*. This resonance suggests that media reform efforts of the 1970s offer valuable lessons for the present and could enrich current reform approaches. The Women's Advisory Council at CBS, for example, tracked real and experiential on-the-job changes for women to guard against inflated and misleading statistics on women's employment gains in television. Secretaries and researchers pointed out inaccuracies in claims about women's placement in jobs, and vice presidents raised concerns about the decreased value of executive titles once women earned them in significant numbers. These issues, raised in the early 1970s, resonated with other women's groups and their ongoing investigations into employment, including AWR's 1972 study and the WGA Women's Committee's 1974 report, described in chapter 3. Organized efforts and observational evidence by and about women workers gauged what employment actually meant for women. Their challenges to industry claims of equal employment opportunities presaged other reports, including *Window Dressing on the Set*, conducted by the US Commission on Civil Rights in 1977, which investigated inflated and misleading statistical employment gains for women.

RETURNING TO THE FEMINIST PAST

In her exploration of the feminist past, Victoria Hesford asks, "How has the history of women's liberation been produced; what stories have been constructed and disseminated as memories of women's liberation, in the mass mediated public sphere as well as the subcultural worlds of feminist and queer studies?"²⁵ Other feminist scholarship augments received histories to, as Anne Enke describes it, "admit a broader set of actors and agendas into the history of the movement."²⁶ When we

challenge perceptions that reduce the feminist past to “two parallel movements of white middle-class women that culminated in the founding of NOW and in the rise of the radical women’s liberation movement,” Susan Hartmann argues that “different narratives emerge.”²⁷ As I hope to have shown in *Producing Feminism*, the role women media workers played in expressing the ideas of the movement adds further complexity to its history.

Looking to the past, as Annie Berke does in her study of women television writers in the 1950s, complicates notions of progress for women. By figuring how “earliness” in many media industries, television included, involved periods of time before women and people of color were expelled from the ranks of workers, Berke challenges “a broader cultural fallacy of liberalism and perpetual progress: things must be better for women *now*, because it was worse *before*.”²⁸ It is tempting to think that the impediments women television workers faced in the 1970s originated in a prefeminist era, as an artifact of the times. Dress codes forbade them from wearing pants, and policies dictated that they ask permission to use the bathroom. Requests to take on prestigious producing projects were presumed to be “greedy” and unprofessional. Their presence raised questions of how writers’ rooms should be run, how scripts were created and edited, and whose voices were suitable for broadcasting. Their health care coverage and support for parenting were inadequate, and their reproductive status created financial burdens and occupational precarity for them. It is remarkable that women changed these conditions for the better in the 1970s. Equally remarkable is how relevant these issues are in the present. Now more than ever, feminist reform strategies matter. At the time of writing this conclusion, the US Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade*, and major corporations like Starbucks are engaging in flagrant union-busting actions. Warehouse workers at Amazon are denied bathroom breaks and are subjected to a humiliating lack of autonomy and respect. And, of course, debates have arisen anew about women’s suitability for a variety of jobs across media industries.

Returns to the past trouble presumptions of the past’s disconnectedness from the present—or at the very least clear distance from it. Feminist histories of labor illuminate the conditions of the present, not least for workers themselves. As Denise McKenna points out, when someone encounters abuses of power in a system, historical knowledge counters assumptions that it is that person’s responsibility or that it is an individualized issue. Instead, we can see that inequalities and exclusions are “baked into the system,” and this knowledge provides us with the energy and confidence to resist, critique, and reform. Histories of workers and workplace activism counter a “flow of history” that “wants to continue on its path and collect more and more material to justify the understanding of it in a certain kind of way.”²⁹

Producing Feminism works to interrupt that flow by expanding histories of the women’s liberation movement to include activism in television production. This mode of scholarship does not just add to what we think we know about the

feminist past and its viability in the present, it reorients it. Behind representations are corresponding and co-constitutive infrastructures and systems, material circumstances and everyday practices of production, and resistant strategies that emerge in all of these contexts. Feminists were there, doing that work and contending with those circumstances. Their legacies are largely absent from histories of television and from current conversations about how to best reform media. This book attempts to amend that.