Book Review:

Clark, Jennifer S. *Producing Feminism: Television Work in the Age of Women's Liberation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024)

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Keywords: *Feminism*, *Television Production*, *Women Employed in Television Industry*, *Sex Discrimination*

Producing Feminism is a fascinating new study of feminist roles inside television production in the 1970s. This valuable addition to broadcasting history and to women's history in the United States contrasts other scholarly work in this field, which focuses primarily on feminist activism, such as pressuring stations with petitions to deny licenses, or images on screen, such as the rise of the employed single woman on sitcoms (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, e.g.). The production studies approach brings new women into the history of feminism and the history of television, such as Eleanor Sanger Riger, who battled workplace discrimination as she produced sports programs for ABC. This approach also shows that the links between the women's movement and television are deeper than earlier accounts allow, as they extend to the ways that workers who identified as feminists changed their work spaces in large and small ways.

Producing Feminism joins the work of Allison Perlman and others in showing how the women's movement reshaped television in complex ways. Although television was hostile to feminism and television co-opted feminism, feminists still used television as a political weapon and brought feminist principles to the industry, particularly as they improved the workplace at television stations and at networks. At the same time, workers in the television industry (some who identified as feminists and some who did not) improved the representation of women on screen. Clark shows that television executives were, in some cases, more

responsive to workplace demands from feminist employees than they were to activists' efforts to gain more favorable television coverage of their movement. Her approach allows readers to see "the presence and efficacy of feminist influence within the television industry," regardless of the on-screen depiction of feminism. Even when networks resisted calls to improve the representation of the women's movement, largely because they believed political pressure should not determine their decisions about programming, networks were more open to feminist activism in and about the workplace. Women's groups at work formed at all the networks in the early 1970s. The Women's Action Committee at CBS, founded in 1972, won many improvements for women, including more appointments of women in managerial positions, childcare benefits, and raises.

Clark is right to bring the workplace reform groups out of the shadows. She sets up a comparison, in which the "inside" activists fared better than the activists on the "outside," such as the feminists who organized the petitions to deny licenses based on violations of the Fairness Doctrine. Yet it could be fruitful to see the insiders and the outsiders as working in tandem, with the pressure from outsiders helping the insiders. For example, when individual stations entered agreements to settle the petitions to deny their licenses (as opposed to the petitions lodged against networks, featured in Clark's analysis), the stations usually set up women's advisory committees, which worked to improve labor practices and programming. Unlike the network committees analyzed by Clark, the advisory committees at local stations were groups of community leaders.

Most readers will be familiar with the television spectacle of Billie Jean King defeating Bobby Riggs in the *Battle of the Sexes*. But Clark introduces us to other landmarks in women's sports on television, such as the *Colgate Women's Sports Special* (ABC, 1974), which featured King. Eleanor Riger, the producer, created space for King to discuss gender discrimination, and she encouraged ABC to hire King as a broadcaster. Riger's feminist framework shaped her productions and her efforts to improve the status of women workers at the network. In the case study of women's sports on television, as in the other case studies in this book, Clark emphasizes the progress of feminist activists and the resistance they faced. Riger, for example, was treated as a "token hire," but also successfully advocated for "female talent" and broadened the possibilities for women's sports on screen.

In rich detail, Clark demonstrates how the women who worked for Tandem, Norman Lear's production company, took political risks and challenged gender and genre conventions with shows. Lear hired the head of Los Angeles National Organization for Women (NOW), Virginia Carter, even though she had no background in television. She educated Lear about the women's movement and other political movements and was a liaison between the company and protest groups in debates over representation of gay characters and Black families, for example. Carter was also pivotal in bringing the *Maude* abortion episodes to the screen, despite the objections of network censors and right-wing groups.

Clark also examines the work of Ann Marcus, one of the creators of *All That Glitters*, a show that built on the success of the experimental show *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. *All That Glitters* tried to make fun of the sexist workplace and objectified men. Although this show was not a success, Marcus and other writers continued to bring feminist themes to programming and their workplaces as their careers progressed. A similar dynamic occurred in

public television, when feminists–the "serious sisters"–created public affairs programs, such as *Women Alive!*, created largely by Ms. Magazine and advertised as a televised version of the publication. These creators were often disappointed that the programs ended too soon or did not reach a wide enough audience, yet the writers, directors, and producers went on to shape other programs and institutions.

Here, Clark might have considered in more depth how "women's" programs were treated as special interest shows or minority programs, along with Black Power programs, and how activists resisted these categories. Feminists complained about being marginalized by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), even though women were a majority of the population. They asserted that men's programs were specialized, not women's. This argument did not convince the CPB. Clark compares three programs on public television: *Yes We Can*, *Woman Alive*!, and *In Her Own Right*. This chapter opens the window on to the larger wave of feminist public affairs programming of the 1970s, including *Woman*; *Wide World of Women*; *For You*, *Black Woman*; and *Now We're Talking*. It is beyond the scope of Clark's study to analyze the variety of programs in this surge, but her work helps point the way for future scholars to assess the rise and fall of feminist programs like these.

As Clark shows, television critics blamed women, feminists, and "feminization" for the poor quality of television, even as feminists brought serious, innovative programs to the screen. Television critics charged that special interest groups, such as the women's movement, subverted the editorial authority of television executives. When NOW challenged the license of WABC-TV in New York City, it charged that its programming throughout the day was biased against women; television's image of women was one-sided, NOW leaders asserted. The Federal Communications Commission rejected this claim, deferring to the editorial control of program managers and television executives, but it also argued that the diversification of the workforce would lead to more varied representations of women. This policy framework is a powerful reminder of why Clark's study of feminists in television production is necessary and important. Broadcasting policy shaped the feminist agenda. It pushed feminist hopes for radical changes in television into production. Historians and media scholars will find that this book is well worth their time.