

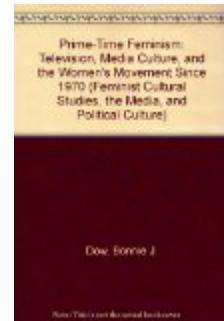
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bonnie J. Dow. *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. xvi + 240 pp.

Bonnie J. Dow. *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. xxvi + 240 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1554-0; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3315-5.

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Published on H-Women (September, 1997)



In 1970, Virginia Slims Cigarettes greeted women with the slogan, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby." By congratulating American women for earning the right to smoke without the Marlboro Man's assistance, advertisers succinctly wrapped feminism in an ideology of consumer progress. Other writers in the mass media repeated the cheerful corporate message. *Time* magazine asked "You've Come a Long Way, Baby?" in a cover article about women's liberation, and *T.V. Guide* editors headlined their piece on the premiere of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* as "You've Come a Long Way, Baby." As media scholar Bonnie J. Dow indicates, the slogan reflected television's main approach to feminism in 1970. If *Mary Tyler Moore* marked an advance for feminists over earlier shows like *Father Knows Best*, the show also suggested the ideological limitations of television for feminist viewers.

Dow builds on several accounts of recent feminist history, including Alice Echols's *Daring to Be Bad*.^[1] Her approach also draws on many recent feminist interpretations of television by writers including Susan J. Douglass and Lynn Spigel.^[2] Like these historians, Dow builds on two differing schools of thought about the history of the media. Dow not only criticizes the mediation of feminism by the culture industry, she also has a keen eye for television's pleasures and counterhegemonic moments. The resulting, sometimes contradictory, reading of history in *Prime Time Feminism* complicates our understanding of the medium's messages for feminists.

According to Dow, in 1970 the title character of *The*

Mary Tyler Moore Show, Mary Richards, became television's first liberal feminist; she was an attractive, single, white, heterosexual woman who had chosen a career over marriage. The show made history by exploring second-wave feminist themes, appearing after the foundation of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966, and shortly after the August 1970 "Strike for Equality" led by NOW leader Betty Friedan. Alongside liberal feminists like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, Mary Richards became an important historical actor in her own right, bringing the question of career opportunities for women to a large audience. Dow writes, "What Mary Richards and Gloria Steinem had in common was the potential to make liberation marketable." Dow believes the media including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* helped make the Equal Rights Amendment the major feminist cause of the 1970s.^[3]

Mary Richards was an attractive character for television producers and advertisers seeking to promote a softer form of feminism. In contrast to the other female characters on the show, Mary Richards had the talent to "make it on her own." As Dow argues, this program's focus on rugged individualism overlooked broader cultural and systemic problems with gender discrimination that affected all women. Mary Richards remained subordinate to her male co-workers. Liberated from the nuclear family, she found a place in a workplace family that mirrored the prevailing domestic ideology of the era. Thus, *Mary Tyler Moore* reinforced a media tendency to avoid more radical feminist criticisms of the gender system offered in this period by leaders such as Ti-Grace Atkinson

and Kate Millet.[4]

Sitcoms after *Mary Tyler Moore* signaled major changes in feminism. Dow approves most of one show, *Designing Women*, which sailed against the prevailing wind of postfeminism in the 1980s. Dow defines postfeminism as a tendency to assume gender equality, and to give up on radical feminism. In the reactionary historical context during the Reagan years, *Designing Women* raised significant feminist criticisms, particularly about sexual politics. In the episode, "The Women of Atlanta," for instance, a magazine asks to photograph two of the main characters from *Designing Women*. When the pair learn that the pictorial will portray them as sex objects, they refuse to participate. "It's too bad (the photographer is) not doing the real women of Atlanta," the character Julie comments. "The real women of Atlanta are the blue-haired ladies who still play bridge at Merrimac's tearoom." [5]

Throughout this study, Dow shows a keen appreciation for these sorts of gems. This emphasis helps discourage what I like to call the Elvis Presley school of media criticism. In one celebrated incident in the 1970s, Elvis drew a pistol in his Las Vegas hotel room and shot the television set. [6] As Dow implies, some scholars continue to rely on a similar sentiment in their discussions of commercial television. Dow offers a persuasive counterargument for feminists by exploring the history of several fairly progressive television situation comedies.

I only wish Dow had followed through further on her promise of scholarly innovation. For the most part, she positions the study in opposition to excessively familiar arguments about the mass media. Dow pays too much attention to destroying Ivory Tower barricades that have fewer defenders left in the academy than the Berlin Wall. Dow is least convincing when she presses her point about appreciating television to imply that only snobs can criticize television viewing as a social practice. She seems too unconcerned that Americans since 1970 got most of their information about feminism from sources like situation comedies.

In *Prime Time Feminism*, Dow mainly indicates a preference for the feminism of shows like *Designing Women* to shows like *Murphy Brown*. Ironically, this aspect of *Prime Time Feminism* resembles the liberal, "lifestyle" feminism Dow criticizes; in some sections, the book reads like a feminist version of *TV Guide*. Dow believes aficionados trying to "dissect" their own pleasures and in-

terests in commercial entertainment are the best media critics. She asks readers to be skeptical of media scholars who claim not to appreciate television "on its own terms," arguing that "(c)ritics of popular culture should favor a swing in the opposite direction." However, as most of the evidence in *Prime Time Feminism* suggests, since 1970 television's "terms" often severely limited the public conversation about feminism. [7]

In the late-1990s, feminists and other progressive thinkers face more disturbing obstacles than the snobbery that continues to linger in the library stacks. The Philistines in Washington calling for an end to government funding in the arts and humanities also defend the popular taste in corporate-sponsored entertainment against the sins of elitism. Writers may find this similarity troubling. Dow's over-appreciation for television consumerism coincides with the latest wave of anti-intellectualism in American culture. She should be more ambivalent about her position as an educated television viewer. Although *Prime Time Feminism* raises many important questions about the role of the mass media in recent feminist history, Dow offers few clues as to why dedicated television viewers should stop channel surfing long enough to read it.

Notes

[1]. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989.

[2]. Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, New York: Random House, 1994; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

[3]. Dow, *Prime Time Feminism*, pp. 32, 52.

[4]. Ibid., p. 28.

[5]. Ibid., pp. 88, 120.

[6]. Red West, Sonny West, Dave Hebler, Steve Dunleavy, *Elvis: What Happened?*, Ballantine, 1977; Albert Goldman, *Elvis*, McGraw Hill, 1981.

[7]. Dow, pp. xii-xiii.

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Citation: David Alexander Hyde. Review of Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970* and Dow, Bonnie J., *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement since 1970*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

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