

Jennifer S. Clark, **Producing Feminism: Television Work in the Age of Women's Liberation**, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024, 218 pp. \$34.95 (paperback).

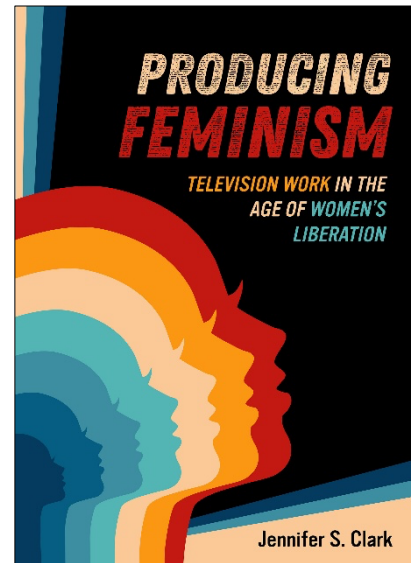
Reviewed by
Rachel R. Reynolds
Drexel University

Producing Feminism: Television Work in the Age of Women's Liberation works to redress the imbalance where feminist studies in television tend toward readings of representational content. Jennifer S. Clark has given us a deeply investigative study of changing workplace cultures. She does this through a series of historical case studies spanning approximately from 1970 to 1977, set especially in the loosely defined historical moment of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Both introduction and epilogue chapters make a case for learning how “women got their feminist visions to air and into the workplace” (p. 4). Clark centers on production studies as kind of “evaluative tool” and part of “constructed histories of media activism” (p. 5) to make feminist inquiry that recuperates how and where women dealt with issues of invisibility and marginalization, sexist work cultures, and the need to justify programming by persuading men that female audiences were interested in more than detergents and cosmetics and then generating new shows with feminist content. Anyone interested in feminist media studies of any kind, and those interested in marginalized peoples and the television industry, should have this book in their collection and in mind.

The second chapter is about women's work groups within the big three broadcasting companies, NBC, ABC, and CBS. Forming in the late 60s and early 70s, they tried to secure greater presence and power for women workers. Clark draws on archives around the United States to find meeting minutes and personal notes and to extrapolate from relatively incomplete employment data to give us a picture of the state of the life of women in these networks as feminist reform was starting to take root. She shows how feminist principles of inclusiveness looked at the time, where groups actively brought women into strategy and policy groups from phone operators and clerks to executive secretaries and production assistants.

The chapter ultimately shows how CBS became perhaps the most progressive network, partly because of women's successes at structural change around underemployment, underutilization of women's talents, and the problems of unmeaningful promotion. For example, she looks at how in the early 70s, hollow titles without changes in job function or salary were often given to women in order for male-run network leadership to claim they were following new FCC regulations on increased hiring and promotion of women (and for that matter, people of color). Women's groups actively documented facts about these issues, using them to expose the problem and argue with some success to get job task descriptions and remuneration standardized across job categories, and thus equalizing important aspects of the workplace for minority groups. Changes like these were crucial to altering workplace structures, placing people on



promotion trajectories, and (in the longer term) changing workplace cultures. This is only one issue of many that Clark examines, and all make for great reading.

The third chapter goes into a different kind of historical detail, focusing on ABC and the careers of Billie Jean King as a feminist activist and sports announcer, as well as Eleanor Sanger Riger, one of the earliest woman television sports producers. Above all, this chapter is the strongest teaching chapter in media studies. Each chapter deals with patriarchy and changing workplace culture, but this one has exceptional discussions around the feminist work ethic (we must be better than them to prove we are as good), anger over sexist practices like not inviting women to production meetings (well-documented, as women kept records for several discrimination lawsuits, and Clark makes these files and notes come alive), or claims that women are not psychologically made for supposedly male-oriented issues like hard news or men's sports broadcasting. This chapter also emphasizes something other chapters do not, which is how normalizing a sports genre like women's tennis has a great deal to do with changing social norms (although if you teach this chapter, you will have to cover Title IX history yourself, as it is curiously only mentioned once or twice). Importantly, Clark shows us how Riger kept afloat in a deeply sexist environment by taking control of "feminized" sports broadcasts (featuring both men and women) such as for tennis, equestrian events, and the Olympics. Riger's work also largely defined women's sports in content and scope, especially the aesthetics of storytelling in sports around competitiveness, drive, and women athletes' experiences, illustrating the roots of how we regard women athletes in mass media today.

The fourth chapter provides the back story of how physicist Virginia Carter arrived by special invitation at Norman Lear's Tandem company to work as a kind of jack-of-all-trades in production while also acting as a high-level liaison to interest groups like the National Organization for Women (Carter had been in the leadership of the Los Angeles branch), and the Congress of Racial Equality. Carter's job was to represent Lear and his television companies to interest groups while also synthesizing these groups' concerns to help Lear's organization create programming that captured audiences by tapping into the zeitgeist. In another section of the chapter, there is a study of the many women workers behind the feminist satirical show *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (pp. 79–91). The show not only generated international buzz around feminism and the possibilities for reaching mainstream feminist audiences, but it was also a conduit for women writers, producers, and directors who were to become women industry professionals in the 1980s. And the chapter meticulously details the give-and-take between Lear and the women working on various shows in his company, bringing to light how women were often central to creating shows on a fine line of palatability to the general public and ideologically more challenging than the "least objectional programming" (p. 99) principle that guided television so narrowly in the 1970s.

The last chapter is about experimental feminist shows on public television, both affiliates and in syndication. There are three shows profiled here, but the most fun and provocative is about *Woman Alive!* (1974–1977; see pp. 128–241), which successfully deployed experimental feminist principles of collaborative and horizontal television production. In some seasons, it offered interview and magazine style pieces, as well as progressive mini-documentaries about regional women's issues especially around labor, which made it a success with audiences around the country (Clark's fan mail material was great reading and used in an interesting way to analyze audience development). The chapter takes on heft by a

discussion of the show's funders, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and *Ms. Magazine*. We learn about critique from both the left feminist press (*Off Our Backs*) and in mainstream sources. There is quite a bit about the potential appeal or lack of appeal that Steinem had for the viewing public, but it is not well-organized. I found this synthesis well-worth reading for the details but hard to come to any conclusions about.

Overall, reading this book accrues to the reader a strong sense of the systemic issues that women have long faced in television and the roadmap for how they were overcome in the past. It also demonstrates how to organize and create effective women's groups or at least forms of solidarity that work from the ground up, something that I suspect we may need more of in the future; reading it today, one might be inspired to lean more into the idea that complacency about women's equality leads to the deliberate erosion of legal power available to achieve and maintain that equality. Clark's research and analysis of footnotes and citations are a model of how to use archives, meeting agendas, personal notes, and published interviews to understand how complex struggles over power in the workplace played out.

The book already densely covers many issues, but I think it would have benefited from a more overt discussion of the spectrum of feminist groups and feminisms of the time. The author often briefly touches on how feminism is overtaken by capitalism and that radical feminism is compromised and eclipsed in workplace studies, but the framework is not very deep. That said, this book's strengths lie in the level of how it informs about audience, creative control, and women's stances on their own work in the industry. A second slight criticism is that this book might have benefited from an examination of what it means to create a women-centered media history that must at times acknowledge the range of dispositions of men in power. Of course, Clark is right to overtly resist creating a hagiography of Norman Lear, for example, as we have enough of those. But the lack of in-depth discussion of men's power means that I walk away from this book not understanding why women's groups failed to advance their cases at NBC and ABC. The problem is that most of the time, these remarkable and persistent women had to continually wrest concessions in decision making, budgeting, and content control from men (or fail at it and go elsewhere). In our politically dug-in times, I wonder if a deeper sense of patriarchal men's frames of minds could have taught us a lot more about strategic feminist stances and how those stances affected feminist action. Regardless, scholars interested in this issue should read Clark's book.