

The Price For Finding Me Was Losing You:

The Rise of the Workplace Comedy With the Rise of the Working Woman

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In the early 1970s, the face of televisions changed with the introduction of a new type of family. The idea of family changed through the decades, starting in the late 40's with television situational comedies like *The Goldbergs*, and continuing into the 50's with shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, and finally to the blended family of the *Brady Bunch* in the 60's. It wasn't until the early 1970's, particularly with shows produced by MTM Enterprises like the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, when a new type of family was introduced to television audiences. Television shows that focused on this new type of family would become megahits of the 1970s and would continue to grow well into the new millennium and become the most predominant family type of television comedy today. If it had not been for the introduction of women into the workforce and the feminist movement throughout the 60's, then television would never have seen the workplace comedy become a staple of the television landscape.

From the 1940's to late 1960's, situational comedies on television often focused their stories on the family, and the primary location of those tales was the family living room. In the early 70's a dramatic shift from family environments appearing on TV shifted towards workplace environments (Dow, 1990). It would be hard to imagine the field of television or media studies without the material of shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M*A*S*H*, and *Barney Miller* to analyze and examine.

Mirroring this shift on television was the increase of women and minorities into the American workforce. Through the civil rights and women's liberation movements of the 1960's, a new social landscape had been created for the 1970's. Women and minorities were receiving more access to financial aid programs, allowing them to attend colleges and universities and achieve higher education levels, which in turn gave them

more opportunities in the workforce where they gained economic advancement in corporate America (Foss, 2008). As society continued to face issues of race, gender and even generational differences, television began to march these issues in front of the camera and into the forefront of American minds. As society changed, so did television audiences.

Television had been considered a feminine medium for years (Newman & Levine, 2011). Advertisers and producers focused on women and designed the majority of their programming for them; after all they made up at least half of the demographics of their viewers. When the majority of television's viewing audience stayed home and tended to the house and family, creating shows about the workforce would instantly alienate half of a network's audience.

Birthisel and Martin (2013) proposed that television shows and programming depends on viewers understanding and comprehending cultural and societal ideas and norms in order to appreciate a television show. If women didn't have the experience or knowledge or understanding of the workforce or corporate life, then they wouldn't enjoy or appreciate the programming that revolved around the workplace.

Suddenly, through the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960's, in addition to the necessity of more income to achieve the American dream painted by advertisers and television, wives and mothers began entering the workforce. From 1975-2009 mothers with children under 18 in the workforce grew from 47.7% to 71.6% (Bianchi, 2011).

Pinsker (1995) describes how, as Jewish immigrants, his family was very weary of television when it was first introduced. When they were introduced to another Jewish

immigrant family on TV, *The Goldbergs*, they suddenly saw a positive spin to this new technology. He sees the popularity of the sitcoms in the 1970's, even though they were such a departure from previous decades of sitcoms, due to audiences being able to relate to them in more ways than they had been able to relate to sitcoms in the past. As a child, it didn't take Pinsker long to realize that the people he saw on TV weren't like anyone he knew in his own life. As Birthisel and Martin (2013) explained, the more realistic a show is to an audience, the more popular it is likely to become. When a show needs to be credible, it adds realism.

Much the way African Americans were drawn to *Amos N' Andy* in the 1950s, and Pinsker and his family were drawn to a show about Jewish immigrants, people were drawn to *All in the Family*, where audiences could relate to the sound of a flushing toilet that was heard for the first time on national television or to their bigot father or uncle (Pinsker, 1995). It was real and realism was now king.

People typically had no idea what the fathers of the 50's and 60's sitcoms did for a living. During those early decades of television, the majority of the audience wasn't in the workforce, so there was a lack of interest in showing it. As women started to enter the workforce, they sought not only the realism, and therefore wanted to know what those fathers did for a living, but could now share in the knowledge of that workplace environment and the people who lived in it.

Women were entering the workforce and that was changing the landscape of America. The makeup of television would also have to change if it was going to continue to capture the female audience. There were always shows with women, but now women

were more than just homemakers. They were in the workforce. Networks knew that those women would want to see themselves on the screen just as they had in the past.

Before the 1970's, television presented a particular image of the female. Dow (1990) categorizes the basic character types of females in pre-70's sitcoms as being that of the housewife, the bitch, the victim or the courtesan. The most common representation of the American woman was that of the good-hearted mother who put family above everything (Troop, 2006).

In the late 1960's, the character of Ann Marie was introduced to television audiences in the television show *That Girl*, a show about an adventurous young woman embarking out into the big city. Although the success of the late 60's sitcom *That Girl* is hailed as a step forward in the representation of women on television, the titular character still always had the protection of her parents and fiancé, just in case something should have gone wrong (Dow 1990). It wasn't until the premiere of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* that a show about a truly independent woman, with no male figure to fall back on, struck out on her own and became successful.

Fast-forward to the late 1970s and the face of television had completely changed. Single women were represented in most time slots and networks and in every type of sitcom. Women were in the office, they were striking out on their own and they were pursuing careers. They were breaking the stereotypes that were created in the decades before. Women could now pursue the jobs that they felt they deserved. They were more than the sex objects that entertained the primarily male workforce and they could now belittle the men who made those inappropriate and undesired sexual advances (Kutulas, 1998).

The typical late 70's and early 80's sitcom changed the face of the workplace to more accurately reflect the face of the real workplace. That era of television presented a work environment where everyone benefited from women's liberation. Real men supported women and the bad men held onto their misogynistic ways. Even the traditional family unit was taking a backseat to the workplace environment. Husbands and wives were rarely if ever seen, such as the ever-absent Vera in *Cheers* (Kutulas, 1998). Mistresses and adulterous partners were rarely seen in sitcoms of the past, and now, it appeared that the traditional family had become the mistress to the workplace family.

In looking at late 70's and early 80's television shows and finding the common threads that run through them all, no television show from that era seems to embody the themes, ideas and concepts of the time better than that of *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978-1984). While maintaining the concept of the traditional family through transferring the traditional archetypes of mother, father and children into the workplace, it also reinforces the feminist ideas of the times through the two female characters of the show, Bailey Quarters played by Jan Smithers, and Jennifer Marlowe played by Loni Anderson.

Situational comedies have become a cornerstone of television programming. No matter what the setting of the sitcom, be it a radio station, a mobile army surgical hospital in Korea or even the family living room, the situational comedy focuses on a group of people, be it a traditional or non-traditional family unit with any combination of mother, father and children, or be it a workplace with those very same archetypes. Cantor (1991) proposed that the success of these situational comedies is due to the centuries old

morality tale at the heart of each episodic series. Cantor explained the fundamental idea of the morality tale is to allow family units to solve problems through love.

WKRP in Cincinnati introduced America to a fledgling radio station as program manager Andy Travis, played by Gary Sandy, is brought in to turn the station around. His answer is to change the station's format from Big band to Rock n' Roll. Among the roadblocks to this transition is the "Big Guy," Arthur Carlson (Gordon Jump), owner of the station, tacky and chauvinist salesman Herb Tarlek (Frank Bonner) who's obnoxious advances were only overpowered by his obnoxious fashion sense, and news director Les Nessman (Richard Sanders) who was more interested in hog futures than the hottest news topics of the day. On Andy's side in the transition is washed up deejay Johnny Fever (Howard Hesseman) who has a strong anti-establishment streak represented by his exile from the FM channels due to his use of the word "booger" live on the air. Blond bombshell Jennifer Marlowe throws the stereotypical blonde persona upside down as the sexy, yet incredibly brilliant receptionist who refuses to fetch coffee or take dictation. Venus Flytrap (Tim Reid), the black nighttime deejay, and Bailey Quarters, the smart and competent traffic manager, round up the station's staff.

The nature of families in the American sitcom is not only to make fun of and deceive each, but is also there to support, provide peace and solve the family unit's problems (Cantor, 1991). *WKRP* fits this idea perfectly, as each character has his or her own quirky behavior that allows the other characters to poke fun at them. Whether it is Tarlek's misogynistic attitudes and awful suits, or Johnny Fever's aloofness brought on by his past drug use, or Les Nessman's imaginary office walls, none of the characters are perfect, and it allows for those imperfections to create problems to solve.

Since women were entering the workforce, television shows could now use the setting of the workplace to present the same morality plays it had been presenting in the past decades, only with newer settings and updated issues (Cantor, 1991). The changes and attitudes of society could be seen in the night and day differences in the conclusions of some of these problems. For instance, the infamous episode of *Father Knows Best*, in which Betty decides she wants to be an engineer, only to be laughed at and belittled until she sheds her work boots and returns to her dress stands in stark contrast to the episode of WKRP entitled, "Bailey's Show." In the very first season, Bailey is given the opportunity to produce her own radio show by program director Andy Travis. While Nessman and Tarlek toss insults her way, she is still supported by others at the station. Despite accidentally putting a self-proclaimed child psychiatrist on the air that winds up being a lunatic, the station still surrounds and supports Bailey and convinces her to continue producing. In the end it is Tarlek and Lessman who are belittled as the shy Bailey finally stands up to them and tells them both to "shut up!"

Due to the short amount of time that sitcoms had to tell their stories, characters had to be close. This closeness allowed them to open up and share problems with one another. In order to tell these stories and have characters interact so closely, these family-like bonds had to be formulated (Dow, 1990). Throughout the show's four-year run, the characters in the show make up the dynamics of a family in the workplace, but with several of the traditional roles being gender swapped. While at times all of the characters could be considered the children of the family, the character most would assume would be the father figure, the "Big Guy" Arthur Carlson, is much more one of

the children of the station, even wearing a conductor's hat and playing with his model train set or as with the first time he is introduced, playing with his new fishing rod.

Much like the advice spewing fathers of shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, there always seems to be the wise sage in workplace comedies who can help solve problems and present the solution to the children's issues. Workplace comedies often allow for more role reversals than in the more traditional family sitcoms, but typically there is the one fatherly character that dispenses all the right advice and helps the other characters solve their problems. There is also the nurturing, motherly character that really cares about everyone and is there to support them when they need a shoulder.

The character that is closest to the father figure would be that of Jennifer Marlowe, the station's receptionist. She is easily the most wise of the bunch and distributes the most common sense logic to all those in the station. In the episode, "Bailey's Show," as Bailey attempts to run from the station as her new radio show begins to fall apart, Jennifer stops her and sits her down. Jennifer not only calms her down and inspires her to stand up for herself, but also dispenses advice as to how to muster the courage to stand up to the boss and the other men. As Bailey explains that if she can't cry in the office, she'll just have to cry in the way home in the car. Jennifer responds positively, telling her that is how the men do it. In another episode, Jennifer helps the disastrously tacky Herb Tarlek change his image and his wardrobe from his highly flammable polyester suits to the more stylish and classy three-piece pin stripes. Jennifer Marlowe takes up the role of the wise and supportive father figure of past decades.

In a twist of fate, Loni Anderson had been turned down to play the role of Suzanne Somer's character in *Three's Company* just before being offered the role in

WKRP. Anderson was secretly glad that she didn't receive the part, as she didn't want to play the "dumb blonde." As a sign of the times, Anderson, playing the smart and charismatic Jennifer Marlowe outsold Somer's posters throughout the run of *WKRP* (Reilly & Hoover, 1979).

The soft gentle character of the show still falls to a female character, that of Bailey Quarters. Representative of the woman with higher aspirations, Bailey starts off as the traffic manager and is basically the station's paper pusher, until she overcomes her timid and bashful nature to push herself forward into the primarily male dominated industry of news reporting. Much to the horror of the old-fashioned chauvinists of the station, Les Nessman and Herb Tarlek, by the end of the series, Bailey is just as much if not more of a news reporter than the news director Les Nessman. In the episode, "In Concert," after Bailey successfully reports a tragedy at a local rock concert despite how emotionally difficult it was for her, Nessman expresses his appreciation for her and tells her, "We're newsmen...newspeople." Such progressions of female characters were being presented in sitcoms to represent the forward momentum women were achieving in the real world.

Despite the conflict and struggles in political ideologies all of the characters at the station had, they still created a type of familial bond that remains so very typical in workplace comedies. In interviews it isn't uncommon to hear actors speak of the cast and crews of these shows like families, much as Loni Anderson called the cast of *WKRP* (Anderson, 1981). They could always depend on one another. Represented most by the episode "Who is Gordon Simms?" in which nighttime deejay Venus Flytrap confesses

that he is a deserter from the United States Army. The station comes together and solves the problem as a family unit. Lessons are learned and the wrong is righted.

Like many of the sitcoms of the 70's particularly those produced by MTM Enterprises, of which *WKRP* was one, the social and cultural issues of the day often took center stage. The producers of MTM Enterprises pushed forward social agendas. They weren't the only ones. Shows like *All In the Family* and *Taxi* were making waves on American television as well. Sitcoms were becoming socially relevant and focusing on important contemporary topics.

The writers and producers of these forward thinking and feminist shows, while inspirational, often sent a hidden, less progressive, message. If we look back at shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *WKRP*, we find these women typically never found a permanent relationship. In *WKRP*, hints of relationships were made and receptionist Jennifer Marlowe was the target of most of the male character's affections, yet neither Bailey Quarters nor Jennifer Marlowe ever settled down or married.

During the 70's and early 80's, these television shows were promoting an environment where women could succeed in the corporate world, but were also showing women that it came with a price. In a way, the theme song of *WKRP* presents a warning to women, that in order to find that success, the sacrifice of not having a family might have to be made. Songwriter Steve Carlisle sings about his move, "town to town, up and down the dial," and that the cost of finding himself, or success in the radio business, was losing the one he loved and had a relationship with. Even those shows that inspired women to pursue successful careers with the promise that they can "have it all," fail to give any distinct plan or advice on how to reach that goal of having it all; a career, a

relationship, and a family (Troop, 2006). From *That Girl* to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *WKRP*, the female leads never wound up marrying in the show, as a result of putting career first.

In the workplace environment, women were destined to be the wives, mothers and daughters of her fellow co-workers. Life outside of the workplace hardly ever existed. Even in programs like the groundbreaking *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Mary Richards was mother, daughter and wife, but never played the role of lover (Dow, 1990). While women were designated to play these roles in the workplace family, it was still the liberation of women and their entry into the workforce that opened the door for workplace families to develop in the first place.

Since the 1970s, the snapshot of the average American family has become made up of mostly two-parent dual earner or single parent, single-earner households (Christensen, 2013). The shift from the living room to the boardroom as a setting for sitcoms is influenced by not only the social and cultural changes that were occurring in those volatile decades, but represented the changes that were happening in the lives of the audience as well. As women entered the workforce, television entered the workforce with them, launching more and more series that took place in the office.

WKRP might have been a very unique show for another reason. While it was able to present women as equals and allowed female characters like Jennifer Marlowe to become the “parent” who distributes the vast wealth of knowledge to the children, it is also one of the first shows to not blatantly be about sex and gender. It was about people, not men and women. Sexism was addressed but it wasn’t the driving force of the show. It wasn’t the theme.

While the stereotypically slimy salesperson embodied by Herb Tarlek was constantly hitting on the attractive Jennifer Marlowe, the smart and sassy receptionist was always able to hold her own against any advancement (Hartman, 2006). The show represented African American's and women, addressed political issues of the day and examined the generational gap, but did so with subtlety. The show wasn't about women in the workplace. It was about people in the workplace. A woman moving up the corporate ladder was normal. Shows like *WKRP in Cincinnati* appealed to not only strong feminists seeking for a representative television show, but to the average male as well. Without drawing attention to the feminist themes, it was able to slowly and seamlessly work the idea into the viewers of the show. It just became normal.

As women continue to move toward equal footing with men in the workplace, those movements will continue to be represented on television. Just as women moving in to the workplace pushed the workplace into the television landscape, the current attitudes and social ideas will always be represented by television and visa versa. Shows like *WKRP* helped normalize the idea of women in the workplace, but it wouldn't have been possible for these shows to influence society and culture had it not been for the women who entered the workforce in the first place.

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