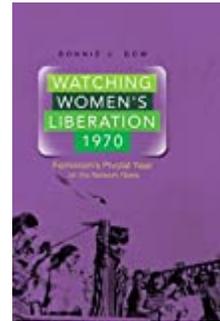




Bonnie J. Dow. *Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014. xii + 239 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03856-3; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08016-6.



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Reporting on the Women's Movement

At the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City on September 7, 1968, several protesters from New York Radical Women draped a women's liberation banner over the balcony, released stink bombs containing Toni Home Permanent Solution (an at-home perm product, which reportedly smelled like eggs), and chanted "No More Miss America" and "Freedom for Women," before being ejected from the venue. In the same way professional sportscasts refuse to show streakers, network television cameras were kept squarely on the stage, equating coverage of the protestors' antics with dangerous encouragement. By refusing to reveal the protests on screen, television executives silenced the protestors and did their part to uphold the country's gendered status quo.

But in 1970, the cameras abruptly turned and women's liberation took center stage. That year, second-wave feminism was a prominent story on all three major news networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS), which collectively made the movement the subject of more than twenty discrete reports. That year, and this coverage, is at the heart of

Bonnie J. Dow's excellent new book *Watching Women's Liberation, 1970: Feminism's Pivotal Year on the Network News*, which combines the fields of media and feminist studies to expose how truly remarkable 1970 was.

Dow's purpose is both simple and complex: she seeks to reconstruct a historicized narrative of national broadcast representation of the second wave as it evolved over the course of a single pivotal year (p. 11). To do this, she moves chronologically through the year, covering the "first, brief, hard news reports" in January that introduced the movement to the stations' audiences, and then examining the March 18 sit-in at *Ladies Home Journal*, an event that not only showed the movement's growing power but also had the added benefit of "precipitating significant changes in editorial and employment practices at women's magazines" (pp. 25-26). The fourth chapter covers the ABC News documentary *Women's Liberation*, aired that May, which presented the movement in a comprehensible manner, analogizing it with the civil rights movement and offering the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as the answer to women's ills. The fi-

nal two chapters cover the August 26 Women's Strike for Equality and the rise of Gloria Steinem as "feminism's enduring media icon" (p. 28). Though Steinem barely appeared in any media coverage in 1970, the "early mediated narratives about women's liberation and their interaction with the movement's own media strategies facilitated Steinem's emergence as the antidote to feminism's image problems" (p. 28). White, liberal, moderate, and middle-class, as well as heteronormative and beautiful, Steinem, Dow maintains, was the woman whom networks found most appealing, and who became, for better or for worse, the movement's most prominently mediated display.

Unlike the rest of the book, however, the first chapter moves away from 1970 to focus on the 1968 Miss America protests, which were not covered by network news at the time. Activists in New York Radical Women connected their actions to other New Left protests, but with little media credibility and a shocking stance, the "bra burning" myth was born. Nonetheless, widespread newspaper coverage made the Miss America protests the origin story for second-wave feminism's public debut. Underscoring the slow pace of network news at the time, Dow shows how it took over a year for television to catch up, and even longer for it to refine and package its message for viewers. Matter-of-fact and even positive coverage was transformed over several months until the movement was a caricature of itself, in which the image and rhetoric of second-wave feminism was distorted for an audience presumed to be antagonistic to feminism's goals and overwhelmingly male. The revelation here is ominous: how women's liberation became a spectacle in the hands of American media, which elided the diversity and pragmatism of the movement in favor of (often exaggerated) claims of sexual initiatives and the threat the movement held for disrupting traditional gender roles.

This is Dow's most important contribution for those who study the social movements of the 1960s and their ef-

fects. She details exactly how television promoted women's liberation, how its coverage of the movement excited and inspired women to join, and then how the networks altered their coverage to characterize "women's libbers" as radicalized man-haters, all in a single year. It is a concise history of one way in which the hopefulness of the era was destroyed, and the book's depth makes it a useful text for a wide variety of classes.

Dow is a professor of communications and women's and gender studies at Vanderbilt University, and, in *Watching Women's Liberation*, she bridges her fields well. But she also draws from a number of other areas, including studies of film, race, sexuality, media, and rhetoric, in order to give her book the widest possible breadth. She is particularly good at analyzing the shifts in rhetoric used to describe second-wave feminists and their goals, uncovering new meaning in old reports and tracing their impact on the stunted passage of the ERA.

It is Dow's contribution to the history of feminism where *Watching Women's Liberation* holds most sway. Students unfamiliar with how "bra-burning" and other manufactured myths about feminism took shape will find much to learn in Dow's text, and it may help them evaluate the rhetorical turns in coverage of women in the news today. Despite Dow's book being focused squarely on 1970, the debates it uncovers and the consciousness it raises remain applicable even in 2015, at a moment when major media figures continue to frame feminism in misguided but meaningful ways. One need not look much further than the treatment of Sandra Fluke in 2012 or of Zoe Quinn, the developer at the center of #Gamergate, to see that women fighting for equality remain easy targets for media ire, which remains almost ritually concocted for the presumed white, male audience that news organizations continue to serve. What Dow contributes to this field is insight into a moment when this treatment began, and what she reveals is the continued relevancy of her claim.

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