

## **LTPF Season 3, Episode 2 – TV**

**Guest:** Andrea Braithwaite, Ph.D. (she/her) Communication and Digital Media Studies, Ontario Tech University; Vice-President, Canadian Game Studies Association

### **Full Transcript:**

Kadie Philp

I'm Kadie Philp. What's your favourite show on Netflix? Have you ever stopped to think about the characters in that show and what each of them teach us, challenge, or reinforce about gender norms or stereotypes? In this episode I speak with Dr. Andrea Braithwaite, Senior Teaching Professor at Ontario Tech University whose research focuses on gender, sociability and belonging in pop culture. Together we explore how portrayals of women and men in television have evolved over time and how that has led to social, political and economic change for women and other equity seeking groups onscreen and "in real life".

Kadie Philp (00:49.612)

So Andrea, your research dives into how pop culture, including television, shapes our understanding of gender. And I'm really excited to talk to you today about how television has played a huge role in influencing and reflecting on social change. And then particular, obviously, for women. We've talked before how women have mostly been present in television since the rise of its popularity. I guess you can give us some timeline stuff here, but I'm saying the popularity in the 1950s, but they were always in fairly traditional roles. And then the 60s, we began to see a shift in how women were portrayed on TV, moving from like strictly domestic. But what were some key shows or key moments that you really see a signaling shift towards women's quote unquote empowerment, however you want to talk about that on screen. And how did these new narratives for women on TV like really start and influence societal change?

Andrea Braithwaite (01:40.998)

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. And I actually will drag us back a bit to the 50s on purpose, just to flag an incredibly important woman in the history of television that helps us think about TV in the 50s, especially as more complex than when we look back on it, we tend to give it credit for, right? And by this I am talking about the wonderful queen Lucille Ball and the amazing, incredibly influential sitcom, I Love Lucy. And so Lucille Ball is first of all, the wonderful person after whom I named my dog. She is just that amazing. And she also was a pioneer in television in general and in the fifties, for women especially. She and her real-life husband, Desi Arnaz, played Lucy and Ricky on I Love Lucy, important in part for being a biracial couple at a time when in some places this still wasn't legal. And the two of them as a partnership behind the scenes wielded significant control over their show. They created their own production company specifically so that they could have great creative control over the I Love Lucy show and over its storylines. And this is something that after the two of them divorced, Lucille Ball retained control of the production company and then used it to launch a whole bunch of shows that would themselves go on to be just juggernauts in television such as for instance Star Trek. So the formula of I Love Lucy actually got up and running a bunch of

the dynamics we still see in a whole lot of sitcoms today. And so if you haven't seen I Love Lucy you absolutely should it's fabulous. And if you have you'll know that the formula revolves around every week she and her neighbor Ethel try to break out of their domestic space, break away from being housewives and find their way into some sort of employment. And it, of course, all goes hilariously wrong. And a shout out to Lucille Ball's fabulous physical comedy. And she ends up sort of back in the home at the end of every episode, which on the one hand, we can see this as that move at the time to reorient women back into the role of being housewives after the wars. But this also means every single week viewers got to see women trying so hard to break out of this role over and over and over again, right? And every week fight to be taken seriously in the workplace. And this set up a lot of the trends we saw in part in the 60s and then especially in the 70s.

Kadie Philp (04:50.977)

Mm-hmm. Yeah. So what were those moments in the 60s and 70s then that bring us to, you know, how that starts to change?

Andrea Braithwaite (05:13.77)

Yeah, I want to flag a few key women in the 60s, Morticia Adams. And we tend not to think of the Adams family all that often, but she and her husband Gomez were an equal partnership. Their relationship was very even keel. It wasn't organized around sort of men versus women drama. And they were a team. They were a family team.

Kadie Philp (05:21.48)

Classic. Right.

Andrea Braithwaite (05:43.991)

Other really landmark women in the 60s, and this is an incomplete list, Emma Peel in The Avengers as part of the popularization of the sort of woman of action on TV. And then especially, and these sort of roles we wouldn't see again for a while, Diane Carroll, who played Julia in the show Julia. That was all about being a Black single mom in a way that didn't make Black women the butt of the joke, but instead the center of the story. And that was incredibly rare for the 60s and really, really important, right? And we see these sorts of themes carried forward into the 70s where the goal of so much television, thanks to, well, Norman Lear especially, was to make television shows that directly addressed social issues like feminist movement, right? So we get Mary Tyler Moore in the Mary Tyler Moore show and Laverne and Shirley as shows about what it means to be a working woman and the opportunities and the challenges that come along with that. We have the incomparable Bea Arthur as Maude in Maude, which had a kind of darker humor but very explicitly feminist arguments about women's bodily autonomy in particular. This was one of prime time's very first storylines about a woman considering and then following through on having an abortion, right?

Right before Roe versus Wade, dealing with issues of alcoholism in the family and using a kind of black humor to make these issues approachable, right?

Kadie Philp (07:39.234)

So that is substantial change. I just want to jump in there because in the 50s you're talking about like, Lucille Ball show, like the partnership between her husband is very interesting and rare, which is like we could do a whole episode on that. But then also talking about evil, the partnership parental model and Adam's family not talked enough about, but great example. But even the level of change, social change had happened during that time and how TV rather than creating shows that were showing this gendered norm ideal, the shows, it sounds like you're saying, started to really address these gendered challenges like, you know, racialized single motherhood, trying to be a working mom and have it all right. Like, we got out of the home, thanks Lucy, but now there's a whole other set of challenges. And then all of these other issues that are arising, social inequalities that the themes of television shows are starting to pick up on, like you picked up like abortion and women's bodily autonomy and all of these things. So that's actually like over 20-year period. That's a significant change in content. How does that keep accelerating? I mean, into the eighties and nineties.

Andrea Braithwaite (08:44.601)

Mm-hmm. Part of what I think it's important to flag, especially around the 50s, 60s, and 70s, is the way television itself worked as an industry at the time, right? Because this was sort of peak network television, which meant a very limited number of channels and all of the other restrictions that come along with over-the-air broadcasting. This was before we had the VCR, right? So you had to watch it when it was on and that's what everybody was doing. And even though everyone is at home watching, right? There is still this much more sort of collective or communal feel to it, right? Yeah. And television was much more of a mass medium at the time trying to aim for the biggest slice of that audience pie that those kinds of technological changes that television undergoes really picking up in the 80s and 90s, right, are part of the context for how television itself changes in the 80s and 90s. Because representations in the media, like representations of women, absolutely happen in a cultural context. And they also happen in a technological context, right? And so part of how television technology develops and changes comes through in what we see and how we see it and how we access television, right? And so that's what we get in the 80s and 90s. We get the deregulation of the TV industry in the US and so a big expansion of channels and networks and then the rise of cable television. So an even greater expansion and all of these startup channels.

Kadie Philp (10:43.244)

So more platforms and yes, going to say opportunity for specialized content and the business model is changing, which is making room for changes in potentially content and ultimately representation of who's being profiled and showcased. You're not competing for one prime time

spot. You now have lots of channels that have prime time spots. Was this good for women? Did this create more equity?

Andrea Braithwaite (10:51.568)

Yes, I think so, right? Because you get channels that are going after very particular sort of niches in the audience, right? They're going after specific demographics. And that leads to television executives trying to target specific audiences with specific kinds of stories, right? As a way to say, we lay claim to women 18 to 25 by these sorts of stories. And one of the things we saw, especially into the 90s, that really reorganized how we represent women and young women is the rise of teen television. Because it wasn't really a thing until the 90s and until we have these channels that are going specifically after teens as a demographic and then we get this enormous yes right we get Buffy we get Dawson's Creek we get shows that want to talk about what young people and then young women are facing. And especially in the 80s and 90s, we have this this broader cultural context of girl power, right? Like we have put feminism into action and girls, you can do it. And that comes through so clearly in teen TV because it's young women in particular that are sort of put forward as like these sort of agents of social change. so their storylines and the way they're presented to us absolutely tap into this idea that girls can do it, right?

Kadie Philp (12:57.026)

That's so it's interesting. This season, we're also talking about women in music and that's going to be covered as well. But this that's a fascinating point that the even the content it was adult or children like junior, junior children, right? And the content was adult women's lives, adult men's lives or adult gender norms and adult gender dynamics, but bringing in which I think is also an interesting question about influence too, because you're bringing in these narratives. And you're saying some of them were like Buffy the Vampire Slayer was a very empowering storyline for young women. Some of the lines in Dawson's Creek were some were not right Beverly Hills I know to know different sort of, you know, Valley Girl projection but that's also interesting because you see the show is simultaneously pushing for and challenging social norms, but also in some ways reinforcing gender roles.

Andrea Braithwaite (13:33.652)

Yeah, right? So we've got young women on the one hand, and part of what we also saw in the 80s especially was shows about and for older women, right? And I'm thinking in particular of Murder She Wrote, right? With Angela Lansbury as this plucky...and everything she says sounds nice but has that wonderful smarmy undertone and the Golden Girls. And it is so difficult to talk about women on television without acknowledging the incredible contributions of the Golden Girls for how we talk about women's issues, which is something they never strayed away from. And in particular, how ageism manifests when you're a woman compared to being a man. Sexuality for older women, women and older women and their susceptibility to AIDS at the height of the AIDS

crisis, right? Women's health issues, especially as they're older, not being taken seriously. Elder care and how it becomes this exploitative industry, right? And all of this within the sitcom format that the Golden Girls is just such a significant sort of anchor for calling attention the same way that teen TV does, right? To the ways in which being a woman is political at any age.

Kadie Philp (15:31.094)

So that's interesting because it sounds like, the emergence of stories that have women's narratives at the center, like what it's like to be a woman, not just a married woman, where it kind of started, right, domesticity in the home being a married woman to like, wait, there's other realities of women, single moms. But that's still the domestic space. But then it's like, wait a minute, there's a whole spectrum of life. So it sounds like the narratives were getting broader and broader. I'm sure you could go on about how those narratives like expanded and we saw even broader range of these stories, right? Like in the 2000s and 2010s, Handmaiden's Tale, rock dramas, all these things. Tell us a bit about that era and what changed in terms of women's stories that were being told very differently in the early 2000s.

Andrea Braithwaite (16:27.704)

Yeah, it's, It is this really interesting time in television. We've, like over the past 20 years, for instance, we've adjusted completely to this idea of TV on demand, right? Started with the VCR, you could record it, watch it again and again. And then as television goes increasingly digital, our capacity to do this changes as well. And this changes the way we watch TV and so it is possible to make much more complex and complicated stories and storylines because the audience has that opportunity to sort of sit with it in ways that we didn't before when we couldn't sort of rewatch or binge the way we do now right and so we see in this era of the capacity to tell increasingly complex and layered stories. The rise of storytellers doing this sort of thing, The Handmaid's Tale is a great example. One of the people we can't not talk about when we're talking about the past few decades of women on TV is Shonda Rhimes and Shonda Lant and just her incredible power within the industry, not only as a woman, but as a black woman, making stories that she is very clear are not about diversity for her. They are about making television normal, right? And she's been very outspoken that her goal is to make television look like the rest of the world looks.

Kadie Philp (18:12.63)

Right, and we don't need to call that diversity and inclusion. It is, this is what the world actually looks like. Yeah.

Andrea Braithwaite (18:18.821)

Yeah right and she talks about this as normalization and I mean Grey's Anatomy has been on for geez 20 something seasons now I can't even count right and it's it is one of those great examples of

what television is like in this era of really big ongoing storylines women with these powerful professional jobs and unlike a lot of other places on television, the women in Grey's Anatomy in particular, they aren't dressed up, they aren't sexualized, they walk around in scrubs 90 % of the time, exactly, and they are treated that way by their storylines, they're treated that way by their partners, we get this wonderful vision of a world in which the men they work with

Kadie Philp (18:59.938)

Well, they're professionals. They're working professionals. Yeah.

Andrea Braithwaite (19:13.976)

and they date and they marry and they have families with are eager to participate in this process rather than the stereotype of the sort of absent father, right? And so this is one of the really interesting things we see at a time when technology lets us get into these stories and these worlds in such detail, or these really sort of layered complex and complicated women, for better and for worse. think Skylar White from Breaking Bad is a great example of the for better, for worse, right? Of a mom who did incredibly rational things to try to save and protect her family and yet still is absolutely demonized by so much of Breaking Bad's fan base. And so this is where the sort of double-edged sort of complicated storytelling comes in.

Kadie Philp (19:46.336)

Yeah, it's always for better and for worse. All the characters, yeah. Now, you, we've alluded to this, but I want to dive into it and get your thoughts on how, you know, media representations of women can actually lead to real world social change, right? And you talked about how this storyline about a woman contemplating and going through an abortion was like not long before Roe versus Wade, right? So it's like we see these things on TV and then we see a reflection like there's maybe a symbiotic relationship happening there. Can you explain, you know, the research and work you do how TV has actually contributed to changing societal expectations and norms, especially around gender roles and gender equality over the decades.

Andrea Braithwaite (20:58.43)

Yeah, we are, we human beings, right? We are creatures who learn socially. That's so much of what we learn about who we are and how to be in our social world is through what is immediately around us. And if it's not immediately around us, we then have to go looking for versions of it somewhere else. And television becomes for so many of us in so many ways, right? One of our only windows onto what life is like in different places and from different perspectives and that sort of thing. And so this is why the way in which people's experiences get represented on TV becomes so significant because it can be some people's only access to what it is like to be somebody other than themselves. there's a media study scholar who studied television specifically extensively named

George Gerbner. He came up with what he called Cultivation Theory. And his theory has been used most often to unpack this idea that violence on television causes violence in the real world, right? But his arguments can be really usefully applied to all sorts of other things. And he suggests that ongoing repeated exposure to these same kinds of images and stories and perspectives can cultivate in us a different perspective, right? Or a fuller understanding. And so it's not as straightforward as we watch one episode of Sex in the City and all of a sudden, you know, life for women changes everywhere. But it's more this kind of gradual accumulation of representations that push at the boundaries of our social norms that over time can help our own understandings of what is normal and ordinary become bigger and bigger and broader and broader.

Kadie Philp (23:11.744)

Right. And I think we can see that, like even you talked the conversation at the beginning of from the 50s to the 70s, what women looked like in the house. And one that just came to mind is even Will and Grace and the depiction of gay men. That was such an introduction, right? And juxtapose that with Schitt's Creek, where that like...homosexual love was just completely normal. Like there was no tension narrative, there was no storyline about how difficult and horrible that was, whereas Will and Grace address that directly, right? So you can see over that time period social values and norms around LGBTQ issues change dramatically. So it's fascinating how powerful storytelling is and how powerful TV as an agent for social change can be. In terms of feminist activism, which is a little bit more active, right? Because as we're saying, nobody would, in hindsight scholars, and I'm going back to Buffy because I loved it, in hindsight scholars would say, Buffy was a feminist narrative, or they would go back and you apply this lens to it, right? So that's kind of a little bit more passive, I think, but in terms of actual feminist activism, you know, how has the portrayal of feminist ideas and issues evolved on TV? Because this is sort of like a radical thing that women did, right? To now kind of like you said, like normalize, like it's just a point of view in the world. So how have you seen that that shift in recent years?

Andrea Braithwaite (24:47.105)

Yeah, right, I am biased as a television study scholar who loves it very, very much. But it is a really great place to look to see our own changing willingness to talk about these sorts of things in these very sort of public places, right? And from like the 50s when television was deliberately trying to act as a sort of agent of change in terms of putting women back into domestic spaces, right? And in very subtle ways of showing women like Leavitt to Beaver being so happy there. Two storylines in the 70s of women very explicitly and forthrightly calling themselves feminists and this being part of the storyline and we have ended up somewhere now that sort of moves back and forth between a few different ways of thinking about how we want to label feminist activism and feminist media. And one of these is gets the category of post-feminism. This idea that we have made it through the feminist movement, it has been successful, we are good, we are done, we don't really need to talk about it in these terms anymore. Everybody knows equality is here to stay. And then we have third-wave feminism and what some people are wondering could even count as fourth-wave feminism that is arguing a little bit differently. There are still big systemic structural obstacles for women out

there that we still need to be agitating about. And so what we tend, we're not done, we're nowhere near done. And what we tend to get on television is more post-feminist, right? This idea that equality is taken for granted and then every woman's challenges are her own to manage and overcome. And stuff that would fall into the category of third and possibly even fourth wave stuff tends to happen around these stories or in more independent media, right? Where storylines about the need for significant social change are possible. And television is in such a difficult place right now with the rise of streaming that most networks don't really know what to do. so tend to sort of shy away from anything that is very explicitly calling itself feminist. And this opens up space for all sorts of other media to step in and do that in ways that we can connect to much more easily. This is where social media and social media movements have really taken. Right? Especially because television is part of what they are talking about. The MeToo movement was in part talking about how television is an industry and Hollywood is an industry are both very good at protecting these problems rather than shining light.

Kadie Philp (27:58.466)

And I love that. I like that a couple of times you've brought up how as technology changed the way to tell a story, create the story, that narratives were actually influenced and changed. And I just want to remind listeners that in season one we did an episode on Dr. Jabra Spahr's work, which talks about how technology completely changed gender roles. So it'll be a nice, someone wants to learn more because you brought it up a few times. I think, yeah, this is something we don't think about. Like the platforms in television or, I mean now, don't even like to television, it's like media production because people are watching TV on streaming platforms, right? So it's very different and the questions of accessibility and representation become much bigger, bigger topic. Now, okay, I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about Canadian TV shows because I know you know some things about Canadian TV shows and shows like Working Moms, N with an E, have really been praised for tackling issues around gender and identity. And you probably know way more, but I would just love to hear from you how Canadian shows have actually contributed to a global conversation about gender equality and gender roles. you know, is there something unique that Canada offers in this space?

Andrea Braithwaite (29:32.859)

Some of it comes from the policies and regulations that Canada has put in place around its broadcasting system for both public broadcasters, like the CBC and private broadcasters, like CTV and Global and CityTV, that don't exist in the same way and to the same degree in, well, in the US, specifically as the sort of maker of most of our television, right? The Broadcasting Act that sort of lays out the rules for what you have to do and what you should not do as a broadcaster in Canada have very clear regulations built into them about diversity and the importance of representing all kinds of Canadian life on Canadian airwaves. No.

Kadie Philp (30:24.398)



So is that new or is that something that was embedded in the policies like kind of from the outset or like early, early additions after the new, after the, were put in place.

Andrea Braithwaite (30:34.568)

Yeah, yeah, yeah, the diversity legislation has been in there since about the 90s. And yeah, yeah, yeah. And so we have this legislation. And for any broadcasters that don't consistently meet these standards, they put their ability to stay on the air in jeopardy. And Canada's also got what is called the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. It is voluntary, but pretty much every Canadian broadcaster is a member and they have their own. Again, voluntary. It's called the Equitable Portrayal Code that lays out very clearly this kind of commitment that all of these broadcasters have voluntarily stepped forward and promised to uphold about creating a culture in which representations of gender equality and diversity are upheld. And so there are these very public-facing sort of policy structures that mean over time we as Canadians have become used to, it has become normal for us to see these sorts of representations on television, right? And the examples that you gave of working moms and Anne with an E are notable both for being CBC productions. And CBC in particular has a much higher standard to which it is held on purpose as the country's public broadcaster for making sure these kinds of representations are available countrywide, right? And CBC has been historically even more subversive than this. CBC's got this fabulous history of really boundary pushing comedy that has directly tackled social issues. Kids in the Hall to take us back, right? And more recently, Baroness von Sketch, which did a fantastic job of tackling issues around sex and gender and sexuality head on and calling out our everyday biases in really smart, thoughtful ways.

Kadie Philp (32:43.658)

Mm-hmm. Kim's convenience. So good. Yeah.

Andrea Braithwaite (33:10.163)

And so some of this is a history in which this has become the norm for Canadian broadcasting. And some of it is very deliberately trying to engineer an environment in which this is the expected way of doing business.

Kadie Philp (33:26.708)

And I would say TVO here in Ontario follows a very, obviously they are part of those policies and courts you're talking about, but I would say they also take that very, very seriously in terms of delivering and creating content. But thank you for giving that policy framework because it's, you know, the pay equity office is an office that administers a policy on, or a law on pay equity. And it's powerful to hear how policy and legislation can actually in cultural and content creation, right, and actually create social change. So this is like a really fabulous way to demonstrate that. So speaking

about pay equity, this is, as you know, our office influenced the Pay Equity Act. And we hear a lot of narratives, especially now it's getting popular pay equity in Hollywood, but also in television, right? We know that shows with strong female leads are popular and successful, but we continue to see pay gaps between male and female actors and you know where how do you see this and what do you think needs to change to actually address this inequality in the industry?

Andrea Braithwaite (34:36.941)

I think an important place to start in television, like most other workplaces, is to make this visible, right? To talk about wages, especially for so many of the behind the scenes jobs in the television industry are unionized, right? And so this is really important to keep and to build out and to strengthen and to make salary scales visible so that there is there is a way to see and then to follow up on what are the sort of expressed commitments to pay equity that are already out there because it's not just let's make it visible it's also let's keep talking about it right so that we can keep it at the forefront of people's minds when they are making decisions about what to watch and what not to watch. And when we go to the polls, who to support and who not to support for how they demand this kind of public and visible accountability to the production companies that bring us this kind of stuff. Another really important way to do this is to move away from precarious labor to more stable and long-term, secure employment opportunities for people, right? Because part of the really easy way to keep wages down for everybody is just to have constant turnover of short-term contracts, because then there's no real opportunity to build seniority and to move up that kind of pay ladder. And so doing away with the turnover of contract labor is better for people doing these jobs and it is better for getting people the pay they deserve for the work that they do. Yeah, it is a structural question.

Kadie Philp (36:42.126)

Yeah, it's a structural question about the way that the sort of television, the television industry pay unionization and pay and kind of gig model, right? They were like gig workers before gig workers was a thing. You get hired for show for a set for a contract and then you move on. So it's like a big question. And I love that you're saying keep talking about it. I think there's two parts of the talking about it. One is we have seen a lot of media coverage of this of female actresses or actors speaking up or male actors speaking up and saying this isn't fair. But we also have seen storylines on TV about this, like not a lot, but I remember West Wing had a storyline on this. Obviously, Mad Men, it was weaved in like, there's been a number of times where it's been raised, you know, not on the media as a production issue, but also as a social issue. So I think it's interesting to see that it's coming, you know, it's being covered in different areas. You know, this has been a fast, we could talk forever, but we've got to wrap it up. This is so good. I know, I know, we could go on and on. Where can listeners learn about your research and follow your work? Because you do such great stuff, and I think it's helpful. You you've given us also language to think about when we're watching or consuming media on whatever platform, streaming, TV, cable, whatever, to think about how it's constructing and reinforcing or challenging gender norms, gender identity of characters. But then also what's the storyline telling us about what's right and wrong and what types of behaviors is

gendered and social issues like equality in all forms, racialized, gendered or non-binary, but also, you know, these pay equity issues too. So thank you for giving us a framework to think about more critically when we're consuming content the ways in which it is shaping us and then shaping and changing society around us. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Andrea Braithwaite (38:46.289)

Yeah, anytime.

Kadie Philp

Here are the top three takeaways I got from today's conversation with Dr Andrea Brathwaite:

1. **Breaking Out of the Box:** From I Love Lucy to The Mary Tyler Moore Show, television has long reflected women's struggles to step beyond traditional roles and redefine their place in society.
2. **Representation Matters:** Whether it's the groundbreaking portrayal of working women or the normalization of diverse identities, the stories we see shape how we understand gender equity and what's possible.
3. **Pay Equity -On and Off Screen:** Despite progress, disparities in pay persist in the entertainment industry. Transparency, advocacy, and structural change are key to closing the gap for good.

Thank you for listening. Don't forget to follow or subscribe and share this podcast. Until next time, let's keep asking questions, challenging norms, and working toward a more equitable world for women to work, live and thrive.