

Introduction

Beginning in the early 1970s, a shift occurred in the world of television comedy. New network executives came in and decided to change the content that was being put on the air. The popular TV shows of the 1960s were based in fantasy and did not address any relevant issues. Programs like *Bewitched*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Green Acres* and *Petticoat Junction* were some of the highest rated shows of the decade. The reasons for these show's success are many. One being they appealed to audiences young and old. Television had become cheap enough to be nearly ubiquitous in the U.S. and therefore a family activity. Also, commercial sponsors were and continue to be the loudest voice in determining a program's content, and wanted to attract the largest audience possible. "And let's face it, if you're a salesman and your goal is to sell as many cans of dog food or tubes of toothpaste as you possibly can, the last thing you want to do is offend any potential customers."¹

After the Communist threat or "red scare" became a lesser issue in the late 1960s, networks felt as though they could depart from traditional, antiquated values and address real societal issues. However, producers and network executives felt as though the best way to portray these issues was through the situation comedy genre. Early sitcoms like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *All in the Family*, *Maude* and *Soap* all tackled issues that were extremely relevant in the lives of many Americans as well as in the greater American culture. Issues like abortion, sexual orientation, sexual performance, and single womanhood were central subjects of these programs and were dealt with humorously in order to sensitize audiences and make them comfortable with these otherwise uncomfortable issues. "People, in my opinion, if you lecture them about what abortion is,

¹ Neuirth, Allan. They'll Never Put That on the Air: An Oral History of Taboo-Breaking TV Comedy. (New York: Allworth Press, 1997), vii .

or what gay is, nobody's gonna [sic] watch that. When they're *laughing*...when it's all over, they'll say, 'Gee I guess the change of life is not a bad thing.'"² This philosophy is what propelled certain sitcoms over the last thirty years, to take certain relevant social issues out from behind closed doors and, for the first time, address them using humor which caused the public opinion of these issues to radically change.

Acclaimed producer Norman Lear is arguable the pioneer of this genre of relevant, issue-based comedy. Lear created such influential and highly regarded show as *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *One Day at a Time*. Lear once said, "I think I see life through the end of the telescope that finds the comedy in *anything*. [...] It was so *easy* to find serious subjects in which you could find the comedy."³ Lear simply took issues he found compelling in his own life and placed them into his television shows. This concept: writing based on personal experience is one that has dominated American situation comedy ever since and is what brought new, different and controversial stories onto American television. The famous coming-out episode of *Ellen* was based on actress Ellen DeGeneres' own struggle with the coming-out process. The book in which *Sex and the City* was based on was taken from author Candace Bushnell's own experiences with life, love and sex in New York City. The premise of *Will & Grace* was based on creator Max Mutchnik's own experience as a gay man with a straight female best friend. Therefore, as many creators and producers have confessed, these shows were not created with the purpose of creating societal change; merely to reflect reality and all of the humor in it. Their priority was humor; not social commentary. *All in the Family* producer and director Bud Yorkin said, "When people ask

² Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on the Air* 154

³ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on the Air* 152

about *All in the Family*, I say to them that the first thing we used to think about was not only to make a social comment, but it is *funny*? [...] We looked at it as a comedy, not a social comment.”⁴

While it is hard to quantify whether or not these shows actually propelled change and tangibly affected society, there is some (anecdotal) evidence to support the assertion that they did. Yorkin said that after the episode of *All in the Family* that dealt with menopause, “women all over America wrote us letters, thanking us for dealing with this subject and laughing at the same time!”⁵ After the coming-out episode of *Ellen* premiered, the ABC as well as DeGeneres herself received letters and phone calls thanking her for showing this issue on television and making their own coming-out experience easier. CBS received positive phone calls after the abortion episode of *Maude* aired thanking the network for having the gall to deal with the issue.

Background

In order to understand how sitcoms have helped change society, it is important to define the words: situation comedy. Author James Roman defines situation comedy as “an enduring television programming genre that weaves a narrative of humor within the context of domestic routine.”⁶ Sitcoms were born on the radio and were later adapted to the television medium. Many popular radio sitcoms made a smooth and successful transition to television including *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Life of Riley*.

Sitcoms often take place in one of two contexts: the family or the workplace. Many early sitcoms were based around the nuclear family of a mother, father, and

⁴ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 154

⁵ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 154

⁶ Roman, James. *From Daytime to Primetime* (Greenwich, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 93

children such as in *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy*. However, over the years the idea of the TV family has changed to include single-parent families as in *Full House* and less traditional families including close groups of friends as in *Friends*. The workplaces where sitcoms take place are also varied. A reason for these two specific settings is that these are areas of life where a lot of time is spent and funny relationships and stories can develop. These two institutions are also extremely relatable as most Americans are part of at least one type of family and are also part of a workplace community. Sitcoms that dealt with relevant issues did not discriminate between these arenas; they encompassed both. *All in the Family*, *Sex and the City*, *Maude*, *Seinfeld*, *Soap*, and *Will and Grace* all loosely fit into the “family sitcom” category whereas *Murphy Brown* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* are considered “workplace sitcoms” (*Ellen* is a sort of combination of the two). Therefore it can be argued that any type of sitcom in any setting can be an arena conducive to addressing relevant issues.

Methodology

In order to effectively illustrate the point that certain sitcoms over the past thirty years have been successful in being the first television programs to address certain controversial societal issues and help create change, three topics are used as case studies. Three sitcoms were chosen per topic in order to show the spectrum of issues addressed and how the presentation of these topics changed over the years. For each topic, the three sitcoms attempt to span the decades from the 1970s to the new millennium (although this is not always achieved). These shows are discussed in terms of their history, content, media response, and what unique aspects made them successful beyond using humor to impact society. The topics and shows discussed are:

- Independent, Single Women: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970s), *Murphy Brown* (1990s), *Sex and the City* (2000s)
- Homosexuality: *Soap* (1970s), *Ellen* (1990s), *Will and Grace* (2000s)
- Sexual Issues: *All in the Family* (1970s), *Maude* (1970s), *Seinfeld* (1990s)

Some of these shows including *the Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Sex and the City*, *Soap*, *Will and Grace*, and *All in the Family* dealt with these issues throughout the entirety of their time on the air, while others like *Murphy Brown*, *Ellen*, *Maude*, and *Seinfeld* only addressed these in one or two hallmark episodes. However, while these shows covered different topics and were on the air across three decades, they do have one very important thing in common: they were incredibly successful. All of these sitcoms lasted for at least five seasons and won dozens of awards (each won at least one Emmy, the highest honor for a television program), and were all praised by critics. It is safe to assume that these nine sitcoms were some of the most successful television programs of their generations speaking to the power, influence, and acceptability that comedy and issue-based comedy can garner.

Issue #1 – The Single, Independent Woman

One of the first societal issues that television sitcoms addressed and helped change was the public attitude toward the single, independent woman. Beginning with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the early 1970s, continuing with *Murphy Brown* in the 1990s, and going even further with *Sex and the City* in the new millennium, the women in these sitcoms illuminated new aspects of single life that had never been presented on television before. They provided TV viewers with a realistic reflection of single life,

thereby changing the public's perception and eliminating the stigma associated with being a single woman.

“TV has built a foundation of sitcoms starring and featuring women. They have reflected the evolving place of women in our society, albeit often late and tentatively. For marital status, to career to child rearing, television has reflected notions old and new, the conventional and the trailblazing, and everything in between. Most notable, though, has been the evolution of the sitcom's single woman.”⁷

The female characters present on television before 1970 did not reflect where many women actually stood in society. During World War II, women entered the workforce in large numbers as they filled the roles left by the men who went off to fight overseas. By 1950, women ages 25-44 comprised approximately one-third of the American workforce.⁸ However, working female characters were absent from the fictional television workforce.

The female characters in the sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s represented only one female archetype: the housewife. Shows like *I Love Lucy*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave it to Beaver* portrayed women as docile, loving, and accommodating mothers and wives who seemed only to be present to please and serve their family and loved ones. “Most sitcoms of that era depicted an idealized portrait of the middle-class housewife. In other words, television offered, at best, a sanitized representation of womanhood and, at worst, a false one.”⁹ But on September 19, 1970, Mary Tyler Moore changed everything.

⁷ Klein, Allison. What Would Murphy Brown Do? How the Women of Prime Time Changed Our Lives (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 17

⁸ “Changes in Women's Labor Force Participation in the 20th Century” U.S. Department of Labor, February 16, 2000 [<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2000/feb/wk3/art03.htm>]

⁹ Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 148

The Mary Tyler Moore Show – She Did Make It After All

Ironically, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was created by two men: James L. Brooks and Allan Burns. The two men wanted to create a show about a new kind of woman: a *divorced* single, career woman. Yes, Moore's character was originally written as a divorced woman. Burns felt that divorce was something not only the American public could relate to, but was something that comedy writers could easily relate to as well. "I think every comedy writer wanted to do a show about divorce...because probably two-thirds of the comedy writers in town had *been* divorced, and wanted to write about their own experiences."¹⁰ Burns added that they wanted Moore's character to be as real as possible and wanted the show to explain why many women in their thirties were unmarried. However, when the creators pitched the show to CBS (the show's eventual home for seven seasons), network executive Mark Golden said: "There are four things Americans won't stand for: Jews, men with moustaches, New Yorkers, and divorced women."¹¹

Burns and the rest of the producers then went back to the drawing board and decided to begin the pilot with Moore's character having broken up with her boyfriend and then striking out on her own in a new city. This strategy proved to be a winning one, as it provided audiences with a woman who had never been married, was unapologetic about that fact, and had the drive and passion to improve and enjoy her own life before sharing it with someone else.

¹⁰ Neuwirth, *They'll Never Put that on the Air* 97

¹¹ Neuwirth, *They'll Never Put that on the Air* 101

In the weeks before *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* premiered, the media took notice of this new shift toward a more socially relevant programming schedule for fall 1970, especially when it came to women. In a September 1970 *New York Times* photo feature entitled “Out of the Kitchen, Ladies,” the paper highlighted three new shows featuring women in the workplace: *The Storefront Lawyers*, *The Headmaster*, and *the Mary Tyler Moore Show*. While these shows featured women as lawyers, teachers, and television producers, the two other shows were dramas and only ran for one season, suggesting the unique impact a sitcom can have in breaking down societal issues.

Not everyone agreed, however, that television was an appropriate venue in which to address relevant issues. Les Brown, TV editor for *Variety* magazine, wrote in late 1970, “The purpose of programs is to deliver audiences to advertisers, so how strong a position could anyone take without alienating perhaps half the viewership on issues that divide the country?”¹² While Brown doesn’t name any programs specifically, he fails to point out how some shows can make an honest, relevant statement using a very effective tool: humor.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show was successful in challenging societal norms for reasons other than the use of humor. The sitcom drew so many viewers (it ranked in top twenty programs during all seven seasons), won so many awards (twenty-five total Emmys), and ultimately helped to change society because it had something familiar that audiences could initially latch onto: a star. Mary Tyler Moore was a household name by the time the show debuted because she had played and won two Emmys for her role as Dick Van Dyke’s wife, Laura Petrie, on the beloved 1960s series *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Viewers were familiar with Moore’s sweet nature and comedic skills. And, while

¹² Peterson, Clarence. “TV Today: Critic Tells Why Season is a Bust” *Chicago Tribune* October 7, 1970

they weren't necessarily used to seeing a single career woman on TV, they were used to seeing Mary Tyler Moore, and that made it easier for the character to eventually become accepted and then loved. Writer Treva Silverman identified Moore's star quality as part of the reason this show was so successful and groundbreaking. "[...] so many young women, and older women, identified with Mary and Rhoda. Everything that they did was kind of really taken in, and taken as gospel. [...] Not just because they did it on television but because of *who* was doing it on television. It was Mary and Val [Valerie Harper]." ¹³

The pilot episode successfully set the overarching tone. In the pilot episode, Mary Richards's ex-boyfriend comes to see her in Minneapolis with the hopes of getting her back. Once Mary convinces him that she needs to be on her own and focus on her own life, the man says goodbye to Mary and adds, "Take care of yourself." She responds by saying, "I think I just did." ¹⁴ While the entire series focused on the issues single women in American society faced, this line would set the tone for the entire show: a woman doesn't need a man to define her or make her happy, because a single girl can take care of herself.

The creators and producers of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* never intended to create a series that would change and challenge the way Americans saw themselves and each other. Director Jay Sandrich said:

"I don't know that Mary's show ever set out to be the groundbreaking show that it became. That was not the concept. It was the right show at the right time. And Mary was really the perfect spokeswoman for young, single women who realized that, number one: they didn't have to have a man in their life full time to be able to have a wonderful life...and number two: they could go out and work." ¹⁵

¹³ Neuwirth, *They'll Never Put that on the Air* 116

¹⁴ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* Season One, Episode One. Original Air Date: September 19, 1970

¹⁵ Neuwirth, *They'll Never Put that on the Air* 114

Murphy Brown – A Pregnancy That Even the Government Talked About

Nearly twenty years after *Mary Tyler Moore* entered Americans' homes and hearts by showcasing the first successful, single career woman on television, *Murphy Brown* attempted to do the same and, like *Moore*, succeeded at it. If *Mary Tyler Moore* provided the American television audience with an introduction to the single, independent woman, *Murphy Brown* took the concept a step further: it showed viewers that a single woman could have a child without getting married and be a great mother despite that.

Pregnancy has always been a difficult issue for television, especially sitcoms to tackle. "On the one hand, it's a highly personal matter, and on the other, it's laden with traditional ideas about women's roles and priorities."¹⁶ During the days of *I Love Lucy*, the characters weren't even allowed to say the word "pregnant." She was "expecting." *Mary Tyler Moore* started a trend of TV women putting off marriage and therefore pregnancy to focus on their careers, and then came *Murphy Brown* in the late 1980s who along with other sitcoms of the time (for example, *Mad About You*) exposed the honest difficulties of having and carrying a child. *Murphy Brown* was unique because she did it all alone and without compromising her professional goals.

Murphy Brown, ran for 247 episodes from 1988 to 1998 on CBS. Candice Bergen played the title character, an investigative journalist and anchor of a newsmagazine show. Although Mary Richards and *Murphy Brown* were both single, driven, career-oriented women, Brown was a more evolved, 1990s version of Richards. "Murphy seems light-years away from Mary Richards. Murphy never stutters; she yells. She speaks her mind. She isn't intimidated by anyone, famous or infamous. Her work is exceptionally

¹⁶ Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 179

important to her, so much so that she compares not working to having her oxygen cut off.”¹⁷

While Mary Tyler Moore, the actress, and her established stardom and following helped propel her show into the groundbreaking series that it became, it was the *character* of Murphy Brown that seemed to make this show into something more than just a run-of-the-mill sitcom. The series begins with the main character’s return to the newsroom after a trip to the Betty Ford clinic to combat alcoholism. Her frequently abrasive personality often gets her into trouble both at work and in her personal life. It is these flaws that make Murphy Brown realistic and compelling to many audience members. “Audiences want to see Murphy succeed precisely because she is flawed.”¹⁸ It is her imperfections and solid head on her shoulders make her decision to have a baby on her own acceptable to viewers.

By the time Brown gets pregnant during the fourth season, the audience had already become comfortable with her fierce independence. They were therefore not surprised by her decision to have a child on her own, and they were interested to see how pregnancy and motherhood would affect her character. Author Allison Klein says that Murphy Brown’s pregnancy made the character vulnerable and showed the “universality of women’s experience and the utter humanity of even the most obstinate women.”¹⁹ However, not everyone agreed that this strategy was an effective one. Richard Zoglin of *Time* magazine wrote in a review: “The trouble is that the show tries to have it both ways: Murphy, the unsentimental career woman, has spent most of the season making cynical jokes about motherhood. Yet when the baby finally arrives, there's our new mother,

¹⁷ Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 170

¹⁸ Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 171

¹⁹ Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 182

misty-eyed, crooning.”²⁰ Despite Zoglin’s opinions, audiences responded extremely well. The season five premiere (the first episode after Brown gave birth) garnered 70 million viewers, 40 percent of the night’s television audience, and the highest ratings for any series in two years.²¹ (EW article)

But was the Murphy Brown character truly a realistic representation of the American single mother? Some members of the news media felt that the ground Murphy Brown was breaking was celebrating “unwed motherhood as a glamorous lifestyle option” and pointed “toward our society’s acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbirth.”²² *Washington Post* opinion columnist Barbra Whitehead wrote that Murphy Brown was a more sexy and fictitious version of the single American mother. Brown is a successful white woman in her thirties and, according to 1990 census information; the majority of unwed mothers are teenagers, black, and “economically vulnerable.” However, realism is not always the necessary strategy for a successful sitcom. A single impoverished black teenager would not make a very funny character. But this lack of realism does have some redeeming qualities, according to Whitehead. “Murphy Brown’s example encourages an equally powerful fantasy among women. It is the fantasy of the girl left alone to play with her dolls. Without a man to complicate and interfere with her life, a woman can have and raise a baby in perfect freedom.”²³

This story arc of *Murphy Brown* made its way into the political rhetoric of the time, signaling the impact a sitcom can have on society. In 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle, while making a speech at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, mentioned

²⁰ Zoglin, Richard. “Labor and Other Pains” *Time Magazine*, May 11, 1992

²¹ Harris, Mark. “What Murphy Brown Almost Said” *Entertainment Weekly*, October 2, 1992

²² Whitehead, Barbara. “What Is Murphy Brown Saying?” *The Washington Post* May 10, 1992

²³ Whitehead “What Is Murphy Brown Saying?” May 1992

Murphy Brown as an unsuitable role model because she ignored the importance of fathers and having a child on her own. While Quayle only referenced *Murphy Brown* in one sentence of his much longer speech, the comment sparked a firestorm of media coverage. The story made it to the front page of the *Washington Post*.²⁴

While it was hard to quantify whether or not *Mary Tyler Moore* directly affected society and caused women to forgo marriage and motherhood for careers, there is no question that *Murphy Brown* and her pregnancy had a direct impact on American culture. It caused a media frenzy and political debates regarding the important societal issue of single motherhood - something that few sitcoms had achieved beforehand.

Sex and the City – More Than Just Sex

If *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* primed audiences in the 1970s to become comfortable with the idea of a single, independent career woman, *Murphy Brown* revealed a new level of this type of character in 1992: the single, independent mother. Then in 1998, the four women of *Sex and the City* went a step further by presenting audiences with the fact that single women could be career-driven like Mary Tyler Moore, single mothers like Murphy Brown, and have active sex lives. "...Women like Mary Richards slowly began to claim their sexuality, culminating in the sexually confident women of *Sex and the City* several decades later."²⁵

Sex and the City tells the story of four single friends, each who represent different archetypes of American womanhood. Lawyer Miranda Hobbes (played by Cynthia Nixon) is the cynical, jaded one who questions every man's motives and does not believe in real-life fairytales. Art dealer Charlotte York (played by Kristin Davis) is the

²⁴ Vobejda, Barbara. "Can A Sitcom Change Society?" *The Washington Post* May 21, 1992

²⁵ Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 105

optimistic one who always believes in happily ever after. Publicist Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrall) is the bawdiest of the group, always having casual sex without the slightest interest in monogamy. Sex columnist Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker) is kind of “a sweet amalgamation of her three buddies.” (Globe article) She constantly questions her feelings about life, love, and sex. While all of these women are different, they are all looking for a man to fill one role or another, whether that role is husband, boyfriend or lover.

“Some viewers have been offended by the show's bawdiness, and others have frowned on the women's obsession with men. Like Elaine Benes on "Seinfeld," the "Sex and the City" women are tough-minded and professionally empowered, but they are nonetheless fixated on finding a member of the opposite sex to make them happy.”²⁶

Single-female sexuality certainly did not begin with *Sex and the City*. In a famous episode of *Mary Tyler Moore*, Mary's mother reminds her to take her birth control pill. Mary simply tells her mother she'll remember without any debate or lengthy discussion. “She simply takes responsibility for her own sex life, something new on television.” (Klein 105) The women on *Sex and the City* definitely take responsibility for their sex lives, don't apologize for it, and, most importantly are willing to talk about it.

The reason *Sex and the City* succeeded at exploring the topic of single womanhood was completely different than *Mary Tyler Moore* or *Murphy Brown* different: the network. *Sex and the City* was able to talk so candidly about sex, depict graphic sexual acts, and expose the active sexual lives of single women because of the network. All six seasons of *Sex and the City* aired on HBO a subscription cable network. Because the network earned its revenue from subscribers, it did not have to accommodate the demands or threats of advertisers and therefore could be daring with their content.

²⁶ Gilbert, Matthew. “*Sex and the City* Back with Wit and Poignancy” *The Boston Globe*, June 2, 2000

Creator Darren Starr told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: "This show deals with language and sexuality in a frank way, the way people talk about relationships in the real world. You can't see that on [network] sitcoms. You couldn't do this show on network television."²⁷

And this content seemed to know no bounds, as the women of *Sex and the City*, "own their sexuality like they own their shoes."²⁸ The show covered the topics of anal sex, oral sex (both giving and receiving), talking dirty, gay sex (both male and female), fetishes, S&M, and many other sexual issues. Certain episodes also discussed where to have sex (Miranda dates a man who only wants to have sex in public), when to have sex (the four women debate whether or not Carrie should sleep with Mr. Big on their first date), and why to have sex (Carrie toys with the idea of having sex with Mr. Big before he moves away to California). These examples illustrate that sex is a character in *Sex and the City* with layers and a reason for being. The sex in this show isn't gratuitous as its presence has a purpose of empowerment. In a large spread in a May 2000 issue of the *New York Daily News*, Kim Cattrall said, "I'm playing this wonderful, joyous, uncompromising, nonjudgmental person, who I think is a role model for women saying 'yes' to their sexuality and 'yes' to their empowerment."²⁹

In their early reviews of the series, most of the mainstream media did not dwell on the graphic sex. The reviews focused mainly on the goal of the series which, according to them, was emphasizing the trials and tribulations of single female New Yorkers. Sex was just one aspect, though a realistic, important one of their lives. "Like the other stars, [Kristin] Davis admires the realistic dialogue on *Sex*. 'We can talk about relationships honestly'," she said. 'Conversations on the show are like conversations I have with my

²⁷ Winfrey, Lee. "Turning Up the Heat" *The Philadelphia Inquirer* June 4, 1998

²⁸ Klein *What Would Murphy Brown Do?* 115

²⁹ Bianculli, David. "The Dirtiest Girls on TV" *New York Daily News* May 28, 2000

friends. My manager loves it because he feels like he gets to see the secret side of what girls talk about.’’³⁰

By exposing liberated sexual lives, *Sex and the City* did not just portray sex for sex’s sake, but it showed real female relationships and real types of women. *The New York Times* said that *Sex and the City* “alights on a particular patch of ground where their characters roam through a hyper-realistic landscape searching for the meaning of love.”³¹ By portraying the characters in four distinct archetypal roles, the show could illustrate women more realistically. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* quotes Kim Cattrall as saying, "This material is really no stretch of our imaginations. We're all young women who've been through the dating experiences, either had those experiences or heard about them. I'm not Samantha, but I know people who are." By presenting a realistic picture of single life in the 21st century, *Sex and the City* makes a statement that this lifestyle is okay; the same thing that occurred with both *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Murphy Brown*. “Television is entertainment and entertainment makes things appear better, more interesting, and even more glamorous than they really are. In a way it has helped single women feel less ashamed of their situation ...”³²

Issue #2 – Homosexuality

It can be argued that sitcoms have had the most success in breaking down stereotypes and prejudices against homosexuals both male and female and have helped expose the larger American public to gay characters that they could relate to and ultimately learn to love. These sitcoms gave a different and more positive face to homosexuality as the previous depictions of gay people in the media had been

³⁰ Winfrey “Turning Up the Heat” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 1998

³¹ James, Caryn. “In Pursuit of Love, Romantically or Not” *The New York Times* June 5, 1998

³² Klein What Would Murphy Brown Do? 41

overwhelmingly negative. And as with all of the issues discussed here, sitcoms such as *Soap*, *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* allowed audiences to laugh with gay characters thereby become more comfortable with them.

While each show had their own defining reasons as to why they succeeded in illuminating new areas of homosexual life and changing public perception, all three have one thing in common: sexual content. None of the following sitcoms ever showed an on-camera intimacy between two members of the same sex (besides a minor hug or kiss). “Apparently, for program executives, progress means constructing images of lesbians and gays that are not threatening to heterosexuals by erasing any sign of lesbian and gay sexuality.”³³ Before *Soap*’s debut, ABC censors noted that: “The relationship between Jodie and the football player should be handled in such a manner that explicit or intimate aspects of homosexuality are avoided entirely.”³⁴ Both on *Ellen* and on *Will and Grace*, the gay characters date members of the same sex and while sexuality was discussed, it was never shown. An ad buyer told the Associated Press that “if Ellen were to find a girlfriend and the two of them are going to the zoo together, it’s not a problem. If they are in bed together, it’s a problem.”³⁵

Soap Shows that a Gay Man Can be a Happy Man

While other programs such as *All in the Family* had gay characters in the early 1970s, *Soap* was the first hit television series (which ran for more than one season) with a recurring gay character. (The show, *The Corner Bar* had a recurring gay character, but the show only lasted one season). And while the character of Jodie Dallas was portrayed

³³ Gross, Larry. Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Media in America (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 87

³⁴ Capsuto, Steven. Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000) 141

³⁵ Capsuto Alternate Channels 385

in both positive and negative lights, the sitcom without a doubt gave viewers a new idea of what a gay man could be, look like and act like and therefore broke new ground.

Many felt the title *Soap* was meant to satire the soap opera genre; however, the producers claim this was not the show's intention. Creator Susan Harris said, "None of us watched soaps. All we knew about soaps was that basically they had no story end, and they were pretty silly. It just gave us license to do what we wanted to do."³⁶ However, the show *was* a satire of something much larger than a television genre. According to executive producer Paul Junger Witt, "I think we were satirizing the status quo more than soap operas. [We wanted] to have characters that were more representative of what we saw going on in society, instead of this generic family that were tended to see in show after show."³⁷

The program told the story of two sisters and their families and their often entangled affairs. The show featured spousal infidelity, men who slept with mothers and their daughters, deranged war veterans, impotence, religious cults, the mafia, and even alien abductions. While the show featured both wacky and silly storylines, they did so alongside the dramatic. "[*Soap* made] statements along the way about the human condition with honesty and compassion."³⁸

While other previous sitcoms including Norman Lear's *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* featured risqué content, no show like it had ever been scheduled in prime time when many children are still watching. The decision to schedule *Soap* at 9:30 PM created a large amount of protest by the ABC affiliates. The President of the Twin Falls, Iowa

³⁶ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on The Air* 203

³⁷ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on The Air* 204

³⁸ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on The Air* 203

ABC affiliate told the *New York Times*, “It’s not a new frontier, it’s a new sewer.”³⁹

Some stations scheduled the show at 10:30 PM and even some (including the one in Baltimore) decided not to air the first two episodes at all. Along a similar vein, many advertisers and sponsors were very wary and even frightened by the condemnation of the show by the Moral Majority. Witt said, “But they managed to frighten Madison Avenue. They managed to frighten the agencies to the degree that, despite our numbers, which were huge, we never got the price that the show should’ve. Because a lot of sponsors were afraid of it.”⁴⁰

The media’s reaction to television shows usually come after the shows have premiered; however, the media’s response to *Soap* came in the summer months before the show even premiered. When the first two episodes were unveiled in May 1977, many people were angered by the show’s content which sparked a media firestorm and the reshooting of certain scenes from the first two episodes. These groups included ABC affiliates, advertisers, the moral Religious Right, and even gay rights activists who felt that the gay character Jodie was too stereotypical and a step backwards for gay depictions in the media. At the time, Fred Silverman the head of ABC entertainment said to *Variety*, “The summer of 1977 may well go down in television history as the summer of *Soap*. Never have so many words been written about a television pilot which so few people have actually seen.”⁴¹

It is important to note that the media did not emphasize the presence of a gay character over any of the other controversial issues that the show portrayed. It only

³⁹ O’Connor, John. “Stir Over *Soap* Continues: Industry Fears Backlash Against Sensationalism” *The New York Times* Jul 12, 1977

⁴⁰ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 207

⁴¹ Capsuto *Alternate Channel* 138

mentioned it as one in a list of many. The number one issue in the eyes of the media, the public and even the show's director seemed to be when Jessica's character has an affair with a tennis pro who is also having an affair with her daughter. This plot point is mentioned in nearly every article written about the show and the show's director Jay Sandrich identified it as the "biggest problem"⁴² the show had to deal with. In fact, the attention the mainstream media paid to the gay aspects of the show's plot came after the show premiered and the preconceived notions of the American public had been debunked. The gay media however, was not as quiet.

Part of the show's content that was exposed in May 1977, was the gay character of Jodie Dallas and his pension for dressing up in his mother's clothes and desire for a sex change operation. The *Philadelphia Gay News* reported in July that "the gay character does nothing but reinforce that old stereotype, which ABC should now realize is a tiring rehash."⁴³ Gay rights activist Newton Deiter said in May, "Judging from the two-part pilot, Jodie seemed to be a physically attractive wimp who never speaks up to defend himself and is the butt of everyone's humor."⁴⁴ *The Philadelphia Gay News* and Deiter reflected the thoughts of many gay rights groups including the National Gay Task Force and the International Union of Gay Athletes who wanted the "mythical stereotypes to be laid to rest once and for all."⁴⁵

Before the show aired, the producers met with special interest groups and one of the points they emphasized to gay rights groups was that the character of Jodie would *develop* and that they needed to be patient. By this time, the public was only aware of the

⁴² Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That On the Air* 208

⁴³ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 140

⁴⁴ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 140

⁴⁵ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 141

content of the first two episodes; hardly enough time to fully establish a character. “We did meet with gay groups who were concerned that the first openly gay character on television would be seen as wildly effeminate. [...] And we also explained that, you know there *was* going to be an evolution.”⁴⁶

The critics and special interest groups were almost silenced after the show premiered on September 13, 1977, especially those critics of the gay content because the character of Jodie did develop and evolve as the producers promised. While many gay rights activists were worried about Jodie’s effeminate qualities and stereotypically wanting a sex change operation, these storylines soon disappeared.

“Most of the protests subsided after the first month, when viewers had a chance to see what a well-written, craftily performed satire it was. Jodie turned out to be sweet, proud, basically non-stereotypical, and very open about his gayness. Many isolated gay and bisexual teenage viewers embraced him as a role model.”⁴⁷

Jodie abandoned his wish for a sex change, attempted suicide, became bisexual and involved with a woman, and by the end of the series was battling for custody of his child. While these storylines seemed far-fetched, as mentioned earlier, they were often paired with dramatic ones. In one poignant and memorable scene, Jodie officially comes out to his older brother who refuses to believe that he has a gay brother. After some convincing, Jodie’s brother ultimately accepts him and the scene ends with the two men hugging each other. “Many of the questions asked during that touching conversation had the ring of truth for the millions of gay people who’d already acknowledged their

⁴⁶ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 210

⁴⁷ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 142

sexuality to friends and family members. For an untold number of others, that dialogue served as a catalyst for similar real life discussions with loved ones.”⁴⁸

Soap was able to successfully expose American audiences to a semi-realistic picture of gay life for many reasons besides the fact that the show was extremely funny. First and foremost, the network (ABC) believed very much in the show and did not succumb to the barrage of criticisms and threats from advertisers and sponsors. Fred Silverman, ABC’s head of programming said, “*Soap* had some real style and sophistication. This was a much smarter show and everybody was proud of it.”⁴⁹ A 1985 *Los Angeles Times* article quoted ABC entertainment president Lewis Erlicht as saying that the network did have trouble getting sponsors and sold the program at reduced rates. “The *Times* article speculates that ABC stuck with the show for four seasons to prove that it wouldn’t be intimidated by outside pressure.”⁵⁰

As was the case with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, one of the other reasons *Soap* was able to effectively communicate issues never before seen on television, was because of the actor who was playing the groundbreaking role. While Mary Tyler Moore had already established herself on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, comedian Billy Crystal was somewhat of a newcomer when he joined the cast of *Soap*. However, he played the character as sunny, positive and very likeable. “Billy Crystal has a level of humanity and warmth in him that to this character that most of America had never seen before – and might very well be shocked by – and ingratiated himself with the audience almost

⁴⁸ Rodger Streitmatter. From Perverts to Fab Five: The Media’s Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians (New York: Routledge, 2009) 45

⁴⁹ Neuwirth They’ll Never Put That on the Air 214

⁵⁰ Capsuto Alternate Channels 144

immediately.”⁵¹ It can be argued that *Soap* would not have had as much impact if the part had been played by another actor.

While *Soap*, like many other groundbreaking sitcoms, had excellent ratings, and won a slew of awards, it had no intention on charting new television territory. According to Witt: “Bottom line: we wanted to do a comedy that said something.”⁵² Witt and the entire *Soap* staff accomplished this goal. While, the storylines weren’t always realistic or plausible, the show planted a gay character in America’s living rooms week after week; showing that a gay man could be happy, funny, loved and likeable and wasn’t anything to be afraid of. “The homosexuals were saying, ‘You’re stereotyping!’ and the religious community said, ‘You’re proselytizing!’ And we said, ‘We’re doing neither. We’re showing this man in a satirical, humorous vein, and hopefully in a fair way.’”⁵³

Ellen Comes Out with a Bang

While *Soap* was the first hit series with a recurring gay character, *Ellen* (which debuted almost twenty years later) was the first sitcom to have a gay character as the central lead and the first sitcom with a gay actress in a leading role. However, Ellen DeGeneres’ character did not come out until the second to last season in one of the most talked about episodes in television history. Just as *Soap* had pioneered, *Ellen* exposed the hardship of the “coming out” process and painted a funny, positive face on America’s lesbians. As GLAAD’s communications director said: “If Ellen Morgan comes out,

⁵¹ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 210

⁵² Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 215

⁵³ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 210

people are going to get to know a lesbian intimately, even if they don't know one in real life.”⁵⁴

Ellen premiered on March 30, 1994 and seemed to be a typical sitcom about a single woman coping with life and love much like *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Murphy Brown*. Early episodes focused on her attempts to find a serious boyfriend and “her tendency to meddle in her friends’ lives.”⁵⁵ *Ellen* was a near instant hit and became the number two comedy by its second season. However, as the years went on, the show failed to find successful storylines. Star Ellen DeGeneres was reportedly uncomfortable with the dating storylines which often drive sitcoms. While DeGeneres herself was gay, by the start of the show’s third season in Fall 1995, she was not out to the public and not ready to come out as her character either. “The show’s writers were at a loss for plotlines, now that their leading character was no longer identifiably heterosexual and not yet openly gay.”⁵⁶ By the end of the third season in the spring of 1996, *Ellen* was no longer a top five show. It finished the season in thirty-ninth place. *Ellen* was in major need of a drastic change and that change came in the form of a ground-breaking and extremely buzzed about episode.

On June 6, 1996, DeGeneres hosted the show’s creative team at her home. She raised a glass of champagne and announced that this would be the year both she and her character would come out publically. But this was much easier said than done. “Given her determination to come out, Disney executives probably thought they had just two choices: to cancel *Ellen*, or let the title character come out.”⁵⁷ Disney was worried about

⁵⁴ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 387

⁵⁵ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 380

⁵⁶ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 382

⁵⁷ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 384

maintaining the show's profitability once the main character came out. Disney was concerned that this change would hurt the company's chances of selling the show into syndication; where many production costs are recouped. However, by mid-September of 1996, the Lifetime cable network purchased reruns of *Ellen* for \$600,000 an episode. "Disney had less to lose that fall than it had a few months earlier."⁵⁸

Originally, the coming out episode was planned to air in November 1996 during sweeps week, and while subtle hints were dropped in each episode of season four, by the time the show went on hiatus in December, ABC had not given the episode the official green light. However, that same month ABC changed the series' time slot from 8:00 PM to 9:30 PM. "This solved two problems: there would be more freedom to explore 'adult' themes and *Ellen* would no longer be opposite CBS's popular *The Nanny*."⁵⁹ Then finally in February 1997, ABC announced it would air a one-hour coming out special episode on April 30 which happened to be the first night of May sweeps.

Like *Soap*, the media coverage of *Ellen*'s coming out episode peaked before it even aired. The large amount of coverage came in two waves. One during the summer of 1996, when it was rumored that Ellen Morgan would be coming out during the show's fourth season. The theme of this first wave was "will she, won't she?" The second wave came in February 1997 when the definitive date of the episode was announced. However, unlike *Soap*, the coverage didn't focus on protests or boycotts, it focused on one question: was America ready for a sitcom focused around a single *lesbian* looking for love? When the idea was proposed initially, Disney itself wasn't sure if the public was ready. "Disney CEO Michael Eisner was tentatively open to the idea of Ellen Morgan's coming out,

⁵⁸ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 385

⁵⁹ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 389

pending the acceptability of sample scripts and assurances that her sexual orientation would not be the show's sole focus."⁶⁰

The media speculated how the episode would affect the future of the program. Many couldn't determine the outcome one way or another. *The Washington Post* said "The coming out episode would either boost *Ellen* into the hit class, or doom it once and for all."⁶¹ However, the article continued, that "for some reason Americans seem less resistant to lesbianism than to male homosexuality, in popular culture and in real life too." The reporter goes on to say that despite this wildly held belief, the success of the film *The Birdcage* could make a sitcom centered around a gay man a potential threat to *Ellen*.

The American public, as well as journalists, seemed to be split on whether or not the episode would be a positive or negative step for the show to take. *Newsweek* quoted a twenty-six year old single woman who said that "If the show is going to turn into 'let's explore what lesbian relationships really mean,' I wouldn't want to watch that."⁶² However, in a letter to the editor in the *New York Times* one viewer saw the deeper social meaning and importance of the episode. "It's not about a television character," wrote Anne Samuelson, "it's about a new level of recognition for each of us who is a gay American."⁶³

Because the episode was expected to bring in very high ratings, ABC was able to sell advertising at twice its normal rate and the date seemed to become somewhat of a holiday in the gay community. The Human Rights Campaign (the largest political lobby

⁶⁰ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 384

⁶¹ Shales, Tom. "Closet Space and Selling *Ellen*" *The Washington Post* April 27, 1997

⁶² Marin, Rick. "*Ellen* Steps Out" *Newsweek* April 14, 1997

⁶³ "*Ellen* Shows the Way" *The New York Times* April 11, 1997

for gay issues) sent out 3,000 “Ellen House Party” kits so interested parties could come together, watch the episode, and simultaneously learn about and campaign for gay rights. “The HRC organizers originally expected to mail out three hundred kits. By early April they had received more than four hundred requests, and they ultimately sent more than three thousand kits.”⁶⁴ If it wasn’t clear already, this show had grown into something much bigger than just another ploy for ratings: it was becoming a social and cultural phenomenon.

Finally, after years of speculation and media coverage, April 30 arrived. The one-hour episode began with Ellen in the back of her bookstore getting ready to go to dinner with her friends who are waiting for her in the front of the store. Getting impatient, her friend asks, “Ellen, are you coming out or not?” Another friend says, “Yeah Ellen!” Quit jerkin’ us around and come out already.” Ellen responds with: “What’s the big deal? I’ve got a whole hour!”⁶⁵ After this witty foreshadowing (that was typical of the show’s fourth season), the episode moved into its main storyline. Richard, a TV reporter wants to pursue a serious relationship with Ellen, however, she finds herself attracted to his producer, Susan (played by Laura Dern). When Susan assumes that Ellen is gay, Ellen quickly denies it and attempts to have sex with Richard to prove her heterosexuality. But once she admits she is a lesbian to herself and her therapist, (played by Oprah Winfrey) Ellen realizes she needs to find Susan, tell her, and start living an honest life. She catches up with Susan at the airport and after much struggle and anguish, finally says the words: “I’m gay!” However, it wouldn’t be a sitcom without a humorous element. As Ellen says these words, her elbow hits the switch to the Public Address system and her confession is

⁶⁴ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 393

⁶⁵ *Ellen* Season 4, Episode 22 Original Air Date: April 30, 1997

broadcasted to the entire terminal. And with that beautiful, honest moment Ellen Morgan had finally come out. The second half of the episode focused on Ellen telling her friends, their supportive responses, and dealing with her first heartbreak as Susan tells Ellen she is in a serious long-term relationship.

The hallmark episode drew ABC's second highest ratings that year after the Academy Awards telecast. The episode did spark "several hundred calls of protest" according to an ABC spokeswoman quoted in a *New York Daily News* article printed two days after the episode aired. The spokeswoman added that the network also received "a generous amount of calls in support."⁶⁶ Only one advertiser (Chrysler) pulled their ads from the episode, and even they decided to put their ads back in the show the following week. "This tells me that when American television programmers take a chance on diversity, it pays off," said Alan Klein, a spokesman for GLAAD. "The American public is interested in seeing reality on the screens."⁶⁷

This episode was able to draw large numbers, not just because of the media hype and years of anticipation, but because it showed a character that America had grown to know and love over four years go through an emotionally difficult process.

"[Executive producer Dava] Savel told a reporter, 'It was really important to Ellen [DeGeneres] to reveal it in such a way that everybody, including middle America, was on board. That everybody saw her angst, everybody saw what she was going go through, and that by the end you're rooting for her.'"⁶⁸

Ellen's writers could've simply just made the character become gay without any sort of fanfare or painful process, but it can be argued that the episode would not have been as successful. "There was a sense that viewers would be more sympathetic to a

⁶⁶ Huff, Richard. "Ellen Receives Out-Standing Ratings" *The New York Daily News* May 2, 1997

⁶⁷ Huff "Ellen Receives Out-Standing Ratings" *New York Daily News*

⁶⁸ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 395

character who is struggling with his or her sexuality than to someone like *Roseanne*'s Nancy, who simply announced that she was in a relationship with a woman.”⁶⁹

There is no question that this episode of *Ellen* changed society. The episode won the Emmy for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series (single episode) as well as a Peabody Award which recognizes achievement in public service by TV networks and other media entities. It also had a profound effect on gay and lesbian Americans who were once afraid to admit their sexual orientations to themselves, family, and friends.

“Anecdotal evidence from social service agencies suggests that thousands of people came out to family or friends that month, many citing *Ellen* as the catalyst. Many wrote to DeGeneres thanking her and saying they wished she had been on TV when they were younger. Some young people wrote to say that she had given them hope and dissuaded them from suicide.”⁷⁰

When *Ellen* returned in September 1997, the tone and theme of the show had changed. While Michael Eisner only allowed Ellen to come out if her homosexuality would not become the main focus of the show; that was just what happened. Ellen's homosexuality did not become one part of her it defined her and became central theme of the fifth and final season. *Ellen* was no longer the same show that viewers were devoted to and just as the twenty-six year old quoted in *Newsweek* had predicted, it became something that not everyone could relate to or wanted to watch. Despite this, *Ellen* exposed the coming out process for the first time on television with humor and compassion and “made American society a safer place in which to be openly gay.”⁷¹

Will & Grace – Just Gay Enough

Only eight weeks after the first sitcom with a lesbian lead character ended, the first sitcom with a gay *male* lead premiered on NBC. Unlike on *Ellen*, the two main

⁶⁹ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 395

⁷⁰ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 396

⁷¹ Capsuto *Alternate Channels* 403

character's homosexuality was not the central focus of *Will & Grace*, but the sitcom did expose certain gay rights issues for the first time on television and did so humorously and gently. The sitcom provided audiences with two different types of gay men and therefore expunged certain stereotypes about who gay men are. *Will & Grace*'s unprecedented popularity for a gay-themed sitcom invited gay characters into more homes than ever before.

Will & Grace premiered on September 21, 1998 on NBC. The sitcom centered around two best friends: Will, a gay lawyer who, in the pilot episode just ended a long-term relationship, and Grace, an interior designer who has been proposed to by her fiancée. Will's flamboyantly gay friend Jack and Grace's assistant Karen rounded out the ensemble cast. The main premise of the sitcom was the close relationship between Will and Grace and the ups and downs their friendship goes through. Creator David Kohan told the *New York Daily News*, "It's like that 'Harry Met Sally . . . ' line when Billy Crystal says, 'A man and woman can never be friends, because sex always gets in the way.' What we want to explore is what happens between a man and a woman when sex doesn't get in the way."⁷²

Will & Grace presented two types of gay men; something that few television shows had done prior. "Indeed, one of the program's most noteworthy characteristics was that unlike its TV predecessors *Soap* and *Ellen*, it didn't feature a solo gay character but two of them who differ from each other in numerous respects."⁷³ Will is a level headed lawyer who doesn't flaunt his homosexuality and rarely dates or has promiscuous sex. Jack is the antithesis of Will. He is incredibly effeminate, promiscuous and aspires to be a Broadway

⁷² Mink, Eric. "Ellen Led the Way – New Sitcom Will Follow" *The New York Daily News* August 27, 1998

⁷³ Streitmatter From Perverts to Fab Five 118

star and has no consistent source of income. Jack is noticeably gay from the moment he dramatically bursts into Will's apartment in the pilot episode. When Jack sits down at Will's poker table, and Will and his buddies start poking fun at him and his sexuality, Jack says, "Most people who meet me don't know I'm gay." Will responds, "Blind and deaf people know you're gay." Grace later says that not only did she know instantly that Jack was gay, but even her dog knew.⁷⁴ However, many people who viewed the show before it aired, had difficulty identifying whether or not Will was actually gay. The value of presenting two different types of gay men is that it expanded viewers' ideas of who gay men are: what they look like how they act. Previous media images of homosexual men often portrayed the "Jack type." Popular films such as 1996's *The Birdcage* and 1997's *My Best Friend's Wedding* featured incredibly campy and effeminate gay men which reinforced certain stereotypes that *Soap*'s Jodie Dallas helped reinforce in American society. As Kevin Dawson from California commented in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* "Gay men on television have traditionally been one of two things: outlandish, campy queens (*Will & Grace* features one of those) or dull, overcompassionate young men who are unlucky in love. Whether "Will" falls into that second category remains to be seen."⁷⁵ Whether or not Will is a member of this second category is debatable but by presenting his character, and subsequently a dichotomy, these stereotypes started to lose their merit and homosexual characters became multi-layered and part of a larger spectrum. In his 1998 letter, Dawson hoped this would be the

⁷⁴ *Will & Grace* Season One, Episode One. Original Air Date: September 21, 1998

⁷⁵ "Gay With Straight; Still Stereotypes" *The New York Times* October 18, 1998

case. "...Maybe *Will & Grace* will succeed in finally presenting a believable gay character who is neither a stereotype nor a political statement."⁷⁶

While most episodes mentioned Jack and Will's homosexuality, very rarely was this issue the central focus of an episode. When it *was*, the show made funny yet important comments about gay rights, many for the first time on television. In the middle of the show's second season, *Will & Grace* featured an episode about gay affection on television. Jack tunes into a sitcom which has advertised that the latest episode will feature a gay kiss. But when the moment of the kiss arrives, the cameras cut away to another scene. A livid Jack marches down to NBC's offices to complain and drags Will along with him. When the two are refused at the door, they join the crowd of people gathered outside 30 Rockefeller Plaza waiting to get their faces on the *Today* show. When the camera pans over to them, Will and Jack lock lips on national television. This episode dealt with the issue of public displays of homosexual affection in "a humorous vein and thereby avoided the attacks that conservative groups would have made if the kiss had been of the romantic variety."⁷⁷

On July 1, 2000, a law went into effect in the state of Vermont which allowed same sex couples to join in civil union and enjoy many of the same rights as married heterosexual couples. Less than six months later, an episode of *Will and Grace* centered around the four main characters travelling to Vermont for a friends' civil union ceremony. The content of the episode has nothing to do with the civil union itself, but

⁷⁶ "Gay with Straight" *New York Times* October 1998

⁷⁷ Streitmatter From Perverts to Fab Five 122

more so with a fight Will and Grace are having. However the *setting* of the episode is a civil union ceremony and with this, “*Will & Grace* is quietly endorsing civil unions.”⁷⁸

Much of the early media coverage of *Will & Grace* focused on its gay content in relation to *Ellen*’s. Many journalists commented that *Will & Grace*’s gay content was much subtler than *Ellen*’s, but the *Ellen* did lay the groundwork for a successful show with gay lead characters. Ed Vitagliano, news editor of the American Family Association of Tupelo, Miss., told the *Washington Times*, “*Ellen* was in your face, an out-and-loud promotion of a lifestyle declared to be a natural variation of human sexuality. *Will & Grace* is not in the same vein as *Ellen*, even though we consider it a stepchild. It probably would not have been attempted had *Ellen* not broken that barrier.”⁷⁹

This subtlety is precisely what made *Will & Grace* the most successful sitcom with homosexual lead characters to date. In reviews of the show, the media believed that the show’s appeal was that it didn’t force homosexuality down the throats of audiences. “The show’s attitude about sexual orientation might best be summed up as ‘Whatever.’”⁸⁰ This was the creators’ as well as NBC’s intention from the beginning: to create a show in which it is the *characters* who are gay, not a show with a gay agenda. An anonymous NBC representative told the *Washington Times*, “It’s not about gayness. The lead character happens to be gay,” (Wash Times) Producer James Burrows said, “We’re not here to proselytize at all. [...] We will do a show that makes us laugh and is entertaining.”⁸¹ It was this formula of comedy over politics that allowed this sitcom to

⁷⁸ Streitmatter *From Perverts to Fab Five* 122

⁷⁹ Duin, Julia. “*Will & Grace* Makes Splash, But Few Waves” *The Washington Time* October 16, 1998

⁸⁰ Mink “*Ellen* Led the Way...” *The New York Daily News* August 1998

⁸¹ Mink “*Ellen* Led the Way...” *The New York Daily News* August 1998

simultaneously change the way people were perceived by the public and entertain tens of millions of people every week.

Issue #3 – Sexual Issues

Sex has always been a taboo issue in American society. No matter what statistical evidence has shown about human sexual behavior, the media has been very wary of portraying sex in any capacity. The film industry Production Code that was implemented in the late 1940s imposed many restrictions on the portrayal of sex on film. While there was no formal code in the television industry, there was more of an unspoken one.

“Since the industry’s birth, television executives had steadfastly avoided any possibility of offending public sensibilities with regard to sex. According to the conventional wisdom that guided the Powers that Be, viewers did not want to have their sexual attitudes challenged by the programs that came into their living rooms.”⁸²

That all changed when one groundbreaking sitcom exposed a wide variety of familiar sexual issues that, until that time, had never been discussed publically. The exposure of such issues as impotence, menopause and sexual assault on *All in the Family* paved the way for other sitcoms to delve into deeper and more controversial sexual issues such as abortion on *Maude*, and contraception and masturbation on *Seinfeld*.

All in the Family – The Sitcom that Changed a Nation

Author Sean Campbell says that January 12, 1971 changed America forever. There was no political crisis or major news story that day, just the premiere of a television show: *All in the Family*. According to Campbell and many other critics, *All in the Family* didn’t just change the sitcom genre, or the television medium, it changed the

⁸² Streitmatter, Rodger. Sex Sells! The Media’s Journey from Repression to Obsession (Westview Press, 2004) 58

entire country. “That was the night that the dysfunctional Bunker family was unleashed on the public airwaves, breaking practically every rule and taboo on TV.”⁸³

All in the Family was the first offering of now legendary television producer Norman Lear who went on to produce such influential and hallmark sitcoms as *Sanford and Son*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, and *One Day at a Time*. All of these programs spoke to particular societal issues including class, race, and divorce. However, none of these shows would have been successful if *All in the Family* hadn’t set the precedent. *All in the Family* was the first show to depict a wide variety of relevant social issues using humor and brutal honesty. Producer and director Bud Yorkin said:

“We were breaking a lot of ground. So much so, that I don’t believe you could get that show on the air today. I think it would be much more difficult today, living in a much more conservative time. They don’t want to deal with the subjects that we dealt with...they were too honest.”⁸⁴

One of the relevant social issues that *All in the Family* tackled was sex. And they dared to do so in the very first episode. “The pilot program, shot in Hollywood, set the tone for the series, and its frank portrayal of sex and the use of racial epithets shocked some CBS veteran executives.” (Roman 104) The first episode, began with Gloria and Mike Stivic, (the daughter and son-in-law of Edith and Archie Bunker) waiting for Edith and Archie to return home from church so they can celebrate the couple’s anniversary. When Mike and Gloria finish their preparations, they decide to take advantage of the fact that they have the house all to themselves. They sneak up to the bedroom but their plans are interrupted when Archie and Edith return home early. Outraged, Archie yells, “You ain’t supposed to be doin’ stuff like that at 11:10 on a Sunday mornin’!”⁸⁵

⁸³ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 123

⁸⁴ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 143

⁸⁵ *All in the Family* Season One, Episode One, Original Air Date: January 12, 1971

“This scene in 1971 was the beginning of a rollercoaster of sex mania in American entertainment throughout the 1970s. On a public and national scale, Lear was the first to introduce this concept into America’s living rooms. [...] He was the first to acknowledge on television that people have sex.”⁸⁶ (Campbell 12)

Sex would be a consistent theme throughout *All in the Family*’s nine seasons. The show discussed a wide variety of sexual issues including menopause, impotence and even sexual assault for the first time on television. These issues were not mentioned in passing, but were the central topics of entire episodes. “In the second season, Lear was writing episodes about personal issues. First, Lear boldly tackled impotence – showing how various generations could look at a common sexual problem.”⁸⁷ In the ninth episode of the second season, Mike becomes overly stressed due to his impending final exams. This stress has infiltrated the bedroom he shares with his wife Gloria and she wants to discuss his lackluster sexual performance. When Mike refuses to talk about it, Gloria, with trepidation, needs someone to turn to for advice and perspective. Edith notices something is bothering Gloria, but Gloria’s response is, “Ma, you know I can’t tell you about a *sexual* problem.” Edith attempts to address the issue of sex with her married grown-up daughter but she can’t even say the word. After less than helpful advice from her mother, Gloria takes the problem to the doctor who tells her that Mike’s impotence is probably the result of anxiety. The next night, Mike comes home after completing his exams, and the two become close again and the episode ends with the couple kissing implying that their sexual problems have been solved.

CBS did not air this episode without a fight, which was to be expected. The show was still in its original 8:00 PM time slot, when many families were watching. But

⁸⁶ Campbell, Sean. *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Publishers, 2007) 12

⁸⁷ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 22

Norman Lear, never acquiesced to the network. “They [the CBS censors] felt some of their new audience might shut off *All in the Family* forever if they saw this episode.”⁸⁸

Lear threatened to pull the show from the network if they didn’t air the episode, and after a long argument, his demands were met.

“Lear brought a very private issue into the public domain, providing awareness through situation comedy, and breaking the ice about it. The episode poked fun, perhaps ridicule, towards those, like Archie and Edith, who were not at all comfortable discussing the situation. It encouraged openness for those, like Mike, who were dealing with the problem. And at the same time, it was hard to keep from laughing.”⁸⁹

The second season continued to feature controversial topics with an episode centered around Edith Bunker dealing with menopause. Edith had been portrayed in the show thus far as a passive, inferior housewife who waited on Archie hand and foot and took every demeaning comment that Archie threw her way. However, in this episode when Edith began menopause, all that changed. She yells at Archie for the first time and has drastic mood swings. Archie, unable to cope with Edith’s behavior, visits her gynecologist for advice. This episode, much like the one about impotence, unapologetically exposed a common problem that many Americans face and showed audiences how to deal with it. Some consider the episode, “one of the greatest episode’s in the show’s history.”⁹⁰ The writer of the episode won the Emmy for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series that year.

In the show’s eighth season, another sexual issue was portrayed on the show for the first time, but was dealt with in a much less humorous way: rape. Edith let a man into the Bunker home whom she believed to be a police officer coming to warn the

⁸⁸ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 23

⁸⁹ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 23

⁹⁰ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 38

neighborhood of a nearby sexual predator. The man pins Edith to the couch and ties her up with his necktie. She ultimately escapes and defends herself with a burning cake from the oven and a knee to the man's crotch. "For the first time in television history, people saw a graphic approach to rape. And it was not graphic because there was on-screen nudity – in fact, there was none. It was graphic because the poor victim was the matriarch of America."⁹¹

As the content of these episodes suggest, audiences got to know the Bunker family rather intimately throughout the course of show. This is one of the reasons why *All in the Family* became arguably one of the most successful and influential sitcoms in American history: the relationship the audience was able to build with the characters. The intimate feelings and details of the characters lives were exposed every episode and thereby the Bunkers became members of America's extended families. This was what made the rape episode so hard-hitting and emotional for audiences. The studio audience who was present for the taping of this episode, often screamed and gasped throughout the taping. The reaction of the audience was microcosmic of the entire nation's. "The moment when the audience screamed 'Run!' was emblematic of why *All in the Family* was so successful and influential – because viewers cared about the genuine characters they interacted with, week after week for nine years."⁹²

While the episodes dealing with menopause and impotence didn't receive direct coverage by the media, the episode on rape did. A *Los Angeles Times* critic said, "one of the rarest gifts in drama is the ability to combine knockabout tragedy with divine comedy

⁹¹ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 40

⁹² Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 43

in the same play and make it palatable.”⁹³ The article goes on to say that like Shakespeare, Norman Lear achieves this with “astonishing success.”

Besides these isolated instances, the media was most vocal regarding *All in the Family* when the show first premiered in 1971, and they focused more so on the prejudice of Archie Bunker. Both critics and the public were divided on whether or not the show’s content was appropriate and on whether or not the show would succeed. *The New York Times* noticed this divisiveness. “The variety of their [critics and citizens] criticisms suggests the show may either polarize the country beyond measure or successfully treat the issue of bigotry in terms of laughter.”⁹⁴ However, even as early as two years after the show premiered, a different *New York Times* reporter noticed that it was the latter option that won out. “*All in the Family* was, in one sense, a way of picking one’s nose in public. It provided a certain catharsis in the knowledge that the things we did or thought or felt in private were not foreign country. Edith’s menopause, Mike’s impotence [...] were not only fit but elegant subjects for laughter.”⁹⁵

Maude – TV’s First Abortion

Twenty years before the media and the American public went crazy over a single episode of *Ellen*, an episode of *Maude* stirred up the most controversy and public outcry of any sitcom episode before it. Maude Findlay’s pregnancy and subsequent abortion was “arguably the most famous and controversial abortion procedure in the history of America.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Smith, Cecil. “The Rape of Edith Bunker” *The Los Angeles Times* October 13, 1977

⁹⁴ Gould, Jack. “Can Bigotry Be Laughed Away? It’s Worth a Try” *The New York Times* February 21, 1971

⁹⁵ Harnetz, Aljean. “Maude Didn’t Leave Them All Laughing” *The New York Times* December 10, 1972

⁹⁶ Campbell The Sitcoms of Norman Lear 77

In September of 1972, Edith Bunker's cousin Maude Findlay who had made appearances on *All in the Family*, got her own show. Maude was a fiercely independent liberal woman who often got into political debates with Archie Bunker. Her show focused around her life with her fourth husband Walter and divorced daughter. The show was produced by *All in the Family's* Norman Lear and therefore was not devoid of social relevancy. Lear took *Maude's* content to another level by, "harpooning subjects that even *All in the Family* had shied away from."⁹⁷ Many of these subjects were sexual in nature including, middle-aged sexual activity, unwanted pregnancy, vasectomies and most notably abortion.

Maude's first few episodes did better in the ratings than *All in the Family's* premiere episodes. After its first eight episodes it was the number eleven show on television, however, Lear felt the need to increase this number and in order to achieve this decided to do an episode on one of the most divisive and controversial topics in American culture: abortion. Originally, the episode was written to have Maude's best friend Vivian be the one with the unwanted pregnancy, but the producers felt it took the focus off Maude. The writer then switched the unwanted pregnancy to Maude. Alan Wagner, Vice President of Program Development at CBS at the time said that Lear felt like he could push the sexual envelope more with *Maude* than he could with *All in the Family*.

"He'd [Lear] already talked about having babies, losing babies, cancer, and defecation on *All in the Family*, but not really sexuality in the usual sense. He'd talked about erectile dysfunction...but when *Maude* started, that pushed into an area in view of things he couldn't deal with earlier."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on the Air* 185

⁹⁸ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on the Air* 189

Not surprisingly, CBS was completely opposed to airing this episode, and like he did with the impotence episode of *All in the Family*, Lear threatened to pull the show from the network if they refused to air the episode. Executive producer Rod Parker said that Lear used money to ultimately get his way as he threatened to sell the show to another network or use his own money to get the show on the air. “Norman was rich enough, he could do that. So they said, okay.”⁹⁹

Just because the greater CBS powers gave the episode the green light, not all of the network’s affiliates were onboard. Two Illinois affiliates refused to air the episode, a first for television. “[The two affiliates] made history as it was the first time any affiliate had refused to broadcast an episode of a recurring series.”¹⁰⁰ The manager of the station in Peoria that refused to air the episode told the *Los Angeles Times*, “We don’t think abortion is a proper subject for treatment in a frivolous way in a comedy program.”¹⁰¹ The decision of these stations caused the National Organization for Women to file a class action suit demanding the stations air the episodes.

The first half of the two part episode aired on November 14, 1972. At this time abortion was illegal in many states (but *was* legal in New York where *Maude* took place) and the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case was nearly a year away. The issue was an extremely important one in American politics at the time. “The issue certainly had social significance – it was one of the major issues that influenced voters in the 1972 election, which took place only two weeks before the episode aired.”¹⁰² By airing this episode before abortion was nationally legalized, *Maude*, unlike *All in the Family*, was

⁹⁹ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 192

¹⁰⁰ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 78

¹⁰¹ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 78

¹⁰² Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 77

dealing with a political issue at the height of its controversy and long before its social acceptability.

The first half hour of the episode centered on Maude learning she was pregnant as a 47-year-old grandmother. Her daughter suggests the idea of not going through with the pregnancy, an option that had never crossed Maude's mind. The rest of the episode focused on Maude telling her husband (who proceeds to choke on his dinner), dealing with her preconceived, albeit antiquated notions about abortion, and the arduous decision that Maude and her husband Walter have to make. Walter tells her at the end of the episode that he will support whatever decision she makes and will get a vasectomy so it won't happen again. At the beginning of part two, after her first bout of morning sickness, Maude lies to her daughter and tells her that she is keeping the baby because it is what her husband wants. After dealing with his reservations regarding his impending vasectomy (which he ultimately doesn't go through with), Maude tells him that she wants to have a baby so that he will be able to have a child of his own. Walter confesses that he doesn't need to be a father and that he wants Maude to make the decision for herself. They both eventually decide it would be wrong to have a child at their age. The last line of the episode is Walter assuring his wife, "For you Maude, for me, in the privacy of our own lives. You are doing the right thing."¹⁰³ Maude then tells Walter she loves him and the episode ends with the couple embracing. In the conversation the two have in their bedroom, the word abortion is never mentioned; the episode does not go on to show Maude going to the doctor or the effects of the procedure. The termination of Maude's pregnancy is implied and never directly announced.

¹⁰³ *Maude* Season One, Episode Ten Original Air Date: November 21, 1972

Despite the fact that the issue was dealt with in a subtle manner, after the episode aired, stations across the country were inundated with calls and letters. WCBS-TV in New York received over 300 phone calls in protest after the second part of the episode aired and CBS network headquarters received 7,000 letters of protest.¹⁰⁴ The episode's message and content made its way into church sermons and letters to the editors of newspapers. Parker recalls how his mother-in-law went to church where, "the sermon was all about how 'those terrible people on *Maude* were murderers.' We're for murder."¹⁰⁵ Ruth Regen, a resident of Evergreen Park, Illinois wrote angrily to the *Chicago Tribune* and said, "How can CBS present such a program which allows its characters to promote the murder of an unborn human being and call it entertainment? No matter what a person's views on abortion, a situation comedy is hardly a place to focus attention on such a delicate subject."¹⁰⁶ Clearly this was more than just another television episode; it had made its way into American communities and churches.

While the calls and letters the network and affiliates were overwhelmingly negative, the majority of the media's coverage, at least those publications who dared to cover the story, was positive for the most part (however it is safe to assume that there were members of the media who disagreed with the airing of this episode). Journalists, despite the fact that they may not have agreed with Maude's decision, were sure that it was an appropriate matter to discuss on a sitcom, the clear antithesis of their readers' opinions. "Like Norman Lear, I think abortion is an eminently proper subject for laughter..."¹⁰⁷ Their justification for their opinions is based on the fact that *Maude* dealt

¹⁰⁴ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 78

¹⁰⁵ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on the Air* 193

¹⁰⁶ "And Now A Word From Our Readers" *The Chicago Tribune* November 27, 1972

¹⁰⁷ Harmetz "Maude Didn't Leave Them All Laughing" *The New York Times* December 1972

with the issue tastefully and not always in a joking manner. "...it seemed to me that they treated the matter of abortion with great seriousness."¹⁰⁸

This episode, nor any other episode of *All in the Family* or *Maude*, would have ever seen the light of day and would not have impacted or changed society if it hadn't been for the passion and commitment of the shows' creator Norman Lear. As mentioned previously, Lear often threatened to pull his shows from the networks when the censors asked him to make certain changes. He believed that what he was putting on television was more than entertainment; it was radically impactful. He told a reporter, "I enjoy stirring feelings, even negative feelings because I think, that is what theater is about. It's marvelous to know you have engaged the feelings of millions of people."¹⁰⁹ Susan Harris (who wrote the abortion episode and would later go on to create *Soap*), said that Lear was her favorite producer to write for. "He was the only one doing television that was finally addressing reality."¹¹⁰ Lear was very serious about comedy and did not push the envelope just to get a rise out of people. He had a clear agenda and he understood the impact his comedy could have on the greater public. This was true of all of his shows and *Maude*'s abortion episode is a perfect example. Lear said:

"We never tried to get away with anything. We never put three "shits" or "fucks" or whatever the equivalent would be in there in order to get away with one. We didn't play *any* games at all...we were dead serious about what we wanted to do. And I think they [CBS] caught onto that – that we were not playing games."¹¹¹

Seinfeld – Master of the Sitcom Domain

After *Maude*, it wasn't until the 1990s that another sitcom dared to expose controversial sexual issues. And that sitcom, like *All in the Family* did in the seventies,

¹⁰⁸ Smith, Cecil. "Maude's Abortion Evokes Protests" *The Los Angeles Times* November 29, 1972

¹⁰⁹ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 78

¹¹⁰ Campbell *The Sitcoms of Norman Lear* 78

¹¹¹ Neuwirth *They'll Never Put That on the Air* 144

forever changed the sitcom genre. *Seinfeld* frankly discussed issues such as contraception and masturbation using an unprecedented brand of humor and wit. The reaction to these episodes by both the public and the media reflected a change in American society and a new era where sex was more socially acceptable, due in part to the sitcoms of Norman Lear. “Though television was changed forever by *All in the Family*, *Maude* [...] there were still a few taboos in place; human foibles and functions that remained verboten, not to be depicted on primetime network TV. *Seinfeld* pulled that last cork out of the bottle.”¹¹²

Seinfeld was born out of Jerry Seinfeld’s standup comedy routine. When NBC approached him about doing a sitcom, Seinfeld insisted that he play himself instead of a fictional character. Seinfeld then went to his fellow comedian and good friend Larry David and they developed the concept for a show about people simply making fun of things. And while NBC loved the pilot episode, which deviated from the conventional sitcom formula, test audiences did not. The audiences rejected the characters as not very likeable. Executive producer George Shapiro quoted the research report which said, “Despite the slice-of-life approach, the program was considered only mildly realistic and believable, and many did not identify with the things with which Jerry was involved.”¹¹³ Once a recurring female character was added to the cast (Elaine, played by Julia-Louis Dreyfuss), *Seinfeld*’s audience slowly grew and NBC began to order more and more episodes. Slowly but surely, audiences got used to its unconventional style, and *Seinfeld* became a hit.

¹¹² Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 220

¹¹³ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 225

It wasn't until midway through the show's fourth season that the show began to delve into more controversial territory. Customarily, David and the writers did not let NBC executives know what the story would be for the following week. For an episode entitled "The Contest" this policy was especially crucial. And when an NBC Vice President heard, the night before the table read, that the episode would be tackling masturbation his reaction was: "Oh, man. Oh, *man*! Because that was unheard of, to do a topic like that."¹¹⁴ However, when he heard the table read, his apprehensions were quelled. "We read the script...and it was so clever and so funny – and the word 'masturbation' was never used. I thought to myself, 'Any viewer of this show is not going to be offended by this.'"¹¹⁵

At first, NBC was clear that they did not want to do this episode, but David and the writers did not receive the amount of protest from NBC that CBS gave Norman Lear for *All in the Family* and *Maude*, showing that dealing with an issue humorously and with subtlety can help subdue reservations and make exposing a certain issue easier. Production supervisor Glenn Padnick said, "It raised my eyebrows – but it was funny! And they dealt with it so well."¹¹⁶ Once network executives reviewed the script, NBC had no notes or proposed changes which stunned writer/producer Larry Charles. "They [the controversial plots] wound up being completely embraced and even the censors were not disturbed by it."¹¹⁷ Protests from advertisers and sponsors were minor as well. Only one sponsor dropped out before the episode aired, but was replaced soon after. *The New York Times* noticed this trend.

¹¹⁴ Neuwirth [They'll Never Put That on the Air](#) 237

¹¹⁵ Neuwirth [They'll Never Put That on the Air](#) 238

¹¹⁶ Neuwirth [They'll Never Put That on the Air](#) 238

¹¹⁷ Neuwirth [They'll Never Put That on the Air](#) 239

“Fewer advertisers are pulling their commercials from television shows this season because of sexually oriented content, network executives say. And one reason appears to be that the more popular shows can easily replace any skittish advertiser with another willing to take the risk.”¹¹⁸

The “Contest” episode aired on November 18, 1992. The show centered around a bet that the four main characters make to see who can go the longest without masturbating. The winner of contest would be “master of their domain;” the euphemism used for masturbation. The idea for the bet comes after George is caught masturbating by his mother. He then decides to swear off the act altogether and Jerry bets him that he can’t. Then Jerry, George, Elaine and their friend Kramer put in \$100 (Elaine puts in \$150 because she is a woman and according to Jerry, it is easier for women to abstain) to see who can hold out the longest. The contest affect’s the characters lives in different ways, most notably Jerry’s, whose girlfriend learns about the bet and reacts by dumping him.

Critics and journalists were not opposed to or offended by the episode; in fact media coverage of the episode in the months directly following the episode’s airing were pretty minimal. The emphasis of the coverage was on the advertiser and sponsor response to the issue of masturbation. Unlike with *Maude*, journalists did not feel the need to give their own opinions, signaling how the understanding of the power and purpose of sitcoms evolved over the twenty years between the two episodes.

Seinfeld permeated American culture like no other sitcom before it. It seemed as though every American understood references to the “soup Nazi” and “shrinkage”. According to Padnick, “the show added phrases into the national vocabulary. People talk

¹¹⁸ Carter, Bill. “Advertisers Less Skittish About Explicit Programs” *The New York Times* December 7, 1992

about a ‘Seinfeld moment’ – and you know exactly what they mean.”¹¹⁹ One such episode that made a permanent mark on American culture dealt with another sexual issue rarely seen on television: female contraception. While *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* mentioned the birth control pill, no other forms of female contraception had ever been mentioned on television. Not until Elaine fell in love with the sponge.

On the December 7, 1995 episode, Elaine learns that her favorite prophylactic is being discontinued. She buys a case of the product and then must decide which of her dates she can sleep with and thereby deem them: “sponge-worthy”. No sponsors dropped out of this episode, and no news articles were solely devoted to the episode, but it did strike a chord with the American public. When the sponge returned to shelves in the mid-2000s, many if not all of the news articles mentioned Elaine and how happy she would be if she heard the news. A July 2007 *New York Times* article was headlined: “Good News, Elaine: The Sponge is Back...”¹²⁰ It was as if Elaine was a real person; not a fictional television character who had been off the air for over five years.

By the time the “Contest” episode and “Sponge” episodes aired, *Seinfeld* had been on the air for over three years. As mentioned earlier the show had an unconventional formula that viewers needed to get used to. However, once *Seinfeld* established its style, these episodes were able to be accepted and enjoyed by American audiences. Ludwin said, When the audience knows what they’re going to get up front – what kind of a show it is – then you are more likely to be able to handle topics that might be considered over the line.”¹²¹ In a lesson most likely learned from *Murphy Brown*, *Ellen*, and *All in the*

¹¹⁹ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 245

¹²⁰ Levere, Jane. “Good News Elaine: The Sponge is Back: With A More Modern Approach” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2007

¹²¹ Neuwirth *They’ll Never Put That on the Air* 238

Family, Seinfeld's producers and writers had to wait for the show to build a loyal following before entering into controversial waters. "By the time the show started doing storylines you might consider iffy, the show had reached a level of success in the history of dealing with stuff that we kept going along hand in hand – like the masturbation episode," said Padnick. The head of Standards and Practices at NBC told *The New York Times* that at the time of the "Contest" episode that *Seinfeld's* audiences had "proved that it does not take offense easily."¹²² NBC and the *Seinfeld* crew gradually built and got to know their audience while establishing their style and this is why the show was able to talk about such issues as masturbation and contraception with minimal protest and opposition.

Conclusion

When asked which medium has had the most impact in changing how Americans perceived homosexuality, author Rodger Streitmatter chose television. "My decision is driven partly by the pivotal importance of the groundbreaking shows *Soap* in the 1970s and *Will & Grace* in the 1990s, but mainly by the nature of the three forms of media [journalism, film, and television]."¹²³ Streitmatter goes on to say that newspapers, websites, and films are easy to ignore and skip over, while television shows often come into viewers' living rooms by accident. This point is true for issues other than just homosexuality and many other factors make this medium more conducive to creating social change.

Television shows have had much longer lives than films or newspaper articles. All of the sitcoms discussed here were on the air for over five seasons. At roughly 22

¹²² Carter "Advertisers Less Skittish About Explicit Programs" *The New York Times* December 1992

¹²³ Streitmatter From Perverts to Fab Five 186

episodes per season, each of these shows aired over 55 hours of content; much more than any film or newspaper article. This amount of time allows for storylines and characters to develop and make their way into the hearts and minds of audiences and therefore gives them a greater power to influence public opinion.

Another reason why television has been more successful in changing society than other forms of media, is the structure of network censorship. More so than in film and newspapers, television networks have focused a lot of their energy and resources on pleasing advertisers. Therefore television executives often want to be conservative with what they put on the air. However in the case of sitcoms, network censors fueled the creativity that caused these shows to push the limits of society. The purpose of comedy is to challenge the status quo and criticize the establishment, so if there was no censorship, there would have been nothing for this sitcoms to take on. "Censorship is not necessarily a bad thing; it forces creative minds to find ways around whatever obstacles are placed before them – to be funny in *spite* of them."¹²⁴

With or without hard evidence, there is no question that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, *Ellen*, *Soap*, *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*, *All in the Family*, *Maude*, and *Seinfeld* have had a positive impact on society by exposing closeted issues using humor and sensitivity. When looking to the future, it is difficult to think of any social taboos that sitcoms have not yet addressed. And while the sitcoms of the new millennium may or may not discuss socially relevant issues, they certainly have nine successful examples to model themselves after and strive to replicate.

¹²⁴ Neuwirth [They'll Never Put That on the Air](#) x