

If No One Remembers It, Why Does it Make a Television Canon?

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In January 2018, CBS announced in a press release that its “classic” sitcom *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) would soon “return to a world of cable news, social media, fake news and a very different political and cultural climate.” This paper scrutinizes how network revivals affect the popular memory of politically- and socially-aware series like *Murphy Brown*, thus challenging the long-term cultural status of once-transformative television content. Though there is merit to the argument that reboots, remakes, and revivals are, on the one hand, an obvious cash grab by network executives, and, on the other, a sign of writers’ creative exhaustion, the stakes are higher with the second coming of *Murphy Brown*. Created and written by feminist women, and featuring an explicitly politicized heroine, this workplace comedy has the opportunity to pick up where the spectacular failure of *Roseanne* left off six months earlier: that is, reclaiming the contributions of women to televisual discourse past, present, and future.

In its original iteration, *Murphy Brown* was celebrated as a liberal antidote to Reagan-era conservatism, an intelligent, acerbic update of the feminist mold forged by Mary Tyler Moore’s spunky newsgirl a decade earlier. The epitome of working womanhood in the late 1980s, Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen) was single, a recovering alcoholic, unabashedly antagonistic, and, eventually, a fictional working mother denounced publicly by the real-life Vice President of the United States, Dan Quayle. The bridging of the fictional with current events in real time was crucial to the character’s function as a political icon in her day, and the series now serves as foreshadowing of the intermingling of televisual and governmental realms in the current *Truman-Show*-esque political realm.

Compared to other reboots, *Murphy Brown*’s relative absence in popular memory complicates the promotional model that networks construct around such programs. While the revival was initially marketed as a necessary resurrection of an iconic character in an era of renewed political intensity, press coverage of its announcement has since focused largely on recalling the significance of the original series for unfamiliar audiences. In its day, *Murphy Brown* embodied a zenith of the second-wave feminism that white, upper-middle-class, liberal Boomers once championed. And to an extent, early promos for the revival play to this demographic, emphasizing the ways in which the stars – and their politics – aged alongside the original audience. But the industry’s allegiance to the 18-49 market suggests that this older appeal is insufficient; promotional interviews and advertisements must also recuperate the historical significance of the show for a broader viewership.

This is easier in theory than in practice; episodes and storylines from the original *Murphy Brown* play much differently in today’s polarizing climate than they did decades

ago, and historiography only goes so far in demonstrating why current audiences should care about the longstanding legacy of a single series. This leads to some obvious questions: what is the potential effect of the revival for historical consciousness? To what end can revivals alone reclaim a popular memory of the televisual past?

Despite the logic of nostalgia as the driving force of network reboots, the lack of recall for this ostensibly “groundbreaking” series offers an opportunity to revisit the stakes of revival for the popular perception of television and its history. For a series to remain transformative in a historical sense, its legitimacy must be continually, publicly recollected. Syndication, streaming, and online archives like YouTube shoulder some of this burden, as do retrospective programs and publications (see CNN’s recent “History of Comedy,” *TV Guide’s 50 Years of Television*, etc.). Revivals may act in similar fashion, presuming they have some resonance among contemporary TV viewership, spread thin as it is amid the plethora of programming options in the digital age. Unlike recently rebooted series like *Roseanne* and *Will & Grace*, *Murphy Brown* did not enjoy a robust second life in syndication after its cancellation in 1998, nor was the series ever released in full on home video. The sitcom’s quiet inaccessibility, despite its consistent inclusion in scholarly literature and popular press “most iconic” lists, renders Murphy something of a phantom within the TV canon – often cited, rarely seen, easily forgotten. Until now?