

Sarah Arnold, *Gender and Early Television. Mapping Women's Role in Emerging US and British Media, 1850-1950*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021; 304pp: ISBN, 9781780769769 price (£85.00), ISBN 000, epub, ISBN, 9781786726100 (£76.50)

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'Without a script faithfully adhered to by the speaker, Talks Producer Mary Adams would have an impossible task at her desk in the control room managing "fades" at the right moment', so claimed the 10 September 1937 edition of *Radio Times*. This description of Adams (p. 91), who worked for the BBC, as a technically adept, skilled professional, is one of the themes that runs through Sarah Arnold's illuminating book about women in early television. With a spotlight on Britain and the USA, two countries at the forefront of the development of this novel form of broadcasting, Arnold investigates how this experimental medium built on an understanding of gender that had already been established in theatre, film and radio, before charting its move away from a focus on women as workers – both on and behind the small screen – to one that foregrounded women as audiences and consumers. Recent years have seen increased academic interest in women in early radio, yet women's links with early television have remained more much elusive. There have been important studies of programmes aimed at women in the post-war years, for example the work of Rachel Moseley, Helen Wheatley, Helen Wood and Mary Irwin in the UK and Marsha Cassidy and Elena Levine in the USA, however very little exists on the pre-Second World War history of women and television. This is a gap which *Gender and Early Television* begins to address, along with a clearly argued analysis of how and why British and US daytime television became gendered 'female'. And not simply female but an imagined audience of women who were white, domestic and middle class.

An important theme for Arnold is how the gendering of television began long before its actual realisation. She starts her study in the second half of the nineteenth century with speculative technologies such as the mutoscope, which clearly defined the sphere of production as male. A dichotomy then emerged with women as viewers imagined as passive and subservient while those on screen might be immoral and erotic. Theatre as a public space was also an area of contention, with women protected from impropriety by the introduction of afternoon matinees. These practices, Arnold contends, contributed to a contradictory understanding of women's association with new media that, while affording greater access, was conditional on 'a set of expectations that were determined by producers, business owners, advertisers and the wider press' (p. 45). The book then divides into two sections, with chapters two, three and four examining women's relationship with the production of television, both as creators and participants. The final three chapters explore how market and audience research became vehicles through which broadcasters came to define the afternoon as women's time. Of course, British and American television services were distinctly different with America embracing commercialism and Britain following a public service route. The BBC closed its service completely between 1939-1946, whilst some American stations continued. Arnold uses this as

an opportunity to reveal divergences, particularly where advertising is concerned, but also similarities such as the marginalisation of women in television production after the war.

By the mid-1920s, as chapter two explores, experimental television had kicked off in both countries. Although available to very few, it was widely commented upon in the popular and trade press of the time, and Arnold draws on this to build a picture of the emergent 'television girl' who, particularly in America, came to embody the 'pleasant, friendly and inoffensive form' that the new medium would take (p. 64). In chapter three, on early British television, Arnold introduces us to Jasmine Bligh and Elizabeth Cowell, the BBC's own 'television girls' who launched the public service in 1936. Arnold argues that whereas Bligh and Cowell were employed to be ornamental on screen, behind the scenes women like Mary Adams and the Head of Make Up and Wardrobe, Mary Allan, were afforded far greater agency. For her fourth chapter, Arnold moves to early US television where, like Britain, the trade press emphasised the experience and skills of women who worked behind the scenes with profiles on, for instance, the 'first female director' - a claim made for both Thelma A Prescott at NBC and Frances Buss at CBS. It is the Women's Auxilliary Television Technical Staff in Chicago, which most captures Arnold's attention. Based at WBKB, from 1942 women ran the network which had formerly been the domain of men. Seen as its 'saviour' during the war (p. 122) as men returned, female operators were increasingly seen as its problem, and dismissed.

Chapters five, six and seven turn to women as consumers and audiences, which Arnold contends became the main focus of the television industry from the late 1940s. Because of the crucial role of advertising, the stress here is on the US with chapter five probing how market research practices, which from the 1920s categorised the female consumer as a white, middle-class, married homemaker and mother, were adopted by broadcasters. Despite often spurious links between housewives and daytime viewing, chapter six unpicks the way that audience research reports came to emphasise, and at times manufacture, this connection in order to sell advertising. Through a close analysis of three research organisations, Advertest, Videotown and NBC's Research and Development department, Arnold makes the case this supposed audience was 'effectively cultivated rather than discovered' by the television industry (p. 176). In terms of British television (chapter seven), although there was no commercial incentive, Arnold argues that the construction and interpretation of post-war audience research similarly gendered the daytime audience as female.

*Gender and Early Television* makes an important contribution to our understanding of women's relationship to this new medium in its formative years. There are gaps; it is a shame, for instance, that there is not a more robust discussion of women in authoritative roles in British television of the late 1940s (Grace Wyndham Goldie and Freda Lingstrom, are simply name-checked). Overall, though, this is a highly engaging and insightful read that throws much needed new light on an under-researched topic.

(1000 words)