ENVELOPE ENTERTAINMENT

How the #MeToo and Time's Up movements are changing the TV landscape

By RANDEE DAWN
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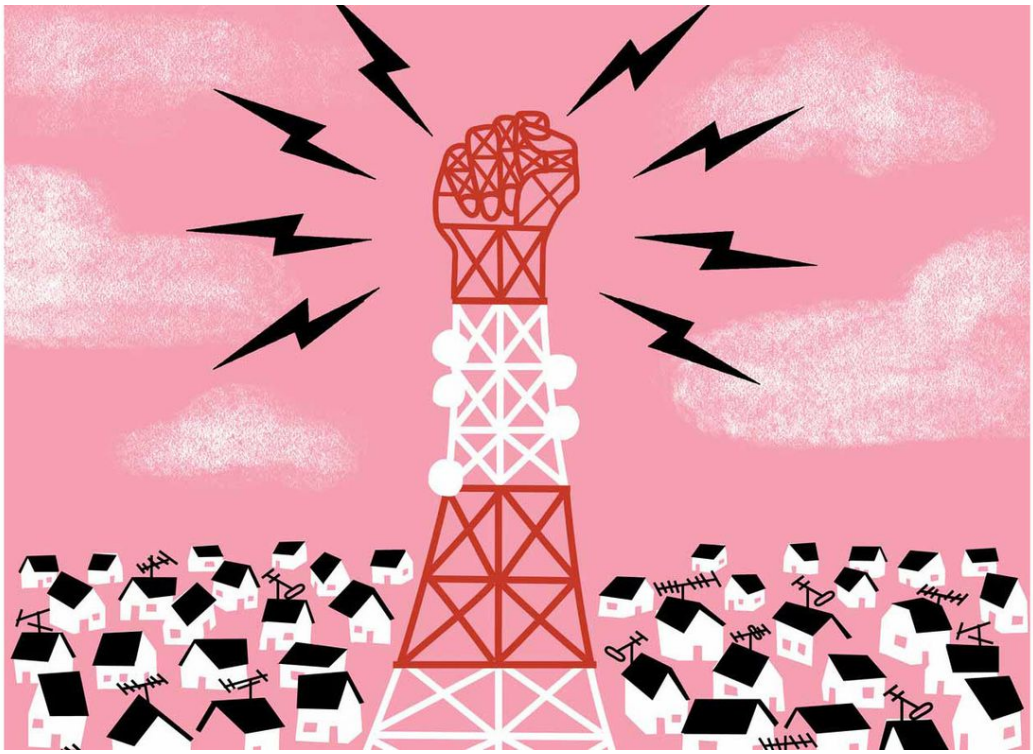

Female-centric series like "Big Little Lies" and "The Handmaid's Tale" reflect the changing nature of the power dynamic between men and women. (Illustration by Justin Renteria / For The Times)

Nine months ago, the #MeToo and Time's Up movements changed the narrative arc in the U.S. First, scores of women (and some men) spoke up about serial sexual abusers and harassers in front of and behind Hollywood cameras. Then the women-centric series "Big Little Lies" and "The Handmaid's Tale" won big at the Golden Globes and Emmys. And more recently, HBO equalized pay for men and women, and "The Crown" agreed to pay its male and female leads equally. Floodgates had been thrown open.

All of which is laudable, but thus far another area of potential change is just awakening. TV has long been understood to both reflect and shape real-life perceptions and narratives – so just how will the actual *stories* being written change in the wake of #MeToo and Time's Up?

"Television is the mythology of our time," says Michael Chernuchin, showrunner for "Law & Order: SVU," a series that since 1999 has been airing versions of the exact stories that are only now capturing the nation's attention. "I think because of our show, victims feel more empowered. People can come out of the shadows to talk about it more: 'I was a victim, and now I'm a survivor.' "

Showrunner Laeta Kalogridis on working with powerful female characters for the R-rated sci-fi series "Altered Carbon."

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Yet despite 19 seasons of a single show's attempt to address what was clearly a festering, otherwise-ignored issue, few shows have stepped forward to try to reshape actual male-female dynamics in their scripts.

Actors have noticed. "I've been begging for so long for that accountability, about how we treat female characters on television — the need to have more agency for characters," says "Ray Donovan's" Paula Malcomson. But in the wake of Time's Up, she says, "People are shaking in their boots."

"The Good Fight" doesn't shy from gray-area, controversial issues, and to its credit leaped on the #MeToo movement with multiple story lines this season, including addressing the issue of consent and an updated he-said-she-said date situation that went sour.

"When you write scripts five or six months before they come out, you're never sure what stories will continue to burn," says Robert King, co-showrunner of the series with his wife, Michelle King. "This story had so much traction that we had stories that played into it in different modes."

Audra McDonald, left, as Liz Reddick-Lawrence, and Christine Baranski as Diane Lockhart in "The Good Fight." (Elizabeth Fisher / CBS)

Simply reflecting back, however, hardly confronts the building blocks of the tropes and familiar story arcs that TV has been telling for decades. Virtually everyone can agree that there are too many dead women's bodies on TV, or assault/rape scenes included to do little more than advance emotional plot, or that "strong female characters" are necessary – but reconsidering the narrative starts on a less melodramatic level too.

Veena Sud, showrunner for "Seven Seconds" (and previously "The Killing"), says she's insisted on story arcs for years that feature men and women collaborating without a romantic relationship emerging.

"That trope is frustrating to me, because it says we cannot be true partners in our work. We cannot be true equals, we cannot hold each other up," she says. "That trope contributes to the sense that the only relationship men and women can have to each other is sexualized, and that's not true."

"One of the problems with television as a medium is its lack of subtlety," says Jane Campion, filmmaker and co-creator of "Top of the Lake" (with Gerard Lee). "You need someone with a vision who insists on changing things and wants to illuminate a

different pathway. Male-think is so pervasive in our culture: The hero story is a male story of strength, integrity and sacrifice. Those stories don't interest me."

Masterpiece's "Victoria" doesn't have room for a literal examination of the movement, taking place as it does in Victorian England. But showrunner Daisy Goodwin – who has a #MeToo story of her own, having been groped, she says, by a government official on a visit to No. 10 Downing Street during David Cameron's tenure as prime minister – is doing her best to highlight the power her female characters hold.

Jenna Coleman as Victoria in PBS Masterpiece's "Victoria." (ITV / PBS Masterpiece)

"We have to dare to think differently," she says. "I'm not reinforcing stereotypes because that's a dramatic trope that's easy to do. I'm nervous of doing anything where women don't have agency – because that's what's been done for so long. I'm not interested in women made powerless by the crisis of the show. I've seen enough female corpses."

Ultimately, though, it takes the conscious effort of – as Campion puts it – "visionary" writers to rethink and reconsider every aspect of the stories being told about women, men, and women and men to effect a true #MeToo change on television.

"We reflect reality," says Sud. "The stories we tell show the possibilities that exist, and close doors as well. Powerlessness is a certain kind of assault too, and we see it over and over again. The girls of the next generation need to know they can be heroes too."

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