The Good Wife’s Representation of Women in the Political and Legal Realms: Balancing Expectations

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Abstract

CBS’s The Good Wife represents a new model of strong female leads in American television series. While television series have traditionally presented normative femininities, the new generation of political and legal dramas on premium television offers a variety of complex characters more responsive to the realities of contemporary society. The model introduced by Alicia Florrick, The Good Wife’s protagonist, is analyzed in this paper as exemplary of the conflict between the public and private domains that today’s working mothers face. Alicia’s happiness is compromised as she tries to recover her identity as both a mother and a lawyer, while at the same time trying to maintain her public image as a political figure. Additional burden to this struggle is added by the disagreement between generations of feminists on what constitutes happiness and success. This paper analyzes the individualized way in which a representative of the post-feminist generation tackles this issue and delivers a powerful message about the impossibility of reaching balance in a flawed social environment that limits female freedom.

Keywords: The Good Wife, Alicia Florrick, post-feminism, legal drama, political wife.

https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i3.7198

1. A new turn in television series production

The new golden age of US television series has, in the last 15 years, witnessed significant changes in television series as a high-quality media product. Along with the participation of a growing number of actors, producers and directors from Hollywood, and their increasing global popularity, the production of television series has advanced the narrative complexity of such media products, as is particularly evident in recent series which tackle political themes (Coletti 50). Coletti notes this increasing interest for series dealing with contemporary political issues and ascribes it to their interaction with real-life society and politics:

Whether focused on the President of the United States (House of Cards, Commander in Chief) or his staff (The West Wing, Scandal, Veep), the management of public offices (Parks and Recreation) or the role of institutions within the larger picture of the life of a city (The Wire), these TV series offer complex representations of politics and the way in which it interplays with society. Moreover, many of these series host real US politicians as guest stars, and TV series have been included in the language of politics, with many politicians – including President Obama – using popular TV shows to illustrate and...
This makes series an important cultural product that help shape public opinion and create new cultural models. It is also worth noting that television series, unlike movies, have the advantage of running for longer periods of time, which allows them to keep track of the political realities as they take place. This allows for an even more interactive relationship that is able to erase the lines between fiction and reality (Coletti 50-51). Among such shows, CBS’s The Good Wife (TGW) also finds its place. The series follows the character of Alicia Florrick, the wife of the disgraced politician Peter Florrick, who is forced to leave his position as State’s Attorney because of his involvement with prostitutes and abuse of office. With Peter incarcerated, Alicia has no choice but to go back to work after taking a 13-year break to raise her children. The series follows her professional development as a lawyer, as she struggles to balance family obligations with a demanding career path towards partnership, while trying to figure out who she is outside the domestic environment. At the same time, her husband’s scandal and subsequent return to government office determine her political presence in the media and personal struggle to harmonize her public and private identities.

TGW embraces the format of the legal drama in its narrative construction, but introduces elements of other genres as well. It incorporates certain characteristics of romantically-themed television series, interpersonal dramas, as well as the feminist thematic, but they are carried out in a strongly political context which determines the strict power relations in which various narrative elements are brought to life. TGW reflects the recent trends in constructing political narrative, as explained above, in multiple ways. To begin with, its storyline is based on real-life examples of sexual scandals and figures involved. It also refers to actual situations and actors from the political realm, even including some of them in the show as cameos. Finally, real-life media refer to the show in political contexts, such as commenting on Hillary Clinton’s interest in Alicia Florrick (Coletti 55). Politics thus function as a background to the narrative as it tackles various social and personal issues.

While political series have traditionally focused on male characters, which also appropriately reflects political realities, the recent proliferation of women as important political agents has also been mirrored in entertainment media. While the world of politics has opened up to women in recent decades, with a growing number of women active in political functions, it has still remained a male-centered system in which power relations are still especially biased and gender stereotypes particularly strong (Ge 40). The character of the female politician has arisen from this struggle and is still being defined, but it can no longer rely on outdated and stereotypical representations of women which have little to do with the complex identities of female professionals. The contemporary media culture has responded to this need by offering new ways of representation for female characters, significantly different from the earlier periods of cultural production (Orgad 478) and modeled after multiple real-life political and public figures (Leonard, “I May Need You” 133).
2. Representation of women in television series

Women have traditionally been underrepresented in television production and not just in the field of politics. The majority of authoritative central roles have always been assigned to male characters, while female characters assumed more passive roles, typically reserved for the private sphere, i.e. the family environment. Orgad differentiates between several idealized representations of women, and particularly mothers, in the media. In the 1950s and 1960s the prescribed ideal was that of the “happy housewife,” focused around the family and household role of the wife and the mother. The 1970s saw the rise of the Women’s Liberation Movement with the advent of second-wave feminism, and so to, the emergence of a new cultural model, that of the “supermom”—a working wife and mother who manages to have both a family and a successful career (478). The following decade continued with the tradition of working women and is said to be characterized by the feminization of network television. The number of female leads in network series increased significantly, mostly as a result of the work of female producers, and series such as Roseanne, Designing Women, and Murphy Brown, which brought to focus female professionals (Atkin, Moorman and Lin 677-78). In the 1990s, as media culture grew increasingly post-feminist the 1970s model persisted and developed into the feminine ideal of a good mother and valued professional, emphasizing women’s confidence, the “I-can-have-it-all” attitude and the importance of female laborers for a productive economy. Moreover, another model emerged as a product of post-feminism, the “stay-at-home mother” who willingly chose to opt out of a successful career and dedicate herself entirely to family life (Orgad 478-79). Another product of the feminization of television are series with almost exclusively female casts, such as China Beach, Heartbeat, Nightingale and Golden Girls (Probyn 151). Despite these changes, the final decade of the twentieth century still showed women on television mostly as characters in dramas and sit-coms, stressing their role as wives over that of professionals. While more recent studies show some improvement in the representation of women’s roles in society, female characters still make up only 39.6% of characters on prime-time television; and the roles they do get are focused around gender stereotypes connected to beauty, sexuality, typically female professions and nurturing roles (Hoewe and Sherrill 62).

Nevertheless, the television production of the last two decades developed a new model of femininity, which resisted the stereotypical portrayals predominant in the 20th century. Even though most female characters in television series still have secondary roles or, if they are playing the main role, they propagate traditional and conservative portrayals of femininity, several series have appeared that confirm the emergence of a different ideal, the “new woman model” (Heredia 169). The change in mentality in women’s representation in the production of television series, specifically on pay channels, is often ascribed to the premiere of Sex and the City (1998-2004). This HBO series had significant shortcomings when it comes to resisting gender, racial and sexual stereotypes, but it represented a turning point in the portrayal of women’s roles in visual culture (170). After the success of Sex and the City, combined with its strong but constructive criticism, new female leads began to emerge in the production of
television series. The protagonists were no longer middle-class heterosexual white women, but gradually characters of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations and dubious morality assumed the leading roles, and they were often represented as successful professionals. Heredia claims that such series have initiated the creation of “a heterogeneous model within which a new intersectional television product has been put forward, one with the potential to overturn old stereotypes, and in which the few starring men appear as seemingly minoritised subjects, whose presence is almost reduced to the point of reification.” Among such shows she lists Fox’s *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), ABC’s *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-present), *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), *Revenge* (2011-2015), *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-present) and *Scandal* (2012-2018), CW’s *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) and CBS’s *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) (169-70). Female characters also entered the traditionally masculine detective and criminal genre, with the appearance of the cop/detective heroine in the 1980s (Heidensohn and Brown 111), which continued into the 1990s and 2000s with female-centered detective shows such as *Law and Order: SVU* (1999-present), *Veronica Mars* (2004-present) and *The Closer* (2005-2012). These shows have strong female leads who do not completely (or at all) correspond to the prescribed ideals of beauty, success, or aspirations. Instead, they offer revisions of normative femininity more responsive to real-life women.

With the new standards of television production that strive for a more realistic and interactive portrayal of social realities, it comes as no surprise that entertainment media have had to adjust the female-lead model to better mirror reality and respond to the demands of a globalized market. While traditional cultural representations of women’s roles in society, as wives, mothers and professionals, helped maintain gender stereotypes and thus never corresponded to their lived experiences (Orgad 479), the television narratives of the new millennium met the needs of their audiences by introducing a growing number of cultural, sexual and linguistic combinations, which reimagined the model of femininity on television (Heredia 167). Besides the increasing diversification of characters, an important change in series production was the introduction of female characters who combined the personal and professional spheres. As the need for a more balanced life for women began to thematically preoccupy media culture, television series proved themselves to be a practical outlet for its promotion, as Rottenberg notes. The pioneer female characters that promoted professional success combined with a search for self-realization in the private sphere (i.e. building meaningful and intimate relationships) were, according to Rottenberg, Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw. The two female leads represent an earlier ambition which demands the respect of women’s presence in the public realm (155-156), as exemplified by the shows mentioned above, combined with the entertaining plots from their quirky personal lives. Nevertheless, despite the critics’ praise for these shows’ complex treatment of women’s experiences, including tapping into complex issues such as women’s sexual lives, loneliness, ageism, insecurities, body issues, and so on, both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were also strongly criticized for their obsession with the romantic lives of their leads. As previously mentioned, their representation of women remained stereotypical, with little
focus on their professional lives and much on the traditional single-girl angst (Stillion Southard 150), perpetuating unrealistic myths about women and their expectations of work, love and life.

Therefore, considering their problematic nature, these shows represent only a stepping stone for the post-feminist cultural production to come, rather than actual feminist turning points in television culture. While such characters initiated a change in portraying female individuals in media culture, there has recently been a shift in the characterization of professionally successful women on television. *TGW* offers what *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* did not: a redefined model of professional women who defy gender stereotypes. Alicia Florrick is an excellent model to demonstrate such a shift in the representation of career women (Rottenberg 155). As Orgad explains: “Alicia is neither the 1960s’ (un)Happy Housewife nor the 1980s’ Supermom. Her character presents a more complicated, sophisticated, and nuanced representation of women’s capacity to participate, meaningfully and simultaneously, in both the public and private spheres, as successful economic labourers and good mothers” (482–83). The titular “good wife” is on a mission to conquer the legal and political realms, despite the limitations they pose on working mothers. She sets on a path to recover her lost identity, but is determined to maintain the aspects of life that bring her joy, no matter the compromises she has to make.\(^1\)

3. **The female lawyer reimagined**

Similarly to *Ally McBeal, TGW* represents a distancing from the typical format of legal dramas. The genre is a familiar format of television series in contemporary media culture. Kanzler even goes so far as to refer to it as “a staple of American popular culture.” She also points out that it is a male-centered genre. Besides the obvious change in the protagonist’s gender, *TGW* assigns new importance to the gender aspect of the lawyer role. It strongly emphasizes the role of women in it by choosing a female main character and observing her everyday struggles both in and outside the workplace, but is different from “pre-Good Wife law shows” in that it portrays both female and male characters alike (Baltzer-Jaray and Arp). Moreover, it is not enough to simply switch genders and leave the model for the lead unchanged. As Kanzler explains, when the main character of a legal drama is female, as a growing number of them seem to be, the “lawyer-hero” has to be reimagined. The most important difficulty to overcome is the construction of a narrative that combines the public sphere, traditionally assigned to men, and the private sphere, with which traditional femininity is more aligned. In *TGW*, the series creators constructed precisely such a character in constant conflict between her public and her private personae, taking on the difficult challenge of representing a female lawyer-hero, but also a political hero. Kanzler describes the series:

> Against the backdrop of a social world in which the public and private cross-contaminate each other in multiple ways, the series constructs a female lawyer that challenges

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\(^1\) In that regard, the actress who plays Alicia, Julianna Margulies, channels the character she played in the *NBC* drama *ER*. As Leonard notes, her portrayal of Alicia's “stoic and no nonsense persona echoes her early work” as nurse Carol Hathaway (“Sexuality” 956).
hegemonic notions of femininity as well as ideas about the operations of the law as a system of the public sphere. Consistently thinking the law along with politics and depicting both as suffused with a mediatized sensationalism that sustains hegemonic discourses, especially of gender, the series adapts the blueprint of the lawyer-hero to engage with contemporary ideas typically denoted by the terms of post-feminism and neoliberalism.

The choice of such a complex hero, or better yet heroine, in a balancing act also contributed to the distancing of TGW from the earlier legal drama tradition. As Baltzer-Jaray and Arp note, legal dramas have conventionally avoided dedicating much space and attention to the private sphere of life (e.g. Law and Order). TGW changed this norm by introducing romantic relationships, interoffice drama, personal identity, issues of privacy, and balancing work with family. While there have been previous shows that have centered around a female character in the legal context, TGW encompasses multiple spheres of life equally and intertwines them into a complex combination of intimacy and publicness that offers a new perspective on the lives of women as media subjects. Alicia represents a truly modern depiction of non-normative motherhood, at the same time professional, loving and sexual, i.e. “a mature, confident, complex woman and mother whose relationship to both work and family is rich and deep” (Walters and Harrison 47).

4. Can they, should they, do they want to “have it all”?

Before there was post-feminism, one of the major feminist issues was whether or not women can “have it all.” The notion of having it all really translates into having two things: a career and a family. Wanting to have it all, therefore, actually means wanting to be a good wife and mother, while at the same time developing a meaningful and successful career. After the initial waves of feminism, once women were allowed a ticket into the world of business previously reserved for men, the goal became not only to excel in that world, but to still be present at home. And while this may seem like a personal choice, some authors have recognized the societal pressures for pursuing both. Woman are now expected to have careers, but the obligation of caring for the children has not been transferred to anyone else; women are still expected to make that sacrifice (Adkins).

The issue, like the majority of feminist issues, is still relevant today and most women continue to struggle. The statistics still witness the gender gap in the workplace, whether it is the predominance of men in leadership and management positions or the gender-based difference in salary. While these issues are still very present and relevant in today’s world of business, this paper focuses instead on the ways in which the “new woman model” of a well-rounded working mother finds equilibrium between the private and the public. This aspect of female lives was recently explored by Anne-Marie Slaughter in her essay “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” which is most relevant for the analysis of Alicia’s character in TGW. The essay is based on a personal story that delves into a huge cultural issue in the US, which is that the social
organization still impedes women from being able to have it all, even when they try to and do all that is in their power. Slaughter, a famously successful career woman, gave up a high-level governmental position because it did not allow her to be a present mother and wife. Despite still having a successful full-time career, just not in that position, she received criticism from feminists insisting that she was making the wrong choice sacrificing her career for her family; the social pressure is for women to pursue career advancement, not to step down when given the opportunity to be in a position of power. While she used to agree with those feminists that women can have it all if they just work hard enough, she has since decided that sacrificing the quality of her family life is not worth any high-level governmental position. Rather than pursue career paths that would prove her equally competent and deserving as men (or possibly even more so), she decided to pursue her own happiness and well-being.

This experience demonstrates what Stevenson and Wolfers call the “new gender gap.” The term refers to the declining levels of happiness for women despite (or possibly because of) the growing educational and professional opportunities. Even though the world is opening up to female professionals, women are still required to make sacrifices that men simply do not have to even consider (Slaughter), and those compromises take away from their happiness. So while women are now allowed to enter the professional and public realms previously reserved for men, despite the huge progress that feminists have made in trying to break the glass ceiling, they are still required to adopt a masculine attitude (“be a man”) and constantly prove their commitment to work above all else in order to be successful, thus completely disavowing the private (Rottenberg 150). As Rottenberg explains in her analysis of Slaughter’s essay, there is no way to be successful in both realms, because they are structured in a way that requires different, and often opposing, attitudes, values, attributes, demands and so on; that is, unless one is superhuman (151).

Swanson proposes the same arguments in her analysis of *TGW*. She argues that society is structured to deny women the possibility of having it all: “because career and family are partial values, the more one is gained, the more the other is lost. The woman (and man) who tries to be a perfect worker as well as the perfect parent is doomed to failure.” Indeed, as Alicia takes on the challenge of building a successful career after 13 years of stay-at-home motherhood, she begins to understand that her parenting will have to be compromised. Her children are left in the care of their grandmother or a nanny, for which Alicia eventually starts to resent herself. However, with Peter in prison she has no choice in the matter; even if she did, she eventually realizes how much she cares for her work and is not ready to sacrifice her professional development even after it is no longer necessary for her to be the breadwinner. Further to this, while Alicia does her best to be a good mother and employee, she is constantly criticized for not being good enough in either area. She is at the same time lectured by her nanny for not spending enough time at home with her kids, and by her colleagues and superiors, who feel that she is not putting in the necessary hours at work (Swanson).

At the same time, it has to be noted that Alicia is the only major character who even tries to balance the private and professional realms in the series. As Adkins notes, she is the only female
character who combines work and family, while other women pursuing careers are mostly childless or young and single (the only exception being Patti Nyholm, who very blatantly uses her kids as props for professional gain). Men, on the other hand, have no family obligations in the show—Peter is what Adkins refers to as a “weekend-dad,” not particularly involved or helpful in his children’s lives. Again, there is an exception to this rule: the investigator Andrew Wiley who gave up his career to take care of his kids. However, this only goes to prove Swanson’s claim that it is impossible to be a good parent and worker at the same time. Whether a man or a woman, one cannot be fully involved in both realms. While the series does not engage in exemplifying this in any more men, there are plenty of female characters who show the impossibility of balancing expectations in career and family.

As the next major female character in *TGW*, the firm’s name partner Diane Lockhart stands out as another example of this issue. The media culture has only recently started to represent older women in its production, after they have been kept off screen for quite some time (Jerslev 67). Diane Lockhart represents an older generation of female and feminist characters in *TGW*. Her age differentiates her from the majority of female characters in the show, but it does not take away any of her power, confidence or attitude. Professionally the most successful character in the show, Diane is a typical representative of second-wave feminism, whose main goal was to shatter the glass ceiling. She dedicated her life entirely to succeeding as a woman in a man’s world and apologized to nobody in doing so. While her career is still blooming even as she approaches retirement, she never had a family that would hold her back. Diane did not marry nor did she have any children, focusing entirely on work and thus paving the way for women like Alicia to easily enter the world of politics and law. It comes as no surprise, then, that Diane would consider it most important for younger women to follow her path to success. Fully aware of the male-centrism of the corporate world, she encourages younger women to fight patriarchy under her mentorship. However, she does not receive the desired response from the post-feminist generation.

5. **The clash of (feminist) generations**

To begin with, Diane insists on female solidarity in the business world, which is not as well received on the part of the younger feminists in the show (Jerslev 70). She wants to create an all-female law firm and constantly emphasizes the importance of women fighting against the patriarchy of the corporate world. The post-feminists, on the other hand, are looking for personalized career management focused around their own professional individualism, while Diane offers a kind of “workplace sisterhood” which is more responsive to the concerns of second-generation feminism (Jerslev 76). While Diane is bewildered by their reluctance to dedicate themselves fully to their careers and the common goal of shattering the glass ceiling, the younger generation’s attitude is based on the post-feminist discourse constructed upon the following:
the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence of ideas of natural and sexual difference; the marked resexualization of women’s bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (Gill 149)

From the pilot episode, Diane offers Alicia direct mentorship, premised upon certain ideas that Alicia is not thrilled to hear:

I want you to think of me as a mentor, Alicia. It’s the closest thing we have to an old boy’s network in this town. Women helping women, okay? When I was starting out I got one great piece of advice: men can be lazy, women can’t. And I think that goes double for you. Not only are you coming back to the workplace fairly late but you have some very prominent baggage. But, hey, if she [Hillary Clinton] can do it so can you. (“Pilot”)

And while Alicia takes Diane’s advice and adopts Hillary’s model as a professional and a wife, and carefully manages her “baggage” along the way, she never really embraces Diane’s proposal for sisterhood or, later in the series, an all-female firm. Instead, she proves herself to be a true post-feminist in her individualized approach based on her own experience, to finally betray Diane for personal interest and for Peter’s gain in the final season.

On the other hand, Diane manages to achieve the autonomy Alicia strives for, by challenging the stereotypes and attitudes imposed on women in the legal profession, thus giving the series female viewers hope of independence (Ge 51). However, she gives up having a family for it. Diane never regrets her decision, but her childless life proves the impossibility (or the belief in the impossibility) of having a successful career and personal life at the same time. She does, however, fall in love with the ballistics expert Kurt McVeigh and marries him in season five; but even a childless marriage late in life creates difficulties for Diane, as she learns how hard it is to balance her professional and political expectations as a married woman. It is precisely her professional ambitions and the couple’s opposing political views that ultimately (with Alicia’s help) destroy their relationships.

Even more important for the discussion on women’s professional lives in the legal and political fields is the attitude towards family life, which most obviously displays the generational clash between feminists of the second wave and the post-feminist generation. Not having a family of her own (prior to season five), Diane does not understand the sacrifice that it takes for women who do to balance it out with career expectations. Swanson believes that Diane’s instructions to Alicia for becoming a partner represent the typical attitude of a second-generation feminist. In the episode “What Went Wrong,” Diane tells Alicia: “All I’m saying is, women need to help women ... I want you to get serious about the partner track ... I’ve been watching you. You have it in you. But you can’t let yourself get distracted. Not with family, not with
friendships. Here, you have to keep your eye on the ball.” To that, Alicia responds slightly annoyed: “I can’t change that I have a family,” suggesting that she is not willing to give that up for a feminist goal, like Diane did. However, for Diane, fully committing herself to work is the only way to succeed: “No one wants you to. But rising to a certain level as you have, Alicia, there are only two options open to you. Rising even further, or falling to earth – and that’s why I want to help you. To offer you my friendship. And my advice.” Despite her offer of friendship, Alicia feels that Diane’s suggestion is hostile towards her post-feminist values. The two feminist generations are often at odds with one another. Post-feminists dismiss second-wave feminism as outdated and unnecessary (Jerslev 80). The reason why it may seem unnecessary is because it is often perceived as a “phenomenon of the past,” no longer relevant in contemporary culture precisely because it made it possible for women to have the liberty to choose (Tasker and Negra 8).

Another interesting female figure in this context is Caitlin D’Arcy, a young and ambitious lawyer who joins the firm in season three. Much like Alicia, Caitlin exhibits impressive competence and strong ambitions from her very beginnings at Lockhart/Gardner. However, her attitude rapidly changes as she learns she is pregnant. In the episode “Long Way Home,” Caitlin immediately announces to Diane and Alicia that she is leaving the law to be a wife and a mother, with no plans of coming back to work. Both Diane and Alicia disapprove of her decision, desperately trying to convince her to try and have both a family and a career. Alicia says to Caitlin: “There’s no reason why you can’t work, be a wife and a mother.” However, just like Alicia does not understand Diane’s instructions to put her career before her family, neither does Caitlin understand Alicia’s. When told that she does not have to choose “either-or,” Caitlin responds: “But I want to choose. Maybe it’s different for my generation, but I don’t have to prove anything. Or, if I have to, I don’t want to.” While Diane is strongly disappointed by Caitlin’s decision as a feminist, claiming that “the glass ceiling was [not] broken for this,” Alicia responds: “Actually, I’m pretty sure it was,” thus showing that she is more understanding of feminist generational differences.

6. Achieving balance in the realm of politics

In addition to their aspirations as lawyers (and judges), Alicia and Diane, as well as other female characters in the series, also show political ambitions. Women’s careers in politics as a popular subject of television production (e.g. House of Cards, Scandal) exhibit additional complexities and obstacles for women balancing private and public lives in this arena.

With the introduction of a female lead in political shows and the aforementioned tendency of entertainment media to look for inspiration in reality, it comes as no surprise that some of the prominent figures from political reality have been incorporated into the new models for television characters. It is impossible not to notice the numerous references to Hillary Clinton in TGW, as well as the strong similarities between her and Alicia’s involvement in political sexual scandal followed by the venture into an independent political career. Tally notes that the trend of
what she calls “Hillary-esque narratives” extends beyond TGW and political television shows.² She has identified multiple formats of fictional narratives which represent one of the three Hillary-esque models: “the frustrated striver, the political wife and the unlikely winner” (125, emphasis in the original), with Alicia corresponding to the second type. Tally defines this model as “the archetype of a political wife whose own ambitions match those of her husband, but who has repressed those desires for political office in order for their husband to obtain higher office” (127). This, of course, is not the only parallel between Alicia and Hillary. Many authors have noted the similarities in their attitudes towards career and family, public and private. Some, like Cardini, even go so far as to identify Alicia as Hillary’s double; she assumes many of the roles that Hillary represented in the American political scene—the advocate of professional success, public persona, dedicated wife, woman who has been cheated on, forgiving wife, and revengeful player. Above all, it is the carefully constructed model of dual political femininity, delicately balancing the private and public dimension, that Alicia and Hillary have in common (413-14).

Despite the careful construction of a powerful political figure that Hillary has worked on all her life, the aspect of her public persona that remains most interesting to the general public is her involvement in the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal in 1998. The famous sex scandal has been identified as the point in political history that triggered a strong interest of the public in the private and, above all, sexual aspects of politicians’ lives (Dagnes 5). The same has, of course, been reflected in entertainment media engaged in political content. The creators of TGW have been most open about the source of their inspiration for the show: “There had been this waterfall of these kinds of scandals, from Bill and Hillary (Clinton), to Dick Morris and Eliot Spitzer, to name a few. I think they are all over our culture. And there was always this image of the husband apologizing and the wife standing next to him. I think the show began when we asked, ‘What are they thinking?’” (Michelle King qtd. in Tally 129). By focusing on the victimized wife, the Kings created a starting point for a show that could trace the full development of the character of the political wife³—from the silent and smiling prop in the background to an influential political agent and a complex individual with high professional ambitions.

Kanzler analyzes the opening scene of the pilot to show that it is the first indication of Alicia’s development into the “political wife” model proposed by Tally. The scene shows a press conference at which Peter confesses his infidelity and resigns, while Alicia stands next to him still and silent. Afterwards, however, when taken behind the stage, just as Peter asks her whether she is alright, Alicia slaps his face. With this sudden act, she transforms from a victim into a star of her own show (Leonard, “Sexuality” 944). In this way she assumes agency and control over her own life, paving the way for her personal development over the next seven seasons. Kanzler notes that the opening scene is designated as the “point of departure” for Alicia’s growth, which is characterized by silence (as opposed to Peter’s eloquence) and lack of agency. She points out

² Tally identifies Alicia as only one of the multiple television characters who channel Hillary Clinton. The most prominent examples of “Hillary-esque” protagonists are House of Cards’ Claire Underwood and Madam Secretary’s Elizabet McCord (125).

³ Morin points out that most of these wronged women are also lawyers who developed powerful independent careers, much like Alicia.
that Alicia’s lack of agency will remain her recurrent theme in the first season, in which she lets things happen to her rather than assume control. However, the scene in the pilot in which she slaps Peter represents the first instance of taking control over her life and shaping it rather than letting it happen. From that point on, Alicia’s navigation through the private and public space is a learning curve that allows her to eventually negotiate her agency, image and experiences in between the public and private spheres. She is taught to take control over how her private life becoming public can shape her character and image. This realization opens up many opportunities for her professionally, but also initiates her struggle with ethical insecurities/debates as she alters her view of the legal and political environments (Kanzler).

Alicia’s experience as a victim of a sexual scandal does not hold her career back, as one might expect. Instead, it helps her build the brand of “Saint Alicia,” the ultimate “good wife” premised on the figure of the martyr, who sacrificed her pride to save her family. The public cherishes this image and offers Alicia strong support, which later both she and Peter use for the benefit of advancing their political careers. She becomes as skillful as Peter in manipulating the public in her favor, but her image relies mostly on her relationship to Peter, as does his on her. Despite significant progress towards social, economic, and professional independence that Alicia strives to achieve throughout the seven seasons, she never manages to rid herself of her husband. As Ge notes, the series finale points out that she has failed in her struggle to establish a personal identity independent of her husband. Her efforts for professional and personal success are always limited by her marriage to Peter, whose “invisible influences” block her from becoming autonomous (51), unlike Diane, who thrives on her independence.

Moreover, the moral figure that she started out as and which is continuously presented to the public takes its toll on the private woman and her personal struggles. As a result of the scandal that was not even hers, Alicia is forced to look for a job in less than perfect conditions, having to rely on her sexuality to convince her former lover to give her a job. She then uses Peter’s political connections to secure a promotion she does not deserve and in later seasons decides to keep up the charade of her marriage, despite multiple affairs and lack of love, merely to propagate her own political career. One of the key concerns of the whole series is the contradiction between what is performed in the public and conveyed in the private realm (Leonard, “Sexuality” 944). Nevertheless, she succeeds in her intention to become a partner and a State’s Attorney, while constantly redefining her own expectations of herself as a mother. What started out as an attempt to preserve the family, brought about a morally compromised and contradictive woman, who is nonetheless determined to get what she wants. Despite the compromises Alicia has to make, she still represents a rare example of a woman in pursuit of happiness.

7. Conclusion

Television series represent an entertaining outlet for the examination of the attitudes and beliefs that shape our society (Ge 42). When law and politics are used as a context to construct television narratives, they provide a specific discourse shaped by patriarchal ideologies. Such
Systems require the introduction of a new model of female characters, one that could represent the challenge of finding an equilibrium that the contemporary woman has to face. The new model no longer idealizes the female figure as the lead, but rather confronts her with issues that real women have to face and compromises that they have to make. The issue of equilibrating the private and public spheres of life, spheres previously reserved for each gender respectively, has become a pressing matter in feminist discourse, one that is surely looking for an outlet in entertainment media, as well. Premium cable television, as exemplified in the analysis of *TGW*, can bring to light the personal conflicts that shape any working mother’s life and, rather than offer a solution, point to a pressing problem in today’s society to help initiate the conversation that might one day lead to change.

**Works Cited**


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