The Cardinal Edge

Volume 1 | Issue 3 Article 16

September 2023

Sex in the Sixties: Playboy's Contradictory Contribution to Social Change in the 1960s

Emily Stucky
University of Louisville, emily.stucky@louisville.edu

Sex in the Sixties: Playboy's Contradictory Contribution to Social Change in the 1960s

Emily Stucky[1]

[1] The University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the perceptions of Playboy magazine during the height of its influence, from 1955 to 1975, through the lens of social justice advocates in the 1960s. Many historical scholars characterize Playboy magazine as strictly anti-feminist, while others would cast Hugh Hefner as liberating in his ideology and political views, seen through reviews of the magazine throughout the 1960s and comments from Hefner himself. But it is more likely Playboy's legacy is much more complicated than either of these positions allow. Playboy occupied a conflicting role in the 1960s: liberating in its post-war sex standards for both men and women, objectifying and restrictive in its depiction of women and its discourse with the women's liberation movement, and outspoken in its advocacy for free speech, though not always in equal measure for all members of society. This paper will discuss interviews published in Playboy, excerpts from other sections of the magazine, and discussions of Playboy in contemporaneous publications, to reveal Playboy held a contradictory role in the social movements of the 1960s, simultaneously furthering social justice in its philosophy and detracting from it in practice. A complex view of Playboy's benefits as well as its harms in the twenty years following its inception allows readers to grapple with a question in modern times—when does intent cease to matter in light of harm caused. Despite its good intentions, Playboy came across to women in the 1960s as a magazine made possible through the work of women, made explicitly for the enjoyment of men like Hefner.

On March 26, 1970, two members of the women's liberation movement appeared on the popular talk show *The Dick Cavett Show* to engage in a heated debate with the other guest of the evening, Hugh Hefner. Susan Brownmiller and Sally Kempton—both feminist authors—did not waste any time exchanging pleasantries with Hefner, founder and editor of Playboy magazine, before diving into their list of grievances. The debate quickly became emblematic of the greater discourse between the feminist movement and the Playboy enterprise, a men's magazine famous for its nude centerfolds and sexual depiction of women. Brownmiller and Kempton slung crushing criticisms at Hefner on account of these depictions, calling them inhumane and "degrading," to which he offered limited retort. Instead, Hefner made several attempts to express solidarity toward the feminist guests, saying he was "more in sympathy" with the aims of the women's movement than was often credited to him. Brownmiller disagreed, calling out the derogatory nature of his representation of women within the pages of Playboy and was met with cheers from the audience when she announced, "Hefner has built an empire based on oppressing women."[1]

This fierce dispute on *The Dick Cavett Show* was hardly an isolated occurrence when it came to the face-off between Hefner's *Playboy* enterprise and the women's liberation movement. Feminists like Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda—along with countless others—spent much of the 1960s and 1970s decrying *Playboy's* nude centerfolds, in which the models are referred to as Playmates, as well as the *Playboy* Bunny waitresses employed at *Playboy* Clubs whose uniform consisted of a scant bunny costume.[2] Susan Brownmiller echoed the sentiment of many when she argued to Hefner that to dress his employees in bunny costumes detracts from their humanity.[3] Through all these accusations of anti-feminism, however, Hugh Hefner staunchly declared himself a member of women's liberation, and even asserted himself to be one of the first true feminists.[4] Hefner was not alone either when he argued *Playboy* advanced the causes of sexual liberation and free speech and revolutionized the very idea of sex in post-war America. Amidst the turbulence of the 1960s, *Playboy* was a tricky contributor to the multitude of social movements that unfolded, never quite contributing to a cause without also contradicting it.

1 *The Dick Cavett Show,* season 3, episode 8, "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists," hosted by Dick Cavett, featuring Hugh Hefner, Susan Browmiller, and Sally Kempton, aired March 26,1970, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BXALFRMpCw&t=133s.

2 Gloria Steinem, "A Bunny's Tale," Show, May 1, 1963.

3 T*he Dick Cavett Show,* "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists."

4 Carrie Pitzulo, Bachelors and Bunnies: *The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 127.

As a publication with tremendous influence throughout the 1960s and 1970s, how did *Playboy* fit into the social change movements of the era, from women's liberation to civil rights? Did *Playboy* play a significant role in either, and was that role for the betterment of society? Some would characterize *Playboy* as strictly anti-feminist, as was evident by the arguments from Brownmiller and Kempton, while others would cast Hugh Hefner as liberatory in his ideology and political views, seen through reviews of the magazine throughout the 1960s and comments from Hefner himself. But it is more likely *Playboy's* legacy is much more complicated than either of these positions allow. *Playboy* occupied a conflicting role in the 1960s: liberating in its post-war sex standards for both men and women, objectifying and restrictive in its depiction of women and its discourse with the women's liberation movement, and outspoken in its advocacy for free speech. However any attempts at liberation and advocacy on the part of the magazine were never dispersed in equal measure for all members of society. This paper will discuss interviews published in *Playboy*, excerpts from other sections, and discussions of men's magazines in contemporaneous publications, to reveal *Playboy* held a contradictory role in the social movements of the 1960s, all at once furthering social justice in its philosophy and detracting from it in practice.

Previous historical analyses of the impact of *Playboy* have focused solely on the magazine's relationship to feminism, or on the importance of *Playboy's* articles and interviews in American mass media. Carrie Pitzulo's 2011 book *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* argues for the complex nature of *Playboy's* role in the development of gender politics, asserting that Hefner's magazine was ultimately revolutionary in its recasting of traditional sexual roles, in spite of feminist critiques.[5] This paper will take a more critical view of *Playboy's* activism, instead emphasizing that the enterprise's harm toward women is not assuaged by Hefner's progressive political outlook. Historians who have studied the imprint of Playboy on mass media and public opinion, such as Laura Saarenmaa's "Candid Conversations: Politics and Politicians in *Playboy* Magazine," have analyzed at the magazine's activism and some of its limitations. However this paper will additionally assert that *Playboy* was exclusionary in its political philosophy, ultimately championing free speech and rights for people who fit Hefner's target audience.[6] Other studies have noted *Playboy's* shifting identities, but few have noted that *Playboy* held all of these all at once, leading to a new legacy as redundant and contradictory. Hugh Hefner founded *Playboy* magazine in 1953 after seeing a deficit in how sex was perceived in the public sphere and depicted in pornography. The magazine reached quick popularity mostly because of its nude centerfolds, but also the coupling of pornography with lifestyle columns, interviews, short stories, and articles. *Playboy* gained influence throughout the 1960s, reaching a peak popularity in 1975 with a readership of 5.6 million people.[7] Despite the conservative voices that disapproved of the magazine's explicit content and the more militant feminists who disliked the *Playboy* Clubs' treatment of their female waitresses, *Playboy* had an undoubtable allure and influence over America. The magazine brought a new definition to masculinity, a new respect for sex in the public sphere, and a new sophistication to the traditional style of pornography.

Playboy offered a liberating view of sexin post-war America by making it a suitable subject for conversation, especially as moral standards—specifically regarding sex—eased with the end of World War II. The transience and shifting priorities that are inherent to wartime made it difficult in the post-war years to care much about traditional sexual morality. Added to that trend, the construction of *Playboy* magazine presented a social taboo—pornography—and combined it with mainstream aspects of society, such as literature, food, and fashion. One could proudly proclaim they were reading *Playboy* for the articles—as so many did—or if not the articles, the advice column, or the interviews, or the short stories. Playboy "raised sex to respectability, made it fit matter for coffee conversation" and "changed sex from a dirty joke into 'entertainment served up with humor.'"[8] The "sassy newcomer" *Playboy* included short stories from distinguished writers like Boccaccio and Bradbury, cartoons, jokes, and other snippets to get readers' attentions.[9] On the subject of *Playboy's* instant popularity, Hefner says, "A great many of the traditional social and moral values of our society were changing, and *Playboy* was the first publication to reflect those changes."[10] In this way, the magazine both capitalized on the shifting moral standards surrounding sex and directed them through its cleverly crafted publications.

Playboy managed to bring sex into the national conversation, which Hugh Hefner accomplished by giving sex a high-class facade. With *Playboy's* first publication in 1953, pornographic magazines were nothing new, but the magazine's "professional sheen"

5 Pitzulo, Bachelors and Bunnies, 12.

6 Lauren Saarenmaa, "Candid Conversations: Politics and Politicians in Playboy Magazine," Media History 23, no. 1 (2017): 50-66.

7 "Playboy," Britannica, accessed November 20, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Playboy.

8 "Penthouse v. Playboy," *Time*, November 7, 1969.

9 "Sassy Newcomer," *Time,* September 24, 1956.

10 Hugh Hefner, interview by Larry Dubois, *The Playboy Interview,* January 1974, 121.

and elegant presentation made owning a Playboy into something sophisticated.[11]Playboy may have advertised "entertainment for men," but this was no empty euphemism for cheap pornography. As one reporter at Time magazine put it, "*Playboy* wasn't only interested in sex. It was the sort of magazine you could read on the Long Island Railroad because it also published stories by legitimate writers."[12] Hefner's decision to combine nude centerfolds with material already deemed socially acceptable elevated *Playboy's* reputation as sexually liberating; not only could readers receive sexual gratification from the magazine, but they could also do it publicly.

Indeed, the presentation of the Playmates contributed to a reconceptualization of what sexy meant. With regard to the centerfold photos, Hefner strove for authenticity, portraying his models as beautiful, but not unrealistically so, and not photographed in crude poses. One of the more groundbreaking issues was Miss September 1955, a model named Anne Fleming, who was photographed topless and wearing black sheer tights. While she was certainly the focus of the picture, the viewer's eye could just as easily be drawn to the ornate staircase, or the armoire staged with fancy dinner glasses and a rotary phone, all of which add to the elegant air of the photo.[13] By presenting pornography in a way that contrasted with vulgarity and crudity, *Playboy* emphasized a high class presentation that could make sex more palatable in a new era of media. Moreover, the Playmate feature gave women approval to take part in the sexual act just as it gave men the permission to seduce as many women as possible, by presenting the centerfold models "as all American girls who enjoyed sex," a revolutionary depiction throughout the 1950s.[14] But *Playboy's* liberating nature was not merely symbolic—through their depictions of sophisticated sex and women as sexual beings—as it would also prove to have a strong economic component, particularly in relation to greater financial opportunities for women.

At least some women found liberation in the pages of *Playboy*, simply based on the sheer number that applied to be featured as Playmate of the Month. By 1973, the Playmates had grown in such popularity that *Playboy's* picture editor Holly Wayne, "received one hundred amateur nude photos a month from women hoping to appear in the magazine."[15] In spite of the degradation the women's liberation movement saw in the nude centerfolds, the role of Playmate held an allure for an unprecedented number of women. In an age where women still raised some eyebrows for wanting a career instead of a family, the idea of working for a big-time magazine was appealing. The money to be had in modeling for *Playboy* was yet another selling point, since just a day or two of posing could pay more than most women in America made in a year.[16] Not only did *Playboy* centerfolds offer a symbolic liberation for female sexuality, but it also enabled many of their models to gain their own financial autonomy and contribute to their own financial liberation.

Playboy boasted a relationship to women's liberation even beyond symbolism or financial gain: that of its activism for women's rights with the establishment of the *Playboy* Foundation. Hugh Hefner made no secret of his support for abortion rights, prison reform, and other causes aligning with his liberal views. In an interview published in *Playboy*, Hefner boasted support for everything from "the antiwar movement" to "sex and research education" to "abortion reform before it became popular."[17] In 1971, the *Playboy* Foundation sponsored a variety of select cases from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) dealing with causes related to women's liberation.[18] Hefner had already accrued a reputation for male chauvinism, so his involvement in these cases was viewed by many feminist activists as contradictory. It does stand out as contrary that Hefner financed causes alongside the very women he had lambasted as "foolish."[19] But the *Playboy* Foundation's involvement in civil rights cases and financial support for expanded freedom for women cannot be considered insignificant, as it moved *Playboy* into the political sphere on the subject of their liberating philosophy.

As much as Playboy was central to debates over the presentation and status of women, its content also signaled a transition to a new definition of gender in terms of what it means to be manly. *Playboy* offered a revolutionary philosophy in its depiction of masculinity, not as the traditional outdoors-y man, but a more sophisticated, consumer-focused gentleman. Hefner described contemporary men's magazines as having "a hairy-chested editorial emphasis, with articles on

11 Sassy Newcomer," *Time,* September 24, 1956.

12 "Penthouse v. Playboy," *Time,* November 7, 1969.

13 "Playmate Anne Fleming." Photograph. September 1955 14

Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies,* 40.

15 Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies,* 51.

16 U.S. Census Bureau; Consumer Income, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1962/demographics/p6037.pdf. (17 January 1962).

17 Hugh Hefner, interview by Larry Dubois, *The Playboy Interview,* January 1974, 121.

18 Louisville Courier Journal, "Playboy to Aid Women's Rights," March 10, 1971.

19 Gloria Steinem, "What Playboy Doesn't Know about Women Could Fill a Book," McCall's, October 1970, 139.

hunting,fishing, chasing the Abominable Snowman over Tibetan mountaintops."[20] *Playboy* offered a different view of the ideal masculinity, with its emphasis on food, wine, and fashion, in addition to the typical sexualized women. The magazine focused on the subjects Hefner was more familiar with, as he put it, "the contemporary equivalents of wine, women, and song, though not necessarily in that order."[21] Other men's magazines at the time would not have considered these effeminate tastes a part of traditional masculinity, leaving quite a lot of room for Hefner to create his own kind of masculine ideal.

Playboy's new definition of consumer-driven masculinity was present in nearly every aspect of the magazine. The food and drink columns—written by Thomas Mario, a popular men's club chef—featured different recipes and drinks, along with appropriate times to serve them. Mario reworked these more feminine pursuits around the ultimate goal of seducing a lover, arguing that knowledge of food and fashion would be appealing to any dinner date. Men with talents and interests on the more feminine side of the spectrum no longer had to choose between these pursuits and being manly.[22] The connection between "tossing a salad" and "seducing a lover" was perfectly clear on the pages of *Playboy*.[23] Unlike traditional men's magazines of the past, the food and fashion columns of *Playboy* invited men to tap into their feminine side—a liberating viewpoint even in the 1960s with regard to traditional gender roles—all with the ultimate goal of seducing their date. The ideal *Playboy* man added to the liberating mantra of the magazine, in that men were free to remain bachelors for as long as they chose, with no obligation to get married at a young age. By making sex more accessible to all, the obligation to be married in order to engage in and discuss sex was removed. Whereas previous generations had seen the ideal man as rugged, physically strong, and ready to give up bachelorhood to provide for his family, the *Playboy* man kept his focus on finer pursuits, and was in no hurry to get married or start a family. Hefner demonstrated this himself in his commitment to lifelong bachelorhood. This hedonistic definition of masculinity was borne of a new emphasis on consumer culture—the *Playboy* man could hardly drive his date around town without the fanciest new manufactured car—and it is difficult to condone a philosophy that urges men away from familial responsibility in the name of masculinity.[24] Yet *Playboy's* definition of the ideal man revolutionized the way men went about seduction and adds to its countercultural attitude on the liberation of sex.

While *Playboy* could veritably boast a liberating reputation in the decades after its inception, the magazine nevertheless incurred a storm of criticism from members of the women's liberation movement, who found no shortage of faults with the *Playboy* enterprise. Feminists critiqued the message of the magazine, the exploitation of female workers, the use of nude centerfolds, and Hugh Hefner himself as the pinnacle of chauvinist masculinity. One of *Playboy's* most powerful critics was Gloria Steinem, a prominent feminist activist of the 1960s and 1970s, so it is not shocking that much of the ardent criticism against *Playboy* appeared in *Ms.*.magazine, for which Steinem was editor. In their December 1974 issue, *Ms*. reprinted in their No Comment section an ad for shoes published in an earlier *Playboy* which featured a naked woman lying on the floor gazing at a pair of shoes, accompanied by the message, "Keep her where she belongs..."[25]The placement of this ad in *Ms.*. served to keep readers informed of threats to the women's movement; *Playboy* later developed into a running joke within the pages of *Ms.*., referenced as the standard for women's subjugation. The writers at *Ms*. sought to hold *Playboy* accountable for any portrayal of women in general, not just in the centerfolds.

The juxtaposition between *Ms.*. and *Playboy* in the 1970s is an interesting one, as two powerful publications both with immense power to influence the social justice movements of the period. While *Ms.*.'s readership never rivaled *Playboy's* the readership of the two magazines had an interesting breakdown—*Ms.*. being three-quarters women and *Playboy* being three-quarters men. However, as *Playboy* appeared on the scene in the early 1950s and immediately began directing public attitudes toward sex

20 Hugh Hefner, interview by Larry Dubois, *The Playboy Interview,* January 1974, 120

21 Hefner, interview.

22 Thomas Mario, "Audacious Italian Dishes," *Playboy*, September 1955, 52.

23 Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies,* 83.

24 "What Sort of Man Reads Playboy" ad, April 1964.

25 "Keep Her Where She Belongs" reprint ad, *Ms.,* December 1974

and gender, Ms. did not get their start until nearly two decades later, coming across more as a product of the feminist revolution than a cause. All the same, *Ms*. catered better to an audience of women who were ready to hear from actual feminist advocates at the time, not male free speech icons that only dabbled in feminist topics.[26] Today, the two magazines read as emblematic of the uncomfortable position of feminism in the male-dominated field of journalism. *Playboy* gains praise and recognition for being versatile—a men's magazine that manages to claim shreds of feminist prose—whereas *Ms*. is continually pigeonholed as a radical feminist publication, with hardly the same nuance afforded.

Ms..Magazine was hardly the only feminist publication showcasing instances of *Playboy*'s sexism in their business practices. An anonymous article satirically titled "Top Job in the Country," published in radical feminist periodical *Off Our Backs,* detailed the working conditions for *Playboy* Bunny waitresses, based on the experiences of a former *Playboy* Bunny. The article begins with an excerpt from the *Playboy Club Training Manual* then continues to expose the promise to become one of "the most glamorous young women in the world" to be a falsehood. The author explained that Playboy Bunnies were hardly the stunningly beautiful creatures they were often believed to be, instead painting them as regular women in uncomfortable costumes which "make[s] breathing a real talent." Of the working conditions, she stated, "I have seen countless girls, including myself, go home crying at night because their feet hurt so badly." She described the exhausting hours, "the normal work shift is from seven to ten hours with a half-hour break if you are lucky" and the meager salary falling below the federal minimum wage.[27]

Hefner's claims of women's liberation tended to fall flat in comparison with such treatment of his female workers. In the interview on *The Dick Cavett* show Hefner argued the Bunnies could not possibly find their costumes or their treatment degrading, or there would not be so many employed, to which both Brownmiller and Kempton vigorously voiced their disagreement.[28]The Off Our Backs article paints *Playboy*'s hiring practices for Bunny waitresses as false advertising, with the author saying she "fell for all the tempting propaganda."[29] These prevailing attitudes among feminists recast women's employment as Bunnies not as empowering, but as a scam. In his interview with *Playboy,* Hefner was asked to comment on his controversial hiring practices—choosing models and waitresses based on their physical appearance—to which he replied there was nothing unnatural about his preference for younger, more voluptuous bodies, and hiring women who fit this model. He said, "a shapely, firm young face and body are more attractive sexually and aesthetically than bulges, sags and wrinkles."[30] Hefner did not seem to see the connection between his discriminatory hiring practices and the oppression of women that feminists so frequently pointed out to him. But for many women's liberation advocates, any credit *Playboy* had earned in their employment of women or countercultural view of sex ran counter to the magazine's objectification in their hiring and treatment of female employees.

But exploitation in the *Playboy* industry was not limited to *Playboy* Bunnies' working conditions; several women voiced their concern over the young ages of the models chosen, arguing the nude centerfolds were exploitative of young people. In her interview with *Playboy* magazine, feminist writer Germaine Greer spoke extensively of the perversion she saw in *Playboy's* use of nude centerfolds, and the entitlement it gave men to view women in real life as the sex objects they see on the page. In a fiery interview, she outlined the double standard, "They all give the illusion that 50-year-old men are entitled to f*ck 15-year-old girls—especially if they're given diamond bracelets—while 50-year-old women are too repulsive to be seen with."[31] Even on *The Dick Cavett Show*, Cavett himself commented on the excessively young models chosen to be Playmate of the Month, saying, "You really think the ladies of your magazine have the opposite of arrested development"[32] Greer's hostile attitude toward her *Playboy* interviewer was certainly warranted, as she was described in the introduction to her interview published in the magazine

26 "About Ms." Ms. Magazine, accessed 13 March 2023, https://msmagazine.com/about/.

27 Bloomington Women's Liberation, "Top Job in the Country," *Off Our Backs* 2, no. 2, (October 1971): 13.

28 *The Dick Cavett Show,* "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists."

29 Bloomington Women's Liberation, "Top Job in the Country," 13

30 Hugh Hefner, interview by Larry Dubois, The Playboy Interview, January 1974, 120.

31 Germaine Greer, interview by Nat Lehrman, The Playboy Interview, January 1972, https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/culture/germaine-greer-playboy-interview/.

32 *The Dick Cavett Show,* "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists."

as "prettier than her TV image and…a superb cook,"showing her objectification even when occupying an academic—as opposed to sexual—role in the magazine[33] highlighted many of many of the concerns from women at the time—that *Playboy* models were too young to be considered realistic or to be displayed in such a manner for such a vast readership of men. *Playboy's* objectification of women extended even beyond the women who applied to be Playmate of the Month. In, onda filed a lawsuit against *Playboy* for $17.5 million for publishing nude photos of her, which had been taken without her knowledge or consent. Fonda had been filming a scene for a movie at the time in which nudity was required for filming but would not actually appear in the finished product. A photographer had snuck onto the set and taken the photos without anyone's knowledge, then published them in the following issue of *Playboy*.[34] This lawsuit suggests *Playboy's* reductive ideology toward women extended beyond those it hired, and those who applied to be featured in centerfolds—all of which implies consent. Rather, *Playboy* demonstrated a lack of ethical qualms about publishing photos of Fonda without any type of consent, profiting off her body in a way that Fonda found commodifying and degrading.

Even in 1974, eight years after the filing of the lawsuit, in Jane Fonda's interview with *Playboy* magazine on the subject of her activism during the Vietnam War, Fonda made no secret of her disdain for the magazine's treatment of her right to privacy. She says, "it was very hard for me to agree to be interviewed by *Playboy*," and explains the nuances of the incident, arguing Playboy mistook an acting choice Fonda had made for consent to use her body for their own financial gain. Fonda explained to the interviewer she agreed to the interview to further her political activism and reach a wide readership, and her interview should not be taken as any endorsement of the sexual content of *Playboy*. Fonda makes her position clear, "I don't like the way *Playboy* exploits women's bodies... *Playboy* has become the symbol of what what is the enemy for women."[35] While *Playboy's* exploitation of Fonda's right to privacy was certainly an isolated occurrence and should not be considered a habit of the magazine, it spoke to a larger ideology from the enterprise that a woman's body was its own to display and its readers' to enjoy, regardless of that woman's professional relationship to the magazine. It also revealed a general distaste women held toward the magazine which became more vocal as a response to occasions like the Fonda lawsuit and was given credence as Playboy actively placed the interests of their male readership above the rights of the women they employed.

This attitude of entitlement from *Playboy* was not surprising, given the reputation of the magazine's founder as a womanizer and a chauvinist. Hefner frequently denied such claims as reductive and ignorant of his views on the issues of women's rights, saying he even invented women's liberation with his depiction of women as sexual beings.[36] But Hefner struggled to see the contradiction between his position on abortion and birth control and the way he spoke about the women he employed. In a 1963 interview with Time Magazine, Hefner said of his *Playboy* Club waitresses, "we have over 24.5 tons of bunnies... their collective chest measurement is 15,156 in., which is about one-quarter of a mile. The waistlines total 9,4721 in. and their hip circ circumference is 14,777 in."[37] Such language was needlessly derogatory even if meant in a joking manner. In comments such as these, Hefner tended to miss the point of feminists' complaints, and simply gave them more fuel for their argument.

This particular argument found itself center stage in the aforementioned 1970 *Dick Cavett Show* debate, in which Brownmiller and Kempton took issue with Hefner on personal grounds, citing him as an enemy of the women's liberation movement. Hefner took note of the hostile tone of the audience, saying "even in the audience...I think we have more than a few of the lib people here."[38] He was certainly correct, as an article in the *New York Times* documenting the evening describes two additional members of the feminist movement who rushed the stage, backed by an additional two dozen. The audience members shouted, "Off the pig" and "Fascist" at Hefner, revealing that if he were a member of the women's movement, he was certainly an unpopular one.[39] Any empowering message *Playboy* displayed in their rewriting of the sexual narrative tended to be overwritten by Hefner's degrading comments, which were poorly received from leading feminist voices of the age

34 "Actress Jane Fonda Sues Playboy for $17.5 Million," *Louisville Courier Journal,* August 17, 1966.

35 Jane Fonda, interview by Ron Ridenour and Leroy F. Aarons, *The Playboy Interview,* April 1974, 142.

36 Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnie*s, 1.

37 "Two Definitions of Obscenity," *Time,* June 21, 1963.

38 *The Dick Cavett Show*, "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists."

39 "Women Militants Disrupt Cavett Show with Hefner," The New York Times, March 27, 1970.

In spite of the negative press *Playboy* received from the women's liberation movement, the magazine still received praise for being an icon of free speech, particularly in an age fraught with McCarthyism Hollywood blacklists, and censorship. In the Playboy interview section, many liberal voices of the decade were invited to share their platform with the magazine's readership, often being one of the primary ways such figures could share their platform with the general public.

In her article "Candid Conversations: Politics and Politicians in *Playboy* Magazine," Laura Saarenmaa argued the *Playboy* interview served as a leading voice in a growing liberal social climate, paving the way for other magazines by interviewing people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Ayn Rand, and Fidel Castro. Saarenmaa noted the dominant demographics of those invited to speak in *Playboy*, "The liberal worldview indeed came across in the *Playboy* interviews, the majority representing the views of the civil rights activists and the representatives of the liberal side of the Democratic Party."[40] In a magazine hailed for its chauvinism and its dedication to repressing women, that *Playboy* also played a sizable role in increasing the platform of prominent civil rights leaders is notable.

At the time of the first *Playboy* interview in 1963, the candidness achieved in *Playboy* interviews was rare, unapologetically giving controversial political figures the floor. Dr. King's interview opened with a moving anecdote of how he explained segregation to his young daughter, when she wanted to go to an amusement park that was open only to whites. " One of the most painful experiences I have ever faced was to see her tears when I told her that Funtown was closed to colored children," said Dr. King.[41] In his interview in 1963, Malcolm X declared to *Playboy* interviewer Alex Haley, "Uncle Sam is guilty of kidnapping. We didn't come here voluntarily on the Mayflower. And 400 years of lynchings condemn Uncle Sam as a murderer."[42] Though it would be a mistake to attribute the groundbreaking ideas of these men as the work of the publishers at *Playboy*, the decision to publish controversial civil rights ideas in a magazine primarily marketed to middle-class white men gave more credibility to Hefner's claims of being a free speech countercultural icon. Even Germaine Greer had to admit the liberal nature of *Playboy* influenced her decision to sit for an interview with the magazine. She explained, "Although I disapprove of the entire subliminal message in Playboy, I suppose your editorial matter is more liberal than that of other large-circulation magazines." She later alluded alluded to the purportedly extensive readership of *Playboy* being useful for expanding the message of the women's liberation movement.[43] While several other feminist leaders like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem refused interviews with the magazine—demonstrating *Playboy's* willingness to interview with those who may not agree with the magazine's platform—Greer saw the opportunity to spread her message as more important than the reputation of *Playboy*.[44] Dr. King had similar qualms with his own interview, but he could not justify passing up the opportunity to reach a readership of 5.6 million people.[45] *Playboy* succeeded in presenting countercultural standard; it would be fruitless to even try. Such an exclusionary message sets *Playboy* in stark contrast to the countercultural message of the 1960s, where free thinking and deviance from the norm was expected and encouraged.

Despite Hefner's frequent claims that one quarter of *Playboy's* readership was female, it remained ultimately a men's magazine, which limited the extent to which it could be called inclusive.[51] Indeed, as the women's liberation movement grew in popularity and membership, the form of liberation *Playboy* had offered for women at the time of its creation in 1953 began to wane in its allure. Even when the magazine was first established, the kind of liberation that Hefner offered women was one that was dictated on strictly male terms. True, the magazine advocated for liberal reforms that were central to the feminist movement, but these were hardly seen as only advantageous for women. Hefner's support of abortion reform and contraception plays perfectly into the *Playboy* mantra of a bachelor lifestyle. If bachelors could have more sex with fewer consequences, there was no reason for Hefner to be against these aspects of the feminist movement. Indeed, some of the supposedly

40 Lauren Saarenmaa, "Candid Conversations: Politics and Politicians in Playboy Magazine," Media History 23, no.1 (2017): 52.

41 Martin Luther King, Jr., interview by Alex Haley, *The Playboy Interview,* January 1965, 42.

42 Malcolm X, interview by Alex Haley, *The Playboy Interview,* May 1963, 20.

43 Greer, interview.
44 Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 140.
45 Saarenmaa, "Candid Conversations," 52.
46 "What Sort of Man Reads Playboy" ad, April 1964.
47 Malcolm X, interview.
48 Hefner, interview.
49 Peter Michelson, "The Pleasures of Commodity, or How to Keep the World Safe for Pornography," The Antioch Review 29, no. 1 (Spring, 1969): 80.
50 Jordan S. Carroll, "Reading Playboy for the Science Fiction" American Literaure 2, no. 87 (June 2015): 336.
51 *The Dick Cavett Show,* "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists."

progressive stances *Playboy* took on women's issue were actually quite hostile toward women in intent, the most obvious example being the issue of divorce. While the magazine's support for divorce—exemplified by Hefner's multiple divorces—initially reads as pro-woman, it just as easily reads as chauvinist, giving men greater opportunity to divorce their wives to pursue younger women. Looking at the liberal nature of *Playboy* through this lens suggests the liberation the magazine offered women was always one that catered more to the needs of men, for which women's liberation was a mere by-product.

The magazine certainly attempted to adjust its message to the changing times, even advising one reader in the Advisor column to encourage his wife to pursue a career. Yet by its twentieth year, "a curious datedness [hung] over Playboy," with "[stories of] elderly lechers chasing gamboling nymphs around the old yacht" not receiving the same shocked acceptance they used to.[52] What used to make Hefner's enterprise a "sassy newcomer" now made it old fashioned.[53]*Playboy*'s unfashionable approach to women even disgusted the creator of Penthouse magazine, one of *Playboy*'s copycats. Bob Guccione said to Time Magazine, "*Playboy* treats women like a child treats a doll. The basic difference between Hefner and me is that I actually like women."[54] Indeed, in many ways the creation of Penthouse magazine in 1965 signaled a behavioral shift in public tastes. Whereas *Playboy* had spent twenty years towing the line between explicit and sophisticated, Penthouse had no objections to being called filthy, often pushing the envelope for how much and in what context nudity could be displayed.[55] After two decades in print, it was not just feminist activists who decried *Playboy*; plenty of male journalists seemed convinced the magazine had outstayed its welcome. All through Hefner's desire for liberality and free speech, that speech was still directed at a particular class of people—men.

Playboy's position in the social justice movements of the 1960s remains difficult to define. Beginning in 1953 with the magazine's inception and continuing until the late 1970s when the *Playboy* fervor began to die down, Hefner's empire was lauded as groundbreaking and subversive, but never without criticism. *Playboy* redefined sex as socially acceptable and provided a new outlet for female sexuality. The editors at *Playboy* employed women both in *Playboy* Clubs and within the magazine, paying their centerfold models more than many American women made in a year. The *Playboy* Philosophy allowed Hefner to espouse a new definition of masculinity that was dependent on the pairing of sex with consumerism, rather than the rugged outdoors-y types of days gone by. And the *Playboy* Interview can reasonably be called pioneering journalism because it was much less constrained by the censorship of the era. Yet every liberating move Hefner made was marred by his disregard for the concerns raised by the very marginalized groups he claimed to champion. Women's liberationists exposed his treatment of his female employees as abusive and "a threat to their humanity."[56] Modern critics point out the unfortunate juxtaposition between Hefner's supposed countercultural attitude and his commitment to capitalist business practices.

Speakers like Malcolm X and Dr. King associated with *Playboy* for the platform it provided, not for any connection with the magazine itself. In the context of the attitudes of social justice leaders of the 1960s, it is difficult to see Hefner's attempts at liberation as anything other than selfcongratulatory and self-serving.

In the twenty-first century, *Playboy* remains a powerful enterprise. Even posthumously, Hugh Hefner remains a figure modern society does not quite know what to do with. A complex view of *Playboy*'s benefits as well as its harms in the twenty years following its inception allows readers to grapple with a question in modern times—when does intent cease to matter in light of harm caused. Despite its good intentions, *Playboy* came across to women in the 1960s as a magazine made possible through the work of women, made explicitly for the enjoyment of men like Hefner. For them, it will always be women like Susan Brownmiller who are the true heroes, who had the courage to call Hefner out for what she saw him as—an enemy of women.

52 "Cupcake v. Sweet Tooth," *Time,* March 20, 1972.

53 "Sassy Newcomer," *Time*, September 24, 1956.

54 "Penthouse v. Playboy," *Time,* November 7, 1969.

55 Robert McFadden. "Bob Guccione, Penthouse Founder, Dies at 79," *The New York Times,* October 20, 2010.

56 *The Dick Cavett Show,* "Hugh Hefner Clashes with Feminists."