

Book Review

Banet-Weiser, S. & Higgins, K. C. (2023). *Believability: Sexual violence, media, and the politics of doubt*. Wiley .256 Pages

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Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins provides a critical account of current debates surrounding believability vis-à-vis sexual violence in both mainstream and social media. The book offers profound insights into discursive formations of sexual assault victims' *believability* at the conjuncture of two historical moments, i.e., the #MeToo movement and the supposed crisis of post-truth. As the authors of the book recall, the rise of the #MeToo movement co-occurred with the erosion of truth amidst a vast sea of 'alternative facts'. On the one hand, the global diffusion of #MeToo once again thrust the widespread issue of sexual violence into the limelight and was, as a result, heralded as a new, fourth wave of feminism. On the other hand, as more and more public accusations of sexual assault against historically powerful men have been made, anxieties have grown over fake news, so-called cancel culture, false accusation, and overreaction, among others, that undergird the politics of post-truth. In this regard, media platforms and media culture in and through which sexual violence cases are exposed are implicated in the conditional construction and reproduction of believable victimhood. Although much has been written on the social, cultural, and political impact of #MeToo, the book is yet another welcome addition to theoretical dialogues on public struggles over believability as it investigates in-depth how the mediated economy of believability operates at this Western-specific historical conjuncture, especially in the wake of the high-profile trial involving Amber Heard and Johnny Depp.

Following the proliferation of media texts including film and television that deal with sexual abuse cases or what the authors term #MeToo media, Chapter 1 delves into their representational construction of believability particularly through labor by victims of sexual assault. That is to say, despite the heightened visibility of gender-based violence in the light of #MeToo, the onus is still on the victim to continually perform multiple labors of believability

convincingly lest they be dismissed outright as a liar. The chapter further explicates how different degrees of believability labor are demanded of distinct types of gendered, racialized, and classed subjects. In the marketplace of believability, the threat of being silenced via, for example, nondisclosure agreements used by powerful men often suffices to deter disclosure of sexual violence stories since the futility of speaking out is often, too, tacitly presupposed. In Chapter 2, the authors dissect how believability labor has been commodified by the anti-sexual violence market by enumerating technological and consumer products of self-defense for women that have been launched after the arrival of #MeToo. The marketing of these supposed quick technological and consumerist fixes is predicated on the mitigation of doubt that women need to perform in order to be believed, thereby placing the burden of preempting sexual violence solely on women and perpetuating the normalization of sexual harassment and violence as part of their daily lives.

Chapter 3 probes further into the contingency and fragility of believability as the hypervisibility of sexual violence issues has been met with resistance from men who find themselves suddenly held to account for their history of sexual abuse. Against the rising tide of misogynistic backlashes, the burden of fully and wholly overcoming doubt falls on women while a little doubt raised in support of wealthy powerful men can often completely undermine the legitimacy of accusations. The digitization of doubt, that is, the demand for evidentiary artifacts and digital receipts within this media culture, has turned disclosure of sexual assault stories into a literal contest for belief wherein doubt can be recast on the victim any time. Chapter 4 weaves together discussions from the previous three chapters to expound on the workings of conditional believability in accordance with the commercial logics of media platforms and culture. The chapter examines how contests for belief are essentially struggles for believable victimhood where truth plays second fiddle to believability. In this chapter, the authors also highlight how the weaponization of victimhood has historically been exploited by not only powerful white men, but also by white women to win out over men of color in the struggles for believability as evidenced by historical cases of false sexual assault accusations against Black and Brown men by white women that ultimately led to wrongful convictions or public persecution. While white women's testimonies are accorded greater validity against men of color, the same courtesy is not extended to Black girls and women who are perennially constructed as doubtful subjects due to the adultification of these marginalized groups in mainstream media.

The concluding chapter revisits discourses on 'truth' within this so-called post-truth era and retraces the static and legalistic perceptions of truth to the Enlightenment period in which

truth was and has been regarded as objective and immutable. However, as the authors have demonstrated throughout the book, truth is far from being static and immutable, it is, in fact, constantly negotiated within the current mediascape oftentimes to uphold the power structures that define truth itself. Instead of a search for an abstract conception of truth, a shift in the focus of analysis to believability that is unevenly but continually required of different sexual assault victims can shed more light on the mechanisms of the cultural context within which the issue of sexual violence has captured public attention and faced relentless pushback from those who are subject to potential loss of their longstanding privilege, entitlement, and power. Despite #MeToo being one of the main points of reference, the authors cover far more than just the movement with their deep dive into a network of online misogyny and their careful analysis of numerous sexual abuse accusations – past, present, and possibly future – against men with different levels of economic, social, and cultural capital. Most notably, with its analytical shift, the book provides a long overdue investigation into the ideologically fraught nature of both scholarly and public discourses on sexual violence as premised on believability work, rather than putative truth seeking.