

# Television and the ‘honest’ woman: Mediating the labor of believability

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Between 2019-2020, three streaming series (all limited run) premiered on Netflix, Apple +, and BBC One/HBO: *Unbelievable*, *The Morning Show*, and *I May Destroy You*. All three narratively centered sexual violence against women, foregrounding the experiences of the women characters. All three were produced within the context of the global movement #MeToo, and two (*The Morning Show* and *I May Destroy You*) explicitly mentioned the movement in the narrative. In the following article, we offer a conjunctural analysis of these three series within a broader context of what we call the economy of believability, as well as the global #MeToo movement.

These shows feature fictional narratives that proximate highly visible sexual violence cases in the US and UK during the five years after #MeToo. *Unbelievable* tells the true story<sup>1</sup> of a young woman named Marie who is raped by a home intruder and then persuaded by police to claim she falsely reported it, resonating with a current context of men’s rights organizations, which have embraced false rape accusations as one of their major causes (Gotell and Dutton 2016). *The Morning Show* follows the colleagues of a popular morning television show anchor who is accused of widespread sexual harassment and assault, closely mirroring the real-life case of the US-based NBC morning show anchor Matt Lauer. Like Lauer, the character Mitch Kessler confesses to infidelity but not to sexual assault or misconduct (Aurthur and Setoodeh 2019). Finally, *I May Destroy You* centers on a young Black woman in London named Arabella who is raped after having her drink spiked at a nightclub. Each episode follows Arabella as she attempts to piece together the details of an assault she struggles to remember. *I May Destroy You* is based on creator and lead actor Michaela Coel’s own experience of being drugged and raped (Petter 2020).

Each of these shows engages discourses about when, and how, to believe women when they accuse men of sexual assault. This question has become a heated point of cultural contention in the era of #MeToo and associated movements like #BelieveWomen, with some commentators cautioning that believing women has become too easy, even dangerously so (for example, see Malkin, 2018). We find it significant that three series have emerged together in the immediate aftermath of the #MeToo moment to explore how and why believing women who

accuse men of sexual assault endures as an uphill cultural struggle. We argue here that these shows should be read as fictionalized real-world phenomena, distilled for television but nonetheless reflective of deeply sedimented assumptions about women, sexual violence, and believability.<sup>2</sup>

Our analysis positions the discourses and narratives of these shows—and of the real-world contexts they speak to—within the broader frame of a mediated and intersectional *economy of believability*, where contestations about how and when women may be believed play out in and through struggles over visibility, authenticity, and recognition. More specifically, we highlight three forms of labor that are demanded of women in and through such struggles. First, we consider the affective performance of believability, often required to overcome overlapping forms of (historical) doubt attached to womanhood at its different intersections with race, class, and other dimensions of identity and experience. Second, we examine the costs of believability, which we propose must be met through spectacles of loss and suffering in order to disrupt persistent denial and gaslighting. Finally, we explore the struggle to attach value to believability through entrepreneurialism; in the contemporary context of #MeToo, we witness the branding and marketing of experiences of sexual violence. Thus, survivors of sexual assault can find themselves as entrepreneurs of the self, a form of labor that is often required to mitigate the material precarity that often follows experiences of sexual violence, even when ‘believed’.

### **#MeToo and the economy of visibility**

Writing about popular feminism and popular misogyny, Author/Date argued that an economy of visibility is the contemporary context for the images, expressions and practices of a highly palatable and easily digested form of popular feminism, one that is largely affirmational and individually empowering. Within this economy, popular feminism often begins and ends with its visibility; to be visible becomes an end in itself, not a means to a different end, such as social change. Indeed, in the contemporary moment, there is what media scholar Herman Gray (2013) calls the “incitement to visibility.” He asks what this quest for visibility can yield when the social structures that produced the necessity for the recognition in the first place have changed, and whether a “desire for recognition” presumes not necessarily a structural change, but rather recognition for an individual positionality.

The economy of visibility manifests in spectacular ways in the global movement #MeToo. Relying on the circuits of visibility (social media platforms, corporate culture, mainstream media, celebrities, etc) through which popular feminism flourishes, the #MeToo movement has been similarly curated. Circuits of visibility prop up and prioritize industries that already enjoy visibility (entertainment, news media) in part because those industries are already designed and scripted for any mode of spectacular spotlight. As we argue, because of this individualist focus, some of the more spectacular #MeToo moments end up working against the calls for social change promised at its beginning.

The social, cultural, and technological developments of the last decade—including but not limited to #MeToo—have made it more possible than ever to level allegations of sexual violence against powerful men in and through media culture. Those cultural conditions that made it important to demand visibility in the first place for victims of sexual violence— not enough representation, representation that is highly stereotypical—have shifted within the popular feminist economy of visibility, but also suffered consequences. Indeed, visibility also incurs negative reactions, and in the context of #MeToo there has been pushback from a number of perspectives. One such pushback is an emerging discourse alleging that, for women who accuse men of sexual violence, believability has somehow become all too easy – that women are now believed too quickly and too lightly, privileged to evade even the most basic level of rational scrutiny to the cost of the integrity of ‘truth’ in our public culture. Within this context,

truthful speech is not something women do, but rather, something women earn. Believability is a commodity to be worked for, paid for, secured—and a commodity of unstable value.

## **Economy of believability**

If believability is a commodity, then it too exists within a particular cultural economy. Here, we position the analytic of an economy of visibility alongside and entwined with an *economy of believability* as a way to think through the gender and race politics that frame sexual violence. Like an economy of visibility, the economy of believability represents an affective continuum within which subjects are unevenly positioned to access and harness believability in struggles over truth in public culture. As with all economies, the positionality of subjects in the economy of believability emerges as a product of labor and resources, which tend to exist in an inverse relationship to one another: the more resources a subject already possesses (including but not limited to various intersecting forms of social, cultural and economic capital, and structural privileges stemming from gender, race, class etc.), the less labor required to secure access to believability through this economy, and vice versa. Some truths, and truth-tellers, emerge into the spotlight—for a variety of reasons. These include historical reasons (they have always occupied the spotlight), structural reasons (they play well for corporate media) and epistemic reasons (they resonate with already established analytic frameworks of subjectivity and universality). On all three fronts, wealthy white men find themselves at a considerable advantage.

White men in positions of power have historically occupied a central position within this economy of believability as ideal believable subjects. In part, this is because the very notion of ‘truth’ has been historically bound up with the experiences of such men. Since the Enlightenment, the twinned epistemological pillars of ‘objectivity’ and ‘rationality’ which hold up the notion of truth in Western culture have disproportionately authorized white men to produce philosophical and scientific knowledge of the world and circulate it as ‘fact’. This illusory power is what Donna Haraway calls ‘the God trick’ – the deeply gendered and racialized capacity to ‘step outside’ the strictures of subjectivity and produce knowledge that speaks to and of a ‘universal’ subject who is naturalized as male, white and Anglo-European (Haraway 1988). Women, people of color of all genders, and subjects speaking from outside the West, meanwhile, have had their truths confined to the particular, the subjective, and the partial (Go 2017). This epistemic inequality graduates with degrees of separation from the white, male Anglo-European subject, so that (for example) a white Western woman may only speak ‘as a woman’ but often universally on behalf of her gender, to the further particularization and epistemic marginalization of Black and Indigenous women, women from outside the West, and women who experience other intersecting forms of oppression (Phipps, 2020). At any gradient, the mandate for objectivity at the heart of the Western understanding of truth only too often operates as a mechanism of domination. It simultaneously ‘locks out’ the knowledge of particularized subjects from the realm of truth while ‘locking in’ the truths particular to Anglo-European contexts and white men’s experiences of them (Harsin, 2019; Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan 2018).

Women, as subjective subjects par excellence, are thus kept symbolically and structurally at arms-length from the possibility of truthful speech: they cannot be truth-tellers, only truth-corrupters, their accounts of the world always partial and biased in ways unacceptable to rational deliberation. Adrienne Rich (1977) locates the origins of this boundary drawn between women and truth in the historical inscribing of womanhood through heterosexist logics: “Truthfulness,” she writes, “has not been considered important for women, as long as we have remained physically faithful to a man, or chaste” (p. 415). The ‘honest man’ is he who speaks truthfully and acts honorably. His word is his bond, as the expression goes – he can be believed, instantly and without scrutiny, just for having spoken. An ‘honest woman’, however, is something entirely different. To draw on another popular expression, a woman “made honest” in Western culture is not she who has been implored, convinced, or inspired to speak her truth. Rather, she is a

woman who commits to monogamous (on her side) matrimony with a man she has slept with. Patriarchy does not expect women to be truthful because it has never needed them to be—our words need not be our bonds if we are already bound sufficiently.

These observations extend to the new visibility of women who accuse men of sexual violence in and through the #MeToo movement. To be sure, #MeToo and social media carry implicit promises of access and audibility: that people can come forward, speak, and be heard, as many people have. But that speech, those voices, continue to be subject to familiar structures of power, and thus familiar roadblocks jamming women's access to truth through the economy of believability. The constructions of woman as particular (and thus not authoritative) and woman as liar (and thus not truthful) are the historical backdrop against which the spectacular visibility of the #MeToo movement has emerged, and are important symbolic forces conditioning how, and to what extent, the movement can contribute to meaningful and enduring political change. Leigh Gilmore (2017) puts the predicament most succinctly: "Women are often seen as unpersuasive witnesses [in court] for three related reasons:" she writes, "because they are women, because through testimony they seek to bear witness to inconvenient truths, and because they possess less symbolic and material capital than men as witnesses in courts of law" (p.18).

This disbelief in women's truths—especially when those truths pertain to experiences of sexual violence—is often directly the collateral of an engrained historical tendency to believe white men. Women who make allegations of sexual assault often find themselves bidding for recognition in the economy of believability against an attacker who denies the assault, or against white men in position of power who gatekeep the various options for justice, restoration, and restitution. The labor of being believed is thus usually doubled over: first, to cast doubt and eventually detach belief from the established version of 'reality' placed in cultural circulation by white men, and then second, to have one's own version of reality recognized and authorized as 'true' instead.

In following pages, we argue that *Unbelievable*, *The Morning Show* and *I May Destroy You* examine the struggle for belief as it manifests in three key forms of labor: (1) the affective performance of believability; (2) payment of the costs of believability; and (3) entrepreneurially attaching value to believability. We argue that these are elements of the broader economy of believability, on which the narrative of each of these series reflects and offers critical commentary. As the core logics of the economy of believability, performance, cost, and value reveal the ways in which the believability of women is contingent in the judgement of others and so always dependent on other factors, including the cultural construction of all women—but especially working-class women, women of color, trans women, and women in sex work—as inherently unbelievable.

Our primary focus in this article is on the marginal position of women within this economy—and so, on gender as one of its most potent organising principles. We adopt this focus because the (binarily) gendered character of believability is the narrative thread that links the three television series we analyze and connects them to mainstream #MeToo discourses. However, from the horrific murder of Emmett Till to the growing visibility of the 'Karen'<sup>23</sup> in contemporary media culture, real world contexts make abundantly clear that white women possess a conditional believability that can be, and often is, weaponized against people of color, including men (Hamad, 2019; Phipps, 2021). An economy of believability that centers white, cisgender men with wealth and influence—as we argue it does—is as much an economy mediated by race, class, socio-economic privilege, and heterosexuality (among other power structures) as by gender. And so, it is not *only* women who must labor to be believed, nor is 'maleness' a politically singular way of moving through the world that comes with believability 'built in'. Our argument here is simply that the *question* of whether, when, and how to believe women who accuse men of sexual misconduct and violence endures in the current conjuncture

as a heated point of cultural anxiety and contention—perhaps even more so amid renewed conversations about the violent potential of ‘white women’s tears’ (Hamad, 2019; Phipps, 2021).

The forthcoming analysis thus necessarily approaches women’s marginality in the economy of believability as complicated rather than deterministic, and heterogenous as womanhood intersects with other dimensions of political subjectivity and experience (like class, as explored in *Unbelievable*, or race, as explored in *I May Destroy You*). By examining how believability is pursued by women protagonists on television, our intention is not to spotlight a condition of unbelievability that is unique to women, but rather to point out the cultural mechanisms through which unbelievability is maintained as well as the forms of labor required for their (potential) unmaking. What does it take to *become believable* from a position of profound marginality—and why does it take so much? These are the questions we carry forward.

## Analytical Approach

We approach *Unbelievable*, *The Morning Show* and *I May Destroy You* not as discreet media artifacts but as part of a broader historical conjuncture, conditioned by the spectacular visibility of networked media and social movements like #MeToo, in which the believability of women has become an object of cultural preoccupation, anxiety, and contention. Stuart Hall described conjunctures as contingent moments of social crisis that emerge through, and can therefore reveal, articulations of economic, cultural, political, and ideological forces in particular historical periods (see Hall et al. 2013 [1978]). “Thinking conjuncturally” (Clarke 2014) means taking up points of contradiction and tension as portals through which to investigate how these various forms of power are compounding and delimiting conditions of possibility for social change. Our argument is that the co-emergence of these three television programs within a very short period of time is analytically significant and politically revealing. The forthcoming analysis will therefore forgo a close analysis of the programs themselves to instead think through the narratives of each together as part of a broader moment of hegemonic instability for white supremacy and patriarchy, emergent not only on television but across popular culture, political discourses, social movements, and corporatized (social) media.

Here, we approach the question of women’s believability by following the narrative arc of one key character from each show. By tracking only one character from each show, our intention is to analyze the types of labor each must perform in pursuit of believability and how these forms of labor play out. Each of these characters—Marie in *Unbelievable*, Hannah in *The Morning Show*, and Arabella in *I May Destroy You*—are women who experience, and then speak about, sexual violence at the hands of men. None of them is the only character in their show to experience and/or speak out about sexual assault. Through this analysis, we hope to demonstrate how these shows, and their core narrative logics, together illuminate and interrogate the specific forces working within the economy of believability, how they work, and whom they work for.

## Unbelievable: doubt and the performance of believability

On 13th September 2019, *Unbelievable* premiered as a new eight-episode miniseries on the popular streaming service Netflix. The show recounts the story of a young woman named Marie who is raped by a masked intruder at her home in Lynwood, Washington, US one night in August 2008. While many women never speak to anyone about incidents of sexual assault—least of all law enforcement—Marie makes the decision the following morning to confide in her friends and former foster parents about the attack and to report it to the local police. At first, Marie’s story is taken seriously – a police investigation is opened, her friends and foster parents are caring and supportive. But then, things start to go wrong. Small details of Marie’s story change between the multiple retellings of the traumatic events of that night demanded of her by police. *Was she tied up, then blindfolded? Or blindfolded, then tied up?* Her opaque behavior in the days

following her assault starts to make her foster parents uneasy. *Why would she call all her friends to tell them about the rape? Why doesn't she seem traumatized? Could she just be looking for attention?* Slowly, slowly, seeds of doubt are planted, until even Marie starts to question whether she really was raped at all. Under the pressure of disbelief (her own and that of those around her, including the police officers to whom she reports), Marie retracts her police statement and is charged with false reporting. She loses her job and her accommodation, her friends shun her, she even contemplates suicide. Meanwhile, a predatory rapist is left unfettered to assault a string of other women in a similar manner over the next three years.

An instant hit for Netflix, *Unbelievable* has become a pop-culture allegory for the #MeToo era. The title 'Unbelievable' is a triple-entendre that reveals three distinct registers of doubt explored through Marie's story. First, it is a label that applies in a literal sense to the character of Marie – that is, to women as doubtful subjects who struggle (often unsuccessfully) to be believed by those from whom we require support, solidarity, and protection. Second, it is a descriptor for the story Marie tells, setting up that the details of Marie's assault – the combination of an armed home invasion and stranger rape, both anomalous, as well as some other specifics – are unusual and sensational in a way that might naturalize doubt as a response. Third, the title '*Unbelievable*' functions as a claim, maybe even an accusation, about the story told by the show – an exclamation of outrage and disbelief about the treatment of Marie and the various intersecting forms of incompetence, negligence and indifference that colluded to deny her justice. The doubt Marie is subjected to and the due process she is denied are positioned as an *unbelievable* case that, in its extraordinariness, spotlights something that is usually much less clear-cut, perhaps less sinister.

Thus, at its core, the show is an excavation of doubt: more specifically, the uphill struggle against doubt that women must prevail through in order to tell stories of victimization at the hands of men. As a close study of doubt, *Unbelievable* reveals believability as a product of labor – a resource to be worked for in a field of power that is structured by patriarchy. More specifically, the series visibilizes the labor of believability that women must perform when they speak out about sexual assault as it manifests in three key registers: physical labor, psychological labor, and the affective labor of performing believability in ways that can garner recognition from people in positions of power.

Much of the series' opening episode is dedicated to exploring the forms physical and psychological labor that Marie must submit to in order to have her assault believed and investigated by law enforcement. In one lingering sequence, the camera cuts back and forth between a medical examiner swabbing, scraping, and applying dye to Marie's genitals and close-up shots of Marie's face and hands. Marie, who was violently assaulted earlier that same day, winces and swallows with each swab; her hands grip each other across her chest and fidget in obvious discomfort. The viewer must endure through this discomfort with Marie, waiting as she waits for it to finally be over; as Marie begins to sit up and the scene seems to be coming to an end, the examiner interjects: "Oh, not yet. Almost done. One more thing." As Marie continues to navigate the bureaucracy of the rape reporting, she is called on to recount every intricate detail of her rape to a stranger – on-duty police officers, detectives, medical examiners – no fewer than eight times across the hour-long episode. Her delivery becomes more and more robotic and detached with each re-telling. However, the episode communicates the accumulative psychological burden of each through the use of flashbacks—violent, chaotic bursts of point-of-view visuals and audio that summon the viewer into Marie's positionality during the rape. These repetitive flashbacks replicate the experience of being triggered—the audience is trained to expect them whenever Marie begins a new re-telling. Marie's bid for the believability through the criminal justice system begins with these acts of physical and emotional endurance; she must submit herself to violation and re-traumatization in order to 'prove' she has been violated and traumatized.

We watch Marie undertake the overlapping forms of physical and psychological labor required of her to report her rape to the police. At first, her ordeal is taken seriously. In the end, however, Marie remains ‘unbelievable’ despite her efforts – her case is eventually thrown out. In the last instance, doubt prevails because Marie fails to successfully perform her experience of rape in a way that those around her will perceive as authentic: that is, to undertake the affective labor of presenting the self as an authentically believable subject in line with the expectations of those in positions of power (Author/Date; Hochschild 1983). Doubt slowly accumulates as Marie fails to perform trauma and injury in ways easily intelligible to those around her – in particular, to the police and to her former foster parents. We see the first flickers of this misrecognition of Marie’s suffering around half-way through the series’ opening episode, when two of her former foster parents, Colleen and Judith, discuss her opaque behavior in the days following the assault: “Honestly, I don’t know how she is. She seemed... I don’t know, fine. Like – like nothing had happened.” Ultimately, Judith reaches out to the two police officers investigating Marie’s case and floats the possibility that Marie has invented the rape for attention. “The whole thing just *felt off*,” she tells them.

In *Unbelievable*, Marie is ultimately disbelieved because she fails to successfully perform a victimhood that feels authentic to those who get to decide whether she is believed or not. Belief, here, is a commodity entirely detached from the substance of what Marie has to say – the truth of her story proves irrelevant until authenticated later in the series by another source. The problem of her (un)believability is not about what she says, but rather, who she is: something that both Marie and her therapist seem aware of by the close of the series:

**Therapist:** This might not be the last time in your life that you’re misunderstood. I just wonder if there’s a way to think about it. About how you might manage this kind of injustice if it were to happen again.

**Marie:** I know I’m supposed to say that, if I had to do it over, I wouldn’t lie. But the truth is, I would lie earlier, and better. I would just figure it out on my own, by myself... So yeah, I guess I’d start with that, Lying. ‘Cause even with good people, even with people you can kinda trust, if the truth is inconvenient... if the truth doesn’t, like, fit... they don’t believe it.

In this scene, there is a shared awareness between Marie and her therapist that “this kind of injustice” may repeat for Marie – that her unbelievability has less to do with the specific circumstances of her rape or other people’s missteps, and more to do with the space she occupies, and will continue to occupy, in the world. For Marie, this potentially lifelong burden of doubt feels insurmountable: it would be easier to seem truthful but actually “lie earlier and better” than to tell the truth and seem like a liar. Ultimately, Marie recognizes that being believed is just too hard, and that ‘fitting’ with what people already believe, or would prefer to believe, is considerably less arduous.

Leigh Gilmore argues that “testimonial truth is indexed not to facts but to power” (2017, 15). This, she suggests, is because we look to testimonial evidence for something “both more and less” than what other forms of evidence can provide: “How the story comports with genre— familiar or dissonant, conforming to expectations or unable to meet them— can determine how much access to credibility and care a witness can achieve” (ibid.). In the context of the #MeToo cultural moment, *Unbelievable* reveals doubt as a burden that is unevenly distributed within the economy of believability and which can only be (potentially) undone through the affective work of performance. In Marie’s story, we see Gilmore’s observations writ large. Watching Marie struggle to have her experience of rape believed by others – to have her story and herself “conform to expectations”, in Gilmore’s terms – is like watching a runner struggle up a hill, with each layer of doubt making the incline a little steeper. As a cultural allegory for a society in which many such struggles against doubt now take place online,

*Unbelievable* warns that visibility and audibility do not automatically beget recognition. Recognition takes work, even for the most highly visible survivor.

### **The Morning Show: denial and the cost of believability**

On 1st November 2019, *The Morning Show* debuted on streaming platform Apple+. While the show was in development before the advent of #MeToo, it was eventually reworked to situate the narrative within that cultural context. The series investigates the ‘behind-the-scenes’ workings of power and influence in the still-patriarchal world of news media/entertainment, but from a creative point-of-view overwhelmingly informed by the experiences of women within that world: all but two of the show’s executive producers, director, and lead actors are women. *The Morning Show* follows a group of colleagues at a leading morning news show as they reckon with the aftermath (both interpersonal and professional) of co-anchor Mitch Kessler being publicly accused of sexual misconduct while working on the show, and subsequently fired. The show is a careful excavation of the culture at the network and how it enabled Mitch to exploit his junior colleagues.

By locating its exploration of sexual misconduct allegations in the context of #MeToo within the world of television news, *The Morning Show* deliberately reflects on the question of truth, and how we arrive at a shared idea of it, at the intersection of two distinct yet interdependent foci of cultural anxiety about the relationship between belief and fact: women, in the context of #MeToo and #BelieveWomen (see Faludi 2020; Lewis 2020; Rachlin 2018; Ransom 2020; Young 2018) and the news media, in the context of the Trump presidency, disinformation and ‘fake news’ (see Abdul-Jabbar 2020; Edgecliffe-Johnson 2018; Stelter 2020; Yee 2020). Running on Apple+ with the tagline “The news is only half the story”, *The Morning Show* gestures to the possibility of truth being similarly partial. It reflexively acknowledges that the ‘news’ is an official and sanctioned version of events that comes to be accepted as authoritatively truthful at the expense of other possible versions. It is significant that, within a self-reflexive commentary on journalism, Mitch is himself a journalist. His role as co-anchor of *The Morning Show* is to define events and their meaning for members of the public—he is a truth-maker, rather than simply a ‘truth-teller’. In the economy of believability, Mitch is therefore dually centered: first, through the authority of his profession, and second, through the authenticity of the ‘good guy’ persona he performs when delivering the news (he is “America’s Dad”, his co-host Alex’s “work husband”, a “good guy”). These are the same resources he deploys to control the definition of events in his personal life – in particular, his sexual encounters with junior staffers.

In *Unbelievable*, it is the very reality of Marie’s rape that is questioned – no one doubts her assault would have been a violent and harmful event had it indeed taken place. However, *The Morning Show* presents the problem of believability the other way around. No one struggles to believe that the women who claim to have been sexually manipulated and exploited by Mitch have in fact had sexual encounters with him. What they doubt is the violence of those encounters, the power dynamics which render them violent, and the consequences of that violence in the lives of those women. In an economy of believability in which Mitch is (at least) triply centered—as a white man, as a wealthy man, and as a man with considerable status and influence at the network where he works—Mitch’s accusers struggle to achieve believability not around the reality of events, but around the reality of their own experiences.

We see this in the storyline of a junior staffer named Hannah, who was sexually coerced and then assaulted by Mitch on a work trip to Las Vegas. In contrast to Mitch, Hannah is a young Black woman at the beginning of her career—as he is triply centered in the economy of believability, she is triply marginalized. Nonetheless, Hannah reports the incident to the president of the network, only to be offered a promotion in exchange for her silence. Realizing that accountability for Mitch is beyond her reach at a network where he wields so much power,



Hannah accepts the promotion. However, she remains traumatized by the incident and by Mitch's failure to recognize the harm he has caused her. As her colleagues gossip about and deride other women who have had 'encounters' with Mitch, Hannah also has little reason to believe she will find belief and solidarity amongst her co-workers.

As *The Morning Show* progresses, it becomes quickly apparent that no one at the network is genuinely surprised to learn about the accusations against Mitch. For Hannah and others, the open secret of Mitch's conduct at *The Morning Show* functions as a form of collective gaslighting. If someone were to speak up about an encounter with Mitch, they would speaking out into workplace culture in which everyone already probably not only knows about the encounter in question but has also decided a priori that it was consensual and unproblematic – if anything, that it reflects badly on the woman involved, rather than on Mitch himself. This is a pre-formed culture of denial in which Mitch's victims can only access believability by meaningfully re-characterizing their encounters with him to bring the 'truth' of them into line with their own experiences of reality. This is a two-bidder model of competition in the economy of believability, in which women must have their version of truth authenticated and believed over and above that of the powerful men they accuse, which has already been placed in cultural circulation.

Susanne Krasmann (2019) reminds us that the force of truth in public discourse is primarily to direct public attention towards moments of revelation—towards what she calls 'the surface' of knowledge, where the world of secret encounters the world of 'the known'. Secrets, she argues, have a discursive function beyond their contents: to inspire curiosity *about* their contents, and in doing so to elevate certain truths to the status of being 'worth knowing'. Open secrets, however—like the open secret of Mitch's philandering and misconduct at *The Morning Show*—perform opposite forms of political work. The practices surrounding Mitch's actions—silence, concealment, appeals to 'privacy', whispers, denial—all echo practices of secret-keeping. However, the series narrative makes clear that the actual contents of this secret exist in 'the world of the obvious' (Krasmann 2019; discussing Simmel 1906). If we take surfacing—the moment of revelation in which secrets cease to be—as the locale of the affective and discursive force of secrecy in public culture, then the implications of framing sexual misconduct, manipulation and exploitation in workplace environments as "open secrets" become obvious. Open secrets do not inspire curiosity about their contents, nor direct attention towards moments of revelation. While obscuring women's experiences of sexual violence from view, open secrecy simultaneously fails to elevate those experiences to the status of being 'worth knowing', as secrecy (at least in its moment of expiration) ought to do. Open secrecy insulates denial because it neutralizes the possibility of disruptive revelation. You can't 'reveal' what is already known.

While *The Morning Show* is a fictional universe, it uses the Mitch/Hannah storyline to critically reflect on how accusations of sexual assault and misconduct surface in the real world, and how denial and open secrecy conspire to re-submerge them. At several points, we see Mitch replicating discourses of male victimhood characteristic of men's rights activism (MRA) which position feminism as a malevolent force (Author/Date; Boyle 2019; Chouliaraki 2020). When Mitch discusses his firing with a friend, it becomes clear that he perceives himself as a victim and views the violence of his conduct at *The Morning Show* as a matter of (unjustified) perception rather than a matter of fact:

**Mitch:** I am as innocent as any straight middle-aged man there is. The only problem is that this is illegal these days.

Mitch positions himself as a martyr to the feminist movement. He laments that the rules of open secrecy have been changed, and that he is now being punished for what "any straight middle-aged man" should be, and usually is, able to get away with in plain sight. The sense of injustice that Mitch feels becomes vitriolic in the penultimate episode of the series, when

Hannah attempts to confront him about the assault. Mitch weaponizes popular feminist discourses of strength and empowerment to try and paint Hannah's sense of injury as a form of feminist hypocrisy:

**Mitch:** No, no, no, no, no! You can't blame me for things that you regret in your past. You are a strong woman. You are empowered.

**Mitch:** I didn't lure you up there. I didn't coerce you. I didn't trick you. We went up there and it fuckin' happened. You're an adult. You could have said something. Hey, you're a smart woman, aren't you? From what I can tell you're pretty intelligent. And a smart woman knows what it means when the lead anchor, who makes 20 fuckin' million dollars a year, is hanging out with the assistant booker.

In the context an economy of believability conditioned by pervasive denial, *The Morning Show* reveals the *costs* of believability for women who accuse powerful men of sexual misconduct and assault. By costs, we do not (only) mean financial payments – though making and pursuing sexual assault allegations do often incur significant financial losses, including potential loss of income and/or costs associated with legal fees and medical bills, among others. Instead, we use 'costs' to describe losses of all kinds—loss of opportunities, of friends and family, of intimate relationships, of employment, of reputation, of dignity, and of joy. Against the widespread assumption that women have something to gain by accusing men of sexual violence—perpetuated in the cultural pushback against #MeToo by MRAs and others—only such (visible, often mediated) spectacles of loss and suffering can authenticate believability. Throughout the series, Mitch repeatedly references the promotion Hannah accepted in from the network in exchange for her silence in order to deny and discredit Hannah's sense of injury—at one point, even implying that she has sexually exploited *him* for professional gain. While Hannah suffers in private, it is only with the visible spectacle of her suicide in the series penultimate episode—an ultimate, existential loss—that denial falters, belief starts to germinate, and her colleagues awaken to the violence of Mitch's conduct at the network.

*The Morning Show* begins with an ostensible moment of surfacing—the first allegation against Mitch is made public. However, the real moment of surfacing is poignantly delayed until the series' end, with the death of Hannah. Reflecting on the 'open secret' of sexual violence, *The Morning Show* reveals two things concurrently: first, that is often the *harm* of sexual violence, not the act itself, that resists belief; and second, that without spectacular loss, there is rarely believability for women—it must always come at a price. Without loss—both lived as suffering *and* performed as spectacle—women and other marginalized subjects stand accused of having 'something to gain' from such accusations and their believability is discredited (Author/Date). In both *The Morning Show* and in broader media culture, women's believability is attached to a kind of moral purity that only the spectacle of suffering and its associated 'politics of pity' can deliver (Chouliaraki 2006). This demand for spectacular suffering emerges directly from the cultural pushback against the #MeToo moment, which has alleged that women now somehow wield disproportionate and inappropriate power over men in the economy of believability.

## **I May Destroy You: entrepreneurialism and the value of believability**

Of the three programs we look at in this article, *I May Destroy You* is the most intentional in reflecting on what the visibilizing force of the #MeToo moment has and has not done to advance the place of women who have experienced sexual assault in economy of believability. Written, co-directed and starring Michaela Coel, the show follows a London-based Black British writer named Arabella as she grapples with the aftermath of a drug facilitated sexual assault, of which she has only patchy and evasive memories. Having previously found fame as a social

commentator on Twitter and self-publishing a first book titled ‘Chronicles of a Fed-Up Millennial’ – which the show positions as having been particularly popular with other young Black women in the UK – we meet Arabella as she is pushing to finish the draft of her follow-up book which, in contrast to the first, has been commissioned by the prestigious publisher Henny House (headed by Susie Henny). She is clearly positioned as a potentially successful young entrepreneur who has her finger on the pulse of the various issues that characterize and shape the lives of millennials. Her difficulty in finishing her second project also speaks to the precarity of self-entrepreneurship, reminding viewers that there are no social or care networks within the contemporary entrepreneurial economy (Littler 2017; The Care Collective 2020). Arabella’s struggle to turn in a finished manuscript is a narrative thread that weaves through all the episodes of *I May Destroy You*, intertwining the chronological progression of the series’ main narrative (Arabella’s assault and its psychological aftermath) with a mounting sense of professional stress and financial precarity.

The struggle to find a narrative for her second book is juxtaposed with Arabella’s struggle to not only remember what happened the night of her assault, but also to deal with the trauma of that memory. These tightly bound struggles manifest in yet another kind of labor, wherein Arabella must navigate her new social and economic positioning as a sexual assault survivor. In Arabella’s recovery, financial survival takes priority over both psychological wellbeing and creative fulfilment. However, within a broader cultural context of #MeToo and a heightened public awareness of the ubiquity of rape culture, she also finds that her status as a sexual assault survivor is commodified and positioned as marketable. When it comes to rape survival as a marketable asset, Arabella’s efforts to secure visibility and recognition around her experience are welcomed and engaged with by her publisher: when Arabella talks to Susie Henny about her assault, Henny’s response is “Rape! Fantastic!” However, a stark contrast is established between Henny House’s embrace of Arabella’s experience of rape when it might help them generate profit through the “#MeToo market” and their failure to recognize the assault as part of Arabella’s lived reality in ways she would find meaningful or helpful – for example, by giving her another advance on her book. Instead, Henny entertains the possibility of Arabella writing a follow-up book about her rape (“I want to hear that story!”) but ultimately cancels her contract when she fails to efficiently produce the manuscript for the book she already has under contract. Here, the question of believability takes yet another turn: Arabella is believed about her sexual assault, but this belief is based on the marketability of the topic, not on recognition of her personal trauma or the structural contexts of sexual violence.

As a precarious subject in a marketplace conditioned by neoliberal economics and whiteness, Arabella finds that there is limited space for her assault and its effect on her to be accommodated in the fragile position she occupies as a young, Black, female creative. She is believed<sup>4</sup>, but belief doesn’t do anything for her. In the absence of the kinds of recognition that she feels would make a difference in her life – an advance from her publisher, compassion from the man she’s dating, or the apprehension of the man who raped her – Arabella pursues recognition entrepreneurially through the mediated visibility of social networks and the #MeToo movement. Through social media, Arabella secures a visibility that helps her accrue forms of recognition that can accommodate, rather than disrupt, the capitalist logics that she must operate within in order to survive financially – specifically, by advancing her brand as a social media influencer. As Gray (2013) comments, “The object of recognition is the self-crafting entrepreneurial subject whose racial difference is the source of brand value celebrated and marketed as diversity; a subject whose very visibility and recognition at the level of representation affirms a freedom realized by applying a market calculus to social relations.” (p. 771) The recognition Arabella is afforded through the mediated visibility of her sexual assault survivorship functions in a similar way: it is her assault that becomes the source of her brand value. As a result, it too becomes subject to the application of “a market calculus to social relations,” and in order for her visibility to continue Arabella must accommodate this market

calculus, largely through the use of social media. Her labor, that is, is entrepreneurial labor that works to brand and market experiences of sexual violence.

By speaking about her experiences of sexual assault online, Arabella rallies encouragement, sympathy, adoration and care through the spectacular hypervisibility of networked social media. However, the series also reflects on the limitations of the kind of recognition that Arabella can secure from strangers online, both in terms of how much comfort it can offer and whether it can meaningfully contribute to the work of political transformation, and thus the pursuit of justice. Arabella gains recognition through the online #MeToo movement only by performing the ‘right’ kinds of survivorhood, often to the betrayal of her actual emotional state and psychological wellbeing. In one scene, we see Arabella sobbing into her hands, only to abruptly snap her head up and take a series of selfies with her fist raised, looking strong and defiant rather than broken and sad. In its reliance on the visibility of social media, #MeToo incites the ‘resilient’ selfie. In turn, the selfie reveals the limited ways in which #MeToo can meaningfully destabilize the forces that expose women to sexual assault in the first place or improve the material realities of those who’ve lived through such violence. #MeToo is implied as a market of visibility regulated by power structures and thus limited in the forms of recognition it can support. In another telling scene, Arabella livestreams about rape culture while walking home: comments like ‘show breasts’, ‘you need fucking therapy’, and ‘am I supposed to give a fuck?’ are littered through messages of support (‘I love you!’) and dependency (‘If it wasn’t for you I would have killed myself’).

For women like Arabella, the value of believability is not self-evident nor self-actualizing. Belief has to actually *do* something in the world to have power, and for women, people of color of all genders, queer people, sex workers and other marginalized subjects, belief often does far too little. Even when accepted as truth, the response to accusations of sexual victimization is too often—so what? Despite the new visibility of sexual violence that the #MeToo moment has delivered, a deficit of meaningful care endures. The forms of compassion and ‘support’ that can be accessed through the mediated #MeToo movement often appear hollow and insubstantial when held up against the material pressures that often bear down on women who’ve lived through sexual violence – among them, the specter of unemployment (Loya 2015), strained access to public services (Anderson and Overby 2020; Postmus et al. 2009; Ullman and Townsend 2007), and costs associated with medical testing and care (Andrews 2019; Tennessee et al. 2017). The value of belief is determined by what it can actually accrue for the person who has been victimized – though Arabella’s publishers don’t doubt or deny that Arabella has been raped, she nonetheless faces a professional crisis and mounting debt.

Arabella responds to the unstable value of her own believability by working entrepreneurially – in ways perhaps not dissimilar so how she’s built her writing career – to try and secure the more substantial forms of care and recognition. Entrepreneurialism, in Arabella’s case, is about finding ways to create value around belief where there was none before. Her approach is improvisational, experimental and reactive – always responding to situations as they are thrown in her path by powerful institutions and individuals, with little power to actually control those situations in the first place. This sense of experimentation is most poetically captured in the final episode of the series, in which Arabella crafts three different possible resolutions to her own story, trying on each one in turn to see how she might be affected by each and how closely those affects might approximate a sense of justice.

## **Conclusion: media and the economy of believability**

The mediated economy of believability reveals the relationship between believability and gendered and racialized subjectivity as particularly crucial in allegations of sexual assault. Often, the only way to instil doubt in a speaker’s claim is to instil doubt in the speaker herself—to foreground a questionable subjectivity in order to background the possibility of authoritative

speech. This is because what is being denied, often, is not the event itself but the speaker's characterization of it. Women are positioned within the economy of believability differently, and what we've attempted to show here is the varied work involved in becoming believable from a position of marginality.

In this sense, we think it is important to consider what these three programs do jointly, rather than simply analyzing them as discrete entities. The narratives of Marie, Hannah, and Arabella move from a preoccupation with truthfulness, where the truth is positioned as something pristine to be "found" or discovered, to one of believability. This shift is important because believability, unlike truth, highlights the dependency of women on the judgment of others. The female characters in these programs bust the popular feminist, neoliberal myth of self-reliance, confidence, resilience—it turns out, recognition of the truth about one's experience is not a secret to be revealed, nor is it something that will emerge if only one labors enough. The "truth" of sexual violence is something structural and normalized, not only individualized. The discourse of believability is exposed in these shows, which in turn exposes the popular feminist conceit that if one merely works hard enough, she—and the truth—will persevere and prevail (Rottenberg, 2018; Gill and Orgad, 2016; Littler, 2017).

In *Unbelievable*, Marie is positioned as doubtful by default because she is a young, working-class woman with a history of abuse and trauma. However, Marie is also white and cisgender. The sense of de facto doubtfulness she labors under would extend even more perniciously to women of color, trans women and sex workers, all of whom are so marginalized within the economy of believability that almost no amount of labor can secure access to belief and recognition. In *The Morning Show*, on the other hand, when Hannah and others at The Morning Show speak out about their experiences of sexual coercion and assault, they have to bid for believability against the man they accuse. Corroborating evidence that might 'objectively' tip the scales of belief in their favor—signs of physical injury, DNA traces and other forms of 'hard evidence'—is notoriously hard to provide. And so, it becomes 'he said, she said'—a zero-sum calculation of veracity in which women as doubtful subjects par excellence are unlikely to ever come out on top. The subjective grounding of this contest is revealed; often, the only referent available for statements which bid for belief within it are the subjects who speak them. Finally, in *I May Destroy You*, believability is rendered in yet a different way, wherein the commodification of #MeToo encourages entrepreneurialism and the "market for sexual violence." As we argued, Arabella's assaults (she is assaulted twice in the course of the series) are widely believed, but the basis of that belief is not her own personal trauma, nor the idea that her assault evidences structural pattern within white supremacist patriarchal culture. Rather, the basis of her believability is the marketability of survivorship in a particular cultural and economic climate.

If there is a single thematic fulcrum that connects our analysis of the labor of believability across these three programs, it is futility. Each program reflects not only on the varied forms of work women must engage in in order to attach believability to allegations of sexual assault, but more bleakly, the likely failure of the endeavour. Taken together, these programs reveal the enduring futility of speaking out about sexual assault in a broader conjunctural moment framed by the #MeToo movement and its anxious and angry cultural backlashes. This point is most starkly communicated in the endings of each show, which make explicit the varied mechanisms that work to suture and contain believability. Marie says that if she were to experience her trauma again, she would "lie better." Denied recognition by Mitch, Hannah suffers an ultimate and existential loss—but even then, her believability remains in question. And in *I May Destroy You*, Arabella offers three different endings to her story—violent revenge, forgiveness, and transformation—all of which are positioned ambivalently vis-à-vis the question of justice. Again, it is by thinking through these programs, together with their overlaps and contradictions, that a more optimistic outlook starts to take form: that through the visibilization and popularization of the labor of believability on television, the truthfulness of women might not be so futile after all.

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<sup>1</sup> *Unbelievable* is based on a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative piece by ProPublica journalist T. Christian Miller and The Marshall Project journalist Ken Armstrong titled 'An Unbelievable Story of Rape' (2015).

<sup>2</sup> The show protagonists we follow in this paper are all implicitly positioned as cisgender and straight. However, when we speak of the marginal position of women in the economy of believability, we speak of all women, including queer women and trans women whom heteropatriarchy renders even more marginal.

<sup>3</sup> 'Karen' is a term popularized on social media to describe white women who endanger the lives and livelihoods of Black people by calling the authorities on them for minor or non-existent reasons (see Williams, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> We should add here that the belief, recognition, and solidarity that Arabella is shown by her close friends is at the forefront of the series' narrative and appears as incredibly valuable and important to her at an individual level. When we suggest that belief 'doesn't do anything' for Arabella, we refer to the belief that garners from people in positions of power and the forms of precarity and injustice that continue to accumulate in Arabella's life despite this belief.