Disengage, Dismantle, Design: Three Strategies for Building Feminist Media Infrastructures

Rachel O'Neill, LSE

Believability covers a wide terrain in its analysis of a mediated economy of believability, one forged through gendered and racialised hierarchies, and constituted by a media landscape in which the pursuit of profit does not simply permit but rather promotes polarisation. Its authors define believability as the "point at which we suspend doubt" (198), the threshold for which moves in accordance with power. Moreover, believability is never assured, but must be continuously performed in ways deemed convincing. As such, it takes work – emotional, psychological, physical – and almost always exacts its own price.

As good cultural studies scholars, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kat Higgins incisively question the 'post' of 'post-truth', asking for whom, exactly, does this 'post' presently pertain, not least given that some subjects – women, people of colour – have long been regarded as past the post in their bid to be taken seriously as truth-tellers. Their analysis offers new conceptual language for thinking about the cultural mediation of sexual violence in the current conjuncture. For example, the 'digitisation of doubt' alerts us to the ways in which the very concept of evidence – what counts as proof of an event or, just as crucially, proof of the meaning of that event – is being remade by digital culture. The risk here is that sexual violence may become "an always-unconfirmable post-truth condition", "permanently irresolvable as a matter of fact" (143).

The book irrefutably demonstrates how, for all the talk of democratisation, networked communications propagate denial and dismissal. As commercial organisations, media corporations have a vested interest in stoking controversy and contention when it comes to sexual violence, as with anything else. Engagement is engagement is engagement, regardless of how wrongheaded or malicious it might be. For major media platforms, it does not matter whether the likes, clicks and shares their content generates is sincere or salacious. Thus if with her last book Banet-Weiser (2018) warned us that *visibility* does not equate to and cannot in itself deliver gender justice, with this book, she and Higgins demonstrate that *virality* does not offer or ensure sexual justice.

We can see this all too clearly in the case of #MeToo, which constructs disclosure as a kind of end point, but which ultimately delivers 'no response', to borrow a phrasing from Jodi Dean's (2005) abidingly salient analysis of communicative capitalism. Banet-Weiser and Higgins note the irony whereby much of the discourse about #MeToo is not about sexual violence at all, but is instead about #MeToo itself. And so an opportunity to grapple with the politics of sexual violence becomes a demand to consider the politics of public accusation. I am sure that for many feminists this trajectory feels familiar, overlaid as it is with the silent addendum: *what about him?*

It is commonplace for people to remark that work such as this is, in a word, 'depressing'. I know this in part because it's something that has been said of my own work, and also because while presenting alongside Sarah Banet-Weiser in the past several audience members prefaced their questions to us with comments about how bleak it all seemed. Perhaps I am revealing something about my own constitution to say that I didn't find this book dispiriting; to the contrary, I found it a resolutely hopeful book, optimistic even.

A strong undercurrent of this work is the belief that media culture is a space of possibility for feminists and for feminisms. As such, a crucial task for those organising around sexual justice today is to transform the current economy of believability "in ways that might be more conducive to sexual justice" (116). By

understanding how believability works, we might gain some insight into how it might work otherwise. In a similar vein, if we can understand what makes doubt, we might be able to figure out what might unmake it.

At all times, Banet-Weiser and Higgins are clear that the 'truth' will not set us free (which is not to say that it won't piss us off – Chapter 2 definitely pissed me off). Instead, it is to consider how a different kind of economy might create pathways towards gender and sexual liberation. A central question, then, is how media might "help us distribute believability more equitably" (194). Recognising the prevalence of sexual violence – a fact as extraordinary as it is, sadly, ordinary – this question entails reckoning with the "deep plausibility of all stories of sexual harms" (194). With this, *Believability* opens out important horizons for feminist analysis as well as activism.

There are, I think, at least three possible pathways this work might inspire us to pursue. The first of these is to *disengage*. By this I mean that we might consider how to direct our energies away from the platforms on which we have, perhaps without realising it, become dependent. This could involve, for instance, moving our activism, or certain facets of our activism, offline. When I pose this prospect to students in a course on 'Mediated Feminisms' I teach on at LSE, many find it a difficult if not impossible to entertain the idea, invested as they are in the affordances online spaces provide for the creation of feminist counter-publics, digilantism and the like. And yet, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins make clear, it is ultimately platforms – themselves patriarchal networks (Little & Winch, 2021) – which have the most to gain "from keeping public accusations as contentious as possible" (198).

The strategies and spaces feminists eek out on social media are not only never assured; they actually lend themselves to surveillance and invasion (Megarry, 2017). (I can't but think of Lorde's (1984) 'master's tools' analogy here). So we have the option: disengage and disconnect, especially from the platforms that have come to dominant our daily existence, so we might engage and connect more securely elsewhere. This does not necessarily mean giving up digital tools altogether; we could make greater use of those that have been specifically built for liberatory struggles: riseup.net and LittleSis.org are great examples.

My second proposition is to *dismantle.* Many of the platforms that many of us engage with on a day-to-day basis can feel somehow inevitable. Even as the popularity of any given platform may wax and wane – Facebook being only the most obvious Global North example, with the recently re-branded X looking set to follow suit – they nevertheless remain imminent, an unfortunate but inescapable fact of life, like death and taxes (though admittedly taxes have proven to be all too escapable for the founders of Silicon Valley behemoths, several of whom appear bent on achieving immortality to boot). And yet, many of these corporations have only existed for the past twenty years or so; some even fewer.

A range of political actors have by now realised that it is beyond time to break up these monopolies, and in so doing turn their own logic back on them; Mark Zuckerberg is not the only one who can 'move fast, break things'. For this we need a wide range of strategies, including anti-monopoly laws and other regulatory frameworks, some of which would need to be supranational while at the same time informed by local conditions and concerns. Feminists needn't reinvent the wheel on this one, but could throw our energies behind existing initiatives; in the UK, this would most certainly include the excellent work being done by the Media Reform Coalition.

Finally: *design.* To my mind this is the most exciting point of departure *Believability* suggests, one that moves with the optimism its authors evince towards media and media culture. As with any other kind of infrastructure, platforms are built and made – and so, could be built and made differently. Where could

we look to for inspiration in pursuing such a project, what blueprints do we have? There is, of course, a long lineage of feminist media, from zines and publishing houses to radio shows and film. But another starting point lies in the work of those dealing with the built environment, such as the all-women collective Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative, active in London throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Matrix grew out of the New Architecture Movement, which had trade unionism at its core but was nevertheless fraught with sexism – as leftist spaces have been historically and too often remain today – such that a number of women decided to set up on their own. Laying out their purpose and principles in the 1984 publication *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment*, the Co-operative wrote: "Buildings do not control our lives. They reflect the dominant values in our society – ideas about women, about our 'proper place', about what is public activity, about which things should be kept separate and which to put together" (1984: 9–10).

The cover of *Making Space* features a photograph of a young woman – one of Matrix's founders, architect Anne Thorne – carrying a pram with a baby in it up a long and unforgiving concrete staircase, the wall behind her proclaiming 'rat race recs' in cursive graffiti scrawl. This is a resonant image for me, as I see women in the building I live in in East London undertake the same task on a daily basis; indeed, often several times a day, with additional small children and shopping bags in tow. My local overground station also lacks any kind of lift facility, so again this is something I see here routinely.

Obviously, building media is not the same as building buildings. And yet, I think some of the same principles may pertain. Crucially, our efforts must begin from the perspectives and experiences of those who will actually *use* this infrastructure. Had they been actively consulted or positioned as collaborators, women in my building would never have agreed to the staircases we now have going in, and certainly not without reliable lift access provided alongside. As Matrix members knew, process is as important as product, precisely because it is the process that delivers the product. The Co-op's work also encourages us to be bold in our ambitions, to believe that it is possible to configure anew the infrastructure – environmental, digital – that shapes our everyday lives.

Ultimately, in mobilising any or all of these tactics – *disengage, dismantle, design* – our purpose as feminist academics and activists is to not simply redistribute believability – always already after the fact, once violence has been perpetrated – but, instead, to transform the conditions that enable sexual violence in the first place. This is my key takeaway from the book, and I commend the authors for it.

References

Banet-Weiser, Sarah (2018) *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny.* London: Duke University Press.

Dean, Jodi (2005) 'Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics'. *Cultural Politics* 1(1): 51-74.

Little, Ben and Alison Winch (2021) *The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism: Celebrity Tech Founders and Networks of Power.* Basingstoke: Routledge.

Lorde, Audre (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.

Matrix (1984) *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment.* London: Pluto.

Megarry, Jessica (2017) 'Under the Watchful Eyes of Men: Theorising the Implications of Male Surveillance Practices for Feminist Activism on Social Media'. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(6): 1070-1085.