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An economy of believability

The economy of believability is the critical and analytical heuristic that frames our exploration of gendered and racialized struggles for believability through media culture in this book. In the twenty-first century, media representations of sexual violence are reinforced by the heightened visibility of popular feminism, so that popular feminist interventions have been increasingly expressed through the media (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018; Orgad and Gill, 2022). Writing about popular feminism and popular misogyny, Banet-Weiser (2018) 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 shifted. For example, when there are more media representations of people of color but there are simultaneously more explicit acts of racism in everyday life, what does increased visibility mean? Gray thus asks whether a “desire for recognition” supplants a structural change with recognition for an individual positionality.

The economy of visibility manifests in spectacular ways in the #MeToo global movement. Relying on the circuits of visibility 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. 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. Social change is often sacrificed at the altar of visibility, producing more and more visibility and increasingly narrowing the discourses of that visibility in the process (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Boyle, 2019; Phipps, 2020). And, the economy of visibility indicates not only the visibility of popular feminism, but also involves reactions to this feminism, in the form of a networked, popular misogyny. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, popular feminism and popular misogyny mirror each other, but in the sense of a “funhouse mirror,” where feminist messages and practices are transformed, distorted, and adapted to serve misogynistic purposes. It is this kind of exchange, the positioning of users as individual consumers on media, and the wide circulation of popular feminism and popular misogyny on corporately owned media platforms, that shapes the *economy* of visibility.

The social, cultural, and technological developments of the last decade 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 to what end? Visibility of feminism has incurred a misogynistic reaction and a pushback against #MeToo 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. The production of doubt is thus closely tied to popular misogyny; in yet another iteration of the “funhouse mirror,” men become victims here of the apparent lack of due process, the targets of witch hunts. 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.

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 and epistemic continuum within which subjects are unevenly positioned to access and harness believability in struggles over truth and fact 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 is 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 and they often overlap) (see Fricker, 2007).

Thus, an economy of believability encompasses not only representations of sexual violence, but also the labor that

is required to *become believable*, as well as the resources of believability that are distributed unequally depending on cultural position and identity. This labor, and these resources, shape our twin-pronged definition of believability, as both performance (labor) and subjectivity (resources). While remaining attuned to the significance of technological and cultural forces in the negotiation of believability through media, here we foreground the historical to offer a critical account of the significance of mediated communication for the (re)negotiation of truth and thus believability – especially as they relate to sexual violence – through a grounded analysis of a wide variety of media products including films, television, digital media platforms, popular music, apps, wearable tech, podcasts, journalistic articles and broadcasts, advertisements, and memes.

More specifically, we have organized this book according to what we identify as different yet related aspects of the economy of believability. Each of these aspects engages with both the performance and the subjectivity of believability, though with varied emphases. Investigating media productions and campaigns and the market for anti-sexual violence, the first two chapters analyze the labor and commodities that form part of the more material base of the economy of believability. The last two chapters engage more with the workings of this economy, investigating the ambivalent ways that digital culture has authorized a shifted definition and circulation of doubt in the context of sexual violence and subsequently the competitive forces that are at play in and animate the terms of who is believed and why. Media, broadly speaking, is the context for the economy of believability; we see media as not merely a system of representation, or a market, but also as the infrastructure and set of technologies where believability is struggled over and negotiated. We thus understand the significance of digital media primarily in cultural terms, casting media as spaces of meaningful struggle within which

the possibility of “truthful speech” is pursued through contests over authenticity, recognition, and belief.

Throughout all of the chapters, we analyze various aspects of digital culture in the contemporary moment. A crucial context in the contemporary economy of believability is social media, including #MeToo and other feminist hashtag activism that encourages a public visibility of sexual violence. Here, we explore not only discourses about the so-called “trials by media” these movements have entailed, but also what actually *happens* in and through such trials. We thus develop a clearer view of how believability does (or does not) flow differently in the mediated court of popular opinion, and so how media does (or does not) afford new opportunities for authority and recognition to women and other marginalized subjects.

In contrast to (utopian and dystopian) narratives of political transformation, we are somewhat less convinced about the extent to which #MeToo – and the structural and cultural changes that both germinated the movement and frame its cultural aftermath – really have implied fundamental shifts in the economy of believability as it relates to sexual violence. Rather than digital media offering a kind of unfettered visibility for all, *specific* messages and practices become popular and more visible (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As Nalanthi Hewa (2020) points out, the framing of sexual assault stories is not about when women come forward on digital platforms, but what happens to their stories once they do. However, the metaphor of digital spaces as “public” remains a powerful force, despite copious evidence about tech companies profiting on specific users’ data, shadow banning, and the racism and sexism “baked” into algorithms (Are, 2020; Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Jackson et al., 2020). As Hewa argues:

The metaphor of the public space is inadequate in describing the ways that the internet and its platforms conceal as much (or as little) as they reveal. The internet is large yet, simultaneously,

it narrows the scope of acceptable and believable stories of sexual violence survivorship. The digital public *stage* – one marked by visibility and the spotlight rather than the sense of openness that the metaphor of “public space” imparts – is not one that welcomes all people and all stories, even as it archives both too much and too little. (2020, p. 4)

The material conditions of digital technology thus shape the kinds of stories of sexual assault that circulate with visibility. #MeToo, as a digital movement (rather than Tarana Burke’s more community-based movement), gains enormous visibility when a high-profile celebrity sends the tweet (Joyrich, 2019; Boyle, 2019; and others). Many hashtags that promote visibility of sexual violence fade into obscurity within a few days (Jackson et al., 2020). Within an economy of visibility, the corporations behind digital media like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and so on, are designed for entertainment and profit, so the stories of sexual violence that best fit within these conditions are the ones that get told and heard (Hewa, 2020; Serisier, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Again, believability is about performance as much as it is about subjectivity: how well does a person perform victimhood? Is she convincing enough? What this means is that believability depends on not only who tells the story, but on how convincingly they tell it: “When survivors are exhorted to ‘go public,’ what they are demanded to make public is not simply their experience of violence or trauma but their own selfhood and believability” (Hewa, 2020). As always, the political potential of visibility is contingent in recognition. Seeing is not, in fact, believing.

Specifically, we position believability as an analytic to theorize how and in what ways sexual violence circulates on digital media platforms. Mythologies about the relative openness of digital media platforms, fueled by technological optimism about broad access and availability, can work to *doubt* women’s believability rather than affirm it. As many

scholars have pointed out, the ideology that “everyone” has a voice on digital media, a voice that will be heard and seen, clearly mobilizes utopian visions of how technology can free us (see Couldry, 2010; Kay, 2020). Some feminist thinkers have also embraced this idea, positioning #MeToo as “consciousness raising,” highlighting the publicity of the stories as key to their political function (MacKinnon, 2019). Throughout this book, the utopic framing of digital spaces as open and transparent works as a double movement for victims of sexual violence: women have to tell the stories convincingly enough for digital media to circulate it. And then, also because of the utopic framing of digital space, and because of the way that women are routinely not believed in cases of sexual violence, digital spaces themselves become a form of evidence that violence occurred: “Survivors who *lack* evidence in the form of texts, chat logs, or emails may equally be accused of lying” (Hewa, 2020, p. 4). The affordances of digital media, in other words, also suggest that if women do not avail themselves of these affordances – the “receipts” in the form of digital traces – they will be less believable, not more. As we demonstrate across the chapters, the visibility of digital media platforms – the promise that these platforms are public – means that those victims of sexual assault with access to these spaces are called upon to use them to prove their experiences and negotiate their believability. Each of the chapters takes on a different aspect of how the subjectivity and performance of believability is expressed within a media context.

In Chapter 1, we examine how mediated narratives of sexual violence and survivorship represent the kind of labor necessary for women to be believed. For example, through narrative arcs and representations, traditional media such as film and television offer stories of redemption, revenge, and, occasionally, futility within the context of sexual violence. The context of #MeToo was quickly capitalized on by media outlets, which incorporated not only the movement but the broader

topic of sexual assault and harassment into programming. Thus, we start our analysis by examining the representational *construction* of believability – especially, a believable feminine subject – across an emerging genre of media texts and productions that we call #MeToo media. This includes a growing number of television texts (both episodes and series) that foreground stories about sexual violence – what Kornfield and Jones (2021) call “#MeToo on TV” – as well as social media campaigns and journalistic reporting across a variety of genres and formats. More than simply representations that lend the problem of sexual violence broad visibility, we propose that such texts are also principally representations of *believability labor*, the kinds of work women and other marginalized subjects must perform in order to try and access what is considered truthful speech through an economy of believability that positions them as inherently doubtful. Framing these media artifacts and the labor of believability is a dynamic push-and-pull between disclosure and nondisclosure, the former of which has been emphasized as a frontier for sexual justice by the #MeToo movement and the latter of which helps to ensure that mediated struggles for belief often never even take place.

While the media artifacts discussed in Chapter 1 are surely part of a broader media economy, circulated on multiple media platforms that are designed for profit, in Chapter 2 we more literally analyze the *commodification* of believability struggles. This includes a market for anti-sexual violence products and services that has boomed with the spectacular visibility of #MeToo and its associated movements. Rather than seeing the unbelievability of women’s testimonies as a *cultural* and *political* problem, the anti-sexual violence market – much like mainstream responses to the problems of mis/disinformation and post-truth – positions it as a technological, consumerist one. Looking at apps and wearable tech, we call into question a market that capitalizes on women’s fear while implicitly

promising that if only women can furnish “more” and “better” evidence of their experiences of sexual violence and harm, the economy of believability will somehow be reconfigured in their favor. In eschewing the politics of belief and its relationship to the horizon of sexual justice, these evidentiary technologies *re-enshrine* the idea that women’s testimonies cannot and should not, on their own, count as evidence of sexual harms. They are, in other words, responses to the unbelievability of women that nonetheless leave that unbelievability intact as a source of market value.

The market for anti-sexual violence thus revolves around a presumption of doubt; the promise of technologies is that they can apparently alleviate doubt. Indeed, backlashes against the #MeToo movement tend to claim that the affordances of digital technologies and platforms and the new hypervisibility of sexual violence in media culture are redistributing the “benefit of the doubt” away from men and toward women. However, as we discuss in Chapter 3, these backlashes position this as a rise of “mob justice” in which the rational pursuit of truth as it relates to sexual violence has been abandoned and men find themselves newly and uniquely vulnerable to the threats of doubt and disbelief. In this chapter, we commence our analyses of “real-world” struggles for believability as they relate to experiences of sexual violence, especially those involving high-profile accused men which garner particular mediated visibility and public attention. Here, we approach the struggle for believability as a fundamentally *competitive* struggle, or a *contest*, between belief and doubt and between accusation and denial. Through the lens of high-profile accusations, such as those against former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, former Australian attorney general Christian Porter, and the hypermediated trial involving Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, we examine the ambivalent status of “doubt” as both a benefit (to powerful men) and a burden (to those they harm) in the economy of believability. In response

to the all-too-often-heard outcry that public accusations of sexual violence – especially, those circulated on social media or in the press – represent a kind of “mob justice” or “trial by media” that both eschews and subverts criminal justice as the “rightful” domain for the arbitration of such claims, we explore the ambivalent ways that doubt is (and is not) being reconfigured in its political uses through digital media, and with what consequences for the gender and racial politics of sexual violence. In the context of what we call “the digitization of doubt,” we find that doubt flows differently in public allegations that are negotiated in media environments and using new forms of evidence that digital technologies afford.

Finally, Chapter 4 synthesizes many of the insights from the previous chapters to explicate what we call “conditional believability.” All (un)believability is *conditional*, we propose, because it is grounded in questions of subjectivity – not just of what we believe, but also of *who* we believe. In this sense, access to being believed (or failure to access it) is deeply conditioned by gender and race, but also by other contextual factors, including wealth, fame, public reputation, and the compatibility (both of subjectivity and of the performance of believability) with the commercial logics of media producers and platforms. Through cases such as those of former Stanford student Brock Turner, former Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, the “Central Park Karen” Amy Cooper, and prolific recording artist and serial abuser R. Kelly, we map how public contests over the “truth” of sexual violence often play out as struggles over a believability that is, first and foremost, affectively *felt* rather than empirically arbitrated by evidence. More specifically, we consider how contests for believability often manifest as struggles over victimhood. While powerful white men are increasingly taking up the mantle of victimhood as their own to cast doubt on those who accuse them, victimhood has also been historically weaponized by white women to ensure they prevail in believability struggles against people

of color – most lethally, when accusing Black men of sexual violence and harms.

Believability adds to the growing chorus of feminist work on #MeToo and its continuing aftermath. But, as we argue throughout this book, believability is not only about #MeToo; it is not only a question of who we believe and why. Rather, we argue that believability needs to be understood as not only *subjectivity*, but also *performance* – and more importantly, how media help negotiate the relationship between the two. In this way, we understand media culture – and the mediated economy of believability in particular – as not only a key context for shoring up dominant understandings and longstanding stereotypes about sexual violence, but also as a space of possibility. By sketching how this space works now, we hope to imagine how it might work differently.