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A roundtable discussion of Kathryn Claire Higgins and Sarah Banet-Weiser's *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media and the Politics of Doubt*

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Introduction

Kathryn Claire Higgins and Sarah Banet-Weiser

In May 2023, writer E. Jean Carroll prevailed in a Manhattan courtroom, and former US President Donald Trump was at last found liable for sexual abuse in a court of law. The jury heard that, in the mid-1990s, Donald Trump followed Carroll into a cubicle of the changing room in the upscale department store Bergdorf's. Once she was cornered inside, they heard, he pinned her against the wall, tore at her clothes, and forcibly penetrated her. Immediately after the attack, Carroll told a couple of close friends about what had happened, but otherwise stayed silent; public disbelief and Trump's punitive impulses both seemed far too assured to risk speaking out. It wasn't until May 2022, with the passing of the Adult Survivors Act in New York, that a window of opportunity opened: survivors of historical sexual abuse were permitted to bring civil lawsuits against perpetrators for assaults that would have otherwise been precluded under the state's statute of limitations (Rodriguez, 2023). Carroll decided to break her silence, and Trump predictably smeared her as a liar and a grifter – as simply another unoriginal beat in the left's / the liberal media's / the Democratic Party's (take your pick) long conspiracy against him and the version of 'the American people' he represents. Yet, this wasn't the story that the jury in Carroll's case found most believable. Instead, they decided that her story was, on the balance of available evidence, more likely to be true than not – more deserving of belief than doubt. Trump was found liable for sexual abuse

and defamation. Speaking to reporters afterwards about the significance of the verdict, Carroll said: 'Now, the world knows the truth'.

It is starting from the mutability of that word, 'truth', and from the difficulty we as feminist scholars feel in trying to share Carroll's optimism about the verdict, that we want to open our introduction to this special section. Why was so very much demanded of Carroll simply to confirm what has always been in plain sight: in this case, that Donald Trump is an abuser of women? The evidence of this truth has never been scarce – which is to say, the doubt of it has never been based on a lack of evidence ([Higgins, 2023](#)). Precisely what kind of 'truth', then, was Carroll referring to – and who among us who did not know it before the trial can truly say they know it now? At what point does an uncertainty about truth become a fig leaf for a much simpler lack of care – care about what that truth has to tell us about the world and about how women, queer people and other marginalised subjects live their lives within it?

In 2017, the viral #MeToo movement unleashed a torrent of stories about sexual harassment, assault and abuse into our digital public sphere. Through the sheer visibility of the movement, many hoped we might be witnessing a possible new redistribution of the 'benefit of the doubt' as it relates to sexual violence, away from powerful men in positions of institutional authority who have enjoyed that benefit as their historical prerogative, and towards those over whom their social and economic power is wielded. Yet, this historical moment coincided with another: one marked by discourses of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' and characterised by growing anxiety about the status of truth in public culture. Reflecting this double movement, 'feminism' was named Word of the Year by Merriam Webster in 2017, newly amplified by #MeToo and other movements, whilst just one year earlier, the 2016 Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year was 'post-truth'.

The overlap between these two historical phenomena – the so-called crisis of post-truth on the one hand, and the emergence of #MeToo as a truth-telling movement on the other – is not often remarked upon. However, in *Believability* ([Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023](#)), we take it to be deeply significant. The book tries to think conjuncturally about a mediated cultural terrain in which our public conversations about sexual violence and other gendered abuses of power (which #MeToo helped provoke) have been steadily and strategically displaced by an anxious preoccupation with the politics of public accusation, and about how we should be trying to establish shared factual truths in public life. This is a terrain in which the fraught questions of who we believe, when and why take centre stage. It is also a

terrain, we argue, in which we see the historical doubtfulness of women and other marginalised subjects compounded by a set of intensified public anxieties about the capacities for deception, manipulation and artifice that are inherent to mediated political life in the digital age.

Believability has been out in the world for less than a year at the time of writing this introduction, and yet with every day that passes there seems to be a new case that could have featured in its analysis. Recently, actor, comedian and manospheric provocateur Russell Brand was publicly lambasted as a serial rapist following allegations from four different and unconnected women published as part of a joint investigation by *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *Channel 4 Dispatches* in the UK ([Urwin et al., 2023](#)). Brand has dismissed the allegations as a 'coordinated media attack' on his reputation provoked by his criticism of journalists and media institutions, in which 'a time of promiscuity' in his life has been twisted by journalists to suit 'another agenda'. In a conspiratorial video **posted to** his Twitter account, he urged his followers to 'stay close' and 'stay awake', using the tried-and-tested technique of positioning the choice to believe women's testimonies as a failure of critical thinking and media literacy ([Skopeliti, 2023](#)). However, other comedians – both men and women – have described Brand's predation as an industry 'open secret', held in place by non-disclosure agreements and 'very good lawyers' ([Sherwood, 2023](#)). 'For many, many years, women have been warning each other about Russell', said comedian Daniel Sloss to *[Dispatches](#)* [(2023)](#).

The allegations against Brand – and the way he has responded, through media, to them – illustrate many of our arguments in *Believability* about the new playbook that has emerged for Accused Men in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement and within an evolving context of post-truth politics. Brand appropriates a feminist script ('a time of promiscuity in my life'), appeals to his audience's distrust of the media ('stay awake') and invokes an ominous yet unspecified sense of conspiracy in order to place the allegations – and the mounting evidence supporting them – under a spectre of intractable doubt. The case also spotlights the dark alliance between non-disclosure agreements and open secrecy, proving once again that the safest place to hide sexual misconduct is in plain sight, where the disruptive power of revelation is blunted a priori.

Brand's ever-so-conventional response to his accusers is not the only recent illustration of how post-truth politics and a gendered politics of believability are melding around allegations of sexual violence in the current conjuncture. If only it were. Just one week earlier, former Spanish football federation president Luis

Rubiales resigned from his position after grabbing and kissing player Jenni Hermoso on the medal podium following Spain's victory in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. Hermoso reported that she did not consent to the kiss, while Rubiales has (predictably) claimed the opposite. The assault occurred in a Sydney stadium in front of more than 80,000 fans and was streamed to millions more via the cameras that were squarely pointed on Hermoso as she stepped onto the podium. **Witnesses, evidence, hypervisibility – all the things demanded of survivors and promised as guarantors of believability.** Yet, as we argue in *Believability*, digital evidence of sexual assault never 'speaks for itself' but rather is spoken for and spoken with: Rubiales and his allies have argued that the video footage of the incident proves the *presence* of consent, rather than its absence, and have shared subsequent videos of Hermoso and her teammates joking about the incident online as ostensible 'proof' of his innocence ([Pisa, 2023](#)). In a public statement, Rubiales defiantly asserted his own bravery and victimhood: 'I have faith in the truth', he said, 'and I will do everything in my power so that it prevails' ([Rubiales, 2023](#)).

In the book, we theorise the cultural terrain for these cases and others like them as a mediated and intersectional *economy of believability*. Here, believability appears as a commodity that is officially available to all but that different subjects are unevenly positioned to access and secure. Attaining public believability is, in this sense, a question both of subjectivity and of performance – of who one is, and how closely or distantly one's identity has been constructed historically vis-a-vis concepts like honesty, credibility, objectivity and trustworthiness, and crucially also of what one *does*, or how hard one labours to secure believability through different kinds of evidence, performance and, increasingly, consumer behaviour. Believability thus has a clear double meaning: it is both the capability of being believed (a believable subjectivity) and the quality of being convincing (a believable performance). And in an economy of believability structured by race, gender and the commercial logics of media platforms and industries (as we argue ours is), these two elements of believability come together to negotiate what ends up counting as 'the truth' in public accusations of sexual violence and misconduct.

This concept of an economy of believability is also our way into understanding the cultural and political aftershocks of the #MeToo movement and others like it, and what we see as an accelerating public backlash against feminist speech about sexual violence. Of course, outcries about #MeToo having 'gone too far' have existed for as long as the movement itself. But, in the aftermath of cases like the Depp/Heard defamation hearing, and as the Brand and Rubiales cases help

illustrate, there is a renewed sense of boldness among accused men to capitalise on the visibility of these accusations and position *survivors* as liars, as manipulators of public trust and ultimately as themselves abusers of vulnerable men who have weaponised the injunction to #BelieveWomen for their own personal gain. We argue that this backlash has been galvanised by a context of post-truth, insomuch as it harnesses doubt as its primary cultural resource, and weaponises doubt to try and return sexual violence to a post-truth frame – that is, a frame in which it is lamented yet asserted that sexual violence is broadly irresolvable as a matter of fact. Yet, simultaneously, we find that the backlash constructs its own legitimacy using the rhetorical building blocks of post-truth's critiques – for example, through impassioned appeals to the importance of facts, evidence and due process as defined by the frameworks of the criminal legal system.

We have two core hopes for *Believability*. First and foremost, it is a book about what we can learn about contemporary rape culture when we view it through the lens of post-truth politics and through the lens of 'believability' as one of its key cultural logics. An uncomfortable yet essential conclusion in our analysis is this: there can be no 'getting away from' believability in mediated public life, nor any easy dislocation of 'the true' and 'the believed' when it comes to the facts around sexual violence. Of course, truth, facts and evidence matter. But *how* and *how much* they matter remain expressions of power relations – specifically, of an economy of believability that continues to allocate unfair advantages to men, whiteness and wealth in believability politics. Believability, we show, can't be easily 'fact-checked' as it is not (primarily) about the facts but, rather, about whom those facts pertain to and whether those people are seen as deserving of the kinds of recognition, solidarity and care that believability affords. This is why reimagining and remaking the mediated economy of believability – in ways more resilient to relations of domination and exploitation, and more cognizant of sexual violence as a characteristic (rather than exceptional) expression of patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism – is an urgent task for feminist liberation.

However, *Believability* is also a book about what we learn about the problem of post-truth politics when we view that problem from the vantage point of rape culture, and so from the vantage point of historically 'unbelievable' subjects. Believability marks the point at which we choose to suspend doubt, and that point has – as feminist scholars have assiduously documented – always shifted with power. However, the politics of believability takes on new significance in a digitally mediated society, wherein everything seems so much more doubtable than it once was. From image filters and deepfake videos to AI-generated images and text, ours

is a media culture in which almost anything can be convincingly faked, and in which our anxieties about being tricked, deceived or manipulated continue to mount. Believability is, consequently, being steadily reaffirmed as one of our most important political currencies, and one of our most pernicious political fault lines. Our intention when writing *Believability* was never for it to become a 'final word' on how the economy of believability is structuring and structured by the politics of gender and race in the contemporary moment. Rather, our intention was to explicate both the mechanics and the politics of this economy in order to emphasise the central importance of believability in the pursuit of both sexual justice and meaningful feminist liberation. We are in awe of the feminist scholars who have contributed to this special issue, whose work was so influential to us while writing, and who have now drawn the arguments in *Believability* into an array of new directions, introducing new problematics and ambivalences, continuing this urgent conversation. We are grateful to all of them.