MISOGYNY AND THE POLITICS OF MISINFORMATION

Sarah Banet-Weiser

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary named *post-truth* the word of the year. In 2017, *Merriam-Webster* named *feminism* the word of the year. Despite their proximity as terms that define the zeitgeist, there is little consideration about how they might intersect and, in fact, constitute one another. Gender is rarely acknowledged as a key context for the very notion of *post-truth*. The potential connection between feminism and *post-truth* has not been acknowledged, despite their both reaching fever pitch at the same time in the same political climate, one that gave way to the renaissance of popular feminism as well as the rise of the contemporary crisis of *post-truth*. They are part of the same cultural ecosystem.

The *post-truth* ‘crisis’ is often framed as the downfall of hitherto functional ‘rationality’ in politics, the decline and waning of expertise and Enlightenment values. ‘Democracy’ is the normative foundation for this crisis; it is the foundation that needs to be returned to as ‘normal’. And, despite the contemporary focus on misinformation and ‘post-truth’, with scores of books and articles published focusing on this apparently novel ‘crisis’ (some more historical and critical than others), I think it is crucial to have historical specificity when considering the relationship between gender and misinformation; a historical perspective from the standpoint of gender unseats the assumptions around truth and democracy and urges us to consider alternative futures. The concerns around *post-truth* – misinformation, disinformation, outright lies – are proclaimed to be a crisis in knowing, in subjectivity, in citizenry; they are seen as affronts to all these ontological and, indeed, scientific claims of being and knowing. Yet this has been the material context for women for centuries, especially for women of colour. In other words, the relationship between misogyny and misinformation is not a new one.

With roots in the Enlightenment and ideas of ‘masculine rationality’, women were, and continue to be, understood as being governed by their emotions, subjective in their understandings of the world, not even capable of speaking the truth or even having access to the truth because their emotions block the truth. Thus, I argue, they are always already the bearers of ‘misinformation’. In this context, in a familiar public/private binary, men are the bearers of public truths while women, at best, are seen as ambassadors of private truths. Men’s ‘truths’ have long been positioned as universal while women’s truths have been positioned as incidental, subjective, and unique, even in the most ‘rational’ corners of the natural sciences (e.g. gender bias in medical research, exclusion of women from drug trials, heart attack symptoms, etc.).
Yet there are specifics of the current moment that mobilise choosing these two cultural and discursive practices – the post-truth and feminism – as words of the year. What were post-truth and feminist discourses responding to in the early aughts? Post-truth characterises a very contemporary cultural moment that responds to increased digital circulation of misinformation about a number of things, from news to health to politics. Contemporary feminism, also in digital circulation, is most often a response to misogyny, though this, too, varies, from resisting online harassment to rape culture to misinformation campaigns. Yet, although feminist theories have long explored the ways in which women’s bodies, affects, practices, and ideologies have been framed as subjective compared to the ‘objective’ masculine spheres and both misogyny and misinformation have been growing concerns in the contemporary digital era, the relationship between these two contemporary discursive practices hasn’t been thoroughly explored in scholarship. (There are key exceptions; see Manne 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2015; Jane 2016, and others.)

Again, post-truth and popular feminism each has a foil they are positioning themselves against: misinformation and misogyny. Arguably, both misogyny and misinformation are linked to new forms of digital hate speech. They are both mechanisms of control: misogyny and misinformation control dominant narratives, practices, policies, and bodies; both promote an agenda that is about controlling groups of people. Misinformation is broadly defined as a strategic, deliberate practice of altering the truth or a set of facts as a way to redirect or redefine a narrative (see the introduction to this volume). The digital era has seen misinformation proliferate, in part because of the flexibilities offered by digital media platforms; that is, at the centre of the circulation of current forms of misinformation are digital media and communication platforms which centrally use misinformation to mobilise citizens and communities (Marwick and Lewis 2015). Historically, the public anxiety about truth claims and who can and should be a truth teller has as a core logic the relationship between truth and democracy, as well as the relationship between a rational subject and truth. This relationship is seen to be profoundly disrupted in the current moment. As William Davies, writing in The Guardian, put it: ‘A sense that the game is rigged now fuels public debate’ (Davies 2019). While ‘truth’ is an often-contested concept, it has nonetheless always depended on the assumption that certain actors tell the truth and that these actors have been authorised with the mantle of veracity in their understandings of the world and of themselves. Yet the idea that the ‘game is rigged now fuels public debate’ belies a long history, one that suggests that the game is rigged differently at different historical moments and that for women and people of colour, the game has always been rigged.

The current decade is also one in which a networked, digital misogyny has taken hold, described as ‘a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms’ (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2015); the logics and affordances of media platforms allow for an amplification of what philosopher Kate Manne has described as “the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance” (Manne 2018). The emergence and heightened visibility of networked misogyny, often centred around a space in online culture called the ‘manosphere’, offer yet another plane in the conjunctural logic of contemporary mechanisms of controlling and disciplining women and have had a central role in the creation and circulation of misinformation (Ging 2017; Jane 2016; Marwick and Lewis 2015).

Misogyny is one of the core common logics in racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic expressions and movements. Thus, I argue here that these two cultural phenomena – misinformation and misogyny – are often mutually constitutive in this historical conjuncture. In the following pages, I explore some of the connections, intersections, and contradictions between misinformation and misogyny and map these connections in two dimensions: (1)
misogyny as a main tactic in the extreme right’s misinformation campaigns, mobilised and weaponised against women as a way to secure or ‘take back’ power and (2) extreme right communities claiming that accusations of misogyny (by feminists, women, and others) are themselves misinformation, thus functioning as a kind of funhouse mirror (Banet-Weiser 2018). I conclude with a discussion of the historical context for these different tactics and point out the long durée of the relationship between misogyny and misinformation.

**Misogyny as core logic of misinformation campaigns**

Extreme-right movements use misogyny as a core logic to their politics and their misinformation campaigns; it is not merely a strategy or tactic, but rather, these movements are frequently based on misogyny as a set of discourses and practices that aim to ‘reset’ the gender balance back to its ‘natural’ patriarchal relation (Banet-Weiser 2018). Within these movements, the need for feminist politics (in a similar way as the need to dismantle systemic racism) is positioned as misinformation. While the racist ideologies of the extreme right have often been correctly identified as white nationalism, the extreme right has always also run on an overtly misogynistic agenda; as Matthew Lyons points out, ‘Harassing and defaming women isn’t just a tactic; it also serves the alt-right’s broader agenda and long-term vision for society’ (2016, para. 8, emphasis added).

A key strategy of the extreme right is recuperation: men’s rights organisations in digital culture are filled with false campaigns about how women and feminists have not just destroyed society but emasculated it. The gendered logic of misogynistic misinformation campaigns is that of a zero-sum game: men lose, become invisible, when women win and become more visible. Conservative populist movements take a particular shape in a contemporary crisis in hegemonic masculinity, a crisis brought on by global economic collapse (as men lose their jobs and future security), by more visible efforts to diversify workplaces and cultural spaces (exemplified by a few visible successful women in technology fields), and by increasing popular feminist activism. Within this crisis, some men (particularly white working- and middle-class men) see themselves as losing cultural and political ground, relinquishing patriarchal authority (Rosin 2013; Negra and Tasker 2014; Banet-Weiser 2018). Within the context of this existing sense of injury and loss, feminists’ call for more equity is framed as dangerous misinformation. Women, and specifically feminism, are assumed as the reason for this loss and are targets for misinformation campaigns. Consequently, a normalised misogyny is often the price women pay for being visible online, with digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook doing little to monitor misogynistic misinformation campaigns.

These misinformation campaigns have been directed particularly intensely at black women, as part of what black feminist scholar Moya Bailey has called ‘misogynoir’, the specific targeting of black women for misogynistic and racist abuse (Bailey 2020). One of the earlier examples of how misinformation was used against black women online came in 2013, when a series of misinformation campaigns were circulated on Twitter (Broderick 2014; Diop 2019; Hampton 2019; Donovan 2019). These Twitter campaigns were initially launched through false hashtags that pretended to come from black women: specifically #End Fathers Day. An elaborate hoax, #End Fathers Day was started by anonymous trolls on 4chan to simulate feminist outrage at the idea of having a national holiday for fathers, claiming that Father’s Day was a symbol of patriarchal oppression. As Donovan points out, ‘To grab attention, these trolls relied on the social norms of trusted self-identification (“I am a black feminist”) alongside feminist support strategies (“listen to women of color”)’ (Donovan 2019) Not surprisingly, conservative media pundits fell for the hoax, amplifying their critique of feminists, especially black feminists (Hampton...
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2019). This misinformation campaign was exposed by actual black feminists, particularly Twitter users Shafiqah Hudson and I’Nasah Crockett, who signaled the fabricated tweets with the hashtag “yourslipisshowing” as a way to make others aware that these tweets were intended to pit black women against each other. However, this kind of mimicry can never be complete. The notion that the ‘slip is showing’ is explicitly about how misinformation will never quite bamboozle those who are in possession of the ‘real’ information (who know how to hide the proverbial slip). Consequently, it’s also a way of calling out the fact that this misinformation campaign does not imagine black women as the recipients at all, but rather white men and women.

#EndFathersDay and other faux black feminist accounts did not receive the kind of international attention that other misinformation campaigns did. As reporter Aremita Diop points out, #EndFathersDay was part of a larger Men’s Rights Activist effort called ‘Operation Lollipop’, in which ‘the idea is to pose as women of color on Twitter and guide activist hashtags as a way to embarrass the online social justice community’ (Broderick 2014). Other early online fake outrage campaigns, such as #WhitesCan’tBeRaped, also emerged from 4chan (specifically, the site’s politically incorrect message board, /pol/), in an effort to outrage feminists and make a mockery out of feminist online campaigns.

But Twitter campaigns of misinformation capitalised on well-established structures of racism and sexism; well before the current preoccupation with the crisis of misinformation in the digital sphere, women and people of colour have been the targets of what could be called misinformation campaigns. In other words, using fake accounts to encourage feminist activists to turn against each other was an early iteration of the relationship between misogyny and misinformation, yet like many other subsequent misinformation campaigns that target women, these faux black feminist accounts did not warrant the same kind of attention that others in the ‘post-truth’ era have received. Despite the important feminist activism that emerged from the misinformation campaign, exemplified by the #yourslipisshowing campaign, the tactics used by 4chan and other extreme-right online spaces in campaigns such as #EndFathersDay demonstrated the power of such manipulation and provided what media scholar Joan Donovan calls the ‘blueprint’ for other misogynistic misinformation campaigns (Donovan 2019). They were also quite successful in galvanising right-wing rage online.

One of the most significant misogynistic misinformation campaigns in the digital mediascape was #GamerGate. In August 2014, a relatively small group of mainstream male gamers and social media users began to use the #GamerGate hashtag; their purported purpose was ostensibly legitimate – to register their objection to questionable journalistic ethics. That purpose, however, was a misogynistic ruse for challenging the visibility of women in the gaming world; Gamergaters were primarily concerned with a few increasingly prominent women in this world, whom they labelled social justice warriors: Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and Zoe Quinn.

Gamergate began with a misinformation campaign: an aggrieved ex-boyfriend of Zoe Quinn posted a 6,000-word screed, claiming that Quinn, a game developer, slept with gaming
journalists in return for good coverage. Though it was quickly demonstrated that this was a false claim, this misinformation, as Charlie Warzel in the *New York Times* puts it,

spiraled into an online culture war, ensnaring female gaming critics like Anita Sarkeesian and other designers like Brianna Wu who would suffer months of relentless abuse on and offline. What started as a revenge post over a break-up morphed into Gamergate: a leaderless harassment campaign to preserve white male internet culture, disguised as a referendum on journalism ethics and political correctness, which ran amok. (Warzel 2019)

As several scholars have pointed out, Gamergate functioned as a kind of ‘rehearsal’ for what is now a normalised online culture of misogynistic harassment based on misinformation. As Warzel continues, Gamergate ‘was a rallying cry’. And it achieved its goal, in terms of ‘intimidating women, deceiving clueless brands and picking up mainstream coverage taught a once-dormant subculture powerful lessons about manipulating audiences and manufacturing outrage’ (Warzel 2019). The idea that Gamergate as a misinformation campaign was a ‘rehearsal’ for politics is telling as it was, at its core, a misogynistic movement (Marwick and Lewis 2015; Massanari 2017). As Marwick and Lewis explain, “‘Gamergater” has become shorthand for a particular kind of geek masculinity that feels victimized and disenfranchised by mainstream society, particularly popular feminism’ (Marwick and Lewis 2105). The ease with which bots, actual individuals, and websites could circulate misinformation about women and feminists within Gamergate reveals the entwined relationship between misogyny and misinformation. The legacy of Gamergate is that it provided a blueprint for how to wage misogynistic misinformation wars, as well as providing guidelines for more general misinformation campaigns mobilised by the extreme right.

Gamergate was successful as a misinformation campaign because it was allowed to proliferate unchecked and unregulated by media platforms, with the masculinist world of tech infrastructure on stand-by as supposedly objective observers. As many scholars have noted, the fact that social media platforms did nothing to curtail or prevent the continued abuse of women in Gamergate set the stage for what is now a broad digital environment that routinely uses misogynistic misinformation campaigns to control and discipline women. And to return to the notion that the current media environment of misinformation is positioned as a ‘crisis’ of truth, when #EndFathersDay or #GamerGate was happening, and when black women and women in tech called attention to these misogynistic campaigns, media companies either ignored or dismissed them. Misogyny is not seen to be a contemporary ‘crisis’, perhaps because it has existed as part of the structural environment for centuries; it is often invisible as ‘hate speech’ because it is so deeply structural.

Numerous other examples of misogynistic misinformation campaigns have occurred in the years since Gamergate. One of the most recent tactics is ‘deepfakes’, a technology of altering video from the original to a ‘fake’ copy and passing it off as authentic.3 Deepfakes, an AI-assisted technology, are important for thinking about the future of misinformation campaigns as deepfakes raise pressing questions about consent and how we consume visual information (Cole 2019). Historically, video has been what reporter Samantha Cole called ‘the gold standard of believability’, where what one sees on video is taken as what is, an authentic and true depiction of something that happened. But this tactic also has misogynistic practices as its origin story; as Cole reminds us, ‘When Redditors started using AI to attach celebrities’ faces to porn performers’ bodies, the media reaction focused on the implications for potential political hoaxes, but we need to focus on the women they harmed’ (Cole 2019).
The tactic of deepfakes is seen to have originated in a misogynistic campaign, in which a Reddit user named ‘deepfake’ imposed actress Gal Gadot’s face onto the body of a woman in a pornographic film and then widely circulated the video. Indeed, the original use of deepfakes, and what remains one of its most common uses, involves swapping a cis-gender female celebrity’s face onto a porn actress (Paris and Donovan 2019). These kinds of deepfakes remain ‘particularly troubling, primarily for its reification of women’s bodies as a thing to be visually consumed, here completely circumventing any potential for consent or agency on the part of the face (and bodies) of such altered images’ (Wagner and Blewer 2019). These deepfakes are clearly examples of misogynistic campaigns with misinformation and lack of consent as their objectives; indeed, the non-consensual exploitation of the deepfake creators is itself part of the logic of the technology, which works to objectify and use women – indeed, to own women’s bodies.

Misogynistic accusations of misinformation

Another dimension of the relationship between misinformation and misogyny distorts the focus of misogynistic misinformation, shifting to men claiming that women’s accusations of misogyny (manifest as sexual violence) are fabricated: an elaborate ruse to cast men as villains and criminals. Like a funhouse mirror, the logic here is flipped: alongside the misogynistic misinformation campaigns online directed to women, there are also examples of specific groups (primarily but not exclusively men) claiming that reports of violence against women are themselves misinformation campaigns. As Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis point out, narratives of men’s rights organisations ‘include the idea that men and boys are victimized; that feminists in particular are the perpetrators of such attacks; and that misinformation, political correctness, and the liberal agenda are used to hide the truth from the general public’ (Marwick and Lewis 2015).

Another of the rallying cries for contemporary men’s rights organisations revolves around the idea that women routinely accuse men of rape falsely, as a way to get revenge for being rejected or as a way to erase a night of regretful sex. The notion that rape accusations are false, put forward by vindictive or spurned women as a way to deflect personal responsibility or as an ‘outrageous’ claim intended for individual profit, is not a new phenomenon within misogynistic structures: the idea that women fabricate rape as a way to deal with rejection has long been a trope of misogyny, emerging with great visibility in the 1980s and 90s with what Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe deemed ‘victim feminism’ in the context of college date rape awareness (Sommers 1994; Roiphe 1994). This conservative counter to an increasing visibility of rape culture on campus was the claim that college women needed to take accountability and responsibility for their own actions in sexual encounters, rather than claiming that they are victims. This definition of victimhood in the era of social media and online vigilantism, specifically the claim that women capriciously occupy this subject position through routinely and falsely accusing men of rape, has been a newly important justification for white privileged men claiming victimhood.

The idea that feminists are enmeshed in what anti-feminist communities call ‘victimology’ and are what conservative communities routinely call liberal ‘snowflakes’ has become a key element of networked misogyny. This networked misogyny has been particularly focused on what men’s rights groups label ‘false’ rape accusations. At least in the United States, the notion that women routinely make false rape accusations as a way to benefit themselves has had a heightened visibility since at least 2014, when men’s rights organisations began to shift their attention from fathers and divorcées (where the focus was on paternity and custody rights, as well
as domestic violence against men) to the gendered pay gap and young men and rape culture (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Like so much of media culture, men’s rights organisations often focus on specific individuals and their crimes as emblematic of an entire demographic or culture. In the early twenty-first century, stories about individual cases on college campuses circulated widely in the media, giving a sense to various publics that false accusations of rape were far more common than actual rapes. In this move, college campuses were highlighted as places where young men’s lives were ‘ruined’ because of the apparently rampant problem of women falsely accusing them of rape. Thus, despite the widely known gap in the numbers of women who have been raped and those of women who falsely accuse men of rape, the few women who have admitted to fabricating a rape become so highly visible in the media that the issue of false accusations becomes over-exaggerated and even normalised.4 The strategy of amplifying individual cases of misinformation (false rape accusations) works to produce a more broadly ideological form of misinformation that circulates and normalises, shoring up the power that is produced at the intersection of misogyny and misinformation. Men’s rights organisations have embraced false rape accusations as one of their major causes; Paul Elam, the founder of what is often considered the flagship website of the men’s rights movement, A Voice for Men, stated in 2014 about college rape culture: “We have a problem with feminists hyper-inflating rape statistics, creating a kind of hysteria on campus over a problem that needs due attention from law enforcement” (Matchar 2014). Another men’s rights website, The Other McCain, stated that

‘Campus ‘rape culture’ [is] hysteria ginned up by the Obama administration and its feminist allies. A major factor in that hysteria was the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) using Title IX to threaten universities for allegedly failing to punish sexual assault. This witch-hunt frenzy resulted in male students being falsely accused of rape and denied their due-process rights in campus kangaroo-court disciplinary proceedings.

(McCain 2017)

The rhetoric of ‘hysteria’, ‘witch-hunts’, and ‘kangaroo-court’ underlies much of the anti-rape culture discourse, often focusing on the apparent fallacy of date rape.5

The accusations by men’s rights organisations and others that women routinely fabricate claims of being raped typically are levied at white men who have been accused of sexual violence. The exception to this is based on histories of systemic racism: though there is a deep relationship between misogyny and misinformation, it is also the case that some women – white, privileged women – are positioned within misinformation campaigns as truth-tellers, as long as their truths do not disrupt the believability of white men. That is, white women have also enjoyed the status of ‘truth-tellers’, often with violent consequences for black men and boys. Perhaps most visibly, we see this with the murder of Emmett Till in 1955; in 2017, the white woman who accused Till of harassing her admitted to fabricating her account (Johnson 2017). There is a tension in the dynamic of misinformation, in which the ‘believability’ of whiteness and the ‘unbelievability’ of womanhood collide in accusations of criminality and sexual violence made all the more complicated by a long-established discourse that constructs black men as sexual predators and white women as ideal victims. As Martenzie Johnson says, ‘We currently live in the world of fake news and alternative facts, but white lies have tangible consequences’ (Johnson 2017).
The idea that women falsely accuse men of rape isn’t the only misogynistic accusation of misinformation; in May 2020, the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, when asked about the flood of calls to emergency call centres during the COVID-19 lockdown, when there were more than 26,000 reports of violence against women, said ‘Ninety percent of those calls that you’re referring to are fake’, calling the vast majority of these calls ‘pranks’ (Kitroeff 2020). The relationship between misogyny and misinformation should be positioned within what I call an ‘economy of believability’, in which women are seen to be liars and untrustworthy by nature. The idea that rape and domestic violence accusations are ‘fake’ or ‘pranks’ for women to profit from relies on this historical and social construction of women as incapable, by nature, of telling the ‘truth’.

**Misogyny and misinformation: a long-standing relationship**

There is an increasing body of work on the crises of misinformation, from post-truth to fake news, but little on the notion that misogyny is often at the core of misinformation campaigns. Yet, as media scholar Safiya Noble points out in her book *Algorithms of Oppression*, search functions in digital media have long peddled in racist terms of reference and images as a way to provide ‘information’ (Noble 2018). As she argues, those media sites with the most titillating, racist, sexist and clickbait kinds of content are often elevated because they generate a lot of web traffic, and that makes money for all search engines. This is why disinformation and racism is so profitable, especially in the United States. (Noble 2020)

Misogynistic misinformation is similarly profitable, which became quite clear in #GamerGate.

The conception of truth and notions of believability in the West have historically been inextricable from whiteness and masculine subjectivity. The truth has always depended on those who are authorised to define it and make it visible. That is, the concern around post-truth has become urgent when those who have defined the truth historically – primarily white, privileged men – begin to witness their truths being questioned, eroding, when they are potentially not believed. As Occenola points out,

Disinformation is one of many in the arsenal of weapons used by trolls and propaganda networks to attack and discredit opponents. It can take several forms, such as fabricated headlines, misleading captions, or falsified information. Female targets of disinformation, however, often face direct attacks on their identity as women. (Occenola 2018)

Within this frame, it is helpful to consider the whole concept of misinformation, which depends on an assumption that the ‘information’ that the prefix ‘mis’ qualifies somehow represents the ‘truth’ or the ‘facts’.

Yet the same prefix in misogyny implies a much broader notion: the hatred and control of women. Those misinformation campaigns that directly challenge a dominant understanding of the ‘truth’ – such as politics, elections, et cetera – garner more public attention than misogyny, perhaps because misogyny is so deeply sedimented in structure, so normalised, that it becomes almost invisible as misinformation. Misogynistic misinformation campaigns do not, that is, represent a disruption or a crisis in everyday lives. They do, however, represent the centrality and normalisation of misogyny as a central part of that everyday life.
Notes

1 I am deeply thankful to Jack Bratich, Inna Arzumanova, and Kat Higgins for their helpful suggestions in writing this chapter.

2 Arguably, misogyny is also frequently part of ‘anti-journalism’ attacks by conservative groups as female media creators and journalists are often the target for these groups. See, for example, www.politico.com/story/2018/11/09/trump-cnn-white-house-access-980280.

3 The deepfake ‘is a prototype of Artificial Intelligence. It is significant to note that a deepfake is more than just two videos that have been merged together to form one video by a person or group using advanced image-editing software (such as Adobe Premiere). Instead, the creation of deepfakes result from feeding information into a computer and allowing that computer to learn from this corpus over time and generate new content’ (Wagner and Blewer 2019).

4 According to the National Sexual Violence Research Centre, studies show a lower extreme of 2.1 percent and an upper extreme of 7.1 percent of false reporting. www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Overview_False-Reporting.pdf.

5 And it is interesting that ‘witch hunt’ references a specific historical phenomenon in which women were harmed and murdered on the basis of being suspect, unbelievable, untrustworthy, and uncompliant with patriarchal expectations. Discursively, it taps into an anxiety about truth, believability, and authenticity that is deeply gendered.

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