

## BOOK REVIEW

**Disclosing Sexual Violence in a Digital Society: Storytelling, Activism, and Justice, by Tully O'Neill, Springer, 2024, 157pp., £109.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-031-74989-6**

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Justice is generally assumed to be clearcut, something that we know when we see (McGlynn, 2014). For survivors of sexual violence, however, the concept of justice is frequently laden with tension. On the one hand, many know the criminal legal system will be retraumatising, akin to a second rape (Campbell et al., 2001), and largely unable to meet their justice needs. On the other hand, a significant number of survivors also believe this system should continue to be part of the 'menu of options' available to them (Daly and Bouhours, 2011: 624), even if they may not choose to utilise it, or even fully believe in its existence. In this vein feminist sexual violence scholarship has sought to both further and understand 'justice from the victim's perspective' (Herman, 2005). In doing so this literature has sought to prioritise "giving voice" to survivors (Clark, 2015; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2018), all the while exploring different justice mechanisms (Jülich, 2006), and suggesting reforms to the current legal systems we have.

Tully O'Neill's *Disclosing Sexual Violence in a Digital Society* is a vital addition to this large and multifaceted body of feminist work addressing sexual violence. Through rigorous qualitative research O'Neill highlights the diverse ways in which those who experience sexual violence navigate speaking out in the online world, and the conscious decisions they make while enacting a 'digital version of 'safety work' (p.43, see also Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). This includes an interesting exploration of the varying reasons different survivors may choose to interact with a range of platforms such as reddit and twitter, or multiple platforms at varying points in their life (see chapter 3). The second half of the book shifts to explore how these approaches to digital speech can be understood as justice seeking practices on individual and collective levels. Here their extension of work around 'informal justice' (p.8) – previously conceptualised as 'practices that seek redress for harms in settings operating *outside of the state* and its institutions' (Powell, 2015: 218) – is of particular note. Combining 'informal justice' with McGlynn and Westmarland's (2018) conceptualisation of kaleidoscopic justice, O'Neill contends that 'informal justice practices in digital society are fluid and potentially refract over time, much like kaleidoscopic justice' (p. 97). Extending McGlynn and Westmarland's (2018: 196) exploration of the possibilities of justice that occurs 'beyond an individual case, and encompasses broader notions of social justice', O'Neill highlights the ways in which informal justice 'exists across varying levels that can co-occur, interact with, and influence each other, in particular, at a community level (of victim-survivors as collective peers) and a societal level' (p.125). One example of this is survivors "speaking-in" to each other, alongside also speaking out (Serisier, 2018), which O'Neill contends can help 'challenge structures and dominant discourses by creating online counterpublics, highlighting the potential for narratives to fuel online activism and social justice' (p.125).

Despite an awareness of the paradoxical nature of justice seeking after sexual violence - whereby the pursuit of formal justice harms survivors and communities yet simultaneously cannot be abandoned – feminist work often shies away from deeply interrogating this very paradox. In doing so this literature also avoids examining what it means that survivors (and feminists more broadly) continue to return to a system that is widely acknowledged as broken. Through brave analysis and engagement with feminist scholarship on the politics of speaking out (Serisier, 2018), and the varying aspects which limit the 'transgressive potential' of survivor discourse (Alcoff and Gray, 1993; see also Naples, 2003), *Disclosing Sexual Violence in a Digital Society* refuses this trap. It is this which I would propose as the book's central contribution to not only the sexual

violence research field, but also feminist, digital, and critical criminologies. In the first instance, O'Neill refuses to shy away from the 'multiplicities, tensions and contradictions' (p.145) that are inherent in the process of navigating and striving for justice. In doing so they show how different survivors disagree with one another and the ways in which different platforms shape the speech of survivors (pp.70-73, pp.134-137). Moreover, even though most of their participants were 'reluctant to perceive their digital practices as constituting justice-seeking behaviours' (p.84), O'Neill argues that we must nonetheless still see these practices as types of 'informal justice'. In unpacking this gentle disagreement with their participants, O'Neill reminds their readers of the ways in which survivor 'options are scripted' (p.105) and also 'constrained by neoliberalism, capitalism, and patriarchy'. In this way O'Neill contends that the choices of survivors are shaped by neoliberalism, late capitalism, carceral politics, and the specificities of digital sites themselves; as too is feminist activism. They thus offer an urgent provocation for feminist activists and researchers to consider 'whose justice we are prioritizing and what that justice looks like' (p.131). In a field which frequently struggles to ask critical questions of the speech of survivors for a wealth of reasons, the significance and courage of this argument cannot be overstated.

There are of course areas where O'Neill could have extended their analysis. Across chapters five to seven, for instance, several references to the limitations of the criminal legal system are made. They also point to the ways in which normative discourses, such as the trauma discourse, produce a desire to "fix" the awfulness of sexual violence, leading O'Neill to question the very possibility of justice (p.141). This discussion is noteworthy, and yet the contours of a survivor and feminist politics that listens *and* responds differently to survivors who utilise these discourses remains underexplored. Or to put this differently, O'Neill avoids fully articulating what it would mean to stay with the impossibility of fixing the injustice that is sexual violence. In doing so they also sidestep what it would mean to respond differently – and possibly challenge – survivors who 'feel two things at once' (p.118), and who turn to carcerality in a bid to solve the injustice they have endured, but who also acknowledge punitivity cannot and will not provide the justice they want. This is perhaps due to O'Neill's utilisation of a kaleidoscopic informal justice which – useful though it is – leads to the perpetuation of a suggestion that is prominent across feminist literature: that 'because some survivors say they desire carceral outcomes, these can never be abandoned' (ackhurst, Forthcoming). The fact that *Disclosing Sexual Violence in a Digital Society* is a project which both seeks to study the individual and the collective, a tension O'Neill themselves notes (p.114), may also contribute towards this avoidance. Indeed, while O'Neill's personal view on the criminal legal system is evident through the book's analysis, I would suggest one risk of the 'multiplicity of informal justices' (p.141) that they call for is that it may facilitate an extension of the 'carceral horizon' (Loney-Howes et al., 2024) that O'Neill themselves roundly critiques.

O'Neill seems cognisant of these risks, however, and the book's conclusion, which engages with Ahmed's (2017: 2) work on the ways in which hope 'animates a struggle', points to the richness of *Disclosing Sexual Violence in a Digital Society's* analysis. As O'Neill reminds us, there are opportunities and constraints (Serisier, 2018) with every approach and with all analysis, but this does not mean feminist researchers should despair. Instead, those who work in and around sexual violence must refuse to shy away from the challenges of 'widening the scope of justice' (p.154), and thus reckon with the stuckness many encounter in doing this work (ackhurst, 2024). This is a demand that *Disclosing Sexual Violence in a Digital Society* heeds, which attests to its significance and the crucial contribution it makes to work on sexual violence.

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