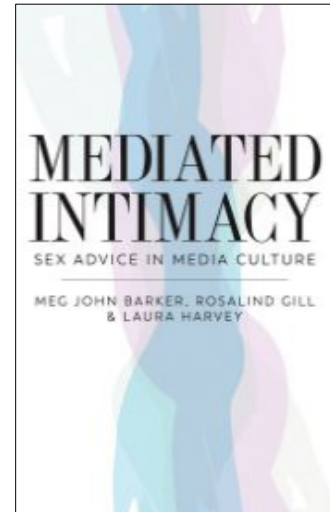


Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill, and Laura Harvey, **Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, 312 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

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The question of how sexuality should figure in feminist research and politics is one of unending controversy, and one in which considerations of media representation and mediated discourse are deeply implicated. The “sexualization debate,” historically grounded in concerns about the sexual objectification of women’s bodies, has since moved into messier terrain—that of “sexual subjectification” (Gill, 2003), a newly hegemonic regime of representation that emphasizes empowerment and free choice. In this regime, women’s sexual practices (who they have sex with, how often, in what ways, for what purposes, etc.) are still subject to ruthless scrutiny. However, this scrutiny now takes place within the context of a culture that also puts intense pressure on women to become the “right kind” of sexual subjects—subjects who are “up for it” but not too up for it, adventurous but not too adventurous, and empowered but not so much as to decenter men in their intimate lives and practices. Needless to say, this is not a pressure that is easily met—the tightrope between “slut” and “prude” is as razor-thin as ever.

Mediated Intimacy forays into the tangled terrain of sexual subjectification with the aim of working through how critical and intersectional feminist theory, politics, and practice ought to orientate itself to the question of sex in the context of mediated social life and culture. The book’s title has potential phenomenological connotations that might at first be misleading, so it feels important to clarify that this is not a text about how the embodied experience of intimacy (sexual or otherwise) is being reworked through technologies of mediation. Rather, the authors’ focus here is on the pedagogical function of media texts—how advice about sex, as it circulates in the media, is implicated in the production of normative visions of human sexual practice that are conditioned by, and have consequences for, relational structures of domination that include patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism.

Taking “mediated sex advice” texts as their empirical material, the authors adopt a necessarily wide conceptualization of all three terms. The result is a book with impressive empirical scope, covering materials as diverse as sex manuals, newspaper advice columns, online forums like Mumsnet, and reality television programs like *Sex Box*. The premise of this approach is simple and salient—that in a media culture saturated with representations of and conversations about sex and intimacy, there is really no end to the number of media genres, texts, and platforms that constitute sites of sex advice.

The central thesis put forward by Barker, Gill, and Harvey is that intimate life has become an important frontier of everyday neoliberalism in which subjects are called upon to engage in projects of “sexual self-building” that demand ongoing investments of capital and labor into various forms of

optimization related to the body, relationships, and the psyche. The sexual subject interpolated in contemporary mediated sex advice is one animated by a spirit of entrepreneurialism—committed to constant improvement through practices of consumption, skill acquisition, preparation, and psychic (re)orientation toward certain preferred (or even required) forms of intimate practice and pleasure. Inspired by Foucault's observation that power operates through the production of subjects, the authors show how mainstream mediated sex advice can serve projects of domination by closing down certain possibilities for sexual subjectivity and intimate life—among them, that one can indeed be "good enough" at sex, that all bodies are in fact "sex ready" without investments of capital or labor, and that sexual intimacy is in fact optional in all contexts, at all times, for all people.

Buttressed through these closures, the authors show, is a culture of intimacy in which sexual success is not just compulsory, but also accessible only through conformation to standards grounded in the normative cultural logics of heterosexuality and neoliberalism. In such a culture, hard exclusions around successful sexual subjecthood are enforced along lines of class, gender, race, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation, among many others. And in the context of what the authors call a cultural "sexual imperative," successful personhood is similarly denied to those subjects unable or unwilling to meet such standards, with the challenges and dissatisfactions of our intimate lives held up as failures of individual will, skill, or character, rather than products of a culture shot through with imbalances of power and resilient relational structures of domination.

Authors Barker, Gill, and Harvey situate these developments within the cultural context of postfeminism, highlighting the many and varied ways in which popular sex advice works to naturalize women (presumed to be heterosexual and cisgender) as the ideal subjects of sexual self-optimization through discourses of empowerment, confidence, and success. Across mainstream advice, it is women who are disproportionately called upon to commit multiple forms of labor and capital to keeping their sexual relationships exciting, safe, and within the bounds of "normal" sexual practice. This burden, the authors show, extends into seemingly endless domains of intimate life—from aesthetic labor to be performed on the body, to the demand that women must intuit men's sexual needs while putting extensive energy and time into communicating their own, and even to the responsibility for ensuring consent in sexual encounters. In one of the most unsettling conclusions reached in the book, the authors demonstrate how the demand for, and gendered division of, sexual labor typically prescribed in mainstream sex advice can actually constitute a cultural imperative for nonconsensual intimate practice—specifically, that people (and especially women) should engage in sex they do not actually want or enjoy to keep their relationships afloat. Even as conversations about consent are beginning to flourish in popular culture, being "adventurous" and "up for it" are still foregrounded in mainstream advice as the most important priorities for women's sex lives.

The empirical analysis in *Mediated Intimacy* unfolds through dialogue across five thematic chapters. The first, on "being normal," examines two different formats of mediated sex advice (sex manuals and newspaper problem pages) to illustrate how the discourses of intimacy contained in these texts work to draw and reinforce boundaries around what counts as normal, "spicy," or abnormal/unacceptable sexual practice. Next, the authors turn to the role of "work and entrepreneurship" in mediated sex advice, highlighting the various forms of aesthetic, practical, emotional, and psychic labor that subjects (particularly women) must perform to meet certain optimization imperatives (e.g., the imperative for variety, for

frequency, for “successful” monogamy) and ensure the survival of their intimate relationships. In their third chapter, on “pleasure,” the authors draw on texts from reality television and feminist blogging to tackle the centrality of the orgasm in popular conceptions of sexual enjoyment, showing again how discourses of pleasure in mainstream advice function to reinforce the idea of sex as work and pleasure as the product of skill applied to a body that is biologically encoded and predictably responsive. Finally, the authors examine the interconnected themes of “safety and risk” and “communication and consent” as they arise in mediated sex advice, highlighting the individualization of safe sex advice (particularly with regard to discourses of responsibility) and the simplification of popular consent discourse in ways that obscure the sociocultural embeddedness of consent challenges.

For readers already engaged in queer and/or feminist research, politics, and lifeworlds, many of the analytical findings in *Mediated Intimacy* will likely seem intuitive. The major analytical contribution of this book, however, is the way that it brings the contradictions of our mediated conversations about sex and intimacy up into the light so that they might serve as points of discursive destabilization and resistance to the infiltration of heterosexist and neoliberal ideology into our intimate lives. Why, for example, do we have a mediated culture of intimacy that alleges a “natural” disparity in sexual appetite between men and women but simultaneously plays down (or flat-out ignores) the need for consent communication in committed heterosexual relationships? Similarly, how can we reconcile a discourse in which monogamy is held up as the “gold standard” for sexual partnership, yet variety is centered as a sexual imperative and boredom normalized as the ultimate challenge for entrepreneurial sexual subjects to overcome? These are just some of the discursive fault lines that *Mediated Intimacy* helps crack open for future academic and activist excavation.

There are two further contributions put forward in *Mediated Intimacy* for which its authors deserve particular commendation. First, this book offers a thoughtful and much-needed intervention into the tug-of-war between “anti-porn” and “sex-positive” perspectives on sexualization in queer and feminist politics and activism—a tug-of-war that has been historically light on common ground. The vision of “sex-criticality” put forward by Barker, Gill, and Harvey—which recognizes sexual agency yet situates its exercise within a relational field of power conditioned by multiple enduring structures of domination—is a convincing third way between these two poles of thought in that it draws our analytical attention sharply toward the contexts of sexual discourse and practice. So, for example, pornography can be feminist without always being feminist, BDSM can be consensual without always being consensual, and a woman’s decision to spend \$100 on lingerie from Victoria’s Secret is neither a simple exercise of sexual agency nor a straightforward moment of subjugation to the aesthetic and consumerist pressures of heterosexism and neoliberalism—essentially, and messily, it is both. Such an approach eschews both essentialism and moralism in favor of situated emancipatory critique that is not just antisexist but also resistant to biphobia, transphobia, classism, racism, ableism, and the steady creep of neoliberal ideology into even the most intimate corners of our minds and lives.

Finally, then, *Mediated Intimacy* deserves considerable praise for the thoroughness with which the authors follow through on their stated commitment to compassionate critique (Barker & Gill, 2012) by offering various suggestions, and tested examples, for how readers might “do” sex-critical advice in practice. The book’s final chapter reflects on the multiple projects of mediated sex-critical advice that have been

established by author Meg-John Barker and sex adviser Justin Hancock, including a website, an animation series, a podcast, and an advice book, among many others. While reflecting on the successes and setbacks of these projects, the authors also engage in dialogue with numerous other professional sex advisers to unearth the many pressures that constrain possibilities for sex-critical discourse in various media contexts. The book concludes with a set of five tips for aspiring producers of sex advice that concretizes the core principles of the sex-critical approach and translates them into easy-to-understand guidelines for practice.

Mediated Intimacy is a rich empirical accomplishment that is highly recommended to researchers engaged in critical investigations of sexualization, representations of sexuality, postfeminist discourse, and the cultural and psychic lives of neoliberalism. It is also an exemplary work of compassionate critique and an inspiring example of how insights generated through critical cultural research can travel outside of the academy and into cultural practice. For this, *Mediated Intimacy* is a valuable text for anyone committed to cultivating an emancipatory research practice.

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