

Mediated intimacy: sex advice in media culture

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Book review: *Mediated Intimacy: sex advice in media culture* by Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill, Laura Harvey, 2018, Polity press.

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In *Mediated Intimacy*, Barker, Gill and Harvey present us with a thorough investigation of sex advice in the media, past and present. The first three chapters of the book comprise an overview of the state of sex advice in the media, covering its history and a range of contemporary debates and representations of sex and sexuality – as well as providing an overview of existing academic research in the field. The remaining chapters focus on particular case studies, including magazine and newspaper advice columns, television programmes, sex manuals, public health information, apps and online environments.

The sheer scope of the book is impressive. The authors have provided a fascinating journey through the media and wider cultural landscape that leaves little uncharted. They situate mediated sex advice within a range of contextual factors: political, economic, social, medical, legal, technological and theoretical. That said, the first few chapters whip through at such a pace that I found myself wanting them to slow down and explore some things in greater detail. This was particularly true of chapter 3, which attempts to cover a dizzying array of media representations of gender, sex, sexuality and relationships. Whilst I understand the desire to situate the rest of the discussion in its wider context, I did feel that I would have preferred a tighter focus on sex advice (as within the rest of the book) rather than a diversion into so many other related areas. That is my only real gripe with this work, however. The rest of the book provides a rich, detailed and comprehensive understanding of sex advice as it occurs in different arenas.

Chapter 2's 'History of Mediated Sex Advice' is an interesting look at how the nature of both the advice itself, and those giving it, has morphed over the decades – from the sex advice provided by therapists, sexologists and medics, through the rise of agony aunts and uncles, to today's culture in which celebrities and bloggers can set themselves up as 'experts' alongside trained professionals.

The majority of the chapters highlight key themes common to sex advice regardless of platform ('normality', work and entrepreneurship, pleasure, communication and consent, safety and risk), and they explore these themes through their chosen case studies. The authors note that sex has become another facet of neoliberal culture and its emphasis on projects of the self. They explore how this narrative drives narratives across different media platforms, where people are encouraged to find 'what works' and to constantly improve their sexual selves. Sex advice thus impels us 'to

become 'intimate entrepreneurs', and to think about our closest personal relationships through the lens of market logics, consumerism, investment and enterprise' (p107).

They also astutely highlight the forms of sex and relationship that are considered normative – for example, they note that penis-in-vagina sex is often assumed to be 'proper' sex, even when a text is ostensibly exploring other forms of sex. In many media accounts, 'PIV sex is given centre-stage – something that takes real effort not to do, whose absence leaves sex somehow 'unfinished'' (p.136). The authors observe that, even in same-sex relationships, a similar presentation emerges, through expectations of anal penetration for men and scissoring for women as PIV equivalents.

Alongside mediated expectations of what is 'normal' or 'expected', they highlight areas that are presented as dangerous – from HIV and AIDS to chemsex; contrasting advice given from advocacy groups and sex professionals with the often sensationalised accounts and fearmongering in contemporary media. They note that such issues are frequently portrayed as a matter of individuals choosing to engage in risky behaviour, thus echoing the neoliberal rhetoric of much media discourse. However, despite this narrative, there are frequently particular groups singled out as being more 'risky' than others: 'gay and bisexual men, people of colour, people who have sex with multiple partners, sex workers and drug users in particular have been the target of public health discourse and interventions...[reinforcing] existing stigma and inequalities' (p155). These analyses of key media texts are fascinating - although perhaps a little depressing, given their conclusions that much of this content remains rooted in very traditional positions on gender roles, sexual practices and LGBTQ+ identities.

In addition to exploring these dominant narratives, they also discuss examples that challenge the norm – occasionally encountering these in mainstream media, but primarily finding them in online and activist communities. Chapter 8, 'Communication and Consent', is a good example of the authors identifying a multiplicity of messages about these issues in different environments.

In addition to their critiques of mediated sex advice, the authors offer potential solutions and ways forward throughout – and in the concluding chapter they also draw upon the expertise of a range of sex advisors to consider both the current state of the field and its potential futures.

The book is engagingly and accessibly written, yet manages to avoid 'talking down' to the reader. It will not only be a valuable read for anyone concerned with mediated discourse about sex and relationships, but for anyone who is interested in the relationship between media, culture, citizenship and neoliberalism. It is not only suitable for academics, but for students and for those working in sex advice, advocacy or in producing sex advice media.