

The Sleaze-O-Meter: Sexual Harassment in the Publishing Industry

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Keywords: Publishing, Publishing Studies,
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Biographical Note

Beth Driscoll is Professor of Publishing and Communications at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Claire Squires is Professor of Publishing Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland. As Blaire Squiscoll, they are the author of the creative critical erotic thriller about contemporary publishing, *The Frankfurt Kabuff* (Kabuff Books, 2019). Their joint publications under their own names include *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and *The Frankfurt Kabuff Critical Edition* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2023), as well as articles addressing topics including book festivals, print and digital materiality in books, and sexual harassment in the publishing industry. Further details of their collaborative work can be found at the website <https://ullapoolism.wordpress.com/>.

The Sleaze-O-Meter: Sexual Harassment in the Publishing Industry

As research collaborators, our ethos is to investigate literary culture using playful, arts-informed methods. We've developed a collection of quirky objects and ideas, including a set of board and card games based on book festivals; a deliberately confusing event feedback form; and numerous Twitter personae and bots. The indirectness of play has liberated us to articulate some fairly sharp critiques, including through satirical means.

Satire is a strategy that undermines entrenched centres of power, a tradition that stretches from William Hogarth's political cartoons, to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, to the feminist "creative complainers" of the art world, [The Guerilla Girls](#). Digital technologies bring rapidity and amplification to 21st century satire. [@manwhohasitall](#)'s pointed tweets, for example, reverse the stereotyping, self-help discourse of media texts aimed at women. These tweets have included [a series about sexual harassment](#): "[My handsome younger brother had his penis grabbed by his boss, the powerful & famous Claire, CEO. He's not sure what to do. Suggestions?](#)". Creative responses—whether satirical, artistic, or just offbeat—can be critical interventions in social issues.

In the immediate aftermath of the revelations about Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, the two of us attended the Frankfurt Book Fair. Frankfurt is the largest global rights fair in the world, where publishers, literary agents and others connected to the book trade gather to do business, network, and socialise. It's an intense manifestation of book commerce: not only are hundreds of thousands of new titles on display, but companies and people "market" themselves, creating business-to-business connections. As academic observers with well-developed publishing industry networks, we noted physical and interpersonal aspects of the fair, and wondered what the Frankfurt School would make of it all.



Figure 1: At the Frankfurt Book Fair Business Club

We attended several alcohol-fuelled stand parties, where we noticed lots of young women in colourful dresses and older men in suits. We were invited into the Business Club, a space that has a small stage with fringed curtains and an aura of power. In Hall 6, one of us was bailed up and asked by an elderly American publisher if she had dated him in the past; the other was invited by an exhibitor to admire the size of his stand. We observed multiple moments of sleaze across the halls as men looked women up and down, and took advantage of their captive positions on stands to talk at them for extended periods; a casual appropriation of women's bodies and attention.



Figure 2: The Frankfurt Book Fair

As part of the outpouring of stories of sexual harassment and abuse in the wake of Weinstein, there have been several reports, interviews and surveys of workers in the global publishing industries. These reveal a constant low level of sleaze, and some appalling stories of abuse. Like many other media industries, the publishing industry is largely staffed by women. However, women mostly occupy entry and middle-management posts, with senior positions held by men. [An Australian editor commented](#) upon the power differential this creates: “This is an industry with older, established men in the corner offices and young women working themselves to the ground in the cubicles, trying to earn themselves a break; that is, an industry where sexual harassment based on power differentials is bound to flourish”. [A French illustrator tweeted](#) “On a quelqu'un d'autre pour le boulot sauf si tu viens chez moi’. Editeur parisien, j'allais illustrer un livre de M. Butor [#balancetonporc](#)” (translation: “We have someone else for the job unless you come to mine’. French publisher, I was going to illustrate a book by M. Butor”. [#balancetonporc](#) is the French equivalent of the #MeToo hashtag). Public accusations of predatory behaviour have now been made against several powerful literary men, including [Lorin Stein, editor of the Paris Review](#), and [Jean-Claude Arnault](#), who has close connections to the Swedish Academy which awards the Nobel Prize in Literature.

This patriarchal structure is part of a broader picture of disadvantage for women in the literary field, which affects women's chances of winning or being shortlisted for literary prizes, being reviewed, pay, and advancement. Feminist collective La Barbe [satirises the repeated pattern of French literary prizes privileging men](#), with all the major prizes won by

male writers in 2017; [VIDA: Women in Literary Arts](#) conducts an annual count of the gender of literary reviewers and reviewees, shaming those with statistics skewed against women (including the *London Review of Books* and the *Paris Review*).

Jobs in publishing are scarce and attractive, a common feature of creative industries which correlates with exploitative work practices including unpaid internships. This makes it risky for people to report sexual harassment and abuse, for fear they may lose their job and not get another, as reports from several different countries makes evident. “I just wanted it to go away,” [one US professional said](#), “I should have just left the job. I tried—I applied to dozens of [other] jobs”. Even for those who are able to leave, the close networks of publishing mean that perpetrators will probably be encountered again, re-traumatising survivors. “I was directly propositioned by older male colleagues, groped, and asked if I would be interested in having an affair [...] I’ve since worked with many of those men again at different companies”, [said a British publisher](#). [Svensk Bokhandel commented that](#) “standing up and talking about harassment and abuse is not an easy matter”, leading to a culture of silence within a “small and fairly closed industry”.

The reports revealed that those working within sales, marketing and publicity are most at risk, with high-status male authors and senior men in positions of power most likely to be among the perpetrators. In the UK, 66% of publicists responding to [The Bookseller’s survey](#) reported they had been subjected to harassment or abuse; [in Australia](#) 75% of respondents in sales and 74% in marketing and publicity reported harassment. [A respondent wrote](#), “One of our company’s focuses is ‘author care’, which for a publicist means make the authors happy no matter what the cost. Publicists are essentially pimped out and if you dare complain about it, the big impressive campaigns will be taken off you.” Reading these accounts, we were reminded of Lynn Coady’s “A Dog in Clothes”, a short story that produces a jolt of discomfort about structural gender disadvantage in the publishing industry (from [Hellgoing](#), 2013). In this story, a young female publicist spends her day accompanying a famous male author who is on tour in Toronto, and grates under continual harassment, including from editors, radio and television hosts. [Speaking about her story](#), Coady has said that publicists “tend to be young women who are basically run off their feet. There’s something caste-y about that. It’s a certain kind of young woman: educated, and on her way up the ladder, but in the meantime we’re going to use her as a dog’s body”.

The publishing industry’s events-based culture, involving substantial work after normal working hours, and often with alcohol, increases risk. “Male colleagues exploit the fact that ours is a ‘relaxed’ industry,” [said a British publisher](#). In the US, one editor discussed the historical foundations of the link between publishing’s social nature and abusive behaviour, stemming from the “industry’s reputation as a place where anything goes, which adds to the glamour of the business.” [As she reflected in Publishers Weekly](#),

The publishing industry [of the 1980s] had quite a reputation of heavy partying, everyone sleeping with each other...I have heard all kinds of stories—mostly from men—about how awesome this time was. I have never heard from women that it was a particularly sexually progressive

time. I think the men felt that they had a free pass and that it was better because it was less politically correct.

The conviviality of the publishing industry is tied to its abusive behaviours. Literary festivals and other book-based events away from the office are often constructed as an attractive aspect of the job, but [for one correspondent](#), “event settings are where harassment is most likely to occur [...] Book publishing, as a social industry with lots of launches and public readings lends itself to these kinds of abuse with little accountability.”

The publishing industry has its own set of available responses to the wave of #MeToo revelations, many of which are being implemented: surveys and reports, sackings, the provision of guidelines, mentoring and training for staff. But what role can academics play? As we noted micro-moment after micro-moment of sleaze at the Frankfurt Book Fair, we saw our contacts on social media sharing #MeToo accounts. Things clicked into place. We were struck by the same phenomenon that [one survey respondent](#) called the “white noise of daily harassment”, a wearying and damaging experience. We wondered how to represent or even play with this participant observation. Could we arm women at the Fair with old-fashioned tally counters, the sort used to count passengers on public transport or numbers in a crowd, for them to click each time they encountered sleaze? A low-tech Sleaze-O-Meter? How would it feel to click after each mansplain or leer? Would there be a tiny satisfaction in the material act of punching the button, somewhat akin to an eye-roll? How might this private, low-tech act of resistance complement the digitally-enabled sharing of #MeToo? How many times would the Sleaze-O-Meters be clicked in the course of an hour, a day, the whole Book Fair? What would, or could, we do with the data? How would we transform our thinking into scholarly direct action?

The Sleaze-O-Meter is a non-actualised project, a think-piece. But we’ve acquired the first six hand-held, mechanical tally counters. A creative, playful intervention is forthcoming.

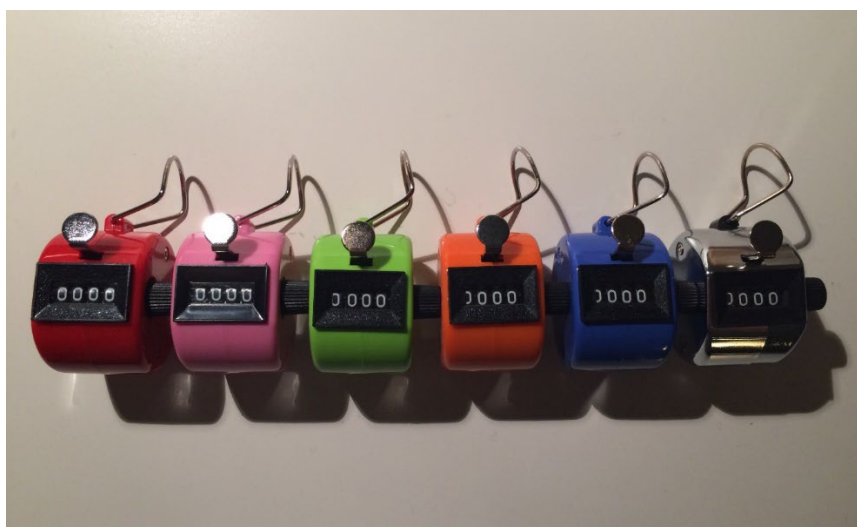


Figure 3: Sleaze-O-Meters

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