

**The Second Sexism and (the ethics of) the Fourth Estate:
A Response to Rebecca Davis**

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Rebecca Davis deserves a measure of credit. Unlike some other journalists who have commented on *The Second Sexism*, she has made *some* effort not to caricature my views, and she has appropriately indicated how I reply to *some* of the obvious objections that are levelled against my arguments by those who have only heard them second-hand. However, her journalistic virtue has its limits and is frequently overtaken by her own disagreement with my conclusions.

Indeed, we are given a taste of this in the opening lines of her piece, where I am characterized as “a victim twice over” – as a man (and thus a victim of second sexism) and as the misunderstood author of a book on this topic. As I have never presented myself as a *victim*¹ this is a curious way to begin. But the introduction has a certain rhetorical force – and one, ironically, that stems from the second sexism. Male victims do not elicit the kind of sympathy that female ones do, and there is even less sympathy for males who present themselves as victims. They are regarded as whingers who should toughen up. These are the sentiments into which the introduction taps when (falsely) presenting me as a self-declared victim.

It is not uncommon for journalists to take shortcuts. What is less common is for them to blame others when those shortcuts lead them to error. Instead of reading my book before she wrote about it, Rebecca Davis attended a seminar at which I spoke about some of its central themes. When readers responded to her article by noting that she had misunderstood me, she defended herself in astounding ways.

¹ I have noted that my arguments have been misconstrued, but that is different from claiming to be a victim in the more loaded sense in which Ms Davis uses the term.

She said that “with the book not widely available, all one can go on is the presentation by the author”. Perhaps she is correct that the book is not (yet?) in many South African bookshops, but since when are journalists so easily stumped? Any bookshop could order it for her. Alternatively, has Ms Davis, a journalist for an online magazine, not heard that one can order books on the web? The book is even available for instant download to a Kindle, if she has one. If not, she could have requested a review copy from the publisher. Finally, as Vinayak Bhardwaj observed in his response to Ms Davis’ article, a detailed essay of mine on the topic is freely available on the internet. The local unavailability of the book within a few weeks of its being published abroad is hardly an excuse for a journalist’s shortcut.

Ms Davis also seeks to defend herself against Mr Bhardwaj’s criticisms by claiming that her criticism of me was “exactly proportionate to the care with which the claims were made” by me in my seminar. Here we see Ms Davis blaming *me* for those shortcomings of her article that result from her having taken a shortcut to comment on my book.

In support of her claim that the fault lies with me, she reveals that she recorded the seminar. This recording was made without my knowledge or permission. No matter how widespread that practice might be it is unethical. It is a basic courtesy to ask for permission to record a presentation. When I learned of the recording and requested a copy, Ms Davis replied saying that while she would have no objection to providing me with the recording, her editor has advised her that “it is simply policy (and media best practice) not to part with these recordings without a court order”.

It is not clear to me why “media best practice” is to withhold recordings from those involuntarily recorded², but I can certainly see why this policy would serve the interests of the media – they can make claims about what people have said without those people being able to verify or falsify those claims unless they go to the trouble and expense of obtaining a court order. It is a very convenient policy to have.

² Releasing the recording to those other than me would put the *Daily Maverick* on weaker moral and legal ground, but my request was that they give *me* a copy of the recording.

In the face of this policy, I have to rely on my memory. I very much doubt that I referred in my presentation to “female circumcision”, as Rebecca Hodes claims in her response to Jacques Rousseau’s comment on Rebecca Davis’ article. I doubt this because, with two exceptions, it is not the terminology I use. I standardly refer to “female genital cutting” which is neither as misleading as “female circumcision” nor as emotive as “female genital mutilation”. One exception is when I am referring to others’ use of the term “female circumcision”, in which case I use scare quotes (which if expressed by finger signals in a presentation, would not be apparent on an audio recording in any event). The other exception is to use the term when referring to that version of female genital cutting that is most closely analogous to male circumcision, namely the removal of the clitoral prepuce and nothing more.

It is thus my belief that Rebecca Hodes simply misunderstood me and not through any fault of mine. My guess is that she leapt to the conclusion that I was speaking about female genital cutting as it is commonly practised (that is, some version of clitoridectomy) and not to those forms that are analogous to male circumcision or are less severe. But whether or not I bear any responsibility for her original misunderstanding, I made it absolutely clear in responding to her comment during the discussion after my presentation, that I was speaking about forms of female genital cutting that were much less severe than male circumcision. There is thus no excuse at all for Rebecca Davis to have repeated the misunderstanding in her article and to note limply that “Benatar says he addresses this argument [that male circumcision and clitoridectomy are very different practices] in more detail in his book”. I addressed the matter in the discussion following the seminar and it should be in Ms Davis’ illicit recording.

Rebecca Davis makes a further claim in response to Mr Bhardwaj’s criticism that she mischaracterized my views. She says that if “it is the case that the ideas involved are too complex to be condensed into a short public talk, then perhaps those fora should be avoided”. What are we to make of this self-exculpation?

If a journalist writing about a book does not actually read the book she is commenting on, she should not expect others with a more casual interest in the topic to read it.

This leaves a book author in the following predicament: Either he can present an overview of the book in a seminar such as the one I gave, or he must accept that a book's ideas will only be accessible to those who read it. Faced with that choice, it is not unreasonable to choose the former option even though it is impossible in a period of twenty minutes to present every nuance of a book of a few hundred pages. The seminar was followed by time for questions and discussion. Members of the audience were free to ask about any matter that they wanted explained in more detail or to raise any challenges. One such challenge was about circumcision. I clarified the issues, but Ms Davis chose to ignore the further explanation in her article, instead focusing on the original misunderstanding of somebody in the audience. That does not mean that the talk should not have been given. It means that she should have written a better article. If she was unable to do the necessary work to comment on the book then, by her own reasoning, perhaps she should have avoided writing the article.