

# Managing argumentative potential in the networked public sphere: The anti-#MeToo manifesto as a case in point

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**ABSTRACT:** The controversy around the Anti-#MeToo Manifesto is undoubtedly a reflection of ‘a central rift within feminism’ today. Nevertheless, a closer look reveals that the divide has also been deepened by a series of clumsy discursive choices and misunderstandings. This paper offers an argumentative analysis that highlights the controversy’s unfortunate turns, sheds light on the divide, and shows how important and yet how arduous a task it is to manage the argumentative potential of one’s discursive choices in today’s networked public sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** agency argument, argumentative associate, argumentative potential, disagreement network, feminism, #MeToo, rape apology, standing standpoint, networked public sphere

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2017, a tweet reignited a movement set to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in society. In the tweet, actress and activist Alyssa Milano called on women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted, to tweet back ‘me too’ (Milano 2017). The phrase, which had been used by civil rights activist Tarana Burke already in 2006, was now becoming the viral hashtag #MeToo. By Monday morning, tens of thousands had already used it, many of which sharing stories too. Responses came from activists, celebrities and ordinary people alike: On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours. Soon, the phrase spread beyond social media: Columnists in major news and media outlets all over the world were using and discussing it. The hashtag trended in at least 85 countries, with local alternative hashtags such as #أنا\_كمان in Arab countries, #MoiAussi in French-speaking Canada, #我也是 and #WoYeShi in China, #QuellaVoltaChe in Italy, and #balanceTonPorc in France. A mass movement was reigniting to spread awareness of the magnitude of the problem and to empower women through empathy.

As the #MeToo movement was gaining momentum by the day, unsurprisingly, critical voices were mounting too. One of the strongest critical reactions came in the form of an open letter published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* in January 2018. The letter, signed by 100 French women, was presented as a statement in favour of the agency of women against “enslaving them to a status of eternal victim” and “reducing them to defenseless preys of male chauvinist demons”.<sup>1</sup> What became known as the Anti-#MeToo Manifesto rejected the movement’s ‘naming and shaming’ of men, defended the ‘freedom to pester’ and urged women to respond to it in “ways other than closing off in the role of the prey” (Le Monde 2018). The manifesto provoked outrage and was described as a clumsy and shocking rape apology. As criticism and counter-criticism were exchanged, it became clear that the charge, though obviously rejected by the signatories, could not be laid off as baseless. The resonance

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<sup>1</sup> The letter was written by Abnousse Shalmani. Most famous among its 100 signatories are actress Catherine Deneuve, radio host Brigitte Lahaie, feminist activist Caroline De Haas, art critic and author Catherine Millet.

between (parts of) the manifesto and arguments that undermine the seriousness of sexual assault could not be dismissed. A few of the signatories, including actress Catherine Deneuve, felt compelled to clarify and apologise. In a new letter, published in *Liberation* a week after the manifesto appeared in *Le Monde*, Deneuve eventually apologised to rape victims who might have been offended by the manifesto (Liberation 2018).

Undoubtedly, the controversy around the manifesto is a reflection of a *central rift within feminism* today: a divide between “two distinct understandings of sexism, and two wildly different, often incompatible ideas of how that problem should be solved” (The Guardian 2018b).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, a closer look at how the controversy developed reveals that the divide, undeniably serious, has also been deepened by a series of clumsy discursive choices and misunderstandings. Through its unfortunate turns, the controversy indeed shows how important and yet how arduous a task it is to manage the argumentative potential of one’s discursive choices in today’s networked public sphere. In the web of entangled issue, arguers often fail to prevent their own arguments from being interpreted as support for positions other than the ones they wish to support. When this happens, they are compelled to clarify and apologise.

In this paper, I analyse the controversy aiming to explain how the manifesto ended up being interpreted as a rape apology. I examine the manifesto’s arguments as well the reactions to it and the subsequent apology. The analysis will highlight the failure to curb the argumentative potential of manifesto’s arguments, how it came about and its consequences. It will reveal how, in the manifesto’s case, by dint of its maladroitness as well as other clumsy statements made later by some of its signatories, the manifesto was (mis-)interpreted as defending a position that undermines the seriousness of alleged sexual assaults and excuses the assailant or blames the assaulted for it. It will also explain how, subsequently, the apology seeks to reinstate an understanding where the support the manifesto could give to these positions is denied.

The paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction, I present a brief exposé of the methods and theoretical tools used in the analysis (Section 2). Following that, I reconstruct the manifesto and present its main arguments (section 3). Then, I analyse the reactions and subsequent apology (Section 4). Finally, I discuss the implications of the analysis and further research.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In analysing the controversy unfolding, I reconstruct the arguments of the manifesto, following the reconstruction method developed by van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs and Jackson (1993), and analyse the reactions to it and the subsequent apology using the concepts of *standing standpoint* and *argumentative associates* (Mohammed, 2018b).

The reconstruction following van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs and Jackson (1993) highlights the role different premises play in support of the different claims made, while focusing on the disagreement that gives rise to argumentation. Accordingly, argumentation is understood as the exchange of reasons in the context of disagreement (Jackson & Jacobs 1980, Lewiński & Mohammed 2016). Applying dialectical transformations to the text will reveal the underlying argumentative structure maintaining a dual commitment to usefulness and adequacy in description (van Eemeren et al. 1993). The method is well suited for the

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<sup>2</sup> As the analysis of Moira Donegan shows, the #MeToo movement represents an approach that is “expansive, communal, idealistic and premised on the ideals of mutual interest and solidarity”, while the Manifesto represents one which is “individualist, hard-headed, grounded in ideals of pragmatism, realism and self-sufficiency”.

analysis of argumentation occurring under less-than-ideal conditions and conducted by less-than-ideal participants (ibid), that is of naturally occurring argumentation (Jackson 2018).

Among the concepts used in the analysis, two concepts are crucial for making sense of the way the controversy unfolds and the (mis-)understanding of the manifesto as a rape apology emerges. The concepts are tailored to the open-endedness typical of the networked public sphere (Benkler 2006, Kaiser et al. 2017, Pfitser 2014) and characteristic of the #MeToo controversy.

Firstly, the concept of *standing standpoint* (Mohammed 2018b) is used in order to highlight the argumentative potential that argumentative choices have in the networked public sphere. The concept refers to standpoints not expressed explicitly by arguers and yet justifiably attributable to them in virtue of premises that have become publicly associated with them. Think of premises such as the second amendment to the US constitution, when invoked in the context of discussing gun policy. The premise has become associated with defending opposition to gun control that it suffices that one invokes the amendment for one to be attributed that position. As long as there is no evidence to the opposite, the position may be attributed as a *standing standpoint* to an arguer who asserts the premise. The standpoint is *standing* just as in a standing declaration (Searle, 1995): it takes effect only once a certain context is in place. The attribution of a *standing standpoint* is presumptive: it can be reversed if an arguer advances what may count as evidence that denies the arguer's commitment to the standpoint. For example, an arguer invoking the second amendment may make it clear that what they oppose is total ban of gun ownership rather than gun control in general.

Secondly, the concept of *argumentative associates* (Mohammed 2018b) is used in order to capture the collective and polylogical (Lewiński & Aakhus 2013) nature of arguing in the network public sphere. Roughly speaking, *argumentative associates* of an arguer A are those arguers who share with arguer A general positions. Argumentative association may be based in the membership of an institution (Government, committee, ... etc), but may as well form on the basis of collective action. The signatories of the manifesto are good examples of *argumentative associates* emerging voluntarily out of collective action. An important consequence of the association is a defeasible transferability of commitments (Mohammed 2018a, b). An arguer may be attributed the position of her *argumentative associates*, in the area where they are *associates*, as long as she does not distance herself from these positions. As the analysis below will show, the concept provides a crucial tool to make sense of the controversy over the anti-#MeToo manifesto.

### 3. THE ANTI-#METOO MANIFESTO: THE ARGUMENTS

The manifesto makes three main claims.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, the manifesto argues that *The #MeToo movement has gone too far*. In support of this claim, three main lines of arguments are advanced. Each of the lines concerns an area harmed by the movement: women, men and the arts. The manifesto argues that the movement which had begun as an attempt to free women up to speak “has today turned into the opposite”: “instead of helping women, this frenzy to send the male chauvinist 'pigs' to the abattoir actually helps the enemies of sexual liberty”. Furthermore, the movement has ‘named and shamed’ men without giving them the chance to respond or defend themselves, the manifesto claims. Men are named and shamed, “while the only thing they did wrong was touching a knee, trying to steal a kiss, or speaking about ‘intimate’ things at a work dinner, or sending sexually-charged messages to women who did not share the attraction”, the text reads. Finally, the movement has caused a ‘purging wave’ in

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<sup>3</sup> The summary of the arguments is based on the analytic reconstruction on the manifesto following method of van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jacobs and Jackson (1993).

the arts, the manifesto laments: #MeToo proponents have called for the removal of a Balthus painting from a museum, Cinémathèque Française is told not to hold a Roman Polanski retrospective ... etc.

The second main point defended in the manifesto is a call for protecting ‘the freedom to pester’ (or to bother, in French *importuner*). *The freedom to pester needs to be protected* for it is *indispensable to sexual freedom*, the text argues. Protecting sexual freedom is a strong concern for the manifesto signatories. This isn’t surprising considering that many of them come from a generation which fought for sexual liberation in the sixties and seventies. The text argues that “the freedom to say no to a sexual proposition cannot exist without the freedom to pester”. In defending the freedom to pester, the manifesto seeks to distinguish between ‘an awkward attempt to pick someone up’ from ‘sexual attack’. In a rather boastful manner, the signatories assert that they “are clear-eyed enough not to confuse” one with the other.

Finally, the manifesto expresses opposition to “a certain feminism that takes the face of a hatred of men and of sexuality”. Here, the signatories seem to be defending a French version of feminism in opposition to an *Anglo-Saxon* one. The main argument here is that *there is no need for the (false Anglo-Saxon) dichotomy of feminism and femininity*. This is, as the manifesto explains, because:

a woman can, in the same day, lead a professional team and enjoy being the sexual object of a man, without being a ‘promiscuous woman,’ nor a vile accomplice of patriarchy. She can make sure that her wages are equal to a man’s but not be traumatised forever by a fonder on the metro, even if that is regarded as an offense. She can even consider this act as the expression of a great sexual deprivation, or even as a non-event.

Consequently, women are urged to respond to the freedom to pester “in ways other than by closing ourselves off in the role of the prey”. In another attempt to distinguish themselves from the version of feminism they reject, they proclaim that it is ‘wiser’ to raise “daughters in a way that they may be sufficiently informed and aware to fully live their lives without being intimidated or blamed”:

Incidents that can affect a woman’s body do not necessarily affect her dignity and must not, as difficult as they can be, necessarily make her a perpetual victim. Because we are not reducible to our bodies. Our inner freedom is inviolable. And this freedom that we cherish is not without risks and responsibilities.

With such rather moralising tone, the manifesto concludes.

#### 4. THE MANIFESTO AS A RAPE APOLOGY: FAILURE TO CURB ARGUMENTATIVE POTENTIAL

In spite of a few fair points made, it was to be expected that the manifesto is described as provocative, clumsy and shocking. Paying attention to the way it was written, and considering the state of the public controversy, it isn’t too surprising that the defence of ‘the freedom to pester’ was understood as ‘standing with those making excuses to torch powerless women’ (The Guardian 2018a), a position ‘contemptuous of the victims of abuse and harassment’ (Franceinfo 2018). In its most extreme version, the criticism called the signatories rape apologists, ‘lobotomised’ by ‘interiorised misogyny’ (Argento 2018).

As the name suggests, the rape apologist charge criticises the act of making excuses for rape. The charge is more generally used to include undermining the seriousness of alleged sexual assaults, excusing the assailant or blaming the assaulted for it. Premises typically associated with a rape apologist argument involve shifting the responsibility to the assaulted,

for example by saying that she wore a short skirt; had a reputation; flirted with the rapist beforehand; had previously had sex with the rapist; was friendly towards the rapist afterwards ... etc. Other premises undermine the magnitude of sexual assault as a problem: it is infrequent, misreported, over-reported, not that big a deal ... etc.

Needless to say, the manifesto does not offer any such premise directly. Yet, that it has been (mis-)understood as such seems to be to some extent justified. In view of the disagreement space in which it occurs, the manifesto may be interpreted as part of a rape apologist argument. This may not be what its signatories wish to do, yet there seems to be something in the manifesto that has the potential to support such views. Otherwise, the signatories wouldn't be compelled to clarify and apologise.

In her clarification and apology, published in *Liberation* on the 15 of January 2018, Deneuve reaffirms commitments to “the spirit of the manifesto”, but clarifies what she takes to be the misunderstanding: she stresses that she does believe sexual harassment and assault are real problems, and apologises to “all victims of unpleasant sexual acts who read the letter and felt hurt by it”. Looking at what is it exactly that Deneuve clarifies and apologises for is a good first step for understanding how the (mis-)understanding of the manifesto came about. In what follows, I analyse three particular excerpts from the apology and trace them back to excerpts from the original manifesto.

#### *4.1 Undermining the seriousness of sexual assault as a problem*

In reference to the men ‘named and shamed’ by the #MeToo movement, Deneuve begins her clarification by saying “I’m not making excuses for these men. I pass no judgment on their guilt or innocence”. Deneuve feels compelled to deny that she is making excuses for these men because a few passages in the manifesto may be understood just like that. For example, in lamenting the harm the #MeToo movement is inflicting on men, the manifesto text reads:

This expedited justice already has its victims, men prevented from practicing their profession as punishment, forced to resign, etc., while the only thing they did wrong was touching a knee, trying to steal a kiss, or speaking about ‘intimate’ things at a work dinner, or sending sexually-charged messages to women who did not share the attraction.

While the manifesto may not be offering excuses for all men accused of sexual assault, the text is clearly excusing those who ‘touch a knee’, ‘try to steal a kiss’ ... etc. When these are acts of unwanted sexual advances, it is hardly a straw man to take the passage above to be arguing that *men are excused for making some unwanted sexual advances*.

The passage plays into the view that *the problem of sexual assault is exaggerated*, too. Using ‘while the only thing they did wrong’ assumes considering what follows no big deal, when what follows are in fact acts of unwanted sexual advances. The assumption conveyed, namely that *making some unwanted sexual advances is no big deal*, has been typically associated with the rape apologist view that *the problem of sexual assault is exaggerated*. Furthermore, in another passage, the manifesto may be read as undermining the seriousness of even those which are ‘aggressive’ among sexual advances. In defending the view that *freedom to pester is indispensable to sexual freedom*, the manifesto argues that:

[...] the sexual urge is by its nature wild and aggressive. But we are also clear-eyed enough not to confuse an awkward attempt to pick someone up with a sexual attack.

Undermining the seriousness of aggressive advances is another position often advanced in support of the view that *sexual assault is over-reported*.

Deneuve may be right, the manifesto does not pass an explicit ‘judgment on the guilt or innocence’ of men accused of sexual assault. Nevertheless, the text has in it what undermines the seriousness of sexual assault as a problem. The discursive choices made convey premises which are typically associated with this view. The text assumes that *making some unwanted sexual advances is no big deal* which is typically used to defend the view that *men are excused for making some unwanted sexual advances*. Furthermore, the manifesto suggests that *aggressive sexual advances are not sexual attacks* which is a premise typically used to support the claim that *the problem of sexual assault is exaggerated*. In view of the public association between these premises and claims, the claims may be attributed to the manifesto as *standing standpoints*. That is, unless evidence to the opposite is offered, the premises assumed and suggested in the text justify an interpretation of the text as making these claims.

Eventually, the manifesto may be understood as a rape apology as a result of the argumentative potential of formulations that it has. While the intent of the signatories, Deneuve claims, was to defend sexual freedom, the choices made invoked claims related to the seriousness of the issue of sexual assault. An unwanted argumentative potential was not curbed – one way it could have been would have been to argue against the undesired claim. If, indeed, Deneuve et al. did not intend to argue that *men are excused for making some unwanted sexual advances*, nor that *the problem of sexual assault is exaggerated*, then not curbing the undesired potential is a case of *maladroit craft*. At best, the text was clumsy and failed to control the argumentative potential that its discursive choices have.

#### 4.2 Anything good about harassment?

Another important ‘clarification’ Deneuve makes relates to whether or not there is anything good about harassment: “nowhere in the petition does it say that there is anything good about harassment, or I would not have signed it”, she says. Here again, Deneuve denies commitment to an undesired claim that has been attributed to the manifesto. In this case, there are two bases for attributing to Deneuve et al. the position that she denies, namely that *women can get something good out of harassment*.

Firstly, similar to the position undermining the seriousness of sexual assault as a problem, the position that *women can get something good out of harassment* can be attributed to the manifesto on the basis of its discursive choices. In the vain of promoting *seduction a la Française*, the manifesto asserts that a “woman can [...] enjoy being the sexual object of a man”. While as such it may be benign, the assertion has been publicly associated with the view that *in spite of what they claim, women do enjoy sexual harassment*. Furthermore, the manifesto makes no effort to avoid association with this view. That could have been done for example by acknowledging the suffering of women who are sexually assaulted. Even to the opposite, as the third item in the apology shows, the manifesto exhibits a total lack of empathy with the women who undergo sexual assault. Here too, the view that *in spite of what they claim, women do enjoy sexual harassment* may be attributed to Deneuve et al as a *standing standpoint*. The attribution may be justified on the basis of discursive choices, public association and lack of evidence to the opposite, but not just that. The clumsy craft is combined with explicit claims made beyond the manifesto.

Indeed, another basis for interpreting the manifesto as claiming that *women can get something good out of harassment* is an explicit claim made by one the signatories, Brigitte Lahaie. In a TV debate a few days after the manifesto was published, the radio talk show host and film actress stated that “One can have pleasure during a rape”. Deneuve’s apology makes direct reference to this statement: “To state on national television that a woman can climax during rape is worse than spitting in the faces off all women who have had to endure such a

crime”. Having signed the manifesto together, Deneuve and Lahaie may be considered *argumentative associates* (Mohammed 2018b), at least when it comes to issues related to sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement. The argumentative association entails a certain *transferability of commitments* between Lahaie and the other signatories. Deneuve et al. may be attributed their Lahaie’s position as a *standing standpoint* that takes force in the absence of evidence to the opposite. The transferability is defeasible and can be annulled by dissociating oneself from the arguer assuming the undesired position, which is what Deneuve’s apology seeks to achieve.

#### 4.3 Offending the victims

A third position attributed to the manifesto and found undesirable by Deneuve is one of lacking empathy for and solidarity with the victims of sexual assault. To that, she writes: “Let me acknowledge those of my fellow women who have been the victims of abhorrent acts and felt offended by the article in *Le Monde*. I apologize to them, and to them alone”. The lack of solidarity position too is attributed to Deneuve et al. on the basis of the manifesto’s discursive choices as well as positions assumed by *argumentative associates*.

Not only does the manifesto lack explicit acknowledgment of the suffering of women who are sexually assaulted, but the text of the manifesto is rife with what may be described as an arrogant language that patronises the women involved in the #MeToo movement, including those who shared their experiences. In distancing themselves from the movement, the 100 women boast:

We are clear-eyed enough not to confuse an awkward attempt to pick someone up with a sexual attack. Above all, we are aware that [...] a woman can [...] make sure that her wages are equal to a man’s but not be traumatised forever by a fonder on the metro [...]. She can even consider this act [...] as a non-event.  
[...] we consider that one must know how to respond to this freedom to bother in ways other than by closing ourselves off in the role of the prey...

The immodest language may have been well-intended, possibly to affirm the signatories’ agency, strength and sovereignty over their bodies, or even better to assert the possibility of empowering other women too. Nevertheless, the contrast it emphasised let away that insolent contempt of the victims of abuse and harassment (Franceinfo 2018).

Here too, it didn’t help the signatories that *argumentative associates* of the manifesto have been explicit in assuming an apathetic patronising position. A few days before the manifesto was published, New York Times columnist Daphne Merkin, for example, wrote addressing the women coming forward: “Grow up, this is real life” (NYTimes 2018). The manifesto was no doubt interpreted in view of such statements. The boastful language, a clumsy craft at best, invoked that position of tolerance to sexual harassment as ‘real life’ and of disdain to women who are ‘traumatised forever’ by it. The position is definitely not impertinent to the rape apologist inclination to undermine sexual harassment as a problem of vulnerable women who aren’t fit for the challenges of modern life.

## 5. DISCUSSION: THE MANIFESTO IN THE COMPLEX DISAGREEMENT NETWORK

As the three examples above show, analysing the manifesto’s argumentative potential is crucial for understanding how the interpretation of the manifesto as a rape apology emerges. The manifesto includes several discursive choices that convey premises typically associated with a relative tolerance of sexual harassment. The discursive choices and the association

between the premises and these views makes such views *standing standpoints* attributable in the absence of evidence to the opposite, i.e., given the lack of effort to curb this argumentative potential. Even more so in view of positions assumed by *argumentative associates* (e.g. fellow manifesto signatories, supporters of it ... etc.). All in all, the *standing standpoints* tolerant of sexual assault are by no means baseless. The manifesto was (justifiably) misunderstood, hence the Deneuve apology.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the analysis using the concepts of *standing standpoint* and *argumentative associates* highlights the complexity of the task of managing the argumentative potential of one's discursive choices in today's networked public sphere. Especially when argumentation involves multiple parties in multiple places (Aakhus & Lewiński 2017) pursuing multiple goals (Mohammed 2016a), multiple issues are intertwined and different disagreement lines crisscross and overlap (Mohammed 2016b, forth.). Eventually, arguers may and do fail to prevent their own arguments from being interpreted as supporting positions other than the ones they wish to support. In this controversy, a crucial disagreement overlap occurs around the question of agency - agency broadly understood as the ability to make choices and act accordingly. Ironically, in its general form, women agency is a premise shared between a trend of feminism and rape apologists. Feminists use the premise to empower women and give them back control over their bodies and destiny. Rape apologists use it to blame them for the assault, make excuses for men or to undermine the assault committed by them. That is to say that the agency premise is part of (at least) two already publicly established argumentative patterns which are considerably different, almost opposite: women are agents therefore women deserve more emancipation and women are agents therefore men cannot be blamed if women choose not to say no.

What we have here is clear case of disagreement within a network (Lewiński & Mohammed 2015) rather than disagreement between two consistently conflicting camps. The agency premise is one place where the disagreement lines crisscross and overlap. Looking at the disagreement as a network, it becomes also clear that central to the rift between the #MeToo movement and the manifesto supporters is what each considers crucial: while the #MeToo focuses on the abuse of power and solidarity with its victims, the manifesto cherishes agency and sexual freedom. The issues are entangled, and as the analysis in this paper shows, the manifesto was clumsily crafted, leading to a bumpy path within the complex network. A vigilant arguer who did not intend to excuse sexual assault would have made the effort to curb the undesired argumentative potential of the agency premise once she had used it (see Mohammed 2018b for examples of arguers' attempts to control the argumentative potential of their choices). As the manifesto case shows, arguers may be held responsible for the uncurbed potential of their arguments: when one fails to anticipate and curb the undesired argumentative potential of one's assertions, one ought to clarify and apologise.

Needless to say that by highlighting the clumsiness of the manifesto and the failure of its signatories to manage the argumentative potential of their text, I am not undermining their case nor favouring the cases of their opponents. Not to fall into the same trap myself, let me end with a disclaimer: The analysis in this paper is not intended to compare the

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<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the analysis makes no assumption of sincerity on behalf of Deneuve. The apology may be genuine: the *standing standpoints* were not intended, and not distancing the manifesto from them was a *faux pas*, a clumsy move. Keeping under control the contribution one's arguments make to the different interrelated issues requires careful craft and is subject to failure. But the analysis holds even in the case of Deneuve's being a *fauxpology*: the *standing standpoints* were in fact intended but Deneuve could not bear the consequences of assuming them so she makes the effort to deny assuming them. This is a plausible interpretation given that Deneuve's controversial stance on sexual assault is not new. In March 2017, while discussing her support for filmmaker Roman Polanski, who is wanted in the US for the statutory rape of a 13-year-old girl in 1977, she said that she "always found the word 'rape' excessive."



communicative competence of the opponents. The author believes that the #MeToo movement has also had its clumsiness and failures to curb argumentative potential. But, that will have to be dealt with in works to follow.

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