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Book Review: Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Violence Online

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***Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Violence Online* by Bailey Poland, published in 2016 by Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press.**

By Shelagh Smith¹

The text measures 252 pages, with an additional forty pages of notes and references. This book is text-heavy; there are no illustrations or photographs. An index, notes, and a bibliography are included for convenience. The book is available in trade paperback with a list price of \$19.95. The author, Bailey Poland, identifies herself as a writer, feminist, and activist as well as the creator of “Leaves and Flowers,” a literary journal. Her previous publications include *Line Zero*, and she is the editor of *Involution: Stories, Poems, and Essays from the First Two Years of “Line Zero.”* She publishes a blog that can be found here: www.baileythebookworm.com/blog.

Poland’s most recent publication is *Haters: Harassment, Abuse and Online Violence* which describes the issue of rampant cybersexism and its fallout, not only for women, but for other underrepresented groups online as well. The text describes itself this way: “Using current events and the latest available research into cybersexism, Bailey Poland questions the motivations behind cybersexist activities and explores methods to reduce footprints of Internet misogyny, drawing parallels between online and offline abuse” (Poland, 2016). The text consists of seven chapters and a conclusion—a Call to Action. This review discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the text and its relation to current available research.

Despite the author’s main goal—to provide an understanding of the motivations behind cybersexist activities and ways to combat it—Chapters One and Two are among the most vital. Building upon earlier researchers and writers Sarah Jeong (*The Internet of Garbage*) and Barbara Ritter, these early chapters provide a foundation for the reader in a field which, admittedly, has not been thoroughly explored and investigated. By providing this foundation, the author creates a common lexicon upon which the book rests.

Chapter One makes the distinction between online and offline worlds, and breaks important material into clearly delineated sections (Dominance & Violence Offline, Political & Financial Power (and their implications), Media Stereotypes, Violence, Male Control of Conversation, Women’s Vocal Patterns, Male Dominance Online, Active & Passive Harassment, and Anonymity). This material sets the stage for the argument to come, arguments supported by the writings of Jeong, Danielle Citron, and others who describe online abuse and its effects. In addition to providing a necessary foundation, these early chapters bring into stark focus the severity and insidiousness of the problem with the use of examples that shatter common misconceptions about who are the purveyors and victims of online abuse. Perhaps one of the most startling revelations—worthy of further study—is the dispelling of the myth that online “trolls” are not simply frustrated young men, but are often older white men who not only perpetrate abusive activities, but actively work to downplay the negative effects of that abuse. This particular model of troll is dismissive, telling those who might take exception to the abuse to simply “get over it” (Poland, 2016, p. 27), attributing any sensitivity on the victim’s part to political correctness rather than recognizing the

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long-lasting damage to those targeted. Poland presents this revelation in depth with specific examples that illustrates to the reader the reach of cybersexism.

Chapter Two identifies the different types of cybersexism, including commonly known strategies such as mansplaining and harassment, but also addresses doxxing and SWATting, and the more obvious risks to women online (abuse, harassment, and threats). The strength of this chapter—beyond providing a framework for the types of abuse—is in its exploration of the “intersection of abuse” (p. 57). Often the strategies to diminish women’s voices online are used in tandem; this chapter, however, stops short in examining how different races and other marginalized groups are affected by abuse. This is not necessarily a fault of the text; it is simply due to a lack of research on the issue. Another area the author touches on but does not fully address is the idea of women’s online abuse of other women, but again the issue does not have a significant body of research from which to draw.

With the definition of cybersexism laid out in early chapters, Chapters Three and Four move into more concrete ideas, including a critique of why common tactics to combat sexism online fail, and the actual physical, professional, and psychological effects of encountering cybersexism. Short of providing a “how to manual” on what works and what doesn’t, these chapters examine the role women are expected to play in policing their own behaviors online to combat abuse. The chapters offer the reader a new lens through which to examine how women are expected to modify their own behavior, rather than placing the onus on the abuser to stop his/her behavior. These chapters skewer the common and facile argument of many abusers who use a 2014 Pew Research Center study (p. 70) to support their assertion that “everyone gets harassed” (p. 68), and their fall-back argument that everyone has a right to free speech. Poland does a solid job of examining the flaws in the Pew Research Center study as it applies to that defense, and places it in context with Sarah Jeong’s assertion that “Platforms that claim to uphold “free speech” are actually proactively engaged in moderation models that are not just mildly inconsistent with, but deeply averse to, the freedom of speech” (p. 81).

The findings in Chapter Three—that the common advice in handling online abuse are flawed—are supported by research provided in Chapter Four: *The Effects of Cybersexism*. This chapter discusses organizations like WHOA (Working to Halt Online Abuse) as one of the few organizations actively collecting information on cyber-abuse victims, and offers a startling insight as to the extensiveness of the acts and their effects. The author also cites the University of Maryland Electrical & Computer Engineering Department study that outlines the pervasiveness of cyberabuse by those who identify as women online, as well as the Ohio University study on women on gaming platforms. The chapter is rounded out by the potential career effects of cybersexism in a professional world increasingly reliant on platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook to make hiring and advancement decisions. To support the assertions in this chapter, Poland again uses case studies and examples to illustrate effects, and once again highlights that the onus of responsible online behavior falls on the victim to minimize their own victimization.

Chapters Six and Seven delve into how to deal with cybersexism. Chapter Six offers potential solutions beyond modifying behavior online, and offers specific tactics that anyone experiencing online harassment can follow today. Chapter Seven is primarily focused on the canon of cyberfeminism, exploring and challenging gender stereotypes, and the author engages her ideas well with those who have come before, including Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant and Danielle Citron. The chapter also offers information on women-based organizations online including Girls Who Code, Black Girls Code, and others. The chapter explores strategic separatism, as well as the crucial role that art and critique have in combating online abuse and harassment. It is perhaps the

most hopeful chapter of a text that ends with a strong call to action in the conclusion where Poland asserts that the “Internet can be more than playground for hateful misogynists venting anger on women without consequence” (p. 252).

In terms of structure, the chapters often end with a case study or example, including some of the most famous examples of cyber-abuse including Gamergate, weev’s attacks on game developer Kathy Sierra, attacks on human rights activist Mariam Veiszadeh, the suicide of Alyssa Funke, and others. These examples deeply personalize the text and allow the reader to see the very real consequences of what others might consider simply harmless online “chatter.” The examples also do a solid job in shoring up the author’s argument in the absence of hard research on the issues; ideally this text—and the examples presented—will be a call to future researchers to examine the impact of cybersexism on women and marginalized populations who have no choice but to interact online in our increasingly tech-centric society.

The only substantive weakness of this text lies not in the work itself, but in the field of study it explores. The author notes several times that there is no real research or data around the issues of cybersexism or cyberfeminism. She relies heavily on others’ work which is helpful in providing context for her arguments, but until there is a substantive body of research around the issues facing women online—research that focuses solely on women’s experiences in a true research standard (rather than anecdotal evidence) —the true scope of the problem cannot be fully evaluated, or, for that matter, addressed. Again, this is not the fault of Poland who makes a strong case, but rather the difficulty—or reluctance—to break through barriers mentioned in the text around women, the Internet, and technology. This book, however, may well serve as one of the forerunners of that research, and at the very least, provide a solid framework through which to view these issues.

A secondary weakness—and a very minor one at that—is the inclusion of information on men’s advocacy groups in Chapter Five. The author spends valuable space dissecting their arguments against female presence online; it is almost as if the author feels the need to justify her position which, unfortunately, undermines her assertion that women do not need to apologize or modify their behavior to fit men’s idea of what the Internet—or women’s role in the tech world—really is. While this information is interesting, it comes across as perhaps a bit self-conscious. Overall, this text provides a strong foundation on the issue with solid connections made to authors who have come before. This book serves as a strong companion piece to Laurie Penny’s 2013 book “Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet,” which also makes the case that to be a woman online is risky business.

In this current cultural climate where simply venturing into an online space requires steeling oneself from personal attack (modeled, sadly, by members of our own ruling class), it is a valuable resource and would make for an excellent initial foray into the issues women face online, issues not likely to be resolved in the near future.