

Laurie Penny

# CYBERSEXISM

Sex, Gender  
and Power on  
the Internet

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*Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet*

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**B L O O M S B U R Y**  
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‘Information wants nothing. People want to be free’ – Cory Doctorow

‘There are no girls on the Internet’ – 4chan

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## THIS IS FOR EVERYONE

The Internet is a godless place, but that's as close to an in-the-beginning-was-the-word as it gets. The phrase was coined by Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, in time for the London Olympics opening ceremony, but the principle that the Internet should be socially, economically and politically free, and that anyone anywhere should be able to use it to build new interactive platforms, extend the frontiers of human knowledge or just surf dating forums for cute redheads, is basically sound. This is for everyone. Or at least, it was supposed to be.

There was a time, not so long ago, when nerds, theorists and hackers, the first real colonisers of cyberspace, believed that the Internet would liberate us from gender. Science-fiction writers imagined a near future just on the edge of imagination, where people's physical bodies would become immaterial as we travelled beyond space and distance and made friends and connections and business deals all over the planet in the space of a split second. Why would it matter, in this brave new networked world, what sort of body you had? And if your body didn't matter, why would it matter if you were a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, or something else entirely?

*I'm twelve years old and I've started hanging out in the type of chat forums where everyone will pretend to believe you're a 45-year-old history teacher called George.* At the same time, the other half of the Internet seems intent on pretending that they are thirteen-year-old schoolgirls from the south coast of England. Amidst growing moral panic about paedophiles and teen sluts preying on one another in the murky, unpoliced backwaters of Myspace, I feel something a little akin to freedom. Here, my body, with all of its weight and anxiety, its blood and grease and embarrassing eruptions, is not important; only my words are important. I don't want to be just a girl, because I already know that being a girl is understood to be somewhat less than being a person. I want to be what web theorist Donna Haraway calls a cyborg:

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism ... I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

At the turn of the twenty-first century my tits were coming in and I wasn't at all impressed with the messy biopolitics of approaching adolescence. The Internet became part of my life early enough to be the coolest thing ever, and late enough that I have memories of GeoCities before it became a howling desert rolling with tumbleweed and dead pixels, and it seemed like a place where all of the bullshit, the boys and dress-codes and harassment and the way grown-up guys were starting to look at me, didn't matter. It was a place where I could be my 'real' self, rather than the self imposed by the ravening maw of girl-world that seemed to be opening to swallow me up. It turned out, though, as more and more of our daily lives migrated online, that it did matter if you were a boy or a girl on the Internet. It mattered a very great deal.

Users of the sprawling 4chan forum – a vast, anarchic, nameless playground of the collective id inhabited mainly but not exclusively by angry young men, which spawned the Anonymous activist network as well as half the stupid cat memes you used to giggle at while at work – declared early on that there were 'no girls on Internet.' That idea sounded like sweet freedom for a lot of us, but it turned out to be a threat.

Over the past two generations, the political map of the human heart has been redrawn first by feminism, and then by a change in technology which is altering for ever how and why and with whom we can communicate. The feminist revolution and the digital revolution have grown up together, and are both incomplete. They pose fundamental, frightening questions about the nature and organisation of human society that are deeply scary to those in power, and in both cases, the backlash is on.

## **NO GIRLS ON THE INTERNET**

'In ye olden tymes of 1987, the rhetoric was that we would change genders they way we change underwear,' says Clay Shirky, media theorist and author of *Here Comes Everybody*. '[But] a lot of it assumed that everyone would be happy passing as people like me – white, straight, male, middle-class and at least culturally Christian.' Shirky calls this 'the gender closet': 'people like me saying to people like you, "You can be treated just like a regular normal person and not like a woman at all, as long as we don't know you're a woman."'

It turned out that the Internet wasn't for everyone. Not really. Not yet. It was for boys, and if you weren't one you had to pretend to be, or you'd be dismissed. 'I'm fine with people deciding individually that they don't want to identify as female on the Internet – in the same way I'm fine with people deciding not to wear a short skirt if they feel afraid or uncomfortable – but no one should tell you to do that, and imply that if you don't comply you are somehow the one at fault,' says journalist Helen Lewis, who was among the first to speak out against online misogyny in the mainstream press. She says that such advice translates to 'duck, so that the shits abuse someone else'.

*I'm seventeen and I'm not allowed on the Internet and it feels like being gagged and blindfolded.* During the nine months I spent in a women's ward for the mentally interesting, the Internet was deemed a bad influence, possibly the worst, on young girls trying to become healthy, well-behaved women: all that porn, all that trash, all those poisonous pictures of very thin models shared on 'pro-ana' sites where we had encouraged each other to starve down to ecstatic skeletons before we were hospitalised.

The Internet was bad for us. It could only ever be bad for us. So were books and magazines, although television and clothing catalogues were allowed. We needed to be 'contained'. That was the word they used: 'contained'. This was precisely the sort of thinking that I'd tried to get away from by getting sick in the first place, but I wanted to be given a clean certificate of health so I could get out of that terrible place and get on with my life. And so I did what girls have always done in desperate situations, in order to survive when the body is contained. I wrote.

I began to write compulsively, in paper notebooks, because computers and smartphones were forbidden. I wrote late into the night and just for myself in a messy, spidery hand that I never showed to anyone, because it was purely mine. Years later when I saw the film *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen's account of being treated in a women's mental hospital in the 1960s, I was startled that the protagonist does the same, writing frantically in longhand like the pen is a shovel digging her out of the shallow grave of social mores where she's been buried alive. I wonder if this is why many women write, because it allows us to breathe.

Writing was always freedom for me. I'm aware that that's the sort of observation that belongs in my personal journal, which is why I kept them. By the time I was certified sane enough to walk the streets I had filled twenty volumes, and I continued to do so in the mad years that followed, years of homeless, precarious, teenage dicking-about and hanging on to a college place

with my fingernails whilst I wrote, learned to be human, wrote, learned to take care of myself, and wrote. And then, sometime after my nineteenth birthday, I discovered Livejournal, and everything changed.

It was my housemate, who I'd met in a cabaret audition, who turned me on to it. Specifically, she told me that this vast website full of teenage fan fiction, nerdy subgroups, and threaded comments of excitable strangers discussing politics and philosophy and the best place to get coffee in cities we'd never even heard of, was where she spent most of her time, and that if I ever wanted to talk to her, despite her being in the next room, I was going to have to join, and post. And so I picked a username out of a hat, this being the year before Facebook, when one's online handle was still a pseudonymous statement of identity, and started writing little blog entries. And that's how I learned to write in public, in a way far more immediate, far more enticing and personal, than the blank, limited space of the school newspaper could ever be.

I write to survive, but I learned how to be a writer online, and so did millions of other women all over the world. And not just how to write, but how to speak and listen, how to understand my own experience and raise my voice. I educated myself online. Grew up online. And on blogs and journals and, later, in the pages of digital magazines, I discovered that I wasn't the only pissed-off girl out there. The Internet made misogyny routine and sexual bullying easy, but first, it did something else. It gave women, girls and queer people space to speak to each other without limits, across borders, sharing stories and changing our reality.

This is the story of how the Net became a universe of infinite possibilities which women are often excluded from building or influencing. You can open your browser and stare into an exhilarating terrain of information exchange and creativity and silly film clips in which women and girls still know, as we know offline, that to participate fully is to risk violence and sexual harassment. The Internet is not monolithic. There are many internets, and some of them have facilitated new conversations and communities dedicated to raising awareness of women's liberation, gender issues, and the amount of work that's still to be done. But we have a brave new world, which looks far too much like the cruel old world. It doesn't have to be that way. Women, girls and everyone who believes that the future of human society should include women and girls as active agents are conspiring to reclaim the Internet for all of us.

## PICTURES OR IT DIDNT HAPPEN

The biggest thing we now learn about sex from the web is this: it happens in front of a camera. Welcome to the world of your tits on screen the next day. At nineteen years old, I was one of the first users of Facebook during its first few weeks of viral expansion in Europe – and that means I was amongst the first cohort to experience the cultural phenomenon of frantic next-day detagging. The lesson you learn, the lesson you have to learn, is that you are always potentially being watched and you must adjust your behaviour accordingly.

*Nineteen and getting my picture taken.* A warm October night in the front room of a student house where we still haven't understood the potential pitfalls of prancing around in our pants girls-gone-wild style, snogging and fumbling and demanding pictures to prove it, like any kids excited by mutual attention: look at us kissing; look at us touching. Pictures or it didn't happen. The next day I find myself tagged on my new profile kissing a female friend, pressed underneath her, hair and sweat and sideboob, giggling at something just off-camera. I detag, but for some reason I leave it up, mistaking the profile archive for the online equivalent of a personal photo album, as so many of us did in the early days. That was before we understood that giving anyone a picture of your breasts, whether a lover or a listed corporation, gives them power over you; before we learned that we had to take care and cover up in cyberspace just like we do in meatspace, in the nominally 'real' world.

Four years later, I'm in a conference hall, wearing sensible shoes and drinking a glass of juice, chatting nervously to an editor who has just given me a job as a political blogger, the magazine's youngest by far. I have won prizes and irritated politicians; suddenly everyone wants to talk to me. Including a bored-looking man in an overstuffed Marks and Spencer suit, one of the jaundiced breed of lifelong political wonks who begin to look middle-aged at around twenty-two and spend the next thirty years gradually expanding on a diet of other people's principles. He asks if he can speak to me alone.

The wonk tells me that a gossip site has pictures of me, and unless I'm nice to the men who run the site, unless I 'handle the situation', they're going to use them. Pictures of me at college with my boobs out, kissing another girl – shock, horror, same-sex snogging! Do I remember the picture? I do now. Yes. Well, I'd better watch out, because there are a lot of people who think I ought to be taken down a peg.

The site in question is the political blog the government fears, the one with dirt on everyone, the one that hates liberals and anyone who dares to have

principles in public almost but not quite as much as it seems to hate women. Particularly young women, or pretty women. Half the traffic to the site is driven by revealing or demeaning pictures of female journalists, politicians and public figures, close-ups on breasts and bottoms, fuelling comment threads full of one-handed rape fantasies where any and every woman in a position of influence can be ‘taken down a peg’. They let me know that they’re going to put my breasts on the Internet. They want me to know they have power over me.

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Only a minority of men use the Internet to harass women with relative impunity, but those who do attack do so out of a hatred, in part, for the presence of women and girls in public space, which is how the Internet still functions, for now. Those threats, however, are made infinitely more effective by public officials warning parents of young girls to keep their daughters offline if they don’t want them harassed, groomed or ‘sexualised’ – a term that seems to refer to the magical process whereby pre-teen girls catch a glimpse of some airbrushed boobs on a pop-up ad and are thereby transformed into wanton cybersluts, never to be reclaimed for Jesus.

The message is remarkably similar, in fact, to the lectures one imagines young girls receiving in the days before contraception, legal abortion and the relative relaxation of religious propriety: your sins will never be forgiven. One slip is enough to disgrace you for life. Naked on the Internet is different from being naked anywhere else, because there’s always a record. Or there could be. We grow up understanding that past indiscretions can never be erased. Don’t let your guard down or your skirt up for an instant, or you’ll be ruined. Not just pictures, but words, promises, furtive late-night search histories, will follow you for ever, and you will always be ashamed.

Although the technology is new, the language of shame and sin around women’s use of the Internet is very, very old. The answer seems to be the same as it always has been whenever there’s a moral panic about women in public space: just stay away. Don’t go into those new, exciting worlds; wait for the men to get there first and make it safe for you, and if that doesn’t happen, stay home and read a book.

People learn to code by playing in coded space. We learn the Internet by being there, by growing there, by trial and error and risk-taking. If the future is digital, if tech skills and an easy facility with the Internet are to be as essential as they appear for building any kind of career in the twenty-first century, then

what are we really saying when we tell girls and their parents that cyberspace is a dangerous place for them to be? We're saying precisely what we've said to young women for centuries: we'd love to have you here in the adult world of power and adventure, but you might get raped or harassed, so you'd better just sit back down and shut up and fix your face up pretty.

Perhaps one reason that women writers and technologists have, so far, the calmest and most comprehensive understanding of what surveillance technology really does to the human condition is that women grow up being watched. We grow up learning that someone is always looking at us and checking for misbehaviour, checking that our skirts are long enough, our thighs tight enough, our grades good enough, our voices soft enough. Whether or not anyone is actually watching and checking at any particular moment is less important than the fact that they might be, and if a lapse is observed the penalties will be dire.

Patriarchal surveillance was a daily feature of the lives of women and girls for centuries before the computer in every workplace and the camera in every pocket made it that much easier. The emotional logic of state and corporate surveillance works in very much the same way: the police, our employers, even our parents with network connections, may be watching only one in a thousand of our tweets, one in ten thousand of our indiscreet Facebook messages; they may only be watching one in a hundred CCTV cameras of the tens of thousands deployed around every major city; but we must always act as if we are observed and curb our behaviour accordingly.

The Internet is only 'public space', of course, in the way that a bar, a sidewalk or a shopping-mall are public space: ultimately, someone rich and mysterious owns that space and can kick you out if they don't like what you're doing there. Being aware of surveillance changes how you behave, how you live and love and tie your shoes and eat breakfast, what you say in public, what you read on the subway.

The first people to notice this were men and boys who had not grown up with the expectation of constantly being watched, who were horrified at the proliferation of spyware, private and state surveillance technology, data collection, CCTV cameras on every street corner, long-range police cameras making it impossible to hold a placard in the street without your face ending up on a database. In many states, it is now illegal to go out with a mask or bandana over your face. But this is nothing new – at least, not for women. As the journalist Madeline Ashby writes,

Apparently, it took the preponderance of closed-circuit television cameras for some men to

feel the intensity of the gaze that women have almost always been under ... It took Facebook. It took geo-location. That spirit of performativity you have about your citizenship now? That sense that someone's peering over your shoulder, watching everything you do and say and think and choose? That feeling of being observed? It's not a new facet of life in the 21st century. It's what it feels like for a girl.

Pictures of girls are one of the Internet's major commodities. Melissa Gira Grant, writing in *Dissent* magazine, identifies the activity of self-branding, self-promotion and social work online as a new 'second shift' of women's unpaid work, but it's more than that. It is, in many cases, part of the work you do for your boss, making your company look good, presenting the right image; we're encouraged to imagine that those who pay us, employ us or live with us might be monitoring us at all times, watching what we do and say. Make sure your Twitter feed doesn't embarrass your boss. Make sure your mum doesn't see pictures of what you did last night. Whether or not they are actually watching doesn't matter – we'd better behave, just in case. It takes to another level the traditional pose of paranoia and anal self-retention that has for centuries been called 'femininity'.

One of the most popular terms for all of this is 'NSFW', or 'not safe for work', an abbreviation coined on chat forums to prevent people accidentally opening links to pictures of fannies or gaping sphincters if there's a chance their boss might be peering over their shoulder. Now, however, 'not safe for work' has become shorthand for anything a bit risqué, especially if it involves pictures of women not wearing what their boss might be. It's rather appropriate, really, since if two decades of faux-feminist 'empowerment' culture have had a project, it has been to make women 'safe for work', rather than making work safe for women. Women's sexual bodies are not deemed 'safe for work', either literally or figuratively. We get to choose, online and offline, between the embattled paranoia of a 'good woman', respectful to her seniors and to men, never openly sexual, never asking questions or talking honestly about our own experiences, or the dark, tawdry world of 'bad women', where sluts who dare to have sex are humiliated and hurt. The ultimate power that men feel they hold over women is to drag them from one category to the other, and the Internet, with its boundless recording and publishing capabilities, can make this infinitely easier.

We cannot perfectly control our online selves any more than we can control the contours of our flesh. Bodies, like data, are leaky. Out of the mess of bodies and blood and bones and pixels and dreams and books and hopes we create this mess of reality we call a self; we make it and remake it. But obtaining a naked or next-to-naked picture of another person gives you power

over them.

In this age of images, the right to request no photos is a sign of truly intimidating social status, of money, power or both, and women, especially young women, almost never have that right. We don't have it in the privacy of our own homes, among friends, in our beds, with our lovers. Especially not with our lovers. In the retail corridor at the New Jersey Porn Expo, shoved in between stall after stall of tacky sex merchandise, was one unobtrusive stand selling hidden cameras, 'for personal security'.

The stallholder was cagey about why there was such a market for concealable recording gear of the type that could be easily stashed out of sight in, say, a bedroom. Some of our customers are just extremely keen on security, he insisted. Watch out for the blinking light, the panopticon eye flashing at the edge of sight.

The surrender of that power can be hugely sensual when it is done with consent – or sickening when it's coerced. Not so long ago, teenage boys would demand joyless fingering or badger female schoolmates into giving them a feel of their developing breasts in order to prove themselves cool and grown-up; nowadays a titty-picture does the job twice as well. A naked picture is never an empty boast: it is proof, proof of your power over another person, and culture still tells us that power over another person is what makes a boy into a man.

## **IT'S FOR YOUR OWN GOOD**

At the same time as girls everywhere are warned to stay offline if we want to preserve a paleo-Victorian notion of our 'reputation', we are told that sex and violence on the Internet isn't 'real'. A robot that can reach through the screen and grab your pink bits has not yet become a standard add-on with every laptop, so sex online can't be real. Can never be coercive.

It might help if we understood, as those who have grown up with half their life on screen instinctively understand, that sex on the Internet is real sex, real pleasure, real passion, whether or not it's 'authentic'. In a world of soft lighting, speed-dating, pleasure tools that pulse and buzz and tickle and shove and whine in half a million varieties of plastic and rubber and steel, in a world of breast implants, dick implants, of genitals shaved and sliced into pleasing

slits and bodies pumped and oiled and choreographed to ram into one another until one of them capitulates, we should have some pillow-talk over precisely what we mean by 'real sex'.

What's it like to date, fuck and fall in love when half your social interactions are online? A rash of textbooks and self-help manuals written in a rush of moral panic by contemporary pop psychologists would suggest that it is uniformly abject and exploitative, particularly for young women. Books with titles such as *Where Has My Little Girl Gone?* and *The Parent's Guide to Protecting Your Children in Cyberspace* advise us to keep kids away from the Net for as long as possible, and instruct parents to implement filtering and censorship systems so that we don't poison young minds or corrupt the innocence of young ladies.

It may seem odd that in an essay on gender politics on the Internet I've not yet mentioned pornography, which we're repeatedly told is the root of all sexism. I don't buy it. In porn, and online, as it is everywhere, sex isn't the problem; sexism is the problem. Online misogyny, like any other misogyny, is about power, resentment and frustration, and not about sexual overstimulation, although it can be sexually expressed. Blaming the vicious woman-hatred of men using the Internet to attack women and girls on pornography is, to a very great extent, letting them off the hook.

Social media long since overtook porn consumption as the thing most of us use the Internet for most frequently (Hinson & Wright, '[Social Media Overtakes Porn](#)'), and social media, because most of it is run by large, terrifying companies with large, terrifying legal teams, is terrified not just of pornography but of sexuality in general. Considering the imperial fuckton of porn available on the Internet, the surprising thing isn't how much it crosses over into our everyday lives, but how much it doesn't. Online and in real life (IRL), sex and gender still inhabit two separate worlds. One is a sanitised, sterilised, buttoned-down world of 'professional' conduct where we edit our extracurricular activities for the benefit of our employers and panic over our children being exposed to an accidentally flashed nipple. The other is a rabbit hole of hardcore heterosexual fucking that relies on its guilty, semi-legal status to disguise the fact that a depressing amount of its content is boring at best and violently misogynist at worst. It's a curious, schizophrenic splitting of sexuality from surface in a culture that is supposed to be all surface. Sex, as ever, isn't the problem. People's inability to deal with sex in a way that is not violent, guilty and contemptuous of women and girls is the problem.

For as long as there has been pornography on the web, there have been calls

to give state censors the power to shut it down. Blanket censorship of pornography, particularly ‘for the sake of the children’, would be a poor answer to the sexual dysfunction of our society even if it were possible. For a start, pornography, along with info-piracy and terrorism, has long been used to justify restricting access to the network as a whole, giving governments the power to control what can be seen by whom. It’s not about protecting women. It’s about controlling people, and so is the crackdown on women’s freedom online.

In 2013, British Prime Minister David Cameron instituted a mandatory filtering system for ISPs, obliging every household to ‘opt-out’ of ‘violent pornography’ and child pornography, and banning certain search terms. It quickly emerged, however, that the filtration system would also block ‘violent material’, ‘extremist’ content, ‘terrorist related’ content, ‘web forums’, ‘esoteric material’ and, of course, ‘web blocking circumvention tools’ – a checklist so broad that it would give the state, in co-operation with ISPs, the power to block almost any website.

Note that whilst using the ‘protecting women from harm’ line to promote the type of porn-block designed to appeal to swing voters, the same conservative government was kicking single mothers off welfare and stripping funding from domestic violence shelters all over the country. A great deal of harm is done in the name of saving people from themselves, and there is a very real risk that feminist rhetoric will be co-opted by people who have no real care for women to push an anti-sex, anti-transparency agenda.

It is terrifically difficult to achieve radical ends by conservative means, and censorship is invariably conservative. Personally, I’m always suspicious of any project that seeks to restrict women’s freedom in order to ‘protect’ us, just as I’m suspicious of any project that seeks to prevent children from finding things out before adults decide they’re meant to.

Censorship of the Internet is surely not the answer, because the Internet is not the reason for the supposed tide of filth and commercial sexuality we’re drowning in; in fact, young people today have less sex than their parents’ generation did at the same age. One has to ask: when, precisely, was the period of human history in which the spectrum of sexual adventure from marriage to mud-wrestling was not in some way mercenary, in some way manipulative; if there has ever truly been a time when people got into bed with one another without preconceptions or agendas, when abuse and violence did not take place, when women were not brutalised, when children were not taken advantage of. These things did not begin with the Internet, and the Internet, if

anything, is helping us to understand and talk about them over networks of intimacy and anger that did not exist twenty years ago.

I want to come right out and fly the flag for sex, for fucking and, yes, for love online. I am a digital romantic. I'm not the only one. Because sex online is real sex and love online is real love and everything in between is real, too, as real as your hand down your pants, your heart in your mouth. I say this for all of us who've ever felt our breath quicken when a particular user pic pops up on screen. For everyone who marvels that you can use a keyboard to construct a perfect rose that will never have the decency to decay. For the kids sexting each other on sticky smartphones while their parents sleep. For the fan-fiction writers sending their horny fairytales out into the dark like perfumed letters. For the student staying up late to hump a camera for her girlfriend in another time zone. For the Craigslist missed connections and the Chatroulette strangers. For the transsexual teenagers whispering lust and learning in chatrooms while smalltown bigots drive drunk through their disappearing fiefdoms. For the World of Warcraft lovers.

Sexuality online is real sexuality, and it's about far, far more than porn. It's the children who meet each other on self-harm forums sharing their most painful everyday secrets until the night when one of them posts in crisis and the others call from across the world in voices so familiar they forget they've never heard each other speak before. It's OKCupid and Fetlife. It's the camgirls and the cryptic personals and the amateur pornographers. It's passive-aggressive status updates, untagging and defriending and brokenhearted blogging. It's the second dates who tease each other with hyperlinks and the couples who send each other cat gifs at work. It's every neck-down naked picture I've ever sent to a boy I wanted to screw.

It's the hours positioning yourself on the sheets for the blink of a camera and touching yourself gently when the laptop shuts. It's the shy intellectuals spinning out message-board chats into something seductive. It's all of us who understand that how you fuck can be less important than how you talk about fucking. It's the lonely bedroom blogger flirting with a spambot. It's the bots who want to be loved and the lovers who want to be robots. It's the perverts, the dreamers and the shy, reaching out across the ether and running chilly fingers over each other's forebrains, and it's complicated. It's always complicated. But that doesn't mean it's not human.

## **A WOMAN'S OPINION IS THE SHORT SKIRT OF THE INTERNET**

‘There’s nothing wrong with [her] a couple of hours of cunt-kicking, garrotting and burying in a shallow grave wouldn’t sort out.’

Like many women with any sort of profile online, I’m used to messages of this sort – the violent rape and murder fantasies, the threats to my family and personal safety, the graphic emails with my face crudely pasted on to pictures of pornographic models performing sphincter-stretchingly implausible feats of physical endurance. This one appeared on a perfectly normal weekday on a racist, misogynist hate site based in the UK, dedicated to trashing and threatening public figures, mostly women. ‘The misogyny here is truly gobsmacking [and] more than a few steps into sadism,’ wrote Mary Beard, a television historian who was also hounded by users of the site Don’t Start Me Off. ‘It would be quite enough to put many women off appearing in public, contributing to political debate, especially as all of this comes up on Google.’

That, of course, is the point. It doesn’t matter if we’re young or old, classically attractive or proudly ungroomed, writers or politicians or comedians or bloggers or simply women daring to voice our opinions on Twitter. Any woman active online runs the risk of attracting these kinds of frantic hate-jerkers, or worse. I’m not the only person who has had stalkers hunting for her address; in 2013 I needed a security detail after several anonymous trolls threatened to turn up to a public lecture I was giving; and at the time of writing, I’m in a safe house after being one of several female journalists in the UK to receive a bomb threat. I could go on.

It’d be nice to think that the rot of rank sexism was confined to fringe sites. The truly frightening thing, though, is that the people sending these messages are often perfectly ordinary men holding down perfectly ordinary jobs: the person who wrote the drooling little note to me above and ran the site it appeared on was an estate agent called Richard White, who lived in Sidcup, outer London, with a wife and kids, and just happened to run a hate website directed at women and minorities. The Internet recreates offline prejudices and changes them, twists them, makes them voyeuristic, and anonymity and physical distance make it easier for some individuals to treat other people as less than human.

But it’s not just individuals having horny fun trolling anyone who seems like they might react. It’s not even just those outside the so-called

‘professional’ sphere of online commentary and debate. In recent years, violent misogyny in comment threads and blogs has become an everyday feature of political conversation on the web. Here are just some of the things that have been written about me personally in the past few months in the comments section of the website Order Order, a blog followed by politicians and journalists across the country, whose editors are considered part of mainstream political debate in the UK. This is a selection from the comments that the editors did not deem worthy of deletion:

Perhaps Sharia might be a good thing after all, if Ms Penny was not allowed out without a member of her Family and we did not have to look at her face, also we could stone her to death, my favourite though would be a Public Hanging or Decapitation, all judging by her views, to be acceptable behaviour. Perhaps she should be Circumcised, only sew up her mouth.

Call me old fashioned bt this young lady should [sic] be whipped through the streets of London before being made to suck Ken Livingstones cock as people throw shit at the pair of them.

The person who wrote the latter is clearly a nineteenth-century burgher, which makes you wonder what he’s doing in the onanistic comment threads of British political wonk-sites, and it’d be funny if it were just him. When I asked for such comments to be moderated, the men who ran Order Order announced that I was ‘embarrassing’.

It’s important to stress that I’m no outlier in having this experience – although I did work as a political journalist in Britain at a time when certain women and girls were singled out to be made examples of by the angry old men in cardigans running most of the dead-tree media. It’s not every woman who writes online or runs a blog or plays videogames, but it’s many of us, and it could be any of us. And threats to hurt and rape and kill are not always less distressing when they don’t come with an explicit expectation of follow-through in physical reality.

These messages are intended specifically to shame and frighten women out of engaging online, in this new and increasingly important public sphere. If we respond at all, we’re crazy, hysterical overreacting bitches, censors, no better than Nazis, probably just desperate for a ‘real man’ to fuck us, a ‘real man’ like the men who lurk in comment threads threatening to rip our heads off and masturbate into the stumps.

The idea that this sort of hate speech is at all normal needs to end now. The Internet is public space, real space; it’s increasingly where we interact socially, do our work, organise our lives and engage with politics, and violence online

is real violence. The hatred of women in public spaces online is reaching epidemic levels and it's time to end the pretence that it's either acceptable or inevitable.

The most common reaction, the one those of us who experience this type of abuse get most frequently, is: suck it up. Grow a thick skin. 'Don't feed the trolls' – as if feeding them were the problem. The *Telegraph's* Cristina Odone wrote that, 'Women in public arenas get a lot of flak – they always have. A woman who sticks her head above the parapet is asking for brickbats.'

Asking for it. By daring to be visibly female in public life, we're asking to be abused and harassed and frightened, and so is any person with the temerity to express herself whilst in possession of a pair of tits.

It's an attitude so quotidian that only when you pause to pick it apart does its true horror become apparent. I am contacted, not every day, but most weeks, by young women who want to build lives as journalists or activists but are afraid of the possible backlash. Every time I receive one of these letters, I get a lurch of guilt: should I tell them the truth? Should I tell them that sometimes I've been so wracked with anxiety by the actions of trolls and stalkers that I've been afraid to leave the house, that I've had to call in the police, that there's every chance they might too? Or should I tell them to be brave, to take it on the chin, not to be frightened, because their fear, their reticence to speak, is precisely what the trolls want to see most of all?

I always hesitate over whether or not to speak about this. For one thing, I don't want to let on just how much this gets to me. Nobody does. It's what the bullies want, after all. They want evidence that you're hurting so that they can feel big and hard. Nobody wants to appear weak, or frightened, or make out that they can't 'take it' – after all, so few people complain. Maybe we really *are* just crazy bitches overreacting?

And so we stay silent as misogyny becomes normalised. We're told to shut up and accept that abuse of this vicious and targeted kind just happens and we'd better get used to it. Whilst hatred and fear of women in traditionally male spaces – whether that be the Internet or the Houses of Parliament – is nothing new, the specific, sadistic nature of online sexist and sexual harassment is unique, and uniquely accepted – and it can change.

Not all online sexism is intended to hurt women. Some of it is intended to impress other men, with hurting women as a regrettable but necessary side effect. A great deal of misogyny has always been a matter between men, performed by men and boys to impress those they consider peers, and forums, games and blogs are no different.

When men say that casual online sexism, –as separate from the personal femicidal misogyny that many women receive when they venture into online spaces men think are theirs alone – is ‘just banter’, they really mean it.

Germaine Greer wrote in *The Female Eunuch* that women had no idea how much men hate them. Well, now we do. The Internet has a way of making hidden things visible, of collapsing contexts so that the type of banter that might once have been appropriate at a frat party exists on the same Twitter feeds where 15-year-olds are starting feminist campaigns. Combine that with the disinhibition provided by time-delay and anonymity and you have a recipe for the sort of gynophobic, racist and homophobic rage that women and men who are its targets often find incredibly frightening.

In the few years I have spent as a young woman with a sizeable online following, I have learned just what a fearful thing it still is to be female in public life, how much resilience and stamina it takes to weather the inevitable attacks. One of the most common insults flung at women who speak or write in public is ‘attention seeking’ – a classic way of silencing us, particularly if we are political.

The fact that ‘attention seeking’ is still considered a slur says much about the role of women in public life, on every scale. From the moment we can speak, young women are ordered not to do so. Little girls who talk too much, who demand the respect they have earned, are ‘attention seeking’, and that’s very bad. Little boys who do the same are ‘confident’ or ‘engaging’. Men in public life, whether they are celebrities or politicians, rockstars or radio DJs, actors, activists or academics, are almost never accused of being ‘attention seeking’, with the possible exception of Bono. For a man to seek attention is no crime: attention is men’s due. Women, however, are supposed to be silent. We are not accorded the same right to speak. We are still little girls demanding ‘attention’, and we should learn our place.

The notion that women should be seen and not heard is not confined to the internet. The popular dead-tree press has always profited from objectifying some women and judging others. Readers are invited to pass judgement upon women’s beauty, upon their sexual behaviour, their fitness or unfitness as mothers, the shape of their bodies, the wobbliness of their thighs and their ability to snap back into a size six swimsuit two days after giving birth, and that judgement is the reader’s reward for skimming lazily over whatever propaganda the red-tops are peddling that day in the guise of news.

Even as women continue to be under-represented as journalists and editors, body-shaming, objectification and witless woman-hating filler copy remain the

stock in trade of the ‘professional’ media. That trend is only becoming more pronounced as the internet undercuts its bottom line. Tabloids are now relying more and more on lazy sexism to sell papers, and the news economy of misogyny is more pernicious than ever as it is experienced in real time online. The woman-hatred of the popular press is in no way separable from the sexism of amateur blogs and web forums: plenty of sexist trolls have regular gigs as print columnists, and the commentariat still behaves like a frat club. Meanwhile, tabloid misogyny such as the *Daily Mail*’s ‘sidebar of shame’, with its crowing over muffin tops and upskirt shots as bad as anything you’ll find on Reddit, legitimises the danker, more covert troughs of gynophobia online.

It is in this climate, in this news economy of misogyny, this society where the male gaze is monetised as never before, the worst thing any woman or girl can be is ‘attention seeking’. Women are supposed to be looked at, but never listened to. We should be seen, but not heard – and god forbid we actually try to direct that attention or appear to enjoy it. If we raise our voices, we are ‘attention seeking’, and a woman who wants attention, never mind respect, cannot be tolerated. If you’re a woman and somebody calls you ‘attention seeking’, that’s a sure way to tell you’ve made an impact. It’s yet another slur that should be a source of pride.

Parts of the Internet still behave like men-only spaces, even though they almost never are. Misogyny, as well as racism and homophobia, is played as a shibboleth, a way of marking out territory – not necessarily to keep women away, but to scare off anyone considered too easily offended, which in practice rarely includes men. It’s a joke, certainly, the kind of weak, cruel joke whose humour revolves around exclusion, the kind of joke one is meant to ‘take’ (can’t you take a joke?) in the way one takes a punch. It’s the way men have always spoken about women in private, and the reason it looks new is that women have never had so much instant and intimate access to these spaces before, where we can observe men speaking about us as they have for centuries when they thought we weren’t watching. The power to watch men back is something the web affords women, but men haven’t quite realised that yet.

Right now, the beginning of a backlash against online misogyny is under way. Women and girls and their allies are coming together to expose gender violence online and combat structural sexism offline, collecting stories on hashtags like the Everyday Sexism Project and the German Aufshcrei campaign. Projects like this turn sexism from something you have to sit with and experience alone, something designed to isolate and shame us into silence, into a strategy of consciousness raising. Sharing stories like this online has

helped women and girls all over the world to realise that they are not the only ones feeling angry, and that something can be done about it. It also enables men and boys who really aren't as ignorant as they'd like to be to understand women's experience in a new way, to understand that the stories they grew up hearing about how the world worked might not be the only stories out there. Digital feminism is changing lives across the world, but for some, that change is painful and enraging. When bigotry is forced to see itself through the eyes of another, the reaction can be grotesque.

In 2012, the blogger Anita Sarkeesian launched a crowdfunding project to create a short film series, 'Tropes vs. Women', which set out to explain the basic, lazy, sexist plotlines of many videogames. The self-satisfied geeksphere exploded with rage; one user even created a flash game called 'Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian', where users could click on Sarkeesian's face and make blood, cuts and bruises appear. Sarkeesian faced down her abusers and made the series anyway. It was a hit.

Six months later, when feminist activist Caroline Criado-Perez successfully campaigned to get a woman's face featured on British banknotes, she was inundated with rape threats on social media. She shared examples of the messages she received from sexist trolls over five days: 'Everyone jump on the rape train > @CCriadoPerez is conductor' was one; 'This Perez one just needs a good smashing up the arse and she'll be fine' was another. Criado-Perez decided to stand up and fight back, demanding that Twitter take more responsibility for abuse on its platform and starting a global conversation about the normalisation of violent misogyny online. Technically, threats of rape and violence are already criminal, and many social media companies, including Twitter, already have rules against abuse and harassment. Just like in the offline world, however, there is a chasm of difference between what is technically illegal and what is tacitly accepted when it comes to violence against women, and the fight back is less about demanding new laws than ensuring existing ones are taken seriously.

Some people claim that the fight back against cybersexism is itself 'censorship'. Some website owners claim that promoting and publicising sadistic misogyny is merely respecting the 'freedom of speech' of anyone with a lonely hard-on for sick rape fantasies. That sort of whinging isn't just disingenuous, it's terrifically offensive to anyone with any idea of what online censorship actually looks like.

As I write, there is a real fight going on to keep the Internet as free as possible from government interference, a fight to keep free speech and

information from the tyranny of state and corporate control. The Internet is full of people who have spent their lives, risked their lives and even lost their lives in that fight. Hackers and internet activists have been jailed for years or decades; Aaron Swartz, the Reddit co-founder and political organiser, committed suicide in January 2013 after being pursued by the US government for downloading and releasing documents from the academic hub JSTOR. As I write, former CIA infrastructure specialist Edward Snowden is seeking sanctuary in Russia, hounded by his former bosses for leaking details of the PRISM programme and informing the world about the extent of British and American government communications surveillance. To claim that there's some sort of equivalence between the coordinated attack on Net neutrality and digital freedom going on across the world and the uninterrupted misogyny of comment-thread mouth-breathers doesn't just take the biscuit, it pinches the packet and dribbles ugly, bile-flecked crumbs into the keyboard. It is deeply offensive to the many, many activists, hackers and developers who have given their time, imperilled their jobs and sometimes risked their lives to keep governments like the United States' from clamping down on free Internet usage to describe women speaking about feminism online as a threat to 'Freedom of Speech'.

The hypocrisy is breathtaking, brain-aching. These people talk unironically of their right to free expression whilst doing everything in their power to hurt, humiliate and silence any woman with a voice or a platform, screeching abuse at us until we back down or shut up. They speak of censorship but say nothing of the silencing in which they are engaged. I have even been told, with apparent sincerity, that using the 'block' button on Twitter to prevent me from having to pay attention to anybody who has posted threats of violence against me is actually an attack on the troll's freedom of speech – no apparent distinction being made between the right to express your views and the right to have your ugliest half-thoughts paid attention to.

According to the current logic of online misogyny, a woman's right to self-expression is less important by far than a man's right to punish her for that self-expression. What appears to upset many of these men more than anything else is the idea that any woman or girl, anywhere, might have a voice, might be successful, might be more socially powerful than they themselves are – at least, that's the message I get every time I'm told that I've got a lot to say for myself, and my silly little girl's mouth could be more usefully employed sucking one of the enormous penises that these commentators definitely all possess.

[In 2011 I wrote that a woman's opinion was the mini-skirt of the Internet.](#)

Since then, the situation appears to have deteriorated, not just for women in public life but for women in public full stop. The Internet is a many-to-many medium. It gives readers and audience members a right to reply to those writers and politicians who, in the pre-digital age, enjoyed the freedom to expostulate and make pronouncements without having to listen to their readers or listeners beyond the odd angry letter in the paper. And that's great. I remain glad that I grew up as a journalist in the age of the Internet; I am used to writing for an audience that is responsive and engaged, to listening to constructive criticism and acknowledging it where it's appropriate. There's a world of difference, however, between the right to reply and the right to abuse, threaten and silence.

To be human is, in almost every case, to crave two things above all else: intimacy and information. The Internet offers us a superabundance of both, which is one of the reasons it sends existing power structures into a panic. Whether it's women and minorities fighting for the right to be understood as fully human, or citizens fighting for access to information they're not supposed to have, the impulse is always to censor, or to attempt to censor. It is ironic, then, that when misogynist trolls are called out on their behaviour, they claim that it's an attack on their freedom of speech'.

The Internet has pressing, urgent problems with freedom of speech, and none of them have much to do with men's right to harass and threaten women with impunity. 'Imagine', wrote Ally Fogg, "that this is not the Internet but a public square. One woman stands on a soapbox and expresses an idea. She is instantly surrounded by an army of 5,000 angry people yelling the worst kind of abuse at her in an attempt to shut her up. Yes, there's a free speech issue there. But not the one you think.'

Freedom of speech does not include the freedom to abuse and silence others with impunity. It doesn't even include the right to be paid attention to. Imagine that that was 'real life'. Imagine that any woman standing up in Parliament, or a lecture theatre or a room full of her friends, to talk about her own experiences learned to anticipate violence, threats and taunting if she happened to upset the men. Actually, you don't have to imagine, because that still happens every day, even in the nominally liberated West. Everywhere, people in positions of privilege warp and misuse the idea of 'free speech' to shut down and silence everyone else's right to speak freely. Freedom of speech, for so many people used to the comfort of not having to examine their lives, simply means freedom from criticism and responsibility.

The whole point of the Internet is that it allows many voices to speak at

once. That's what the network is. The sudden presence of women in great and vocal numbers online doesn't prevent men from using the Internet, because this isn't primary school, and nobody is actually allergic to girls.

Damn right this is about freedom of speech. It's about whose freedom of speech matters – and if the answer to that is 'white, straight men and nobody else', then the internet is not as free as we'd like to believe.

## **AND THE GEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH**

I'm a nerd-chasing nerd and I'm not sorry. For much of my twenties, I worked on the principle that if you knew about comics, like me, and spent a lot of time on the Internet, like me, then I'd probably want to take you to bed, if we could both stay off Twitter for long enough. If you're not a geek or a nerd I suspect you'll be boring in bed and out of it. Nerds are the sexiest. Nerds are quick learners, and they've often read a lot of instruction manuals before they get a chance to try out their tricks. Nerds get excited. Nerds can fix things, like your hard drive, or your heart. And sometimes you can learn things from them.

'Some people are just butthurt that girls get to come into our special club,' says The Geek, trying not to spill tea on his naked legs. I'm paraphrasing, because I don't generally keep a recorder handy during sex, unless the other person is particularly into that sort of thing, which tends to be its own special warning sign. There are many geeks in my life, but only one is the Geek, the one I lure into intense anarcho-feminist discussions with the promise of an intense horizontal workout, and occasionally vice versa. We met, that's right, on the Internet. After three years of semi-regular shagging and enough pillow chat to know each other's pets and housemates by name, we still claim to know each other from the Internet. I could draw you a map of the moles on his back. I could pick his scent out across a room, a mixture of Old Spice, tannin and something dank from the basement where he works, adding the visual effects to green screen film stock, but the Internet is where we met and where we talk; IRL is just for fucking.

He made a rape joke on our first date. I say 'date', but it was more of a mutual test to see if we could stand each other enough to screw, mutual desperation having been established in chatlogs beforehand. We snarked at each other about politics and Joss Whedon shows and appeared to decide, as so

many do, that a shared love of certain comics would help us overcome mutual loathing for long enough to satisfy a basic animal need. Three hours later, knackered and sweating, he put on a Jedi-robe dressing-gown and got out his glow-in-the-dark dice to show me their inscriptions and I decided that this one might be worth talking to.

What I want him to understand is what I want every nerd boy in my life to understand: that we were there too, the other geeks and weird kids whose lives were hellish at school, who escaped into books and computers, who stayed up all night scanning obscure forums, looking for transcendence, dreaming of elsewhere. We were there too, but you didn't see us, because we were girls. And the costs of being the geek were the same for us, right down to the sexual frustration, the yearning, the being laughed at, the loneliness. And then we went online, which was supposed to be where nobody could tell that you were a shy, speccy loser with no friends, only to find ourselves slut-shamed and screamed at if we gave away that we might be female. For us, there was no escape. We had to fight the same battles you did, only harder, because we were women and we also had to fight sexism, some of it from you, and when we went looking for other weird kids to join our gang, we were told we weren't 'real geeks' because we were girls.

Geek misogyny is its own special flavour of bullshit, and it is part of the infrastructure of how gender works online. I'm using the terms 'nerd' and 'geek' interchangeably, in part because a great many people who are both have clear ideas on the distinction between the two, and everyone has different ideas about what that distinction is. In the 1900s, a 'geek' was a member of a travelling circus who bit the heads off live chickens to entertain local yokels. Today it's more likely to be a person who works with computers and gets very excited about comics. What's important about geeks and nerds is a sense of being an outsider, a fascination with learning, and specialist knowledge.

That specialist knowledge could be coding, or it could be literature, or it could be where exactly to bite down on a cockerel's spine to make the arterial blood gush most gruesomely over your shirt. Either way, it's probably something your parents don't really understand.

The idea that women can't ever be proper geeks or 'real' nerds is perhaps the most insidious part of the misogynist's defence of geekspace. It's what leads to terms like 'fake geek girl', to the assumption that women who like science fiction or comics or gaming or technology don't really know what they're talking about. A close friend of mine who works as a senior editor at a major science-fiction publishing house is regularly mistaken for somebody's

girlfriend – or for a promotional ‘booth babe’ – at conferences and conventions.

We have to take back the word ‘geek’, not just women and girls, but anyone out there who is fed up with the assumption that being a geek means sitting in your parents’ basement in a failed startup hoodie, hating women. One of the most upsetting things about the way nerd culture has been incorporated into the mainstream, quite apart from personal childish annoyance when something you’ve been into for ages becomes cool, is the subsumption of many of the radical, egalitarian impulses of traditional nerd culture into a stereotype. It’s doubly upsetting when that stereotype has some basis in truth.

The social narrative of the successful geek has become the twenty-first century’s Horatio Alger tale of the victorious underdog, the outcast made good, but the one mode for triumph in this story is acquisition – specifically, acquisition of hot chicks and a pile of money.

This is the story of Geek Triumph. It’s a short story, and you can find it in every comic shop, DVD aisle and entrepreneurial business memoir. The Geek Boy has an awful time at school. He is lonely. He has no friends, or few friends, and is bullied. Nobody understands his special genius, and the hot, popular girl who is the object of his late-night tissue-box fantasies won’t even look his way. Geek Boy, however, has a way to escape this otherwise Dantean nightmare of post-pubescent torment: he is smart. He is really smart. He uses his smartness to make a pile of cash and get the girl, becoming the ultimate neo-capitalist patriarch without even having to change out of his slogan T-shirt.

The getting of the girl is a pivotal part of this Pygmalion tale. The story simply wouldn’t work if the girl wasn’t got. The hot girl, in fact, is the motivating factor, both the prize and the peril – she is the Dark Crystal, the One Ring, the McGuffin that makes the rest of the narrative hang together. She isn’t a real person, of course; that’d be inconvenient. In some variations of this story, the pretty, popular girl gets her comeuppance – usually humiliating rejection by the now universal Geek Boy – and is replaced by a less popular but equally pretty girl who has been pining for the protagonist since Act I. The trouble is that if the story doesn’t work out that way – and in an economic system designed so that most of us lose it really doesn’t usually work that way – people start looking for someone to blame.

‘The web is geared towards constructing subcultures and for many years operated as a subculture,’ says Maha Rafi Atal, a journalist who writes on gender and tech for Forbes and other sites. ‘There is a real truth to the idea that the men – and at the time it was mostly men – who first built the web were at

the margins of social power in a traditional, high-schoolcafeteria sense – and because a lot of them were young, the symbol of the social belonging they didn't have was their inability to connect with women.' Even though everyone is now online, including the jocks, cheerleaders and cool kids, Atal explains that 'the culture still operates on the basis of woman as the inscrutable enemy.'

The story of the Genius in the Basement is the creation myth of many of our social networks, just as the story of the Founding Fathers is the creation myth of American capitalism: it may only tell part of the story, but it's the part that makes the rest easier for the most privileged to understand. The Oscar-winning 2010 film *The Social Network*, which spins out the fractious formative years of Facebook into a heartwarming tale of one smart loser's triumph over romantic adversity to become the world's youngest billionaire, tells just this story in perpetuation of the myth.

In the first scene, a young Mark Zuckerberg, played by Jesse Eisenberg, is dumped by his girlfriend. He takes revenge by using his superior tech skills to create a site that allows his fellow students, presumably men, to rate the attractiveness of women at their college based on pictures grabbed without permission from Harvard servers, blogging sexual slurs about his recent ex at the same time. The site, Facemash, goes viral: Zuckerberg has created an incredibly clever toy, broken codes, beaten the system, and made a tool that reduces every woman in his peer group to their value as a sexual object. He's the man, and they are just women, and he can control them; he has won. We see Zuckerberg's character applying the basic principles of this system to construct a social platform on which, ten years later, a quantifiably large proportion of human interaction takes place. Welcome to Facebook.

In *The Social Network*, men who have been humiliated by women have had the last laugh: they have used their smarts to monetise social capital, to turn every one of us into a digital product constantly engaged in that 'second shift' of self-promotion, curating our online presence, developing our brand, updating our photos to make ourselves look like we're having the best and most employable time possible, all the while making money for Facebook and its spinoff sites. Capitalism, technology and the revenge of the socially excluded have come together to create a world where all of us, particularly women and girls, are products, all social capital shall be categorised for cash, and the geek shall inherit the earth.

The number of women working in technology isn't just low – it is falling. Only 7 per cent of tertiary degrees in computing are taken by women and girls, and women leave the industry at all levels. Yahoo boss Marissa Mayer

estimates that 15–17 per cent of Silicon Valley engineers are women, and just 20 per cent of engineering and computer science majors in the United States are female. Mayer, who didn't start messing about on the Internet until she was in college, disproves the rule that once we've failed to teach any given generation of girls about computers in elementary school, it's too late for them. Tech skills can be picked up as late as you like, as long as you don't believe that your brain is temperamentally unsuited to the task, as many girls and women do.

Of course, Mayer proved her credentials as a leader in a land built and run by nerd men by taking away Yahoo employees' right to work from home – making the company yet another Silicon Valley leader structured in a way that excludes women who have children, or who want them someday, from full participation. Tech is a notoriously hostile sector for anyone whose lifestyle doesn't happen to chime with that of a single guy working ten-hour days, and it's getting worse.

Kate Losse was one of Facebook's earliest employees, and her 2012 book *The Boy Kings* tells the inside story of the company as it developed. 'I wrote the book because in working there ...I noticed things that weren't being articulated and that are really important in understanding how social technology is affecting us,' Losse told me over instant messaging (IM). 'One thing I noticed is how driven by women's images and social media labor Facebook and other social technologies are. But that fact isn't well recognized or rewarded by these companies for the most part.

There was this assumption that a very specific kind of person made tech products and that he was usually a young male entrepreneur with specific tastes and values and that he was somehow this genius of social media.'

This is not, in fact, the way the Internet works, and it's not the way geekdom works, either. Being a geek isn't about getting your revenge on the people who bullied you at school. It's not about hanging out in dark bedrooms hating women. Being a geek is so much more than that. It's about being curious, and clever, and wanting to take the hard outer casing off the world to understand the mechanisms. Being a geek is about making things, and fixing things, and taking things apart to see how they work, sometimes lines of code and sometimes countries. It's about being excited, tremendously excited, about awesome things like stories and games and comics and books and films and not ever having to apologise for thinking those things are brilliant. It's about learning, and creating, and wanting. It's about understanding, on a fundamental level, that being smart is more important than being strong, and that who you

are and where you come from doesn't matter as long as you've got curiosity and guts.

One of the most important things to understand about cybersexism is that it comes from a place of pain, a place of fear and hurt that translates into violent incomprehension in the most personal ways. It is not, of course, the responsibility of those abused to make their abusers feel better, but compassion is a useful tool for understanding as well as a way forward.

For geekdudes, the Internet is a safe space. It always has been. Sure, it's also a weird warren full of casual violence and bullying, but it's their weird warren of casual violence and bullying, and unlike in what those who live there like to call 'real life', they know the rules. They made up some of the rules. They grew up on the Internet, and they pride themselves on knowing its language and customs better than anybody else, whether or not they actually do.

It starts at school, like almost everything else. The sense that being smart and a bit strange makes you a target for violence, means you're not a real man. It seems a cliché to point out that geeks, nerds and boffins of all kinds, anyone who was a bit clever or unorthodox or both and lacked the talent or volition to conceal it, anyone who was bad at sports and flirting, we all had to deal with daily harassment and ostracism, usually for years. It affects everything. For boys, being tormented by jocks creates an embattled masculinity. And that embattled masculinity sometimes finds a home online and a target in women, preferably women who are far away and can't fight back.

One of the most important ways in which boys prove their social value, prove that they are or will shortly become men, is by exerting power over women: sexual power, physical power, the power to bully and threaten and intimidate and control. Sexism is a status play. At school, the fact that geek guys are normally lower down the status hierarchy is part of what creates the unique flavour of rage spicing up the murky broth of nerd misogyny, and the rage is knotted up with sexual frustration.

The creation myths of geek misogyny hold that almost every transformative piece of technology in history was invented by a man to impress a woman, who was generally ungrateful. A viral blog post by Crackd.com editor David Wong described 'why no amount of male domination will ever be enough':

Go look at a city skyline. All those skyscrapers? We built those to impress you[.] All those sports you see on TV? All of those guys learned to play purely because in school, playing sports gets you laid. All the music you hear on the radio? All of those guys learned to sing and play guitar because as a teenager, they figured out that absolutely nothing gets women out of their pants faster. It's the same reason all of the actors got into acting.

All those wars we fight? Sure, at the upper levels, in the halls of political power, they

have some complicated reasons for wanting some piece of land or access to some resource. But on the ground? Well, let me ask you this – historically, when an army takes over a city, what happens to the women there?

Woah. Hold it right there. What happens to the women in occupied cities? Exactly the same as what happens to the women when players attack a town in a MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game): they get raped and murdered. Wong interprets that, on behalf of the lady-fancying, male, Internet-using community, as a massive compliment:

‘You’re all we think about, and that gives you power over us. And we resent you for it,’ writes Wong, choosing to elide the experience of the millions of men who do not think about women in that particular way. It hasn’t occurred to Wong, and to every other angry man in front of his laptop, that not all ‘women’ have this power, because the category ‘women’ does not, in fact, include only ‘women David Wong wants to have sex with’.

Moreover, perhaps even the women who do have this kind of power don’t actually want it. Perhaps we consider it a raw deal that the power to turn men on is the only sort of power we’re allowed, and that we’re punished and resented and attacked and bullied, brutalised and killed for having it. Guys, listen up: we’re not conspiring with your boners against you. Women are people, not walking bags of pheromones and interestingly arranged body fat, and we like to be treated as such.

In 2003, a list of ‘Geek Social Fallacies’ – the particular social hang-ups common to many circles of nerds, hackers, gamers and oddballs – went viral online, and ten years later it’s still an important reference point for members of the communities that built much of the architecture of the Internet. The first and most important of these is that ‘ostracisers are evil’. Geeks of every gender and background, having experienced the pain of being shunned and excluded, are loath to exclude anyone else, even if their behaviour is offensive, creepy or violent. This can lead, in groups that would otherwise consider themselves progressive, to the tolerance of vicious bigotry. In some circles of professional nerds it’s openly admitted that sexism and homophobia have long been tolerated, or written off as ‘ironic’, as long as the person spreading such hatred is a good coder or a decent gamer. A long history of learned defensiveness leads nerds to come together to protect any member of their group, whatever they’ve done. It’s an understandable impulse – right up to the point where you realise that tolerance of bigotry automatically ostracises everyone who happens to be a woman, or queer, or frightens them away from social and professional groups in which ‘white, male, cis and straight’ is the

default player setting.

To the list of geek social fallacies, one might well add ‘the fallacy of persecution’. Slowly but surely, being a geek – particularly a tech geek – has become a position of power. A job at Google or Facebook is for the young people of the twenty-teens what a job in finance was in the 1980s: a whole new world of pseudo-meritocracy, with its own laws and customs that happen to be that much easier to negotiate if you’re a white, straight, middle-class cis guy, however much the recruitment drivel claims otherwise.

That doesn’t mean that being a geek, a nerd or a weird smart kid at school is any easier now than it was ten years ago, and it certainly hasn’t stopped nerds from being mercilessly made fun of in a certain type of bro-comedy that still dominates mainstream Hollywood programming, from *The Big Bang Theory* to *The IT Crowd* to any half-rate thriller where the hilariously sexless scientist helps the jock hero to triumph. But the territory has fundamentally changed, and I don’t simply mean that thick glasses have become cool – believe me, I hate that too.

Part of the problem is the suspicion that girls just aren’t as clever as boys. It’s not been modish to say that out loud for decades, but it is implied every time excuses are made for why women remain vastly underrepresented in tech, in politics, in business, in the top rungs of academia. Just look at the evidence: we apparently have equality now, and yet there are still far fewer women in ‘smart jobs’ than there are men. We’re told unremittingly that feminism has achieved all of its aims, and that even if it hasn’t, tech and research are fields of perfect meritocracy, so this must be a process of natural selection. If women aren’t making it to the top, that’s clear evidence that they simply aren’t good enough, aren’t bright enough, aren’t committed enough.

In her excellent book *Delusions of Gender*, neuroscientist Cordelia Fine meticulously debunks every cod theory attributing social sex class to hardwired ‘brain differences’. The many available studies that show no practical difference whatsoever in the cognitive, reasoning or structural processing power of ‘male’ and ‘female’ brains tend to get far less press coverage than those claiming that the social mores of white, suburban, 1950s America were laid down in prehistoric times – despite the fact that they are consistently more sound. Fine quotes many of the world’s most respected psychiatrists and neuroscientists, such as Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, peddling such codswallop as: ‘The female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems.’

This, in fact, is the most persistent delusional artefact of what is known as evolutionary psychology. Women are good at feeling and men are good at thinking. Women have more ‘social’ intelligence, are better able to ‘multitask’, whereas men are better at things that require the sort of focus that can only be achieved when your wife or girlfriend is sorting out dinner.

Women can be almost as smart as men, but we’re smarter at different things, things like nurturing, listening, taking care of other people, managing social systems, throwing parties, publicising events and inventions men are in charge of, organising the diaries and offices of men that they might better concentrate on the important work, and, of course, raising children. Men, in other words, are good at doing, making and building things; women are good at making life easier for men. We’re not less smart, we’re just different smart. Smart at things that don’t involve being listened to or making an impact on the world. You know, different smart.

It’s a eugenics of gender that would be seen for the throat-closingly vile propaganda it is were the tests being done on people of different races, ethnicities or sexual preferences. And yet these myths persist because they are soothing, comforting, because they provide a halfway rational basis for the prejudices that poison our society.

Otherwise rational individuals cling to bad science to justify the ongoing dismissal of women in exactly the same way people once clung to religion to provide that same justification: once, women didn’t go into research and engineering because God had designed them to be full-time mothers; today, women don’t go into research and engineering because evolution designed them to be bad at maths and better at babies. This is, apart from anything else, a terrible misuse of a respected theory.

## **THE NEW CYBORGS**

*I’m twenty-six and I work and write and hunt down stories online, and right now I’m following the Pirate Party, the online-freedom activist group that became a global political movement, as it seeks to get its first representatives in a national parliament, in Iceland. In a bar where all the candidates, hackers and gamers and nerds to a man and woman, are gathered for drinks and strategy, someone starts talking about feminism, and how it makes the men*

feel.

I join the conversation. It's a discussion I've had before. It encompasses how the guys feel when their idols are accused of rape, what they think 'patriarchy' means, whether women are really just overreacting – and their fear of being misunderstood. Their fear is legitimate, that there is pain on both sides. Then one of them, a hacker called Jason who has been belittling the women at the table, says something that will stay with me for a long time. 'I think you're wrong,' he says, 'but I'm prepared to accept that I might not have all of the information.'

Why does he think the women are wrong about how they experience gendered violence?

'I'm not saying that. I just feel you're trying to define me, and trying to define men, and I don't like it.'

Has he considered that he might not have all the information about himself?

I know I've said the right thing, because Jason manages to convey an expression of sudden quiet enlightenment under a thick and ponderous neck-beard, which is quite a feat. Over the next three days of reporting we continue the discussion. This guy wants to learn. He isn't the first geek guy I've met who has come suddenly to the understanding that their information about how the world works is flawed and incomplete, nor the first to want to change it. I am drawn back to thinking about Haraway, and her notion of becoming a 'cyborg' – allowing technology to change us, to expand our thinking, to make us braver and more hopeful.

Geeks aren't just the problem. Geeks are also the solution. The Internet may perpetuate prejudice and facilitate gendered violence, but it also helps us fight it. When the story of Amanda Todd's suicide hit the press, Anonymous and other amorphous online activist groups got together to expose men who they accused of blackmailing her with nude photos. Shortly afterwards, misogynist trolls like 'Violentacrez' – a middle-aged man named Michael Brutsch, who was behind reddit subgroups like 'jailbait' and 'creepshots' – began to be hunted down and identified by journalists or private individuals. As I write, a new mood of online vigilantism is beginning to take hold of the Net, whereby people with a modern understanding of misogyny and what it means aren't prepared to wait for society to fix itself. You can hack anything, after all, and that includes sexism.

Vigilantism is what happens when the laws of the land are not fit for purpose. Right now the Internet is outstripping the conventional court system when it comes to digging out information about rapists and other sexual

predators. When geeks decide to take up the cause of feminism, this is a fearful thing. The Internet is a new country, without laws or borders, and there is no reason for the old rules of men-talk-women-get-fucked to apply here for very much longer.

A networked society is only as good as the networks upon which it is built. A network which dehumanises women and denies them full, free access to the same channels men enjoy is simply not a network that works properly, and geeks, nerds and everyone who cares about the Internet as a free and open space need to understand that their network is no longer fit for purpose. Our system is broken. It needs to be updated.

As in cyberspace, so in meatspace: the networks in which we love and fuck are the same networks in which we do politics, educate one another, fight the government, change the world. If the Internet is revolutionising politics, keeping girls off the Net, or at least keeping us cowed and complicit online, is a way of shutting us out of that revolution.

The Internet is a political place, if it is a place, and a place where politics is being altered for ever. Young people, disenfranchised people, ordinary workers sitting at home with tired faces uplit by lonely laptop screens are working out new ways of finding one another in this networked world, building platforms and lines of communication that have, over the past half-decade, routinely outpaced and outsmarted governments. Every time an individual state attempts to crack down on freedom of speech online it reassures Net denizens that online activism and online organising are powerful.

The Internet is a real place. It's where we live and work and fight and fuck and make friends. Harassment, intimidation and silencing online are more than 'just words', and not just because they are sometimes, in my experience, photos of your head pasted on porn, cartoons of you being beaten up, or phone calls whispering about your sexual history. Whoever cooked up the idiot axiom about sticks and stones breaking bones but words being essentially harmless never knew a teenager bullied to suicide by online taunting.

Once the geek community finally wakes up to the fact that the harassment, bullying and intimidation of women online is a clear threat to the principles of freedom of speech and egalitarianism, the social space of the Internet will start to look very different. Boys grow up believing that they are the hero of their own story; girls have to learn not to see themselves as a supporting character in someone else's saga. Fortunately, the Internet lets you choose your own adventure. Systems can be rewritten. Protocols updated. The social architecture

we're building online today will be the one the next generation grows up in, and if that looks too much like the one in which we did, for all our talk of futurism, we've fucked up. There's time to turn it around. The gender revolution and the digital revolution are happening together, and they scare the same people for the right reasons. The system adapts, and we can rewrite it so it works better – or we can make it a playroom for the prejudices of the past. It's up to us.

## A Note on the Author

Laurie Penny is a writer and journalist. She writes for *Vice*, the *Guardian* and many other publications, is a columnist and Contributing Editor at the *New Statesman* magazine and Editor-at-Large at cult New York literary project *The New Inquiry*. At the age of twenty-three she was the youngest person to be shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for political writing for her blog 'Penny Red' which, like her first feminist book, *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism*, was a word-of-mouth hit. She has reported on radical politics, protest, digital culture and feminism from around the world, working with activists from the Occupy movement and the European youth uprisings. She has 75,000 followers on Twitter and in 2012 won the British Media Awards' 'Twitter Public Personality of the Year' prize, which she accepted in absentia with a speech about the ongoing harassment of women on social media. Laurie is a nerd, a nomad and an activist. She is twenty-six years old and lives in London.

## **By the Same Author**

*Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism*

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