

Chapter 7: The Normalization of Injustice

Jason

“My former college housemate, Calvin, was never hard to find. He was almost always parked on the living room couch with a sprawling array of video game controllers, glowing screens, and wires woven throughout the room. His ability to multitask was second to none. He would engage in mass online gaming while messing with his handheld device, simultaneously hanging out on social media on his laptop. He had entertainment down to a science! I learned a lot about the lifestyle habits of an avid gamer from Calvin. One aspect that especially stuck with me was the kind of expression gamers engaged in during their online battles. No one held back their emotions, thoughts, opinions, or frustration. Insulting, cursing, taunting, provoking, or “chewing out” other players made up most of the online chatter, usually without cause or reason. I remember Calvin, who was kind and gentle in nature, trying to reason with the other players. He would question their outbursts and politely ask them to be respectful when playing, but it was as if he was talking to people who had their headphones turned off. It fell on deaf ears. I was a college basketball player at the time, and thought about how insulting another player in such a way would probably end with a trip to the emergency room; in the world of online gaming, however, no one can touch you. There are simply no real consequences for degrading others.”

The Sanctity of Speech

The internet grants unprecedented freedom to those savvy enough to wield a mouse and keyboard. Upgrade to a touchscreen, and surfing the web becomes a lot more like finger gymnastics. The internet is a powerful tool to share a wealth of knowledge, culture, and ideas, which creates the basis for the freedom and development of Euro-American society.²⁷² Our access to information and our ability to share our thoughts and opinions through the web allows us to exercise our fundamental human right to the freedom of speech at a level that has never before been

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possible in human history. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers to the freedom of expression as, “[everyone’s . . .] right [. . .]to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”²⁷³ The declaration is recognized by the global community as a “[. . .] common standard of achievements for all people and all nations.”²⁷⁴ It is a milestone document that unites the global community by a universal understanding of fundamental human rights. According to the Human Rights Committee, the freedom of expression, together with the freedom of opinion, is instrumental in providing the necessary conditions for the development of a human being, which establishes the cornerstone of liberty in all democratic societies.²⁷⁵

Benjamin Franklin said, “[w]hoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech.”²⁷⁶ The freedom of expression is of critical value for creating active participation in civil life; where self-actualization in a diverse and tolerant society is possible through uninhibited access to scores of ideas, thoughts, and philosophies.²⁷⁷

No longer does the common citizen have to take up their position on their humble soapbox in the town square to make their thoughts known. The open plains of the web offer almost everyone their own digital stage. Standing face to face with our toughest critics and deliberating our personal thoughts and political opinions on the streets of Washington D.C. would require heaps of courage in comparison to posting a simple tweet or updating our social media status.

Boundless Consumption

According to *Statista*, in April 2020, fifty-nine percent of the world’s population—4.5 billion people—were online active users.²⁷⁸ The natural social and cultural barriers that once limited a youth’s ability to access unfiltered information and express themselves in the broader community are virtually nonexistent.²⁷⁹ Two factors that contribute to the power of the online world are anonymity and equality. No one will ever know who username *surfer-dude88* is, but everyone can hear or read what he has to say. People can hide behind the screen and engage with one another as equals. No one would know if *surfer-dude88* just

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got out of prison or made a fortune in the stock exchange, or if maybe he's a fourteen-year-old deliberating his political ideals like a young Stephen Colbert. In the end, everyone can be anyone, making the internet unique to those who wish to be measured by their words, not their social status, cultural background, or age. This is especially relevant for youth whose status as a child often disqualifies or undermines their participation in public debate.²⁸⁰

Humanity online represents a new era where the enjoyment of the freedom of expression by both children and adults has become a central component of societal living.²⁸¹ We don't have to look far to see how Trump's Twitter account, Obama's Facebook campaign, or the Kardashians' *insta-drama* has influenced culture and politics. Kim made porn pop; Obama "liked", "followed", and "friended" his way into office; Trump, for better or for worse, tweeted; and Hillary learned that not all email is created equal. A vital role of the freedom of expression is to critique government and to question policy with the intention of being heard. It allows citizens to seek the support of the people to pursue common interests, alternative policies, and thoughts that are often contrary to the government in power.²⁸² Everyone, including youth, has the ability to play the role of the 'public watchdog' without the bias of corporate interests; a role which used to be limited to mass media firms.²⁸³

Stolen Innocence

Even though the expansion of the freedom of expression into online territory has greatly benefited our society, it has also given people an incredible degree of unchecked autonomy to use these networks for their own devices. Pornography consumption has flooded the internet under the protection of free speech (freedom of expression). Our infatuation with unbridled freedom has dissolved both legal boundaries and societal values that once separated child, adolescent, and adult expression. This has created an exploding exploitation market, where dehumanization is monetized. Children and teens don't have to seek out harmful digital media; rather, billions of hours of the most grotesque content is dumped on the digital streets for all to discover. Disturbing adult sexual fetishes and degrading acts of sexploitation wander their way, like trash caught in the wind, onto the digital playgrounds of our children's online world.

The Economics of Aggression

Jason

“ I recently encountered a pop-up ad on my smartphone while reading the news. It advertised an app where users could use the swipes of their finger to beat and batter a sexy 3D-looking woman. As the video ad previewed the game, it showed a user’s finger aggressively swiping over the female character, who would respond as if being struck or punched. The woman’s response to being beaten was downright cynical. She would giggle and get back up as if she wanted more.

As a teen, I can remember the constant temptation to check out porn on YouTube. I would browse for videos about typical young guy interests, such as cars, surfing, paintball, sports, etc. After clicking on a specific video related to my search, YouTube would display what were supposed to be related videos on the side of the screen. Somewhere in the lineup, there were suggested clips showing naked women holding rifles, sitting in cars, or even playing sports. It was just waiting for me to click and enjoy the show. I guess that is where it all could have started, and usually does for countless young men and women. Sexual expression is designed to be found and viewed. The porn industry takes advantage of the right to freedom of expression. More clicks, more money; it’s as simple as that. With 830 million teens online, there is money to be made. We talk about porn as the dark corner of the web, but it is much more like the “city of lights,” Las Vegas. Companies will do whatever they can to get you through the door and make money.

The online sex industry and its overwhelming influence on the development of children and adolescents alike represents a culture that has been slowly worn down. Porn has gone mainstream and has become an inevitable part of our daily lives. In October 2014, Pornhub stepped into the public eye in the middle of Times Square in New York City with the advertising slogan “All you need is hand”²⁸⁴ and their website address posted underneath. In 2015, people lined up around the block to see *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which was followed by *Fifty Shades Darker* in 2017 and *Fifty Shades Freed* in 2018. As porn continues to find acceptance in mainstream society, tech companies, who are profiting by the billions, aren’t expected to develop safeguards to protect youth from the seductive draw of online sex.

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When I worked in the school system, I remember hearing a fourteen-year-old girl gushing about how she and her friends were going to see *Fifty Shades of Grey*. What kind of effect does a movie that celebrates and sexualizes male dominance and violence against women for the sexual pleasure of men have on a young girl? It's very possible that she left the theater thinking, "So this is what men think is beautiful and sexy." According to CDC and United Nations (UN) reports, nearly one in five women have experienced rape or attempted rape²⁸⁵ and thirty-five percent of women have been attacked physically and/or sexually by an intimate partner or non-partner in their lifetime.²⁸⁶ The harsh reality is that kids in Euro-America have effortless access to online content that makes *Fifty Shades* look like a *Disney* movie in comparison. Most major tech companies wash their hands of responsibility but make huge financial gains from their involvement. It's always the same excuses: "It's too expensive"; "We're just a platform, and what people upload is not our responsibility"; "It's impossible to protect children without damaging the freedom of expression." At the end of the day, no one is willing to sacrifice a slice of the fortune to end online sexploitation, protect children, and assist parents in developing feasible alternatives to secure their children's online experiences.

What would happen if other industries, like the car industry, were allowed to behave this way? What if they placed all responsibility on parents to protect their kids? They could simply say that they just manufacture the cars. It is the parents who drive them. It is their job to keep their kids safe. Think about how much money the car industry would save without having to engineer their automobiles for safety or to be environmentally friendly. The auto industry invests an incredible \$100 billion a year in R&D,²⁸⁷ where a value for safety and environment are critical focal points. If the tech industry was expected to behave in a similar way, where consumers, not maximum profit, are the central focus, childhood innocence and adolescent development would have a fighting chance. The problem isn't necessarily politicians, industry leaders, or even the porn industry, although they all have their part to play. The biggest problem is us. We have swallowed the pill of passivity. We don't fight for our parental rights to protect the best interests of our children and teens. Our society has overwhelmingly bought into the ideology that the internet is too vast and too open to protect our children from harmful media content. We have accepted the fact that whatever

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happens to them online is largely beyond our control. It's as if the porn industry and Big Tech have been given a free pass in comparison to the incredible standards that other industries are legally required to meet. Let's be real for a moment and sober up to the kind of industry online porn has become, and whether we should question, at a societal level, if we are okay with how it takes advantage of the right to freedom of expression.

Sexploitation

Pornography consumption goes hand in hand with an increased demand for commercial sexual exploitation. Sex educator Ran Gavrieli explains:

Porn is marketing for sex trafficking both directly and indirectly: directly because online and offline hubs for trafficking use pornographic images to draw the buyers, indirectly because of porn's influence on the culture. A key ingredient to the success of commercial sex is the belief that people (women especially) are sexual commodities, and Internet pornography is the ideal vehicle to teach and train this belief.²⁸⁸

Porn sites like Pornhub are known for profiting from trafficked women, rape, and child abuse.²⁸⁹ On February 10th, 2020 the *BBC News* released the heart-wrenching account of Rose Kalemba, a fourteen-year-old teenager who was kidnapped at knifepoint by two men. She was forced into their vehicle and driven to another location, where she was repeatedly raped over the course of twelve hours. A third man recorded her assault, adding another layer of dehumanization to her horrific torture. The videos they made of her assault and rape were uploaded to Pornhub with the title, 'teen crying and getting slapped around', 'teen getting destroyed', 'passed out teen.'²⁹⁰ Two months after Rose's horrifying ordeal, she stumbled upon the Pornhub links to her rape on social media, which led to a wave of vicious bullying at her school. She spent six months pleading over email for Pornhub to remove the videos, but it wasn't until she changed her email address and posed as a lawyer with a fictitious lawsuit that the site responded and took the videos down within forty-eight hours. To date, a campaign by *ExodusCry* to

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shut down Pornhub has been signed by almost two million people from more than 192 countries and endorsed by over 300 anti-trafficking and children and women's rights organizations.

The Other Side of the Camera

In front of the camera is the seemingly always willing and “give me more” persona of the porn star; however, on the other side of the camera lens is a criminal world built on dehumanization and exploitation of vulnerable human beings. Supporters of the porn industry lean heavily on the hollow argument that online sex reflects a free market where women can choose to profit from their involvement in the production. Dr. Donna M. Hughes, co-founder of *Citizens Against Trafficking*, fights to expose the plight of women who are used to produce mainstream porn. In her article, *Sex Trafficking of Women for the Production of Pornography*, she shares the traumatic stories of former porn actresses which reveal how porn and sexual exploitation are intertwined with demand and consumption. Like most sex traffickers, porn producers and agents alike make a business out of exploiting society's most vulnerable. Porn is essentially filmed prostitution. It is the act of paying someone for sexual favors. Prostitution is illegal in most states because it is a breeding ground for sexploitation and organized crime. It robs the vulnerable and marginalized of their humanity, reducing them to an object to be bought and sold. However, “purchasing” someone to have sex in front of a camera with the intention of reselling the abuse online is somehow considered a legal, protected work of art. The correlation between sexual abuse and prostitution is high. A sample study based in New York found that 95-98 percent of women involved in human trafficking had a history of childhood abuse and neglect.²⁹¹ Sexual abuse is a horrific act that breaks down self-worth and damages the natural boundaries that protect our sexuality from the ill intent of others. A child or adolescent survivor of sexual abuse may feel that their value as a human being is reduced to their physical body, creating a major vulnerability for future abuse to occur. One in four girls and one in six boys become victims of sexual abuse before they turn eighteen years old.²⁹² One in five women will get raped in their lifetime.²⁹³

Dr. Hughes explains, “[porn performers’] first experience making

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commercial pornography is often brutal and traumatic.”²⁹⁴ Threats, drugs, and alcohol are commonly used to coerce and numb their victims from the unspeakable trauma. Alexa’s introduction to porn was far from what she had expected. “My first movie, I was treated very rough by three guys. They pounded on me, gagged me with their penises, and tossed me around like I was a ball! I was sore, hurting, and could barely walk. My insides burned and hurt so badly. I could barely pee and to try to have a bowel movement was out of the question.”²⁹⁵ Other women Dr. Hughes writes about described a world where no matter how loud they pleaded for the beatings and humiliating subhuman treatment to stop, the cameras kept rolling. One actress refused to perform and wanted to go home after getting tricked by her agent to show up to a shoot, where seventy-five men who answered a newspaper ad were lined up to ejaculate in her face. Her hesitation was met with a threat of a fictitious lawsuit if she didn’t agree to be the victim of this hugely degrading production. Fear and intimidation are constant undercurrents surrounding the industry side of porn.²⁹⁶ Shelly Lubben, a former pornography performer, testified, “Women are lured in, coerced, and forced to do sex acts they never agreed to do . . . [and given] drugs and alcohol to help [them] get through hardcore scenes . . . The porn industry is modern-day slavery.”²⁹⁷ Imagine how these depictions of exploitation corrupt the core values of developing adolescents. It’s impossible for youth to pleasure themselves to online prostitution and learn to respect human dignity at the same time.

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Every time society sees injustice but accepts it as a part of life, terrible atrocities follow. We must only turn the pages of history to see injustice

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repeat itself over and over again. We need to be wary of corrupted culture and common societal beliefs, because the very nature of a corrupt society is to normalize injustice so it is hidden behind popular opinions, one-sided arguments, and legalization.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born into

slavery on February 11, 1813. In her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she recounts the raw, real, and horrifying realities facing one who is born into a corrupt culture; a society that legalized the act of owning another human being as personal property. Jacobs' story is unique in the way she exposes the normalization of injustice, wherein every possible rationalization, no matter how absurd, was employed to vindicate this cruel trade of owning and selling people.²⁹⁸ The history of slavery in

America exposes how culture can be blinded to the point where the average citizen sees their "lawful" involvement as just and right.

When reading the chilling accounts of Ms. Jacobs' plight of being born and raised a slave, it's difficult not to wonder how people residing in the "land of the free and home of the brave" justified slavery as an ethical, moral, and inevitable way of life. Jacobs' childhood and adolescence were tragically stolen from her by the bonds of slavery. Sexual abuse and morbid beatings plagued what should have been the best years of her life. The cruel, inhuman treatment of African Americans was beyond the pale of even the darkest imagination. Jacobs described one particular punishment where a slave was bound to a wooden beam, feet hanging from the ground, and beaten to near death. "[N]ever before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall; in succession, on a human being. [. . .]"²⁹⁹ Jacobs eventually escaped the horrors of slavery and became an abolitionist, reformer, famous author, and speaker.

This is only a glimpse of her life, and doesn't do her story and accomplishments justice; however, her firsthand account highlights how the normalization of injustice brings unfathomable pain and suffering to those who don't have a voice, or who have been stripped of their rights for the benefit and financial gain of others. The history of slavery in the

RUMB Challenge

Give three examples of normalized injustice today (*e.g. products produced through child labor*)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

If people know that an injustice is wrong, why is it still legal?

If porn is a breeding ground for exploitation and degradation of human dignity, why is it so widely available to kids and teens without any legal recourse?

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United States reveals the destructive nature of a culture where there is a collective opinion that is so established and normalized within societal living that the legal framework itself supports such injustice. Slavery was so ingrained into everyday life that one of the main arguments supporting its existence was that society itself would crumble into economic ruin if it was abolished.³⁰⁰

Perhaps some of the most empowering and equally beautiful words ever written come from the United States Declaration of Independence: “[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”³⁰¹ This declaration was written in 1776. Slavery wasn’t abolished until 1865 in the 13th amendment of the US constitution, nearly ninety years later. How many African Americans suffered unimaginable atrocities against their humanity in someone else’s pursuit of liberty and happiness?

Despite the abolition of slavery almost 160 years ago, between 100,000 and 300,000 youths are trafficked and sexually exploited within the United States every year.³⁰² Like an aggressive weed, exploitation and systemic injustice may be cut down, but if the roots aren’t addressed they will grow back under the guise of popular culture. Pornhub serves as a prime example.

Pornhub actively approves and profits from racist sexual exploitation on its site. One current video on their site, titled “Black slave gets f***** by white master”, received 240k views. In light of videos like this, Pornhub’s attempts to appear anti-racist and philanthropic could not be more cynical. Their donation of \$100,000 following George Floyd’s death, claiming that they stand in solidarity with injustice and racism,³⁰³ cannot cover the true nature of their online content. International speaker, author, domestic violence expert, and cultural sensitivity trainer Dr. Carolyn West explains, “The images found in porn predate the founding of the United States.”³⁰⁴ Today’s porn industry monetizes erotic images that normalize oppression, exploitation, and violence against women (and men) of color. It draws on the images of unimaginable suffering from hundreds of years of slavery, oppression and social injustice.³⁰⁵ Porn turns the cruelty and exploitation that has been around for hundreds of years into profit. Dr. West explains that it is dehumanizing, degrading, loaded with racism, sexism, and aggression towards women of color.³⁰⁶

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As we've previously argued, sexual stimulation has a deep impact on the development of the adolescent brain. It creates powerful neural pathways that hardwire the consumption of racist porn with self-pleasuring and consumerism. As Dr. West concluded in her interview with Gail Dines from Culture Reframed, "I see no evidence that you can consume hours and hours of some of this racialized content and be a better human being for it."³⁰⁷

A Societal Parasite

Porn piggybacks on the momentum of current events. As Dr. West states, "We are living through a global pandemic and now we have pandemic porn" making a mockery out of a crisis where hundreds of thousands have lost their lives. She went on to say that the moment Bill Cosby was convicted, the porn industry made a parody about his crimes against women as if to make a joke out of the Me Too movement. This trend has now continued into the social justice movement. Dr. West recounted finding porn that co-opted the language of the "Black Lives Matter" movement by producing a genre of porn called "Black Wives Matter." Dr. West explains, "It's a way of minimizing, trivializing and marginalizing [social justice movements]. It becomes a space where you can say the most horrifically racist things that you can't say in mainstream media."³⁰⁸ If we want to confront injustice in our nation and combat sex trafficking, exploitation, and the corruption of core human values, we must question the practices of freely accessible mainstream porn. We have to question how many young people we will

RUMB Challenge

Freedom is like water. We need it to survive and thrive. However, too much water can lead to drowning.

Sit down as a group or family and discuss five issues regarding the internet where people are "drowning" in someone else's unchecked freedom (*examples: fake news, cyberbullying, data harvesting*)

Are there any effective efforts underway to change laws regarding these issues you chose? Why or why not?

What boundaries do we have in the offline society that are disrespected or non-existent online? Why?

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allow to be swallowed up in the name of freedom before history reveals our society's shameless passivity and acceptance of this trade.

Breaking Free

When society and culture no longer reflect ethical truth, we cannot wait for politicians or industry to make a corrective course. Instead, a grassroots movement is needed to rise up and speak on the behalf of those who are unable.

The age of the internet has created a new and untamed frontier, where freedom and human rights are enjoyed at a higher degree than any other time. However, we must not forget the cruel and grim lessons of history. With more freedom comes more responsibility. Freedom exercised without restraint is not true freedom, because unchecked freedom can greatly harm the rights of others. Freedom is a beautiful gift, but without regard for others, it can be someone else's prison. If we want this rising generation to tackle some of the greatest societal challenges of our time

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with dignity and respect, we must take a stand against the exploitation, degradation, and racism depicted online.

However, before we can take an effective stand against a billion-dollar industry, we need the right equipment. We cannot go to battle without

a weapon or a shield. Understanding our fundamental rights, the rights of our children, and the rights of parents to guide and protect their families is a critical step towards finding our collective voice together. Changing systems and reforming exploited internet legislation takes courage and a deeper understanding that speaks to the principles and foundations that our right to speech was built upon. When we expose the link between online sexploitation, pornification of youth, and the way tech companies take advantage of legislation and the freedom of expression to justify their corruption, we begin to see how we can fight against injustice and reform a broken web.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it important to learn from our historic failures to protect human dignity? How can these hard lessons expose normalized injustice today?
2. Why is it impossible to consume pornography and respect human dignity at the same time?
3. Why does mainstream pornography rely on images that portray violence, aggression, and racism?
4. What are some of the dangers of complete anonymity online?
5. Have you ever seen exploitive images on the web? What was the context?
6. What can we do to stop an exploitation online?