

Shaheen Shariff: Sexting and Cyberbullying: Defining the Line for Digitally Empowered Kids

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Shaheen Shariff's *Sexting and Cyberbullying: Defining the Line for Digitally Empowered Kids* presents an ambitious and thorough attempt to illuminate the various ethical, social, and legal considerations that surround cyberbullying. As her recurring dislike of the term "cyberbullying" reveals, this concept admits much nuance, and a good deal of the book serves accordingly as an effort to minimize the generational gap in understanding between the children who expertly engage in using various digital media and the adults who attempt to monitor, regulate, and understand these children's actions. Ultimately, her arguments culminate in a body of evidence-based policy recommendations and educational tools that signal her hopes that the issues of sexting and cyberbullying can be dealt with effectively through a preventative, rather than reactive, approach. The book may have originally been intended for lawyers, parents, lawmakers, and educators, but ultimately it achieves a high level of accessibility that makes it more than suitable for reading by post-secondary (and even mature secondary) students. Shariff does not deny the presence of gaps in her research, but she acknowledges that her team continues to fill these through ongoing investigation. She also stresses that once her current research has been completed (in 2016), she will undoubtedly have a very different version of this book to present. Thus, in its current, slightly incomplete state, Shariff's book manages nonetheless to present comprehensive and thoughtful views on cyberbullying in its context among DE (digitally empowered) kids, and in raising many intriguing questions it serves as an

effective introduction to thinking through the many complexities of digitally empowered generations.

The first chapter serves as the book's introduction and begins by exploring previous research into the nature of cyberbullying. She mentions work from the past decade that she suggests would supplement her current work (Shariff 2009; Van Praagh 2007). Shariff then carefully explains the delicate nature of several kinds of interactions on the internet, and also provides solid definitions of "trolls" and "cappers" to give the audience an idea of what sort of adults get involved in explicitly illegal cyberbullying of children. She also spends a good deal of time thinking through and defining the notions of DE Kids, DE Young Adults, and DE Generations. This ensures that the audience has enough familiarity with the varying flavors of digital empowerment to understand the arguments that she will make. Furthermore, in revealing her thought processes as she attempted to best define DE kids, she reveals the many considerations that go into trying to think about youth from an objective and empirical lens. Shariff then poses a list of questions directly applicable to the legal framework regarding cyberbullying and children, and delays her answers to later chapters to give the audience time to consider them independently. She then proceeds to give a thorough overview of the goals, structure, and content of the chapters that follow. Although this leaves little to the imagination when one actually reads the later chapters, it does nonetheless allow the audience to have a clear picture of her entire argument before they begin to read any one part of it. This also gives her ideas a nice formal cohesion because she describes how they are interrelated from the very beginning. Additionally, the overview she gives of the various legal and statutory examples that she cites later enables the audience to attain a degree of comfort with these examples, which proves

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very helpful since, for the most part, Shariff returns to the same handful of examples quite frequently and simply analyzes them very thoroughly. The first chapter thus sees Shariff giving the audience a good idea of her book's main themes and arguments while also giving them a small taste of the data and citations she uses later.

In the second chapter, Shariff establishes one of the core views of her book by analyzing the role of gender in cyberbullying. She begins with a few broad approaches to viewing sexism in modern culture, and also provides several insightful examples of how rape culture frequently becomes perpetuated by peers of DE kids, the media, and even institutions of higher education. She then presents several high-profile cases related to cyberbullying, rape, sexism, or any combination of the three, and specifically analyzes the ways in which the public, the media, and the denizens of the internet responded to these cases. She also explores the possible motivations for why young girls seem to so frequently engage in sexting (or any sharing of intimate photos) despite being aware of the consequences. These motivations become particularly intriguing in juxtaposition with the case studies that preceded them. For instance, she integrates the role of rape culture in her analysis of the Steubenville rape case of 2012, where an intoxicated 16-year-old was raped by two high school student athletes and footage was shared over social media by their peers. Shariff notes that both the media and many DE adolescents who viewed the footage claimed that the victim "was asking for it" by choosing to drink and worried more about the futures of the athletes who committed the rape than the victim herself. She also explains how rape culture combined with social pressures led the victim's peers to ever view the damning digital evidence as acceptable to be shared on the internet, and thus justifies the need for rational, non-arbitrary lawmaking in that domain. Shariff then segues into her presentation of the Define the Line (DTL) research that her team collected over the previous three years. She presents the goals of the project, gives an explanation of the methodologies, and finally presents some of the most pertinent results in the context of her discussion of sexism and gender roles among DE kids. This represents one of the most interesting parts of this chapter, especially given the powerful direct quotations from focus group participants that she chose to include. She then argues that it is the responsibility of adults to try to understand these children's mentality, and not the other way around, and that this ought to inform policy-making despite the historical precedent of assuming that adolescents can automatically handle some of the assumptions of legal adulthood. This builds a solid foundation for Shariff's later arguments that ultimately proves to be the point she references the most: without an understanding of how and why DE kids act in the way that

they do, futility almost surely results when trying to act or legislate "on behalf" of these DE generations.

At this point, Shariff has set herself up very well for the next chapter, where she explores the legal and ethical ramifications of attempting to prosecute children under existing child pornography statutes. She attempts to discover why DE kids themselves often draw very arbitrary lines between what constitutes "flirty fun" and what makes for immoral, illegal, or inappropriate behavior. She also analyzes several illuminating quotations from DE youth that show a belief that almost any action they take online could fall under the blanket immunity of "just joking" in most cases. Shariff then acknowledges that the media coverage of sensational and shocking cases (including those of Amanda Todd, Jane Doe, and the aforementioned Steubenville rape case, among others) often stirs up a public outcry that causes the creation of "big-stick" policies resulting from crises of conscious rather than empirical research or critical thinking. This leads into her analyses of the actual laws and criminal punishments invoked in these and some lower-profile incidents in both the United States and Canada. Shariff remains careful to discuss not only the jurisprudence in each situation, but also the inherent assumptions about childhood common in each legal system and general legal attitudes toward enforcement concerning child pornography laws. In this way, she continues to give balanced opinions about the delicate legal topics she covers. Throughout these discussions, she also makes the convincing argument that, too often, child pornography laws are applied without considering the age, emotional state, social situation, and legal awareness of the adolescents involved. Shariff then investigates how the interests of the state and the interests of a DE child can conflict. In one of the most interesting portions of the entire book, she explains that, when trying to choose between punishment and rehabilitation (or between deterrence and reintegration), one must exercise extreme caution in choosing punishment because children often face much stronger peer influences and do not yet have the willpower to resist them. She then ties this back into more research involving adolescent development and legal culpability and ultimately concludes that most laws in this domain have proven to be simply outdated and do not adequately address the needs of today's DE youth (Van Praagh 2007). Shariff thus concludes the chapter with a call to action to legislators to fix this problem by considering empirical evidence (including her DTL research) and allowing this to inform new policy.

The fourth chapter investigates the role of joking and hyperbole among DE youth and tries to explain how to balance the issues of defamation and the state's duty to protect children with a child's due process rights. These two seemingly unrelated concepts actually find themselves joined together rather successfully in two successive legal

case studies, both of which Shariff not only analyzes very well from an extralegal point of view but also uses as starting points for more general discussion of how many existing legal definitions are too monolithic to adequately account for the nuanced behaviors of many DE youth on the internet. She makes an effort to make a case in favor of keeping the current statutes (both Canadian and American) in place, but ultimately concludes that this simply cannot be done without infringing on adolescents' due process rights. This presents a critical turning point in the content of the book; until now, Shariff has tried her best not to blame any one policy or system for the difficulties that arise when dealing with DE youth and cyberbullying. Here she admits that due to precedent (as well as the unfortunately inflammatory effect of most media), the current legal framework places a large burden on police and judges to determine matters best left to psychologists and children's advocates, among others. This gives the audience the first glimpse of her concise and evidence-based recommendations that form the crux of her arguments at the conclusion of the book, and it gives these last chapters a power than can be felt among the data of the earlier chapters but does not quite seem to permeate her conclusions to the same extent. Shariff follows these case studies with a fascinating look at the United Nations' *International Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, which she uses to explore the moral prerogatives of government in the context of DE youth's right to due process. Although her arguments for changing policy and practice perhaps come off as a bit too altruistic to be practical, they reveal nonetheless a deep interest in creating a system that more fairly and accurately handles the issues created by DE youth on the internet. Shariff complements this with a brief survey of laws in the United States and Canada that could benefit from replacement, a discussion that definitely could be of interest to lawyers and policymakers alike.

Shariff's ultimate chapter begins with two ostensibly irreverent quotations from *Lord of the Flies* and *Harry Potter* that ultimately prove to represent core tenets of her views of DE youth. She presents a compelling case for ensuring that laws meant to protect DE youth must not be used in such a way to criminalize those they intend to safeguard. She then revisits many of the main points of the book (including ideas about guilt, freedom, and choice) which she discusses in the context of children's literature. After having explored a variety of cases that pertain to digital transmissions of depictions of both consensual and non-consensual sexual activity, Shariff once again touches on the rape culture that the media often inculcates through its coverage of cyberbullying and sexting. As she draws the conclusion that few people currently involved in the juvenile justice system do much to fight this rape culture, she nonetheless remains rather mellow in tone, one of the

key strengths of much of the book. She once again recommends the abolition of "big-stick" child pornography laws, instead exploring many alternatives including rehabilitation through thinking through the eyes of the victim. She then raises the captivating concept of victim-perpetrators, a surprisingly large category of DE youth that contains those who bully while simultaneously being bullied by others. Shariff finally synthesizes all of the information and arguments she has presented up to this point into her concrete and remarkably simple recommendations for action. She envisions a holistic strategy that educates youth and law enforcement alike on the precarious ethical and legal concerns of using online media. She encourages sustainable funding for special educational programs to enable schools to combat cyberbullying at its source, and she strongly advocates for a statutory shift from reactive to proactive laws. The book then concludes with a second nod to *Lord of the Flies* by once again exploring the notion of "survival of the fittest" as it pertains to DE youth and digital media: because DE youth are (by biological powers out of their control) inherently not the fittest, they deserve to be protected by knowledge, non-arbitrary laws, and informed parents, teachers, and judges so that if they do use the internet to harm others, everyone will know exactly who deserves to be held accountable.

Shariff makes effective use of four brief appendices that enhance and illuminate her policy recommendations from the book as a whole. Appendix A comprises a detailed list of various pieces of legislation in both Canada and the United States that judges often apply to cases of cyberbullying. It takes a state-by-state (province-by-province in the Canadian examples) approach that would surely prove helpful to parents and educators throughout the two countries as a recently-updated starting point for further legal research. Appendix B contains more of Shariff's team's DTL research in the form of graphs that further underscore many of her points from Chapter 2. She presents the results by age and gender as well as solely by gender to highlight many interesting patterns, especially those found within the pre-Facebook age group (ages 9–12) and the Facebook age group (ages 13–18). Appendix C presents a sample workshop that Shariff gives to undergraduate university students that would serve as an excellent model for anyone desiring to implement similar workshops at their own university. Finally, Appendix D presents a sample syllabus for an undergraduate course investigating public policy and digital media, specifically in the context of adolescence. All of the resources in the appendices increase the direct utility of the book for educators and parents. They also serve as examples of ways to adapt Shariff's arguments specifically for students, and models for younger students could definitely be modeled after those given in the appendices.

In summary, Shariff's book signifies a solid effort to present a thorough investigation of cyberbullying for those who know little about the topic (and especially for those not a part of a DE generation). She admits that not much has changed since her earlier work, but remains optimistic that the framework she lays out could definitely succeed in practice (Shariff 2015, p. 156). She manages to build a multilayered argument and to draw clear conclusions without really alienating any one school of legal, moral, or judicial thought. The book does perhaps skew a bit to the Canadian side in terms of examples of legal precedent, cases of cyberbullying, and the media's role in engaging the public, but Shariff definitely provides more than enough references regarding similar occurrences in the United States to counter claims of national bias. In addition, the work manages to remain highly accessible to almost any reader by breaking its main ideas into small, easily digestible pieces and reiterating the structure of its arguments before and after it presents them. Whether

Shariff's current research will validate the DTL results presented in this book will be a concern for later editions. In the meantime, *Sexting and Cyberbullying* provides a wealth of knowledge that definitely fills important gaps in the existing research on DE adolescents.

Conflict of interest The author reports none.

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