

# Haters

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(I originally intended this for startup founders, who are often surprised by the attention they get as their companies grow, but it applies equally to anyone who becomes famous.)

If you become sufficiently famous, you'll acquire some fans who like you too much. These people are sometimes called "fanboys," and though I dislike that term, I'm going to have to use it here. We need some word for them, because this is a distinct phenomenon from someone simply liking your work.

A fanboy is obsessive and uncritical. Liking you becomes part of their identity, and they create an image of you in their own head that is much better than reality. Everything you do is good, because you do it. If you do something bad, they find a way to see it as good. And their love for you is not, usually, a quiet, private one. They want everyone to know how great you are.

Well, you may be thinking, I could do without this kind of obsessive fan, but I know there are all kinds of people in the world, and if this is the worst consequence of fame, that's not so bad.

Unfortunately this is not the worst consequence of fame. As well as fanboys, you'll have haters.

A hater is obsessive and uncritical. Disliking you becomes part of their identity, and they create an image of you in their own head that is much worse than reality. Everything you do is bad, because you do it. If you do something good, they find a way to see it as bad. And their dislike for you is not, usually, a quiet, private one. They want everyone to know how awful you are.

If you're thinking of checking, I'll save you the trouble. The second and fifth paragraphs are identical except for "good" being switched to "bad" and so on.

I spent years puzzling about haters. What are they, and where do they come from? Then one day it dawned on me. Haters are just fanboys with the sign switched.

Note that by haters, I don't simply mean trolls. I'm not talking about people who say bad things about you and then move on. I'm talking about the much smaller group of people for whom this becomes a kind of obsession and who do it repeatedly over a long period.

Like fans, haters seem to be an automatic consequence of fame. Anyone sufficiently famous will have them. And like fans, haters are energized by the fame of whoever they hate. They hear a song by some pop singer. They don't like it much. If the singer were an obscure one, they'd just forget about it. But instead they keep hearing her name, and this seems to drive some people crazy. Everyone's always going on about this singer, but she's no good! She's a fraud!

That word "fraud" is an important one. It's the spectral signature of a hater to regard the object of their hatred as a fraud. They can't deny their fame. Indeed, their fame is if anything exaggerated in the hater's mind. They notice every mention of the singer's name, because every mention makes them angrier. In their own minds they exaggerate both the singer's fame and her lack of talent, and the only way to reconcile those two ideas is to conclude that she has tricked everyone.

What sort of people become haters? Can anyone become one? I'm not sure about this, but I've noticed some patterns. Haters are generally losers in a very specific sense: although they are occasionally talented, they have never achieved much. And indeed, anyone successful enough to have achieved significant fame would be unlikely to regard another famous person as a fraud on that account, because anyone famous knows how random fame is.

But haters are not always complete losers. They are not always the proverbial guy living in his mom's basement. Many are, but some have some amount of talent. In fact I suspect that a sense of frustrated talent is what drives some people to become haters. They're not just saying "It's unfair that so-and-so is famous," but "It's unfair that so-and-so is famous, and not me."

Could a hater be cured if they achieved something impressive? My guess is that's a moot point, because they never will. I've been able to observe for long enough that I'm fairly confident the pattern works both ways: not only do people who do great work never become haters, haters never do great work. Although I dislike the word "fanboy," it's evocative of something important about both haters and fanboys. It implies that the fanboy is so slavishly predictable in his admiration that he's diminished as a result, that he's less than a man.

Haters seem even more diminished. I can imagine being a fanboy. I can think of people whose work I admire so much that I could abase myself before them out of sheer gratitude. If P. G. Wodehouse were still alive, I could see myself being a Wodehouse fanboy. But I could not imagine being a hater.

Knowing that haters are just fanboys with the sign bit flipped makes it much easier to deal with them. We don't need a separate theory of haters. We can just use existing techniques for dealing with obsessive fans.

The most important of which is simply not to think much about them. If you're like most people who become famous enough to acquire haters, your initial reaction will be one of mystification. Why does this guy seem to have it in for me? Where does his obsessive energy come from, and what makes him so appallingly nasty? What did I do to set him off? Is it something I can fix?

The mistake here is to think of the hater as someone you have a dispute with. When you have a dispute with someone, it's usually a good idea to try to understand why they're upset and then fix things if you can. Disputes are distracting. But it's a false analogy to think of a hater as someone you have a dispute with. It's an

understandable mistake, if you've never encountered haters before. But when you realize that you're dealing with a hater, and what a hater is, it's clear that it's a waste of time even to think about them. If you have obsessive fans, do you spend any time wondering what makes them love you so much? No, you just think "some people are kind of crazy," and that's the end of it.

Since haters are equivalent to fanboys, that's the way to deal with them too. There may have been something that set them off. But it's not something that would have set off a normal person, so there's no reason to spend any time thinking about it. It's not you, it's them.

## Notes

[1] There are of course some people who are genuine frauds. How can you distinguish between x calling y a fraud because x is a hater, and because y is a fraud? Look at neutral opinion. Actual frauds are usually pretty conspicuous. Thoughtful people are rarely taken in by them. So if there are some thoughtful people who like y, you can usually assume y is not a fraud.

[2] I would make an exception for teenagers, who sometimes act in such extreme ways that they are literally not themselves. I can imagine a teenage kid being a hater and then growing out of it. But not anyone over 25.

[3] I have a much worse memory for misdeeds than my wife Jessica, who is a connoisseur of character, but I don't wish it were better. Most disputes are a waste of time even if you're in the right, and it's easy to bury the hatchet with someone if you can't remember why you were mad at them.

[4] A competent hater will not merely attack you individually but will try to get mobs after you. In some cases you may want to refute whatever bogus claim they made in order to do so. But err on the side of not, because ultimately it probably won't matter.

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