



Trolling Pathologies

Hal Berghel, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The netizen watch phrase is: don't feed the trolls. A better guide would be: learn to recognize the trolls.

The phrase “online trolling” denotes the practice of anonymously interrupting normal and customary information exchange in order to lure the recipient into reacting to the message. It shares this interference function with signal jamming, network blocking, network filtering, and a host of other technologies. The important difference lies in trolling’s anonymity and pathological allure. Unlike more primitive interrupts, trolling attempts to either engage or inflame the receiver, usually through misinformation, lies, distortions, and so on. Of course, it weren’t for the false, misleading, or inflammatory content, and the desire for anonymity, trolling wouldn’t be necessary—ordinary communication would suffice.

ONLINE TROLLING

Trolling can be understood as a virulent form of online interruption. It makes an important and weaponized contribution to the Internet’s negative space,¹ the digital

repository at which unprepared and impressionable minds feed. In this capacity, trolling is an epistemological companion to fake news, alt-facts, canards, fallacies, prevarications, hyperbole, illogic, BS, exaggerations, and hate speech.

Of the various forms of online trolling, some can be easily dismissed as pedestrian information interferons. These include hit-and-run posting, sh*tposting, meatpuppeting, and other social media snarkiness that serve the subcerebral regions of troll-space. In my view, the most interesting and worthy of study are those that have the greatest potential for social disruption and/or are the most suggestive of underlying personality disorders—especially those that seem to be in co-morbidity with dramatic personality disorders (Cluster B) such as narcissism and histrionics, as described in the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm).

It’s not surprising that trolling, as a weaponized form of communication, is popular with today’s tyrants, dictators, and demagogues. We’ve recently become acutely aware how comfortably trolling complements such modern political perversions as pathocracy (rule by a maladjusted minority, primarily psychopaths and narcissists)²



and kakistocracy (rule by the least competent).³ Of course, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell spoke forcefully on this phenomenon in the past century. Trolling adds nothing conceptual to villainy, just a new digital veneer.

For classification purposes, I offer the following (nonexhaustive) list of definitions of online trolling.

- › *Provocation trolling*: to elicit a particular response (for example, hostility) from one or more participants of an online forum
- › *Social engineering trolling*: to incite participants to activities that they would normally not have undertaken (closely related to provocation trolling)
- › *Partisan trolling*: to de-legitimize a political opponent or opposing party for political advantage
- › *Ad hominem trolling*: to harass, defame, or de-legitimize individuals or groups
- › *Nuisance trolling*: to derail the thread of an online forum (blog, chatroom, and so on)
- › *Snag trolling*: to evoke responses to satisfy curiosity
- › *Jam trolling*: to disrupt a communication channel (the trolling equivalent to a denial-of-service attack)
- › *Sport trolling*: to gratify the troll (just for the fun of it)

Of course, all forms of trolling should be taken seriously, for the consequences can be severe and disruptive to the prevailing social order or the civility of the participants to one another. Online trolling can manipulate public opinion precisely because it so easily escapes detection by the uninitiated. But not all trolling is equal in terms of effect—especially in politics. Trolling frequently says something particularly revealing about the psychology of the troll.

WHEN TROLLING BECOMES PATHOLOGICAL

“Don’t feed the trolls” is a well-worn cliché for netizens. And there’s certainly something to be said for this: responding to trolls encourages further trolling much like answering robocalls tells marketers that your phone line is active. Nicole Sullivan⁴ argues that trolls tend to be people who seek conflict. Thus, feeding trolls only energizes them. Yet this analysis is incomplete.

It seems to me that pathological trolls aren’t driven by the need for attention at all. Rather, they seek to

exercise power over others. In other words, they’re first and foremost control freaks. And since the online world allows them to hide behind the cloak of anonymity, they’re malignant control freaks. Let’s look at this from the point of view of what I’ll call stimulus-response trolling theory, which builds on research by Claire Hardaker.⁵

We could develop a suite of trolling methodologies based on networking principles—rectified trolling, bi-directional trolling, relayed trolling, and so on—but we’ll limit ourselves here to the basic types of exchanges, in which the tilde indicates that no trolling was involved in that component of the exchange:

1. ~TROLL/~TROLL: ordinary exchange
2. ~TROLL/TROLL: indicating a troll/trollop that injects him/herself into an otherwise ordinary exchange

3. TROLL/~TROLL: sucker/victim—the troll “catches” the unwary victim off-guard and manipulates to effect
4. TROLL/TROLL: troll warfare; provocative in its potential deviance, this has yet to mature

Case 3 predominates in the trolling landscape of the Internet’s negative space and is the primary subject of Sullivan and Hardaker’s observations. In fact, as it underlies much of the misinformation promulgated during the 2016 US presidential campaign and accounts for most categories of trolling

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described above, it fits well within the “discipline” of disinformatics.⁶ Case 3 is also becoming a cornerstone of Machiavellian manipulation of public opinion in the digital age.^{7,8} Case 4 has yet to fully emerge, but the prospect of future political troll wars seems likely.

TWO CASES OF AD HOMINEM TROLLING

Having outlined the underlying “logic” of online trolling, I offer a couple of noteworthy exemplars.

iPad Steering Wheel Mount

The first example illustrates a snag (or possibly social engineering) trolling stimulus and ad hominem trolling responses. It emerged during an online discussion of a fictional iPad Steering Wheel Mount (www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdAkKKxOvu4). This fantastic piece of trolling was engineered by my colleague (and former fellow *Computer* editor) Chuck Severance as

part of a social media experiment to investigate how viral videos propagate. Along with the YouTube video, Chuck also provides a fictitious website (www.steering-wheel-ipad.com/index.html) replete with faux user testimonials and bogus ordering instructions.

The iPSWM purports to be safer and less distracting than other hands-free devices by attaching directly to the steering wheel. The idea alone is priceless, but the critical responses to the video are particularly noteworthy:

DONT DRIVE AND USE THIS OBJECT!.,,please,,,"

- › Danielkaas94: "Only a true american would 'invent' this kind of garbage you're an id[i]ot case closed."
- › GanceDavin: "You must be a special kind of stupid"
- › Kevlandy: "What a retarded invention."

To be sure, some respondents picked up on the gag. But all too many did not, and this makes the study fascinating—

corporate headquarters ("the Base 441 design and incubation studio in the Lansing, MI designated renaissance zone") appears to be an abandoned warehouse, and the link to the iPSWM patent takes you to the patent for duct tape. Confirmation of the gag was never much more than a mouse click away from the original YouTube video and website, yet so many missed it. The reason for this should be intoxicating to mental health professionals. Trolling pathology must be understood in terms of this willful ignorance.

Rather than being thoughtful, troll reactions seem to be a gut-level state of hyperarousal or acute stress response by the sympathetic nervous system.

- › Dana: "you shouldn't be reading on a turn anyway' lol, OR BEHIND THE WHEEL AT ALL!"
- › phoulmouth: "was waiting, no, hoping, that this moron crashed."
- › Samuel: "Funniest thing ever ... If this isn't a joke bro you got ambition. Lol"
- › Miorakira: "You're an idiot. Plain and simple."
- › Aerolift: "I can't wait tto see the airbag popping :D ipad inside your brain"
- › Gerry: "Really stupid. What else ya got?"
- › TheFroman007: "This is single handedly the dumbest f*cking idea ever. You cant look at anything on the dash now like the speedometer, tachometer, or even if you have gas in your car. And how about when that airbag goes off, have fun having a smashed ipad in your f*cking face. Why the f*ck do you need to read while driving. Do that when you stop."
- › Alex: "This is one of the most idiotic and stupid things to do..

and alarming. Of course, the hostility of the responses is transparent. But at a subtler level the respondents betray an intellectual shallowness by not making any effort to understand the stimulus in context. Rather than being thoughtful, the reactions seem to be a gut-level state of hyperarousal or acute stress response by the sympathetic nervous system. If language weren't involved one might be tempted to explain these reactive mechanisms by way of analogy to the primitive behavior of lower primates.

As an aside, the trolling phenomenon gets at the heart of many of society's deepest problems, not the least of which is the inability to either anticipate or understand irony. The scariest part of this exchange is that some of these respondents undoubtedly carry weapons and vote.

It's important to note that while Chuck didn't highlight the fact that he's on the faculty of the University of Michigan, he didn't go to any great effort to conceal it either. The iPSWM website contained links to both a personal profile and other university-related activities. The photo of the

Right Angle Flex Shaft

My second trolling example is provided by Amazon. In the "Comments" section under an ad for the Dewalt DWARAFS 12" Right Angle Flex Shaft, a drill bit extension for hard-to-reach places, a customer posted the following question: "The description says it is a 'right angle flex shaft' but in the picture it appears to be pointing to the left—is this the right or left version?" (www.amazon.com/ask/questions/Tx2ZFG8IP7LBYNZ/ref=ask_dp_dpmw_al_hza). This predictably energized a platoon of trolls:

- › S. Whitaker: "Seriously!?!? Lol. Right angle is a term for 90 degree angle. But I don't think you should be using any form of power tools."
- › Lauren: "I've got a left-handed hammer, if you need one."
- › Richard: "I had the same problem with a box of nails. I would grab one and it would point to the right wall, not the left wall. I was only able to use about half the box."
- › Marty: "I think that would depend on whether you are north or south of the equator. If you are at the north or south pole, it will not work at an angle at all."
- › K. Sianecz: "Depends if you live on the left or right side of the Prime Meridian."
- › Bruce: "You should go into a circular room, find a corner to sit, and think about it."

- › Octoberken: “It’s configurable. If you rotate it 180 degrees along the vertical axis it will point to the right.”
- › Brendan: “Right angle refers to the degree of the angle. 90 degrees is a right angle. There’s no left or right version.”

All but the last two are ad hominem responses to what’s pretty clearly a snag or sport trolling stimulus. As with the iPSWM, the initial critical responses show clear evidence of pedestrian herd mentality as the respondents try to outdo one another at the questioner’s expense. This case differs from the iPSWM in only one important respect: this snag troller didn’t leave any clues behind. That said, the ad itself, especially the product photo, would make the gag obvious upon even minimal reflection. But once again, the first-order effect is an ad hominem attack on the source presumably triggered by some primitive primate instinct. Perhaps ad hominem trolling is a linguistic counterpart to a fight-or-flight response.

WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?

Note that in both examples the first-order response to the trolling stimulus is caustic. The reasons are probably best left to social scientists. But some superficial conclusions are obvious. The reaction suggests a variety of unhealthy personality traits that might even qualify as disorders. I’m convinced that whatever the causes might be, they’re likely to be found in DSM-5. As one untrained in psychotherapy, I can only suggest the mundane: the caustic responses suggest myopia, egoism, poor self-control, and a perverse feeling that diminishing others can elevate self-worth—not to mention a shallow intellect, and absence of contextual awareness. If Freud were alive today, what a field day he would have with trolling.

If I’m right, pathological trolling illustrates the worst aspects of human nature. The parallel between

malicious trolling and disseminating fake news, lies, and such seems obvious. What’s not obvious are the mental machinations that drive this antisocial behavior. I would speculate that those who engage in malignant online commentary are in some sort of cognitive decline as yet to be defined by social scientists and mental health professionals. The fact that trolls seem to become immediately polarized by such a simple thing as an advertisement or a tweet shouldn’t be overlooked. Their behavior is rife with unhealthy impulses.

In Scandinavian mythology, trolls are mischievous and sometimes dangerous creatures that live in caves or underground. The name—derived from the Old Norse word for “fiend”—is an appropriate descriptor for the legions of anonymous pathological posters who contribute to the polarization of society by propagating misinformation and venom. At this point online trolling is but one stage of a disinformation wash cycle that seems to infect every important aspect of our life. In a future column, I’ll discuss what we might be able to do about it. Meanwhile, remember that the price to avoid being the “victim of trolling” is eternal vigilance. ■

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HAL BERGHEL is an IEEE and ACM Fellow and a professor of computer science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Contact him at h1b@computer.org.

