Chapter 11
Trolling for the Lulz?
Using Media Theory to Understand Transgressive Humour and Other Internet Trolling in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

Internet trolling as a term has changed in meaning since it first entered mainstream use on the Internet in the 1990s. In the 2010s, it has come to refer to the posting of provocative or offensive messages on the Internet to harm others. Thischange in usage of the term opens up new challenges for understanding the phenomenon, especially as some are still resistant to taking it beyond its original meaning. This chapter tries to distinguish the 1990s kind from the 2010s kind by referring to the former as classical trolling and the latter as anonymous trolling. Taking part in the former is considered to be “trolling for the Lolz” (i.e. positive) and the second to mean “trolling for the Lulz” (i.e. negative). Through using document and genre analysis, this chapter finds that there are common ways in which anonymous trolling manifests differently on different platforms. The chapter concludes by presenting a model for understanding which genres of online community are at risk for particular types of trolling.

INTRODUCTION

Internet trolling is a term that has changed with use over the last twenty years. In the 1990s Internet trolling was a term referring to the practice of posting provocative messages that were so obviously intended to be inflammatory that the resulting barrage of abusive posts that followed, called a ‘flame war,’ made regular members of online community feel entertained. In the 2000s the use of the term as being distinct from ‘flaming’ was challenged (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002) and by the 2010s the term had changed again to that the two were almost inseparable (Bishop, 2014; Hardaker, 2010). Internet trolling has now come to mean the posting of messages via a public communications network that are either provocative or offensive. Distinctions have been drawn between the two, with the 1990s variety being called ‘classical trolling’ and

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the 2010s variety being called ‘Anonymous trolling’ (Bishop, 2013a). The reasons for the first are self-evident, but in the case of ‘Anonymous trolling,’ which should always have a capital ‘A,’ more explanation is necessary. The word, ‘Anonymous,’ is named after a group of self-described Internet users who attempt to create organised abuse of others or disruption to services, such as through distributed denial of service attacks.

Terms like, ‘Trolling for the Lulz’ and ‘Trolling for the Lolz’ can be better understood with these classes of trolling. The former, which is where people post offensive messages for their own entertainment can be seen to resemble Anonymous trolling. The latter, which is the posting of messages for others’ entertainment as well as one’s own, can be seen to resemble classical trolling. The terms, ‘troll’ and ‘trolling,’ as latched onto by the mass media, could be considered to be the latest term used to describe abuse via technology, with the earlier term being cyberbullying. Some researchers have tried to make distinctions between abusive types of trolling as being ‘flame trolling’ and ‘cyber-bullying’ and the more positive sort being ‘kudos trolling’ and ‘cyber-kindness’ (Bishop, 2012b; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2013). Whichever terms are used it is clear that there are positive types of trolling and negative kinds, and it is possible to accommodate both the traditionalists and the more modern uses of the terms.

BACKGROUND

The change in meaning of Internet trolling has created a divide between the traditionalists who want it to have the classical meaning, and those who want it to have the Anonymous meaning. The character theory in Table 1 by Bishop (2012b; 2013c, 2014) could provide a means to resolve this dispute. When spoken about in terms of classical trolling, those who troll could be called, ‘Trolls’ (with the capital ‘T’) and those who take part in Anonymous trolling could be called, ‘trolls’ as is commonly done by the media. Trolls are not the only type of Internet users who take part in trolling, as there are many others, as can be seen from Table 1. Online community users, which include Trolls, are known collectively as trollers (Bishop, 2012b; Bishop, 2014; Herring et al., 2002).

As can be seen from Table 1, the Big Man is someone who does trolling by posting something to others in order to support their own worldview, even if it does not support others’ collective opinions and ends up offending them. The type of troller most people in fact mean when they call someone a ‘troll’ is in fact the Snert. A Snert takes part in trolling to harm others for their own sick entertainment. The more pleasant trollers include the Flirt, who take part in trolling to help others be sociable, including through light ‘teasing’. There is also the MHBFY Jenny, a troller who takes part in trolling to help people see the lighter side of life and to help them come to terms with their concerns. One of the most creative trollers is the Wizard, who does trolling through making-up and sharing content that has a humorous effect or promotes positive use and understanding. On a darker note, the E-Venger type of troller does trolling in order to trip someone up so that their ‘true colours’ are revealed. They may also, in the moment, fiercely attack someone who offended them in order to ‘fight flames with flames’. A high profile example of this was with Liam Stacey, a student from Swansea, who posted a string of abuse to Twitter following being rebuked for posting an offensive comment about a footballer who suffered a cardiac arrest (Bishop, 2013a; Bishop, 2014; Cleland, 2013; Edwards, 2012; Fisher, 2013; Hall, Hanna, & Huey, 2013). Another type of troller – the Iconoclast – takes part in trolling to help others discover ‘the truth’, often by telling them things completely factual, but which may drive them into a state of consternation. They may post links to content that contradicts the worldview of their target, for instance. A slippery type of troller is the Chatroom Bob, who takes