The Menace Here to Stay, Better Not Take the Bait

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Trolls don’t hate people as much as they love the game of hating people.

BBC DOCUMENTARY ‘TROLL HUNTERS’

Introduction

In contemporary times, digital communiqué platforms thriving on computer-mediated communication, have gained colossal currency, especially the social media platforms or social networking sites. Due to easy availability of the Internet and smart-phones at affordable prices and the germination of numerous social media platforms and digital spaces for interaction, the communication via social networking sites, brimming with user-generated content, have metamorphosed the very way in which human communication used to transpire in the past. Today, on one single social media platform, we can witness, the convergence of other mass media platforms. However, unlike the traditional communication apparatus of the past, which had professional communicators conceptualising, designing, disseminating and gate-keeping the content or message, the social media flourishes in a more or less, unrestricted freewheeling environment. On social media, the users of social media create the online content, irrespective of the level of communication skills and this

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content is then disseminated by the same users on their desired social media platform, completely uncensored and without any checks and/or balances.

**Objective**

On the one hand, online social media channels and digital platforms have undeniably, given human communication an opportunity to exponentially develop in a computer-mediated environment, which provides speed, spontaneity, blurring of geographical lines, freedom for the user to create and also distribute content, gain cost-effective, instantaneous responses, and several dynamic, multilayered feedback systems.

On the other hand, the same computer-mediated communication platforms and social media alike, have also opened up a can of worms in the form of various challenges like adverse feedback, social media addiction, disjointedness from the real world, identity thefts which can result in reputation damage and financial implications, misinformation, fake news, cyber stalking, cyber bullying, frauds and scams and so on (the list is endless). However, one glaring negative aspect that has emerged very conspicuously, and which can easily be cited as one of the most afflictive concerns in the present age is the online trolling on digital and social media platforms.

The primary objective of this paper is to understand the concept, origin, repercussions and possible solutions of this phenomenon of ‘Internet trolling’ in computer-mediated communication, with particular reference to social media trolling, in depth. The paper investigates various dimensions of Internet trolling, which includes, firstly, analysing if ‘trolling’ is an emerging concept of cyberspace or a renewed memoir of ancient rhetoric.

Secondly, the paper also tries to explain the characteristics of Internet trolls and also the traits of ‘Internet troll’ – vulnerable targets. Thirdly, it tries to delve into the psychological profile of Internet trolls. Hence, fourthly, it describes the classifications of Internet trolls. Fifthly, a demonstration of the strategies adopted by trolls along with the effect of trolling is described. Sixthly, this paper tries to examine Internet trolling from the gender perspective. Lastly, it has elaborated in some detail on the various strategies that can be employed to cope with the crude actions and cruel intentions of Internet trolls.

**Key Terms**

(a) **Internet Trolls**: The word “troll” is from late Middle English and originally meant, “an imaginary, either very large or very small creature in traditional Scandinavian stories, that has magical powers and lives in mountains or caves.” However, in cyberspace, an Internet troll is a member of the Internet
community who deliberately posts offensive, provocative, divisive, online abuse; manipulative, and controversial online comments, with the intention of flustering, instigating, or evoking anger in the targeted ‘netizen’. The term is also associated with a fishing technique – say your foolish thing, watch the world bite.

(b) **Computer-Mediated Communication**: It refers to the communication occurring between humans, however with a computer-assisted device. It provides fast communication, instantaneous exchange of thoughts; messages and also has the ability to conceal the identities of the senders and receivers. The online trolls have extensively exploited this element of anonymity provided by computer-mediated communication.

(c) **Social Media**: *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines social media as “websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the Internet using a computer or mobile phone.”

Kaplan and Haenlin define social media as “A group of Internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundation of the Web 2.0 which allows their creation in exchange of user-generated content.” According to Safko in his book *Social Media Bible*, social media is the media that is continuously used during human communication to be social. Social media foundations rest on the Internet and technologies emerging from new media. Examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, web blogs and so on. The users themselves do the content generation and distribution.

**Trolling: A Concept of Cyberspace or Renewed Memoir of Rhetoric?**

In digital culture, the latest concept of “online trolling” is being closely observed continuously and studied by several media researchers; however the field requires more scientific data as indicated by a few research studies conducted on the subject. But the critical question that arises is; is trolling an ancient concept or a new concept originating from the realms of infinitely connected digital spaces?

According to an article, titled, *The Art of Trolling: A Philosophical History of Rhetoric*, trolling is distinctly explained as old as ‘history of rhetoric’ itself. The article emphasises how the history of rhetoric along with the history of trolling evolved concomitantly. The trails of both can be observed from the times of Sophists from the pre-Socratic school of philosophy in ancient Greece till the present century information societies built on binary numbers of digital blocks. Both rhetoric and trolling have co-evolved from ancient times to contemporary times, and “steeped in philosophy and mythology, spanning across cultures, continents, and time.” Today, trolling has proliferated from the oral
and written culture of human communication, into the digital spaces of human communication, where on the present-day, social media is extensively being used by humans to communicate.

Characteristics of Internet Trolls

One of the principal characteristics of a troll is that he/she is an attention seeker who can use deliberately designed online communication on social media, to get an emotional reaction out of his/her target. Secondly, a social media troll can have disingenuous and multifaceted motivations. This can include a variety of topics ranging from self-centred politics, to a playful trickster, or to a ‘netizen’ who is making an endeavour to be a “modern-day culture hero” or a philanthropist to a vindictive, spiteful, abusive but seldom threatening online narrative fabricator. The third characteristic of a troll is that his/ her malicious intent is to construct a communication and post it to its target audience just to derive amusement out of the emotional reaction incited due to the message or post. It is highly possible that the troll, in reality, doesn’t even concur with his/her own virtual narratives.\(^9\) Fourthly, they exhibit antisocial behaviour in digital spaces. Fifthly, they feed on the sense of drama, under the guise of anonymity, camouflage, and absence of authority to keep a check on their nasty online conduct.

Lastly, there is a fine line between haters and trolls. However, the most distinguishing feature between both of them is primarily their agenda. The aim of troll is not to demean the online target but to engage the target in a fight and simultaneously engage the targeted ‘netizen’s’ social network against him/ her and involve more people to group against the set target.\(^10\) However, sometimes these online deviant behaviours can spill over and merge into one.

Characteristics of Targets Vulnerable to Internet Trolls

Trolls tend to target anything and anyone that is likely to bring attention to them. This includes brands, corporate houses, influential public figures, social activists, feminists, journalists, political figures/rivals and so on. Trolls also tend to target vulnerable communities of the society, marginalized groups and women. According to the social media psychologist, Mark Smyth, a member of the Psychology Society of Ireland, “Trolls will underestimate someone based on gender or race, and this simply shows the limitations of their insight. These could be remnants of the old stereotypical patriarchal society, where women and minorities didn’t have the opportunity to share their opinion.”\(^11\) The underlying intent is to target profoundly sensitive and emotional audiences, that can be in grief, or have marginalized voices that want to be heard and so on.
Psychological Profile of Internet Trolls

The invasion of online trolls in digital spaces has not gone unnoticed in the various spheres of academia; like communication, media studies, anthropology and so on. However, it has created of the maximum interest in the discipline of psychology, wherein the study of trolls has become an interesting case in point. The study titled, Constructing the Cyber-troll: Psychopathy, Sadism, and Empathy", revealed the personality profile of Internet trolls and summarized that trolls have, “higher levels of trait psychopathy, sadism, lower levels of affective empathy, cognitive empathy and are master manipulators of both cyber-settings and their victims’ emotions.” According to another study titled, “Trolls just want to have fun” by Canada’s University of Manitoba, “cyber-trolling appears to be an Internet manifestation of everyday sadism.” The study further reveals, “similar patterns of relations between trolling and the Dark Tetrad of personality: trolling correlated positively with sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.”

Classifications of Internet Trolls

Based on the online behaviour of the trolls in digital spaces like social media, in the article titled, “Multidimensionality of online trolling behaviours,” reveals four major classifications of trolls, which are as follows:

- (a) Serious trolling (not funny and ideologically motivated)
- (b) Humorous trolling
- (c) Serious non-trolling behaviours
- (d) Humorous non-trolling behaviours

The same study also reveals the seven behavioural dimensions of trolls, which can be listed as follows:

1. Communicated serious opinions;
2. Representative of public opinions;
3. Pseudo-sincere;
4. Intentional;
5. Provocative;
6. Repeated; or
7. Satirical

Furthermore, in the chapter, “What motivates Online Trolling and its Perpetrators,” the following kinds of subtypes have also been identified with the online trolling:

(a) Political Trolling: They are political provocateurs, who harass their
target with different political choices with provocative statements, hate speeches, bitter antipathy, extremist thoughts, nastiness, deliberate insulting rhetoric, where political correctness is the first causality.

(b) Religious Trolling: According to Urban Dictionary, Religious trolls come in the guise of a supposed spiritual leader who misuses their authority. The aim of the religious troll is to incite hatred and discriminate against people by using religion. The discrimination can be along the lines of religious belief, cultural values, sexual preferences, affiliations and so on. Religious trolls openly distort sacred scriptures to their advantage. They selectively pick up texts, substitute its meaning and use it against others.

(c) RIP Trolling: In this kind of trolling, the usually anonymous trolls, post offensive comments about the deceased and target those individuals in digital spaces who are mourning their loved ones. The recent case in point is the untimely death of late actress Sridevi, and the way trolls targeted the deceased as well as her family members. From citing reasons of “surgery” behind her death to the celebration of her daughter’s birthday, or questioning her last rites and so on. This subset of trolls is considered to be ‘evoking much stronger emotions’ as these are considered sacred timings and spaces for society.

As per another study, titled, “I Do it for the Lulz: A Qualitative & Psychological Analysis of Internet Trolls” following are the common types of trolling:

(a) Griefing: In this, the troll put the victim in a situation, which causes them grief and later on disseminates the victim’s reaction on various other social media platforms.

(b) Flaming: In this, the troll deliberately involves the victim or the set target into a verbal argument by bringing up those topics, which can evoke strong emotions and induce hostility. Flaming can be applied independently and also with trolling context.

(c) Raiding: In this troll lays a kind of virtual siege on the victim and assault in a group. Example, recent NDTV News anchor Ravish Kumar’s virtual attack by the army of trolls.

(d) Shock Value Trolling: In this, trolls deceptively expose the victim to the content, which evokes ‘shock’ as a response. This can include obscene material, horror images or video or external link which leads the victim to a shocking/obscene website.

(e) Bait And Switch Trolling: In this, a troll lures the target into an online deception or prank. Often disguised as a hyperlink similar to target’s
interest, but will eventually take the victim to an inappropriate or objectionable webpage.

(f) **Advice Trolling**: This is another tactic used by trolls to target victims. In this, the troll creates and shares a malicious content in the guise of a piece of advice, which will deceive the victim. Example: Your Mac is under virus attack.

(g) **Newbie Trolling**: In this, trolls masquerade as novices and put irrelevant questions on virtual discussion boards. The aim is to annoy other group members by posing as a feeble-minded person.

**Strategies Adopted by Internet Trolls**

Trolls use various strategies against their targets; following are a few of those tactics:

- to delegitimize a legitimate argument or to demolish a counterview or a person/ personality, trolls often use passionate, irrational outbursts, along with hateful maleficent speech.
- they frequently undermine fair discussions or a person/ a personality by dismissing counter views or logic and manufacturing alternative facts to devalue/ demean/ distort the rational counter argument or the person/ personality.
- trolls camouflage themselves under the guise of anonymity or fake names to hide his/ her real identity.
- the language used by the trolls aims at evoking anger; therefore, their expression often includes abuses, sexist remarks, racist remarks, threats, false accusations, etc.
- trolls often bring ideologies into the spotlight and also in ambivalence. They propagate the ideology that they believe in and frequently undermine, derogate and spread manufactured lies against a different ideology.
- trolls also use the “shouting” and the “silencing down” strategy towards their targets.
- they also use the act of ‘doxxing’ and publish personal information of the victim on various online platforms, like *Aadhar* details, driving license, passport, address, etc.
- they also use racist and sexist threats, rape threats, death threats against their target and their families.
Effects of Internet Trolling

Trolls can disrupt potentially constructive discussions by causing their degeneration into irrelevant antagonism. They can evoke strong emotions and can severely hurt the victim. Trolling can induce problematic psychological effects on the victim’s mind. It can lead to low self-esteem, depression, heightened levels of anxiety and so on. Trolls like to legitimise hate speech, bigotry, offensive discourses and conflicting emotions. Trolls cause profound impact on people’s embodied identities, cultural and religious beliefs, political inclinations, etc.

However, trolls through their own comments, can reveal their very own ideological inadequacies. Trolls can evoke a sense of insecurity in the minds of the targeted person/groups. Trolling can cause a forced silence or exit of the target from that digital or social media platform. Trolls are one of the reasons for ravaging the Internet culture, which was to propagate freedom of expressions, exchange of ideas, connecting people from different parts of the world. They can force the victim to change his/her user id and assume a new masked identity.

Internet Trolling and Gender

When it comes to trolling, research indicates the participation of more men as trolls as compared to women trolls. This negative involvement of men in the computer-mediated environment has been recorded previously and cited many times in the past also. The studies also indicate that men tend to exhibit more antisocial behaviours in digital spaces than their counterparts. As per research studies, trolling is more obvious in a male-dominated arena, a space where they can reinforce their masculine ideology against that in the real world, where their counterparts are successfully breaking it. Research also indicates that the trolling behaviour is contagious. It can start with an individual and spread to online groups and online communities.

A new type of trolling that is slowly emerging from the dark world of online trolls is “gender-trolling”. This type of depraved trolling is mostly targeted against women, with the aim to incite fear in the minds of the targeted women and forcing them out of the online discussions, maybe damaging their online reputation and even instilling fear in their minds. Gender trolling is exponentially more vicious, antagonistic, belligerent, threatening, pervasive, enduring and it employs an extensive usage of graphics, sexualised and gender-based abuses/insults to demean women as sexual objects and actually belittle them for just being women. They also use death and rape threats as a weapon against their victims.
Strategy to Cope Up with Trolls

As computer-mediated communication has become omnipresent in everyday human interaction, the intrusive nature of this communication poses a pervasive threat to its users. Internet trolling is one of the dangers lurking in the cyberspaces. However, one can adopt a few strategies to counter and to some extent minimise the impact of trolling. First, ignoring and blocking trolls is the most practical way. Second, use ‘report abuse’ option available at social media sites/apps. Third, on social media platforms and online discussion forums, the presence of a sensible moderator at the comment sections and online discussion forum can reduce the effect of a troll by not allowing him/ her to post offensive messages online. Fourth, opting from privacy settings to keep the door closed for the trolls. Fifth, avoid posting your email id, mobile numbers on social media platforms. Sixth, on online discussion forums, one can also up- and down-voting system at comments section is another way to discourage trolls. At places, where it is possible, one can use disable comments option. Seventh, keep in mind that the trolls use baits of provocation to trigger a desired response from the victim, the sensible thing to do is to not to fall for the bait.

Eighth, as an online community response to the victim of internet trolling, flooding the victim’s online social media platforms with sympathy and kindness by fellow social media user is also a counter strategy used by the online community against trolls.\(^{25}\) Ninth, usage of “humour” can be employed as one of the strategies to counter trolls. Lastly, technology can also be employed to fight against the trolls. In 2015, Google funded a study, which constructed an algorithm to identify trolls and ban trolls.\(^{26}\) Apps to counter trolls are also picking up in the online market. Apps like Heartmob or Trollbusters helps online users to report trolls and seek assistance from others. In 2017, Indian Government also announced the launch of “I am Trolled” app.\(^{27}\) Lately, to tackle the menace of trolls, use of Sentic Computing is being advocated, that will effectively analysis of natural language text and can assist in detecting trolls, therefore prevent web-users from falling in the trap of trolls.\(^{28}\)

Conclusion

Although trolling is an ancient trait of human behaviour and/or human communication, it seems to have simultaneously evolved with the history of rhetoric. However, with the dawn of digital technologies, and the existence and augmentation of digital spaces along with rapidly progressive, communication technologies, it has reincarnated itself with new vigour. It has been propelled into an unexplored digital territory, which had not been experienced in the past.
Recent trends also show that Internet trolls have steadily spread their destructive ways in various dimensions of digital spaces. The crucial question that arises is whether it is just gaining attention or amusement at the expense of others like a trickster or do these trolls have the capacity to influence politics, create disharmony, suppress ideas, propagate fake news, shape legislation and even acquire positions of influence where they can actually challenge the very threads that have been binding societies till now?

The negative impact of trolls on the virtual computer-mediated world of social media users is as severe as in real world. Many research studies have revealed that the psychological effects of experiencing trolling online are similar to the psychological effects of offline harassment. The menace of trolls seems to be here to stay, but the answer is to not take the bait, and, rather choose discourses and online acquaintances wisely, self-monitor the social media networks and digital conversations, using strong privacy settings, and ultimately using the very technology being misused by the trolls against them and above all, collectively as well as individually, building psychological and emotional resilience against the trolls.

Notes

7. The Sophists were orators, public speakers, mouths for hire in an oral culture. They were gifted with speech, *Sophists*, 2018, Qcc.cuny.edu, retrieved on 4 June 2018 from http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%202%20GREEKS/Sophists.htm


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


20. n. 8.


