

Trolling: The Ultimate Activist Trap

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Abstract

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Article

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It also provides one of the most remarkable resources to any social movement: the capacity to integrate resources and efforts and share narrative and information rapidly. But the flora and fauna of this digital landscape can be downright unpleasant and dangerous at times. As I'm sure anyone who's ventured into the depths of its maw can attest to.

What am I talking about? Why, trolls, of course.

No, not the scary things that live under bridges and eat goats and/or children. I'm talking social engineering trolls. Forums, message boards, comment threads, IRC chats, image boards, nearly every single location you can think of has had trolls in it. They come in hundreds of different styles and flavors, approach from hundreds of angles and are a potent force to be reckoned with for anyone seeking to make a well known place for themselves on the "internets".

In order to understand trolls you first have to understand social engineering. S.E. is, at its most basic, the art/science of incorporating knowledge of human patterns of behavior and stimuli response into your actions in such a way as you can (reasonably) control another human being's responses. Social Engineering is quite literally the in depth, clinically approached version of good old fashioned manipulation. It can be as simple and benign as wearing certain color combinations that are more likely to inspire trust or it can be as complex and nasty as creating elaborate blackmailing schemes that enable you to con people out of their money. Social engineering is a tool. It isn't inherently evil and it does have cases where it can be put to intensely good use. Hostage negotiators use social engineering to control folk who have taken hostages and bring a peaceful end to the danger. And on the other token a serial date rapist will use social engineering to manipulate women into risky positions and then take advantage of them when they can't escape or fight back as easily. S.E. is and has always been a method of control however and engaging in it carries a great deal of risk, not just for your targets but also for you.

Trolling is merely a specific version of social engineering. A specific type that incorporates a certain

methodology in the abstract (while the complexity and differences sit in the details). However they all exhibit a set of shared traits. Trolls seek a response. Invariably. It is about your reaction as the target. Stop reacting and they lose interest. Trolls attempt to elicit an activity and in doing so they draw people out. Trolling in and of itself is an act of drawing a person out. It's a lot like fishing. You put bait on the hook. Drop the hook into the water. Fish nibbles and bam. You yank the pole, the hook sets and suddenly the fish is out of water and at your mercy. What trolls do is they apply social engineering in such a way as to create stimuli that draw people to them (usually angrily) and then they continue to engage in behaviors that in turn keep the people around and engaged.

Trolling is, generally, a very harmful state of affairs. Quite often an energy drain on the resources of any network to deal with, Trolls, among other types of draining social engineer types, are intensely damaging influences. Not only do they suck the energy and motivation out of a network but they often harm and scatter the members of that network to the four winds, further damaging its integrity. That isn't to say that trolling is inherently bad either. Trolling can be used for good purposes. Most notably being antagonistic satire, designed to draw people out to think on the topic raised after their rage subsides. Jonathan Swift, the author of *A Modest Proposal*, is probably the most brilliant example around of a "troll" (I quote because back then the word didn't exist as it does now) engaging in antagonistic satire. There are internet trolls that do this. The best example is a relatively prominent troll on the forum board site GaiaOnline.com called Happy * Day. The Happy Day troll incorporates something awful between the Happy and Day words, like Assault, Infanticide, Mutilation, Slavery, etc (e.g. Happy Murder Day) and tends to target topics with entrenched views bogging them down. She (we assume she, as the avi is a girl) is obviously offensive as hell and very antagonistic. But the points raised are also thoroughly intelligent, well thought out and generally beneficial. And the rage created by her entry nevertheless always gets her arguments noticed. People invariably fight them because of her but usually lose because they are actually good arguments. Other types of trolls tend to concentrate mostly on hurting or dominating people. The most notable of those types being the denizens of /b/ on the various *chan image boards. They tend to follow a swarm method of trolling using white noise of spammed memes and offense trolling to attack anyone they find amusing to attack. Another well known troll on GaiaOnline.com is Barrakath (also called Scholastic and recently has been going by variations on Latin usernames with the same avi) whom is normally called Barry. He is a catholic homophobic, transphobic, racist troll and spends most of his time targeted Jewish folk and POC, while occasionally spreading out to decry homosexuality and transsexuality (when he's not spending his time hitting on every woman he sees in the forums, including myself, which is why he hates transsexuality now. XD).

There are some archetypes of methodology out there for trolls. Many of these will overlap and few of them will appear just by themselves in a single troll. These archetype names are by no means official names. Few have made a study of trolls so there's not a lot of academic work out there I can use to pull terminology from.

1: Offenders: Offense trolls target based on things found personally offensive. They will try to pick up on what will affect their target the best and then use it to their fullest power. This tends to be the most common method of bigot trolls because of the absolute ease with which marginalized groups are targeted and offended.

2: Concern Trolls: Concern trolls pretend to be (or genuinely believe that they are) helpful and concerned about things that are going on. However most of their concerns incorporate the begging the question fallacy (e.g. “when did you stop beating your wife?”, “I never started beating my wife... o_O”) and tend to imply really awful things about the people they pretend to (or are) concerned about.

3: Clever Trolls: Clever Trolls are those who employ antagonistic satire. They always have a distinct purpose to their actions of getting an idea across or raising a view and are inciting reactions to get the idea noticed instead of ignored. Bigots usually fail at this because a clever troll’s ideas or views need to be logically supportable and most bigotry is based off of fallacy driven emotive arguments used to justify and rationalize internalized hatred and feelings of superiority.

4: Noise Makers: Basically spam of incoherence, pictures or weirdness. Usually the most simple and least effective of trolling methods because it is so easily recognized as trolling by its obvious nature. Often mixes with Offense Trolls.

5: Griefers: Trolls that don’t necessarily have offensive content (in fact their views may be quite reasonable) but are intensely antagonistic, nasty, rude, insulting, demanding or vicious. They also tend to mock people when they lose a debate or back down, making it extraordinarily hard to back down even when you’ve been proven wrong.

6: Devil’s Advocate Trolls: Trolls that play DA and use arguments that they don’t believe in for varying purposes, usually presented in an offensive or antagonistic manner.

Trolling, whatever archetype it fits, is still a form of social engineering and ergo a form of control. This means that inherently and invariably, when you troll anyone you are attempting to control them and their responses. This does act as a form of dominance, even if you don’t intend to be dominant (say merely protect yourself). Not necessarily a bad thing, especially if you’re trolling a group who attacks and hurts your people. But, if you troll a marginalized group, then you are attempting to control and dominate a marginalized group. And that is silencing and marginalizing behavior in and of itself.

So no matter what, trolling marginalized groups is marginalization and therefore it is a bigoted act. Not that this stops many people. In fact, trolling is such an effective method of silencing that it tends to be a primary methodology. Just look at the shit Amanda Hess at The Sexist Blog on Washington City Paper has to deal with in the comments (scroll down past the article) when she calls out a pretty popular and well known offense troll named Tucker Max. And that isn’t the worst either. Trolling is a huge part of the methodology of silencing. Partly because of how utterly effective it is at creating fear and sapping energy.

Trolls draw a person out. Normal silencing techniques are designed to work when you speak up. But a troll puts out a wide net, catches you in it before you’ve even thought to speak out and then controls you to make you reveal yourself. Once you are revealed, the troll swoops in and plays hack and slash with you, using as much offensive and triggering material as possible all while using the methods of Griefer Trolls to further push fear into you. The energy used dealing with these social engineers is intense. It can be beyond draining to respond to constant bullshit arguments interspersed with triggering and painful images or words. It exhausts a person and it creates fear. Both of these are highly dangerous emotions for a marginalized activist. Not only has the troll silenced us from speaking, the troll has pulled us out of hiding and silenced us even then. The fear is pushed to such an intensity that most of

us will train ourselves to not even respond to such grandiose and ridiculous levels of offensive hatred as these trolls spout just to avoid being hit by them. And this means that people can get away with the less intense but still damaging ism and privileged bullshit they normally spout because of the troll.

That's a pretty horrifying level of effectiveness, wouldn't you agree? It works in the long term because trolls don't just seek to quiet us, they literally seek to make permanent wounds.

As a former troll, I have a bit of an advantage. I enacted retirement from grieving (but not clever trolling, although I do it a lot less now) because I realized the kind of shit I was doing was hurting people in a way I simply could not find ethically supportable. But my past experiences on the not so nice side of this food chain have also given me an excellent eye into how trolling works. If the net comes back empty, you move on. Not once was it workable to stay in an area and keep on dropping the net over and over if I pulled in no fish whatsoever. Trolls have energy concerns too and often we would be dropping nets in multiple locations. One doesn't pull, we move on. Most trolls do it out of a need to hurt, dominate, control or exert hate. All of these emotions require instant gratification, rarely is one patient for a fix (and addicting it is to dominate and control people, so the drug analogy is a good one) and so if you don't give the trolls what they want, you leave them shaking and moving out for another more useful place. Responding to trolls (banning them technically counts as a response but one that is reasonably dismissive so it's fine) will immediately amp up the attention, the attacks, the nastiness and the offense. If you think the net is bad, then swim into it and bite the bait. You will regret it and your community will regret it too.

The best way to handle trolls is to disengage. Always. And it will be hard to do, obviously. The best trolls will make it extraordinarily hard to pull away from them. They will make you feel like a coward or feel like by backing down they'll convince everyone of the horrible things they believe. For a marginalized person this is especially painful, because so many people tend to believe the shit the trolls are peddling. But the fact is, fighting a troll is always a losing battle. Invariably.

Trolls are, in the end, energy sink traps. You may see them like an opponent, whom you must fight against, but the moment you strike out even once, you are caught and they will drain you of every drop of vitality and sense of safety you have. It is vital that all activists remember this.

Don't feed the trolls. Because it is you they're feasting on.

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