

Abusing the internet trolls

3 January 2014

Internet trolling is a matter of "moral panic", according to an assessment of this activity by Jonathan Bishop of the Centre for Research into Online Communities and E-Learning Systems in Brussels. Writing in the *International Journal of Web Based Communities* he suggests that the misrepresentation by the media of all those who participate in this often negative but not always abusive behaviour can have a detrimental effect on attitudes to younger internet users in general.

The phrase "Internet trolling" is presented by the media as being commenting in a needlessly sarcastic, facetious, abusive or offensive manner on social networking and other online forums. The term has become the phrase of choice for those who seek to censure the internet. The mass media, politicians and social pundits have found it increasingly useful shorthand for labeling anyone who publishes remarks with which they do not necessarily agree online.

As Bishop explains, the term "troll" has been evolutionary. "The use of the word trolling to refer to provocation was probably first used in the military to refer to the reeling in of enemy fighter jets into a dog-fight," he said. "As my paper shows it was used on the Internet in the 1990s to refer to enticing people into flame wars by saying things that would provoke others into posting abusive messages, called 'flames.'"

As with all areas of human activity there is a darker side to trolling and the media and pundits alike today use the term to refer to those people making abusive and threatening remarks to famous or infamous persons online. The difference between the irritating behaviour of a common internet troll and the latter is perhaps as stark as passersby tolerating the utterances of a street hawker and the person who stalks another and shouts through their letterbox or worse.

This latter perception has, Bishop suggests, been helpful for building the careers of politicians in search of causes to fight, as well as mass media

organisations looking for a means to create a [moral panic](#) that provides both entertainment and interest to their audiences. "The [mass media](#) can be seen to have accommodated the word troll between 2010 and 2011. In March 2011 in particular, British tabloid newspapers like the Daily Mail and the Express, who tailor their content to a more 'right-wing' audience, became a useful term for describing people who abuse others online," explains Bishop. "One thing that is certain of all media of all eras is that they rely on popular stereotypes to convey meanings that appeal to their audiences," he adds. Likewise, politicians and others will exploit the popularized terms used by the media to their own ends to demonise specific activities and to score political points against their opponents.

Bishop points out that the journalese shorthand misconstrued and exploited initially by the tabloid media and then adopted by the wider community of broadsheets, TV pundits and ultimately politicians simultaneously demonizes youth as celebrity-abusing trolls and then the victims of a broken society depending on the specific political agenda of the outlet. One might suggest that it is as if trolling is simply another ambiguous term with shades of meaning depending on context that is itself manipulated for political ends.

More information: *Int. J. Web Based Communities*, 2014, 10, 7-24

Provided by Inderscience

APA citation: Abusing the internet trolls (2014, January 3) retrieved 8 December 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-abusing-internet-trolls.html>

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