

Internet Trolling in Ghana

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Abstract—this paper presents the definition and history of internet trolling as espoused by different views and some varied ways it is practiced. A link between the Ghanaian cyber communication space and this online practice is verified and substantiated with an empirical study with regards to some social media platforms. The social implications are analyzed and some recommendations are made.

Keywords-trolling; troller; social media

I. INTRODUCTION

The trolling practice, basically, is the act of luring others into fruitless and time-consuming discussions. The term derives from the traditional fishing practice where a baited line is dragged behind a boat (Oxford English Dictionary, 1992). However, others view it as a fairy-tale monster lurking under a bridge to frighten unsuspecting bystanders. It is known that the trolling process begins with a message that is “intentionally incorrect but not overly controversial.” (Herring, 2002) unlike ‘flaming’, which is “an electronic mail or Usenet news message intended to insult, provoke or rebuke, or the act of sending such a message” (Free Online Dictionary of Computing, 1998), trolling simply sways a person or a group from the purpose of discussion or the goal of such a group. (Andrew, 1996; Donath, 1999) are convinced that catching inexperienced users or “new-comers” is a commonly stated aim of trolls. “The object of recreational trolling is to sit back and laugh at all those gullible idiots that will believe *anything*” (Andrew, 1996). Ideally, trolling seems isolated but, in practice, it merges with flaming, in that both cases show the intent to disrupt the ongoing conversation and both can lead to aggravated protracted argument

II. THE EXODUS OF TROLLING

Usenet, where trolling was first reported, revealed that a highly successful troll is one that is cross-posted to, and responds to on, many varied newsgroups, thereby disrupting multiple groups with minimal effort. Andrew (1996) made a clear distinction between “career troller” – individuals who deliberately set out to sway groups and/or make trouble- from those motivated simply by the desire to get attention. Usenet, where trolling was first reported, revealed that a highly successful troll is one that is cross-posted to, and responds to on, many varied newsgroups, thereby disrupting multiple groups with minimal effort. Andrew (1996) made a clear distinction between,

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“career troller” – individuals who deliberately set out to sway groups and/or make trouble- from those motivated simply by the desire to get attention.

Literature on disruption of online feminist spaces, for example, goes back to the eve days of computer-mediated communication research. Balka (1993) traces the history of four feminist forums from the 1980s, all of which experienced some degree of harassment. Ebben (1994) comments on the evolution on Usenet of the soc.feminism newsgroup, which was initiated in response to an earlier rebirth of the newsgroup soc.women having been taken over by men, and which itself has eventually been taken over by men posting antifeminist and misogynistic message (Sutton, 1994). In a similar way, Reid (1994) reports an occurrence on a MUD for sexual abuse survivors, in which a male-presenting actor named “Daddy” traumatized the community by shouting dehumanizing sexual graphics to the participants of the MUD. These attacks from men have warranted the formation of women-only groups. For example, Sisters- a women-only group of computer science women. Anita Borg, the group’s leader has vehemently defended the group in Camp (1996). Herring et al. (1995) suggests that women-only groups, regardless of whether they discuss feminism, are basically a reaction to patterns of male dominance in mixed-gender discussion groups online. Nonetheless, women-only groups create domains in which women become easy targets for men (Hall, 1996). As a combat strategy, some women-centered groups respond to disrupting or harassing behaviors by actualizing participatory policies that make it difficult for future disruption to take place. For instance, from Collins-Jarvis (1997) the Gender hotline reopened with a moderator who filters all messages received before relaying them as posts. The MUD for sexual survivors reported by Reid (1994) initiated a process of verification, which disabled the feature that permitted the user to communicate simultaneously with everyone in the MUD.

III. RESEARCH ON TROLLING

Research on trolls is scarce but their activities challenge online communities; one of the main challenges of the Wikipedia community, for instance, is the fight against vandalism and trolls. Shachaf et al (2010) conclude that trolls are one type of a hacker. Schwartz [p.3] mentions that trolls are part of ‘a growing Internet Subculture with a fluid morality and a disdain for pretty much everyone else online’ and asserts that a troll is ‘a normal person who does insane things on the internet.’

The only scientific study (Herring et al, 2002) about trolls analyzed their activities in an online forum and categorized troll behaviors as follows:

1. Outward manifestation on sincerity, 2. Flame bait, and 3. Attempts to provoke futile arguments.

Here, the troll was successful in manipulating members’

ideologies into an intense conflict, which became one of the reasons that the members could not effectively ban the troll. 'Trolling will stop only when its audience stops taking trolls seriously.' Schwartz (2009)

Research by Dr. Claire Hardaker reveals that trolls are actually just bored people seeking cheap thrill. They are not moved by insults because getting insulted is their main objective: they find it amusing that they have the power to provoke anger. It is interesting to note that contrary to popular perception that trolls are young teenagers, Dr. Hardaker's research found that the span all ages and backgrounds.

IV. INTERNET TROLLING IN GHANA

Internet penetration has rather been on the far lower side as far as the Ghanaian cyber communication space is concerned. Nonetheless, the practice of internet malfeasance, like trolling, is commonplace, especially with the advent of the newer and more interactive online social media suits such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram and the like.

These platforms allow for the formation of groups and chat features- a fertile ground for trolls to breed and work.

Using Whatsapp, for instance, it provides a special case in point since it is widely used by a very large section of the Ghanaian populace, especially the youth.

V. WHATSAPP TROLLING

Usually, chat rooms or groups are created using this technology so that certain persons can share and/or chat about some matter pertaining to the purpose of the formation of the group. However, for some reason, certain unwelcomed individuals' snake their way into these groups, in spite of the 'moderators' who oversee the management of the membership of these groups. These people come into the chat rooms and spring up totally irrelevant and unrelated topics (mostly sensitive) to that of the purpose for which the forums are formed and this sometimes inflame emotions, thereby causing some legitimate members to exit the groups. Surprisingly and for some reason the moderators of these forums, who have the capacity to "delete" membership tend to enjoy the sway the troller has instantiated, hence leaving the troller to have a free day.

The issues that surface frequently include, but not limited to, issues on tribal stereotypes, religion, ethnicity, partisan politics, sports and rumors. Some of the tactics trolls use is: "HADCASE": [self-invented acronym]

1. Hypo-criticize. i.e., eschewing a fault whiles doing that same fault.
2. Anti-pathasing. i.e., taking antagonistic position and asking inexperienced questions, hence, covertly evoking ego, sensitivity, guilt and emotions in general.
3. Deviate. i.e., going off-topic especially of very sensitive topics like religion.
4. Cross-posting. i.e., posting off-topic messages to different forums to elicit numerous responses.
5. Annoy. i.e., openly and purposely attacking a member verbally.
6. Shock. i.e., plain insensitivity to serious topics on areas like religion, death, and politics and so on.
7. Endanger. i.e., pretending to give helpful advice thereby eliciting the response of goodwill members.

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