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Trolling, and Other Problematic Social Media Practices

Gabriele de Seta

I, TROLL

Ever since I started regularly accessing the Internet on my first personal computer in the late nineties, I’ve engaged in practices that today would be alternately called ‘trolling’, ‘flaming’, ‘cyber-bullying’, ‘online harassment’, ‘social media abuse’, and so on. I was fourteen years old, and I had finally convinced my parents to buy me a rather expensive Pentium III desktop computer so that I could play StarCraft: Brood War with some friends. The real-time strategy videogame had just come out, and sparring online with clan-mates from all around Italy was my favorite activity, monopolizing a large chunk of my time out of school. Along with StarCraft came MSN Messenger, gaming forums, IRC channels, and a variety of other platforms mediating my online interactions.

Many of these interactions were quite quarrelsome: a regular multiplayer game with friends or strangers would customarily begin with a ritual exchange of greetings, then escalate rapidly into racial offenses or sexual slurs, often dragged on through private messages until one of the participants blocked the other – losing a tournament game mattered quite a lot to us. Similarly, conversations with classmates, punctuated by rapid-fire MSN notification bleeps ringing across my house, often oscillated between the private plotting of pranks and more public gossip; the hazing and shaming of unfortunate victims moved seamlessly from schoolyards to group chats. Forums were even more confrontational. As my interests shifted from online gaming to death metal, I found myself comfortably at home in one small bulletin board mostly populated by people I had never met. Discussions about the latest album releases would quickly heat up into violent quarrels about personal taste, peppered by elaborate offenses singling out each other’s mental health, political beliefs, sexual orientation, physical appearance, and so on.

Over several years of participation, discussions in this particular forum became less and
less about music, and more a series of con-
voluted in-jokes drawing from a shared rep-
ertoire of ridiculous stories that occurred
on public threads, private messages, and
occasional meetups at metal festivals. When
we discovered that it was possible to obtain
embarrassing personal details about each
other by impersonating this or that person
on the community’s IRC channel, some of us
went beyond the line of what would be today
dealt with in a civil court case. Yet, we found
all of this to be worth the fun, and in self-
reflexive discussions about our online com-

munity we sometimes marveled at how the
absurdist abuse that we perfected as a form
of sociality had in fact woven a tight texture
of affects and memories between a group of
people living across the country who would
have never interacted, much less bonded,
under different circumstances. ‘Il forum è
vita’, we often joked ironically when some-
one took an abusive session of online hazing
too seriously: ‘The forum is life’.

This bit of autoethnographic recollec-
tion from more than a decade ago, a time
when I had no idea of what trolling – let
alone autoethnography – meant, is neither
a disclaimer nor an apology. Rather, it’s an
introduction to the central argument of this
chapter. After familiarizing myself with the
vast literature covering a variety of ‘prob-
lematic’, ‘disruptive’, ‘abusive’ and ‘anti-
social’ practices on social media, as well as
with the extraordinary visibility of trolling
in contemporary popular media narratives, I
felt the need to begin my discussion of the
topic with some first-person memories. By
taking stock of the socially mediated ev-
day that Georges Perec would call ‘infra-
ordinary’ (1997, p. 177), I want to highlight
how complicated arrangements of practices,
often reduced to shorthand terms, functional
causes, and direct consequences, are always
grounded in individual and self-reflexive
experiences across time and space. For the
same reason, I’ve decided to intersperse the
text of this chapter with screenshots of posts
by users participating in discussions about
trolling that I purposely organized on two
online image boards. By including a selec-
tion of posts collected from two structurally
similar online platforms – 4chan and AC
anonymous board, respectively enlivened
by predominantly American and Chinese
usebases1 – I hope to undermine and desta-
bilize my own academic writing, while wel-
coming social media users voicing personal
interpretations of their own practices into the
text (Figure 21.1).

QUESTIONS OF (BAD) FORM

Trolling, along with a shifting constellation
of related or overlapping terms (flaming,
spamming, cyber-bullying, online harass-
ment, social media abuse, and so forth),
belongs to the wider domain of social media
practices that resulted from the populariza-
tion of Internet access and participatory digi-
tal media platforms. As Lee Rainie and Barry
Wellman (2012) point out, the intense
socially networked activities of digital media
users, which include countless ways of creat-
ing, sharing, ranking and discussing content,
inevitably imply a certain degree of personal
disclosure, and easily lead to occasions for
surveillance and sousveillance:

many internet users are leaving considerable digi-
tal footprints, advertently and inadvertently, for
others to follow. And follow they do. […] Not only

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Figure 21.1  Anonymous reply to a discussion thread about trolling I opened on 4chan
are other users ‘creeping’ and ‘stalking’ each other, but also governments and large organizations have the capacity to surveil individuals. (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 80)

Hurling insults across private messages in multiplayer games, embarrassing classmates in group chats, or impersonating users on IRC channels exemplify the tightening imbrication of social media and personal life. The rapid pace with which digital media platforms introduce new affordances for interpersonal interaction complicates this sociotechnical context, and along with evolving interactional norms and situational rules of etiquette emerge new ways of disturbing, harassing or abusing each other online.

In English-language media, trolling has become a placeholder for a stunning variety of practices (Hardaker, 2010, p. 224), ranging from mocking or taunting each other for fun (O’Neil, 2015) to disrupting large online communities (Pao, 2015), and from engaging in large-scale harassment campaigns (Allaway, 2014) to impersonating multiple identities engaging in extremist activities (Zavadski, 2015). Andrew Whelan (2013, p. 41) argues that the term ‘troll’, both as a noun and a verb, is widely appropriated by news media and recurrently used to sustain various moral panics about the abuse of networked communications. The incorporation of this term in the inventory of popular media narratives has resulted in overly simplified explanations of wildly different problematic social media practices. On the other side of the explanatory spectrum are the painstaking attempts of academic researchers to find a solid definition for these practices, often to counter the populist sensationalism of media panics (Jane, 2014, p. 532). Some examples testify to the variety of possible approaches to the topic:

Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns; the newsgroup members, if they are cognizant of trolls and other identity deceptions, attempt to both distinguish real from trolling postings and, upon judging a poster to be a troll, make the offending poster leave the group. (Donath, 1999, p. 43)

To troll is to have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort upon one’s audience. To be trolled is to be made a victim, to be caught along in the undertow and be the butt of someone else’s joke. (Bergstrom, 2011)

Internet trolls – a class of geeks whose raison d’être is to engage in acts of merciless mockery/flaming or morally dicey pranking. These acts are often delivered in the most spectacular and often in the most ethnically offensive terms possible. (Coleman, 2012, p. 101, emphasis added)

Trolls are people who act like trolls, and talk like trolls, and troll like trolls because they’ve chosen to adopt that identity. (Phillips, 2013, p. 505)

Online trolling is a specific example of deviant and antisocial online behavior in which the deviant user acts provocatively and outside of normative expectations within a particular community; trolls seek to elicit responses from the community and act repeatedly and intentionally to cause disruption or trigger conflict among community members. (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015, p. 163)

This chapter is an attempt to pull together the three contexts sketched above: the multitude of practices experienced in one’s infra-ordinary use of social media; the sensationalist narratives mustered under buzzwords throughout news media narratives; and the scholarly representation of a variety of practices often described as deceiving, confrontational, offensive, negative, disruptive, abusive, unethical, non-normative, deviant or antisocial. A reader might be expected to ask: What is trolling? Why do some social media users troll others? Is trolling good or bad? How can trolling be stopped? Unfortunately, my contribution is not meant to answer any of these questions. As I summarize in the first half of this chapter, more than twenty years of research into problematic social media practices have already tackled many of these interrogatives, providing a wide variety of comprehensive answers, and producing a rich and detailed cartography of the possibilities of academic approaches to trolling.

The broader theoretical question that this chapter addresses is, rather: Where next? How can we write about trolling, and about
other problematic social media practices, while avoiding both the oversimplification of popular media narratives and the overdetermination that results from academic treatments? I attempt to answer these questions in the second half of the chapter, in which I present the results of a research project about trolling on Chinese social media platforms. I use this example to argue for the advantages that ethnographic accounts of infra-ordinary social media use, underpinned by a radical notion of underdetermination, might have for future discussions of problematic practices.

GOING META: REVIEWING LITERATURE REVIEWS

Much of the attention that social uses of the computer has been given focused on outstanding incidents of sexual harassment, gender-switching, electronic cads who break women’s hearts, flaming and other abuses, rather than the countless rewarding and routine non-problematic interactions (Baym, 1994, p. 29).

One of the quirkiest claims found in journal articles and book chapters dealing with trolling is that there hasn’t been enough research on the topic (Leaver, 2013, p. 217). This lamented underrepresentation is usually explained with the scattering of existing literature across disciplinary domains (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014, p. 97), the conflation of radically different problematic practices under the same buzzword (Whelan, 2013, p. 48), the excessive technicality of research (McCosker, 2014, p. 204), or insufficient attention given to trolling in a particular discipline (Hardaker, 2015, p. 201). Dispersed across discursive communities or overlooked in specialist circles, trolling is described as an irremediably mysterious activity, an esoteric ritual practiced by folk devils in perpetual need of reconsideration and of innovative research approaches.

It isn’t a coincidence that most treatments of trolling begin with a substantial literature review of the topic. Literature reviews of trolling research are fairly homogeneous, and largely agree in tracing the evolution of the problematic social media practices over two decades of sociotechnical change:

In scholarly work, trolling has morphed from a description of newsgroup and discussion board commentators who appeared genuine but were actually just provocateurs, through to contemporary analyses which focus on the anonymity, memes and abusive comments most clearly represented by users of the iconic online image board 4chan, and, at times, the related Anonymous political movement. (Leaver, 2013, p. 216)

Even when slanted towards specific theoretical resources or disciplinary approaches, many reviews of existing scholarship propose a similar history of trolling research,

Figure 21.2  Anonymous reply to a discussion thread about trolling I opened on 4chan
dividing it into two major blocks: early explorations of conflict and impoliteness in computer-mediated communication and online communities, and more recent studies of problematic practices on contemporary social media platforms.

In this chapter I provide a more genealogical outlook on this body of research, arguing that trolling and similar social media practices have, in fact, been extensively studied across disciplines over a substantial period of time. The purpose of my genealogical approach, inspired by Foucault’s lifelong work on the idea of genealogy, is to ‘account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc.’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 117) rather than flattening them onto a transcendental history. A genealogy of trolling research seeks to identify the emergence of the definitions of certain practices (Rabinow, 2003, p. 55) and has the advantage of foregrounding how their problematization is structured and stabilized (Koopman, 2011, p. 539). In light of this, rather than pursuing strictly temporal or disciplinary categorizations, I map the existing research literature along three axes of controversies: the tension between descriptions of trolling as part and parcel of early Internet culture and its diagnoses as deviant online behavior (Culture <-> Deviance); the attempts at defining trolling versus the pursuit of contextual descriptions (Definition <-> Contextualization); and the debates between sympathetic appraisals of trolling versus critical condemnations of the practice (Endorsement <-> Critique). These axes define a three-dimensional domain of inquiry along functional, epistemological and ethical continuums, outline a comprehensive cartography of two decades of research into problematic practices on social media, and should provide a clear picture of the zones of opportunity for future inquiry.

**Culture <-> Deviance**

Actually, tell you what scares the shit out of me on the net. AFU (alt.folklore.urban). Now there’s a newsgroup to dread. Posting as a newbie there should be one of those (often fatal) moves grouped under the same heading as accidentally shooting yourself through the private parts. (Anonymous Usenet user quoted in Tepper, 1997, p. 43)

The first axis of controversy outlines a functional tension between two possible repertoires of answers to the question ‘what is trolling?’ – one relying on insider accounts of the practice and defining it as an essential part of a culture of the Internet, and another observing its disruptive consequences and diagnosing it as a clear case of deviant behavior encouraged by computer-mediated interaction.

A certain impenetrable mystique has been an integral part of early descriptions of trolling, which chronicle a time when disruptive and uncivil practices in MOOs, newsgroups and chatrooms were often called flaming (Baym, 1995) or spamming (Marvin, 1995). Perhaps the earliest account of a case of trolling, Julian Dibbell’s ‘A Rape in Cyberspace’

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**Figure 21.3** Anonymous reply to a discussion thread about trolling I opened on 4chan

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Anonymous 11/01/15(Sun)20:11:14 No.649533404

You’re a fucking retard for writing about trolling. All of this shit is just distraction. No substance. It’s like a giant circlejerk videogame. Conflict for conflict’s sake. The winner is the one who reduces the other to raging shitposts, producing no further comprehensible content. But is that true? The lasting influence on both parties is familiarity, like how cubs play-fight so they might be able to actually fight when they are older and tested for real. And ultimately, only the strongest ideas survive. It’s a good thing that we have all these trolls to shut up the pussies of the world.
TROLLING, AND OTHER PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES

(1993) presciently outlines all the major concerns that have echoed through two decades of academic research and public debate around problematic social media practices. ‘They say he raped them that night’, Dibbell begins, providing a poignant first-person account of harassment in cyberspace. The story is made even more uncanny and estranging by the distance separating the contemporary experience of ubiquitous and mobile social media from the textual environment of LambdaMOO, which the author describes as ‘a very large and very busy rustic mansion built entirely of words’ (1993, p. 1). The ‘Bungle Affair’, during which a MOO player called Mr. Bungle forced the in-game avatar of another player to engage in degrading sexual acts, is pitched by Dibbell as a case of online abuse that challenges techno-utopian visions of cyberspace. He begs readers to ‘look without illusion upon the present possibilities for building, in the on-line spaces of this world, societies more decent and free than those mapped onto dirt and concrete and capital’ (Dibbell, 1993, p. 1).

Dibbell’s ethnographic attention to the political debates rippling across LambdaMOO in the wake of the Bungle Affair, which resulted in the deliberation of new community rules and in the emplacement of protective functions, is a clear example of how early descriptions of interaction in online communities contributed to the wider construction of an ‘Internet culture’. In the classic definition by David Porter, the culture embodied by the Internet is theorized as a product of intense online interactions, ‘a collective adaptation to the high frequency of anonymous, experimental, and even fleeting encounters familiar to anyone who has ventured into a newsgroup debate’ (Porter, 1997, p. xi), which happens:

not in the interface between the user and the computer, but rather in that between the user and the collective imagination of the vast virtual audience to whom one submits an endless succession of enticing, exasperating, evocative figments of one’s being. (Porter, 1997, p. xiii)

A number of researchers identify flaming, spamming and trolling as integral parts of Internet culture, conflictual and imaginative interactions between users and their imagined networked publics (boyd, 2011) requiring constant adaptation and negotiation (Myers, 1987, p. 264). As Marvin (1995) notes, ‘[t]hese articulated aesthetics serve as rules for proper behavior, markers of experience and belonging, metaphors for poetic expression and resources for play and challenge within the community’ but can at the same time be deployed for aggressive and even abusive purposes (Stivale, 1997, p. 134), resulting in a form of ‘personal verbal violence’ that is ‘widely practiced and equally widely abominated’ (Millard, 1997, p. 145). Progressively codified as a ludic in-group activity, trolling ‘serves the double purpose of enforcing community standards and of increasing community cohesion by providing a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not’ (Tepper, 1997, p. 40).

It’s quite evident how early descriptions of flaming, spamming and trolling as integral components of an emerging Internet culture are predominantly based on certain locales (mostly the United States), platforms (mostly Usenet newsgroups and academic LISTSERVs) and userbases (mostly educated, middle-class males). This is not a coincidence, for ‘[i]n its early years, the only people using the internet were the ones developing it’ (Baym, 2010, p. 17). Just as Dibbell’s Mr. Bungle is revealed to be a communal account operated by residents of a NYU student hall floor (1993), confrontational interactions in online spaces appear to have been pioneered by the very same ‘highly educated scholars and researchers’ (H. Wang & Hong, 1996) who were writing extensively about the topic. In the earliest evaluations of the practice, flaming is in fact identified as an essential element of academic mailing lists: ‘it educates the ignorant, polices cyberspace, brings order to the group, and scares away unwanted commercial advertising’
University students and researchers were the first Internet trolls, and explained their practice by linking it to the ‘high concentration of reflexive, reflective, anxious, and/or contentious personalities in academic communities’ (Millard, 1997, p. 147).

On the opposite side of these self-reflexive observations about Internet culture made by early adopters of the medium are studies that correlate trolling and similar practices with psychological deviance or antisocial behavior (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015), a quite common response to emerging phenomena involving new technologies and youth (Yar, 2005, p. 387). Often grounded on technologically determinist arguments about the reduced social cues characterizing interactions mediated by the mostly textual interfaces of the early Web (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), these treatments of trolling correlate disruptive, deceptive and abusive practices to psychological features such as sadism (Buckels et al., 2014), identify the behavior of victims of online harassment as coping strategies (Lee, 2005), and propose the introduction of protective systems and participatory incentives to discourage problematic behavior on social media platforms (Bishop, 2012).

Parallel inquiries in communication studies and sociology take a less prescriptive position, and approach trolling as a case study in interpersonal relationships, evaluating the emotional impact of ‘messages that hurt’ (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998, p. 173). The resources most often underpinning this strand of scholarship are the online disinhibition effect and deindividuation theory. According to John Suler, a consequence of the anonymity, invisibility and asynchronicity characterizing online interactions is that ‘some people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person’ (2004, p. 321), a form of online disinhibition which can in turn lead to disproportionately toxic behavior such as trolling. Following a similar technologically determinist argument, deindividuation theory correlates the anonymity and invisibility characterizing online interactions with anti-normative behavior, positing that ‘[b]eing unidentified and thereby unaccountable has the psychological consequence of reducing inner restraints and increasing behavior that is usually inhibited’ (Postmes & Spears, 1998, p. 239). Anonymity, in the various degrees allowed by different social media platforms (Anonymous, 1998, p. 382), emerges as a key variable in discussions of problematic online practices (Tomita, 2005, p. 186), most recently and notably rehashed by the popularity of Anonymous, the collective movement supposedly emerging from the contentious and anti-normative environment of the 4chan image board (Bernstein et al., 2011, p. 53).

Figure 21.4 Anonymous reply to a discussion thread about trolling I opened on 4chan
Definition <-> Contextualization

troll v., n.

To utter a posting on Usenet designed to attract predictable responses or flames. Derives from the phrase “trolling for newbies” which in turn comes from mainstream “trolling”, a style of fishing in which one trails bait through a likely spot hoping for a bite. The well-constructed troll is a post that induces lots of newbies and flammers to make themselves look even more clueless than they already do, while subtly conveying to the more savvy and experienced that it is in fact a deliberate troll. If you don’t fall for the joke, you get to be in on it. (Andrew/, 1996)

The research literature mapped along the first axis of controversy in the previous section was chiefly concerned with the functional implications of trolling. Defining the practice itself – either as an essential component of early Internet culture or as a consequence of the technological constraints imposed by computer-mediated communication – appears to be a rather straightforward task. The definitions of terms like trolling, flaming, or spamming are directly lifted from the communities in which they are used (such as the explanation from The Troller’s FAQ quoted above), interpreted by scholars who are at times part of these very same communities, and theorized either as activities contributing to online sociality, or as symptoms signaling the mediated occurrence of antisocial deviance. The second axis of controversy, introduced in this section, complicates the first, functional one by asking an epistemological question: should researchers strive to abstract trolling into a minimal, generalized definition, or should they rather pursue situated and contextual descriptions of problematic social media practices?

With the popularization of Internet access, the multiplication of online platforms, the advent of social media and the broadening spectrum of possible forms of networked participation, the definition of trolling becomes a problematic question in itself. As noted by Claire Hardaker, ‘particularly within media and social networking circles, it is possible to find widely divergent denotations and usages that make the creation of any clear definition [of trolling] almost impossible’ (2015, p. 202). The dispersion of trolling across online communities, platform userbases and networked publics has resulted in two diametrically opposed epistemological approaches to this sort of social media practice: on the one hand, the effort to find a minimal definition of trolling that can be applied across disciplines and contexts; on the other hand, the choice to embrace differences and to focus instead on pragmatic explorations of what happens in particular socially mediated contexts.

The definitional effort is best represented by the work by O’Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) on what they call ‘problematic messages’. In their paper, the authors lament the lack of ‘precise conceptual and operational definitions of “flaming”’ (O’Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003, p. 69), which leaves the discussion of problematic practices to popular opinion and news media, resulting in anxieties and moral panics about the Internet. O’Sullivan and Flanagin clearly write in reaction to existing academic literature, which they deem too technologically deterministic in its generalizing about different social media practices and defining them as antisocial, offensive, hostile or aggressive (2003, p. 72). Their solution comes from social semiotics: while recognizing that apparently hostile messages can be motivated by both antisocial attitudes and pro-social functions, the authors propose to ground their definition of a practice onto the context in which it occurs, supported by ethnographic attention to how users articulate local norms. O’Sullivan and Flanagin’s definition of flaming – ‘intentional (whether successful or unsuccessful) negative violations of (negotiated, evolving, and situated) interactional norms’ (2003, p. 84) – is by necessity minimal and open-ended, leaving room for changes of the practice in time and place, and for its adaptation to the analysis of other problematic social media practices such
as online harassment, hate speech, and so on (2003, p. 88).

Claire Hardaker’s extended research work on impoliteness in computer-mediated communication develops along similar vectors. By moving beyond deindividuation theory, she seeks to complicate the definition of impoliteness in online interactions through a careful mapping of its different nuances grounded on sociolinguistic evidence: ‘a definition of trolling should be informed first and foremost by users discussions’ (Hardaker, 2010, p. 215). Drawing on painstaking linguistic analyses of longitudinal activity in two Usenet newsgroups (rec.equestrian and uk.sport.football), Hardaker proposes her own definition of trolling: ‘Trolling is the deliberate (perceived) use of impoliteness/aggression, deception and/or manipulation in CMC to create a context conducive to triggering or antagonising conflict, typically for amusement’s sake’ (2013, p. 79). After honing in on this definition, Hardaker acknowledges that for many newsgroup members the identification of the practice is a similarly processual task: accusations of trolling are ‘often co-constructed, sometimes through heated arguments spanning many days, involving dozens of users, and situated within a set of fluctuating, community-based norms’ (2015, p. 205).

Approaches from the opposite end of the epistemological spectrum avoid the definitional problem altogether and begin from the situated contexts of different online communities and social media platforms. Over the past two decades, trolling has diversified beyond the well-documented acts of provocation and deception on mailing lists and newsgroups, and a wide variety of recent research has explored how problematic practices emerge and are dealt with on different online platforms (Fuller, McCrea, & Wilson, 2013, p. 4). In its most extreme formulation, this contextual approach argues that in the fluid ecologies of contemporary media, searching for a general definition of trolling might be a nearly futile exercise. In his study of provocative humor shared on Facebook groups by Australian spectators of the 2012 London Olympic Games, Tama Leaver demands such a kind of epistemological contextualization as a prerequisite for any discussion of the topic: ‘if trolling is situated as a practice to be addressed, then the term at least needs to be better explicated in each instance in order to ensure arguments and discussions of trolling are actually talking about the same thing’ (2013, p. 221).

Grounding comparative descriptions of problematic social media practices onto the situated circumstances of use and their representation in popular media and academic discourses is necessary to understand what trolling is, and isn’t, across different contexts. Moreover, trolling and similar terms are undeniably sites of prescription in themselves – similarly to the recurring anxieties around hacking or cybercrime, they can be ‘actively constructed by governments, law enforcement, the computer security industry, businesses, and media’ (Yar, 2005, p. 390). A classic example of the contextual approach to problematic social media practices is the work of Susan Herring and colleagues (2002) on a specific instance of trolling that caused trouble among the members of a feminist discussion board. Drawing on a detailed description of abusive interactions, the authors suggest a number of possible contextual interventions, such as the implementation of filtering functions and the improvement of community policies (Herring et al., 2002, p. 381, emphasis in original).

Similar studies demonstrate the variety of situational contexts and the importance of understanding local articulations of social media practices. For example, while Phillips (2011) demonstrates that trolling activity on Facebook memorial pages is underpinned by a critical attitude towards the platform’s implementation of post-mortem profile pages and towards global media’s obsession with tragedy, Shachaf and Hara (2010) find the trolling of entries on the Hebrew Wikipedia to be largely motivated by the boredom,
attention seeking and vengeful resentment of a handful of users directly impacting on the community’s well-being. Problematic practices not only differ across contexts, but might play out differently in structurally similar online environments: Binns (2012) describes the counter-strategies employed by online magazine editors to stymie trolling in comment sections and avoid disruption of the community atmosphere (2012, p. 554), but a study by Sindorf (2013) illustrates how similar moderation measures implemented by an online community newspaper to crack down on rude and insulting comments are widely perceived by the userbase as an overreaction and an attack on the democratic function of the comment section itself (2013, p. 195).

**Endorsement <-> Critique**

[...] an entry in the prestigious Journal of Usenet Stupidasses written by an academic from the Department of Fine Malt Beverages at Bungmunch University. (Vrooman, 2002, p. 61)

The two axes of controversies outlined in the previous sections define a horizontal surface of inquiry concerned with the functional role of problematic practices and with the possible ways of knowing about these practices. Just like the epistemological axis complicates the functional one by questioning the researchers’ definitions of trolling as an essential part of Internet culture or as an abject manifestation of antisocial behavior, the third axis proposed in this section complicates the previous two by introducing an ethical dimension: if problematic social media practices are found to be socially productive for a certain community of users, should the sympathetic researcher take a stance and contribute to their defense from social stigma and mediated anxieties? If playful in-group activities become abusive and cause harm to individuals or communities, should the concerned scholar renounce impartiality and raise her voice to denounce these actions? In light of these ethical choices, how can researchers deal with communities that start talking back, reacting to their representation in academic discourse and media narratives?

An earnest sympathy for the emerging components of quickly changing social media cultures, combined with contextual attention to the local norms and functions of problematic practices, often results in scholars engaging in mildly defensive endorsements and ethical reappraisals of trolling. These sometimes hark back to histories of confrontational communication and disruptive performance in society, such as the long pedigree of rants and invective in American culture, which served ‘an important social function in communicating social and political perspectives’ (Vrooman, 2002, p. 56). Subcultural repertoires are another important point of reference for reassessments of problematic practices, and allow Coleman (2012) to position trolls within an extended history of technological mavericks, including phone phreakers and hackers. For Coleman, these figures of disruption can be interpreted as contemporary iterations on the mythical notion of the trickster, historical and fictional characters that recur across world
cultures and are known for their ‘acts of cunning, deceitfulness, lying, cheating, killing and destruction, hell raising, and as their name suggests, trickery’ (Coleman, 2012, p. 115). This is a provocative genealogy, but as Boellstorff (2015) cautions, attempts at generalizing trolling by inscribing it in mythical archetypes can become functionalist tricks of perspective if they are not informed by anthropological evidence regarding the specific social implications and cultural contexts of tricksterism in world history and literature (2015, p. 394).

Also sympathetic towards trolling, but more mindful of the problematic politics of naming, are interventions that draw on first-hand involvement with different social media platforms and critical participation in networked publics. For Bergstrom (2011), the exaltation of disruptive figures should not obfuscate the fact that among many networked publics, the accusation of trolling is still deployed as an exclusionary category in itself, used ‘as a justification for punishing those who transgress (or are accused of transgressing) an online community’s norms’. Similarly, Sindorf (2013) warns that the very act of establishing the boundaries of trolling and incivility in increasingly commercialized online spaces requires prudent ethical positioning: ‘who gets to decide what is and is not productive to debate? Are these distinctions that we feel comfortable making? Are these distinctions that we want someone else to make, especially when they may have financial motives at heart?’ (Sindorf, 2013, p. 211). Ultimately, as McCosker (2014) argues through a study of media events and YouTube publics in New Zealand, defining problematic interactions on social media platforms as aberrant or antisocial can elide their participatory potential: ‘provocation should be understood in context and examined in terms of the way it can not only problematise, but also productively intensify, vitalise and sustain publics within social media sites’ ( McCosker, 2014, p. 202).

Ethical choices not only determine researchers’ positioning in relation to problematic practices, but the guiding metaphors they employ to describe social media. While authors leaning towards the reappraisal and endorsement of trolling tend to characterize online platforms as arenas for agonistic debate and democratic deliberation, scholars more concerned with the consequences of abusive interactions seek to ensure the existence of safe spaces (Herring et al., 2002) amidst the pervasively expanding hate space of the Internet (Shepherd, Harvey, Jordan, Srauy, & Miltner, 2015). The gendered nature of many online spaces and the predominance of sexist and misogynistic dimensions of abuse has been consistently traced from the early days of the medium, through hacking (Yar, 2005, p. 394) and gaming communities (Taylor, 2003, p. 37), to contemporary discussion boards and social media platforms (Phillips, 2013). In the case of 4chan’s /b/ board, which Phillips identifies as a hotbed of trolling locked in a feedback loop of amplification with its own news media coverage, the difficulty in assessing user demographics behind the screen of anonymity should not hinder a recognition of ‘the ways in which trolls’ raced, classed and gendered bodies undergird and provide context for trolling behaviors’ (Phillips, 2013, p. 495).

The work of Emma A. Jane presents a more radical critique of both trolling and of its appraisal in academic research. According to Jane, the numerous problematic practices described by scholarship about hostile communications on the Internet should be understood under the general header of ‘e-bile’, which she identifies as ‘a type of vitriolic discourse notable for its hostile affect, explicit language, and stark misogyny’ (Jane, 2015, p. 65). Besides agreeing with the claim that ‘iterations of hate speech have become endemic to much online discourse’ (Shepherd et al., 2015, p. 1), Jane argues that celebratory and dismissive scholarly accounts of abusive practices are complicit in overshadowing more ethically pressing questions about ‘the
real harms done to real victims in numerous real ways’ (Jane, 2015, p. 70). Jane’s evocative claim describing how ‘toxic and often markedly misogynist e-bile no longer oozes only in the darkest digestive folds of the cybersphere but circulates freely through the entire body of the Internet’ (2014, p. 532) stands in stark contrast to the functionalist folkloristics of flaming on academic mailing lists from two decades before.

Both the most apologetic chronicles of trolling and its most radical critiques are clearly speaking to a certain context – that of contemporary Anglophone cultural politics – and might seem puzzling to social media users from the increasingly diversified non-English language Internet. Yet, they suggest an important shift. As the editors of a recent journal issue about the topic argue, ‘the way that we talk about trolls and trolling as a phenomenon of post-Internet culture places us in a broader, longer fight over the ethos, the history, and the politics of the digital’ (Fuller et al., 2013, p. 2). Confronted with increasingly fluid media ecologies and expanding networked publics, academics are demanded to take ethical stances regarding problematic practices on social media, and to confront reactions from the communities that see their practices scrutinized and articulated by knowledge-producing outsiders (Figure 21.6).

**THERE’S NO TROLLING IN CHINA**

During my doctoral research I dedicated part of my ethnographic fieldwork on Chinese social media platforms to investigate the practice of trolling in a sociotechnical context noticeably distant from the Euro-American, Anglocentric media ecologies described by the majority of the existing scholarship on the topic (de Seta, 2013). The People’s Republic of China hosts the world’s largest Internet user population – 649 million users as of December 2014, 85.8% of which go online through a mobile device (CNNIC, 2015, pp. 25–28) – and the accelerated development of communication technologies in the country has been kept under close scrutiny as a key aspect to understand the growing prominence of the PRC in a global context (Zhou, 2006). The history of the Internet in China has been extensively chronicled over two decades of academic research both nationally and internationally (Qiu & Bu, 2013), with the majority of the literature focusing on the implications of the technology for online business, global Internet governance and local civil society (Herold & de Seta, 2015).

In terms of online platforms, the Chinese landscape is markedly shaped by the tight grip that the national authorities hold on Internet governance through incentives to the local industry, protectionist policies and outright censorship. Even though the impact of filtering systems and restrictive measures on user behavior is disputed (Taneja & Wu, 2014), it is undeniable that the situated predilections of hundreds of millions of local users result in a distinctly national Internet experience. Whereas contemporary narratives of the global Internet imagine the average user networking on Facebook, blogging on Twitter and Instagram, searching on Google or Yahoo!, chatting on Whatsapp or Snapchat, and watching videos on YouTube...

**Figure 21.6** Anonymous reply to a discussion thread about trolling I opened on 4chan
or Netflix, the majority of Chinese Internet users widely embrace homegrown services and platforms such as instant messaging software QQ, mobile social contact app WeChat, social networking websites QZone and Douban, microblogging platforms Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, search engine Baidu, video hosting service Youku Tudou, and so on. E-mail is rarely used, instant messaging plays an important role in everyday life, and online forums (locally called BBS, the acronym for bulletin board system) have remained popular since the early years of the medium (Wallis, 2011, p. 412), ranging from small communities to massive commercial or governmental platforms such as Baidu Tieba and Qiangguo Luntan (Damm, 2007, p. 413).

Besides the predominance of homegrown platforms and services, one of the most evident differences that I noticed at the beginning of my investigation was the absence of trolling in local media narratives. Whereas English-language popular media routinely describe trolling in terms of pranking, confrontation, harassment and abuse, in China mass-mediated anxieties related to the Internet tend to focus around a different set of practices and phenomena. During the time of my fieldwork (2013–2014), the most recurrent Internet-related anxieties were renrou sousuo [literally ‘human-powered search’], a form of online vigilantism through doxing (F.-Y. Wang et al., 2010); the exploits of the wumao dang [fifty-cent party] of government-paid posters (Chen, Wu, Srinivasan, & Zhang, 2011); the activities of shuijun [literally ‘water armies’] of commercial astroturfers (Luo, 2010); and the propaganda department’s push against loosely defined yuyan baoli [verbal violence] and wangluo yaoyan [Internet rumors] (Zhao, 2013). While these phenomena partially overlap with the problematic practices described in the first half of this chapter, the feelings and reactions articulated by local Internet users challenge simplistic equivalences with trolling. For example, recent surveys reveal the Chinese Internet users’ widespread fear of becoming target of a renrou sousuo (Wallis, 2011, p. 421), while discussions with Chinese urban youth highlight anxieties about the potential dangers of emotional involvement with contentious online spaces, Internet rumors and personal attacks (Cockain, 2015, p. 59).

When I asked users of Sina Weibo, Douban, QQ and Baidu Tieba about trolling, I found myself in the awkward position of having to explain the meaning of the English language term through actual examples of problematic online interactions – often producing more confusion than clarity – which interviewees would interpret using a wide range of Chinese terms: ‘this guy is just a penzi! [sprayer]’, ‘he is zhao chou [looking for trouble]’, ‘this post is diaoyu [fishing]’, or ‘this one is a naocan [braindamaged]’ (de Seta, 2013, p. 308). While I regularly observed recurring instances of trolling across discussion boards and social media comment sections, these practices were never lumped under a single Chinese word that would directly translate to ‘trolling’, but were rather described through a range of specialized vernacular terms with well-documented popular etymologies (2013,
Trolling, and Other Problematic Social Media Practices

As kindly explained to me by users of the AC anonymous board in a discussion organized during the writing of this chapter, among many possible contextual translations of trolling such as *hei* [to smear], *zhuonong* [playing with], *wunao pen* [mindless spraying], *diaoyu* [fishing] or *yinzhan* [to look for a fight], some originated from specific geographical areas and media environments – for example, in the case of *shua baimu* ['playing white eyes'], online gaming in Taiwan (Figure 21.8).

One of these many terms – *diaoyu*, which literally means ‘fishing’ – provides a clear example of how social media practices cannot be assumed to map smoothly across contexts. Suggested by many users as one possible translation of trolling, fishing is commonly practiced by posting *diaoyu tie* [fishing posts] or *diaoyu duanzi* [fishing bits], elaborated texts belonging to a vernacular repertoire of *diaoyu wen* [fishing literature]. *Diaoyu wen* includes fabricated news articles, carefully researched pseudoscientific reports, and sensationalist social media posts written in specific stereotypical styles (de Seta, 2013, p. 311; Han, 2015, p. 1014). Here’s a ‘classic diaoyu bit’ kindly

Figure 21.8 ‘In Taiwan League of Legends is really popular, and the word used in that game is *shua baimu*, it means something like playing carelessly on purpose and letting the opponent win.’ Anonymous replies to a discussion thread about trolling I opened on the AC anonymous board
shared with me by one user of the AC anonymous board:

There’re surely a lot of wumao here, is the sentence ‘giving money to the people’ enough to make you feel uncomfortable? Giving money to the people is always better than giving it to the leaders, right? My classmate’s father took part in the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, there was one time he drank too much and told me that the thing actually only cost less than five hundred million US dollars. So the question is, where did the remaining twenty billion dollars go? Just let your imagination fly. You shouldn’t always indulge in comics and cartoons; if you have the chance, go learn how to cross the firewall, you will be able to see a different world. Since when we entered the month of July, it seems like a lot of people supporting the Party and the government have appeared around here, summer holidays did really arrive uh.

This diaoyu duanzi, known as sanxia wuyi [Three Gorges’s Five Hundred Million], was originally posted in July 2012 as a comment to an article about the success of the Three Gorges Dam, and generated over one thousand responses for its outrageous claims based on hearsay (Moegirlpedia contributors, 2015). After being thoroughly debunked by members of the AC community, the comment has been incorporated in a repertoire of fishing literature, and its occasional reposting plays on multiple layers of humor. For uninformed audiences, the conceited prose reads as a smug mockery of discussion board users themselves, described as narrow-minded wumao ['fifty-cent’ paid posters] who waste their summer holidays on comics and cartoons; when posted at the right time, this diaoyu duanzi might successfully elicit replies by outraged newcomers. For community members in the know, the reproduction of the post evokes the collective process of debunking the ungrounded allegations formulated by the original author, and stimulates further debate about the formal characteristics, discursive strategies and political leanings of fishing posts, consolidating the community’s repertoire of diaoyu wen.

Compared with a similar practice on Usenet, where trolling posts are customarily explained as confrontational gatekeeping practices useful to protect specialized online communities from the unchecked influx of newcomers, diaoyu is interpreted by discussion board users as an occasion to engage in a collective fact-checking exercise in response to widespread anxieties about the dissemination of rumors and personal accusations by paid posters and propaganda workers, and about the radicalization of political conflict in online spaces (Wu, 2012, p. 2227). The communal creation of a repertoire of debunked rumors and failed provocations, maintained as a repository of community knowledge and disseminated for in-group amusement, evidences how tightly social
media practices are tied to local sociotechni-
cal contexts and situated experiences of use
across multiple scales. In the case of trolling
in China, these include everything from the
larger media ecologies of national platforms
and services to the massive linguistic context
of the Chinese-speaking Internet, down to
the infra-ordinary experiences of discussion
board users and their situated interpretations
of specific media practices and texts.

SOCIAL, MEDIA, PRACTICES

Even though the Victorian Internet, a term coined
by Tom Standage to refer to the telegraph system
of the late nineteenth century, did not include such
parasitical entities as worms and viruses, the
discursive position of the anomalous was filled
with other kinds of near-mythical instances of the
uncanny. […] Often these were part of the folk
culture of the new media rather than official con-
cerns […]. Yet the short story “The Volcanograph”
introduces how weird objects of network culture
had already spread in the nineteenth century.
The short story depicts “hobgoblins” who keep
disturbing proper communicative events. The
unwanted intruders that keep “breaking in” on
the channels are given a lesson with the aid of a
telegraphic bomb, a countermeasure of a kind.
(Parikka, 2011, p. 268)

The mythologies of communicational distur-
bances uncovered by Jussi Parikka in the
passages quoted above testify to the all-too-
human propensity to make sense of problem-
atic presences in technological networks by
constructing folk cultures of new media
populated by weird objects and uncanny fig-
ures. The difference between nineteenth-
century hobgoblins disturbing telegraphic
communications and twenty-first-century trolls
wreaking havoc on social media is that today,
these near-mythical figures increasingly
embodi official concerns about a wide vari-
ety of media practices.

In this chapter I contended that social
media practices commonly identified as
problematic, confrontational, aggressive,
abusive, or antisocial are an important topic
of inquiry not simply due to their supposed
resistive or recalcitrant qualities, but because
they exemplify how much of contemporary
media use is continuously constructed at the
intersection of infra-ordinary experiences,
popular media narratives, and academic dis-
courses. If it’s true that we (academics, jour-
nalists, social media users) talk about trolling
only through polemics (Fuller et al., 2013,
p. 1), then perhaps this chapter provides
some directions to move towards more pro-
ductive problemizations (Foucault, 1984,
p. 384) of what the terms social, media and
practices imply when they are used to articu-
late each other.

After recalling some first-hand experiences
of problematic online interactions from my
early years of Internet presence, I argued that
social media practices are complex arrange-
ments of technologies and usages, the articu-
lation of which is unavoidably grounded in
individual and self-reflexive experiences
across time and space. Trolling, along with
related problematic practices such as flaming,
spamming, cyber-bullying and online abuse,
belongs to a wider congeries of social media
practices resulting from the popularization
of Internet access and participatory digital
media platforms. While portrayals of trolling
in popular media have repeatedly oversim-
plified the phenomenon to foster anxieties
and moral panics about networked commu-
nications, academic research has painstak-
ingly attempted to account for the practice
beyond such generalizations. In the first half
of this chapter, I proposed a genealogy of two
decades of research literature into problem-
atic social media practices by distributing it
along three axes of controversies: the tension
between descriptions of trolling as functional
component of Internet culture and its diagno-
ses as deviant online behavior (Culture <->
Deviance); the contrast between attempts to
derive a general definition of the practice and
efforts at emphasizing its situated circum-
stances (Definition <-> Contextualization);
and the debates between sympathetic reap-
praisals of problematic interactions versus
their critical condemnation (Endorsement <-> Critique).

Mapping a selection of the existing research literature along these three axes highlights the various theoretical and methodological contributions provided by scholarly treatments of the topic, and disproves the recurring claims that trolling is an inexorably understudied phenomenon. In actuality, a sustained cross-disciplinary engagement with problematic social media practices has resulted in important conclusions: trolling isn’t a necessarily antisocial practice, but it can contribute to community cohesion as much as damage it; confrontational interactions don’t directly result from the technological affordances of social media platforms, but can be mitigated with the implementation of ad-hoc measures; generalized definitions of problematic practices can be useful heuristics for further research, but risk flattening or misinterpreting their local articulations; and the positional and ethical choices made by the researcher ultimately determine which productive and abusive aspects are emphasized or obfuscated in academic accounts of problematic social media practices. The choice of distributing research literature along three axes describing functional, epistemological and ethical continuums is not presented as a definitive mapping of the field and can be expanded or reconfigured according to different dimensions, but has the advantage of opening up a wide variety of possible approaches to the topic while also hinting at zones of opportunity for future inquiry: when, and where, is trolling defined as such, and by whom? How is the problematization of a certain practice negotiated between communities of social media users and networked publics? What positionality does the researcher choose when confronted with problematic practices, and how are users portrayed in the research output?

In the second half of this chapter I presented a short overview of a research project about problematic interactions on Chinese social media platforms, highlighting how the loss in translation of the term trolling has lead my inquiry towards a rich repertoire of locally articulated practices tightly connected to different contextual scales. By focusing on the specific case of diaoyu [fishing] on a Chinese discussion board, I explained how the communal creation and dissemination of a repertoire of debunked rumors and failed provocations is linked to national media ecologies, informational anxieties and platform-specific interactional practices. Contrasting a predominantly Anglocentric research literature with a case study from China is not meant to be a call to de-westernize social media studies by presenting exotic social media contexts as sites of difference and otherness, but is rather intended as a way to question a practice by drawing on ethnographic attention to its situated articulations. Alireza Doostdar’s account of ebtezaar [vulgarity] as a linguistic practice among Iranian bloggers (2004) and Sahana Udupa’s work on the social and mediated construction of gaali [abuse] by Indian Twitter users (2015) are other examples of this research approach. According to Udupa’s findings, for instance, accusations and dismissals of gaali are central concerns for Indian Twitter users who want to engage in highly confrontational debates around Hindu–Muslim politics. Unraveling the situated articulations of the practice reveals its grounding in India’s history of political language play, its role in ritual social relationships during Hindu festivities, and its contemporary deployment as a gendered re-politicization of the domestic sphere (2015, pp. 7–14).

To conclude, it might be helpful to openly situate my own approach to problematic practices in terms of the same axes I used to distribute a substantial body of existing research, and to suggest some promising directions for future research endeavors. For my own inquiry, I adopt a neutral position on the functional axis (trolling is not a constitutive component of Internet culture nor necessarily deviant behavior), a radically contextual position on the epistemological
axis (trolling has to be understood in situated social settings), and an agnostic position on the ethical axis (my representation of trolling doesn’t side either with or against the practice). These choices lead to my preference for ethnographic and dialogic accounts of trolling and other problematic social media practices, a solution close to the one Whelan (2013, p. 57) derives from ethnomethodology: ‘Naming behaviour as trolling is not deploying an objective and stable descriptor to convey a meaning about a social practice which is somehow itself before we get to it, it is a means of producing a social practice itself as meaningful.’ Considering practices as being constantly produced by their own social and situated articulations is a promising starting point to engage with the mythical figures and folk cultures of new media beyond reductive dualisms and assumptions regarding the homogeneity of sociotechnical worlds (Crook, 1998).

Following these decisions, I take trolling as a starting point to understand ‘the place of provocation in its multiple, highly contextualised and always changing forms’ (McCosker, 2014, p. 202), and as an example of how problematic practices can be disentangled from the polemics developing around them. Another advantage of an ethnographic approach to social media practices is its sensitivity to the ‘aspects of everyday internet use that often remain unnoticed’ (Lovink, 2011, p. 10). The capacity of tuning into the trivial everyday that Georges Perec would call infra-ordinary as its extends into our sociotechnically mediated lives (Bassett, 2012, p. 111) allows ethnographically grounded inquiry to avoid both the oversimplification of popular media narratives and the overdetermination of disciplinary discourses. In times when media become increasingly fluid ensembles of technologies, platforms and forms of access, turning problematic practices into problemizations of the infra-ordinary experience of mediated sociality can be a fruitful strategy to gain a better understanding of the interrelation of media and practice (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010). As Perec recognizes, turning towards the infra-ordinary results in research outcomes that appear fragmentary, apparently trivial, and ‘barely indicative of a method, at most of a project’ (1997, p. 178). This, I argue, is in fact what makes this turn essential: by moving towards the domain of the trivial and the infra-ordinary, I hope that my contribution provides a sense of ‘how thoroughly social, how culturally and semantically articulated, how under-determined and contingent media production, reception and use are in practice’ (Hobart, 2014, p. 517). Grounding ethnographic accounts of infra-ordinary mediated sociality on such radical notions of underdetermination and contingency will become increasingly essential for future discussions of trolling and other problematic social media practices.

Note

1 4chan is an English-language bulletin board launched in 2003 and hosted in the USA. Modeled on the popular Japanese image board Futaba Channel, 4chan is divided into several thematic sections, does not require registration, and it has become known for its users’ participation in various forms of disruptive activities. The AC anonymous board (AC nimingban) is a Chinese-language image board launched in 2011 by the video-sharing website AcFun and hosted in the People’s Republic of China. Also modeled on Futaba Channel, the AC anonymous board is divided in numerous thematic sections, encourages anonymous participation, and at the time of writing moderates posting through timed cookies.

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