

Chapter 10

Developing and Validating the “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things Scale”: Optimising Political Online Communities for Internet Trolling

Jonathan Bishop

Centre for Research into Online Communities and E-Learning Systems, UK

ABSTRACT

Internet trolling describe the posting of any content on the Internet which is provocative or offensive, which is different from the original meaning online in the 1990s, referring to the posting of messages for humourous effect. Those systems operators (sysops) who run online communities are being targeted because of abuse posted on their platforms. Political discussion groups are some of the most prone to trolling, whether consensual or unwanted. Many such websites ara open for anyone to join, meaning when some members post messages they know are offensive but legal, others might find grossly offensive, meaning these messages could be illegal. This paper develops a questionnaire called the This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things Scale (TIWWCHNT-20), which aims to help sysops better plan the development of online communities to take account of different users’ capacity to be offended, and for users to self-assess whether they will be suited to an online community. The scale is discussed in relation to different Internet posting techniques where different users will act differently.

INTRODUCTION

Internet trolling as a term has changed in meaning through use since the 1990s. Around that time trolling meant posting messages on the Internet in order to provoke a reaction. It has come to mean the posting of provocative or offensive messages more generally (Bishop, 2013a; Bishop, 2014b; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011), but in legal terms it should refer to the posting of messages which are grossly offensive as opposed to simply offensive (Starmer, 2013). The difference between what is

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offensive and what is not appears to in some cases be driven by the media, meaning people posting offensive messages are falling foul of the criminal justice system as pressure is put on law enforcement authorities to deal with such content

It is now firmly established that cyberspace is not a frontier in its own right but is subject to the jurisdiction of nation states (Bishop, 2011a). Case law has established that what is grossly offensive to one person may not necessarily be grossly offensive to another. The case of *DPP v Connolly* in the UK for instance found that a person who might send an image of an aborted foetus to pharmacists with a political message would not be breaking the law, whereas if they sent the same to an abortion surgeon it would be free speech as the abortion surgeon is unlikely to get grossly offended, but pharmacists unexposed to such images are likely to. In terms of the USA and Canada the cases of Jake Baker and Arthur Gonda respectively has the same outcome which was that by sending abusive messages between one another could not be considered unlawful because they were not intended for a wider audience (Wallace, 1999). In the case of Jake Baker specifically he was found to not have broken US trolling law in the form of the Telecommunications Act 1996 by posting a plot for a rape story to a newlist as it was free speech. This was replicated in the UK with the case of *Chambers v DPP*, where it was found that a message has to cause apprehension in those receiving it in order for it to be illegal.

Such clear yet complex case law provides a challenge for the systems operators (sysops) who run online communities where the posting of political content is the norm. The chance of someone getting grossly offended when most others in a community are not even offended can create challenges for sysops. Websites like 4chan have tried to deal with this by separating general boards like ‘/b/’ from ones containing hardcore content like ‘/hc/’ so that users know what to expect. However it is difficult for these sysops to plan the design of an online community without knowing which content would be tolerable to which people. This is something this paper hopes to solve.

Politicisation in the Network Society

The term network society is now widely used. The network society is made up of virtual communities and organic communities (Van Dijk, 1999; Van Dijk, 2005). It is almost impossible in today’s world to exclude any form of governance over one’s life. This has led to online discussion groups and online communities in general to be cesspits for political partisanship where people express opinions on the basis of whether it corresponds with the policies of the political party they support and not their genuine convictions. Equally there are those online discussion groups which are solely dedicated to attacking politicians regardless of their party politics. One might therefore see the world not as a network society per se, but as a collection of network societies in which the social construction each person has received through their senses about the world, is to them the true reality. It is therefore important to understand the political points of views of those who participate in online discussion groups because depending on their point of view and attitudes their participation in an online community may be destined to be successful, or indeed unsuccessful.

The 12 Types of Troller

It is established that there are 12 types of Internet troller that describe many of the types of behaviours online, through clearly defined character theory (Bishop, 2012b; Bishop, 2013b). In addition to this there are four groups of Internet troller in which these can be classified using definitions available in

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