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Troll Logic as Challenge to Future Journalism

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Troll Logic as Challenge to Future Journalism

Introduction: Strange bedfellows

One of the big issues of today's information society is mis- and disinformation (Freelon & Wells 2020). Propaganda, astroturfing, and decidedly untrue statements are not new concepts to news media though, and traditional, well-researched, and tested journalistic practices have had ways to deal with these for decades (Ireton & Posetti 2018). Today's public discourse, however, is characterised by especially many discordant voices, some of which are clearly not interested in telling the "truth" or advancing the common interests of people. Viral memes, "clicktivist" demonstrations, and other examples of the power of social media users are often based on unsubstantiated or made up information as if it was of equal value to well-researched facts. The era of fake news (Tandoc et al. 2018) and conspiracies (Enders et al. 2021) follows a new and different logic, one that defies traditional journalistic methods: a *troll logic* (see Phillips 2015, 115).

Where you would expect to be able to follow a trail of money, power or services rendered to find where a narrative originates, in order to understand who benefits, troll logic means participation for the "lulz". There is no obvious connection between the story, the originator, the supporter, and the benefactor. Troll logic was born from efficient dissemination technologies that computer networks afford, and bears witness to the new user affordances that allow the general public access to wide ranging, unchecked communication platforms. Troll logic is based on a decentralised network and guerilla warfare-like system with isolated cells that may never have anything to do with each other beyond wreaking havoc. They all use the same tools to connect while performing for other participants, rather than assuming the position of audience members (see Mihailidis & Foster 2021).

This chapter explores the close connection between journalism logic and troll logic, demonstrating how easily journalists are taken for a ride if the person playing with them has no traditionally defined interest in the case at hand – lulz and encrypted conspiracies both being rather tricky to pin down as an interest or benefit. We are also interested in finding out how troll logic changes the journalism-audience relationship, and whether journalism has a chance when facing troll logic. It is disconcerting to think that troll logic may have been born from journalistic logic, but the connections are there. In fact, it seems that troll logic and journalistic logic have similar objectives, such as affectively enticing their audiences, and they certainly rely on the same methodologies, aided by digital communication technologies.

Troll logic takes advantage of the weaknesses of journalistic practice and abuses it as far as possible. Where journalism speaks of "fair and balanced", troll logic twists that into "all views matter equally," and offers alternative, unsubstantiated, and often made up information as if it was of equal value to

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well-researched facts. The importance of the subjective truth as well as the objective fact is being upended into a free-for-all of random opinion. Investigative journalism is mimicked into conspiracy theory deep dives into complex rabbit holes, with the Q-conspiracies as the most recent example (Moskalenko & McCauley 2021). In this chapter, the associations between journalism logic and troll logic are analysed through examples of news stories, journalistic work, and the new kinds of journalism-audience relationships made possible by the dubious heroes of investigative journalism and evolving communication technologies.

Not only for the lulz

Troll logic first appears in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (S5/E11, 2000) as “insane troll logic”, when Xander is told by an actual troll to choose between his own death, or that of either his girlfriend or his best friend. The way the troll argues for why it out of respect for Xander should kill him foreshadows internet troll logic. Phillips writes about the *cultural logic of trolling* (2015, 115–134) focusing on the close connections between troll practices and news media (Phillips 2013). For her, trolling consists of, e.g., sensationalism and detachment leading to emotionally distant fetishism; disaster-focused content; self-obsession; selective attention to events; rational arguments disregarding emotions; sensationalism profiting of the harm to others; an obsession with winning arguments in order to assert dominance; keeping control and regarding emotions to be signs of weakness and loss.

Many of these troll practices are recognisable from news media as well. Traditionally, the more distant an event is from the audience, the less news value it has (Galtung and Ruge 1965, 81) – an observation echoed in Phillips’ work, too (2015, 120). Similarly, the need for sensations to get through to the audience is highlighted, as well as the focus on negative events (Galtung & Ruge 1965). To draw further comparisons, we find competition in the rush to present breaking news, and a focus on shocking details rather than the big picture. Objectivity, the elusive ideal of journalist practice, is often described in the emotionally disengaged and often androcentric rhetorical paradigm of trolls, too (Phillips 2015).

Troll logic has also been used in the descriptions of online trolling, as “insane troll logic” (Fichman 2020) or “troll logic” along the same track as Phillips (Kurowska & Reshetnikov 2018). Our use of the concept is aligned with Phillips’ understanding, as a way to take advantage of topics or events that might be manipulated with all communication methods accessible to create as much mediated interest as possible, while disregarding facts and contexts in favour of emotional responses. Troll logic is specifically aimed at angry responses, in the spirit of lulz, where the troll invites others to play a version of “chicken” where the one who gets angry or upset first, loses.

Aside lulz, there is also a darker side to troll logic. Especially in political journalism, troll logic is being weaponised by political outliers such as the protesters on Capitol Hill and the civil war inciters across the United States. Examples of this can be seen in the use of the “OK” hand signal of the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters/Release the Kraken flag by anti-government extremists, and the combination of igloos and Hawaii prints, both referring to a code word for civil war (e.g. Simon & Sidner 2021).

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These types of coded messages let extremists and political protesters find each other through cryptic references with plausible deniability as humorous nonsense (Woodward 2020).

Similar reliance on symbolism in political contexts has surfaced also elsewhere. In Belarus, for instance, the historic white-red-white flag has since 2020 been complemented by more discrete symbols of resistance, such as embroidered clothing and art, as government-led aggressive suppression of the national symbols has led to their disappearance from the media (Kulakevich 2020). Being politically active in oppressive states requires “hacking the system” and troll tactics in gaining visibility by the mainstream media, but similar mechanisms also work in liberal Western democracies (e.g. Zuckerman 2019).

A simple way to grasp journalists’ attention is to use visual symbols that can be remediated and recirculated in news journalism. In Western Europe, the Yellow Vests movement that started in 2018 successfully “branded” its convoluted political demands under one simple yet powerful visual cue, the yellow vest, with connotations to the working class and emergency situations so effectively that just by wearing this garment, literally anybody, with or without a political agenda, could become a representative of the movement (e.g. Kipfer 2019). These and other examples from around the world increase the urgency to understand troll rhetoric, its cultural roots and connections, and how it is being used to disrupt and obfuscate publicly accessible information and the debate which is vital to the core of democracy.

Investigative journalism and the internet

Investigative journalism is often defined as the search for truth (De Burgh 2008, 10). As such, it is often framed as the “fourth estate,” the watchdog of democracy that challenges authority on behalf of the public (Carson 2020, 83–84). Investigative journalists are not universally loved though, as their job often leads to uncovering unpleasant and even dangerous “truths”. An example of such a controversial figure is Julian Assange, known for his involvement in the leak of materials concerning very problematic American military activities in Afghanistan (Greenslade 2020). Through the website *Wikileaks* he created a repository for documents, making them available for journalists to dig through and reveal critical information.

Wikileaks turned Julian Assange into a dubious hero. The leaks endangered American resources on hostile soil, while also revealing the wrong-doings of the American military. The final say about the cost-versus-value of such leaks will probably never be public knowledge, but those who are convinced that governments around the world are hiding proof of government crimes gained affirmation and a role model (see Osborne 2019). The *Wikileaks* scandal confirmed that there are government conspiracies, and the prosecution of figures such as Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning (released classified documents published by *Wikileaks*), and Edward Snowden (released classified documents to *The Guardian* and *Washington Post*) proved that bringing this information to light was dangerous.

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The roles of Assange, Snowden, and Manning are essential in order to understand the troll logic of journalism. The real and meaningful information they conveyed that caught the eye of the public and revealed abuse by the authorities muddied the waters when it comes to understanding what kind of information you face when you are presented with an alternative understanding of accepted truths (see Brevini 2017). The self-made nature of their revelations and the active campaigns to repress the information they shared lend credibility to grassroots information sharing and collaborative document interpretation (Carson 2020). We may regard the maxim of “Do your own research”, familiar to us from contemporary conspiracy theories, as one strand in this development (Tripodi 2018, 27–34). This is the domain of conspiracy theorists, and the events propelling Assange, Snowden, and Manning into the public eye are living proof that occasionally there are real conspiracies out there.

Anonymous and the birth of activist trolls

Trolls are regular participants in the public discourse, and trolling often relies on a display of knowledge of cultural codes, past conversations, and obscure references. Trolls are inexorably technology-savvy and internet literate, and they actively defy authority and control, disguising under aliases and collective names like “Anonymous”. Trolls may be the opposite of a passive audience; they are an active participant with a “different” agenda. Nevertheless, trolls are not usually viewed as a constructive counterpart in public debates.

“Anonymous” was a hacker collective that took its appellation from the generic name given to all who participated at the image board 4chan.org. Gabriella Coleman describes her efforts at getting insights into Anonymous through spending time on 4chan and gaining the trust of the participants (Coleman 2014) and the political activism of the group (Coleman 2013a). Between 2008–2010, this group grew from pranksters trolling “for the lulz” into an activist group with a “full-fledged pranking campaign against the Church of Scientology” (Coleman 2013b, 3). Also, they had very strong opinions about free speech. In 2010, Anonymous, “specifically AnonOps,” launched a DDoS campaign against PayPal, MasterCard, and Visa in response to their refusal to accept donations for Julian Assange (Coleman 2013b).

Here we see the best known troll group launching their attacks on behalf of one of the most controversial document providers in modern investigative journalism, *Wikileaks*, establishing a tight connection between trolling and investigative journalism. This is, however, not the only way Anonymous connects to mainstream media. In 2007, *Fox News* gave Anonymous the appellation, “The Internet Hate Machine” (Coleman 2013a, 221; Phillips 2015, 51).^[1] The attention from mainstream media and particularly conservative media with alarmist headlines, such as *Fox News*, propelled the group into the public eye. According to Phillips,

Fox was the trolls’ most conspicuous and ultimately their most expedient media adversary. Not only was Fox’s output (and the output of its various subsidiaries) reliably sensationalist, thereby furnishing trolls with a seemingly endless supply of trolling opportunities, it was also

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reliably (over)reactive, meaning that trolls would be provided with a steady diet of lulz. (Phillips 2015, 56).

This positions Anonymous firmly on the side of free speech, while also as the adversary of sensationalist media such as Fox News, and it also embeds a relentless mockery of media produced spin in troll logic.

Anonymous participants might have appeared to be your everyday random internet troll, but the kind of pranks and activities they pulled demanded a lot of resources. One of their favourite weapons, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, may be pulled off by one person using a cleverly written computer code to get multiple sources to attack the target they want to flood with requests, blocking it, but even that single person depends on the education and time that goes into creating the software, a computer to do it on, and access to the internet. This means that we can confidently claim that Anonymous members were privileged with leisure, education, and technology, and while their actions may have been targeted at social injustice, they rarely carried a real risk for anyone but a small core. Unlike Assange, Manning, and Snowden, these troll/hacker/activists got to keep their privilege and comfort. Considering that they also grew out of imageboards, specifically 4chan, we know they are familiar with a style of banter that is very offensive, earning it the “hate machine” nickname (Hagen & Tuters 2021).

While we do not know the actual faces of the people participating on imageboards, we know that racist, misogynist, and straight humour, often distributed and shared through memes, is essential on 4chan and 8chan (8kun) (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2017). These memetic strategies take advantage of the language and cultural reference points of the target demographic to not only drive a set of topics into public discourse but, eventually, to further political activism. In our earlier study we have analysed this strategy in the context of an online harassment campaign targeted against women interested in games (Mortensen & Sihvonen 2020). Even if the humour and the memes circulating on these boards may appear harmless, or as kind of an insider joke, the logic guiding their appearance and effect bears resemblance to so-called activist trolls, using the same tactics to further a (political) cause in the legacy media and spread their message both through internet lingo and traditional journalism.

Journalists using troll tactics

So far we have discussed how glimpses of troll activities and troll logic are visible in the ways journalism and the public discourse operate today. In this section, we are going to look into how journalism, despite the many decades of its professionalisation and institutionalisation, remains entangled in practices that we regard as examples of the troll logic.

It would be tempting to think that there is a dichotomy to be made between trustworthy journalistic institutions, like the BBC and Reuters, tirelessly producing the most accurate news around the world, and “fake news” sites that exist to propagate a certain worldview or a political agenda. However, it

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may in fact be impossible to distinguish the outlets of respectable news organisations from sites that look like journalistic sites but do not adhere to the general principles of journalistic integrity, reliability, and fact-checking (Marwick 2018, 478–479). For instance, large Russian news organisations RT and Sputnik, which are publicly funded and state-controlled, are known to amplify certain voices over others and spread disinformation that serves the purposes of the political and economic elites (Watanabe 2018). A recent study focusing on mainstream news publishers producing and distributing “manipulated” news in association with the Umbrella Movement protests in Hong Kong found out that strong political views guided the reporting of certain events, and that they were deliberately intended to foster particular attitudes and action (Wong et al. 2021). Similar examples around the world illustrate how difficult it is to make a distinction between trustworthy and unreliable reporting.

Another dichotomy waiting to be drawn considers the funding of journalism. Basically, different outcomes and criteria for newsworthiness can be expected to stem from the funding structure that is based on either state-supported public funding (e.g. public service broadcasting) or commercial viability, i.e., being market-driven. In addition, many sections of legacy media are politically aligned, such as the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany or the left-leaning *The Guardian* in the UK, and also regional, denominational, social class-, and language-based demarcations can be observed in their constitution (e.g. Smith 2017).

There has never been a media system where “truth” would have been uncontested and universally accepted, at least without the help of a multilevel state-run propaganda machine. The two main tenets of journalism, the quality of news outlets and the origins of funding, have ceased to demarcate the “respectable” and influential sites of discourse from others, as social media has granted a nearly universal access to efficient publishing technologies and communication platforms, many of which may even look convincing and believable as sources of information (Hannah 2021). At the same time, legacy media everywhere are suffering from falling audience numbers and advertising revenues, and as a result, their role and power in society are rapidly diminishing (Franklin 2014). These tendencies are deeply intertwined, and as a result, today’s mediasphere offers a radically different site of action for internet trolls than pre-social media.

Although it has been argued that news journalism at large may be becoming less dependent on any one form of funding and instead enjoy the benefits of multiple revenue streams (Franklin 2014, 484), others think quite the opposite (e.g. Bakker 2012) and point out how the strive to produce content for digital platforms has led to the decrease of work by professional journalists, editors, and fact-checkers. From the audience’s perspective, reading blogs and chatting online may have replaced some of the engagement with professional journalism from the 1990s onwards (Jones & Salter 2012). The shrinking numbers of journalism can in fact be interpreted through two simultaneous crises, of financial viability as well as of civic adequacy (Blumler 2010). As the need for public discussions or deliberation has not diminished, quite the contrary, the void left behind by declining access to quality journalism has arguably benefited many “activist” voices that have gained unprecedented popularity among the information-hungry crowds (Mihailidis & Foster 2021).

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Troll logic and gamified information retrieval

Whitney Phillips (2018b) has studied the symbiotic relationship between trolls and journalism, and even though both of these – especially the politically aligned far-right extremism now considered “trolling proper” – have changed, there are relatively immutable elements in journalism that characterise the response to trolls’ media manipulation tactics. Phillips’s starting point is that both trolls and the media need one another, and this interdependency takes shifting and curious forms. Drawing from the experiences of the older reporting on the underground political movements and Anonymous activities on the imageboards, the focus has since moved to following certain conspiracy theories, the QAnon movement in particular, both globally and in the US (Phillips 2018a; see also de Zeeuw et al. 2020; Hannah 2021).

There are striking similarities between the media tactics of historical political extremists and groups that we call Anonymous or trolls today. In the 1920s US, the Ku Klux Klan purposefully cultivated friendly journalists and baited the mainstream media with camera-ready spectacles in order to gain media coverage, acquiring wild successes and recruiting new members (Donovan and boyd 2018). A similar paradoxical logic applies to journalism covering conspiracy theories today. While some members of the public gain new insight into the story and strengthen their critical vocabulary, others develop an even more profound antipathy against the perceived ruling elites. Reports on conspiracy theories thus strengthen their sense of community. By sharing their distrust in journalism and the belief that everything mainstream media writes is a lie, they are able to name a common enemy and establish a new ground with others (Phillips 2018b).

The final question reporters must ask themselves stems from the fact that journalists aren’t just part of the game of media manipulation. They’re the trophy. Consequently, before they publish a word, journalists must seriously consider what role they’ll end up playing in the narrative, and whose work they’ll end up doing as a result. (Phillips 2018b)

Conceptualising journalists as the “trophy” of the game of media manipulation places them at the centre of the action. In fact, journalists’ work and the connections between conspiracy theories, internet trolls, and games have been examined on a number of occasions (e.g. Stewartson 2020). For instance, in the days before the attack on the Capitol Hill interest in the mixed-conspiracy group QAnon increased, and it was often noted how much its activities resembled a game (Flam 2021; Kaminska 2020).

Considering QAnon’s earliest known appearance on 4chan, the argument that there is a connection between conspiracies, trolling, and games is not unreasonable. As we point to the similarities between troll logic and sensationalist journalism, we recognise the danger of *apophenia*, or seeing meaningful patterns in random observations and coincidences (Hagan 2011). Apophenia gains strength from collective action. It therefore resembles what in game studies is known as *theorycrafting*, collaborative information gathering used to understand the “black box”, the part of a game engine that is kept hidden from players but containing the information that decides the

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outcomes of game events (Paul 2011). Conspiracies like QAnon that appeal to all of us function as a warning sign of the dangers of seeing patterns where none may in fact exist.

Conclusion: Trolls in power?

The Capitol Hill insurrection can be regarded an apex of troll power. It is (at least so far) the best example of the new ecosystem of media, where traditional journalism, social media platforms, and the imageboards where most anonymous/Anonymous activists operate all exist in the same public conversation. There is increasing evidence of the troll logic gaining visibility in legacy media and affecting the ways journalists are able to do their work. From these manifestations we gather that social media are the crucial environment through which troll logic gains ground or withers. We began this chapter by asking whether journalism would have a chance facing troll logic, and we answer that only if journalists thoroughly familiarise themselves with the social media tools and mindsets of trolls they are dealing with.

Let us take Twitter as an example. In many countries, Twitter is primarily used by journalists, politicians, and social media influencers, and as it favours the short form, it is a tool prone for sharp expressions and exaggerations – clickbait, in short. Twitter is used widely as a source of information by journalists, as well as a tool for disseminating and commenting on the news by the public (Franklin 2014, 484). However, Twitter is by no means a neutral medium: it is prone to traffic and trends manipulation (e.g. Zhang et al. 2017) and it sustains ecosystems of fake accounts and bots (Morgan 2018). This leaves journalists, in an intense time-crunch to beat the deadline, and users producing easy content, particularly vulnerable to manipulation for harm, for politics or just for the lulz.

The idea of trolls mostly circulating memes and pranking other users has been surprisingly persistent. Until 2014, imageboards were mainly considered the rather innocuous home of Anonymous and other humorous activist trolls. With #GamerGate it became clear that these imageboard actions were not funny at all (Mortensen 2016). Since then, troll logic has infiltrated news reporting in numerous ways. By exploring the connections between journalism logic and troll logic and taking examples from all over the world, we have in this chapter opened the discussion on the new kinds of journalism-audience relationship. As journalism based on verified information is vital for democracy, the influence of troll logic compels us to investigate how it is being used to disrupt and obfuscate the information we are able to obtain, as well as the rules of public discourse we are obliged to follow.

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^[1] Coleman dates this to 2007, while Phillips cites an article from 2009.