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What do Social Scientists Know about Trolling?

Introduction

The Internet world nowadays has provided us with plenty of benefits that allowed technology to be where it's at today. It has become a safe haven for many people who seek communities who have the same interests as them. People who are introverted or might be less social than others can look towards the Internet as a means of comfort and a time away from the dangers that exist in the real world. However, the Internet has also become a cesspool for manipulative and toxic individuals who seek to troll others online. While the Internet has its benefits to how it has become convenient to the everyday lives of everyone, it is also important to highlight the dangers that exist online with individuals who seek a life of delinquency.

Trolling has immense negative effects on the individuals being affected online. It can affect them mentally, leads to consequences, and only influences other people to hivemind into the troll behavior as well. Because of these reasons, I have decided to find what research social scientists have conducted on the perception of trolling.

This paper will provide an overview on the various articles that discuss the findings on trolling behavior and the consequences it has brought on the online community. The articles

are constructed through professional scholars, with the paper finding the means of how damaging trolling can be.

What is Trolling?

Trolling, while although it has a broad meaning, can be understood with a greater context than what its normal meaning is. Trolling in general means posting anything, whether that is a comment or an image, online as a means of provoking anger or any emotional reaction in people. It can create large arguments in which the “bait” is meant to be deliberately offensive. This can be conducted with plenty of purposes such as to promote political misinformation, offending people’s beliefs or community, or deviate from the justifiable opinion. However, with the context of this paper, trolling can also be targeted onto one individual from a “troll,” which is the one committing the trolling. When it is targeted onto one individual, the troll usually conducts their actions by posting something that is rather offensive to the target alone, affecting their emotions. Several other individuals can gang up as well and troll the target rather than just one and they will continuously do this. It is a form of harassment and trolls often find enjoyment out of it at the mental expense of the targeted individual, which is why it always brings negative consequences.

Social Scientists’ Findings on Trolling

In the article, “Our Experiments Taught Us Why People Troll” by Cheng et al., Cheng et al. (2017) researched different patterns associated with trolling behavior online. They conducted an experiment on 667 participants in which it was found that how influential trolling can be on others. The participants started with a quiz, then read an article and engaged in

discussion. Through the experiment, two factors can be concluded on what influences people to engage in trolling: a person's mood and a discussion being started by a troll. They found that "people put into negative moods were much more likely to start trolling." As a result, they are susceptible to the influence of other trolls. Because of this influence, a discussion that is started by a troll causes any person to become more likely to engage with it as well. This is how trolling gets its reputation, through its toxic malevolence and likelihood to increase its gathering. Despite these negative results found by the scholars, they believe these results can be used to reduce trolling prevalent online by monitoring online discussions closely.

Another common finding has been that trolls are purposely spreading misinformation regarding politics online at an alarming rate. An article titled "Propaganda-spewing Russian Trolls Act Differently Online from Regular People" by Savvas Zannettou and Jeremy Blackburn (2024) and "Political Trolls Adapt, Create Material to Deceive and Confuse the Public" by Savvas Zannettou and Gianluca Stringhini (2024) both signify the dangers of Russian trolls manipulating political social media, specifically information regarding the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The first article by Zannettou and Blackburn was about how the scholars found that out of 27,291 tweets from 1,024 Twitter accounts, a lot of these were about the Trump vs. Clinton presidential race. A lot of these troll accounts that they found were both right and left leaning, which made it harder to discern the election interference. They also put on identities that were frequently changed in which they had staunch support for one side of the election, as they observed through the Internet Research Agency. The other article by Zannettou and Stringhini observed that Russian bots were also promoting propaganda by creating their own as well as backing others. The scholars in this article found that "about 30% of the images they tweeted

has not appeared on other social media or elsewhere on Twitter and were therefore likely created by the Russians behind the accounts.” This brings alarming news not just to geopolitical affairs but also to democracy as elections are now being interfered with rather than being fair.

The final two articles tackle the topic of how bots and fake accounts online have had an effect on trolling. “How Fake Accounts Constantly Manipulate What You See on Social Media – and What You Can Do About It” by Professor Jeanna Matthews of Clarkson University (2020) elaborates on how fake accounts or so called “sock puppets” are causing distrust online. Fake accounts are being created on social media for trolling purposes containing spouts of racism and other controversial matter. Professor Matthews believes misinformation and disinformation is slowly becoming a leading force online and that chaos is becoming more of the norm. In contrast, “Fighting Online Trolls with Bots” by Professor Saphi Savage of West Virginia University (2017) finds a speckle of lighter news in the same genre of malicious accounts. Through her experimental Twitter bot group, Botivist, she found how important bot intervention with human behavior is. This is relevant due to the fact that Twitch, a streaming platform, has introduced bots as a means to counter trolling in their online chats. Bot intervention has a means of monitoring and changing trolling behavior, so it is less likely to be done again.

Conclusion

In conclusion, trolling behavior can have immense consequences online to the individuals and communities involved. It is likely to be induced by negative moods and influences others to partake in it as well through discussion posts. Trolling has also been

displayed through political misinformation and fake accounts sparking controversy. However, steps are being done to mitigate trolling behavior such as monitoring online discussions more closely and implementing bots to moderate chatrooms on social media. These articles by the Professors shine a light on how serious of an issue trolling has become and that strategies being developed can help make a difference in the malevolence that trolling creates online.

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