

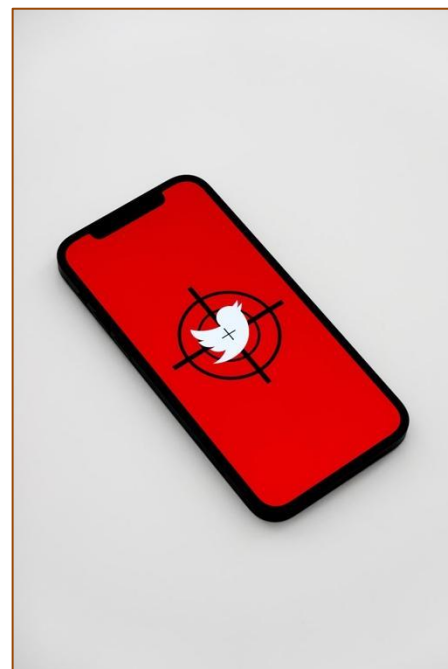
SOCRATIC DISCUSSION OR MASKED BIGOTRY?

THE ETHICS OF TROLLING

Over the course of several weeks in 2022, alleged Russian bots, fake accounts, and right-leaning trolls have been flocking to Twitter. While this is nothing new, the uptick in these accounts has been widely attributed to the imminent acquisition of the platform by infamous engineer and investor Elon Musk (Colleran, 2022). Of the many trolling strategies used by groups and individuals alike, perhaps none is more prevalent than “classic trolling” where trolls flood social media feeds – in this case, with the use of the term “Liberal NPC” (Bell, 2018). This recent explosion of “Liberal NPC” tweets reignites a decades-old debate about the limits of free speech and the place of trolling in political discussions.

“Trolling” is a set of behaviors that range from harmless pranks to efforts to destroy a target’s reputation (Manivannan, 2014). “NPC” is a term used in the gaming world that refers to “non-playable/nonplayer characters,” where these characters’ primary duty is to advance the game’s plot by assisting the player in various ways, such as saying scripted lines when approached (Roose, 2018). The use of the term “NPC” in trolling, especially in reference to “Liberals,” is relatively new, dating back to the 2018 midterm elections when 4chan and Reddit users poured onto Twitter in droves, creating hundreds of spam accounts with similar avatars and included “NPC” somewhere in their name or handle (Bell, 2018). The groups held that those who opposed Trump were “brainwashed sheep... conditioned to parrot left-wing orthodoxy” (Roose, 2018). Eventually, these trolls began sharing election misinformation, such as spreading incorrect voting dates and, as a result, thousands of these accounts were suspended (Roose, 2018).

The proliferation of “Liberal NPC” comments under most left-leaning tweets are often left by users who may not even be directly associated with trolling campaigns. This marks a shift toward the naturalization of trolling on social media, but at whose benefit and whose expense? As noted by multiple infamous trolls like Andrew Auernheimer (known online as weev), trolling is a necessary part of a functioning democracy because of its unabashed absolutist view of the first amendment and free speech (Auernheimer & Camilleri, 2012). Consequently, trolls frequently target projects they believe to be limiting free speech. Trolling, even in its most primitive form, exercises the right to say almost anything you want, your right to attack views you don’t agree with, and hold contradicting values and opinions. According to Auernheimer, Jesus, religious prophets, Brigham Young, and Socrates were all trolls, which demonstrates the necessity of trolling in developing philosophies and new ways to think about the world (Aurenheimer & Camilleri, 2012). Trolls also believe in trolling’s ability to expose the “true nature” of the person you are interacting with since, after all, one of the goals of trolling is to get a rise out of your target and turn their anger into another point of contestation (Aurenheimer & Camilleri, 2012). Each of these ideas intersect for the greater purpose of trolling, which is to engage others on a range of issues in a public forum.



However, most of these views of trolling have become pipe dreams, as the evolution of trolling hasn't quite lived up to the promises of open, democratic discussion. Not only is the trolling community enormously one-sided, their new-wave strategies mostly consist of things like "Liberal NPC" comments and spam Twitter accounts, which shows that trolls are less concerned with fostering engagement than they are with simply stating disagreement at every opinion different from theirs, especially as these spam comments are rarely followed up with.

Another core element of trolling is humor. In addition to failing to meaningfully contribute to discussion, the humor in mainstream trolling is not "universally positive," as it can "construct walls, assert normative values, and fetishize those deemed other and less than" (Phillips & Milner, 2017). While the stakes for "Liberal NPC" comments may be considered low, it is nonetheless enmeshed with bigotry and offensive ad hominem attacks. Indeed, these and other troll "jokes" are often deployed "in the service of direct harassment, antagonization, and silencing" (Phillips & Milner, 2017). Comments urging people to commit self-harm, open racism, ableism, and homophobia are all weapons to simply get one's attention, not dialogue about issues. Furthermore, infamous trolls are frequently affiliated with neo-Nazis, such as Auernheimer who currently runs an online white supremacist newspaper in Ukraine (Gutman-Wei, 2018). When he hacked thousands of wireless printers and printed fliers that urged people to join the "struggle for global white supremacy," it was discussed under the lens of trolling unsecured internet services and not an act of blatant racism (Gutman-Wei, 2018).

While recent forms of trolling certainly stretch ethical limits, does this discount its original purpose of trolling and the necessity of free speech in a democratic society? In the end, the debate over trolling is more nuanced than it might appear to be and simultaneously tests the limits of free speech and interaction. Trolling as a mode of rhetoric is one that constantly tries to even out the field of engagement for people exchanging ideas in good faith. Part of the appeal of trolling is its function as a spectacle of engagement and its relative scarcity. But as trolling becomes more commonplace on social media and strays further from its primary mission, one cannot help but wonder whether or not the person behind the screen realizes the irony in tweeting the 1000th "NPC" comment of the day.

Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical tensions exist in the practice and evaluation of trolling?
2. Should a right to absolute free speech apply to trolling? Can trolls use offensive language for their purposes?
3. Do you associate trolling with religious figures and philosophers, or average, every-day people? Does this association change your view of trolls?
4. Do you think trolling is an effective method of fostering a discussion?
5. Does the bigotry sometimes found in trolling negate the value in trolling overall?

Further Information:

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