Trolling for the Lulz?
Using Media Theory to Understand Transgressive Humour and Other Internet Trolling in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

Internet trolling as a term has changed in meaning since it first entered mainstream use on the Internet in the 1990s. In the 2010s, it has come to refer to the posting of provocative or offensive messages on the Internet to harm others. This change in usage of the term opens up new challenges for understanding the phenomenon, especially as some are still resistant to taking it beyond its original meaning. This chapter tries to distinguish the 1990s kind from the 2010s kind by referring to the former as classical trolling and the latter as anonymous trolling. Taking part in the former is considered to be “trolling for the Lolz” (i.e. positive) and the second to mean “trolling for the Lulz” (i.e. negative). Through using document and genre analysis, this chapter finds that there are common ways in which anonymous trolling manifests differently on different platforms. The chapter concludes by presenting a model for understanding which genres of online community are at risk for particular types of trolling.

INTRODUCTION

Internet trolling is a term that has changed with use over the last twenty years. In the 1990s Internet trolling was a term referring to the practice of posting provocative messages that were so obviously intended to be inflammatory that the resulting barrage of abusive posts that followed, called a ‘flame war,’ made regular members of online community feel entertained. In the 2000s the use of the term as being distinct from ‘flaming’ was challenged (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002) and by the 2010s the term had changed again to that the two were almost inseparable (Bishop, 2014; Hardaker, 2010). Internet trolling has now come to mean the posting of messages via a public communications network that are either provocative or offensive. Distinctions have been drawn between the two, with the 1990s variety being called ‘classical trolling’ and...
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the 2010s variety being called ‘Anonymous trolling’ (Bishop, 2013a). The reasons for the first are self-evident, but in the case of ‘Anonymous trolling,’ which should always have a capital ‘A,’ more explanation is necessary. The word, ‘Anonymous,’ is named after a group of self-described Internet users who attempt to create organised abuse of others or disruption to services, such as through distributed denial of service attacks.

Terms like, ‘Trolling for the Lulz’ and ‘Trolling for the Lolz’ can be better understood with these classes of trolling. The former, which is where people post offensive messages for their own entertainment can be seen to resemble Anonymous trolling. The latter, which is the posting of messages for others’ entertainment as well as one’s own, can be seen to resemble classical trolling. The terms, ‘troll’ and ‘trolling,’ as latched onto by the mass media, could be considered to be the latest term used to describe abuse via technology, with the earlier term being cyberbullying. Some researchers have tried to make distinctions between abusive types of trolling as being ‘flame trolling’ and ‘cyber-bullying’ and the more positive sort being ‘kudos trolling’ and ‘cyber-kindness’ (Bishop, 2012b; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2013). Whichever terms are used it is clear that there are positive types of trolling and negative kinds, and it is possible to accommodate both the traditionalists and the more modern uses of the terms.

BACKGROUND

The change in meaning of Internet trolling has created a divide between the traditionalists who want it to have the classical meaning, and those who want it to have the Anonymous meaning. The character theory in Table 1 by Bishop (2012b, 2013c, 2014) could provide a means to resolve this dispute. When spoken about in terms of classical trolling, those who troll could be called, ‘Trolls’ (with the capital ‘T’) and those who take part in Anonymous trolling could be called, ‘trolls’ as is commonly done by the media. Trolls are not the only type of Internet users who take part in trolling, as there are many others, as can be seen from Table 1. Online community users, which include Trolls, are known collectively as trollers (Bishop, 2012b; Bishop, 2014; Herring et al., 2002).

As can be seen from Table 1, the Big Man is someone who does trolling by posting something to others in order to support their own worldview, even if it does not support others’ collective opinions and ends up offending them. The type of troller most people in fact mean when they call someone a ‘troll’ is in fact the Snert. A Snert takes part in trolling to harm others for their own sick entertainment. The more pleasant trollers include the Flirt, who take part in trolling to help others be sociable, including through light ‘teasing’. There is also the MHBFY Jenny, a troller who takes part in trolling to help people see the lighter side of life and to help them come to terms with their concerns. One of the most creative trollers is the Wizard, who does trolling through making-up and sharing content that has a humorous effect or promotes positive use and understanding. On a darker note, the E-Venger type of troller does trolling in order to trip someone up so that their ‘true colours’ are revealed. They may also, in the moment, fiercely attack someone who offended them in order to ‘fight flames with flames’. A high profile example of this was with Liam Stacey, a student from Swansea, who posted a string of abuse to Twitter following being rebuked for posting an offensive comment about a footballer who suffered a cardiac arrest (Bishop, 2013a; Bishop, 2014; Cleland, 2013; Edwards, 2012; Fisher, 2013; Hall, Hanna, & Huey, 2013). Another type of troller – the Iconoclast – takes part in trolling to help others discover ‘the truth’, often by telling them things completely factual, but which may drive them into a state of consternation. They may post links to content that contradicts the worldview of their target, for instance. A slippery type of troller is the Chatroom Bob, who takes...
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Table 1. A character theory of trollers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Troller Character Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-Venger</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Vengeance’ forces. An E-Venger does trolling in order to trip someone up so that their ‘true colours’ are revealed. An E-Venger is a type of ‘Hater,’ because they target those who ‘wronged’ them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iconoclast</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Destructive’ forces. An Iconoclast takes part in trolling to help others discover ‘the truth’, often by telling them things completely factual, but which may drive them into a state of consternation. They may post links to content that contradicts the worldview of their target. An Iconoclast is a type of ‘Hater,’ because they can make others aggressive when they challenge that person’s worldview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snert</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Anti-social’ forces. A Snert takes part in trolling to harm others for their own sick entertainment. A Snert is a type of ‘Hater,’ because they try to harm others as a result of their warped morality that leads them to want to ‘put others straight’ for their own satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Man</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Order’ forces. A Big Man does trolling by posting something they think is pleasing to others in order to support their own worldview, which often offends that person and turns them against the Big Man. A Big Man is a type of ‘Lolcow,’ because whilst trying to be an unwanted arbitrator others unite against them and this continues while they are a member of a specific online community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ripper</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Thanatotic’ forces. A Ripper takes part in self-deprecating trolling in order to build a false sense of empathy from others. A Ripper is a type of ‘Lolcow’ because others get satisfaction out of mocking them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatroom Bob</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Existential’ forces. A chatroom Bob takes part in trolling to gain the trust of others members in order to exploit them. Chatroom Bobs are a type of ‘Lolcow,’ because they are targeted by others who can see through their games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHBFY Jenny</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Forgiveness forces’. A MHBFY Jenny takes part in trolling to help people see the lighter side of life and to help others come to terms with their concerns. A MHBFY Jenny is a ‘Bzzzter,’ because they will try to be helpful when in reality they do not understand the other person’s situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wizard</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Creative’ forces. A Wizard does trolling through making up and sharing content that has a humorous effect. A Wizard is a type of ‘Bzzzter,’ because they may post content for the sake of it even if they know it is not accurate or reliable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flirt</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Social’ forces. A Flirt takes part in trolling to help others be sociable, including through light ‘teasing.’ A Flirt is a type of ‘Bzzzter,’ because they post anecdotes which may not be relevant to the specific situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurker</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Surveillance’ forces. Lurkers make silent calls by accident, etc., clicking on adverts or ‘like’ buttons, using ‘referrer spoofers’, reporting posts, modifying opinion polls or user kudos scores. Lurkers are a type of ‘Eyeballer,’ because they will observe what others are saying and rarely see the need or have the willingness to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troll</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Chaos’ forces. A Troll takes part in trolling to entertain others, bringing some fun and mischief to an online community. A Troll is a type of ‘Eyeballer,’ because they will wait for the opportune moment to disrupt the community’s equilibrium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder</td>
<td>Driven by ‘Escape’ forces. An Elder is an outbound member of the community, often engaging in “trolling for newbies,” where they wind up the newer members often without questioning from other members. An Elder is a type of ‘Eyeballer,’ because they will look out for unsuspecting members to target for entertainment, such as playing devil’s advocate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

part in trolling to gain the trust of other members in order to exploit them (Bishop, 2012d; Bishop, 2013b; Jansen & James, 1995; Jansen & James, 2002). Their close cousin – the Ripper – takes part in self-deprecating trolling in order to build a false sense of empathy from others. Finally there are two less dominant Trollers that can be seen in Table 1 – the Lurker and the Elder. Lurkers, who lack a visible presence in the community for the reason that they are often on the periphery, are like their Elder cousins, who are outbound and also on the periphery (Bishop,
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TROLLING IN DIFFERENT GENRES OF WEB-BASED COMMUNITY

Websites or other platforms such as ‘viral email’ are dedicated to humour by creating large dynamic archives of material that had been circulated by being ‘passed along’ or using ‘viral’ methods (Shifman, Coleman, & Ward, 2007). While at the start of the millennium only minor amounts of viral transfer of transgressive humour occurred via Websites, since then it has become a major part of the proliferation of flame trolling across the Web and beyond emails and newsgroups. Viral humour can play a part in meta-communication, such as where extended threads on online communities like 4chan can result in discursive construction of communication action patterns that could be better utilised as part of information systems that support communication and cooperation in virtual intercultural communities (Yetim, 2001). Such narratives can form part of the signalling mechanism for the formation of sub-cultures, particularly ones that instigate Internet trolling or lurking (Bishop, 2012a). Table 2 presents a list and description of online community genres on which social networking platforms can be built to enable these types of communication.

Original genres like the personal homepage have now been transposed into social networking services as ‘profile pages’ and individual-controlled ‘groups,’ which are linked together more often than not through the circle of friends social networking technology. Message Boards are also a common type of online community, composed of threads of discussions that can often be started by any member of the community. Email lists and newsletters are flexible online communities that people can easily join, leave and participate in using only their email account. Chat groups can take many forms and usually allow the instant sending of a message for others to respond to immediately. Virtual worlds also allow for fluid interactions and users can often fashion a particular character for themselves. Weblogs and directories have a particular structure that makes them distinct from other online community genres. Finally Wikis and Hypertext fiction are unique in that it is often possible for someone to create a new page to add to the existing ones and in the case of Wikis it is often possible for others to edit these pages, even if they have been posted by others.

Whilst the advantages and disadvantages of these Web-based communities are clear, the differences between them in terms of how trolling is manifested is less clear. It is therefore a goal of this paper to understand the differences between the different genres.

Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study is document analysis. Document analysis is done to analyse entire forms, such as intelligent form analysis and table detection, or to describe the layout and structure of a document (Kleber, Diem, & Sablatnig, 2010). In the case of this study it will be the latter. One new problem in Web document analysis is the rich variety of data formats (Lopresti & Zhou, 1998). This paper attempts to show how through understanding online communities as genres can help aid the understanding of new knowledge around Internet trolling.
Table 2. Genres of Web-based community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Advantages/Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Homepage</td>
<td>Advantages: Regularly updated, allows people to connect with those that they know through leaving messages and joining circle of friends. Disadvantage: Members often need to re-register for each site and cannot usually take their ‘Circle of Friends’ with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Boards</td>
<td>Advantages: Posts can be accessed at any time. Easy to ignore undesirable content. Disadvantages: Threads can become very long and reading through the messages is time consuming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Lists and Newsletters</td>
<td>Advantages: Allows a user to receive a message as soon as it is sent. Disadvantages: Cannot always access an archive of messages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat Groups and Instant Messaging</td>
<td>Advantages: Synchronous. Users can communicate in real-time. Disadvantages: Posts can be sent simultaneously and the user can become lost in the conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Worlds</td>
<td>Advantages: 3D metaphors allow a user to get more involved in the community. Disadvantages: Requires certain hardware and software that not all users have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weblogs and Directories</td>
<td>Advantages: Easily updated, regular content. Disadvantages: Members cannot start topics, only respond to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis and Hypertext Fiction</td>
<td>Advantages: Can allow for collaborative work on literary projects. Disadvantages: Can bring out the worst in people, such as their destructive natures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Documents**

The documents that were chosen to be analysed for this study were from the social media platforms that were commonly used. For the personal homepage this was Facebook. Whilst this may not seem obvious for some, Facebook can be seen as a social networking service that is made up of lots of independent online communities. In other words, a Facebook Profile or Page is a personal homepage according to the definition in Bishop (2009). In terms of Weblogs and Directories, Yahoo!Answers was chosen. Using the definition in Bishop (2009) it can be seen that as this Website involves a specific user making an opening post and inviting comments, with this post being listed among other posts, then it fits into this genre. Yahoo!Answers is known to be notorious for trolling. For the Wikis and Hypertext Fiction category Wikipedia was chosen. Whilst wikis like Encyclopaedia Dramatica are dedicated to Anonymous trolling, as Wikipedia is more mainstream it would provide a more authentic and like-for-like comparison to the other genres investigated. In terms of Chat Groups and Instant Messaging, Twitter was chosen. Whilst to most people, academics included, Twitter is a micro-blogging platform, if one applies Bishop (2009) today, as opposed to when it was published this makes more sense. Messages on Twitter are exchanged between users synchronously in that anyone can create a new post directed at anyone. It can therefore be seen that Twitter resembles a chatroom more than a blog, which in the case of the latter is asynchronous and posts can only be initiated by the blog owner. The Website, 4chan, was chosen for analysis for the Message Board genre. Whilst this is used by the Anonymous group to troll for the Lulz, it was originally set-up as an American alternative to the Japanese Futaba Channel, 2chan, both intended as Manga ‘imageboards’. Google Groups was the document...
source selected for ‘Email Lists and Newsletters.’ Whilst others were available, this platform was chosen because it was based around the Usenet platform, which existed since the 1990s.

**Results**

The results of the study showed that the differences identified between genres of online community exists, but the ways in which others were abused was almost the same, even though the posts manifested differently in keeping with the genre style.

**Personal Homepage (Facebook)**

The social networking service Facebook was at the time of writing one of the most popular Websites of its kind. Facebook, like MySpace, is based around using buddy-lists to join personal homepages (i.e. profiles) together. The difference between these three platforms is quite simple. Facebook allows users to add anyone who confirms the friendship request, and the user can group their friends into ‘Circles,’ something later adopted by Google+. MySpace allowed people to add anyone they chosen, but was limited in how users could group their friends. One can see a collection of self-authored Facebook pages as being no different to a GeoCities Website, except it requires little skill for users to set up a personal home page and link it to their friends on Facebook. Even Facebook’s innovative ‘Facebook Apps’ platform is little different from what CGI scripts and Java applets were in the day of Geocities. The Wall is also little different from a Guestbook. Even so, its ease of use led it to become the most popular hosts of online communities of its time. It also became a platform among those that were most open to subjecting users to flame trolling. Whilst abuses of memorial pages came to prominence with Natasha MacBryde and Georgia Varley, both from England, the country of Wales has had its fair share of abuse on the platform. One of the most notable examples was the mocking of Phillip Hill, 45, Charles Breslin, 62, David Powell, 50, and Garry Jenkins, 39, who were miners who died tragically in the Gleision Colliery near Swansea. These men were working in a deep pit mine which flooded, eventually killing them. Following the death, memorial Webpages were set up to mark their tragic deaths, which were set upon by flame trollers, probably because of the genuine outpour of public sympathy by people in Wales for their countrymen, which they felt misplaced (Walter, Hourizi, Moncur, & Pitsillides, 2011). The Member of Parliament for Neath Peter Hain tweeted: “Some people are just sick. Hope police hunt down those responsible and ensure they feel full force of the law.”

The personal homepage on Facebook, unlike earlier platforms one might argue, includes not only profile pages for users, but the more feature-rich Facebook Pages for promoting organisations, and in many cases today, for ‘memorial Websites’ where family members and others can remember those loved ones who have passed away. High profile cases of flame trolling on Facebook include the bullying of Natasha MacBryde by Sean Duffy, or the harassment of Georgia Varley’s family on Facebook.

**Weblogs and Directories (Yahoo!Answers)**

As discussed in the previous section, a Weblog is defined by having a single or small group of people who can initiate a discussion for others to comment on. This is similar to directories, such as e-commerce Websites, where the e-tailer lists products they are offering and invites other to comment on them. YouTube could be considered a Weblog as people post a video for others to comment on, and it could also be a directory, because the videos are presented categorically or through recommendations in some cases. This shows this genre proposed by Bishop (2009) to be solidly founded.

The Weblog and directory considered in this section is Yahoo!Answers. This social networking
platform allows people to ask and answer questions on any topic for those other users of the Website to answer. As can be seen from the image on the left of Figure 1 the questions asked about Wales are often typical of the stereotype of it being a coal mining country which had a troubled relationship with the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Equally users of Yahoo!Answers take to more direct forms of transgressive humour, such as making offensive jokes about Welsh people and asking others to join in with suggestions, as can be seen from the image in Figure 2. References to “shagging sheep” and the all too common abuse of Welsh people surface often as a normal course of activity. Few complaints are ever made, perhaps legitimising transgressive humour like this.

As one can see from Figure 3, a discussion on teenage suicides in Bridgend involves the responder confirming to the questioner that the cases are being whipped up by the media to cause a moral panic. The answerer then makes a transgressive jibe about the area by saying there must be a virus in the air that is making teens suicidal. In Wales the media often present groups of youths as ‘gangs’, describing how they can exploit mobile phones and Internet chat rooms to pass fight details to interested groups. Trollers, or ‘trolls’ are presented little differently.

Wikis and Hypertext Fiction (Wikipedia)

Wikipedia is a social media Website where theoretically anyone can participate. In reality it is mainly a close group of people who control specific pages, locking out anyone with a different opinion to them. On Wikipedia it is possible to control content if one is able to amass enough supporters. This happened in the case of Ryan Giggs, a Welsh footballer whose page was ransacked following allegations that he got a super-injunction against another Welsh person called Imogen Thomas. As can be seen from Figure 4, Giggs Wikipedia page had edits which made this claim and users left comments in the notes section which had to be deleted by the Wikipedia management in order to avoid charges of contempt of court.

The whole incident shows the vulnerability of public figures to social media services. For instance it is part of Wikipedia’s rules to stop people with ‘conflicts of interests’ in an article from editing them, which means strictly speaking it is difficult for people who have articles about them on Wikipedia to protect themselves from abuse.

Chat Groups and Instant Messaging (Twitter)

On Twitter it is possible for anyone to start a conversation with anyone, simply by typing their user name prefixed with an ‘@’ such as @Imogen_Thomas. It makes sense therefore to extend ‘Chat Groups’ in Bishop (2009) to be called ‘Chat Groups and Instant Messaging.’

This lack of control one would normally see on blogging platforms is one of Twitter’s weaknesses and in fact Imogen Thomas has been a major victim of this following her associations with Ryan Giggs and the saga around the case that she allegedly slept with him. Thomas has over 330,000 followers on Twitter. The Snerts/Hater Trollers said “vile” things to Thomas for their own sick entertainment, making it a clear cause of transgressive humour. Thomas posted: “Can the haters stop writing [to] me? Don’t you think I have suffered enough?” which did nothing to help, leading to her following it up with “I actually think I’m having a little breakdown - crazy. One minute I’m feeling okay, as ok as can be, the next I’m so low, depressed. Need my mum.”

Thomas told the Wales on Sunday newspaper about her experiences of flame trolling, “I don’t want to have to face it every single day. Some days I can just cope with it fine, but other days it can
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really catch me on a bad day. It’s just not fair. I shouldn’t be having that much stick - I think I’ve suffered enough. I just want them to let me get on with my life but some people are reluctant to let me do it.”

It is not uncommon for people in Wales to attack their fellow compatriots if they become successful. While this was made light of in books like The Xenophobe’s Guide to the Welsh (Winterson-Richards, 2008), it is a serious problem for anyone with aspirations to make it in their homeland. One may link it to the “politics of envy” where local socialist parties get elected among the more disadvantaged through adopting rhetoric that all capitalists are privileged and greedy, which resonates with people unable to take advantage of the free market to get out of poverty, or be attacked if they try. The aforementioned book (Winterson-Richards, 2008) makes it clear, even humourously that those from Wales most likely to be successful and thinking favourably about Wales and its people are those Welsh people who do not live there.

Figure 1. Transgressive humour about Welsh coal miners on Yahoo!Answers

![Resolved Question](image)

**The Bridgend Suicides?**

I know the majority of them happened a little while ago now, but now another young teen has been found hanged…

Anyone want to share some thoughts/theories?

Are the media totally blowing it out of proportion or do you think something major is happening here that the police just can’t seem to reach?

4 years ago

![Best Answer](image)

Best Answer - Chosen by Asker

The media are just doing their job…and that’s reporting. I don’t know why so many young people are killing themselves in that area. Maybe it’s like that film where everyone commits suicide because of some virus in the air lol

Edit: The film’s called ‘The Happening’ btw

4 years ago

Asker’s Rating: ****
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Message Boards (4chan)

The Website 4chan (www.4chan.org) is built around a message board format where users are asked to anonymously submit abusive images and others for comment by others as a kind of anti-social empathy platform. Known as a ‘clubhouse’, where its users conduct and then post their flame trolling abuses, they produced some of their worst following the death of pop star Michael Jackson, where emotional discussions were the norm on the Website (Schweitzer & Garcia, 2010). In terms of coal mining and people from Wales in general, many of the posts were derogatory. As can be seen from Figure 5, the reactions to the Bridgend suicides discussed in the last section could be considered insensitive at least.

The newspaper coverage following these suicides created a sense that society was damaged and the community where they occurred, Bridgend, was portrayed in a sinister way (as Figure 3). For instance in one edition of the Wales on Sunday, it was described as a “dark and frightening place associated with a spate of teenage suicides.” Mass panic emerged in the media and stories emerged with parents calling for social networking Websites to be shut down because they encourage suicide, such as a mother from Swansea called Claire Jones, according to an edition of the South Wales Evening Post. With these two presentations of the Bridgend suicides it can be seen that the shock and awe around the suicide is replicated in the current representations of Internet trolling, where it is seen as a social ill that someone must
be responsible for. In other instances on 4chan those countries reliant on coal or formerly reliant on coal like Wales were portrayed as being ‘backwards’ and Welsh people were treated less favourably. This one thread shown in Figure 6 continued the constant discrimination against the Welsh who are often told by others, “Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief” (Thomas, 1997).

Transgressive humour like this often causes public controversies, and such recurring events in media democracies, play out social divides through a dramatisation of moral and political rifts (Kuipers, 2011). The example in Figure 6 is a perfect depiction of what is called ‘meta-communication’ and serves as a way to force the creation of sub-cultures where some users of a Website may feel like an outcast. It is presented as a kudos troll that complements a group, in this case saying that Welsh people are the best, whilst actually being a flame trolling presented ‘good’ Welsh people as criminals. It can therefore be seen that flame trolling can be subtle enough to convey the positive messages in signalling theory whilst actually having a more disingenuous outcome (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011).

Trollers rooted deep in meta-communicative signalling are often what are known as ‘Poe trolls’ and ‘Concern trollers’. Concern trolling post kudos in support of the opinion of the mainstream whilst having concerns that support their actual point of view (Goode, 2010). Trolling of this kind, particularly if it is entertaining is difficult to identify as transgressive humour due to it looking more like those messages seen in signalling
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Equally, Poe Trollers take on the persona of someone whose point of view they disagree with and argue it in such a way to discredit it. They are so named after Nathan Poe who created ‘Poe’s law’ which says that one cannot tell the difference between a genuine supporter of a religious point of view who is extreme and these figures of parody without the use of ‘emoticons’ to let people know they are trolling.

Newsletters and Discussion Lists (Google Groups)

Newsletters and Discussion Lists are quite similar and have a shared background. Once it was very common for Websites to keep users up-to-date with what was going on in the online community by sending them emails with summaries of activities. Because of how the email was once popular,
discussion lists came about where people would send emails to an email address which then sends that email out to a number of other email addresses registered on the server. Both these have spawned a degree of flame trolling where with the immediacy of email, people can post abusive replies as soon as they receive it. The most popular was at one point Usenet, but with the advent of the Web-based eGroups, later taken over by Yahoo! the accessibility of this platform improved.

Today it is possible to access these Usenet groups from Google, and this section will now look at some of the representations of Wales in them. As can be seen in Figure 7, the flame troller on this thread is trying to make light of the fact that many Welsh people are on low wages and are having to work hard to obtain them. This type of transgressive humour can cause self-esteem issues, as people are likely to feel a lack of worth and importance essential to motivation (Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006).

In the picture in Figure 8 it is possible to see that on Usenet especially, not all narratives are of an abusive nature, especially to the Welsh. The poster in this cases identifies with the plight of the miners who died at Gleision Colliery after their memorial pages were ransacked by flame trollers. This is an emerging response to transgressive humour, where users of the Internet do not always see it as a justifiable form of participation but seek fair and responsible interactions.

TOWARDS A TROLLING MAGNITUDE SCALE FOR UNDERSTANDING INTERNET TROLLING

It has been found that it is possible to classify trolling into different severities based on the amount of effort it takes to enact a particular form of trolling (Bishop, 2012c). This uses classifications of Internet trolling from established literature (Jansen & James, 1995; Jansen & James, 2002). A modification of this framework from Bishop (2012c) is presented in Table 2. Added to it are two additional elements – trolling magnitude and at-risk-genres. The former is a rating system that uses the severity of trolling as a numerical value between 1 and 4. A trolling incident that happens in the moment will be around a trolling magnitude (TM) of 1 and an incident that requires a lot of planning and creation will have a TM of around 4.

As can be seen from Table 3, these severities are linked to the specific genres discussed earlier. Chat Groups and Instant Messaging are more likely to be at risk of Playtime trolling (between 1 and 1.99) where the immediacy of the situation takes over due to low involvement and medium to high flow. Weblogs and Directories are most at risk of Tactical trolling (between 2 and 2.99) where users will need to put some thought into writing an extensive article, sometimes up to 500 words. People wanting to comment may be required to register to post, reducing the immediacy of their
posts. Blogging can be seen as a ‘thought dump’ for ideas, and platforms like Yahoo!Answers allow people to give their non-expert opinion for the person asking the question to decide the merits of it, even if it is not accurate. Such platforms may offend Big Men and Iconoclasts, but be very welcoming to Flirts and MHBFY Jennies.

Wikis and Hypertext Fiction are most likely to attract Strategic trolling (between 3 and 3.99), where the user has to make an effort to get the content onto the Website, meaning they will have to scheme to get offensive content adopted without others noticing, or by teaming up with others of the same worldview. This can include involving others in ‘owning’ a page on Wikipedia so only the content one wants on there is permitted by those who edit it and monitor it. If someone tries to change it, then by being part of a team with others one can ensure the page is not changed. The people most adept at this are the E-Vengers who are motivated to get back at someone, the Big Men who will go to great lengths to ‘enforce’ their opinion, and the Iconoclasts who will try to ensure a particular worldview is not represented.

Finally, Personal homepages are most likely to be used for Domination trolling (between 4.0 and 4.99), where users have to go to huge efforts to make their abusive content available. Whether this involves setting up a Facebook Group using a fake account linked to a fake email, or using a dedicated Website to target a particular person, one needs to go out of one’s way to do this type
of trolling. Most notoriously, Sean Duffy created a video called ‘Tasha the Tank Engine’ to mock the death of teenager Natasha MacBryde, who died in a railway tragedy. This type of trolling is suited to E-Vengers, Chatroom bobs and Snerts, who will make the effort as part of a long term campaign against their target, who need not have wronged them other than by being more successful than them.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Media Studies as a discipline has a lot to offer the study of new media cultures and societies. Concepts such as genre and character theories, as has been shown in this chapter, can go some way to explain what appears to be new phenomena, when in fact traditional understandings of media-text can apply. Multimedia Studies as a discipline, therefore, needs to extend the use of media theory to capture the online world with frameworks as applicable to new media, as they were with old media. The genre and character theories used in this chapter have shown that Internet trolling has some common features, but also raises new questions. These include whether the nature of trolling requires that new types of Web-based community need to be developed, which are not prone to trolling. From this the question will be asked whether such a platform is a new genre, or falls within pre-existing ones.
Trolling for the Lulz?

Table 3. A Framework for identifying severities of trolling using Trolling Magnitude (TM)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TM</th>
<th>Trolling type</th>
<th>Severity</th>
<th>Flow/Involvement</th>
<th>At Risk Genres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0-1.49</td>
<td>Playtime</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>High Flow/Low Involvement</td>
<td>Chat Groups and Instant Messaging, Email lists and Newsletters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5-1.99</td>
<td></td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Med Flow/Low Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0-2.49</td>
<td>Tactical</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Med Flow/High Involvement</td>
<td>Weblogs and Directories, Message Boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-2.99</td>
<td></td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>High Flow / High Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-3.49</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>High Flow, Med Involvement</td>
<td>Wikis and Hypertext Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5-3.99</td>
<td></td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>High Flow, Med Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0-4.49</td>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Low Flow, Med Involvement</td>
<td>Personal Homepages, Virtual Worlds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5-4.99</td>
<td></td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Low Flow, High Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

While ‘trolling’ has existed as a term since the 1990s to reflect provocative messages, there has been an exponential increase in the term being used to describe abusive behaviour online in the 2010s. Trolling has therefore come to mean anything from the intentional bullying of others, to the posting of transgressive media for humorous effect, often with the hope it will ‘go viral’.

The paper looked at the different representations of transgressive humour in different genres of online communities, by focusing on depictions of people in Wales and their heritage of coal mining. The types of troller that use these different genres were also assessed. The paper found that much humour replicates that in the real world, such as references to sheep, ‘Taffy the Thief’ and low skilled jobs. References to tragic deaths of Welsh people were mixed, with Websites like 4chan mocking Welsh people who died, while Usenet groups were being more sympathetic.

The paper reassessed the description of Twitter as a microblogging platform, as unlike Weblogs anyone can start a topic on anything directed at anyone. This suggests that Twitter now fits into the chat group and instant messaging genre more than microblogging. The implications of social media for celebrities such as Welsh footballer Ryan Giggs, and another Welsh celebrity, Imogen Thomas, who it was alleged slept with him, is that it is going to be hard to escape into a secure place of privacy as in the past, as they will be hit by flame trollers from all angles.

In the media, including the media in Wales, it is often the case that trolling and so-called “trolls” are often presented in the same light as the moral panics around the tragedies they are focusing on. For instance the Bridgend teenage suicide catastrophes were presented as a sign of a failing society. The same theme of a society out of control was used for the trollers who reported to either encourage suicide or posted jibes about the victims and Welsh people in general. Moral panics, like that seen around trolling and teenage suicides seem to be inevitable, whatever ‘social ill’ is most common at the time.

Finally, the paper presents a ‘trolling magnitude scale’ for assessing the severity of trolling so that following the demise of the moral panic around ‘trolls,’ it will be possible to fairly assess which
acts of flame trolling are most harmful and which are not. By combining the online community genre theory with research on flow and involvement, a framework is constructed so that it is possible to see which online community platforms are most at risk of certain types and severities of trolling.

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**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Genre:** A media studies concept that involves the systematic analysis of a media-text to explain its properties so that it is possible to distinguish it from other media texts.

**Lurker:** A user of an online community that does not participate in the posting of content to that Website.

**Online Community:** A type of virtual community that is enabled through Internet technologies.

**Trolling:** The posting of content to the Internet, such as online communities or Web-based communities, which is intended to be provocative or offensive.

**Virtual Community:** A community where those that form part of it exist in different localities (i.e. virtual communities).

**Web-Based Community:** A particular genre of online community that is based around a hypertext approach to the Internet.