

Are the trolls winning?

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Guest blogger **Wendy M. Grossman** finds that it's hard for parents and teachers to guide children to avoid bullying (online and off) when so many adults behave so visibly so badly. She takes a closer look at bad behaviour online, and how to avoid 'feeding' the trolls while maintaining 'freedom of speech'. Wendy writes about the border wars between cyberspace and real life. She is the 2013 winner of the **Enigma Award** and she has **released** a number of books, articles, and music. [Header image credit: D. Foster, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]

Are the trolls winning? Is it impossible to have civilised speech on the internet? The most recent incident to fuel this debate is the widely reported departure of Ellen Pao from the CEO's job at the discussion platform **Reddit** after eight contention-filled months during which, among other things, she canned some of the site's most hate-filled subsections ('subreddits') to angry cries of censorship. The result, as in so many **prior cases**, was torrents of abuse in all directions.

Usenet newsgroups, the social media of the early 1990s, were **known for trolling and flame wars**. Like today's social media, most users were traceable, but some hid behind unrevealing email addresses. Then, as now, that anonymity was often more apparent than real. Then, as now, online interactions made visible levels of hostility rarely shown in daily physical life.

Getting away with bad behaviour online

To the best of my knowledge, **Sara Kiesler** was the first to study online communications. In **Connections: New ways of working in the networked organization**, she, and co-author Lee Sproull, analysed the indirect effects of using email and newsgroups for internal communications. Given their focus, anonymity wasn't an issue. But the factors they did find driving bad behaviour still apply: the apparently ephemeral nature of messages, reduced self-consciousness and audience awareness, and the distancing effect of a medium whose remote interactions are experienced in solitude. They also note the equalising effect of the loss of status cues, which persists today despite the replacement of traditional cues such as dress, position at a table, or office size with numbers of followers and 'likes'.



Greatly amplified now are scale and speed: social media have democratised the global-scale nastiness formerly limited to tabloid newspapers. As Jon Ronson writes in his recent book, *So you've been publicly shamed*, a woman posting an ill-judged joke while boarding a plane can become a vector for global outrage and find herself fired on landing. The butts of these exercises, as Ronson learns in interviews, remain traumatised years afterwards. And, as many who have outed someone else's bad behaviour have experienced, the pack may turn on the source (especially when the source is female and/or non-white).

The WELL
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After standing down, Pao argued in the *Washington Post* that the trolls are winning, a theme taken up by long-time online community participant *Elizabeth Weise in USA Today* (in 1996, with Lynn Cherny, Weise edited the book *Wired women*). Weise's article argues that anonymity is the most significant driver of bad online behaviour, and cites The WELL, where everyone's identity is verified when joining, as a counter-example. Flaming behaviour takes place on The WELL as elsewhere, but it's true that the worst – stalking, bullying, death and rape threats – aren't really an issue.

Scale is likely a factor: in a small town you may despise some people but you're stuck with them. On a system like The WELL, which dates to when the people you knew online rarely intersected with the people you knew offline, organisation by topics means that you experience other users in many different contexts: it changes your view of someone's obnoxious attitude in one area when you see it balanced by their despair about their sick child in another. Today's social media are far more aimed at enabling people to socialise online with people they already know, even if only slightly, and the context of interactions is more limited.

'Don't feed the trolls'

That, in and of itself, doesn't provide extra safety. The in-depth case studies in Danielle Citron's book *Hate crimes in cyberspace* show that often the very worst behaviour is instigated by people who already know the targets. In all the cases she cites – and in most others – these are women, usually young women. Citron, a law professor, proposes enforcing existing laws, such as those against harassment, stalking and threats, and changing the legal regime of liability for service providers.

Lawrence Lessig's often-cited *Code, and other laws of cyberspace* lists several ways to control online behaviour: computer code, laws and social norms.

Jon Ronson's primary suggestion is to change social norms: don't pile on in these pack attacks. This idea also has a long history; see, for example, Gene Spafford's early 1990s *rules for posting to Usenet* and *Tim O'Reilly's 2007 draft code of conduct for the blogosphere*.

Throughout online history two things are known to work to control bad behaviour in a single space: the persistent presence of tough but fair moderators, and a firmly enforced policing of ignoring – not feeding – the trolls. Today, however, where a determined troll can switch sites and media to pursue the same victim, neither is so easily done.

It's hard for parents and teachers to guide children to avoid bullying (online and off) when so many adults behave so visibly so badly.

Safety advice

Some good advice and guidelines come from the US lawyer *Frederick S. Lane*, whose book *Cybertraps for the young* discusses in depth the kinds of troubles children can get into online, and proposes effective controls. Another good resource for safety tips (obligatory disclosure: I helped



edit this book) is security expert Linda McCarthy's [Digital drama: Staying safe while being social online](#).

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