

# Trolls (oops, I mean “Conversation Hackers”) | Idiotprogrammer

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(<http://www.imaginaryplanet.net/weblogs/idiotprogrammer/2010/01/trolls-oops-i-mean-conversation-hackers/>) · by Robert Nagle

Here’s a reason I can’t resist blogging. I have lots of browser windows open and it’s easier to record them on my blog instead of other mechanisms (delicious, etc).

Olivier Morin on people who troll on websites and why they do it

([http://www.cognitionandculture.net/index.php?id=559:conversation-hackers-trolls-argumentation&Itemid=34&view=article&catid=32:oliviers-blog&option=com\\_content](http://www.cognitionandculture.net/index.php?id=559:conversation-hackers-trolls-argumentation&Itemid=34&view=article&catid=32:oliviers-blog&option=com_content)). A long fascinating read.

We suggest, instead, that peace could be made between Trolls and other humans. Conversation hackers are useful. Like other hackers, they test the boundaries of a system, and they force users to devise better systems. They strain human argumentation to its limits. Dealing with Trolls forces you to sharpen your arguments and keep a cool head. Sometimes you might even learn something from a Troll. Socrates was maddening, but he helped make some concepts clearer. And all these Greek and Chinese philosophers/sophists forced their interlocutors to revise the usual rules of argumentation and make them much more specific. Some modern logic was born from these efforts.

There is another reason to make peace with Trolls: they are much less alien than we'd like to think. Everyone has their inner Troll ; everyone has their urges to argue pointlessly with people they know they won't convince. Anti-Troll norms might keep our inner Trolls in check. But they might also foster a spirit of intolerance for other people's pig-headedness, and encourage us to deny our own trolling proclivities. Anti-Troll brigades are full of Trolls, Anti-Trolling being one of their best weapons. On the other hand, experienced Trolls gone to the bright side are better than most people at guiding arguments in interesting directions – which is why they often become newsgroup moderators. As usual, a system's hacker is often the best expert in the security of that system. Knowing that pig-headed discussions will never disappear from this world, there is sense in preferring to deal with proud and savvy Trolls, instead of clumsy, insecure and aggressive pig-heads. To quote our informant again: *“those who do not know about trolling troll unconsciously”*. One might want to chose the conscious version.

(I thought the section about the Flat Earth Society was hilarious. See also Mattathias Schwartz's fascinating article about trolling on 4chan ([http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)) which defines lulz for me:

“Lulz’ is how trolls keep score. A corruption of “LOL” or “laugh out loud,” “lulz” means the joy of disrupting another’s emotional equilibrium. “Lulz is watching someone lose their mind at their computer 2,000 miles away while you chat with friends and laugh...”

This may be an example of unconscious trolling, but a number of people send me articles about global warming which involve recycling of the usual half-truths. The trick is identifying key parts of the argument (trolling or nontrolling) and then responding with a “Rebuttal to End all Rebuttals” URL. For me, skeptical science has a page called Skeptic Arguments and what the Science Says

(<http://www.skepticalscience.com/argument.php>) . It's a brilliant page and one of my favorites on the Internet. Each argument is listed, rebutted and given a discussion forum where passionate people can battle over the details. The page is maintained by John Cook in Australia, and it has saved my butt and countless hours trying to look things up. Thank you, Mr. Cook!

Surely, the discussion page is not the last page on the subject (although it can say an awful lot). But when you send the URL to your friend or relative, you have shown your friend that the argument/fallacy is so familiar and well-known that it is not a fresh argument. It saves me the trouble of having to get into the nitty gritty details every time a denialist a curve ball (Is Antarctica losing ice? (<http://www.skepticalscience.com/antarctica-gaining-ice.htm>)) . When I respond, I usually just respond with a simple URL, as though it were an urban legend like the myth that underarm deodorant causes breast cancer (<http://urbanlegends.about.com/cs/healthmedical/a/antiperspirants.htm>) . You then divert the troll away towards an article towards an external source with the manpower and expertise to quarantine it.

The key move is giving a response which requires less effort than the effort required to make the original post. (Sometimes I have to restrain myself; it's particularly hard on Facebook). One nice thing about being an Internet blogger that over time you get around to blogging on just about any subject under the sun. (Just you wait, Classical Egyptology scholars; my post on that subject is in the works!) After you have blogged about something definitely, it is definitely nice being able to respond with a definitive article I already wrote about a topic. (Some examples: Anti-abortionism is easy; why not have a position requiring true moral courage?

(<http://www.imaginaryplanet.net/weblogs/idiotprogrammer/2009/05/anti-abortionism-is-easy-why-not-have-a-opinion-requiring-real-moral-courage/>) and Health care: answering the libertarian argument (<http://www.imaginaryplanet.net/weblogs/idiotprogrammer/2009/09/health-care-reform-and-medical-bankruptcy-answering-the-libertarian-argument/>)).

I really have to force myself to avoid troll-friendly threads. I once wrote on a mailing list, and it quickly became apparent that one person was pulling the discussions down; he did have a few points to make (I'll grant him that), but he insisted on having the last word about everything. Eventually I realized that he was arguing for the sake of arguing, not because he really hoped to change minds.

Sometimes it can be useful to go through an entire thread –especially if people are sharing experiences or making recommendations rather than simply trying to refute what the previous commenter said.

I face a challenge with regard to this blog. 99% of comments on my blog are honest and constructive, but occasionally someone will visit and dump some long thing on a related topic. The problem is that I may not be prepared to defend the original article against the criticisms of the commenter. I've published some anti-TARP articles over the last year, and on one such occasion, I received some articulate and long-winded argument for something preposterous (I don't know; the gold standard? I don't remember). Hey, I just blogged about the article; I shouldn't have to defend every aspect of it! On the other hand, if I leave the comment unanswered, it implies that I am agreeing with it. (Perhaps that is a reason I am secretly glad that more people are not reading this blog!). As a blogger, I am prepared to defend the main argument of an argument, but not every single point of it. Time simply does not permit this.

Finally I wanted to draw a parallel between trolling and legal negotiations. When two sides have a battle over a lawsuit, often it boils down to which side can bleed the other side dry of financial resources and give them an incentive to settle. In legal battles, "trolling" can be a very effective negotiating tactic – especially if it brings the other side to expend significant resources in having to respond. You can certainly cross a line with this, but in legal disputes it is important to conserve finances and minimize the overall legal costs for having to pursue your rights. Lawyer time is expensive, and so each side has to be careful not to incur higher legal bills to rebut trivial points. Lawyers know that time spent on argument is expensive.

**Jan 14 2010 Update.** Wow, Morin really outdoes himself. Here's his comment about troll irony:

There is something about trolling that I find tremendously relevant to pragmatics on the web: trolls' intricate use of irony. As Milo Price points out, trolling can be extremely diffuse and lacking in aggressivity, sometimes to the point of being undetectable – just like Socratic irony. Trolls have a distinctly ironic argumentative style. What does that tell us about pragmatics on the web?

From a pragmatic standpoint, irony is essentially allusive and multilayered (you basically allude to something you or someone else might have in mind). That is why irony typically requires a rich shared background if it is to work at all. For example, a sentence like 'your boyfriend has a nice new haircut' can be ironic if told to someone whose boyfriend is completely bald, by someone who knows that. Common knowledge of what makes the sentence ironic is essential. But some forms of irony are more multilayered than others. Note that the more multilayered the irony, the more common knowledge you need to make sense of it. Troll jokes, like the French 'mer il est fou' ("but he's mad") are typically ironic to the 3d or 4th degree.

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Such heavily multilayered jokes require a rich shared communicative background to be made sense of. True, Trolls use them once in a while to make fun of disoriented victims who just don't grasp the irony (this is part of what makes 'everything is serious on the internet' funny). But they are also popular among non-trolls in communities like 4chan, where they work like shibboleths.

Troll irony, as I see it, is richer and requires more pragmatic skills than most instances of irony. This belies the common picture of cyberspace as the realm of conversational pathology. Sick arguments do occur on the web, but they also occur around dinner tables, at any bar's counter, at coffee breaks, etc. I remember reading, from a sociolinguist, the record of a live conversation between two people, A and B; A argued that the Chinese cannot smash at ping-pong. B disagreed and asked for reasons. Well, A replied, the Chinese don't know how to hold a racket. Then what, B enquired, would the right way of holding a racket be, given that some of the world's best ping-pong players go for the 'wrong' way? There is no right answer, A replied, because table tennis is not a real sport anyways. The discussion then proceeded to sink in the quagmire of 'Let's define sport'.

The big difference between these conversations and those that take place on the web is that they will, most of the time, go unrecorded. We often take part in such silly conversations, we just didn't realize it until chats could be written down.