

Sexual Abuse, Misogyny and Hooliganism: The Perverse Logics of Troll Networks

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Abstract

Social media has been witnessing a spate of unacceptable, violating and criminal behaviours. Troll networks have been misusing Facebook and Twitter, the popular networking sites, as sites of vigilantism and mob justice. Individuals and troll armies have been unleashing terror and severe abuse on women with dissenting political opinion or questioning the patriarchal or religious order. Verbal and visual offensives targeting women's bodies, sexualities and identities have become routine. Body shaming, revenge porn, sexting and threats of sexual violence, rape and murder threats that reeks of entrenched misogyny and sexism are harming women and online safety is emerging as a major concern.

This paper analyses few specific cases of gendered online abuse to understand the nature of trolling - abuse, attacks and character assassination. The paper aims at identifying the *modus operandi* of troll armies and the strategies employed by women to counter the trolls and report the criminal behaviours. Further, the paper tries to trace the structure, support mechanisms and political leanings of the organized trolls. The paper also looks at the intervention of social media in situations of online abuse.

Keywords: Online Abuse, Trolling, Misogyny, Sexual Violence, Vigilantism

Introduction

Trolling is a public misconduct in online communities involving abuse intended at intimidation and defamation of the target. Trolling can harm the personal, professional and public environment of the abused and, at times, affect their psychological health and wellbeing. The anonymity, or rather the virtual existence, of the trolls through interactive interfaces like comments and user-generated contents like memes in a largely de/unregulated networking environments, coupled with inadequate legal provisions to tackle troll crimes, have bolstered the troll operations.

Identifying the origins of trolling, Scholar Vincent Miller (2016) notes:

In its original incarnation, trolling referred to the use of interactive features of The Web, such as comments facilities and forums to create disruption and conflict. However, the recent popularisation of the term 'troll' has meant that the term is now used very loosely to describe any form

of *serial abusive or anti-social behavior on-line* [emphasis mine] and tends to occur anywhere on-line content or opinions are posted: social networking sites, on-line forums of all descriptions, chat groups and blogs. 'Trolling' as a term now encompasses behaviours such as 'flaming' and 'cyberbullying'.

Debates on trolling attribute the negative behavior to anonymity of the trolls. Miller, on the contrary, argues that the tone of life within digital culture will not alter with lifting the anonymity. He quotes three reasons for it:

First, this assumes that people are inherently malicious and that only the threat of being held accountable for one's actions is the reason people are not malicious all the time. Secondly, it ignores the fact that there are plenty of anonymous environments where people are very civil. For example, e-Bay, is an environment where anonymity is necessary, yet it is also an extremely civil and kind on-line environment.

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Thirdly, it is blind to the fact that there are plenty of anonymous on-line environments where anti-social or aggressive behaviour occurs. For example, many cyberbullying studies demonstrate that the perpetrator is known to the victim 40–50 per cent of the time (Tokunaga, 2010). Social networking sites (notwithstanding purposely created false identities) are anonymous environments, as are text messages. Such logic suggests that there is a need to introduce alternative theoretical accounts of how technologically mediated presence may affect ethical social conduct.

Internet studies scholar Whitney Phillips articulates that trolling arose in the 1990s and is defined by disrupting a conversation or entire community by posting incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board ... for [the troll's] own amusement, or because he or she was a genuinely quarrelsome, abrasive personality. Further, she explains that trolls engage in such behaviour to amass “lulz” (derived phonetically from LOL, meaning laugh out loud) - an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s).

Gender trolling – A Crime Against Women

Gender trolling is distinct from other generic forms of trolling in that it targets particularly women and is essentially a blatant patriarchal offensive to patrol women's bodies, sexualities, identities and boundaries. Gender trolling is an online manifestation of the prevailing sexual violence, misogyny and male domination but aggressively defies the norms of public conduct and decency. It is a *digital avatar* of moral policing, vigilantism and mob justice, which aims at disciplining women into the dominant male hegemonic discourse. Obviously, the powerful and opinionated women, iconoclastic women and feminists receive the wrath of these trolls. The gender trolls often predate on women journalists, politicians, feminists, film and sports celebrities, writers and poets. However, trolling is common and women of all walks of life are vulnerable to attacks. The difference remains with the orchestrated trolling being far greater on the dissenting voices.

In this paper, I propose that gender trolling, unlike the generic troll, is a *‘rhetoric of abuse and obscenity’* that demeans women's bodies and personhood. Second, through the study of gender trolling, I argue that there are organized troll brigades that “champion” the cause of gender trolling through authentic person-identified accounts or fabricated accounts in social networking sites. Third, the gender trolls are predominantly male. Fourth, the organized trolls in vernacular are extremely vulgar. Lastly, the organized gender troll networks become echo chambers validating one another and reinforcing trolls through multiple networks and users.

The nature of gendered abuse in these trolls range from

name-calling, sexual abuse, body shaming, hate-speech, doxing (posting the targets personal details like phone numbers, email ids and address), flak and identity theft, revenge porn, sexting to threats of sexual violence, rape and murder. F-words and cuss words are the primary vocabulary. ‘Slut’, ‘bitch’, ‘prestitute’, ‘whore’, ‘prostitute’, ‘cunt’ etc. form the normal language of the trolls.

Scholar Karla Mantilla (2013) identifies the distinct features of gender trolling as:

- **The participation, often coordinated, of numerous people** – a concerted or coordinated effort on the part of many trolls, often in the dozens or even hundreds, who overwhelm the victim with the sheer quantity of attacks, sometimes numbering hundreds per hour for a sustained period.
- **Gender-based insults** - including the widespread use of pejorative terms that are leveled particularly at women—“cunt,” “whore,” “slut”—and comments designed to insult and humiliate women, especially in regard to their weight and physical appearance.
- **Vicious language** - vicious and vile language and intent that can best be described as “hate,”
- **Credible threats** - a significant and credible component of threat: rape threats, death threats, threats of torture, “doxing” (revealing the offline identity of a person's online presence), or posting targets' home or work addresses and encouraging others to menace or threaten them with loss of their job or their physical safety.
- **Unusual intensity, scope, and longevity of attacks** - tends to persist over a long time span; Gender trolls proactively and relentlessly pursue their targets across various online sites and even into actual life, and they also often pursue victims' supporters and friends for additional targeting. Crashing victims' websites.
- **Reaction to women speaking out** - it nearly always occurs in response to women speaking out about some form of sexism.

The Swear-Brigade of India

In general, scholars analyzing trolls have identified three kinds of trolling – individual, organized and state-sponsored, but in the Indian context, both the organized and state-sponsored kinds broadly collapse into single category. The ruling dispensation with its fundamentalist ideology is in enrolling and promoting organized troll networks to carry out rightist offensive on dissenters scuttling the freedom of expression and democracy. Women expressing nonconformist opinion as well as asserting women's rights and resisting the retrogressive attitudes against women become major targets of abusive trolls. Apparently, women's rights activism becomes a severe target for ugly backlashes. Many a times, it has transcended from being an online safety issue to endangering offline safety. Gender trolling

has emerged as a global concern. This discussion takes up a few cases of gendertrolling in order to locate the nature and *modus operandi* of the organized trolls.

On 5 Sept 2017, Senior Journalist and Editor of *Gauri Lankesh* magazine, Gauri Lankesh was shot dead after many online and offline threats. Till her death, the rightist troll brigade hounded her with vicious attacks for her relentless tirade against the communal forces in the tabloid, for her active role in anti-communal fronts and for her vocal support for women's cause. Worse still, the trolls went on to celebrate her death. For instance, Nikhil Dadich, a business man and garments manufacturer and a Hindu nationalist tweeted in Hindi that a b**** had died a dog's death and all the pups were bawling. Prime Minister Modi was accused of following such trolls in his twitter account prompting the protest #BlockNarendraModi.

Following her death, there was a facebook post that named five prominent women - Sagarika Ghose, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Kavita Krishnan and Shehla Rashid – as anti-national and should be assassinated like Gauri Lankesh. Activists Kavita Krishnan and Shehla Rashid get trolled almost every day. The trolls went to the extent of threatening Journalist Sagarika that her school-going daughter will be raped. Veteran journalist Barkha Dutt was trolled after she penned a book *This Unquiet Land: Stories from India's Fault Lines*. She participated in the anti-trolling day – a *Hindustan Times* campaign #LetsTalkAboutTrolls and the trolls responded with a counter campaign attacking her all the more. In fact, Harry Stevens and Piyush Aggarwal launched an anti-troll campaign at *Hindustan Times* tracking a week's tweets of four prominent women journalists. Barkha Dutt received 3,020 tweets followed by Rana Ayyub, the author of *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up*, with 2580 tweets.

A PEN international survey that interviewed 23 women journalists in television channels in India found that all of them were trolled. Editor Dhanya Rajendran of *The News Minute* received over 30,000 troll tweets with the hashtag #PublicityBeepDhanya when she commented on a popular South Indian actor Vijay's film. All these data only establish that women journalists are prone to trolling.

Providing an incisive account of the troll operations in India, Swati Chaturvedi (2016) in her book *I am a Troll* observes that there is a clear link between the BJP and trolls and the BJP's IT cell at 11, Ashoka Road controls much of the online trolling. In her interviews with Sadhvi Khosla, who coordinated the BJP troll network and quit from it, she establishes that the troll volunteers and employees were given a hit list of journalists, including Barkha Dutt and that unfavourable mention of Modi ji anywhere would be picked up by digital tracking tools and trolls would descend into their course.

In her revelations on Barkha troll episodes, Khosla shares, "I simply could not follow Gupta's (BJP social media official) directions any more when I saw rape threats being made against female journalist like Barkha Dutt, who had been my idol when I was a kid. I had even copied her hairstyle in school. And here we were supposed to attack her in filthy terms. Every day some new person was a target and they would attack like a swarm of bees with vile sexual innuendoes, slander, rape and death threats."

The attacks on Journalist Rana Ayyub is a demonstrative case of a premeditated hate campaign. She was stormed with rape threats, gang rape threats after being falsely quoted (in a tweet on 20 April 2018) that she was supporting child rapists on the pretext that Muslims were no longer safe in India. Her phone number and residential address was posted online. A porn video superimposing her head on an actress was sent to her parents, friends and relatives. The attacks became exceedingly virulent and the United Nations had to intervene seeking the Indian government to provide safety. Lakshmi Subramaniam, journalist of *The Week* magazine, became a bait to the trolls after criticising the condescending behavior of Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit (of BJP party) in patting her cheek when she asked a question in a press meet. Commenting on this, another BJP leader S.Ve. Sekar, wrote on his fb post, "Illiterate scoundrels are now in media, she is not an exception to that. No one can become a reporter or news anchor without sleeping with some big shots." Her accounts were drenched with excessively vulgar and obscene comments in vernacular – Tamil language. Feminists like Kavita Krishnan, National Secretary, All India Progressive Women's Association, who have been in the forefront of the anti-rape campaigns that followed the Nirbhaya issue, has been targeted for her Leftist and feminist politics. She was in a storm of controversy after making a statement in a tv debate that 'one can only pity people who fear 'free sex' because 'un-free sex' is nothing but rape.' Swarms of rightist troll armies attacked her with filthy and obscene abuses. She was targeted for her skin colour, appearance, body... A troll invited her to join him in demonstrating free sex. Threats of rape, gangrape are "common" in her accounts. A fake Wikipedia page was created with intensely abusive narrative of her birth. When PM Modi's #SelfieWithDaughter initiative was launched, she criticized it leading to a spiral of odious attacks.

In both Lakshmi Subramaniam and Kavita Krishnan's case, the original accounts of many trolls are found to be fabricated with no profile, no photos, no friends or even posts. At times, there were photos that showed their political connections i.e., the rightist political outfits. A few only engaged in the activity of visiting the account to be attacked and posted the filth. A few others carried the filthy posts in their account too. A few had a small friends network that showed their friends had similar political affinities and were even trolls themselves exposing that

they were organized trolls. The problem is that they are emboldened as the strategies for online safety like limiting or blocking words, reporting, legal complaint are inadequate and they enjoy the overt support of the rulers.

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