

Internet Trolls: The New Sophists

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Online bullying is hardly anything new. Back in the golden age of message boards and chat forums, around the mid-to-late 1990s, it was common to receive replies or private messages that contained rude remarks, offensive language, or obscene images. Asking for help with installing a computer part? Expect at least a few sarcastic replies telling you to throw your computer out because you are an incompetent fool. It seems that so long as more than one human can access a communication space, at least one will use the opportunity to goad others into confrontation. Recently, the general public became interested in the subject of these Internet trolls and their behaviors, in large part because of Donald Trump's election as President of the United States in 2016. Millions of Internet comments that were initially thought to come from the social media accounts of genuine Trump supporters were unearthed as bots, or fake accounts that use artificial intelligence to generate and post comments (Kupferschmidt). To make matters more interesting, as the election neared, news media became aware of a wave of fake news stories being circulated primarily by Eastern European citizens, some of whom were possibly employed by the Kremlin (Shane; Woolf). A year later, America is still investigating accounts, their origins, and the extent of the Russian government's involvement. The level of deception that Internet trolls obtained in 2016 suggests that trolling is more than simply posting rude comments to garner a reaction; rather, the more it is studied, the more it becomes clear that Internet trolling is a complex, strategic course of action used to disrupt online social spaces.

Therefore, I intend to provide a preliminary exploration of Internet trolls in this paper to determine if contemporary trolling shares characteristics with the Sophist movement active during the fifth and fourth centuries in ancient Greece. This study intends to compare rhetorical techniques and group ideology to support my hypothesis that trolling is, in fact, strategic in nature and employed by individuals who could be considered what I term “The New Sophists.” Since this topic could be further explored through a wider selection of texts, or by an increased volume, I in no way claim this to be a comprehensive or exhaustive study; therefore, this paper should be viewed as a preliminary exploration as previously stated.

As with most technological jargon revolving around western Internet culture, determining an accurate definition for certain words or phrases can be a challenge. I decided to use *Urban Dictionary*’s definition because it is one of the oldest Internet sites dedicated to providing information on an exceptionally wide range of slang and colloquialisms. It is also democratic in nature, as anyone can create an account with the website to vote on the accuracy of definitions or to create their own; for example, the top-rated definition for the term “trolling” was created by user Zerotrousers in 2009 and, as of December 16, 2017, had 5,085 “upvotes,” or positive feedback ratings. This definition is as follows:

The art of deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off, usually via the internet, using dialogue. Trolling does not mean just making rude remarks: Shouting swear words at someone doesn't count as trolling; it's just flaming, and isn't funny. Spam isn't trolling either; it pisses people off, but it's lame.

The most essential part of trolling is convincing your victim that either a) truly believe in what you are saying, no matter how outrageous, or b) give your victim malicious instructions, under the guise of help.

Trolling requires deceiving [*sic*]; any trolling that doesn't involve deceiving [*sic*] someone isn't trolling at all; it's just stupid. As such, your victim must not know that you are trolling; if he does, you are an unsuccessful troll ("Trolling").

An interesting note is that trolling seems to be defined as much by what it is *not* as by what it *is*, a possible indicator of an internal structure or schema that serves as a guide for participation. The author goes on to provide a list of ways that an attempted troll could determine if their mission was successful. They explain:

Signs that your trolling is successful [*sic*]:

- *Your victim screaming in all-caps at you.
- *Personal attacks (Calling you a retard, idiot, etc).
- *Being an Internet Tough Guy.
- *Making a crude remark, before quickly logging off before you can retort.

Signs that your trolling is unsuccessful [*sic*]:

- *Your victim identifying you as a troll.
- *Identifying yourself as a troll.
- *Your efforts being ignored.
- *Being counter-trolled (Zerotrousers)

These guidelines could be used to create criteria for analyzing trolling comments for future research, but for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on each criterion's rhetorical

implications; for example, each criterion that determines success requires the rhetor to accurately gauge their audience. If a troll wanted to cause their victim to respond in all capital letters, a text-based emote that signifies the person would be shouting their words, the troll would need to first engage the victim in a manner that would attract their attention, and then they would need to press the victim to the point of rage by successfully assessing their responses to provide effective counters. This schema and set of guidelines suggests there is more to online trolling than simply leaving rude comments on social media posts; there is a sense of intentionality here.

Indeed, Zerotrouser's definition includes two examples of successful trolling scenarios that detail their respective methods: counter-trolling and trolling "to convince someone to do something stupid" ("Trolling"). Counter-trolling is typically considered the method employed by intended victims who discover they are being trolled and decide to retaliate; it is important to note that engaging in counter-trolling consequentially results in the victim becoming a new troll. This was one of the first plausible connections I made between online trolls and the Sophists, as Bizzell and Herzberg explain, the ancient philosophers "taught young people that they could improve themselves via Sophistic teaching. They did not need to defer to the wisdom of their elders or social betters—self-improvement was open to anyone who could pay for it, and anyone, no matter what his or her natural endowments, could make some progress under Sophistic teaching" (22). Counter-trolling, then, can be considered the self-improvement a victim goes through to enact revenge or counter some of the embarrassment of being victimized. Concepts like "improve" and "progress" are debatable, another trait shared between these two discourse communities.

Once I determined there were enough similarities between online trolls and the Sophists, I began researching each group's respective motivations and ideologies. In 2012, *Vice News* published a story by journalist Glen Coco that attempted to answer the question, "what is trolling?" It is a tongue-in-cheek piece that refers to itself as a "reference guide for the British media," because, according to Coco, major British news publications incorrectly labelled perpetrators of harassment or threats as trolls. He bases his analysis on the same *Urban Dictionary* definition that I use in this paper, pointing to key terms that separate trolling from other Internet behaviors like flaming which means to openly argue with a target, usually through personal insults or threats. This distinction is arguable, although Zerotrousers does state that trolling is only legitimate if it is done "for the lulz," or for the personal enjoyment of the troll. They also include "[p]ersonal attacks" on their list of signs that a troll is successful, thus implying the party that resorts to personal attacks is not, by definition, trolling ("Trolling"). Flaming would not be considered trolling, according to Zerotrousers, unless the instigator's motivation behind the flame war, or argument, was purely for entertainment. Coco suggests that no flaming can be considered trolling, however, because there is "nothing at all 'clever' or 'secret' about it" ("Why Does Nobody"). However, considering a bullying tactic clever is a subjective call that largely depends upon one's position; similarly, any victim who is spammed, meaning they are subjected to a barrage of comments or messages by one or more persons, is not the victim of trolling (Zerotrousers). This is important because more recent cyber attacks against celebrities like Leslie Jones were carried out by dozens of people acting in response to Milo Yiannopolous's directions to attack her for starring in the all-female reboot of the *Ghostbusters* franchise (Warzel). These attacks, according to Coco and Zerotrousers, are not

trolling because they qualify as a spam campaign and they were not secretive. Yiannopolous will be discussed later in this paper since he is commonly referred to as “The World’s Biggest Troll” and is a poster child of the self-described “alt-right” movement of white supremacists and neo-Nazis in the United States (Bryant). Instead, before I discuss characteristics and strategies of trolls, I will briefly summarize the ancient Greek Sophist movement and their core ideologies.

According to Bizzell and Herzberg, “[t]he Sophists were a diverse group of early philosophers who were interested in exploring all branches of knowledge. They wandered from city to city, expounding their views to those who could pay for the privilege of listening, and also committing their ideas to writing” (“The Sophist Movement” 22). Most of their writings were destroyed or left to rot, however, because other philosophers viewed Sophists as opportunistic and immoral, especially Plato. This is due to the Sophist belief in self-improvement that was not predetermined, or innate, rather something that could be developed and practiced over time. They also “believed that human knowledge relies solely on sense perception and is therefore necessarily flawed” and that “[c]ertainty or absolute truth is not available to humans, ...but probable knowledge can be refined by pitting opposing positions against one another and examining the arguments thus brought forward.” Arguing oppositions will sound familiar to some readers because it is the foundation of the United States justice system, in which attorneys argue multiple sides of a case to condemn or exonerate a defendant before a judge (Bizzell and Herzberg 22). To men like Plato, such beliefs meant that orators would be willfully lying to people and teaching others how to be better at deception, and admittedly, the Sophists did not make the strongest cases for themselves to suggest otherwise.

Gorgias, for example, explained to his listeners that “[a]ll who have and do persuade people of things do so by molding a false argument,” a statement that implicates the schools of Aristotle and Plato just as much as it does the Sophists (Gorgias 45). However, Gorgias is using a concept of deception that is not the same as our contemporary understanding; he meant that “[we] can be said to be ‘deceived’ when we are convinced of a probable truth by the power of crafted language” (Bizzell and Herzberg 23). This means that deception, in the Sophist sense, is more akin to persuasion than it is chicanery. Based on their contemporaries’ reaction to the ideology, it appears that most ancient Greeks did not accept the secondary definition, possibly due to similar negative connotations for the term. This rejection is not entirely dissimilar to the way people view online trolls who claim to carry out their actions in the name of “lulz.” If we consider the three branches of Aristotelian rhetoric, an orator engages an audience with a purpose to discuss a topic (forensic), praise/blame (epideictic), or persuade (deliberative). According to the Sophists, if audiences are “convinced” of any “probable truth” by the orator, they have been deceived; this means that all forms of rhetoric are subject to deception because this carefully crafted language “make[s] what is incredible and unclear seem true to the eyes of opinion” (Gorgias 45). Opinion is the key to understanding, as acceptance of a probable truth in this manner rejects the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of truth. Bizzell and Herzberg explain that “Plato encouraged the view that the Sophists were concerned merely with the manipulative aspects of how humans acquire knowledge—that is, with how people could be persuaded that they had learned the truth, whether or not truth was in fact conveyed” (23). Both camps believed their interpretation of truth to be correct despite such a grand concept being a social construction rooted in their individual beliefs.

The primary difference is that Sophists actively challenged the role of truth in human communication; in fact, “[the Sophists] overthrew the idea that philosophical discussion should aim to measure the actual by the ideal; they preferred to suggest possibilities—simply aiming to make people see that what has always been so does not necessarily have to continue.” Monied, property-owning citizens of ancient Greece might have been uncomfortable with social conventions or traditions being questioned, let alone with the thought of anyone, who could afford to pay a teacher, being able to learn the art of persuasion. Sophists, while not egalitarian by any means, could have posed a sufficient threat to the status quo enough to explain the contempt with which Plato and others wrote about this rival movement. Further support for this hypothesis comes from Bizzell and Herzberg’s explanation that Sophists “sought to call attention to the function of language in inducing belief...” and held that “[i]f society’s laws do not come from some godly source, then one cannot presume them to be ideally designed to suit human nature” (Bizzell and Herzberg pp. 23-24). Questioning the mechanisms of Greek politics was probably not a great way to make friends, nor would encouraging youth to hone their persuasive skills to use in their attempt to question traditions and live in the moment. This conflict between philosophical camps mirrors the current clash between Internet trolls and typical social media users, since living for the moment is the same thing as “doing it for the lulz,” and their primary purpose is to disrupt social spaces.

Furthermore, the “*Dissoi Logoi*” from roughly 400 B.C.E. contains a defense for the just nature of lying that reads like an argument that might be used by an Internet troll. The author considers the kairotic nature of their proposition while explaining the near virtue of deception:

“it is just to tell lies and to deceive. Opponents of this view might say that doing these things to one’s enemies is shameful and base; yet they would *not* say that it is shameful and base to do them to those whom one holds very dear—parents, for example. For if it were necessary that one’s father or mother should consume some medicament (whether in solid or liquid form), but he or she was unwilling, is it not just to give them the medicament in their food or in their drink and not say that it is in it?” (Anonymous 51; emphasis original)

A key tactic of online trolling is to knowingly argue from the side of the argument that will trigger the most rewarding reaction; in this case, rewarding means the amount of lulz afforded to the troll. This tactic requires the troll to quickly assess the situation surrounding the text or reply on which they intend to comment, determine which rhetorical strategies will elicit their desired response, and to further manipulate the course of the comment thread to maximize their lulz. One of the easiest ways to launch a successful troll is to comment from the perspective of the target audience’s polar ideological opposite. This is similar to playing devil’s advocate, only successful trolls will have constructed a believable character in their comment so that the audience believes the troll’s beliefs and expressions are genuine. Deception also plays a key role in successful trolling; one of the criteria listed in its definition is that “[t]rolling requires deceiving [*sic*]; any trolling that doesn't involve decieving [*sic*] someone isn't trolling at all; it's just stupid” (Zero trousers). I posit that this notion of deception is remarkably similar to the Sophist’s concept, and it provides evidence for my hypothesis that trolling is a complex, strategic course of action created using highly structured schemas. Internet trolls do not need to have any knowledge of classical rhetoric to be successful because it is possibly the

techniques that stem from deeply rooted understandings of social scripts; in other words, if we can assume that certain concepts from ancient Greek rhetoric have bled through the centuries to impact western beliefs or social scripts like morality and reason, then it is possible that people who wanted to engage in trolling developed their guidelines and principles based on theories or observations made thousands of years ago whether cognizant or not. A solid example of this theory is found in the writings of “Protagoras... [who] developed the technique of exploring possible truth via opposing arguments, or ‘*dissoi logoi*,’” an exercise that could be determined as a successful troll (Bizzell and Herzberg 23). But, before I launch into further comparison, I want to provide background on the main troll that I used as a basis for my analysis.

No public figure more accurately represents the embodiment of Internet trolling than the journalist and former Twitter personality Milo Yiannopolous. He became famous for inciting the attack on Leslie Jones through Twitter in July 2016, an act which resulted in his permanent suspension from the social media site, but he became Internet Famous in 2012 for his role in the Gamergate controversy; readers unfamiliar with Internet culture might best recognize Yiannopolous as the former senior Tech editor for *Breitbart News*. He is affectionately referred to by supporters and fans as “The World’s Biggest Troll” and most recently inspired far right and white supremacist protestors to clash with counter protestors before the intended start of UC Berkeley’s 2017 Free Speech Week. This led a journalist at *Wired* to coin the phrase, “Yiannopolous-style extreme trolling” which is dismissed by the general population as “IRL (in real life) stagings of Twitter fights” that she believes “trivializes what’s really going on” (“Milo”). Clearly the riots at UC Berkeley show Gorgias was right when he said “[t]he effect of speech

upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies” (46). In this case, Yiannopolous and other far-right figures manipulate supporters through their rhetoric to mobilize them against liberals and “snowflakes” who “can’t take a joke.” These demonstrations range from spam attacks on Twitter to protest marches, and even calculated counter-intelligence maneuvers on known troll hubs like the imageboard website *4chan* (“Can’t Take a Joke”). Trolls like Yiannopolous use the first amendment in defense of their actions, and consider themselves successful if their targets respond in any way that is not acquiescing.

This places counter protestors and critics in the position of anti-free speech or anti-first amendment, labels that currently fuel far-right political rhetoric (Goodwyn; Lind; Merelli). Due to the hyper-polarized political climate of the United States and the positioning of the first amendment as a right under liberal threat in conservative political circles, this new breed of Internet troll. By stoking the fires of anxiety under their supporters, threatening their looming, inevitable loss of rights, trolls utilize a consequence of this style of rhetoric originally observed by Gorgias where “fear extinguishes and excludes thought,” meaning this audience is mobilized by an instinctual reaction to perceived threats, fabricated or legitimate (46). This might account for the number of threats made against victims of rape, murder, and assault; far-right Internet users tend to adhere to red pill ideology, have a history of violence, and display antisocial behaviors (Donovan; Kasumovic & Kuznekoff). Additionally, a psychological study of Internet users found that “approximately 5% of Internet users who self-identified as trolls scored extremely high in the dark tetrad of personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and, especially, sadism” (Stein). These traits could explain why Internet trolls

applying pressure to the psychological stressors of their supporters tends to elicit heightened emotional responses.

Being exposed to this extreme rhetoric over long periods of time could also explain the escalation of threats and aggressive behavior exhibited by what are sometimes referred to as troll armies. It is obvious that trolls have come a long way from their days in the 80s and 90s spent tricking Internet newbies seeking help in chatrooms into shutting their computers down; it sometimes feels like benign pranks are scarce and they have been replaced by malicious campaigns, spam attacks, and doxing. A recent report in *Time* explained this shift toward bullying as what “[p]sychologists call... the online disinhibition effect, in which factors like anonymity, invisibility, a lack of authority and not communicating in real time strip away the mores society spent millennia building” (Stein). The mores to which Stein refers could be considered the social contract explained by Bizzell and Herzberg (25). If public opinion of these New Sophists heads completely south, it will mirror the condemnation and attempted erasure of the ancient Greek Sophists at the behest of Plato and his contemporaries. This is one reason why political motivation is an area that requires further research because it is unclear whether the affiliation that most currently active trolls have with the far-right political movement in the United States means they no longer qualify under the *Urban Dictionary* definition of trolling, since political motivation could be seen as superseding the accumulation of lulz. If it is determined that political trolling is distinct from traditional trolling, then similarities between the New Sophists and the ancient Greek Sophists would be more closely tied since malice is not characteristic of traditional trolling, but is a primary characteristic of political or extreme trolling.

Further similarities between Internet trolls and Sophists are their shared preference to live in the moment and their habitual residence in ethical grey areas. Sophists believed that “rather than agonizing over what is proper or improper according to unchanging social rules, people should consider their immediate circumstances and what would be expedient at the moment” (Bizzell and Herzberg 24). This aligns perfectly with the opportunistic tendencies of trolls who believe that if a chance to troll presents itself, they are obligated to act. Trolls’ justification for this behavior is that they are joking and people need to recognize trolling for what it is: a way to get lulz. This is why victims are sometimes encouraged to retaliate and counter troll, a practice that shares a philosophical link with the Sophist explanation of good and bad: “some say that what is good and what is bad are two different things, others that they are the same thing, and that the same thing is good for some but bad for others, or at one time good and at another time bad for the same person” (Anonymous 48). Sophists and trolls both believe “[t]o put the matter generally, all things are seemly well done at the right moment, but shameful when done at the wrong moment” (50). This belief places *kairos* at the center of rhetorical practice and suggests that recognizing the right moment is possibly more important than intention or action. For the Internet Age, this means that trolling memorial pages on social media should be acceptable and considered successful if the trolls are kairotic.

The ancient Sophists, however, would most likely not bombard a Facebook memorial page with crafted comments developed through *dissoi logoi*; therefore, a stark difference between ancient Sophists and Internet trolls is their level of reverence for general society. The accepted Sophist belief regarding social scripts and authority was that “it is often to people’s advantage to obey human law, even if doing so requires suppressing some natural instincts...

voluntary commitment to obey human laws in one's own ultimate self-interest." A Sophist, then, might function harmoniously within their community to avoid negative consequences or confrontation (Bizzell and Herzberg 24). Trolls, on the other hand, tend to display antisocial tendencies and actively reject community standards; they do not so much worry about fitting in as they do actively work to disrupt the space. Unfortunately for the average Internet user, trolls execute their disruptive maneuvers with intentions antithetical to Isocrates's belief that practicing rhetoric would only produce the result of, as he termed it: "the stronger a man's desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honorable and to have the esteem of his fellow-citizens" ("From Antidosis" 77). However, the Sophists acknowledged their capability of altering social scripts and explained "there need be no moral turpitude in th[eir] deception, if probable knowledge, based in our deceptive, limited sensory organism, is all humans can achieve anyway" (Bizzell and Herzberg 23). This aligns with Zerotrousers's rule that trolling is only legitimate if carried out "for the lulz" and suggests that although disruptive, trolling is ultimately intended to be innocuous ("Trolling"). As a clarifying point, the Yiannopolous-style of extreme trolling does not meet these qualifications.

In fact, although "the Sophists' ability to see many sides of an issue encouraged cultural tolerance, which would be a stabilizing factor in a diverse society," there does not appear to be any utopia of cultural exchange and harmony on the horizon for denizens of the Internet, especially as trolls continue to pursue political agendas. The New Sophists do not appear to be interested in "the possibility of communities uniting, not on grounds of a common... culture, but on grounds of a common recognition that humanity could express itself in many ways and was not subject to an absolute standard that could mark some ways for annihilation" (Bizzell

and Herzberg 25). However, victims of online trolling might find solace in Isocrates's stern message for critics of the movement. He cautions: "[i]f any one is under the impression that people who rob others or falsify accounts or do any evil thing get the advantage, he is wrong in his thinking; for none are at a greater disadvantage throughout their lives than such men; none are found in more difficult straits, none live in greater ignominy; and, in a word, none are more miserable than they" ("From Antidosis" 78). It is a possibility, and fits the parameters of what could be considered a probable truth.

Ultimately, the most extreme result of the unimpeded rise of this new brand of Internet trolling would be a total application of Poe's Law, an internet meme taken from a Creationist message board that was morphed over time into an accepted Law of the Internet. The man who first proposed the law, Nathan Poe, provided the official definition on *Urban Dictionary* as, "[n]o matter how bizzare, outrageous, or just plain idiotic a parody of a Fundamentalist may seem, there will always be someone who cannot tell that it is a parody, having seen similar REAL ideas from real religious/political Fundamentalists" ("Poe's Law"). The law is frequently employed by Internet users on imageboards and social media as a response to an ambiguous interaction with another user. An unintended consequence of extreme trolling, then could be that statements or images meant to inspire lulz actually cause psychological harm over time. Gorgias explored this possibility arising from Sophistic exercises because he believed in the power of words to transport audiences to conjured places and make spoken images become real before their eyes as the orator spoke. He suggested that "[i]n this way the sight engraves upon the mind images of things which have been seen. And many frightening impressions linger, and what lingers is exactly analogous to (what is) spoken" (Gorgias 46). This could mean

that a consequence of widespread application of Poe's Law and exposure to extreme trolling could sway a population's sociopolitical views and inspire direct action; the events of the Charlottesville protests might become a regular occurrence. This is another reason why I suggest further research delve into the connection between extreme trolling and fake news. Whether or not my New Sophist theory is adopted, the rhetorical and political implications of extreme Internet trolls should not be dismissed as merely an annoying cultural phenomenon.

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