

Yimin Chen – Internet Trolling

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Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.

Yimin Chen: I would say that I'm a lapsed troll. I'm a former troll perhaps.

Alex Mayhew: That was Yimin Chen, a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University. Today we're going to talk to him about Internet trolls, maybe not in the way you normally think about them.

I'm Alex Mayhew, also a Ph.D. student from the same faculty as Yimin. He and I have been known to exchange ideas on all sorts of things, but those are for another day. Today, it's trolls.

I started by asking Yimin why Internet trolls?

Yimin: You know there's this phenomenon that happens online and that people are getting sort of more and more aware of. It's called Internet trolling. A lot of times, when you hear it on the news or in the media it's often talked about in very negative terms, like this is online cyber bullying, this is harassment, this is just people being really nasty to each other.

And I said in my proposal that that is at odds with how I understood where the term comes from. A lot of communities see trolling as sort of much more positive, much more fun, and I would be interested in looking at where people are differing in terms of what they consider to be trolling, or what they're calling trolling, and that there could be useful policy guidelines that could come out of this.

Alex: So, I'm guessing there's a personal story behind this. After all, he describes himself as a lapsed troll.

Yimin: Near the end of my undergraduate sort of studies, I once again found myself perhaps spending more time than is healthy on the Internet. A very interesting sort of website, web community, appeared on my radar; a fascinating piece of the Internet and of sort of Internet history.

At the time I was an executive member in the school anime club, but yeah, I was really into that sort of thing. I was into videogames. And there was

lots of really interesting, fun discussions going on in certain parts of 4chan about those sorts of things. There was memes being created like every minute, a lot of in-jokes that were super funny if you know what they were talking about and like completely impenetrable if you didn't.

And it was super interesting to me to spend time with sort of like-minded, jokey kind of trolly people, right. We just sort of played around remixing media, making jokes, sometimes sarcastically at the expense of other people, but I felt like it was all in good fun.

Alex: Clearly something that changed along the way. Yimin had started to think about trolling differently.

Yimin: You know Internet trolling often involves a level of deception, right. I'm saying something ironically or sarcastically, so the sort of meaning or the intent of what I'm doing, what I'm saying is not the same as what I'm actually saying or doing, right. There are different layers of interpretation there.

I felt very strongly that I wanted to defend trolling, that, you know, people have it wrong, that people who had negative views towards trolling were not getting the joke, taking it too seriously, or just being offended over nothing. And it took me a while to sort of grow out of that style of thinking.

And a lot of it had to do with conversations with a lot of the other graduate students around here in FIMS working in different areas, working in things like media studies where they talk about, very much about sort of the power of words or actions, and of how ways of thinking or ways of behaving can have very serious consequences, you know, whether or not you're sort of "taking it too seriously" or not.

Alex: Gamergate was significant for Yimin. I asked him to tell me why.

Yimin: When you're no longer sort of immersed in that kind of culture and that sort of environment, in you know, 4chan or example, things can look very different, right? Because when you're in 4chan all the time, you look around and you see people just behaving kind of like idiots, ironically, ridiculously, just acting out, goofing off.

That becomes sort of normalized, you know. That's just what you think being on the Internet is or means or looks like. Without that sort of little echo chamber of ha, ha, ha, everyone's trolling, blah, blah, blah, you know my jokes, I know your jokes, even if you say something terrible I know it's ironic and not to take it seriously.

Gamergate was one of the I think pivotal sort of turning points in my thinking about Internet trolling and about the work I was doing. And it helped me realize that, you know, there could be very important or serious implications of how I frame my research and what I sort of ultimately say about my research, right. Because in a lot of these circumstances, a lot of

these instances, Internet trolls are engaged in some very serious, very harmful, sometimes even criminal behaviour.

And very often, as a shield they would say that, you know 'I'm just trolling. Don't take it so seriously.' You know, 'Why don't you have a sense of humour?' when they are very much just bullying people, or worse.

I didn't really want my work to support that kind of mentality. I still want to talk about the different ways that trolling is understood by different groups of people, the different ways that the term is used, and the different types of behaviours and so on that the term is applied to. I've just been made much more aware, and I want to be much more careful in what I say about that and how I draw these distinctions.

Alex: Finally, I asked Yimin, why does this matter? How can your work be applied?

Yimin: My original intention when I was applying to this Ph.D. program is still more or less what I hope to accomplish with my research, to inform sort of policy decisions and to better inform understanding of what happens on the Internet, and what types of things people do online.

One way, again, to influence policy might be better ways to recognize when certain behaviours become harmful, or what sort of contexts and what sort of situations certain behaviours become harmful, as opposed to when maybe it's okay to sort of leave them alone for them to do their own thing. Also, I think this could help inform education initiatives about sort of Internet use and interaction in general.

I guess one thing I want to say with this work is, you know in the end, a plea for people to maybe just be nicer to each other. If you're sure that your audience is going to appreciate your off-coloured joke, maybe it's okay, go ahead and tell it. Or, if you're not even thinking about whether or not your audience is going to appreciate this joke, maybe don't tell it. Like, err on the side of not being a jerk.

Alex: Well, there you have it, words to live by. Don't be a jerk.

Announcer 1: This has been another episode of So What?.

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Announcer 1: So What? is created and produced by graduate students at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University in London, Ontario.

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