INSIDE THE MIND OF AN INTERNET TROLL

What drives people to post hate speech online? BY ELLA GAUCI

I spend most of my day in a gloriously queer bubble. It is my own personal rainbow microcosm. A place that makes me feel like the world will be alright. But every day, this bubble is popped by one thing: logging on to the DIVA Facebook page.

Within seconds, I'm back down to Earth. A hateful, spiteful, homophobic Earth. I begin my daily task of removing the hate speech that was left the night before, hundreds of venom-filled comments spat with such menace that you'd think they would crack the screen. Whether it be on a post about trans rights or a relationship timeline of The L Word's #Tibette, these trolls gather to gobble up any goodness that existed in the comment section below.

These trolls are not predictable. I often do not know when they will strike. No matter how many times you block, report, delete or censor them, they come back with a vengeance. At first, I was angry. But as the months passed and their relentless tirades continued, I couldn't help thinking one thing: "Why do they do it?"

The term "internet troll" has been around since the late 1990s, but was initially confined to the corners of internet subculture. As the internet expanded, so did people's access to platforms to troll. Whitney Phillips, assistant professor of digital platforms and ethics at the University of Oregon, began looking at trolling culture on the website 4chan back in 2008. At first, her research was largely centred on trolls who were often involved in subculture inside jokes with the aim of goading journalists.

On a Reddit thread entitled "Trolls of Reddit, why do you do it?", the reasons for this playful form of trolling are vast. While some cite humour – one saying, "If it isn't funny, it isn't trolling" – others are driven by their own pursuit of fame. Many lamented that the "glory days of trolling" were over with the expansion of the internet. It became apparent as I was reading that there is a hierarchy of trolls, with its own fame system and rewards.

This form of trolling, however, is very different to the type of bigotry that we see on pages like DIVA's Facebook. For Whitney, it's important to distinguish that identity-based trolling is less about "play" or "fun" – it's about taking on a moral crusade.

Take for example Laurence Fox's online tirade against former RuPaul's Drag Race contestant Crystal, in which Laurence accused the drag queen of being a paedophile. After winning a landmark libel case, Crystal explained to Dazed the impact of this type of trolling: "It's disgusting, scary, and upsetting, but I don't think I had realised how much tension our community was holding about this. [...] It feels like a line has been drawn that this is completely unacceptable. Maybe we're never going to be able to do anything about the anonymous accounts on Twitter, but if somebody with a public profile does it, we can hold them to account."

"Hundreds of venom-filled comments spat with such menace they might crack the screen"

While Laurence's words are abhorrent, they are hardly surprising from the man who got fired from GB News for inappropriate comments. I want to find out more about these "anonymous accounts", and what might prompt an everyday person – like you or me – to start spewing hate speech.

"When you are fighting the devil it makes you feel important, and it gives your life meaning," Whitney explains. "My colleague calls it a form of dark enchantment. It makes you 'The Chosen One' of your story. When you're motivated by this idea of a moral crusade – for example, that you hate lesbians – it doesn't feel like a joke. It's coming from a place of bigotry."

While some identity-based trolling may be motivated by actual religious beliefs, as Whitney explains, the trolling itself can become a "quasi-religion" where trolls feel that their work online is for a much greater good, elevating them to a state of piety. And there's no stopping them.

"It turns it into a quasi-religious crusade," Whitney continues. "That's what makes it so difficult to push back as it's not easy to talk to them. There's almost this compulsion to call out 'evil' when you see it. When you think about the persistence of these attacks – these people are not content leaving one message and going away – it becomes an ongoing battle. That battle is an ego boost for one thing. If you are constantly fighting 'the devil', you are constantly reinforcing your own exalted position."

So how can we stand up against this? Earlier this year, the organisation Human Rights Watch started its own campaign #SecureOurSocials (hrw.org) to put pressure on social media companies like Meta to do more to protect LGBTQIA people on platforms like Facebook. But in a world where social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) are owned by people like Elon Musk – who has mocked pronoun usage and removed the site's ban on misgendering trans users – Whitney argues that the solution has to be community-led.

"We need to stop thinking that they [social media organisations] will be the ones to help us. Instead, the conversation is about how we can deal with the underlying ideology and demonology that compels people to show up on the internet and behave in certain ways. This is ultimately not an online problem. This is an offline problem that shows up online. Any solutions that do exist need to start in a person's community. They have to come from trusted messengers."

While the solution to ending identity-based trolling is not straightforward, understanding why trolls behave in certain ways can be a helpful tool for starting the conversation. While the bigotry these trolls spout is often horrific, it also comes from a place of deep belief. With education, conversation and community, I hope that we can slowly peel back those layers to find human connection again. **D**