

“You’re trolling because...” – A Corpus-based Study of Perceived Trolling and Motive Attribution in the Comment Threads of Three British Political Blogs

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Abstract

This paper investigates the linguistically marked motives that participants attribute to those they call trolls in 991 comment threads of three British political blogs. The study is concerned with how these motives affect the discursive construction of trolling and trolls. Another goal of the paper is to examine whether the mainly emotional motives ascribed to trolls in the academic literature correspond with those that the participants attribute to the alleged trolls in the analysed threads. The paper identifies five broad motives ascribed to trolls: emotional/mental health-related/social reasons, financial gain, political beliefs, being employed by a political body, and unspecified political affiliation. It also points out that depending on these motives, trolling and trolls are constructed in various ways. Finally, the study argues that participants attribute motives to trolls not only to explain their behaviour but also to insult them.

Keywords: troll(ing), motive attribution, blog

1. Introduction

This corpus-based case study investigates a prominent social phenomenon of computer-mediated communication: trolling. It aims to identify the linguistically marked motives that participants attribute to those whom they call trolls in 991 comment threads. These threads were published on three British political blogs, *Guardian Politics Blog*, *Guido Fawkes*, and *LabourList*. The paper is also concerned with how these motives affect the way trolling and trolls are discursively constructed in the threads. Another goal of the paper is to examine to what extent the motives attributed to trolls in the academic literature correspond with those that the participants attribute to the alleged trolls.

The analysis focuses on 2,036 motivation-related metapragmatic comments taken from these 991 threads. In these comments, participants call other users trolls or identify comments as trolling and also discuss the possible reasons why the alleged trolls are trolling. The study first presents a taxonomy of the linguistically marked motives in these comments and then it applies this taxonomy to annotate the comments. Thus, it develops a discursive-pragmatic annotation system for linguistically marked motive attribution in computer-mediated interactions.

This study can be situated within the fields of corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker, 2006) and pragmatics (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2016). Beyond trolling, the paper has relevance to the pragmatics of computer-mediated communication (Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013) and within that, to the study of metapragmatic comments in computer-mediated interactions (Tanskanen, 2007).

2. Literature Review

‘Trolling’ is usually described as a set of goal-driven behaviours, while ‘troll’ is deemed a behaviour-based identity (Hardaker, 2013). The most often mentioned goals attributed to trolls are: attracting other users’ full attention (Hardaker, 2010), triggering intense unpleasant emotional reactions (Thacker & Griffiths, 2012), eliciting potentially offensive responses from others (Morrissey, 2010), causing,

perpetuating or escalating conflict (Galán-García et al., 2014), disrupting the ongoing interaction (Binns, 2012), and deceiving or manipulating others (Donath, 1999).

The discursive actions perceived as acts of trolling are: repeating the same utterance (Shachaf–Hara, 2010), posting irrelevant or meaningless information (Morrissey, 2010), posting misleading or factually incorrect information (Hardaker, 2010), disseminating bad and/or dangerous advice (Donath, 1999), ignoring, despising, rejecting or attacking the core values of the interaction (Utz, 2005), (hypo)criticising others (Hardaker, 2013), and directly insulting, threatening or otherwise attacking others (Herring et al., 2002).

Although the motives for trolling are also often mentioned in the literature, most studies do not attempt to empirically examine them but they instead treat them in a speculative manner (Hopkinson, 2013). This is a clear gap in the literature, to which this study is related.

Trolling is usually approached as an emotionally motivated individual behaviour. The most often mentioned motive is that trolls engage in this behaviour because they simply enjoy it or its consequences (Hardaker, 2010). Further emotional motives are also mentioned, such as boredom (Baker, 2001), a need for attention or achievement, revenge (Shachaf & Hara, 2010), loneliness, curiosity, malevolence (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015), a desire for control and self-empowerment, hate towards specific participants, and hostility to the purpose of the interaction (Herring et al., 2002). It is also suggested that trolls can be motivated by specific political goals and (political) ideologies (Özsoy, 2015). A key aim of this study is to examine whether the above-mentioned motives correspond with those that the participants attribute to the alleged trolls.

3. Data and Method

3.1. Data collection

The corpus consists of 991 comment threads of three British political blogs, *Guardian Politics Blog* (GP), *Guido Fawkes* (GF), and *LabourList* (LL). In this paper, a ‘thread’ refers to the comments of a blog post. These 991 comment

threads thus include 617,782 comments of 991 blog posts. The size of the corpus is around 21.9 million tokens.

GP is the political blog section of a major British newspaper, *The Guardian*. GP can be characterised as a liberal centre-left political blog with more permanent contributors and a highly diverse readership. The blog posts are written by professional journalists in a neutral manner while the commenters represent the entire political spectrum.

GF is an independent libertarian and anti-establishment political blog, which was founded by Paul Staines. Whilst GP has more authors, Staines most likely remains the main contributor. The blog posts are often sarcastic and overtly criticise or mock the major British political parties, such as the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats, and their leading politicians. Similarly to most political blogs, the commenters do not form a homogeneous community. However, many of them explicitly support the right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP). This strongly relates to GF's anti-establishment stance as many perceive UKIP as an anti-establishment party.

LL overtly supports the centre-left Labour Party and aims to provide a forum for debate within the Labour Party. The blog posts are written by numerous contributors. While LL itself is said to be independent from the Labour Party, many of the contributors are Labour's MPs or are otherwise affiliated with the Labour Party. Rather unsurprisingly, most commenters support the Labour Party and have left-wing leanings.

The threads were selected based on two criteria: (1) The thread had to be published on GP, GF or LL between 1 January and 31 December 2015. (2) The thread had to include at least one comment in which a participant called at least one other participant a troll and/or described at least one comment as an act of trolling at least once (hereon referred to as a 'troll comment'). That is, at least one participant had to use a word form of the lexeme TROLL, such as *troll*, *trolling* or *troller* to refer to another participant or comment as illustrated in example (1).

(1) [guardian_65_22345]
stop posting rubbish, troll!

Data collection included the following steps:

(1) A list of 50 British political blogs active in 2015 was compiled. I considered a blog to be any website appearing on a blog hosting platform, such as blogspot.com and/or that called itself a blog. They were deemed to be active in 2015 if at least one post was published between 1 January and 31 December 2015. Finally, I classified political blogs as those whose main topic is politics, i.e. the acquisition, distribution and practice of power in human communities, societies and states. Four sources for collection were used:

(a) **Teads list of top 100 British political blogs in September 2015.** Teads is a French technology company expert in video advertising solutions. It regularly publishes a list of top 100 British political blogs on its website.

(b) **Vuelio list of top 10 UK political blogs in October 2015.** Vuelio is a leading global provider of PR and Political Services Software. It publishes a list of the top10

UK political blogs.

(c) **Google search.** The search terms were *British political blog*, "*British political blog*" 'British political blog as exact term', *UK political blog* and "*UK political blog*" 'UK political blog as exact search term'.

(d) **The political blogs recommended on the already collected ones** were also considered.

(2) I gathered all those threads from these 50 blogs in which at least one participant/comment was deemed to be a troll/trolling. I manually searched 26,804 threads from 2015 for the *troll* character string, and found 1,712 relevant threads. Then I saved each thread in a separate txt file.

(3) For the purposes of this case study, I selected the first three blogs, GP, GF, and LL since these had the highest number of qualifying threads. I decided to focus on only these three blogs in this paper since although the original list consisted of 50 political blogs that cover the entire political spectrum from far right to far left, 58% of the collected troll threads come from these three blogs. Thus, GP, GF, and LL are the key British political blogs for analysing perceived trolling in the British political blogosphere and their troll threads constitute an adequate sample of the more comprehensive corpus that includes all the 1,712 troll threads of the 50 blogs. Furthermore, the aim of this paper is not to draw general conclusions on perceived trolling in the British political blogosphere but to provide a context-sensitive analysis of the motives attributed to trolls on three British political blogs where participants call others trolls considerably more often than on other British political blogs.

(4) Four versions of the corpus were created. Version 1 consists of complete comment threads with blog posts and metadata (nicknames, dates, URLs etc.). Version 2 also includes complete comment threads but without the blog posts and any metadata. The troll comments (`<tc></tc>`) and the troll tokens within them (`<tt></tt>`) are also annotated in this version. Version 3 has only the troll comments while Version 4 contains all non-troll comments.

Table 1 includes the number of blog posts, comments, tokens, troll comments, and troll tokens in the second version of the corpus.

	Overall	GP	GF	LL
Threads	991	167	391	433
	100%	16.9%	39.5%	43.7%
Comments	617,782	374,604	170,610	72,568
	100%	60.6%	27.6%	11.7%
Tokens (million)	21.9	14.5	3.9	3.5
	100%	66.2%	17.8%	16%
Troll comments	4,477	1,738	900	1,839
	100%	38.8%	20.1%	41.1%
Troll tokens	4,884	1,894	955	2,035
	100%	38.8%	19.6%	41.7%

Table 1: Threads, comments, and tokens in the corpus

The majority of the data comes from GP as 60.6% of the comments and 66.2% of the tokens were published on this blog. However, LL has the most troll comments.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis involved a corpus-based qualitative-interpretative analysis of the collected troll comments:

(1) Using the concordance lines of the search term `<tt>*troll*</tt>` in AntConc (Anthony, 2016), I selected and annotated those troll comments from Version 2 in which the assumed motives for trolling were discussed (hereon referred to as 'troll motive comments'). This is illustrated in example (2).

(2) [labourlist_333_21]

The Tories must be really panicking if they hired A to troll the way he does here. You just can't get decent staff these days.

(2) I identified the linguistically marked motives that participants attributed to those they called trolls and created a taxonomy from them.

(3) I described how the different linguistically marked motives affect the discursive construction of trolling and trolls in the comments.

(4) To determine how often the participants explicitly attribute the identified motives to the alleged trolls, I used the motives as descriptive categories and provided each troll motive comment with motive-related annotations.

(5) To make this discursive-pragmatic annotation process more transparent and systematic, I studied the n-grams and collocates of the search term `<tt>*troll*</tt>` in Version 2 and the positive keywords in Version 3 against Version 4 as a reference corpus using AntConc. (Settings for n-grams: search term: both on the left and on the right, cluster size: between 2 and 6, min frequency: 5 and min range 1. Settings for collocates: window span: 5L5R, statistic: Mutual Information (MI), min MI score: 3.0, min frequency: 5. Settings for keywords: keyness statistic: log-likelihood (LL), min LL score: 3.84, min frequency: 5.) The aim of this step was to identify those words and expressions that mark a motive for trolling on their own.

(6) I summarised the quantitative results of the annotation.

4. Results

4.1. A taxonomy of the motives attributed to trolls

2,037 troll motive comments were identified in the corpus. 866 in GP, 279 in GF, and 892 in LL threads. Five motives for trolling emerged during the analysis of these comments:

(1) various emotional mental health-related/social reasons, (2) financial gain, (3) unspecified political affiliation, (4) political beliefs, and (5) being employed by a political body.

The first motive covers various, often inter-related emotional states (e.g. boredom, loneliness or enjoyment), mental health issues, such as OCD, and social deprivation as reasons for trolling. When users suggest this motive, trolling is constructed as an emotionally motivated individual behaviour and trolls are portrayed as miserable individuals with emotional, mental health-related, and social problems.

(3) [guido_40_308]

*No wonder A keeps **trolling** here. He must be **bored** witless.*

The second motive refers to those cases where users imply that others are trolling because they are paid for it. However, it is not mentioned who pays the trolls and why. Here, trolling is constructed as a financially motivated individual activity and trolls are represented as rational but immoral and dishonest individuals.

(4) [guardian_48_3718]

*He/she might be an individual expressing their own opinion, legitimate in a democracy whether you or I agree with it. Whereas you could be described as a **paid troll**.*

The third motive represents those comments where users indicate that others are trolling due to their political affiliation. However, it remains unspecified whether the trolls merely support a political body or they work for it. Thus, the way trolling and trolls are constructed in these comments is ambiguous.

(5) [labourlist_432_1761]

***Tory troll** hanging around Labour sites. Why?*

The fourth motive stands for those occasions when users imply that others are trolling since they support a political party or an ideology. Thus, trolling is constructed as an ideologically motivated individual activity and trolls are depicted as irrational political fanatics.

(6) [guido_90_573]

*FFS we have an unusually high number of stupid **socialist trolls** in this thread. Are they seriously trying to tell us that Bin Laden wasn't a murderous butcher who had declared war on the western world? Keep it up you **lefty trolls** so everyone realises how vile and stupid you are.*

The fifth motive is that certain users are trolling because a political body, namely a British political party, another country (Russia or Israel) or the European Union employs them and has ordered them to do so.

(7) [guardian_129_6462]

*Nice **trolling** from a **Tory Party Central Office intern**. **Hopefully**, come the 11th, **you'll be signing on as unemployed**.*

It is also repeatedly suggested that as part of their employment, these political bodies (5a) send the trolls to these blogs, (5b) tell them how to troll, (5c) sponsor their trolling and (5d) train them. Consequently, trolling is constructed as a financially and politically motivated and centrally organised collective activity while trolls are portrayed as unskilled and low-paid employees of low prestige who simply follow orders but do not necessarily support the political body that employs them.

4.2. Annotation of the Troll Motive Comments

The above-presented motives were used as descriptive categories to annotate the 2,037 troll motive comments in the corpus. Table 2 displays the n-grams and collocates of the troll tokens and the keywords in the troll comments that were used to make the annotation process more consistent.

N-gram	Collocate	Keyword	Motive tag
paid troll(s)	paid	paid	2/5c
–	pay(ing)	–	2/5c
–	sponsored	sponsored	2/5c
–	funded	–	2/5c
Tory troll(er)(s)	Tory	Tory, torytroll	3/4/5
trolling Tory	Tory	Tory	3/4/5
–	conservative	–	3/4/5
Labour troll(s)	Labour	–	3/4/5
–	Corbynista(s), corbynite	–	3/4/5
–	Corbytrolls	Corbytroll(s)	3/4/5
–	Blairite	–	3/4/5
establishment troll	establishment	establishment	3/4/5
–	liblabcon	–	3/4/5
UKIP troll(er)(s)	UKIP	–	3/4/5
–	kipper	cyberkipper	3/4/5
Green (Party) troll	Green	Green	3/4/5
SNP troll	–	SNP	3/4/5
–	BNP	–	3/4/5
EU troll	EU	EU	3/4/5
right(-)wing troll(s)	right(-)wing	–	4
left(-)wing trolls	–	–	4
lefty/leftie troll	lefty, leftie(s)	leftie	4
leftard troll	leftard	leftard	4
Central Office Troll(s)	Central, office	central	5
CCHQ troll(s)	CCHQ, HQ	CCHQ, HQ	5
–	Lynton	Lynton	5
–	employed	–	5
troll army	army	–	5
–	Kremlin	Kremlin	5
Hasbara troll	Hasbara	Hasbara	5

Table 2: The n-grams, collocates and keywords marking a motive attributed to trolls

Table 3 presents the proportion of those troll motive comments that were provided with a particular motivation-related tag. Note that as one comment could receive multiple tags, the sum of the percentages in the same column is not necessarily 100%.

Motive	Tag	Overall	GP	GF	LL
Emotional reasons	1	5.9%	6.8%	10%	3.8%
Financial gain	2	1.9%	2.3%	5.4%	0.3%
Unspecified political affiliation	3	65.3%	56.2%	38%	82.7%
Political beliefs	4	12.3%	15.1%	16.5%	8.2%
Being employed by a political body (PB)	5	17.7%	24.1%	33.7%	6.5%
Being sent by a PB to troll	5a	0.8%	1.3%	0.7%	0.3%
Being told by a PB how to troll	5b	1.3%	2.2%	1.4%	0.4%
Being paid by a PB to troll	5c	5.3%	6%	16.5%	1%
Being trained by a PB for trolling	5d	0.3%	0.2%	0.7%	0.2%

Table 3: The proportion of troll motive comments provided with a particular motivation-related tag

The results demonstrate that the most prevalent linguistically marked motive for trolling is an unspecified political affiliation, which is followed by being employed by a political body, and political beliefs. Meanwhile, emotional/mental health-related and social reasons as motives ascribed to trolls only occur in 5.9% of the troll motive comments.

The most striking difference in the distribution of the motives attributed to trolls between the three blogs is that unspecified political affiliation is much more prevalent whereas being employed by a political body is considerably less frequent on LL than on GP or GF. This is because there was a single commenter on LL who frequently used the expression *Tory troll* and consequently, his/her comments were provided with the unspecified political affiliation motive tag.

This shows that since only a small minority of the commenters call others trolls, the individual habits of those who do so can have a major impact on the general distribution of the motives on a blog. Thus, the quantitative differences between the blogs can be better explained by these context-dependent individual practices than by abstract variables, such as the political position of the blogs.

5. Conclusions

The main conclusions of this study are as follows:

(1) Although the relevant academic literature regards trolling as a chiefly emotionally motivated behaviour, in the context of online political discourse, participants attribute other motives to trolls as well, including financial gain, unspecified political affiliation, political beliefs, and being employed by a political body.

(2) In the examined corpus of comment threads from British political blogs, an unspecified political affiliation, being employed by a political body and political beliefs are more frequently mentioned motives for trolling than emotional reasons.

(3) A local conspiracy theory has been developed around trolling on the investigated blogs as some participants repeatedly suggest that various British political parties, other countries or the European Union secretly employ trolls. Thus, trolling is perceived as part of the online political warfare, a means that is believed to be used to manipulate public opinion.

(4) Whilst the concept of trolling can be constructed in different ways in the analysed troll motive comments, a

common trait of these comments is that the alleged trolls are portrayed in a strongly negative manner. Thus, when participants call others troll, they do not only attribute motives to the trolls to explain their behaviour but also to insult them.

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