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“Trolling is not stupid”: Internet trolling as the art of deception serving entertainment

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Abstract: This paper aims to distill the essence of Internet trolling, a prevalent intercultural online communicative phenomenon which appears in many forms and guises. However, the label “trolling” tends to be (mis)used in reference to communicative practices which are not trolling in the traditional sense. It is argued that trolling necessarily relies on deception performed in multi-party interactions, which is conducive to (humorous) entertainment of self and/or other participants, at the expense of the deceived target. Taking data from email communications of the “DontEvenReply” troll, this account not only draws on the literature addressing the focal phenomenon but also integrates findings from several other fields of investigation (the philosophy of deception, humor theory, and the pragmatics of interaction) in order to demystify trolling.

Keywords: deception, entertainment, humor, insincerity, multi-party interaction, online communication, trolling, untruthfulness

1 Introduction

Although *trolling* has been a commonplace communicative practice on the Internet for over two decades, it has received little focused scholarly attention in linguistics, let alone in pragmatic studies (but see Herring et al. 2002; Hardaker 2010, 2013), to which the present discussion is meant to contribute. Trolling appears to be a more popular topic in socio-cultural and folklore studies (Bishop 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014a, 2014b; Phillips 2015). Also, the notion has reverberated across the interdisciplinary academic literature devoted to computer-mediated communication in general. Even more ink has been spilled on trolling in the non-academic press and online resources. Consequently, the label “trolling” is frequently overused and abused, because journalists, lay Internet users, and even researchers not preoccupied with trolling tend to base

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their understandings on their intuitions and/or isolated examples that do not correspond with the technical understanding of “trolling”, as reflected by the word’s provenance. Also, Internet users tend to (mis)apply the term “trolling” to various abusive online practices, such as the Gamergate controversy (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy), and all manner of aggressive and/or antisocial behaviors, some of which are properly termed *flaming*, *e-bile*, *heckling* or *cyberbullying*, among others.

Suggestions are sometimes made that the evolution of trolling needs to be acknowledged, and that a distinction needs to be drawn between “traditional” trolling and its new forms (Bishop 2014a, 2014b; Phillips 2015). Indeed, researchers should account for the new manifestations of trolling but they should also differentiate it from the phenomena that are tantamount to online antagonism but share little with trolling in the traditional, that is technical, sense, while only being arbitrarily called “trolling” by individual Internet users, yet not the majority of them. Language use evolves, and new meanings almost always emerge in popular usage. However, the individual use of the label “trolling” in reference to any asocial or aggressive activity online (cf. Philips 2015) does not necessarily indicate a consistent semantic shift.¹ Moreover, lay language users may be the main drivers of language change, but this does not mean that folk uses are, or must be made, consistent with technical/academic parlance. The distinction between *etic* and *emic* labels (for an overview, see Haugh 2012) needs to be maintained in order to safeguard the epistemological status of theoretical analysis and prevent lay understandings from entering academic discourse (see Eelen 2001; Watts et al. 1992). Consequently, the traditional sense of the polysemous label “trolling” should, it is here argued, be sustained in the scholarly literature, regardless of contemporary lay language users’ inconsistent parlance,² especially given that the notion has always posed definitional problems for academics, as will be shown in the course of this paper.

The principal objective of this article is then to elucidate the defining characteristics of (traditional) trolling per se and to distinguish it from other communicative online phenomena. New light is shed on the definitional components of trolling from the perspective of philosophical studies on deception, humor

¹ Note the Internet users’ criticism levelled at this broad understanding of “trolling” supported by Phillips in her talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAubx3BBgLk>, which proves that language users are not unanimous.

² The problem of a mismatch between academic terminology and inconsistent ordinary language use pertains to many topics in theoretical linguistics (e. g., irony vs. sarcasm, lying vs. deception, or teasing vs. disparagement humor). Academics must make clear distinctions between such notions to capture the underlying phenomena, and the same pertains to trolling.

theory, and the pragmatics of interaction in new media. The findings from these disciplines are brought together with the existing research on Internet trolling and reliable online definitions which give Internet users' insight into the phenomenon. The online sources quoted here evince high reliability, insofar as they are constantly subject to vast Internet audiences' validation, rather than representing individual users' views. The theoretical discussion is illustrated with examples of email exchanges compiled by a celebrity troll.

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, the existing conceptualizations of trolling are critically revisited. Notwithstanding the multifarious manifestations trolling may have, its two characteristic features are teased out: *deception* of the *target* and (*humorous*) *entertainment*³ of non-deceived participants, including trolls themselves. Although trolls wish their deceptive communicative intention to remain covert so that some individuals are deceived, they may make it overt for the sake of others' entertainment. As will be shown in the course of the paper, these two necessary conditions for trolling tend to be neglected in the topical literature. Before the two are elaborated on, the exemplifying data are presented in Section 3. In Section 4, because of the two communicative goals orientated towards different interactants, the issue of multi-party online interactions is briefly discussed. Against this backdrop, the two interdependent components of trolling are examined and, for the sake of clarity, illustrated with the relevant examples introduced earlier. In Section 5, it is argued that trolling practices are amenable to analysis as deception types explored in philosophy. Finally, in Section 6, the entertaining/humorous potential of trolling is accounted for with reference to humor theory. The last section offers a number of conclusions.

2 Existing definitions of Internet trolling

The metaphor-based term “Internet trolling” (hereafter “trolling”) tacitly captures the nature of the focal phenomenon. The prevalent view holds that it derives from fishing jargon (i. e. the trailing of a baited hook behind a boat for a fish to catch) but also alludes to Scandinavian mythology, according to which trolls would lurk under bridges and let people pass only when the latter had provided correct answers to tricky questions (Crystal 2001; Herring et al. 2002; cf.

³ Entertainment, conventionally conceived as any pleasure-giving activity, encompasses humor production/experience, which is typically (but now always) indicated by the receiver's smiling and laughter.

Bishop 2014a). These ideas seem to reverberate across the discussions of Internet trolls (or simply “trolls”⁴) and trolling.

It is believed that Internet trolling came into being in the late 1980s or early 1990s on a website called *alt.folklore.urban*, taking the form of reposting clichéd questions and topics so that new users would reply, exposing themselves to ridicule (<https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Trolling>). Over time, trolls have developed a plethora of techniques. Bishop’s (2012c, 2014a, 2014b) complex classification of troller types presents the full spectrum of paramount trolling goals and ploys, many of which may actually co-occur or overlap. One may extrapolate from this complex taxonomy that trolling individuals may aim to: reveal people’s genuine (evil) nature, wind up new members, hurt others for the sake of self-entertainment, gain others’ trust to exploit them, report on facts that will baffle others, perform self-deprecation in order to elicit sympathy from others, distort numerical data (e.g., the number of likes or the results of polls), help others look on the bright side of life and overcome their worries, help others socialize (e.g., through teasing), please others by supporting their (uncanny) views, amuse others by sharing made-up humorous content, and entertain others via mischief. This list of objectives indicates that trolling is an internally diversified phenomenon and may actually be purely benevolent. However, according to the prevalent (though not unanimous) view, trolling is a dishonest and/or disruptive activity.

Several conceptualizations of trolling have been made, the differences between them residing in the characteristics of trolling techniques encountered by the authors in their data. This is why the descriptions can hardly be considered all-encompassing. For example, Crystal (2001: 52) defines trolling as “the sending of a message (a *troll*) specifically intended to cause irritation to others, such as the members of a chatgroup. It is an innocent-sounding question or statement, delivered deadpan, and usually short, though some trolls are verbose in their apparent cluelessness.” This definition emphasizes that trolls aim to stir up negative emotions and incite others into verbal conflict, similarly to another definition: “A troll is a user who tries to goad others into responding in a certain way. To do this, a troll usually posts inflammatory, off-topic, or ludicrous material in the hope of generating an emotional response” (Beyer 2014: 150). In this vein, Binns (2012) lists such trolling ploys as starting arguments, criticizing or

⁴ While some authors use the terms “troller” or “troll” as synonyms, others use the label “troller” to denote a person and the label “troll” in reference to their message (e.g., Crystal 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Hardaker 2010, 2013). Also, in Bishop’s (2012c, 2014a) detailed list of troller character types, a troll is a type of a troller who aims to “entertain others, bringing some fun and mischief to an online community” (Bishop 2014a: 12).

complaining. It is also claimed that a troll may feign naïveté or disseminate ill-founded advice (Donath 1999; Utz 2005; Hardaker 2010, 2013), thereby soliciting corrective or aggressive responses (cf. Internet users' conventional reaction "Not sure if trolling or just stupid" which tends to follow posts which come over as being particularly silly or uncanny). Other definitions present the troll as someone who poses a purportedly legitimate question or makes a statement, nurturing an intention of luring unwitting interactants into useless and time-consuming or provocative discussions (Herring et al. 2002; Turner et al. 2005). Combining two of these approaches, in line with Herring et al. (2002), Shachaf and Hara (2010) compile the following three definitional components of trolling: a flame bait (designed to attract predictable responses), an attempt to provoke futile arguments, and an outward manifestation of sincerity.⁵ Finally, Phillips (2015) lists a few markers of "subcultural" modern trolling: self-identification as trolls (e. g., on 4chan), celebration of anonymity, the lulz⁶ (i. e., amusement at the expense of others), and some form of disruptive/antagonistic behavior, such as: flame baiting, grieving, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, racism, pornography, disrupting a forum by asking a silly question, and being otherwise annoying.

Based on these definitions, it can be gathered that while some claim that trolling messages sound innocuous and unsuspecting (e. g., Crystal 2001; Turner et al. 2005), others (e. g., Gully 2012; Beyer 2014; McCosker 2014) suggest that Internet trolling consists in inflammatory or controversial messages. This testifies that trolling has multifarious manifestations (cf. Bishop 2013a, 2014a, 2014b), and that the (non)aggressive nature of trolling messages cannot be their core definitional component. Phillips (2015) states that trolling ranges from aggressive to innocuous forms but it does stem from these antagonistic⁷ behaviors, not all of which classify as trolling, as she also cautions. Recognizing the diversity of trolling techniques, Hardaker (2013) lists six (frequently overlapping) strategies, which she situates on the covert-overt⁸ cline: digression, (hypo)criticism, antipathising (taking alienating positions), endangering (pretended help or advice), shocking (being overtly insensitive about taboo topics), and aggressing (which coincides with malicious impoliteness).

5 The issue of ostensible sincerity is crucial, but it does not bring out a distinctive characteristic of trolling, namely its *insincerity*. Sincerity is a presumption underlying most human interactions. People typically regard others as being sincere and want to come over as being sincere (even when engaged in deception).

6 The word "lulz" has originated as a plural variant of *lol*, i. e. laughing out loud.

7 She does not explain the difference between aggression and antagonism, though.

8 However, trolling is a covert activity, regardless of its manifestations at the utterance level, in the sense that it is anchored in the deception of chosen individuals, as will be argued here.

Nonetheless, trolling is frequently understood only as sending antagonistic, inflammatory messages with the intent of provoking others into conflict. In both folk and academic parlance, “trolling” tends to be used as a capture-all term for a whole gamut of online behaviors indicative of antagonism and aggression, which are conducive to conflict. As a result, trolling tends to be confused, or even used synonymously, with *flaming* or *flame wars*. Flaming should be understood as sending aggressive messages that threaten other Internet users (e.g., O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003; Johnson et al. 2008), being indicative of genuine expression of hostility and aggression. Although trolling is sometimes discussed in the context of flaming or as if it coincided with flaming (e.g., Baker 2001; McCosker 2014; Phillips 2015), the view advocated here is that trolling and flaming are markedly different phenomena, even if they show some affinity (Hardaker 2010, 2013) or overlap, leading to extended arguments (Herring et al. 2002). Trolling messages need not necessarily be aggressive but they frequently invite emotional or conflictual responses, giving rise to flaming (cf. the idea of flame baiting mentioned above). Herring et al. (2002: 372) distinguish between the two, based on the assumption that flaming overtly aims to incite, provoke or rebuke “any and all readers”, whereas trolling is not so controversial and targets primarily the naïve and vulnerable. Whether or not trolling messages are controversial is a debatable matter, given their diversified forms, and the subjective evaluations of what qualifies as controversial and who can be regarded as naïve.

It is proposed here that the fundamental feature that distinguishes trolling from flaming, as well as other conflictual online behaviors, is that the former is necessarily based on some form of *deception*. As Hardaker (2013: 82) observes, deception is “an almost ubiquitous, defining ingredient of trolling, involving false identities, disingenuous intentions, and outright lies”, while aggression is also important, but “not necessarily always *produced* by the (alleged) troller.”⁹ Although Phillips (2015) is not supportive of deception as a necessary condition of “modern” trolling, she does seem to (unwittingly) imply that deception lies at its heart: “Trolls don’t mean, or don’t *have* to mean, the abusive things they say (...) Targets of trolling, on the other hand, are expected to take trolls at their word” (Phillips 2015: 26). What may be extrapolated from this is that a modern troll may deceive the target with regard to his/her communicative enterprise (e.g., that he/she cannot understand something or believes that something is the case).

⁹ Nonetheless, Hardaker’s departure point is that trolling amounts to “being deliberately antagonistic or offensive via computer-mediated communication” (2013: 58) and she does include impoliteness/aggression in her definition of trolling (2013: 79).

Even though only a few authors (Donath 1999; Crystal 2001; Dahlberg 2001; Hardaker 2010, 2013) emphasize the relevance of deception, this appears to be an intrinsic feature of all trolling proper, which is germane to the examples cited in the topical literature (notably, Herring et al. 2002; Hardaker 2010, 2013), while not being characteristic of other aggressive online activities, such as flaming. This feature is captured by the following definitions, albeit together with other (complementary) characteristics:

A troller is a CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement. (Hardaker 2010: 237)

Trolling is the deliberate (perceived) use of impoliteness/aggression, deception and/or manipulation in CMC to create a context conducive to triggering or antagonising conflict, typically for amusement's sake. (Hardaker 2013: 79)

Online trolling is the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet (...) to make users appear overly emotional or foolish in some manner. If an unfortunate person falls into their trap, trolling intensifies for further, merciless amusement. (Buckels et al. 2014: 97)

These definitions suggest that trolling may involve some form of deception concerning one's communicative intentions. Also, in the light of these three quotations, yet another definitional component of trolling emerges, namely its entertaining, frequently humorous, potential. While Hardaker (2010) points to a troll's sociopathic self-amusement, as do Buckels et al. (2014), trolling may be orientated towards amusing others (Bishop 2014a, 2014b). Essentially, the underlying goal motivating trolling appears to be the entertainment of self and sometimes also of others, which may foster humor experience and which arises as a result of deception. Admittedly, the most adequate definition that encompasses the two essential features of trolling and does not prioritize any specific strategies is a non-academic one endorsed by Internet users:

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 (...)

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 [sic] troll. (...) There is only one legitimate reason to be trolling: For the lulz.

(<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=trolling&defid=4250942>)

The remainder of this paper will focus on the two pivotal characteristics of trolling: deception and (humorous) entertainment. At first blush, the two may

seem to be mutually exclusive, but they are not, being inter-dependent and orientated towards different participants in *online interactions*, usually *multi-party* ones. A genuinely deceptive utterance may exert different communicative effects on different participants. Importantly, although it will not be humorous to the deceived target, a deceptive utterance may amuse non-targeted interactants (including the troll himself/herself, and sometimes solely himself/herself), who are privy to the deception.

The proposal of the two definitional components of trolling operating in multi-party interactions on the Internet is illustrated with data taken from a celebrity troll's website, which will now be introduced.

3 Celebrity trolling

Identifying a troll is problematic for both Internet users and researchers (see Hardaker 2010, 2013; Shachaf and Hara 2010). While some people try to conceal their argumentative ineptness by purporting to have attempted to troll (<https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Trolling>), successful trolls only very rarely reveal their goal (see Hardaker 2010). Thus, alleged trolls will plead innocence or attack their accusers (Herring 1999; Herring et al. 2002). A troll's admission of guilt is tantamount to his/her failure (<https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Trolling>). Therefore, messages bearing the formal features of trolling, together with the allegations and accusations of other Internet users, need to suffice as evidence that an act of trolling has taken place. As Hardaker (2010) rightly observes, neither participants interacting with the alleged troll nor researchers can ever "categorically know" a troll's intent or identity. This paper sidesteps these methodological problems by addressing the case of a troll who publicly admits to what is here technically defined as trolling,¹⁰ a *celebrity troll* listed in many troll rankings found on the Internet (e. g., <http://www.internetmarketingninjas.com/blog/social-media/awesome-internet-trolls/>).

A person hiding under the pseudonym *DontEvenReply troll* anonymously launched a website called "DontEvenReply.com E-mails from an asshole" (<http://dontevenreply.com/>) in June 2009. Its success led to the 2010 publication of a book entitled "Emails from an A**hole: Real People Being Stupid" authored by John Lindsay, which is the troll's real name (<http://tenminuteinterviews.com/>

¹⁰ Phillips (2015) studies the practices of self-identifying trolls (e. g., on 4chan's /b/ board). However, the multifarious instances not validated by any academic definition need not coincide with trolling in the technical sense, depending merely on individual users' misuse of the term, with which many other users do not agree.

john-lindsay/). The website and the book feature email exchanges that he has had over the years with his targets, using different names and email accounts. He performs his deceptive activities in private interactions with the victims only to later report on his website on his elaborate trolling emails, together with the reactions they have engendered. A similar practice can be found on 4chan, where users are encouraged to troll others outside of the site and then post the results on the /b/ board (<http://boards.4chan.org/b/>) for other users' entertainment. Lindsay wreaks havoc in emails and uses his website like a "clubhouse", where he posts back the fruit of his labor for others in the online community to see.

According to the information on his website, the troll looks for the victims among the authors of classified advertisements, choosing preposterous ones that he finds worth ridiculing. Posing as a prospective buyer or seller, Lindsay makes outlandish offers to unsuspecting victims in his email replies. Provoking targets, he lets human vices show when they respond. However, as he admits in the FAQ section, only 10% of the targets reply to his emails. This may indicate that 90% of the would-be victims are impervious to his trolling or can see through the attempted deception. In Bishop's (2014a) terms, the "DontEvenReply" troll is an "Iconoclast" since he goes out of his way to find people who disagree with him in order to have an argument. Although trolls like him may be classed as "Haters", they are more of devils' advocates found in classical trolling than abusers found in anonymous trolling (see Bishop 2014a).

The samples shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3 comprise Lindsay's first prank (Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3), which still ranks high among the top-rated emails, according to the website visitors' evaluations. It has a tripartite structure, because Lindsay consecutively impersonated three different individuals with different ludicrous offers for the author of the advertisement.

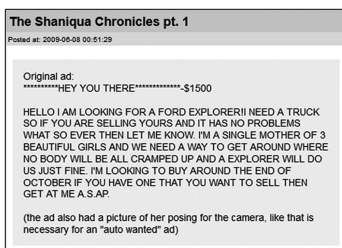


Figure 1: The Shaniqua Chronicles Part 1 (available at <http://dontevenreply.com/view.php?post=30>).

Me to SHANIQUA *****

ay yo girl i gots a ford explorer for you

its not really a 1997 its a 1985
and its not really a ford explorer its a ford bronco but its like the same thing

here are the specs if your interested:

- 217,292 miles
- transmission is in good shape, 5th gear and reverse work but the rest dont
- the V6 engine was replaced with a V8, gas mileage is pretty good - i got about 12 mpg highway the other day but that was with premium
- power windows but you have to turn a crank to roll them down
- tape player - it does play but there is a def leppard tape jammed in there and it won't come out. great for def leppard fans!
- i am a smoker so you can smell it in the car, but ill throw in an air-freshener for an extra 10 bucks
- it came with front airbag, but it deployed in my last accident and i didnt get it replaced. broncos are safe though so you wont have to worry about an airbag.
- the air conditioning does not work anymore, but it used to and was really cold.
- heat works if you drive the car for a while
- the frame is bent due to an accident with a tractor trailer, but as long as you dont drive over 40 you shouldnt have any problems
- it can seat five which is good for kids, but the back seat has beer and urine stains. they have been professionally treated with windex
- the rear window is missing, but has been repaired with saran wrap
- you will need to have some minor repairs done: new brakes, the rear axle is missing, needs a new radiator and coolant system. i spoke to my friend who knows a lot about cars and he said it shouldnt cost more than a few bucks.
- im asking for \$7,500 but am willing to negotiate.
- let me know what you think
- ted

SHANIQUA *** to Me**

No thanks. That's not what i'm looking for it's too old and not even the right type of Ford. Have a nice day :)

Me to SHANIQUA *****

I'm willing to drop the price to \$7,000 and throw in a phil collins cassette tape for the tape player, even though it may seem old, it still runs like it was O's bronco, and don't worry about it not being an explorer, all fords are built ford tough.

SHANIQUA *** to Me**

I don't think that you read my ad i don't have \$7000.00 to spend on a truck much less a DAMN 1985 BRONCO!!!!!!!!!!!!!! You should be willing to give that old ass piece of shit away GO AWAY and leave me the hell alone STOP WASTING MY TIME!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Me to SHANIQUA *****

I see you are a tough negotiator. My final offer is \$6,900, and i'll include a floormat from my 1983 cutlass supreme. this floormat is brown with several stains and cigarette burns, but it will keep the beautiful bronco interior very clean. please consider this generous offer.

SHANIQUA *** to Me**

READ THE AD 1500 THAT'S IT I DON'T WANT YOUR DAMN FORD BRONCO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Me to SHANIQUA *****

Okay, I can see that this luxurious bronco is out of your price range. That is okay, I have a cheaper car that you may be interested in. It is a 1996 Geo Metro. Almost EXACTLY the same as a Ford Explorer. When looking at the two, I personally can't even tell the difference. It was my son's car, but he lost his license after his third DUI, so now I am stuck with it. I have no use for it though, and would be willing to sell it to you for \$1550.

Features:

- 246,000 HIGHWAY miles
- AM radio, great for traffic reports and radio disney
- 3 great tires from Walmart, they still have about 200 miles worth of tread on them
- Partially functional transmission. Reverse does not work, but you don't really need that anyway.
- Due to a wheel alignment problem, the car can only turn right. But with power steering, it makes turning right easy. Three right turns can make a left.
- No title
- Currently needs brakes, exhaust, catal converter, a front wheel and rotor, and a motor to pass inspection. But as long as you don't get pulled over, who cares about inspection?
- The paint is a metallic/rust red. Some of the spots have rusted through, but I covered it up with duct tape and spray paint. Looks good as new!
- Comes with THE CLUB, a state of the art anti-theft device. But I lost the key to it, so its stuck on the steering wheel. great for leaving your car in west philly!
- The gas tank currently leaks gas, so MPG is around 6 or 7 depending on how fast you drive. You just need to keep plugging the hole with gum. At that price, this car is a DEAL! Let me know what you think.

SHANIQUA *** to Me**

YOU ARE AN ASSHOLE GO AWAY GO AWAY GO AWAY GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY FACE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Me to SHANIQUA *****

so you don't want the geo? you're missing out on a dream car, tell you what, for that price, I will also include three old Newsweek magazines, a uscd toaster, and an old Philadelphia Eagles #81 Terrell Owens jersey.

Figure 1: (continued)

The Shaniqua Chronicles pt. 2
 Posted at: 2009-05-08 00:52:01

I couldn't resist fucking with her again. I used another e-mail account.

Original ad:
 *****HEY YOU THERE*****-\$1500

HELLO I AM LOOKING FOR A FORD EXPLORER!! NEED A TRUCK SO IF YOU ARE SELLING YOURS AND IT HAS NO PROBLEMS WHAT SO EVER THEN LET ME KNOW. I'M A SINGLE MOTHER OF 3 BEAUTIFUL GIRLS AND WE NEED A WAY TO GET AROUND WHERE NO BODY WILL BE ALL CRAMPED UP AND A EXPLORER WILL DO US JUST FINE. I'M LOOKING TO BUY AROUND THE END OF OCTOBER IF YOU HAVE ONE THAT YOU WANT TO SELL THEN GET AT ME A.S.A.P.

(the ad also had a picture of her posing for the camera, like that is necessary for an "auto wanted" ad)

Me to SHANIQUA *****
 Hey there! I saw your ad and I think I have the perfect car for you. I am selling my 2001 Ford Explorer Eddie Bauer edition. It is a great car and I hate to see it go, but I need the money to pay off my 2nd DUI fines.


Only 72,000 miles! Here are the features:

- CD Player
- Intact windshield
- Rear tires
- Spare tire
- New windshield wipers
- Beautiful white exterior paint
- Cloth interior

It was in a very MINOR fender bender, however, and will need a few repairs. As you can see from the picture, you may need to replace the passenger-side mirror and headlights in order for the car to pass PA inspection. I took it to a mechanic, and he said that the mirror is fixable. I was selling the car for \$1800, but due to these minor issues, I will drop the price to \$1750.

Thanks,
 Ryan Jackson

Attachment:



SHANIQUA *** to Me**
 Hi I'm sorry I can't afford to buy your truck it looks really nice and I would love to be behind the wheel of it but I can't afford it. My budget will only allow for me to spend 1500 sorry

(she obviously didn't realize there was a picture)

Me to SHANIQUA *****
 tell you what, I'll bump the price down to 1500, but I get to keep the CD player and the passenger seat, and I will clear all of the change out of my ashtray.

this car is a great deal. I've included a picture, check it out and please reconsider!

SHANIQUA *** to Me**
 WHY WOULD I BUT A PIECE OF JUNK WHY FOR WHAT YOU BETTA BET IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Figure 2: The Shaniqua Chronicles Part 2 (available at <http://dontevenreply.com/view.php?post=31>).

The Shaniqua Chronicles pt. 3
Posted at: 2009-06-03 00:52:03

Original ad:
*****HEY YOU THERE*****-\$1500

HELLO I AM LOOKING FOR A FORD EXPLORER!! NEED A TRUCK SO IF YOU ARE SELLING YOURS AND IT HAS NO PROBLEMS WHAT SO EVER THEN LET ME KNOW! I'M A SINGLE MOTHER OF 3 BEAUTIFUL GIRLS AND WE NEED A WAY TO GET AROUND WHERE NO BODY WILL BE ALL CRAMPED UP AND A EXPLORER WILL DO US JUST FINE. I'M LOOKING TO BUY AROUND THE END OF OCTOBER IF YOU HAVE ONE THAT YOU WANT TO SELL THEN GET AT ME A S.A.P.

(the ad also had a picture of her posing for the camera, like that is necessary for an "auto wanted" ad)

Me to SHANIQUA *****
Hello,

I saw your ad on ***** and I think I have a great car for you. I am selling my 1996 Ford Explorer. I used to work in the film industry, and I got this car after it was used in a movie. It has a custom paint job from the movie set. I barely drive it, so it has only around 60,000 miles on it. I really have no use for it anymore, so I am willing to get rid of it. Take a look at it and let me know what you think. I've attached a few pictures of it. Please note that it did have a MINOR accident involving an animal and may have slight damage.

Thanks!

Attachment:



SHANIQUA *** to Me**
Sir I thank you for trying to help but I don't want to drive the truck from the dinosaur movie I wouldn't mind if I had money to get it painted over but I don't. Thanks anyway

Me to SHANIQUA *****
I always believe that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, and you shouldn't judge this car by its paint job. It has a great engine that will not quit. From the inside, you can't even tell it is painted like that. This car is reliable, and will NOT be going extinct any time soon.

SHANIQUA *** to Me**
No thanks!!!!

Me to SHANIQUA *****
Tell you what, for an extra 50 bucks I will spray paint the entire car flat black. I took an art class in high school so I have some experience painting and it will look great.

SHANIQUA *** to Me**
NO THANKS!!!!WHEN YOU GET A SHINY BLUE OR BLACK ONE THEN YOU LET ME KNOW.

Me to SHANIQUA *****
Here's what I am willing to do. For \$60, I will spray paint the entire car black, and then cover it with scotch tape so it is shiny. I'll also throw in a VHS of Jurassic Park I taped off of TBS 5 years ago, includes many classic "retro" commercials that you don't see on TV anymore. A collector's goldmine!

SHANIQUA *** to Me**
NO THANKS TRY SOMEONE ELSE. I'VE ALREADY MADE A DEAL WITH SOMEONE ELSE THEY WILL BE BRINGING ME THE TRUCK TOMORROW MORNING.

Me to SHANIQUA *****
WAIT! Before you make that deal, check out the new. REPAINTED Explorer. I repainted it a nice shiny blue. Please check out the picture and reconsider!

Attachment:



Figure 3: The Shaniqua Chronicles Part 3 (available at <http://dontevenreply.com/view.php?post=32>).

Traditional email exchange may not be the prototypical venue for trolling, which is usually associated with discussion boards and Internet forums, as well as other *one-to-many* communicative practices (see Section 4), as evidenced by the literature (e. g. Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Shachaf and Hara 2010; Hardaker 2010, 2013). Indeed, frequently, a troll intends to deceive many individuals, not being able to predict who the fooled targets will actually be. However, it needs to be observed that Usenet, which can be regarded as a hybrid between email and web forums with topical threads, offers one of the main avenues for Internet trolling. Email is also ripe for trolling and it is the most consensual form of communication, with interactants communicating in private,¹¹ and the trolling strategies being personalized. Similar to trolls on forums and Usenet that operate in multi-party environment, the DontEvenReply troll ultimately publicizes his emails. He first picks individual victims and applies extremely elaborate and creative techniques to deceive them with a view to amusing other Internet users, who will appreciate his wit and deceptive endeavors. As the examples above illustrate, Lindsay's email exchanges are usually dyadic ones (unless he impersonates more than one individual and uses the carbon copy function, as is the case with "Barter My Whore Wife" at <http://dontevenreply.com/view.php?post=28>), but they are duly embedded as messages in one-to-many interactions when Lindsay publishes the emails online for the benefit of the general audience who visit his website.

The DontEvenReply troll's posts bear many of the (non-essential) features of trolling mentioned in the various definitions presented in Section 2, such as constituting a flame bait or promoting useless discussion. Most importantly, Lindsay's trolling shows a whole gamut of deceptive strategies conducive to humorous entertainment. The two goals (to deceive and to amuse) are enacted not synchronously but asynchronously and with regard to different receivers. This raises a crucial problem concerning the nature of the divergent meanings the different participants at the reception end are meant to, and ideally do, infer.

4 Trolling in multi-party interactions

As traditionally defined, following Goffman's (1981) thought, participation in any spoken or written interaction involves the *production* end and the *reception*

¹¹ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the issue of email as a venue for trolling.

end, which is pertinent to online communication. While some *dyadic* online interactions can be found, for example the traditional exchange of emails between two individuals (with no multiple recipients or carbon copies), many Internet communication genres transcend the traditional interaction between the *speaker/sender* and the *addressee*, involving other *hearer/receiver* roles, necessitating new participatory frameworks to account for the different participants (see e. g., Dynel 2011a, 2014, and references therein).

Essentially, any *one-to-many* message publically available on the Internet enjoys an indeterminate number of participants at the reception end. Its author must be mindful of the fact that it will be widely available and must ratify an infinite number of (imagined/expected) anonymous Internet users (e. g., Burgess and Green 2008; Chovanec and Dynel 2015) while the prospective receivers may be envisaged only to an extent (e. g., people interested in buying or selling a particular object, or Internet users seeking entertainment). Anybody who does read an online message becomes a ratified participant, any personal, social or legal restrictions notwithstanding. This is relevant to the DontEvenReply troll's posts, as well as his victims' previous advertisements. Importantly, the DontEvenReply troll reframes his previous email exchanges as publicly available one-to-many posts. This is in accordance with the observation that Internet communication allows seemingly private (one-to-one) messages to be easily replicated and transformed into public ones via reposting (Chovanec and Dynel 2015), as a result of *embedding of interactional frames* (Goffman 1981; Chovanec 2015).

Visitors to Lindsay's website are ratified participants joining the interaction later than the addressed target, that is, after the superordinate interactional frame has been constructed. The visiting users can be conceived as an anonymous *collective addressee* in the overarching interactional frame, whom the troll addresses, albeit only tacitly, by making the posts comprising the earlier email exchanges. The email addressee and the collective addressee are distinct participatory roles operating in different interactional frames. However, the target of deception may visit the website, and will probably not find its contents funny. Each of the emails will have been written with a twofold communicative intention and two addressees in mind: the addressee of an email (the deceived addressee), and the future visitor of the DontEvenReply website (the entertained addressee).

Importantly, trolling in other Internet genres (e. g., forums) will not show the same two types of addressees, but will typically involve two receiver roles: those who are (meant to be) deceived, and those who are not but are amused instead, distributed among unspecified users participating in a forum interaction. Each message sent by a troll carries a twofold intention: to deceive, and,

based on this, to (self)entertain, which need not always materialize if the prospective targets (e. g., new members) are not deceived or individuals expected to see through the deception (e. g., seasoned users of a forum) are not entertained. These two goals will now be discussed.

5 Deception

Trolling, it is here argued, even if seemingly benevolent (cf. Bishop's (2014a) list of strategies), arises from some form of deception of the *target* (an individual or group of individuals). Even though trolling is sometimes viewed as online deception motivated by *malicious intention* (Utz 2005), a deceptive act may show different degrees of gravity and may bring about different interpersonal effects. Deception may be performed for the target's sake, as is the case with white lies. Nevertheless, typically, deception is considered immoral, having negative repercussions for the target, while benefitting the deceiver (see e. g. Williams 2002; Saul 2012).

Deception is conventionally understood as intentionally causing another individual to (continue to) believe something the communicator *believes to be false* (e. g., Bok 1978; Vincent and Castelfranchi 1981; Mahon 2007, and references therein). Any deceptive message shows *covert untruthfulness*, yet not necessarily objectively verifiable falsehood (Vincent Marrelli 2003, 2004; Dynel 2011b, 2016 forthcoming b and references therein). Importantly, this definition centers on an assumption of communication between two individuals: the deceiver and the deceived. Most philosophical studies on deception are premised on an assumption of a participatory dyad, and thus they do not account for more receiver roles. Moreover, the role of the deceived individual tends to be marginalized, which shows in the prevalent use of the verb "deceive" as if it were an intransitive one (notice the phrase "intent to deceive" recurring in the literature). On the other hand, the standard definition of *lying* (see Mahon 2008; Fallis 2010), here seen as a salient type of deception (cf. Bok 1978; Kupfer 1982; Williams 2002; Mahon 2015), next to a host of other strategies (see Dynel 2011b), is predicated on what Mahon (2015) dubs "the addressee condition." One can lie only to a particular addressee-target, whether in synchronous or asynchronous interactions. Mahon (2008) rightly observes that it is possible to lie to a few individuals at a time or even the general public, thus allowing for the collective target. Importantly, a troll can lie to (or otherwise deceive) an unidentified group of anonymous Internet users. Nonetheless, deception philosophers hardly ever dwell on the problem

of multiple recipientship or different communicative effects devised by a deceiver for the participants at the reception end (but see Dynel 2016 forthcoming a). The same holds for studies outside the field of philosophy, even if they presuppose the presence of many deceived individuals performing the same reception role, as is the case with most forms of *online deception*.

Online deception, i.e. deception on the Internet, may be considered a salient type of *digital deception*, i.e. deception in technologically mediated messages transmitted via communication technology (Hancock 2007). The topic of deception facilitated by the Internet has generated avid academic interest in psychology and communication studies (e.g., Hancock et al. 2007; Donath 1999; Dahlberg 2001; Whitty 2002; Utz 2005; Whitty and Joinson 2008). Regardless of the type of communicative activity at hand, when interactants are not familiar with one another offline, the Internet offers fertile ground for *identity deception*. This is hardly surprising, for Internet users can easily manipulate their identities (thanks to the anonymity, at least partial, that the Internet affords). In this vein, a few researchers (Donath 1999;¹² Dahlberg 2001; Hardaker 2010) propose that trolling consists in identity deception.

According to Donath (1999: 45), a troll aims to pass as a “legitimate participant” of a group, given his/her “interests and concerns.” In this sense, an Internet user’s contribution to an exchange, whether multi-party (e.g., a forum or a chatroom) or dyadic (e.g., an email), is legitimate only if it is sincere. This legitimization is independent from the default ratification of any Internet user in any publically available interaction, as endorsed earlier; rather, it concerns each individual’s self-selection as a participant in the light of his/her sincere opinions, interests or goals. A troll will strive to present himself/herself as an individual sincerely participating in a computer-mediated interaction, while *covertly pretending* (see Dynel 2017 forthcoming a) to have the focal opinions, interests or goals in front of the deceived target. For example, none of the three individuals portrayed by Lindsay is sincerely interested in the original advertisement or has any intention of selling Shaniqua a car. According to his deceptive plan, she does not see through the covert pretense (at least until she terminates the email exchanges), and she ratifies him as the addressee of her replies and legitimizes his email responses as being sincere offers.

In Hardaker’s (2010) view, a troll enacts an online identity inconsistent with his/her genuine offline one to gain in-group membership with other Internet users (e.g., of a forum). According to this interpretation, the DontEvenReply troll attempts to form a minimal (dyadic) social group with the addressee of his

¹² However, Donath (1999) lists “identity concealment” as a form of deception distinct from trolling.

emails, winning her trust as genuine prospective sellers. To enact distinct identities, he manipulates his style of writing, for example to come over as being an uneducated person (cf. the careless style with grammatical errors and no punctuation in Part 1).

Nonetheless, it may be claimed that identity deception is not necessarily the most important feature of trolling, which thrives primarily on what may be dubbed *message deception*, i. e. diversified covertly untruthful contributions to the ongoing interactions. A troll may not provide explicitly any information about his/her fake identity, while identity deception may be merely a consequence, not always consciously envisaged, of the topical deception he/she performs. This is the case of the DontEvenReply troll's sharing some untruthful information about his contrived character's past, such as: "I used to work in the film industry and got this car after it was used in a movie" (Part 3) in order to account for his possession of the bizarre car. Based on this example, it seems that message deception may coincide with identity deception (cf. Hancock 2007). On the other hand, a troll may also contribute a message which is covertly untruthful, namely such that he/she does not believe to be true but whose content is not orientated towards self-presentation (as many examples below will show). Overall, it is argued that some aspect of identity deception is more of a bedrock premise for a troll, who covertly pretends to be an individual that fulfills the default expectations of the other interactant(s) (e. g., someone that who finds a forum topic relevant, or has a genuine offer to make), but message deception is key to a troll's contributions, which may, but do not need to, promote identity deception.

A few definitions of trolling (Hardaker 2010, 2013; Buckels et al. 2014) encompass the component of message deception. Herring et al. (2002) and Shachaf and Hara (2010) appear to allude to the deceptiveness of trolling messages when they mention the appearance of sincerity. Donath (1999) mentions in passing that some trolls post deliberately misleading (i. e. deceptive) information. Crystal (2001: 52) suggests that a troll's bait is "false information deliberately introduced into a conversation to see who falls for it." Regrettably, none of the authors explains what stands behind the "apparent sincerity," "misleading" or "falsehood."

It is here argued that each contribution, whether an email or a post, and typically its subordinate units made by a troll depend on covert untruthfulness, and therefore, deception. In what follows, employing philosophical parlance, attention is paid to untruthfulness and several forms of deception trolls tend to deploy in order to hoodwink others into responding to the messages as if they were truthful. The types of deception are the focus of strictly theoretical philosophical studies, typically illustrated with constructed examples (see Dynel 2016

forthcoming a). Real data may pose problems in empirical analysis, for the deceiver's communicative intentions and beliefs can only be conjectured, sometimes with very little certainty, whilst they are central to the fine philosophical distinctions between the types of deception. Therefore, the interpretations of the DontEvenReply troll's messages presented below should not be regarded as being definitive.

Generally, in each of his emails, the troll deceives Shaniqua that he is willing to sell her a car. This overarching deceptive goal is anchored in several types of verbal deception performed on the utterance level. *Lying* is one of them. According to the classical philosophical definition,¹³ a lie is tantamount to an assertion the speaker believes to be false with a view to deceiving the receiver by having him/her believe this assertion to be true (see e. g., Chisholm and Feehan 1977; Bok 1978; Kupfer 1982; Adler 1997; Williams 2002; Mahon 2008, 2015; Fallis 2009, 2010; Carson 2006; Sorensen 2007; Stokke 2013). For example, "I repainted it a nice shiny blue" (Part 3) is a blatant lie, which, incidentally, the troll may want his target to ultimately discover, after she has seen the attached photoshopped picture.

Typically, liars intend to deceive the targets with reference to the contents of their assertions and, to achieve this goal, they also intend to deceive the target about their believing the assertions to be true (cf. Kupfer 1982; Simpson 1992, Faulkner 2007; Fallis 2010; Mahon 2015). However, a deceiver may intend to deceive the target about whether he/she believes the assertion he/she is making to be true, while not intending to deceive them that the assertion is true (cf. Chisholm and Feehan 1977; Fallis 2010; Mahon 2015). This concerns cases when the communicator believes that the receiver will recognise the assertion as being false, and thus he/she can only deceive the receiver about his/her believing the truth of this assertion. According to the standard definition of lying, this is a different type of deception (Mahon 2015), which seems to be pertinent, for example, to the DontEvenReply troll's stating, "its not really a ford explorer its a ford bronco but its like the same thing" (Part 1), which he cannot expect to be taken to be true by anybody with rudimentary knowledge about the two cars, and which might only deceive the target in that it represents his genuine belief, albeit misguided. (Incidentally, this deception would hardly work if stated by a professional car vendor, who is competent in the topic and will go to any lengths to sell a car.) Alternatively, it could be claimed that this instance represents what is known as *bullshit*, in view of the troll's general communicative intent

¹³ This definition captures the prototypical cases, not marginal examples which preoccupy philosophers (see Mahon 2008; Fallis 2010).

and lack of concern for the truth. “Bullshit” is a technical philosophical term, which should not be deemed offensive or synonymous with “rubbish.”

Many cases of trolling messages, which are primarily meant to incite the receiver rather than represent the truth, may be classified as bullshit (e.g., Frankfurt 2005 [1986], Carson 2010; Fallis forthcoming, Meibauer 2016 forthcoming). According to Frankfurt’s (2005: 54–55) original (and still prevailing) definition, bullshit displays “lack of concern for the truth” and “misrepresentational intent” or “phoniness” and refers to statements about whose validity the speaker does not have sufficient knowledge, being ignorant of, and/or indifferent toward, the truth. While the bullshitter does not intend to deceive the target about the propositions, he/she does intend to deceive the target “about his enterprise” (Frankfurt 2005: 54). The bullshitter deceives the target by presenting his/her assertion as something he/she (the bullshitter) believes to be true and is true. In other words, the bullshitter deceives the target by covertly pretending to believe his/her statements to be true. In the example above (Part 1), this is reflected by the specifications for both cars on offer, which the DontEvenReply troll knows to be non-existent. He is not concerned about whether such cars could even exist but checks if the target will find the descriptions truthful, which she seems to do.

Another form of verbal deception that does not amount to lying encompasses a host of untruthful verbal formulations which are not assertions (cf. Mahon 2008, 2015), for example those performed in the interrogative or imperative mood, as in “Let me know what you think.” The troll is not concerned about the target’s perception of his offer and deceives that he is, but he cannot be said to be lying when he makes the insincere request.

Yet another salient form of deception is *withholding information or deception by omission* (Chisholm and Feehan 1977). Frequently, it manifests itself in messages which give incomplete information, which is why they are sometimes referred to as *half-truths* (Vincent and Castelfranchi 1981; Vincent Marrelli 2003; Saul 2012) or *lies of omission* (Chisholm and Feehan 1977; Mahon 2015). Essentially, the communicator tells the truth but intentionally withholds information which he/she deems relevant for the target (Castelfranchi and Poggi 1994) in order to induce a false belief in the latter. For example, in the textual presentation of the car on offer, Ryan Jackson lists a number of its merits, yet keeping covert the fact that the car is essentially a wreck (Part 2). Although he provides a picture of the car, which does reveal this information, Lindsay bases the deception on the assumption that the addressee will not open the attachment until after reading the text, and will be deceived at least for a moment. Incidentally, given her reply, the target seems not to have opened it at all, remaining deceived longer than expected, until later in the correspondence.

On the whole, the untruthfulness, if not absurdity, present in the bulk of Lindsay's email texts might be overt to some, but (at least initially) it must not have been transparent to the gullible target, resulting in her being successfully deceived. This fact serves the humorous entertainment of the individuals visiting the troll's website.

6 (Humorous) entertainment

As reported earlier, trolling is thought to have come into being as a form of humorous entertainment. Nevertheless, Bishop (2014a, 2014b) suggests that, over the years, the scope of trolling has changed. The idea of playful provocation for the sake of mutual enjoyment and bond-building has been replaced by that of abusing others for only the troller's own sick entertainment. He labels the former "classical trolling," and the latter "anonymous trolling." On a different axis, Bishop (2012b, 2012c, 2014a) distinguishes between abusive trolling, calling it "flame trolling," which is not intended to amuse anybody, in opposition to "kudos trolling," which may be based on "transgressive" humor (see Bishop 2012c, 2014b). As Bishop (2014a) observes, however, what is offensive to one person may be simultaneously entertaining to another. Therefore, it seems that the two types of trolling do not form a dichotomy, but are rather two facets of one phenomenon.

Trolling typically invites the lulz "amusement at other people's distress" (Phillips 2015). Similarly, Fuller, McCrea and Wilson (2013) note that "what counts as abuse, and what counts as lulz, may just depend on which end of the stick we have grasped." Frequently, it is only a troll that takes (sick) pleasure in his anti-social activity and its negative repercussions. This idea of self-entertainment seems to lie at the heart of the conceptualization of trolling as a game of deception played on unwitting victims (Donath 1999; Dahlberg 2001). However, on some occasions, trolls share this victorious experience with others, notably other Internet users with insight into the deceptive activity, which is claimed to have been the prototypical form of trolling in the past (cf. Bishop 2014a, 2014b). A troll may, perhaps only tacitly, wish that some online participants will see through the deception and find it amusing especially in the context of other people's being taken in. Those who follow a troll's bait are prone to the mockery of non-deceived users (Tepper 1997). This is germane to the DontEvenReply troll, whose humorous intent is explicitly indicated showing in the self-report available on his website, and is reflected by the comments left by the amused visitors. While the intention to amuse

others is transparent in this troll's activities, in the case of other trolls, it may be more difficult to specify whether trolling attempts are (supposed to be) humorous to anybody else apart from the troll. Admittedly, all trolling serves as a form of entertainment of the troll, and possibly also of others, which may be conducive to humor.¹⁴ It needs to be stressed that the current concern is the potential for *humor*, understood as an objectively verifiable notion, rather than *funniness*, that is idiosyncratic evaluation of humor, which always shows degrees and varies for each person.

Whether it serves only self-entertainment or also other-entertainment, trolling may be considered to be an online form of *superiority/disparagement humor*, which derives from “denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target” (Ferguson and Ford 2008: 284). According to superiority theory, humor stems from enhanced self-esteem thanks to a downward comparison with the target (e. g., Hobbes 1996 [1651], La Fave 1972; La Fave et al. 1976; Gruner 1997), or a feeling of superiority and triumph based on the recognition of the target's infirmities, foibles, weaknesses or misfortunes, which are foreign to the humor experiencer (see Dynel 2013). It may be argued that a troll establishes his/her superiority over the target by successfully deceiving the latter. Internet users privy to the deception may side with the troll (but will not if they should sympathise with the target or find the trolling vulgar, annoying, or otherwise inappropriate) and take pleasure in their superiority over the gullible, successfully deceived target.

A troll disaffiliates himself/herself from the target and aims “to enhance the self at the expense of others” (Martin et al. 2003: 48), which is why a troll's deception may be regarded as a vehicle for *disaffiliative humor* (see Dynel 2013). This humor is defined as a salient category of disparagement humor residing in genuine aggression against a target, which serves as the source of amusement of participants other than the target, both the speaker and

¹⁴ An anonymous reviewer points out that the fundamental characteristic of trolling is the desire for recognition: for being clever (superior to the target), for belonging to a superior social group (being disaffiliated from the target), and for being creative. The reviewer adds that as long as the troll receives recognition from someone, trolling is successful. This may indeed be the case of the troll discussed here. Nevertheless, while they may explicitly report on their previous activity, trolls never reveal their trolling intent online on the websites where they operate, or in email exchanges with the targets. Some trolls, albeit successful, may never receive any recognition from anybody online (or offline). The forms of recognition listed by the reviewer correspond to the sources of pleasure (for the troll only) predicted by the superiority theory of humor. These will be in force even if a troll assumes that his/her deceptive activity has not been detected by anybody, and when he/she has no intention of sharing this experience with anybody but enjoys the activity on his/her own.

receivers. Thus, trolling qualifies as disaffiliative humor operating in multi-party interactions on the Internet. If no one is privy to the troll's deception and ulterior motives, he/she must be trolling merely for his/her own sadistic enjoyment (see Buckels et al. 2014). However, when other Internet users are invited to, and/or are able to, recognise trolling, they may reap cognitive rewards, appreciating the troll's intellectual superiority (manifest in the ability to deceive the target), affiliating with him/her, and disaffiliating themselves from the gullible target. The DontEvenReply troll's intellectual superiority and his victims' inferiority are all the more transparent given that the targets are indeed deceived by strikingly impossible and phony messages. In essence, non-targeted individuals can laugh at the target together with the troll. This is conditioned upon such users' affiliation with the troll rather than the victim, as predicted by the *disposition theory of humor* (e. g., Zillmann and Cantor 1972, cf. Dynel 2013), according to which an individual's humor appreciation correlates negatively with the favorableness of his/her disposition towards the disparaged target and varies directly with the favorableness of the disposition towards the disparaging individual.

Trolling may be compared to offline behaviors, real-life or fictional (e. g. in films), face-to-face and mass-mediated, where one individual (or more) is amused at the expense of a deceived butt (see Dynel 2017 forthcoming b). The act of deceiving one person by means of covertly untruthful statements or questions in order to amuse another had been common in human interactions long before the advent of the Internet. Because of the discrepancies between offline and online interactions (such as the spoken/written mode, and online asynchrony and anonymity), the deceptive, and simultaneously, humorous acts performed in offline and online multi-party interactions are necessarily different. Among other things, the vast and anonymous Internet audiences might motivate more malicious and creative types of deception than those found in real life. In any case, deception in offline interactions should not be (retroactively) termed "trolling", which had better be reserved for the specific deceptive practices on the Internet. Importantly, trolling is not the only manifestation of online deception facilitating the humorous entertainment of others on the Internet (e. g. films on YouTube which show some individuals being successfully deceived).

Moreover, *genuine deception serving humor* in multi-party interactions, manifest in trolling or other practices in online and offline interactions, must not be mistaken for perfectly benign *put-on humor*, *garden-path jokes* and other *deception-based categories of humor* in which the deception is instantly revealed to the deceived individual for the sake of his/her amusement (see Dynel 2017 forthcoming b for discussion). Admittedly, the deception-based forms of

conversational humor, anchored in the “just joking/kidding” metamessage (whether or not verbalized), can also be found in online interactions, but they are markedly different from trolling. Trolls may intend to amuse anybody but the targets, and they typically do not reveal their underlying deceptive intentions to the targets. Trolling, if successful, remains covert from the perspective of the targets, and even if the latter should discover it post factum, they stand no chance of finding pleasure in having been hoodwinked and (publically) ridiculed. Finally, trolling, which is an intrinsically covert and intentional activity, cannot be mistaken for overtly untruthful humorous messages (see Dynel 2017 forthcoming a), which a receiver takes at face value and misinterprets as being truthful. This is the case of failed humor and (unintentional) *misleading*, but not (purposeful) deception, which inheres in trolling.¹⁵

Essentially, the DontEvenReply troll’s elaborate emails are humorous units, their deceptiveness notwithstanding. Post addressees will then easily affiliate with the troll, appreciating his wit and mocking the targets’ gullibility, and sometimes striking stupidity. This is facilitated by the fact that the troll’s communications are, on the whole, innocuous, being provocative but not overtly offensive. Also, the targets’ naïve reactions are conducive to humor experience. On the other hand, the targets may also respond emotionally by resorting to *impoliteness*. This is yet another source of vicarious pleasure for individuals who are not the target of the verbal attack. Impoliteness and ensuing conflict in which one is not directly involved, being only an observer, has grown to be a popular form of entertainment (e. g., Culpeper 2005; Dynel 2012, 2013).

7 Conclusions

The central goal of this paper has been to identify and depict the definitional components of (traditional) trolling, against the backdrop of the relevant multidisciplinary literature. An attempt has been made to distil the essence of trolling, a heterogeneous phenomenon which manifests itself in many speech activities in different forms of Internet communication.

The crucial proposal of this paper is that a trolling contribution has a twofold communicative goal: to deceive the target and, as a result, to entertain

¹⁵ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for posing several questions that incited me to elaborate on these humor-related issues in this paragraph and the preceding one.

trolls themselves and sometimes also other Internet users who can see through the deception or, as in the data used here, are made privy to the deception by the trolls themselves. These two objectives are then orientated towards different participants in multi-party interactions.

Deception is an intrinsic feature of all trolling, irrespective of its manifestation at the utterance level or the nature of the reply it elicits. Trolls primarily wish to deceive with regard to the content of their messages and/or their belief about the truth of their messages (their falsehood being obvious to the receivers), whereby their prime deceptive goals are performed in order to lure unwitting targets into replying. Also, identity deception is not always trolls' central goal and does not suffice to capture the deceptive mechanics of trolling, while message deception shows a number of different manifestations (lies, deception by non-assertions, deceiving about one's belief, bullshit, and deception by omission), which can be universally detected in trolling activities.

The second characteristic of trolling is its entertaining/humorous potential, which gives pleasure to the troll and sometimes also to other Internet users. A troll may just wish to take pleasure in deceiving others, establishing his superiority over the deceived individuals, or he/she may mean to amuse others by revealing the fruit of his/her deception to them. The latter will share the troll's experience of intellectual victory, basking in the latter's glory, and may also find amusement in the reactions trolling engenders from the deceived target, from whom they disaffiliate themselves. Yet another source of humor may be the creative trolling message as such, thanks to its wittiness and/or absurdity.

Overall, this article has addressed the need for clearer definition of trolling vis-à-vis other online communicative behaviors in terms of both form and underlying rationale. Compared to activities such as cyberbullying and cyberterrorism, trolling seems to enjoy relatively benevolent motivation. Even if some of the trolling practices may be annoying or obnoxious, trolls do not typically intend to inflict real harm, while only preying on their targets' gullibility for the sake of entertainment of self and others. If they succeed in deceiving some and amusing other Internet users, as the DontEvenReply troll does, their trolling cannot be seen as stupid.

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