

## Where Anonymity Breeds Contempt

■ Julie Zhuo

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*In the following essay, which appeared in the Opinion Pages of the New York Times in November 2010, Zhuo gives readers a definition of the term trolling and offers examples to show why it is problematic. As you read, pay attention to how Zhuo's thesis answers a question that arises from this discussion of trolling: what can we do to combat the problem?*

### Reflecting on What You Know

Do you think people interact differently online than they do face-to-face? Why or why not? Think of an example that supports your answer.

**T**here you are, peacefully reading an article or watching a video on the Internet. You finish, find it thought-provoking, and scroll down to the comments section to see what other people thought. And there, lurking among dozens of well-intentioned opinions, is a troll. 1

"How much longer is the media going to milk this beyond tired story?" "These guys are frauds." "Your idiocy is disturbing." "We're just trying to make the world a better place one brainwashed, ignorant idiot at a time." These are the trollish comments, all from anonymous sources, that you could have found after reading a CNN article on the rescue of the Chilean miners. 2

Trolling, defined as the act of posting inflammatory, derogatory or provocative messages in public forums, is a problem as old as the Internet itself, although its roots go much farther back. Even in the fourth century B.C., Plato touched upon the subject of anonymity and morality in his parable of the ring of Gyges.

That mythical ring gave its owner the power of invisibility, and Plato observed that even a habitually just man who possessed such a ring would become a thief, knowing that he couldn't be caught. Morality, Plato argues, comes from full disclosure; without accountability for our actions we would all behave unjustly.

This certainly seems to be true for the anonymous trolls today. After Alexis Pilkington, a 17-year-old Long Island girl, committed suicide earlier this year, trolls descended on her online tribute page to post pictures of nooses, references to hangings and other hateful comments. A better-known example involves Nicole Catsouras, an 18-year-old who died in a car crash in California in 2006. Photographs of her badly disfigured body were posted on the Internet, where anonymous trolls set up fake tribute pages and in some cases e-mailed the photos to her parents with subject lines like "Hey, Daddy, I'm still alive."

Psychological research has proven again and again that anonymity increases unethical behavior. Road rage bubbles up in the relative anonymity of one's car. And in the online world, which can offer total anonymity, the effect is even more pronounced. People—even ordinary, good people—often change their behavior in radical ways. There's even a term for it: the online disinhibition effect.

Many forums and online communities are looking for ways to strike back. Back in February, Engadget, a popular technology review blog, shut down its commenting system for a few days after it received a barrage of trollish comments on its iPad coverage.

Many victims are turning to legislation. All 50 states now have stalking, bullying or harassment laws that explicitly include electronic forms of communication. Last year, Liskula Cohen, a former model, persuaded a New York judge to require Google to reveal the identity of an anonymous blogger who she felt had defamed her, and she has now filed a suit against the blogger. Last month, another former model, Carla Franklin, persuaded a judge to force YouTube to reveal the identity of a troll who made a disparaging comment about her on the video-sharing site.

But the law by itself cannot do enough to disarm the Internet's trolls. Content providers, social networking platforms and community sites must also do their part by rethinking the systems they have in place for user commentary so as to discourage—or disallow—anonymity. Reuters, for example, announced that it would start to block anonymous comments and require users to register with their names and e-mail addresses in an effort to curb “uncivil behavior.”

Some may argue that denying Internet users the ability to post anonymously is a breach of their privacy and freedom of expression. But until the age of the Internet, anonymity was a rare thing. When someone spoke in public, his audience would naturally be able to see who was talking.

Others point out that there's no way to truly rid the Internet of anonymity. After all, names and e-mail addresses can be faked. And in any case many commenters write things that are rude or inflammatory under their real names.

But raising barriers to posting bad comments is still a smart first step. Well-designed commenting systems should also aim to highlight thoughtful and valuable opinions while letting trollish ones sink into oblivion.

The technology blog Gizmodo is trying an audition system for new commenters, under which their first few comments would be approved by a moderator or a trusted commenter to ensure quality before anybody else could see them. After a successful audition, commenters can freely post. If over time they impress other trusted commenters with their contributions, they'd be promoted to trusted commenters, too, and their comments would henceforth be featured.

Disqus, a comments platform for bloggers, has experimented with allowing users to rate one another's comments and feed those ratings into a global reputation system called Clout. Moderators can use a commenter's Clout score to “help separate top commenters from trolls.”

At Facebook, where I've worked on the design of the public commenting widget, the approach is to try to replicate real-world social norms by emphasizing the human qualities of conversation. People's faces, real names and brief biographies (“John Doe from Lexington”) are placed next to their public comments, to establish a baseline of responsibility.

Facebook also encourages you to share your comments with your friends. Though you're free to opt out, the knowledge that what you

say may be seen by the people you know is a big deterrent to trollish behavior.

This kind of social pressure works because, at the end of the day, most trolls wouldn't have the gall to say to another person's face half the things they anonymously post on the Internet.

Instead of waiting around for human nature to change, let's start to rein in bad behavior by promoting accountability. Content providers, stop allowing anonymous comments. Moderate your comments and forums. Look into using comment services to improve the quality of engagement on your site. Ask your users to report trolls and call them out for polluting the conversation.

In slowly lifting the veil of anonymity, perhaps we can see the troll not as the frightening monster of lore, but as what we all really are: human.

### Thinking Critically about This Reading

Zhuo points out several legal efforts to curb “trolling” but argues that “the law by itself cannot do enough” to stop abusive comments (paragraph 9). Where does she think the responsibility lies? Do you agree? Why or why not?

### Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is Zhuo's thesis, and where does she state it?
2. What problem does Zhuo address in this essay? How does her thesis offer an approach to this problem?
3. Why does Zhuo think Plato's story about the ring of Gyges (4) is relevant to Internet users?
4. How does Zhuo define the “online disinhibition effect” (6)? Which of Zhuo's examples of this effect do you find most powerful? (Glossary: *Definition*)
5. Zhuo identifies anonymity as a source of the problem. How does she think Internet culture allows, or even encourages, users to remain anonymous?
6. At the beginning of her essay, Zhuo says a troll can lurk “among dozens of well-intentioned opinions” (1). What does this say about the balance of thoughtful responses and inflammatory

comments online? How much of the latter do you think it takes to derail a discussion?

### **Classroom Activity Using Thesis**

A strong thesis makes a claim rather than stating something obvious about the topic. One way to check whether your thesis makes a claim is to try stating its opposite as an alternative. If this new thesis seems absurd or wrong, your original thesis might benefit from greater specificity.

Imagine that you were going to write a response to Zhuo's argument about online trolling. Which of the following could be a thesis statement for a substantial counterargument? If you're not sure, test each one by stating its opposite. Note: often a good thesis cannot be easily reversed because it does not frame the issues in black and white.

1. Something should be done to decrease irresponsible commenting online.
2. Trolling can best be addressed through stronger laws.
3. Online forums often become a platform for inflammatory comments.
4. Web developers are inventing new systems to discourage trolling.
5. Though it is important to combat trolling, websites should preserve open commenting policies.
6. Zhuo overstates the problem of trolling on the Internet.

Now that you've eliminated some, how many potential theses are left? When writers like Zhuo address complex issues, thoughtful readers can respond with an array of ideas, concerns, or questions. Look at the remaining thesis statements, and discuss how each one takes a different approach to the problem.

### **Suggested Writing Assignments**

1. Find a newspaper article posted in the past weeks and survey the comments section. Do your findings support Zhuo's assertions about trolling? Write an essay that summarizes what you observe. Your thesis should state what these comments reveal about online commenting behavior.