Pnina Fichman and Madelyn R. Sanfilippo, **Online Trolling and Its Perpetrators: Under the Cyberbridge**, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 201 pp., $75.00 (hardcover).

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Once upon a time, before the rise of social media and online communication, trolls existed only in fairytales like "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" (Watts, 2007). In the folktale, the troll lurks under a bridge, threatening to eat all who dare pass, until the third and largest billy goat gruff violently defeats the troll, and the bridge is cleared for all. Following this tale's teachings, Internet users are routinely reminded not to feed the trolls. In ***Online Trolling and Its Perpetrators: Under the Cyberbridge,*** Pnina Fichman and Madelyn R. Sanfilippo continue their research into online trolls. Although the text is analytically underwhelming, the authors offer nuanced explanations of the behaviors and motivations associated with trolling, provide numerous case studies to illuminate the practice's many facets, and present the results of their thoughtful ethnographic research.
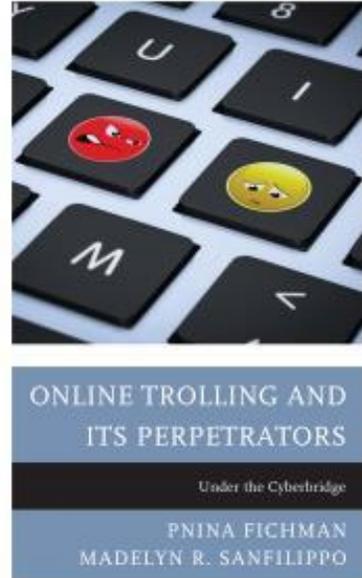
Early on, the authors clearly present their goal: to distinguish trolling from other forms of online deviance. They assert that "various other antisocial and deviant behaviors, such as cyberbullying and hacking, attracted significantly more scholarly attention, yet trolling is a distinct phenomenon" (p. 3). They also posit that trolling is not necessarily always a negative behavior and explore this element in chapter 5, "All Trolling Is Not Equal." Among the authors' key objectives, they seek answers to diverse questions such as,

> Who is a troll and why do they troll? What factors enable online trolling? How do members and administrators of online communities detect, interpret, and react to trolling? How can online trolling be handled effectively? What is the impact of sociocultural and technological environments on online trolling? What motivates trolling? Is trolling socially negative, or can it impact online communities and society in positive ways? (p. 1)

Fichman and Sanfilippo are most successful in their discussions of enabling factors, in chapter 4, "Online Enabling Factors for Trolling and Deviant Behaviors"; reactions to trolling behavior, in chapter 5 and in chapter 7, "Trolling in Context"; and interacting with trolls, in chapter 9, "Responding to Online Trolls."

Structurally, Fichman and Sanfilippo begin by defining online trolling "as a repetitive, disruptive online deviant behavior by an individual toward other individuals or groups" (p. 6). In their estimation, to troll is to take part in a "generally humorous activity," whereas to be a troll is to act "in a deviant,

nonhumorous way" (p. 5). This kind of subcategorization continues throughout chapter 2, "What is Online Trolling?" Table 2.3, "Types of Trolls" (p. 12), details various types of trolls to examine the breadth of trolling behaviors; for example, there are Rest in Peace, ideological, Laugh Out Loud, nonideological, religion, and political trolls. In the authors' estimation, each subtype uses trolling to accomplish a specific goal, whether to amuse themselves by "exposing that disingenuous nature of memorialization" (p. 12), as the Rest in Peace trolls seek to do, or "to undermine the ideological opposition" (p. 12), as is common for political trolls. The authors argue that as greater nuance is applied to types of trolls, future researchers will be better able to study individual behaviors and understand this form of online deviance. They suggest that researchers must "do more than identify trolls" (pp. 21–22), but in their focus on differentiating among the myriad subcategories and their respective motivations, Fichman and Sanfilippo also engage in the same generic identification practices throughout.

In the next chapters, "What Motivates Online Trolling and Its Perpetrators?" and "Online Enabling Factors for Trolling and Deviant Behaviors," the authors begin to delve into the main substance of their work: how to differentiate trolls through behavior analysis. They strive to prove that not all trolls are equal, yet the various motivations for online deviance they put forth apply nearly unanimously to each subtype of troll. In Table 3.1, "Types of Online Deviant Behaviors and Their Motivations" (p. 25), they assign a combination of malevolence, deviant impulse, enjoyment, activism/ideology, social status, psychology, and technology as motivating factors for trolling. As much as the authors maintain that trolling is a unique behavior with wide-ranging customs and outcomes, their work does not thoroughly disprove the notion that online deviance—and, by extension, trolling—is simply motivated by the "desire to wreak havoc" (p. 28).

Within popular culture and mainstream media, trolling is easily grouped into a singular activity, which denies the differences between trolling's unique behaviors and motivations, according to the authors. Along with this, they argue that media condemnation of all trolling denigrates trolls unfairly. In their most innovative chapter, "All Trolling Is Not Equal," the authors reveal the book's intentions:

> Almost the entire body of literature discusses online trolls from the point of view of those who are impacted by online trolling, while little scholarly work attempts to present the trolls' point of view. From an outside point of view, online trolling is perceived as online deviant behavior. This chapter is an effort to shed light on the concept from a segment of the public that extends the concept to include normative online behavior and the point of view of those who claim that they troll at times. (p. 65)

The authors intend to "shed light" on trolling from within the subculture to diversify discussions of trolling so research can continue with greater nuance. As J. Bishop defined trolling in 2014, it "once meant provoking others for mutual enjoyment, but now means abusing others for personal enjoyment" (p. 8). However, this definition does not provide for an assessment of trolling's varied motivations, which Fichman and Sanfilippo detail extensively.

As opposed to existing scholarship surrounding online trolling, Fichman and Sanfilippo engage in ethnographic research using surveys and panels to gather information on how college-age students feel

about trolling. Their focus group participants almost universally disagreed with mainstream media's assessment that trolling is akin to a "social disease" (p. 66) and felt that "media and academia take 'trolling' too seriously" (p. 77), although the respondents showcased an intuitive ability to discern between trolling and more complex deviant behaviors. According to the authors,

> Participants seemingly recognized why the terms *troll* and *trolling* are applied to other behaviors and their perpetrators, yet felt that to use *troll* interchangeably with *hacker* or *bully* or to call all offline pranks or acts of deception *trolling* would be inappropriate. (p. 80)

For example, Participant B observed that *trolling* as a term "is probably becoming more overused and more broad, like what you were saying earlier with differentiating between trolling and bullying, and that kind of stuff" (p. 76). Similarly, Participant A observes that "the media does a really bad job of distinguishing between [trolling and cyberbullying]" (p. 78). Following this, chapter 7 offers a wide variety of case studies that will prove useful for researchers looking into specific instances of trolling in popular culture. Everything from a satirical review of a King James Bible on Amazon to false revisions of Wikipedia pages and feminist responses on Facebook to Governor Rick Perry's "positions on women's reproductive rights" (p.127) are discussed to illustrate the importance of analyzing context to determine trolling's motivations.

Throughout this work, Fichman and Sanfilippo strongly resist any appearance of bias against those who engage in trolling. They admit that "online vandalism, identity deception, excessive argumentation, and harassment are often the first thing that come to mind" (p. 172) when discussing trolling and acknowledge the potentially devastating effects on victims. However, the authors also extoll the positive outcomes of trolling, such as those who use trolling to expose bigotry and hypocrisy. While the authors provide numerous case studies of "positive" instances of trolling, the negative results far outweigh any potential positive outcomes because of trolling's sheer capacity to inflict serious damage on victims. Although the authors' commitment to unbiased research is commendable, it is difficult to appreciate the virtues of trolling alongside related exploits, such as the recent public abuse directed toward Leslie Jones of *Saturday Night Live* by cyberbullies. Although more critical of trolling outright, Whitney Phillips's *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (2015) takes a more analytical approach using cultural theory to assess trolling in context.

Diverging from popular representations of trolls in mainstream media, Fichman and Sanfilippo investigate trolling behavior from the point of view of trolls and dissect how trolling is perceived across demographics to deliver a more complete image of the contemporary troll. Fichman and Sanfilippo have published several coauthored books and articles on social informatics and online communication since 2014, and this most recent book serves as a culmination of various research projects and a comprehensive exploration of existing research surrounding trolling. The authors argue that previous work in the field often resorts to assessing trolling through politeness discourse theory, cultural theory of subcultures, and hacking studies and, as such, lacks a sense of nuance necessary to understand "the depth [of] trolling" (p. 21). By their own account, the book is intended to serve a variety of audiences, but

it is targeted toward academics already familiar with the field or those looking for a primer in online trolling as related to social informatics. This text proves to be an excellent resource and a solid contribution to studies of social informatics and online communities through its ethnographic research, with near-exhaustive citation of past scholarship. While *Online Trolling and its Perpetrators* does not make a strong enough argument to push the field in any significant direction, it offers clear evidence to delineate between trolling and more serious forms of online deviance.

References

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Watts, L. S. (2007). The three billy goats gruff. *Encyclopedia of American folklore*. New York, NY: Facts on File.