

Don't be a comment troll

Written by The Vidette Editorial Board
Thursday, 07 February 2013 13:03

The Internet is an easy place to hide. Anybody can go online and create various web accounts using false information to interact with others. We've heard about catfishing, but what about comment trolling?

Comment trolling has been around for as long as the Internet, though its name has only recently become popular. Comment trolls are those who lurk around on the Internet, waiting for articles, blog posts or videos to appear so they can post mean, negative or sometimes just confusing comments. While some may create accounts using their actual personal information, many utilize ambiguous usernames as a façade to post harmful words without retribution.

Researchers at George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication in Virginia recently conducted a study on comment trolls after hypothesizing that the reason why many people were misinformed about scientific issues such as climate change was because of the misleading comments posted on articles.

Chris Mooney wrote in an article for Mother Jones that the study surveyed 1,183 Americans to analyze the negative consequences malicious online comments had on the readers' understanding and opinion of the scientific issue at hand. Participants read a blog post about the risks and benefits of nanotechnology. The post was neutral and not in favor of one position or the other. Some participants were given negative comments at the end of the article, and some were given neutral or positive comments.

The study showed that those whose article contained the negative comments at the end — similar to ones comment trolls would post — were more defensive and angry after reading the article. Scientific American Blog Editor Bora Zivkovic explained that "The nasty comment thread polarized the opinion of readers, leading them to misunderstand the original article."

Comment trolls aren't only ruining readers' understanding and opinions about science. The Guardian conducted a similar test where staff monitored the tone of comments on their Facebook page and website after an initial comment was posted. They determined that the

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early comments influenced the way others responded afterward.

Besides news articles and blog posts, comment trolls have been attacking helpless Internet users elsewhere. How many instances have we heard about someone posting a video on YouTube and receiving an overwhelming amount of negative comments, some even suggesting that the user kill themselves? What about the hurtful bullying that occurs on Tumblr through the anonymous ask option?

While you may think that your comments online don't make a big difference, they sometimes do. This Editorial Board is strongly advocating that you do not become a comment troll and do not allow yourself to be affected by one. Just because it's easy to unleash your emotions and sometimes hurtful opinions online because you can remain anonymous doesn't mean it's okay.

Many of us know what it's like to read a news article or watch a video online and then scroll to the bottom to read the ridiculous comments. While they may be entertaining, think about the potentially negative consequences these comments could be having. And most importantly, think through your response before you post.