Trolling and flaming: Putting out the fire

Trolling and *flaming* refer to the intentional disruption of online communities. While closely related, the general difference is that trolling is considered to be rude or impolite commentary and posts, lacking in etiquette, while flaming refers to insulting or provocative commentary (Hardaker 2010; Herring et al. 2002).

There is a lack of clarity concerning the definition of trolling. For example, senders may not have intended to troll (ie to be rude or impolite); instead, they may have misunderstood the context of the discussion, or made an error that has been misinterpreted (Hardaker 2010). The exchange may then escalate when others add their opinions. In contrast, motivations for flaming included passing time, escaping from reality, relaxation and entertainment (Alonzo & Aiken 2004).

Trolling and flaming may be opportunistic, or specifically directed at individuals or groups, particularly those who are already discriminated against (Herring et al. 2002). Trolling and flaming are facilitated by the perceived anonymity and physical distance between the troll and the victim, and they typically take place on social media sites, blogs and online discussion forums (Hardaker 2010; Herring et al. 2002).

Trolling and flaming, when persistently directed at the same target(s), may constitute cyberstalking or cyberbullying and the effects on the intended victim may be similar, including feelings of anger, powerlessness, sadness and fear (Hoff & Mitchell 2009).

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (2012: np) has provided the following advice to protect against trolling and flaming:

» **IGNORE** the troll—don't respond to nasty, immature or offensive comments. Giving trolls the attention they want only gives them more power.

» **BLOCK** the troll—take away their power by blocking them. If they pop up under a different name, block them again.

» **REPORT** trolls—report to site administrators. If they pop up under a different name, report them to site administrators again. If they continue, contact the police for further advice.

» **TALK** with friends and family—if a troll has upset you, talk about it with friends and family—it's not you, it's them. Visit the Cybersmart Online Helpline or call Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 [or LifeLine on 13 11 14].

» **PROTECT** friends from trolls—if trolls are upsetting a friend tell them to Ignore, Block and Report. Tell their family and other friends and encourage them to seek support.

Evidence of trolling or flaming may be obtained by taking screenshots or printing the offending pages. Where there is a threat to safety, trolling and flaming should be reported to the police. Civil action may be an option where defamation has occurred.

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