

Stupid, Pointless, Annoying, Messages:

Some of the Consequences and a Few Ways to be an Ethical Troll

Amy Long

Paralyzing confusion, an instant knot in the pit of my stomach, flushing cheeks, and head throbbing—that’s what I felt when I realized I’d been had. I had just sold my daughter’s iPad and was pretty sure I had wiped it clean. A few days later, I received an email saying a children’s iPad game had been purchased on my Apple account. I followed the link, put my credit card numbers in and clicked enter. I can’t remember what exactly the next page said that led me to think “what the f\*\*k just happened?!” I immediately called the number provided, and there was no answer, (insert previously described anxiety attack here).

I blame my lack of web knowledge and now disenchanted belief that people are inherently good from being both old and old-fashioned. That was a minor event in the grand scheme of things, and I do mean scheme. How can we stop these fraudulent jerks from taking advantage of us? We can’t stop it from happening, but we can play the game. In James Veitch’s TED talk, “More Adventures in Replying to Spam”, he hilariously alludes to his ethical reasons for replying to spam mail. Veitch’s approach to fighting these menaces is used for good by turning the scammers’ tactics against them. Veitch is essentially sharing the message to respect others and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (*Bible Gateway*, Luke 6:31). If we were to apply this ethical view onto other mass communication domains, we would have to look at the different ways to “fight the good fight” against the scammers and trolls alike.

Fundamentally speaking, internet trolling sparks heated and trivial arguments that are cruel and annoying; spam or scams are a means to acquire items or money from unguarded individuals selfishly. Merriam-Webster defines the verb troll as the act of “antagonizing [others] online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other

disruptive content”, society labels these criminals as “keyboard warriors” or “trolls”, and others may go so far as to be scam artists.

Veitch accomplishes his plans of annoying the scammers by replying and mimicking their spelling errors and misuse of words such as described in his video when the alleged “Head of *costumer* care” from the “Royal BS”<sup>1</sup> messages him. He asks the messenger, “What sort of *costumes* do you do?” (“More adventures in replying to spam” 00:06:25-00:06:50). Veitch justifies his interactions with the spammer saying that he is taking away from the time they would be targeting other more vulnerable people.

One can assume that much of the hate spewed on forums, blogs, and in comment sections come from jealous, angry, and depressed people. The aggressors are treating others the way they feel, thinking they can hide behind their screens and be anonymously cruel without having to deal with the repercussions. Some may choose to ignore the negativity that is spread throughout the web, but many others find these cruel words impactful. Research by Statistics Canada has found that one in five internet users between the age of 15 and 29 have been either cyberstalked or cyberbullied, with the victims being twice as likely to commit suicide (Mental Health Commission Canada). Another approach which differs from Veitch’s is to kill them with kindness, which many are so clearly need. Sarah Silverman exemplified this method when she responded to an online bully with compassion and told them “she was worried about them; that their hurtful words came across as more of a cry for help than an insult” (Sirota, par. 2). However, not all stories are tragic. There are many others like Veitch who choose to make light of the situation and use forms of humor to combat trolls.

There are keyboard warriors, like author J.K Rowling, using social media to hit back against internet trolls. Rowling has some of the most amusing responses to online critics. One of my favourite retorts on Rowling’s twitter is when a man said he was going to burn her books and movies after he read an article on them, she said in reply, “Well, the fumes from the DVD’s might be toxic and I’ve still got your money, so by all means, borrow my lighter” (@jk\_rowling). In addition, Rowling has used her platform to raise awareness of gay rights

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<sup>1</sup> Here, of course, Veitch pokes fun at the scammer’s attempted impersonation the Royal Bank of Scotland by referring to it with the initialism for “bull s\*\*\*.”

when she was questioned by a reader on the matter of Dumbledore's sexuality. According to the reader, Rowling's claim that Dumbledore was gay was invalid due to his homosexuality not being a visual trait. Rowling retorted to this, "maybe because gay people just look like... people?" (@jk\_rowling). Through her responses she has illustrated how trolling "a la Veitch" can do more than antagonize or prevent harm, but it can also do good.

While it appears that spamming the spammers could be a fun idea, Veitch has also said that "the internet gave us access to everything, but it also gave everything access to us" ("The agony of trying to unsubscribe" 00:02:09-00:02:13). The owners and advertisers of every site collect our personal data; our email addresses are shared and sold between companies. According to Competition Bureau Canada, as reported by CTV News, Canadians lost nearly 100 million dollars in 2018 to scams, and that amount only accounts for roughly five percent of reported cases (Bahn). People from all walks of life can become victims of deceit, with many senior citizens falling prey to both online shopping scams and investment traps. Others looking for love have been catfished, convinced to hand over money, or have had personal or doctored photos used for humiliation or blackmail. Scam artists may use other tactics such as romancing their victims, phishing, or tax extortion. The truth is that scammers are not concerned with the well-being of others and have no regard for treating others with respect. Their kindness is a means to an end, the end being their personal gain.

With so many deceitful and cruel individuals taking advantage of the anonymity of the internet, people should exercise a level of caution whilst sharing their information online to save themselves from their anxiety reaching new levels. A few examples of how to deal with internet trolls are to mirror their negativity, use humor, be kind, or not engage. These techniques won't put an end to spam, scams, or cyberbullies, but they can make for an interesting and amusing experience while saving a few others in the meantime. Whichever way you choose to deal with internet discourse or choose to not deal with it at all, educate yourself, question everything, and always choose to treat others the way you want to be treated. If you are going to use humor or try to outwit or outsmart, remember to put yourself on the receiving end and make sure you could deal with someone saying the same things back at you. As the old sayings go, "don't dish it out if you can't take it" and "karma is a b\*tch."

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