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Online trolling: The case of Madeleine McCann

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ABSTRACT

Despite the sustained media attention surrounding internet trolling, academic studies investigating its occurrence are rare. This study aimed to provide a case study analysis of the behaviours and strategies of a group of alleged Twitter trolls referred to as the anti-McCanns due to their continual abuse of Kate and Gerry McCann as well as those who support them and thus identify as pro-McCann. The way in which language was used to construct the anti-McCanns group identity, enhance in-group cohesion and facilitate out-group disassociation from the pro-Mccann group was additionally explored, given that previous research has implicated group processes in the propagation of aggressive online conduct. A multi-method approach involving a combination of ethnographic observations and the collection of online commentary was employed. The data was then analysed using quantitative content analysis and discourse analysis, which indicated that language was utilised in a variety of ways by the anti-McCanns to construct a salient group identity and negatively stereotype and disassociate from the pro-McCann group. Findings additionally revealed that several strategies were employed by the anti-McCann trolls to provoke and derogate members of the pro-McCann group, supporting previous findings which have linked trolling to both western media culture and the characteristics of anti-social personality disorder. The implications of these findings both theoretical and practical are discussed, alongside recommendations for future research.

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1. Introduction

In 2011 Sean Duffy became one of the first internet trolls to receive a custodial sentence in the UK after being jailed for 18 weeks for posting offensive messages and videos on tribute pages created to honour the memory of deceased young girls. One of the deceased persons targeted was 15-year-old Natasha MacBryde, who had been killed after being hit by a train. In a barrage of offensive posts on a Facebook tribute page set up by her family, Duffy left messages such as "I fell asleep on the track lolz", as well as posting videos depicting children's character Thomas the tank engine beneath a superimposed image of Miss MacBryde's face.

Despite the firmly established illegality of internet trolling within the UK, cases such as that of Sean Duffy appear to represent the exception, not the rule. Few others have since culminated in charges being brought, and the taking of legal action is generally

deemed extreme and unnecessary, despite the often-significant detriment caused to the individual(s) targeted (Bishop, 2013b). This ostensible reluctance to convict internet trolls is attributed in part to the implementation of Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) guidelines in 2012 imposing a higher threshold for the criminal prosecution of trolling following an eight-fold increase in cases tried between 2003 and 2011 (Fiveash, 2014). These guidelines specifically propose that the bringing of criminal charges be reserved for circumstances in which communication can be proven to be grossly, as opposed to just merely, offensive (Bishop, 2013b).

The exponential increase in reported incidences of trolling has been accredited in part to the significant rise in social media usage over the past decade. As of January 2016, there were approximately 3.4 billion internet users and 2.3 billion active social media accounts, operating primarily through social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter (Kemp, 2016). Few could deny the pervasive effect such social networking sites have had in recent years. To put this into perspective, Facebook alone was assimilated to the third largest country in the world based on its population size of 1 billion in 2011 (Mal & Parikh, 2011). Twitter.

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Meanwhile, a micro-blogging service, currently boasts around 288 million monthly active users and is one of the fastest-growing sites in the world (Chae, 2015).

The primary aim of this research is to provide a case study analysis of a group of alleged Twitter trolls commonly referred to as the anti-McCanns. Operating predominately under pseudonyms, the group are responsible for posting abusive and antagonistic messages on Twitter levelled at both Kate and Gerry McCann, the parents of abducted child Madeleine McCann. The anti-McCanns are also known to engage in verbal attacks against anyone who takes to Twitter to support the McCanns, particularly those who identify as pro-McCann and are therefore perceived to represent an opposing group of sorts. Despite nearly 10 years having passed since Madeleine's abduction, there are still estimated to be over 100 tweets posted using the McCann hashtag every hour, making this a significant community to investigate in terms of the sheer volume of activity they generate.

1.1. The case of Madeleine Mccann

To put the research aim into context, it is first necessary to consider some of the events surrounding Madeleine's abduction and the subsequent investigation into her disappearance. On May the 3rd 2007 three-year-old Madeleine was taken from a holiday resort in Praia da Luz, Portugal, after being left with her two-year-old twin brother and sister in an unlocked apartment while her parents dined at a nearby Tapas bar (Machado & Santos, 2009). Her disappearance prompted what has come to be regarded as one the most widely reported child abduction cases in contemporary history, with saturation coverage akin to that which followed the death of Princess Diana (Rehling, 2012).

The investigation into Madeleine's abduction initially yielded few leads, with those that were pursued failing to generate further clues. The case, however, took a turn on the 31st July 2007 following reports of biological traces in the holiday apartment by two UK sniffer dogs (Machado & Santos, 2009). The outcome of this search was one of the main reasons the McCann's came to be regarded as suspects, despite widely held concerns surrounding the reliability of cadaver dogs (Lasseter, Keith, Jacobi, Farley & Hensel, 2003; Warren, 2015). Nevertheless, Portuguese investigators stood by these identifications and despite the lack of corroborating evidence, put forth the theory that the McCanns had sedated Madeleine, causing her to die in a tragic accident, before attempting to conceal this fact by disposing of her body. Despite these allegations, the McCanns were never formally charged, and as such, are considered innocent.

1.2. Trolling research thus-far

Despite increased interest as of late, existing academic research on trolling is somewhat scarce. The limited research carried out thus far has traditionally focused on the linguistic analysis of corpora containing iterations of the term troll (Phillips, 2015). Hardaker (2010), for example, conducted a content analysis of Usenet posts containing accusations of trolling, identifying its four primary characteristics to be those of aggression, disruption, success and deception. The latter was also emphasised by Judith Donath, who defined trolling as "a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players" (Donath, 1999, p. 40). Hardaker (2013) later identified 6 primary strategies utilised by internet trolls. These ranged from covert tactics such as digression from the discussion topic at hand and the criticism of spelling or grammatical errors made by others, to overt ones such as the use of insensitive, inflammatory and threatening language. Such attempts to define trolling are however limited, as

existing forms of trolling not only manifest themselves differently across cultures (De Seta, 2013) but are also constantly evolving in order to adapt to the developments of online environments and interactions (De Seta, 2013; Hardaker, 2013; Phillips, 2013).

Recently, the focus has shifted from the analysis of online comments to the ethnographic study of communities of trolls (Bishop, 2013b; Phillips, 2015), particularly those who self-identify as such, and in so doing, form a subculture characterised by a distinct set of linguistic features and behavioural norms. Phillips (2015) after carrying out an ethnographic study of a network of self-identifying trolls on 4chan, an open access image-based bulletin board, concluded that trolling in the subcultural sense is predicated on aspects of media culture, with which it forms a symbiotic relationship (Phillips, 2013).

While such findings serve to frame trolling as an unremarkable phenomenon, representative of an extreme manifestation of pre-existing cultural practices, others have lent their support to the notion that those who engage in it may be driven, at least in part, by their individual pathology. Exploring the role of clinical disorders, Bishop (2013b), carried out an in-depth interview with a self-confessed troll, drawing attention to the many similarities between the characteristics of anti-social personality disorder as outlined in the DSM-V and those exhibited by the troll. These included the marked intimacy deficits made evident by the individual's claim that he enjoyed toying with him, as well as indications of deceitfulness and manipulative and callous behaviour.

Similarly, in two online studies exploring the relationship between the dark triad of personality, sadism and trolling behaviour, throughout which a total of 1215 participants were accumulated, trolling behaviour was found to be positively correlated with sadism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014). Of all three measures, sadism, commonly defined as the enjoyment of cruelty, was found to show the most robust associations with trolling, both in terms of enjoyment levels and the extent of which the individual identified as an internet troll, as measured using the Global Assessment of Internet Trolling (GAIT) (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014). This finding, coupled with the fact that sadism was unrelated to the enjoyment of other online activities such as chatting and debating, led them to conclude that cyber-trolling appears to be an Internet manifestation of everyday sadism.

The measures employed were however limited, in that they did not allow for elaboration as to the type of trolling activities participants engaged in, nor the environments in which they occurred. Given that trolling behaviour has been shown to differ significantly between websites such as Facebook and Wikipedia (De Seta, 2013), it is arguably necessary to pinpoint the specific form of trolling being investigated before inferences can be made regarding the intentions and motivations which drive this behaviour.

Shachaf and Hara (2010), who avoided this pitfall by focusing on the behaviour of Wikipedia trolls, interviewed 15 moderators with whom they had engaged in frequent interactions with. Content analysis revealed emerging themes to be those of boredom, attention-seeking, and revenge. They concluded that the trolls came to regard Wikipedia as an entertainment venue through which they could find pleasure in causing damage to the community as well as individual users, all while shielding their identity beneath a cloak of anonymity.

The anonymity afforded by the internet, as pointed out by Widyanto and Griffiths (2011) often encourages a sense of impunity, which can cause users to become disinhibited and behave online in ways which violate the social norms they would otherwise adhere to when engaging in face to face encounters.

Exploring the role of anonymity in the context of internet trolling, Cho & Acquisti (2013) found that a users' propensity to carry out trolling behaviour decreased as the level of identifying