

## Chapter 12

### Troll: The Problem with Digital Tricksters and Monsters

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‘Troll’ has become a ubiquitous metaphor and archetypal villain in digital media discourse. They hide in the shadows of digital spaces and prey upon the weak, unleashing arsenals of deception, harassment, or hatred for their own amusement or nefarious purposes. In this chapter, we analyze the origins and uses of the troll metaphor and – building on existing research – present a critique of its potential role in downplaying the severity of racism, misogyny, and state-orchestrated propaganda. The metaphors of ‘troll’ and ‘trolling,’ we argue, have become oversaturated with phantasmatic meaning due to their invocation of longstanding mythologies about tricksters and monsters. In this way, these terms contribute with little clarity, while adding a sense of more-than-human agency to social transgression online. Taken together, the chapter provides both an introduction to the etymology of the ‘troll’ metaphor as well as a critical discussion of its limitations in connection to threats to democratic debate.

#### Introduction

The notions of ‘trolls’ and ‘trolling’ in digital media have become ubiquitous across online communities, journalism, and scholarship, capturing a range of different and often-times conflicting phenomena. Depending on the context, the metaphor of the ‘troll’ might invoke images of bored teenagers engaging in silly pranks, political activists mocking opponents, radicalized groups orchestrating targeted discriminatory harassment, or paid propagandists interfering in foreign elections.

The ‘troll’ has become such a pervasive metaphor for online users that it is seemingly “everywhere, doing everything – even when the behaviors are only loosely related, or even outright incompatible” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 8). It has obtained a mythological character as a nefarious *trickster* or *monster*, lurking in the ‘dark corners’ of the web, ready to fool, harass, or manipulate unsuspecting users, either as part of a devious scheme or simply to achieve a sadistic-yet-childlike form of amusement.

When journalists report on social (mis)behavior online, the ambiguity in the meanings of the ‘troll’ metaphor makes it a perfect shortcut, especially for punchy headlines. For example, *The New York Times* has applied ‘troll’ to employees engaging in “political brawls” in workplace intranet forums (“How to Keep Internet Trolls Out of Remote Workplaces,” Bowles, 2021), racist and misogynistic harassers on social media (“Female Entrepreneurs Who Confront a Particular Kind of Troll,” Roberts, 2022), and state-backed election interference (“Russian

trolls and bots are back,” Myers, 2022). ‘Troll’ is thus used as shorthand for any and all types of transgressive users, without much consideration for the specific character of the situation at hand. This has led scholars to argue that a “lack of clarity and agreement about what constitutes a troll is exacerbated by media’s misappropriation of the term to describe various acts of online deviance and disobedience” (Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2016, p. 6).

In this chapter, we want to introduce and critically discuss the metaphor of the troll, outlining both its pervasiveness across journalism and scholarship as well as its problems. We do so to argue – in line with other digital media scholars – that the current ubiquity of ‘trolls’ not only limits our understanding of networked discriminatory harassment and state-run propaganda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also seriously risks downplaying their severity by individualizing, trivializing, and mythologizing organized harm.

In the following, we will briefly outline the origins of the ‘troll’ and ‘trolling’ metaphors as well as some key scholarly definitions. Second, we will unpack how trolls embody modern-day representations of mythological creatures – *monsters* and *tricksters* – which carry deep historical and cross-cultural significance. Doing so, trolls reinvigorate long standing fantasies and folklore about transgression and mischief. We will introduce the term “phantasmatic oversaturation of meaning” to refer to the ways in which the ‘troll’ metaphor endows online (mis)behavior with a mythological aura, which minimizes human agency, historical legacies, levels of orchestration, and real-world consequences. This, of course, does *not* mean that harm inflicted by online harassers or manipulators is in any way fictional or unreal. On the contrary, our aim is to showcase that – in being described as the result of ‘trolls’ – deeply hurtful actions are often problematically bestowed with a more-than-human characteristic, while evading critical analysis of their role in social and political landscapes. This, we propose, calls for serious questioning of the usefulness of the troll metaphor in discussions and investigations of the dynamics, aims, and implications of harmful online behaviors in its many different forms.

## What is a Troll?

The exact origins of ‘trolls’ and ‘trolling’ remain somewhat unclear. While scholars agree that internet users coined the terms in the late 1980s or early 1990s (Donath, 1998; Dynel, 2016; Herring et al., 2002), their etymology has been traced to both fishing (i.e., ‘trolling’ as dragging a line behind a boat) and Norse mythology (i.e. a ‘troll’ as a supernatural creature) (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016; Phillips, 2016). No matter which came first, both of these connotations

exist in parallel today, as ‘troll’ is, at one and the same time, used as a verb to describe social behaviors aimed at baiting a provoked response – e.g. “Elon Musk trolls another prominent Democrat” (Lima & DiMolfetta, 2023) – and as a noun to describe a nefarious type of internet user – e.g. “Russian trolls and bots are back, targeting Tuesday’s U.S. midterms” (Myers, 2022).

In academic and journalistic descriptions of trolls, we find a range of different understandings that tend to fall into one of three broad camps: (1) one that views trolls as impulsive and apolitical provocateurs driven by simple boredom and nihilism; (2) one that views trolls as morally motivated groups of discriminatory harassers; and (3) one that views trolls as propagandists-for-hire, acting on top-down orders as part of large-scale propaganda operations. In the first of these conceptualizations, trolls are defined as infantile digital pranksters driven by a primordial desire to “cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). Trolls behave “in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (Buckels et al., 2014). Rather than acting based on any kind of collective or political motivations, trolls engage in mischief simply “out of boredom, attention seeking, and the pursuit of entertainment” (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016, p. 8). The goal is often described as “lulz, a particular mind of unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter” (Phillips, 2016, p. 24). In being apolitical, some scholars argue that “even if some of the trolling practices may be annoying or obnoxious, trolls do not typically intend to inflict real harm, while only preying on their targets’ gullibility for the sake of entertainment” (Dynel, 2016, p. 376). This understanding of trolls and trolling has been labeled as “classic trolling” (Birbak, 2018) or “generic trolling” (Mantilla, 2015, p. 11), since it dates back to the term’s early use in online forums and message boards. From this view, trolls are first and foremost nonpartisan pranksters driven by a cynical, but also mostly innocent, goal of disturbing the normal flow of conversation in digital media.

In the second characterization, trolls are hate-motivated reactionaries, engaging in coordinated harassment online, primarily targeting women and minorities. From this perspective, “trolling is a mechanism through which White men, especially politically conservative men, collectively target others with their rage, disgust, and discontent” (Ortiz, 2020, p. 6). Trolls are described here as political actors who take part in systematic and sustained attacks against perceived

outgroups. In the specific context of harassment against women, Mantilla (2015) proposes the concept of ‘gendertroll,’ arguing that such trolls are notably different from ‘generic trolls’:

Gender trolls, as opposed to generic trolls, take their cause seriously, so they are therefore able to rally others who share in their convictions to take up the effort alongside them, resulting in a mob, or swarm, of gendertrolls who are devoted to targeting the designated person. Because of the numbers of people involved in the attacks, gendertrolls are able to sustain their attacks for an extended period of time – for months and, not atypically, even for years.

(Mantilla, 2015, p. 11)

Gender trolls and generic trolls thus differ in terms of not only their motivations, but also in their level of organization, their aims, the duration of their behavior, and the harm they inflict. This brings us to the third conceptualization where trolls are not only described as political and part of a collective, but also as operating within hierarchical organizations, often described as ‘armies,’ ‘farms,’ or ‘factories’ (Donovan et al., 2022; Howard, 2020; Nechepurenko, 2023). Here, trolls are no longer motivated by amusement nor by reactionary hatred, but by economic incentives and/or loyalty to a government or established political party. Such trolls engage in deliberate and coordinated forms of harassment and manipulation based on top-down orders from political or even military leaders (Kurowska & Reshetnikov, 2018). From this perspective, “trolling is a prolific pro-regime practice generating the ‘flooding’ of political posts written in accordance with a set of guidelines handed down ‘somewhere from the top’” (Kurowska & Reshetnikov, 2018, p. 352). As summarized by Howard (2020), such trolls are

formally organized: they are often paid staff working under contract with a government, public agency, or recognized political party. The staff of such social media militias usually have genuine ideological affinities with the ruling elites of a government or party.

(p. 30)

If we try to distill a core set of characteristics of trolls based on these three types of descriptions, we are quickly faced with a peculiar paradox. Not only do trolls seem to embody a wide range of different forms of transgressive online behavior, but the term also seems to simultaneously capture contradictory forms of actions, motives, and implications. In one instance, trolls act

apolitically on nothing but primordial desires and impulses with no serious harm intended – in the next, they work systematically towards political goals and targeted harassment. In one instance, they act within a loose network of like-minded individuals, and, in the next, they act based on top-down orders. We have tried to summarize these differences in Table 12.1.

**Table 12.1**

<i>Type of Troll</i>	<i>Aims</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Effect</i>	<i>Mode of Action</i>
‘Generic’ (i.e. for the lulz)	Amusement	Boredom	Mild disturbance/ annoyance	Individual
‘Discriminatory’ (e.g. gendertroll)	Harassment	Hatred/ reactionary politics	Sustained psychological terror	Networked
‘Propagandist’ (i.e. part of troll armies)	Strategic political goals	Money and/or loyalty to a government or party	Large-scale political interference	Organized

Despite obvious contradictions, these conflicting understandings of trolls and trolling coexist and intermingle fluently across academic and journalistic discourses. This not only creates confusion as to what a ‘troll’ actually *is* or *does*, but also causes a continuous displacement of the agency involved. Harmful behaviors are at one and the same time attributed to specific people or groups and to an amorphous shadow-figure that has a mythological and more-than-human mode of being, always lurking yet beyond full comprehension. Before we lay out our critiques of this ambivalence of the troll metaphor, in the next section we first explore the term’s folkloric roots and examine how these produce an oversaturation of meaning and phantasmatic otherness.

## The ‘Troll’ as a Monster and Trickster

The ‘troll’ is distinct from other ambivalent digital media metaphors in its deep entrenchment with folklore and religion. Markedly, the phantasmatic character of the term traces back to its folkloric origin in Old Norse mythology; an otherworldly figure that threatens the humankind, bearing variable appearances that defies attempts at neat definition. Scholars often invoke the similarly ambiguous trickster figure, found in a wide range of mythological traditions, in describing and explaining contemporary transgressive online behaviors. This liminality, as featured in both mythological conceptions of the ‘troll,’ presages its capacity to encompass a wide range of meanings today as “an umbrella term” for “asocial internet behaviors” (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 4).

The Old Norse roots of the term ‘troll’ invokes ambivalence, trickery, and deceitfulness:

In Old Norse, the word *troll/tröll* denoted all sorts of things – giants, troublesome people, even troublesome animals... This semantic breadth adds to the problem of determining the etymology or even the primary meaning of troll, but it is emblematic of trolls: they are shifting and changing, hard to pin down in the end, except perhaps by what they are not: human, normal, helpful... For the rest of their history, trolls continue to be associated with disorder and darkness, with the non-human, with chaos and the Other.

(Lindow, 2004, pp. 12–17)

In Old Norse literature, trolls are mythological beings that transgress boundaries and potentially bring about world-ending destruction. They have no fixed identity, but are rather characterized through an oppositional relationship to human norms and behavior. As noted by Lindow (2004), ‘troll’ was later translated from Old Norse into Latin through terms such as “*bestia* (‘beast’), *demonum* (‘demon’) and *monstrum* (‘monster’)” (p. 44). In contemporary popular culture, this understanding of trolls persists, for example in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series in which trolls are portrayed as large, ugly, murderous beings aligned with the evil Sauron.<sup>1</sup> This sense of an otherworldly and unpredictable threat is often invoked in journalistic and academic depictions of ‘trolls’ when describing harassment or disinformation campaigns,

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<sup>1</sup> In paradoxical contrast to this depiction, however, trolls can also be found in bright variants, as seen in characters such as the Moomintrolls or the trolls in the eponymous movie franchise by DreamWorks Animation. Similar to tricksters, in other words, trolls exist in contemporary folklore as ambivalent creatures that can embody both good and evil, yet share a defining characteristic of being outside of human normality.

especially those involving large numbers of participants, allegedly constituting faceless troll armies or factories.

Beyond its etymological roots, several scholars have noted how online ‘trolls’ share numerous similarities with mythological trickster figures. As Gabriella Coleman (2015) writes in her book *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*: “It is not difficult to imagine the troll and Anonymous as contemporary trickster figures. They are provocateurs and saboteurs who dismantle convention while occupying a liminal zone” (p. 34). In a similar vein, Whitney Phillips (2016) notes that “much like mythological trickster figures, whose refusal to editorialize compels onlookers to make sense of what is happening, trolls’ actions highlight the more ambivalent aspects of the dominant culture” (p. 50).

Trickster figures have a deep history across religion, folklore, and fairy tales. As Anthropologist Paul Radin (1956) concludes:

Few myths have so wide a distribution as the one known by the name of The Trickster. For few can we so confidently assert that they belong to the oldest expression of mankind ... and have survived right up to the present day.

(p. ix)

The trickster exists in supernatural figures such as Coyote (Native American mythology), Loki (Norse mythology), Hermes (Greek mythology), and Anasi (West African mythology) as well as in present-day pop culture figures such as Joker in the Batman series (Coleman, 2015; Harris, 1997; Hyde, 1998).

As defined by Radin (1956), the trickster is characterized by behaving on impulses and knowing “neither good nor evil” (p. ix). It possesses “no values, moral or social” (p. x) nor any “well-defined and fixed form.... Laughter, humor and irony permeate everything Trickster does” (p. x). Hynes (1997) similarly notes that, although concrete manifestations of them vary, tricksters share a “fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality” from which they obtain attributes such as being “deceiver/trick-player,” “shapeshifter,” “situation-invertor” “messenger/imitator of the gods” and a “sacred/lewd bricoleur” (Hynes, 1997, p. 34).

The similarities between online trolls and tricksters – as serial agitators who defy social norms while possessing more-than-human agency – is evident when journalists and academics depict high-profile provocateurs or political groups who operate in digital media spaces. In line with the trickster’s antics, trolling is often understood to be a kind of impulsive behavior that aims to provoke and disturb. At the same time, trolls are portrayed as being able to deceive anyone at any time, invoking a dual image of fool and mastermind, which is a core attribute of mythological tricksters (Radin, 1956). Relatedly, just as the trickster is seen as having no moral values, trolls are portrayed as disregarding social norms and expectations just for their own amusement. Both the trickster and troll also divide their audience. While some deride them as evil provocateurs, harassers, or forces of destruction, others worship them as (anti-)heroes. Many outspoken tech entrepreneurs and evangelists evoke this dual image of fool/mastermind, anti-hero/hero. Elon Musk – CEO of Tesla and SpaceX – has for example celebrated trolls as being “kinda fun” (Musk, 2023a) and as provocateurs who will all “go to heaven” (Musk, 2023b). Finally, no matter how high-profile the trickster figure or troll is, a sense of mystery is key to its (self-)identity. Like the trickster figure, the online troll is always lurking, yet can never fully be seen or understood in terms of human rationales or motives. Kurowska and Reshetnikov (2018, p. 348) summarize these similarities as follows: “Both are liminal figures who defy norms and revel in causing chaos; both almost never editorialize or tell the audience what to make of their message.”

In contemporary popular culture and news media, the two mythological conceptions of the ‘troll’ – as monster and trickster – appear in parallel in equal measure, adding to the metaphor’s ambiguity. For example, when news media visualize online trolls and trolling, they often do so through images of a more-than-human beings that mischievously interrupts human sociality. A famous example can be found in the 2016 front page of *Time Magazine*, in which a hairy creature with a mischievous smile – identified inside the magazine as a troll – is seen staring into a laptop next to the headline: “Why we’re losing the Internet to the culture of hate” (Time Staff, 2016). Other examples include evil-looking monsters (Suciu, 2020), human-monster hybrids (Klug, 2022), or creatures living inside of humans, controlling their actions (Mims, 2017). Here, we clearly see how trolls are visually instilled with a more-than-human mystique as a type of being or behavior that transcends human normality and rationality.

In sharp contrast to such images of monsters and tricksters, however, news media also depict online trolls and trolling through images of specific public figures, for example Elon Musk,

Yevgeny Prigozhin (in the case of Russian troll armies) or Andrew Tate (in the case of misogynist trolls). In this way, the agency, motivations, and real-world effects of trolls tend to exist in a liminal zone between human and non-human agency, concrete and abstract manifestations, and real and phantasmatic narratives. As we will argue in the following, this risks both obscuring and trivializing the motivations and consequences of harassment and organized propaganda in the digital era.

## Critique #1: Troll Downplays the Seriousness of Harassment and Discrimination

When scholars or journalists describe social phenomena as the result of ‘trolls,’ questions of motives, aims, decision-making, and harm become fundamentally ambivalent and opaque. It invokes a sense of uncanniness as if certain people or actions transcend human behavior and accountability. For example, when Instagram introduced and subsequently updated its filtering tool for comments and direct messages (DMs), the company clearly stated that the tool’s purpose was to combat online abuse, “whether it’s racist, sexist, homophobic or any other type of abuse.” (Mosseri, 2021) A blogpost by CEO Adam Mosseri from 2021 used racist abuse directed toward football players during the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship as an example. In several cases, however, media coverage of this feature simply referred to it as a tool to “ignore the trolls,” (Wagner, 2016) “take on internet trolls,” (Newcomb, 2016) or something to “rid Instagram of its troll problem” (Thompson, 2017). Short of specifying the issues the company tried to tackle, the news headlines evoked the ambiguous image of tricksters and monsters rather than real-world discriminatory harassment that perpetuated historical injustices.

The opacity of what ‘troll’ actually means is not merely a rhetorical curiosity. Far-right movements, for instance, have long been exploiting online anonymity to post racist and misogynist content while denying any seriousness of intent (e.g. “just trolling” as an excuse). As Julia DeCook (2020) astutely notes, the metaphors of ‘trolls’ and ‘trolling’ have become “a political strategy and identity to absolve them [far-right activists] of blame or accusations of what their real intentions are. Calling them ‘trolls’ hides the level of sophistication and vast levels of influence that they had on public opinion and discourse.”

Designating users uncritically as ‘trolls,’ in other words, plays into the hands of far-right movements and hate groups since it gives discriminatory harassment a veneer of joviality and irony, which can easily be used to excuse or conceal real-world damage and the perpetuation of historical oppression. It also individualizes structural problems. Phillips and Milner (2017) point to this exact problem in explaining why they have come to abandon the term:

’Trolling’ as a behavioral catch-all is imprecise and, in terms of classification, ultimately unhelpful. Further, as it often posits a playful or at least performative intent (‘I’m not a *real* racist, I just play one on the internet’), the term also tends to minimize the negative effects of the worst kinds of online behaviors.

(Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 8)

As these arguments highlight, invoking the ambiguous image of a naive-yet-cunning, destructive-yet-humorous anti-hero has significant political ramifications, enabling harassers, racists, and misogynists to claim a sense of plausible deniability through ambivalence and irony. In this way, rather than being simply a vague term, the ‘troll’ metaphor helps launder destructive harm caused by systemic oppression with deep historical roots. To say that reactionary tormentors are ‘just’ trolls or engaged in trolling supports an agenda of both normalizing and banalizing structural injustice and the persecution of marginalized groups.

## Critique #2: ‘Troll’ Downplays the Level of Organization of Digital Propaganda

As we have previously noted, journalists and scholars have also come to use ‘troll’ to describe agents that carry out political, often state-led, propaganda operations. This usage implies that large numbers of social media accounts with nefarious purposes are considered, at best, a loose network of users that share some characteristics in their posts. Even academic terms such as “social media militias” and “troll armies” tend to emphasize the magnitude of such operations and the implicit sense of threat, instead of indicating the level of organization as seen in military units.

Empirical evidence on propaganda campaigns suggests that large-scale operations are often professionally managed and funded by state-led entities, or those affiliated with a political party. Russia’s state-backed Internet Research Agency (IRA), for example, housed hundreds of employees in its St. Petersburg headquarters (Chen, 2015) and exhibited clear signs of

coordinated action to engage in cross-platform information operations (Lukito, 2020). The deployment of multiple account clusters to post about different topics, from divisive political and racial issues (Freelon et al, 2022; Linvill & Warren, 2020) to local news updates (Ehrett et al., 2022), also showcased the IRA's internal division of labor. Studies have uncovered some of its common tactics as well: IRA accounts often gained initial following by interacting with well-known Twitter accounts (Linvill & Warren, 2020; Xia et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021) and infiltrating mass media coverage (Lukito et al., 2020); they also purposively used popular hashtags to boost the visibility of their content (Wilson et al., 2018).

To name these content producers “trolls” caricatures paid propaganda agents behind the screen at the expense of revealing the material interests, organisational structures, and labor relations that keep the propaganda machine running. Doing so, it individualizes a deeply structural and geo-political problem. The Internet Research Agency consists of hundreds of employees, paid by the Kremlin to create propaganda materials and coordinate social media posting. In the Philippines, the “political trolling industry” consists of public relations professionals and creative industry up-and-comers who create and disseminate fake news for additional income (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; 2019). The booming creative industry and gig economy provides the labor infrastructure for the disinformation complex to take shape. The de-humanizing tendency of the ‘troll’ description hides from public view what Ong & Cabañes (2019) has called “a culture of production” behind disinformation campaigns, thus presenting merely a comical, supernatural, or jovial characterization of such operations (see also Geltzer, 2018).

Finally, since the current usage of online ‘troll’ does not trace back before the internet, it hinders our understanding of digital propaganda campaigns as new iterations of age-old influence operations, used by states and groups vying for power and dominance. Russia and the former Soviet Union have a long history of conducting “active measures” (Abrams, 2016) as an important part of intelligence work to insert noise into its rivals’ domestic communications. In the US, right wing organizations like those connected with the Koch network (MacLean, 2020) have long been propagating disinformation to promote its ideology. These are resource-intensive, years-long (decades, in some cases) efforts at power play that historians would be hard done to overlook. The contemporary ‘troll’ and ‘trolling’ discourse about digital propaganda campaigns, however, seem to have foregrounded the meanness of

nefarious social media posts, but largely downplayed the political economy, structural foundation, level of organization, and contestation of power behind such operations.

## Conclusion: Abandoning the Trolls?

Trolls and trolling have become ubiquitous mythological clichés. In today’s public discourse, these ambiguous terms are being uncritically applied to any and all forms of misbehavior online, to the extent that they carry little weight when it comes to addressing online hate, discrimination, and political manipulation. Instead, they launder harmful content and trivialize the perpetrators’ behavior by suggesting that they need not be taken seriously, thus hindering productive discussions about how to mitigate them. In this chapter, we argue that the metaphors of trolls and trolling limit our ability to investigate and understand the dynamics of contemporary harassment, racism, misogyny, and propaganda. From our point of view, researchers and journalists ought to stop casually labeling any and all types of transgressive users as ‘trolls,’ and instead work towards uncovering the context-specific dynamics, historical roots, structural conditions, and consequences of online harm in its multitude of different forms.

We have put forward two main critiques of the current usage of this metaphor: First, this term adds a jovial and apolitical veneer to harmful behaviors, giving them a phantasmatic allure of otherness – something that transcends human motives and accountability – by invoking a sense of mythological agency. This added veneer can then easily be used to excuse or condone racism, misogyny, and harassment (e.g. “Relax, it’s just trolling”). Second, the term ‘troll’ often conceals the level of organization behind transgressive behaviors, and by extension the similarities between offline and online (both contemporary and historical) forms of harm. The term frames the perpetrators as individual rather than collective actors, while also obscuring the historical (and at times geopolitical) roots of online harm, including racism, misogyny, and state-backed propaganda.

In short, the metaphors of trolls and trolling often trivialize harmful online actions by presenting them as innocuous and individualized, thereby obscuring the coordination and historical injustices behind such behaviour. This not only emboldens perpetrators but also impedes meaningful discussion on how to address systemic problems around racism, misogyny, and state-backed propaganda in the 21st century. From this conclusion, we advocate abandoning ‘troll’ and ‘trolling’ as descriptors in the academic literature, while calling for

deeper investigations into their discursive and metaphorical roles in popular culture. Further research is needed on the performative implications of ‘trolls’ and ‘trolling,’ not as apolitical phenomena ‘out there,’ but as political signifiers mobilized to legitimize, conceal, and sediment specific relations and imbalances of power. This includes investigations into how political, journalistic, corporate, and academic actors might trivialize or rhetorically launder racism and misogyny through troll-as-trickster narratives of innocent heroes/anti-heroes that simply act for the ‘lulz.’ In this way, we call for the end of the troll as a ubiquitous buzzword and the expansion of critical inquiry into its metaphorical implications.

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