

## Make America Troll Again

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Whitney Phillips, [This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture](#) (2016).

There is a theory that Donald Trump does not exist, and that the fictional character of “Donald Trump” was invented by Internet trolls in 2010 to make fun of American politics. At first “Trump” himself was the joke: a grotesque egomaniac with orange skin, a debilitating fear of stairs, and a tenuous grasp on reality. He was a [rage face](#) in human form. But then his creators realized that there was something even funnier than “Trump’s” vein-popping, bile-specked tirades against bad hombres and nasty women: the panicked and outraged denunciations he inspired from self-serious defenders of the status quo. “Trump’s” election was the greatest triumph of trolling in human history. It has reduced politics, news, and culture to a non-stop, deplorably epic reaction video.

There is no entry for “Donald Trump” in the index of [Whitney Phillips’s](#) 2015 book, [This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture](#). But this playful, perceptive, and unsettling monograph is an outstanding guidebook to the post-Trump hellscape online trolling has made for us. Or perhaps I should say to the hellscape we have made for ourselves, because Phillips’s thesis is that trolling is inherently bound up with the audiences and antagonists who can’t stop feeding the trolls. Much like Trump, trolls “are born of and fueled by the mainstream world.” (Pp. 168-69.)

[This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things](#) is first and foremost an act of ethnography. Phillips embedded herself in online trolling communities, interviewing participants and following them as their targets and methods evolved over the years. The book strikes an especially good balance: close enough to have real empathy for its subjects’ motivations and worldview, but not so close as to lose critical perspective. It also displays an exceptionally good sense of context: the reporting is grounded in specific trolling communities, but Phillips is careful about situating those communities within large cultural trends, online and off.

There are many kinds of trolls: patent trolls who file suits without warning, commentator trolls who make provocative arguments with a straight face. Phillips focuses on what she calls “subcultural trolls,” who self-identify as part of a community of trolls, set apart from the mainstream, engaged in the anonymous (or pseudonymous) exploitation of others for the lulz. Think /b/ on 4chan, think Anonymous, think AutoAdmit, think alt-right.

Phillips defines “lulz” (a corruption of “LOL” with a sharper edge) as “amusement at other people’s distress.” (P. 27.) A classic example is “RIP trolling”: going to social media memorial pages and leaving messages to shock, confuse, and anger grieving families. Phillips argues that lulz are characterized by *fetishism*, *generativity*, and *magnetism*. “Fetishism” is used in a quasi-Marxist sense of dissociation: RIP trolling, for example, involves an act of emotional detachment that cuts away the actual human tragedy and focuses on extracting humor from arbitrary details, like a victim’s lost iPod. “Generativity” refers to the same kind of playful remixing, repurposing, and world-building that online fanfic communities engage in. And “magnetism” captures lulz’ memetic qualities: they draw attention in and allow a trolling community to cohere around iterated themes and phrases.

The heart of the book (Part II), with examples drawn roughly from 2008 to 2011, is a sustained argument against being too quick to treat trolls as the Other. Trolls take expert advantage of mainstream media attention. Their tactics are often straight out of the corporate PR playbook and its [even more unsavory cousins](#), and their cultural postures are funhouse-mirror reflections of attitudes that are prevalent in mainstream culture. (Breitbart, in other words, is a professionalized

political trolling operation—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is a news organization genetically enhanced with troll DNA.) “[T]rolls and sensationalist corporate media outlets are in fact locked in a cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle,” Phillips writes. (P. 52.)

Trolls thrive on mainstream media attention in two related ways. One is the classic hoax, updated for the Internet age. Some trolls are masters at feeding the mainstream media false stories (fake news!). Multiple local TV stations fell for troll-supplied stories about a supposed crisis sweeping through the United States of teenagers huffing jenkem (a fermented mixture of feces and urine). The other is that trolls are skilled at turning attention into a game only they can win. Resistance is futile; one cannot argue with a [sea lion](#) or reason with the Joker. In this, Phillips argues, trolls channel Schopenhauer. The point is to win the argument by any means necessary, right or wrong. (If the technique sounds familiar, it may be because you’ve seen it coming from the talking heads on Fox News or from behind the podium at the White House Press Briefing Room.)

Aspects of trolling are rooted in widely shared mainstream attitudes. It draws heavily on a muscular strain of free speech libertarianism that shields even the most offensive speech. If you don’t like what I’m saying, it’s your own damn fault for listening, or for being bothered by it. If you don’t want your feelings to be hurt, don’t have feelings; if you don’t like death threats, just kill yourself. Phillips does a nice job tracing trolling’s complicated relationship with race, gender, and sexuality: the same trolls—the same trolling campaign—can enjoy lulz at the expense of vulnerable minorities, privileged white middle-class comfort, conservative intolerance, and liberal pieties. Making racist jokes is both something that many millions of Americans routinely indulge in and something that makes many millions of Americans (not usually the same ones) really angry.

Trolling eats everything, including especially itself, and reduces it all to a pulsing blob of incoherent imagery, held together only by the pleasure of a laugh at the expense of someone who can’t take the joke. Indeed, there *is* no other joke; trolling is bullying, or [dominance politics](#) from which everything but the lulz has been stripped away. Phillips calls it “pure privilege,” and explains that trolls “refuse to treat others as they wish to be treated. Instead, they do what they want, when they want, to whomever they want, with almost perfect impunity.” (P. 26.)

But, to repeat, trolls “aren’t pulling their materials, chosen targets, or impulses from the ether. They are born of and fueled by the mainstream world—its behavioral mores, its corporate institutions, its political structures and leaders—however much the mainstream might rankle at the suggestion.” (Pp. 168-69.)

We have met the troll and it me.

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