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TROLLING IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Impoliteness, deception, and manipulation online

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ABSTRACT

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), or the communication that humans engage in via networked devices such as computers (December 1997; Ferris 1997; Herring 2003: 612), provides a rich area for the study of im/politeness and face-threat. Whilst CMC has many benefits, such as allowing quick and easy communication by those spatially and temporally separated (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab 2002: 371), it is also predisposed towards higher levels of aggression than forms of interaction such as face-to-face communication (FtF). CMC can offer a degree of anonymity that may encourage deception, aggression, and manipulation due to a sense of impunity and a loss of empathy with the non-present recipient—an effect known as deindividuation (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler & McGuire 1986; Sproull & Kiesler 1986). Using two **usenet** corpora with a combined wordcount of 86,412,727 words, I primarily investigate a negatively marked online behaviour (NMOB) known as trolling, which involves deliberately attempting to provoke online conflict. I secondarily investigate related NMOBs such as flaming (a reaction or over-reaction to perceived provocation), cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking. The analysis establishes that academia and legislation use these terms in vague, contradictory, or widely overlapping ways. This thesis aims to answer three research questions. The first (*what is trolling?*) formulates a definition of trolling, including its interrelationships with other NMOB, using a quantitative and qualitative corpus linguistic approach. The second (*how is trolling carried out?*) outlines the major trolling strategies found in the dataset, along with the user responses to those strategies, and the troller defences to those user responses. The third (*how is trolling co-constructed?*), which is closely related to the second, qualitatively investigates one extended example of trolling to see how this NMOB is co-constructed by the group via impoliteness, identity construction, and deception.

Wordcount excluding front- and back-matter: 89,823

DECLARATION

I hereby confirm that this thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Any sections of the thesis which have been published, or submitted for a higher degree elsewhere, shall be clearly identified.

Claire Hardaker

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PREFACE

In researching this thesis, I have become only too aware of the ever-flourishing lexicon of group-specific abbreviations or technical terms that appear in the datasets, and though, at the start of this thesis, I considered myself a savvy internet user of many years, the meanings and histories of some instances were still new to me. It seemed unreasonable to assume that readers of this work would be in a better position, so in the early stages, I attempted to gloss these terms via explanatory footnotes and/or notes in square brackets. However, it quickly became apparent that in some sections the footnotes would be so numerous, repetitive, or lengthy as to be unmanageable and obtrusive. As a result, to provide information for those who need it, without cluttering the page for those who do not, I have settled for the imperfect solution of a glossary, and throughout this work, words formatted **in this manner** have corresponding entries in the Glossary. Terms most central to this work (e.g. trolling, flaming) are excluded since these are explored in depth within the thesis itself.

Following Donath (1999), throughout this thesis, when describing the data, I distinguish between the *message* (a troll, her flames), the *individual* (the trollers, a flamer), and the *act* (to troll, his flaming). This is purely to disambiguate sentences such as, "the troll was later removed", which could otherwise be unclear. When the lemma (i.e. a root word and all its variants) is used, this is indicated with small capitals (e.g. TROLL, FLAME).

In all examples, both from the corpora and from other sources such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and so forth, all spelling, punctuation, and grammar remains as per the original. Changes to format and presentation (mainly for the sake of readability) are explained in §4.2.5 below.

The use of *speaker* and *hearer* throughout should, unless stated otherwise, be taken to mean any producer of communication (e.g. one who speaks, writes, gestures, etc.) and any consumer of that communication (e.g. one who hears, reads, watches, etc.). Given the frequency of these words, I have abbreviated them simply to S and H. Throughout much of this work, S and H's sex are unknown or uncertain, however, the use of singular *they* is both grammatically awkward, and in many cases confusing. Therefore, for purely alliterative convenience, S is usually deictically indexed as *she/her/hers*, whilst H is indexed as *he/him/his* (e.g. "**S** may find that, though **she** can prove **H** wrong, **he** rejects **her** explanation in favour of **his** own"). In the few instances where the data examples suggest suitably identifying pronouns, these are followed instead.

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Rachel, I could not have picked a better candidate-in-arms to face conference debuts, peer reviewing, and a doctorate with.

Finally, to the unerring constant when everything else kept changing: without you, this would have been neither possible, nor worthwhile.

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

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1.1.—CONFLICT AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC)

Firstly, it is necessary to begin with a definition. This thesis is dedicated to studying a negatively marked online behaviour (NMOB) known as *trolling*. Since this concept is not widely known about, I begin with a very simplistic, working definition that is extensively tested and elaborated on throughout this thesis: *trolling* denotes the act of deliberately antagonising others online for amusement's sake. The more generic term, NMOB, captures a range of negatively evaluated behaviours that are carried out online, including (amongst others) trolling, flaming, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking.

In this introductory Chapter, §1.2 explains what triggered the research into NMOB, including why a better understanding of this area is important. §1.3 discusses the research questions and aims I address, and §1.4 explains the contributions that this thesis makes. §1.5 outlines the overall layout of this thesis and §1.6 concludes with the conventions used in this work.

1.2.—WHY CONFLICT ONLINE?

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is communication that humans engage in via some form of networked device, such as a computer, mobile phone, or multi-player online gaming system (December 1997: 5; Ferris 1997; Herring 2003: 612). This can take place via a protocol such as the worldwide web, email, or instant messenger, or it may take place between devices that are networked to each other, but not the internet (also known as a darknet).

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The first academic interest in CMC began in the 1970s as the popularity and availability of computers increased (Vallee, Johansen & Spangler 1979). This interest soon diverged into sub-disciplines, such as human-computer interaction (HCI), child-computer interaction (ChiCI), and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW). As computers became mainstream, politicians, the media, and businesses took interest, and since then, issues as diverse as **spam**, aggressive video games, online stalking, computer-related depression, and cybercrime have been the subject of headlines, adverts, and political campaigns.

Social science interest in CMC has been slower to develop, but in 2010, the *Journal of Politeness Research* released the *Politeness and impoliteness in computer-mediated communication* special issue, and there are increasing numbers of relational, social, and psychological publications on CMC. However, little research into CMC *conflict* exists, particularly from linguistics, and especially from a non-Brown & Levinson (1978; 1987) perspective. (This is discussed further in Chapter Two.) As late as 2010, Haugh writes:

with the exception of work by Locher (2006a) and Graham (2007; 2008), there has been little research on (im)politeness in various forms of computer-mediated communication from this perspective. (Haugh 2010b: 8)

Haugh (2010b) goes on to highlight that aligning research into NMOB with theorising on impoliteness could bring potential benefits for both sides. In particular, research shows that flaming demonstrates similar tendencies to offline impoliteness, such as variability in perceptions of what constitutes impoliteness and flaming, as well as evaluations of the degree of hostility

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(Graham 2007: 743). Given that flaming and trolling overlap, the application of impoliteness theory to trolling may also bring insights. This argument is only strengthened by the fact that trolling is frequently discussed by users in relation to other behaviours that are typically the subject of academic literature on impoliteness (e.g. *rudeness, hostility, aggression, etc.*, see §5.4 for more on this).

One explanation for the shortage of social, linguistic, and psychological research into online conflict may be that CMC is still viewed as less formal, less valid, or less 'real' than other, more traditional forms such as face-to-face (FtF) communication or writing. Synchronous CMC (SCMC) in particular is perceived as a marginal, frivolous plaything for children (Herring & Nix 1997: 7; Merchant 2001: 295), and a time-wasting distraction in the workplace (Cho, Trier & Kim 2005). This perception may also be due to the fact that CMC is still in the final stages of becoming an accepted norm, just as the printing press, telephone, and television were once viewed with fear and suspicion until they too became unremarkable parts of our lives. On average, over a million UK households per year are connecting to the internet (Statistics 2008: 1). This suggests that regardless of general attitudes towards, or stereotypes about CMC, as the process of normalisation completes, CMC will become even more important in, and integral to our lives. The social, linguistic, and psychological meanings (and limits) of online behaviour will continue to evolve, and given that CMC is far from standardised, the mismatches between expectations, intentions, and interpretations will, in all likelihood, continue, or even increase.

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In the meantime, whilst CMC research from other perspectives is flourishing, linguistics-based CMC research is still in short supply, and that which does exist almost entirely ignores the interrelated phenomena of trolling (antagonising a general target online), cyberbullying (persistently antagonising a specific target online), and cyberstalking (persistently antagonising a specific target online with a high risk of offline actual harm, whether mental, social, physical, financial, etc.). (These definitions are elaborated on in Chapter Five.) This is despite the fact that NMOBs are major issues for many CMC environments, from large **social networks** to small messageboards. Trolling has featured in global media (e.g. Heffernan 2008; BBC 2010c; Camber & Neville 2011; Goodman 2011; Morris 2011), and is the subject of lay user discussion and interest. Within linguistics, however, it is difficult to find articles that address trolling even in passing (e.g. Baker 2001; Phillips 2002), and far fewer address trolling directly (e.g. Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Hardaker 2010; Shachaf & Hara 2010).

In fact, within academia, there appears to be a limited understanding not only about why trolling occurs, but even of what it is. This is unsurprising when we consider that this behaviour seems unique to CMC, with no real offline equivalent¹. However, it is surprising when we consider the now-flourishing area of *im/politeness*² which deals with facework, rapport, (dis)harmony,

¹ There are media productions such as *Beadle's About* and *Phonejacker* which deliberately place unsuspecting victims into aggravating or stressful situations to provoke reactions from them. In shows like *Beadle's About*, the victim is eventually made part of the joke (i.e. when the host appears with a camera crew) whereas in shows like *Phonejacker*, the victim may never find out that s/he has been the butt of the joke unless s/he happens to watch the show. Unlike trolling, however, the entertainment is not for the benefit of those directly involved, but is instead intended for a watching, uninvolved audience.

² Throughout, I refer to im/politeness as *field(s)*, reflecting the ongoing debates regarding whether impoliteness and politeness should be understood, and researched, as distinctly separate entities. My view is that we cannot divorce the two, but, to understand each, we should view each as more than a mere absence, corruption, or mirror-image, of its 'opposite'.

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coercion, manipulation, and aggressive communicative acts (e.g. Locher 2006a; Bousfield 2008; Bargiela-Chiappini & Kádár 2010; Culpeper 2011a).

This leads to the discussion of im/politeness research. Politeness became popular in the 1970s, with the works of Lakoff (1973; 1977; 1989), Brown & Levinson (1978; 1987), Leech (1983) and others. Outside of academia, rudeness has been a focal point in British politics, with Tony Blair's Respect Agenda (Culpeper 2011a) and the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) aimed at tackling "harassment, alarm or distress" (Crime and Disorder 1998a) caused by, among other behaviours, "abusive and intimidating language" (Home Office 2009). Though impoliteness research has flourished, as recently as 2006, it was described as surprisingly scarce within the social sciences (Condor 2006: 14, fn. 4), perhaps due to the belief that impoliteness is rare in day-to-day interaction (Leech 1983: 105). However, impoliteness too has now finally arrived with the first monograph (Bousfield 2008), international conference (*LIAR II* 2009), and 2008 special edition of the *Journal of Politeness Research (Impoliteness: Eclecticism and Diaspora)* on the subject.

Despite increasing interest in impoliteness and in CMC, as mentioned above, there is little academic work that looks at impoliteness *in* CMC (see, however, Chester 1996a; 1996b; Herring 2002; Herring et al. 2002; Graham 2007; Shin 2008). That which exists tends to focus on flaming (a heated (over-)reaction) in asynchronous CMC (ACMC). When using ACMC, S does not automatically assume that H can immediately reply. Typical ACMC includes [usenet](#), [blogs](#),

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and **social networks** (e.g. Pfaffenberger 1996; Graham 2003; Hatipoğlu 2007).

When using SCMC, S typically expects H to be concurrently online and to reply promptly³. Because of this, ACMC and SCMC can be used for different forms, and norms, of interaction, yet research into SCMC such as **chatrooms**, **instant messengers**, and **virtual worlds** is far more scarce (see, however, Turkle 1997; Zdenek 1999; Fung & Carter 2007).

In summary, though academic interest in NMOB is slowly catching up with media interest, trolling in particular has been left almost entirely to the press. In fact, the little research that does exist tends to take its definitions from the media and intuition, rather than from the users. As a result, TROLL⁴ tends to be applied to several NMOBs, or used interchangeably with terms such as FLAME. Since it is impossible to cover all NMOBs, I focus primarily on trolling, and situate this in amongst flaming, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking. To do so, it is necessary to also research these behaviours but it is not possible to pursue them to the same depth. By undertaking this thesis, though, I hope to add to the body of work on all of these areas.

1.3.—RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIMS

This section outlines the research questions and methods adopted to address those questions. Chapters Two and Three review current and influential literature on im/politeness and CMC. This allows the NMOBs under discussion

³ Like many binaries, the ACMC/SCMC distinction is not concrete; users ultimately determine interactional synchronicity.

⁴ Note that small capitals are used to refer to all variants of a root word (i.e. the lemma).

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to be situated within the current understandings of what is perceived as face-threatening as well as how the medium may affect NMOB.

1.3.1.—What is trolling?

The first research question, *What is trolling?* is addressed in Chapter Five, and aims to define trolling. To press, most definitions of trolling have been left almost exclusively to the media (e.g. Black 2006; Moulitsas 2008; C. Thompson 2009). Many media sources describe trolling as simply posting incendiary online comments designed to provoke conflict:

Hiding behind the pseudonymity of a Web alias, trolls disrupt useful discussions with ludicrous rants, inane threadjackings, personal insults, and abusive language.

(Naraine 2007: 146)

Heffernan (2008) highlights the goal—amusement at another's expense:

Internet trolls [...] trick vulnerable people with whom they have no quarrel; they upset those people; they humiliate them; they break their hearts; they mess with them. They do it for [...] the **lulz**—the spiteful high.

(Heffernan 2008)

As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, academic uses of TROLL are not perfect either. They tend to capture several distinct NMOBs, and do not always reflect how users themselves define trolling. To remedy this, I investigate the behaviours, attitudes, values, etc. that users in this dataset identify as trolling. The dataset in question is comprised of two **usenet** corpora with a combined count of 86,412,727 words. Examples of each NMOB including trolling are extracted using *WordSmith*® (corpus linguistics software). Once retrieved, Chapter Five qualitatively analyses user discussions of trolling and other

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related, yet distinct NMOB, including flaming, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking. This challenges and informs theoretical definitions given in the academic and legislative literature reviewed in Chapters Two (§2.4, §2.5, and §2.6) and Three (§3.6) by providing a fuller semantic, social, and cultural context in which these terms should be understood.

1.3.2.—How is trolling carried out?

Having established a working definition for trolling, and a contextual backdrop against which this behaviour might be understood versus other, similar NMOBs, the second research question (*how is trolling carried out?*) is addressed in Chapter Six. This Chapter investigates *how* (alleged) trolls in this dataset carry out trolling (i.e. the various strategies that trolls use, and are accused of using), how users respond to what they identify as trolling, and how the (alleged) troller reacts to, or counters those responses.

1.3.3.—How is trolling co-constructed?

Having established what trolling is in relation to other NMOB, and how trolling is carried out and countered, the third research question (*how is trolling co-constructed?*) is addressed in Chapter Seven. This question seeks to understand how trolling and responses to trolling are co-constructed, challenged, and negotiated over longer interaction. To discover this, Chapter Seven qualitatively analyses one case study (see Appendix B). This exemplifies how specific trolling strategies are employed and countered, but also how the process of co-constructing someone's identity and behaviour as legitimate is struggled over as

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the interaction unfolds.

1.4.—THESIS CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis hopes to contribute to the field(s) of im/politeness theoretically and methodologically. With regards to the former, I depart from the traditional im/politeness and facework theories by formulating a *heuristic circle approach* (see §2.4.5), a hybrid of extant frameworks that is adapted to account for deception, mistakes, and multiple intentions (Penman 1990).

Further, unlike canonical im/politeness research which has traditionally only considered single turns, or short excerpts, this framework is applied to extended examples of interaction. This allows fuller analyses of the ways that impoliteness, deception, and manipulation can be co-constructed, challenged, and renegotiated between participants, who may implicitly or explicitly change position, gain or lose support, and win or cede points as the interaction evolves.

Methodologically, this work also adopts a corpus linguistics approach, which is fairly innovative in im/politeness research, and offers at least three advantages. Firstly, large corpora offer a wealth of data which can then provide trends of behaviour and usage. This avoids reliance on one-off, potentially atypical instances. Secondly, corpus linguistics software provides a more reliable and robust method of extracting all instances (see §4.8 and §5.3 for discussion of this), and avoids problems such as selection bias. Thirdly, this enables a corpus semantics approach of situating a word or phrase in its larger lexical, semantic,

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and pragmatic context. This substantially assists in creating working definitions that reflect how users themselves understand and employ terms or phrases.

1.5.—THESIS STRUCTURE

Chapter Two lays the foundations by briefly outlining the seminal theories in politeness (e.g. Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Brown & Levinson 1987), and the newer developments in impoliteness (e.g. Bousfield 2008; Bousfield & Locher 2008; Culpeper 2011a). I then move onto intention, interpretation, and deception, which all play a fundamental role in trolling.

Chapter Three reviews relevant parts of the growing body of CMC literature, including major cases involving CMC and specific research into trolling and related NMOB such as flaming, cyberbullying, and **spamming**.

Chapter Four describes the datasets, including their selection, collection, and characteristics. This Chapter also indirectly suggests ways that NMOBs might be managed by users, groups, and admins. I then briefly outline the methods applied to each research question.

Chapter Five addresses research question one (*what is trolling?*) by employing user metadiscussions of TROLL in order to create a working definition. I then consider trolling in relation to other NMOB such as flaming, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking.

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Chapter Six addresses research question two (*how is trolling carried out?*) via qualitative analyses of, (1) linguistic behaviours that are seen by users to be trolling; (2) user responses to those (alleged) trolling attempts; and (3) responses that (alleged) trolls make in return. I then finalise the trolling definition that was started in Chapter Five.

Chapter Seven addresses research question three (*how is trolling co-constructed?*) by qualitatively analysing a case study of trolling in light of the strategies identified in Chapter Six.

Finally, Chapter Eight concludes by summarising the main findings overall, the outcomes of the research questions, and future areas for development.

1.6.—THESIS CONVENTIONS

In researching this thesis, I have become very aware of the ever-flourishing, group- and CMC-specific lexicon in the datasets, and though, at the start of this thesis, I considered myself a savvy internet user, the meanings and histories of some terms were still new to me. It seemed unreasonable to assume that other readers would be in a better position, so initially, I used explanatory footnotes and glosses in square brackets. However, the footnotes soon became obtrusively long, numerous, and repetitive. As a result, to provide information for those who need it, without cluttering the page for those who do not, I have settled for the imperfect solution of a Glossary. Throughout this work, words formatted in

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this manner have corresponding entries in this Glossary. Terms central to this work (e.g. trolling, flaming) are excluded since these are already explored within the thesis itself.

Whilst my preference is to refer to *trollers* as *trolls*, I follow Donath (1999) in this thesis, and distinguish between the *message* (the troll), the *individual* (the troller), and the *act* (trolled, trolling). This is purely to disambiguate sentences such as, *the troll was later removed*, which could otherwise be unclear. When the lemma (i.e. a root word and all its variants) is used, this is indicated with small capitals (e.g. TROLL, FLAME).

The use of *speaker* and *hearer* throughout should be taken to mean any producer of communication (e.g. speaker, writer, gesturer, etc.) and any consumer of communication (e.g. hearer, reader, observer, etc.). Given the frequency of these words, I abbreviate them to S and H. Throughout much of this work, S and H's sex are unknown or uncertain, however, the use of singular *they* is both grammatically awkward, and sometimes confusing. For alliterative convenience, therefore, S is usually deictically indexed as *she/her/hers*, whilst H is indexed as *he/him/his* (e.g. *S may find that, though **she** can prove **H** wrong, **he** rejects **her** explanation in favour of **his** own*). In the few instances where the data suggests suitably identifying pronouns, these are followed instead.

Finally, whilst some format changes have been made (see §4.2.5 for details of these) in all examples, the spelling, punctuation, and grammar is original.

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2.1.—PAST AND PRESENT RESEARCH

In this Chapter, I review literature that has shaped the field(s) of im/politeness and deception, whilst the discussion of manipulation is implicit throughout this Chapter, and indeed, the rest of the thesis. Later, in Chapter Five, I analyse user-based metadiscussions of terms such as *trolling* to assess whether they are sufficiently captured by those impoliteness and deception theories, and if not, how those theories fall short.

§2.2 reviews Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975, hereon CP), which is fundamental to several im/politeness and intention theories. §2.3 outlines two politeness approaches that have informed most subsequent impoliteness research. §2.4 explores recent impoliteness frameworks and terminological issues. §2.5 discusses S intention and H interpretation, since these are major factors in NMOB. §2.6 reviews deception, and §2.7 concludes.

2.2.—GRICE'S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE (CP)

Grice's CP (1975) is fundamental to several models evaluated below and postulates that, all other things being equal, S will,

make his conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which he is engaged. (Grice 1975: 45)

Grice suggests four maxims of interaction:

- Quantity**
1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the talk exchange)
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

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Quality Try to make your contribution one that is true
1. Do not say what you believe to be false
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Relation Be relevant

Manner Be perspicuous
1. Avoid obscurity of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly (Grice 1975: 45-6)

Grice suggested, however, that other maxims (e.g. social, moral, aesthetic) are observed in interaction such as, *Be polite*:

I have stated my maxims as if [the purpose of talk] were a maximally effective exchange of information; this specification is, of course, too narrow. (Grice 1975: 47)

It is this notion—that people may be maximally inefficient for reasons of politeness—that is incorporated into *Politeness Theory* (see §2.3.2).

2.3.—POLITENESS APPROACHES

Since politeness has received considerable attention and is not the focus of this thesis, I only briefly summarise the most relevant theories, and refer the reader to other influential works. Further:

although the conceptual heart of the field is still located in pragmatics, models of politeness have been applied and sometimes refined in diverse disciplines, including psychology (especially social psychology), anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies and behavioural organisation. (Culpeper 2011b: 391)

The result is multiple interpretations of what 'politeness' actually is, even within similar fields (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,464), and the literature reflects this diverse background and lack of agreement.

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2.3.1.—Social norm approach

One of the major politeness approaches is known as first order, social norm, or emic politeness (known as politeness¹), and,

correspond[s] to the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups. (Watts, Ide & Ehlich 1992: 3)

Eelen (2001) gives a fuller definition when he suggests that politeness¹ is,

how a native informant conceptualizes his or her own behaviour, as well as [...] what actually goes on in the native informant's head while performing the behaviour in question. In terms of politeness, this [...] refers to, on the one hand, the informants' conscious statements about his or her notion of politeness [...] and on the other to his or her spontaneous evaluation of (im)politeness (of his or her own or someone else's behaviour), made in the course of actual interaction. (Eelen 2001: 77)

This is opposed to politeness², which is,

the scientific conceptualization of the social phenomenon of politeness in the form of a theory of politeness¹. By means of such a theory we should be able to understand how politeness¹ works, what its functionality is, what it 'does' for people and for society in general. (Eelen 2001: 43)

Social norm politeness, one of four major politeness theories (Fraser 1990: 220), is a lay person's commonsense view of im/politeness. A crucial aspect of social norm im/politeness is its reference to social norms—it is a normative view of behaviour that is (in)appropriate *in context*. When an utterance is contested, we may be seeing indications of norms being breached, explicated, challenged, and (re)negotiated (Terkourafi 2001; Watts 2003). However, everyday politeness notions *alone* cannot adequately account for im/polite behaviour:

Not only is an equivalent term not found in some languages (Ehlich 1992: 94; Nwoye 1992: 315), but corresponding terms in different languages do not necessarily cover

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the same semantic fields (Hill et al. 1986; Watts 1992: 49; Luksaneeyanawin 1999). Everyday perceptions of politeness are equally changeable over time (Ehlich 1992: 94ff.), and speakers' perceptions of what is polite might be particularly uncertain or diverging during periods of flux (Lakoff 1979: 74). But perhaps the most compelling argument against taking the everyday notion as the basis for a theory of linguistic politeness is that the use of grammarians' 'polite' variants of neutral terms or constructions may well lead to a contrary effect in context. (Terkourafi 2001: 4)

Terkourafi highlights the variable use of the terms and the conceptualisations behind them at the macro-level (across cultures and eras) and the micro-level (between individuals and contexts). My view is that everyday im/politeness notions are not well-articulated enough to formulate *independent* tools for analysing linguistic im/politeness. We can, however, look within our im/politeness metalinguistic repertoire for evidence of the framework by which we (as lay users and analysts) conceptualise, understand, and interpret im/politeness. It is from this direction that I believe the most fruitful future models will emerge.

2.3.2.—Facework approach

Arguably still the most elaborated model of politeness (Watts 2003: 63), Brown & Levinson's Politeness Theory (1978; 1987, hereon PT) is a framework for polite behaviour based on Goffman's socio-psychological construct of face (Goffman 1967; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,453). This construct was already a reworking of Durkheim's (1924) theory of social interaction (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,459):

[Face] link[s] up to some of the most fundamental cultural ideas about the nature of the social persona, honour and virtue, shame and redemption [but it is] the bare bones of a notion of face which (we argue) is universal, but which in any particular society we would expect to be the subject of much cultural variation.

(Brown & Levinson 1987: 13)

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Face is a culturally defined psychological self-image that consists of negative face, or "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" and positive face, or "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 61-2).

According to PT, a face-threatening communicative act (an FTA) must be appropriately redressed with positive and/or negative facework, otherwise H may retaliate by attacking S's face (Culpeper 1996: 355). Brown & Levinson (1987: 76) argue that the necessary facework is calculated by summing the power (P) and social distance (D) between S and H, and the imposition's ranking (R_x), giving the FTA's overall weightiness (W_x):

$$W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$$

However, this assumes that P, D, and R can be quantified, and that a reduction in any one value will result in an overall reduction in W_x (Culpeper 1996: 355). Whether or not this is the case, Brown & Levinson suggest that in calculating these variables, S might decide whether or how to perform an FTA as follows:

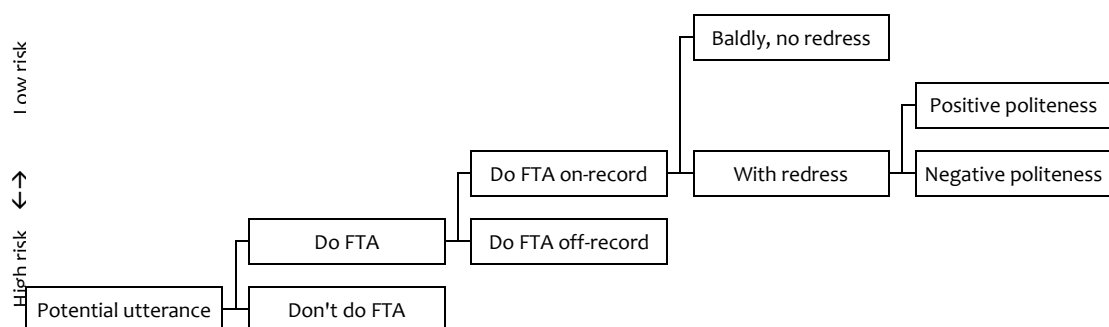


Figure 2.1: Output strategies (adapted from Brown & Levinson 1987: 69)

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Finally, PT suggests that greater indirectness and maximal inefficiency (Grice 1975) leads to greater politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987: 4).

PT has been subject to countless criticisms, so for brevity, I cover only the main ones here. Firstly, PT focuses on linguistic form, such as lexis (e.g. taboo words), syntax (e.g. imperatives), speech acts (e.g. threats), communicative acts (e.g. interruptions), and conversational structures (e.g. dispreferred responses), since these were viewed as amenable to categorisation as 'more polite' or 'less polite' (cf. Lakoff 1975; Leech 1983). For example, Haverkate (1988) suggests that,

certain 'impolite' speech acts, such as reproaching, threatening and insulting are performed by speakers with the intrinsic purpose of attacking or undermining the hearer's face.
(Haverkate 1988: 394)

However, one form can undertake many pragmatic functions, regardless of the ostensible or conventionalised im/politeness of that form.

In PT, positive and negative face are mutually exclusive, but in reality most utterances address both faces (cf. Austin 1987: 41; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,461; Bousfield 2005: 1,122). Negative face is also criticised for its Western bias (cf. Matsumoto 1989; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,460). The power, distance, and ranking equation is seen as inadequate, whilst there is virtually no account for other variables (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,463). Another criticism targets the claim that most utterances are inherently face-threatening. For this to be true,

there must be, as a prerequisite for politeness to occur, a fundamental antagonism between the speaker's intentions, on the one hand, and social aspects, on the other.
(Werkhofer 1992: 180)

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PT also attempts to capture all impoliteness as bald-on-record, i.e. as maximally efficient and non-redressive (Culpeper, Bousfield & Wichmann 2003: 1,547-50), by suggesting a correlation between indirectness and politeness (Blum-Kulka 1987; Sifianou 1992; Kienpointner 1997; Cashman 2006: 221). However,

sentences are not ipso facto polite, nor are languages more or less polite. It is only speakers who are polite. (Fraser 1990: 233)

Finally, whilst PT does not claim to address impoliteness, without modification, it cannot account for interaction that is not polite.

2.4.—IMPOLITENESS APPROACHES

This section covers the most relevant impoliteness approaches and definitions. However, until recently, there has been a shortage of impoliteness research for many reasons. Politeness research was established earlier, and still overshadows impoliteness in breadth and depth. Politeness theorists have also tended to focus on the harmonising efforts that we put into social relationships (Spencer-Oatey 2000a: 3; Mills 2005: 264), and have traditionally viewed impoliteness as a deviation from 'normal' behaviour (Austin 1987: 5; Eelen 2001: 104):

Conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behaviour in normal circumstances. (Leech 1983: 103)

Leech's view assumes a set of 'normal circumstances' that are difficult to define, since (as shown below) conflictive illocutions are expected and even sanctioned in all manner of 'normal circumstances'. Early impoliteness work generally followed this view that impoliteness was deviant, and tended to ignore or

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postulate limited motivations for impoliteness. For instance, Austin (1987) suggested that linguistic aggression might act as a tool for enforcing social ingroup/outgroup boundaries and hierarchies (1987: 17), whilst early work by Culpeper (1996: 350) cites "social disruption" as a motivating factor.

Kienpointner (1997: 280), however, argues that we should not view non-cooperative discourse as an abnormal, exceptional, or irrational opposite to politeness. Whilst impoliteness may be considered *exceptional or abnormal* by lay interactants (Culpeper 2010: 3,238), a growing body of research supports Kienpointner's argument that impoliteness is not always *irrational*.

To summarise this research, we find linguistic aggression in numerous aspects of our lives, including everyday chat (Beebe 1995), adolescent interaction (Labov 1972; Goodwin & Harness Goodwin 1990), the family home (Vuchinich 1990), fiction (Tannen 1990; Culpeper 1998), the media (Hutchby 1992; 1996; Culpeper 2005; Bousfield 2008), therapy sessions (Labov & Fanshel 1977), doctor-patient interactions (Mehan 1990), workplaces (Andersson & Pearson 1999; Holmes, Marra & Schnurr 2008), army training (Culpeper 1996), politics (S. Harris 2001; S. Harris, Grainger & Mullany 2006), forensic contexts (Inbau, Reid & Buckley 1986; Penman 1990; Shuy 1993; 1998; 2005; Archer 2008), and of course, CMC (Herring 1999; Honeycutt 2005; Willard 2007)⁵.

As the field has progressed, so too has the understanding of the distinctions

⁵ Whilst linguistic interest in impoliteness is just blossoming, law, anthropology, business, psychology, and politics have long been researching this phenomenon, usually at the macro-level and under the term 'conflict'.

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between form-based and content-based theories (see §2.3), the roles of S intentions and H interpretations (see §2.5), and impoliteness motives (see §2.6.2, §5.4.4, §5.5.1.4.1, and §5.5.1.4.2). Researchers have studied impoliteness from broadly different perspectives, including the postmodern discursive approach (§2.4.2), the interactional approach (§2.4.3), and the social psychological approach (§2.4.4). Prior to these developments, impoliteness models were generally created from reversed or modified politeness approaches, and the main three examples of this will be briefly covered before moving onto contemporary approaches.

2.4.1.—Modified facework approaches

A serious issue when discussing *politeness* theories is that,

the concepts involved can never explain impoliteness in the same way or to the same extent as they explain politeness. So the bias towards the analysis of politeness is not just a matter of differential attention, it goes far deeper than that: it is a conceptual, theoretical structural matter. It is not so much quantitative, but rather a qualitative problem. (Eelen 2001: 104)

This problem does not diminish when politeness approaches are transformed into impoliteness approaches. At best, the same issue occurs in reverse—the theory which now accounts for impoliteness, cannot deal with politeness. At worst, the new model inherits the issues that limited the original approach.

2.4.1.1.—*Speaker-based approaches*

The first approach that modified PT (Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987) to account for impoliteness is Lachenicht's (1980) Aggravating Language Framework (ALF),

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which summarises an extensive array of impoliteness strategies. ALF extends PT's positive and negative face (Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987) into a theoretical system of abusive language (Lachenicht 1980: 615):

'Hurt' is achieved by (a) conveying that the addressee is not liked and does not belong (*positive* aggravation) and by (b) interfering with the addressee's freedom of action (*negative* aggravation). (Lachenicht 1980: 607, emphasis original)⁶

ALF's significant weakness is its speculative nature. Examples are drawn from anecdotes, imagination, and a dictionary of insults (1980: 683). Failure to create this model from, and test it on, empirical data allows the possibility of describing anomalies as norms. Impoliteness is also viewed only from S's perspective, so ALF cannot account for genuine impoliteness that H has not recognised (i.e. *failed impoliteness*; see §2.4.6 for fuller definitions).

2.4.1.2.—Hearer-based approaches

The second approach that modified PT (Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987) to account for impoliteness is Austin's (1987; 1990) Face Attack Approach (FAA).

FAA assumed that,

face-attack is in fact a corruption of the principles of face preservation, and many of the strategies for the one can be co-opted for the other. (Austin 1987: 5)

Therefore, instead of offering freedom (negative politeness), one restricts (negative impoliteness), and instead of approving (positive politeness), one disapproves (positive impoliteness). Austin points out that,

mutual vulnerability cannot be assumed, since there are many situations where S is

⁶ Lachenicht later confuses these: "positive aggravation [...] attacks his need for freedom of action..." (1980: 631).

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much less vulnerable than H, i.e. when S has greater power than H, or when S is a member of a solidary group to which H does not belong. In many cases, in fact, solidarity may actually rest on the necessity of destroying the face of another group or person. (Austin 1987: 17, emphasis original)

Whilst Austin makes some excellent insights, FAA also has weaknesses. Its data is untested evidence drawn from intuition, which cannot be quantified. This makes it impossible to know if marginal strategies receive undue prominence over frequent ones. Impoliteness is also viewed only from H's perspective (Austin 1987: 42) so FAA cannot account for genuine politeness that H has not recognised (i.e. *failed politeness*; see §2.4.6 for fuller definitions).

2.4.1.3.—Speaker- and hearer-based approaches

The third approach that modified PT (Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987) to account for impoliteness is Culpeper (1996) Impoliteness Framework. Unlike ALF (Lachenicht 1980) and FAA (Austin 1987; 1990), however, IF is S *and* H based, and later reworkings use empirical data (Culpeper et al. 2003; Culpeper 2005). Initially, IF closely mirrored PT with superstrategies and output strategies⁷ that S selects from based on the (perceived) level of risk (Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987; Culpeper et al. 2003):

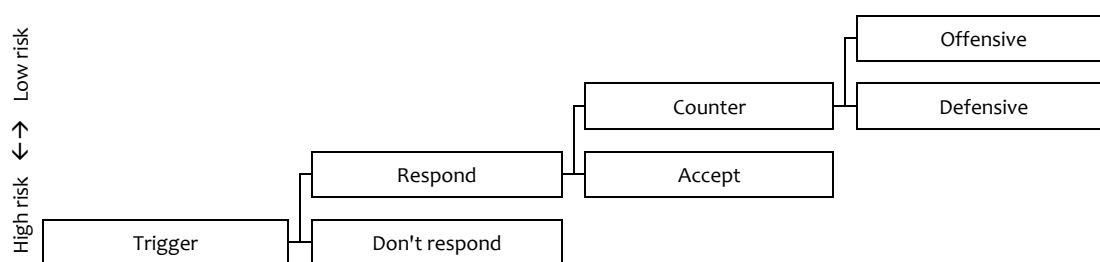


Figure 2.2: Output strategies (adapted from Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,563)

⁷ One exception is that *off-record politeness* was partnered with *sarcasm* or *mock politeness* (1996: 356).

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An open-ended list of H-based counterstrategies were proposed, which involved, at the offensive pole, attacking S's face (e.g. by threatening her), and at the defensive pole, protecting one's own face (e.g. by ignoring her) whilst some counterstrategies fell between these poles (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,565-8).

Departing from this theory in later work, Culpeper (2005) suggests that,

the superstrategies of positive and negative impoliteness should be revised to fit Spencer-Oatey's categorization of face or "rapport management".

(Culpeper 2005: 42)

Aligning IF with Spencer-Oatey's relational work theory (2002) begins to address some issues inherited from PT, such as the cultural mutability of face. However, this also introduces new issues, but as Spencer-Oatey's model is considered in §2.4.4, nothing more is said here. Instead, I now consider newer impoliteness theories which have moved away from, or entirely discount PT.

2.4.2.—Postmodern, discursive approach

The first of the three newer impoliteness approaches that I consider is the discursive approach (PDA). PDA, largely a product of postmodernism, is typified by the work of Eelen (2001), Mills (2003; 2005), Locher (2004; 2006b), Locher & Watts (2005; 2008), and Watts (2003; 2005). PDA generally focuses on H interpretation (Locher & Watts 2008: 80) and espouses a first order, or user-driven understanding of im/politeness:

We consider it important to take native speaker assessments of politeness seriously and to make them the basis of a discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach to politeness.
(Locher & Watts 2005: 16)

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Postmodernism is built on the notion of social constructionism (see Schegloff 1991; Sacks 1992; Ochs 1993; H.M. Cook 2006), and suggests that social interactional phenomena such as face and im/politeness do not exist outside of social groups or interaction. Instead postmodernists argue that humans *construct* concepts like im/politeness, justice, truth, and linguistic meaning.

PDA argues that communicative phenomena are not *intrinsically* im/polite. Nor are meanings *objects* that are given by S and received by H. Instead, PDA analyses the pragmatic *processes* of creating meaning, identity, and context, and how these are continually negotiated between S and H as the interaction unfolds. As Mills suggests, an utterance with an *ostensibly* impolite form can readily fulfil a polite function (and vice versa):

Rather than assuming that there is something intrinsically impolite about certain utterances or exchanges, I argue that impoliteness is attributed to a speaker on the basis of assessments of their intentions and motivations. (Mills 2005: 264-5)

Beebe (1995: 161), for example, shows how restaurant waiters can use apparently polite 'attentiveness' to (try to) hurry diners, whilst Culpeper's (1996: 356) mock politeness strategy more broadly exemplifies using polite *forms* to achieve impolite *functions*. Meanwhile, de Klerk (1997) and Coates (2003) demonstrate that apparently impolite taboo language can reinforce ingroup solidarity, whilst Lycan (1977) and Tannen (1981) show that interruption and overlap can be positively valued as signals of involvement and interest.

PDA does not assume the traditional binary description of an utterance as

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either polite or impolite. Instead, it posits an im/politeness continuum based on the ongoing *assessment* by H, S, and others, of meanings, intentions, and motives. Unlike earlier theories, PDA allows that interactants may be uncertain or mistaken about utterances (or whole exchanges) and leave with different interpretations (Mills 2005: 264).

PDA also argues that the analyst should not impose theoretical notions onto lay understandings of the interaction:

Rather than imposing second-order principles in retrospect on linguistic data, it is important to recognize that terms such as 'impolite', 'polite' or 'appropriate' are inherently evaluative and normative. (Locher 2006b: 252)

Mills (in prep.) elaborates on this when she suggests that discursive theorists,

are also concerned not to delve too deeply into interactants' intentions and what we as analysts can infer about their intentions and feelings, but rather they are concerned with what interactants *display in their speech to others*.

(Mills in prep.: 10, emphasis mine)

PDA theorists (e.g. Eelen 2001: 253; Mills 2003: 2; Watts 2003: 143; 2005: xxii)

draw heavily on the Community of Practice (CofP). A CofP is,

...an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (This does not mean that communities of practice are necessarily egalitarian or consensual—simply that their membership and practices grow out of mutual engagement.) ... Individuals typically negotiate multiple memberships (in families, on teams, in workplaces, etc), many of them important for understanding gender-language interaction.

(Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464)

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Three key elements create a CofP: *mutual engagement* (S intends to engage with H and H intends likewise), *joint enterprise* (S and H collaboratively construct a context, e.g. a job interview), and *shared repertoire* (e.g. shared background knowledge, discourse, and norms) (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 175). Utilising the notion of the *shared repertoire*, PDA argues that only interactional participants or CofP members can assess the relative im/politeness of an utterance, and the analyst should merely present the interactants' assessments. In fact, there is overlap between this PDA tenet and the Conversation Analysis (CA) view that,

the relevance of sociolinguistic variables for the participants themselves *must be demonstrated* on the basis of data. (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998: 5, emphasis mine)

More fully, CA argues that,

analysis should begin without any a priori assumptions about the data at hand, but should seek to discover the order that is realised through participants' communicative competencies, and which in turn *should be demonstrably relevant to the participants*. (Wooffitt 2005: 160, emphasis mine)

Whilst Hutchby & Wooffitt (1998) explicitly identify abstract sociolinguistic variables such as power, gender, and class, this argument can also include intentions, interpretations, and feelings (cf. Mills in prep.: 10).

PDA takes issue with unquestioning acceptance of pre-existing notions, generalisations (especially where these involve stereotypes), and 'grand narratives' or over-arching theories, since these are necessarily founded on generalisations. Instead, "contextual analysis and a focus on the multivalency of interpretation is what characterises post-modern research" (Mills in prep.: 6)

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since this tries to avoid unwittingly propagating embedded stereotypes. PDA theorists essentially want,

a shift in emphasis away from the attempt to construct a model of politeness which can be used to predict when polite behaviour can be expected or to explain post-factum why it has been produced and towards the need to pay closer attention to how participants in social interaction perceive politeness. (Watts 2005: xix)

Rather than limiting research to im/politeness, this suggests that analysts should look more broadly at interpersonal interaction (termed "relational work" by Locher & Watts 2005).

PDA is not without its critics. Holmes (2005) describes the refusal to take previously established, or currently accepted notions for granted as irritating, counter-productive rug-pulling (her words) (Holmes 2005: 120). Pizziconi also highlights the danger of disallowing *a priori*, predictive models, or *post facto*, descriptive, explanatory theories since this removes im/politeness,

from a historically determined, socioculturally specific, and interactionally negotiated conceptualization of the term. (Pizziconi 2006: 680)

Without this sociocultural and historical context, academic im/politeness is so far removed from lay conceptualisations as to make the definition almost useless (Haugh 2007b: 297). Further, when the first order im/politeness definitions of some PDA researchers are analysed (e.g. Watts 2003: 19, 162; Locher & Watts 2005: 17), they are actually,

theoretical notion[s] masquerading as a lay conceptualisation (Terkourafi 2005a: 243; Xie et al. 2005: 449; Glick 2006: 732; Vilkki 2006: 329). (Haugh 2007b: 299)

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Therefore, rather than creating im/politeness¹ concepts, some first-order researchers are inadvertently slipping into im/politeness² definitions that lay users would not (fully) recognise as exemplifying their notions of im/politeness. We must also ask: if the researcher is not authorised (in the PDA paradigm) to impose theoretical notions or interpretations onto the data, then,

who is really establishing that evaluations of (im)politeness have been made: the analyst or the participant? (Haugh 2007b: 303)

Secondly, if this argument is followed to its extreme—particularly if the lay user's lack of meta-linguistic resources is taken into account, then,

any interpretation—both of analysts and real-time, speaking 'lay' participants too—will be questionable. (Bousfield 2010: 114-5)

Additionally, PDA's reliance on "what interactants *display in their speech to others*" (Mills in prep.: 10, emphasis mine) is problematic. Interactants do not always make their interpretations or intentions obvious. A simple, artificial example effectively demonstrates this:

[A is passing B's desk. B has just returned to work after a personal loss.]

A Hi B, good to see you! How are you?

B I'm good. You?

A Starving. Off to lunch. See you in the meeting later?

B Sure.

[A leaves.]

In this example, A is keen to know that B is coping, but realises that asking directly could be distressing, so she hides her real intentions behind a casual greeting. Despite this, B guesses A's real intentions, and attempts a sincere-sounding, reassuring response. A suspects that B actually isn't 'good', but since

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revealing this could embarrass him, she continues as though all is well. B too suspects that A was not fooled, but appreciates her thoughtfulness.

As this example and §2.5 show, Ss and Hs regularly convey false intentions and interpretations. The issue for PDA, however, is that the almost-taboo subject of B's loss never features in this conversation, despite powerfully influencing the creation and expression of Ss and Hs intentions and interpretations. Even *if* intentions or interpretations are professed, we *still* cannot be sure that they are sincere. (If B asked A to explain her real motive, A might still insist that she was only being polite.) In short, reducing the starting-point of analysis *purely* to potentially false, and sometimes scanty assertions regarding (alleged) intentions or interpretations stifles the wealth of insight that the analyst's own (world, social, pragmatic, etc.) knowledge may produce. In this thesis, I use the evidence that the data provides in conjunction with my own world knowledge and endeavour to make clear where this knowledge is brought in throughout.

I also take issue with PDA's argument that H's (apparent) interpretation should be privileged over S's (apparent) intentions, and that we must be CofP members or interactants to judge im/politeness (e.g. Eelen 2001: 253; Mills 2003: 2; Watts 2003: 143; 2005: xxii). My reasons for believing that one need not be a CofP member to understand im/politeness are as follows: if S wishes to produce, for example, a racist slur, she is likely to target a CofP she does not belong to. Despite this, to produce an effective insult, she must still judge what she *thinks* will offend that group. CofP membership might give her advanced, group-

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specific pragmatic competence and knowledge of face sensitivities. However, general world and pragmatic knowledge alone may still be sufficient to allow her to be offensive, and to allow others who are *also* not members of that CofP to condemn her behaviour as offensive.

I also do not believe that only interactants can judge im/politeness. There are many examples of people taking offence at interactions that did not involve or target them (cf. Jonathan Ross/Russell Brand's prank calls to Andrew Sachs⁸, and *Top Gear's* 'Mexico' incident⁹). The same argument is also inconsistent with how children are socialised into pragmatic im/politeness knowledge beyond that which they experience or produce themselves. People implicitly absorb knowledge (e.g. about behaviours, cultures, attitudes) through language, so it seems odd to suggest that knowledge of im/politeness—including its norms, enactments, judgements, etc.—is only available to actively participating interactants (Bousfield 2010: 114-5).

I therefore argue that external observers, including analysts, *can* apply their (pragmatic, social, cultural, academic, world, etc.) knowledge to determine whether they think utterances are im/polite. This does not guarantee that the analyst will be correct, but as this data repeatedly shows, even core CofP members are not guaranteed to arrive at the correct assessment. However, as

⁸ Jonathan Ross is a British television presenter, Russell Brand is a British comedian, and Andrew Sachs is a British actor (aged 82). In 2008, Brand and Ross recorded themselves leaving a series of crude messages on Sachs' answer-phone about his grand-daughter. The BBC received over 38,000 complaints, and were later fined £150,000 by Ofcom.

⁹ *Top Gear* is a British BBC car show notable for its irreverent humour. During series 16, episode 2, the hosts discussed a new car from Mexico, with comments such as, "Cars reflect national characteristics. A Mexican car is just going to be a lazy, feckless, flatulent oaf..." This resulted in widespread criticism, most notably from the Mexican Ambassador to the UK.

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long as the analyst supports careful analysis with evidence, is open to revision, or even proposes multiple possible explanations, then this seems as rigorous a route as possible in a topic that is heavily embedded in trying to explicate the inaccessible workings of the human mind.

A further aspect discussed above, was that some research (e.g. Mills in prep.) argues that analysts ought not to generalise. Unsurprisingly, given my corpus-based approach, I argue that micro- and macro-analyses are not only useful, but can be highly complementary. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003) suggest that:

Generalization is at the heart of research and [...] we ultimately seek global generalizations [but] we need to exercise care in how we form those generalizations—how we move from observations of the behavior of particular people in particular situations to broad societal patterns.

(Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 80)

Since it does not follow that generalisations must always be gross oversimplifications, as Eckert & McConnell-Ginet go on to say, I aim to take "careful steps" rather than "broad leaps" (2003: 80).

Finally, PDA has its own internal theoretical issues. Many PDA incarnations are based on Sperber & Wilson's (1986; 1995) Relevance Theory which posits that,

communication is achieved by encoding a message, which cannot travel, into a signal, which can, and by decoding this signal at the receiving end. [...] As long as the devices are in order and the codes are identical at both ends, successful communication is guaranteed.

(Sperber & Wilson 1986: 4)

This epistemology of positivist objectivism fundamentally clashes with social constructionism. Arundale (2008), who highlights a range of issues with

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Relevance Theory, argues that this view of communication does not sit well with the discursive view of interaction as a collaborative construct; an issue summarised by Haugh (2007b):

An encoding/decoding model, such as relevance theory, cannot successfully account for the property of emergence or interactional achievement that characterizes communication in general (Arundale 1999: 122-4; Arundale 2006: 195), and politeness in particular (Haugh 2007a: 95). (Haugh 2007b: 301)

In short, whilst PDA argues that im/politeness is emergently constructed, it incorporates a theory which does not allow for emergent construction. Thus, whilst PDA has marked a theoretical step forwards, there is still much to do.

2.4.3.—Interactional approach

The second of the three newer impoliteness approaches that I consider is the interactional approach (IA), typified by Arundale (1999; 2005; 2006; 2008) and Haugh (2007b; 2010b). The IA posits that,

each participant's cognitive processes in interpreting and designing are responsive to prior, current, or potential contributions the other participants make to the stream of interaction. (Arundale 2005: 59)

In different words, the interaction, and more importantly, the *interpretation* and ongoing form of that interaction, is shaped by an interlinking chain formed from what *was* said, what *is* being said, and what *may* be said. This again overlaps with CA, in which each interactant's response is understood in light of what has gone before and what can come later. Like PDA (§2.4.2), IA adopts the social constructionism and communication theory of identity views that face and im/politeness are interactional constructs (see Hecht 1993; Jung & Hecht

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2004; Hecht, Warren, Jung & Krieger 2005):

[IA] conceptualises 'face', '(im)politeness' and identity as emergent phenomenon [sic] that are both enacted in, and constitutive of, communication.

(Haugh 2010b: 658)

Like gender, power, and so forth, im/politeness and face are bounded by the culture, society, and context in which they occur:

While (im)politeness may be projected by speakers or interpreted by hearers, if our aim is [to] better understand [sic] how perceptions of (im)politeness arise through interaction, it is important to also focus on how (im)politeness is interactionally achieved as a joint accomplishment of both the speaker and the hearer. [...] (Im)politeness is thus conceptualized as being conjointly co-constituted in a collaborative, nonsummative manner through interaction by participants.

(Haugh 2007b: 306)

Haugh (2007b: 306) suggests that this moves im/politeness theorising past the problems inherent in encoding/decoding communicative models. An issue with IA, however, is that *intentions* are effectively backgrounded in favour of the way that interactants co-construct the discourse:

[W]hether one appeals to the speaker's intentions themselves (plausible or actual), or alternatively to the recipient's perceptions of the speaker's intentions, such appeals ultimately result in an impoverished account of impoliteness. Situations where diverging interpretations of impoliteness arise, for instance, cannot always be treated as a matter of recipients "incorrectly" inferring the intentions of speakers, as is largely assumed in (neo-)Gricean and Relevance Theoretic approaches to communication (Arundale 2008; Haugh 2009a: 92). Instead, they may involve deeper differences in interpretative norms and sociocultural presuppositions that cannot be reduced to contextual differences (Haugh 2008b: 219-224). *It appears, then, that in evaluating a speaker's behaviour as impolite or offensive, it is arguably not the (attribution of the) speaker's intentions per se that are necessarily crucial, but rather the speaker's behaviour with respect to how the recipient thinks others would (or should) evaluate such behaviour (as impolite, offensive and so on).*

(Haugh 2010b: 10-1, emphasis mine)

Whilst the notion of contextual other-based norm-evaluation is useful, it is problematically incomplete with regards to trolling. A troller's efforts can

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involve co-constructing an *apparently* sincere discussion (e.g. explaining evolution to a creationist) whilst subtly working towards triggering an argument. By backgrounding intentions, IA appears to stop at the interactional surface, losing the deeper analysis of deception and manipulation.

2.4.4.—Social psychological approach

The third of the three newer impoliteness approaches that I consider is the social psychological approach (SPA) (Spencer-Oatey 2000b; 2005; 2007). The SPA is based on the interrelated notions of identity, face, and rapport. Older identity research tends towards dualistic notions of the *individual* self (what I and others ascribe to me as an independent individual) and the *collective* self (what I and others ascribe to me as a group member). SPA, however, goes beyond this purely cognitive view and argues that identity is also socially and relationally enacted, and that the self-image we (try to) present to others is influenced by expectations and values (Schlenker & Pontari 2000: 204). (Note that identity is discussed in full in §3.5.). SPA links identity with face:

I propose that in cognitive terms, face and identity are similar in that both relate to the notion of 'self'-image (including individual, relational and collective construals of self), and both comprise multiple self-aspects or attributes. However, face is only associated with attributes that are affectively sensitive to the claimant. It is associated with positively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly), and with negatively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others NOT to ascribe to him/her. (Spencer-Oatey 2007: 644)

In SPA (2005; 2007), face is the affective parts of our identity. Any element of a person's identity can be(come) affectively sensitive, and move from being part of one's identity to being part of one's face. SPA also adopts the social

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constructionist view that identity and face are interactionally constructed:

I propose that interactionally, face threat/loss/gain will only be perceived when there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed (or denied, in the case of negatively evaluated traits) and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others. Contrary to Goffman's claim that face is associated with 'approved social attributes', I propose that the attributes that are affectively sensitive will vary dynamically in interaction, and will not always conform to the socially sanctioned ones (or non-sanctioned ones, in the case of negatively evaluated traits). In fact, it is possible that people will choose to contest one or more approved attributes, and to claim other attributes that are more important to them in that particular context.

(Spencer-Oatey 2007: 644)

In fact, rather than pursuing a notion of im/politeness *per se*, Spencer-Oatey (2007) focuses on this socially constituted cognitive phenomenon of face, and on the notion of *rapport management*:

Rapport refers to the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people, and *rapport management* refers to the management (or mismanagement) of relations between people.

(Spencer-Oatey 2005: 96)

As per the im/politeness approaches already discussed above, individuals can engineer the relationship as the interaction proceeds, based on behavioural expectations, face sensitivities, and interactional wants (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 96). The umbrella of rapport management, however, is fairly broad:

I take the management of rapport [...] to include not only behaviour that enhances or maintains smooth relations, but any kind of behavior that has an impact on rapport, whether positive, negative, or neutral.

(Spencer-Oatey 2005: 96)

This can make analysis difficult, since behaviour that might seem irrelevant to the observer could be vital to the interaction, whilst some important elements, such as emotional state, private shared history, and group-specific knowledge will be partially or fully unavailable to the analyst.

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2.4.5.—Hybrid impoliteness approach

The following summary explains which parts of each approach I adopt in order to analyse the data throughout this thesis.

The first idea I partly adopt is the postmodern, discursive approach's (PDA, see §2.4.2) view that identity and im/politeness are emergent and ascribed (correctly or otherwise) by individuals as interactions unfold. The second idea I adopt is the interactional approach's (IA, see §2.4.3) notion that interaction is achieved by co-constructing utterances based on previous, current, and future contributions. However, I do not (and indeed, cannot) background intentions and interpretations, due to the impact that these have on NMOB, and especially trolling. The third idea I adopt is the social psychological approach's (SPA, see §2.4.4) emphasis on the interrelationship between identity and face.

I haven taken the strengths from the above three approaches and formulated from them the *heuristic circle approach*¹⁰, based on the following major tenets:

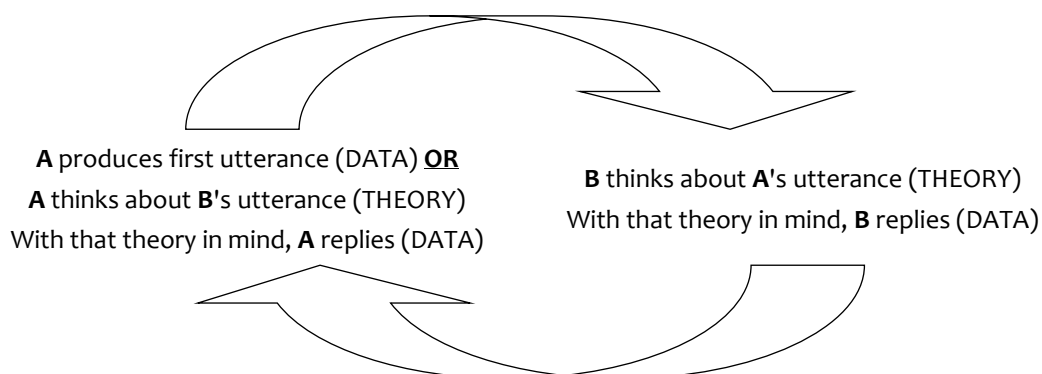
1. Academic im/politeness definitions (including trolling and other NMOB) must be primarily driven by lay user understanding, (meta-)discussion, co-constructions, and reconstructions. These may be—
 - a. inconsistent, and even conflicting, between groups, individuals, and contexts
 - b. supplemented, developed, or elaborated on by the analyst using her own knowledge (world, social, pragmatic, academic, etc.)
2. Im/politeness (including trolling and other NMOB), face, identity, etc. are all processes that are—
 - a. discursively co-constructed during interaction

¹⁰ This name attempts to capture the continually post- and premeditative nature of interactional co-construction, whereby each turn shapes, and is shaped by what came before, what can occur, or is occurring now, and what might come next.

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- b. open to discursive *reconstruction* (e.g. when a prior utterance acquires new meaning based on new information)
 - c. open to mistakes, deception, manipulation, etc. on S's *and* H's part
3. Co-construction and reconstruction can shape, and be shaped by S's/H's—
- a. knowledge (world, pragmatic, social, historical, relational, etc., including S/H's knowledge of his/her own intentions/interpretations)
 - b. beliefs (e.g. moral, ideological, theoretical, etc., including S/H's hypotheses about others' intentions/interpretations, character, knowledge, etc.)
 - c. norms (e.g. schematic expectations for that group, society, culture, etc.)
 - d. context (including the above, and participants, events, locations, times, etc.)

To explain more fully, A's definitions and/or understanding of, for example, trolling (points 1 and 3) will impact how she constructs B's interaction (2a) or reconstructs it afterwards, in, for example, discussions with others (2b), and her interpretations of the ongoing interaction are open to error (2c). A's construction will be based on her knowledge of B (3a), beliefs about B's intentions (3b), her expectations for that group (3c), and the particular context (3d). The interaction may produce new information affecting anything from A's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations (3a-c) to the context itself (3d). This may impact A's ongoing construction of B (2a), or encourage her to later reconstruct B's utterances (2b), or even alter her future (co-)constructions, with B or others. In short, this approach works in a continual heuristic, interlinking circle:



As above, A receives *data* (B's utterance). He analyses this, and *theorises* about

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B's construction, understanding, meaning, intentions, motives, etc. Based on his theory, A produces data (a response). B then analyses this, and *theorises* about A's construction, understanding, etc.. If A's response does not match B's expectations, she may prompt A to correct his theory. However, if B behaves as though all is well, this is likely to reassure A that his theorising is correct.

There are important points to note. In routine, well-established interaction such as greeting-and-greeting, S/H are unlikely to move beyond unconscious, efficient surface-processing. Conscious theorising, testing, or even questioning are more likely if one suspects that the other is constructing the interaction in a deceptive, manipulative, mistaken, or otherwise 'unfaithful' way. With regards to trolling, therefore, B may lead A to believe that he is correctly theorising about her (i.e. her intentions, knowledge, beliefs etc.), when she is actually deliberately, surreptitiously misleading him.

2.4.6.—Definitions of impoliteness

I now turn to the issues of definitions and terminology that im/politeness has struggled with. As Watts (2003: 9) suggests,

(im)politeness is a term that is struggled over at present, has been struggled over in the past and will, in all probability, continue to be struggled over in the future.

(Watts 2003: 9)

Evolving im/politeness research has necessarily resulted in the growth of metalanguage (e.g. *impoliteness, rudeness, face-attack, conflict, and incivility*).

The following subsections group some of these major academic definitions,

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though in doing so, some finer distinctions will inevitably have been lost.

However, terminology is,

just one of many issues that face those interested in conducting research into and concerning 'impoliteness', 'rudeness', 'aggressive language', 'the causing of offence' or linguistic behaviour which may be otherwise recognized (if not termed) as socially-negative face-work will have to consider. (Bousfield 2010: 101)

Instead of trying to enter or untangle this ongoing debate on terminological validity, I review some of the most commonly used terms, and argue that none fully captures the phenomenon of trolling. (I elaborate on this in Chapter Five.)

2.4.6.1.—Ritual or mock impoliteness

Ritual, or mock impoliteness "is an offensive way of being friendly" (Leech 1983: 144), which in Australian cultures can take the form of *jocular mockery* (Haugh 2010a), and in Anglo-American cultures, the form of *sounding* or *playing the dozens*. This can consist of ritualised, rhyming insults that are meant to be clearly untrue. Whilst a lay person might deem the *form* impolite, the *function* is to enhance and reinforce closeness, affect, and group cohesion between S and H (Haugh 2008). This is distinct from impoliteness types which foster S/H antipathy and division (Labov 1972).

2.4.6.2.—Non-malicious or incidental impoliteness

Incidental impoliteness is a by-product of S undertaking the task at hand (e.g. criticising a student's essay) despite being aware that she may offend H anyway (Goffman 1967: 14; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,549; Culpeper 2005: 36-7). Due to the lack of malicious intent, we might argue that this is not impoliteness at all.

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2.4.6.3.—*Rudeness, faux pas, failed politeness*

Culpeper (2005: 63) cites *rudeness* as the unintentional absence of appropriately polite behaviour. Goffman (1967) suggests that S,

may appear to have acted innocently; [her] offence seems to be unintended and unwitting... In our society one calls such threats to face *faux pas*, gaffes, boners or bricks. (Goffman 1967: 14)

Similarly, *failed politeness* (Beebe 1995: 166) covers instances where S intends to convey a polite attitude but offends H by misjudging the degree or type of politeness required (Culpeper 2005: 37). This type of impoliteness is based on H interpretation, rather than S intention (cf. *failed impoliteness*, §2.4.6.4.1).

Bousfield (2008: 73) distinguishes between instances where H realises that S did not mean to be impolite (but is still offended anyway), and instances where H incorrectly interprets malicious intent (cf. *malicious impoliteness*, §2.4.6.4).

2.4.6.4.—*Genuine, malicious, strategic impoliteness, or instrumental rudeness*

These terms by Culpeper et al. (2003: 1,546), Goffman (1967: 14), Lakoff (1989), Bandura (1973), and Beebe (1995: 159), refer to acts that S carries out with the intention of offending H, *and* of conveying that intent to H. Bousfield (2007) more fully defines malicious impoliteness as:

[T]he issuing of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive face-threatening acts (FTAs) that are purposefully performed:

- 1) Unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation (where mitigation equates with politeness) is required and/or,
- 2) With deliberate aggression, that is, with the face threat exacerbated, 'boosted', or maximized in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted.

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Furthermore, for impoliteness to be considered successful impoliteness, the intention of the speaker [...] to 'offend' (threaten/damage face) must be understood by someone in a receiver role. (2007: 155; cited in Bousfield 2010: 112)

Within this definition, to qualify as *successful* malicious impoliteness, S must intend to be impolite, *and* H must correctly reconstruct S's intent (though whether he then conveys this is another matter). However, not all malicious impoliteness is successful, therefore based on H's response, malicious impoliteness can be split into two further subtypes, which are given below.

2.4.6.4.1.—Failed malicious impoliteness

Malicious impoliteness fails when H misinterprets the utterance as, for instance, mock impoliteness, incidental impoliteness, failed politeness, etc. (Bousfield 2008: 73). (See §2.5 for discussion of intentions and interpretations.)

2.4.6.4.2.—Frustrated malicious impoliteness

Malicious impoliteness is frustrated when H correctly reconstructs S's malicious intent, but is simply not offended, or is even amused by it. Bousfield (2008: 72, fn. 6) provides the example of a child trying, and failing, to insult a parent, however, impoliteness may still be frustrated between Ss and Hs of equal rank.

2.5.—INTENTION AND INTERPRETATION

Within all of the above definitions, intention and interpretation are recurring issues. However, they are *especially* important with regards to trolling, since the grey area between S intention and H interpretation is precisely the habitat in which trolling thrives. If this grey area did not exist—if S knew *for a fact* that H

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was trolling him, dealing with her would be largely simplified. It is therefore worth thoroughly considering intention and interpretation, and how these are manipulated by interactants.

The definitions above (§2.4.6) also tend to paint an idealistic representation of interaction, where S conveys an intention, and H (un)successfully receives it:

If the intentions attributed by the hearers are roughly the same as those expressed by the speaker, then communication is considered to have been successful.

(Haugh 2008: 99)

In reality, however, H (and analyst) must hypothesise from the evidence, sometimes quickly, just what S intended (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,552; Mills 2003: 136), and mistakes, deception, and manipulation are common. Graham captures this when she suggests that,

Culpeper et al. (2003) propose that, in order for impoliteness to occur, there must be *intent* to attack the Hearer's face and the *context* must be consistent with an interpretation of impoliteness. While I agree with this definition, it does not specifically address instances where there are different *interpretations* of Speaker intent between the Speaker and the Hearer.

(Graham 2007: 743)

Hypotheses about intentions and interpretations are probably (unconsciously) reinforced if further interaction seems to support them, otherwise, they are probably (consciously) modified or suspended.

Another important issue is: what do we mean by *intention*? Unlike fields such as communication studies (Cohen, Morgan & Pollack 1990), psychology (Malle & Knobe 1997; Malle, Moses & Baldwin 2001; Malle & Hodges 2005), and cognition

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(Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne & Moll 2005), until recently, linguistics paid intention and interpretation scant attention (Haugh 2008: 101). Previous im/politeness frameworks tended to focus purely on S intention (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987; Lachenicht 1980), or H interpretation (e.g. Austin 1987; 1990), allowing both failed impoliteness, and failed politeness to be analysed as successful impoliteness. Later research typically draws in both S and H (Culpeper 1996; Watts, Ide & Ehlich 2005; e.g. Bousfield 2008; Haugh 2010b) but there is much left to do, including addressing the fact that not all notions of intention are identical.

2.5.1.—Pragmatic paradigms

The first issue with defining *intention* is that the pragmatic paradigm one is working from (i.e. Cognitive-Philosophical or Sociocultural-Interactional) may influence how, or even *if* this notion is taken into account:

In light of the entrenched nature of views on intention in both the Cognitive-Philosophical and Sociocultural-Interactional traditions in pragmatics, it is perhaps not surprising that the question of the place of intention in pragmatics has been attended to only sporadically by researchers. (Haugh 2008: 101)

According to Levinson, the debates between the two major pragmatics tribes are "squabbles at the margins" (Levinson 2006a: 90), however, when the differences are considered more closely, we can see that intention is far more complex than has perhaps yet been realised (Haugh 2008: 102). Sociocultural-Interactional pragmatics generally backgrounds intention as an equivocal, problematic, or non-central issue (Haugh 2008: 100). For instance, Verschueren (1999) argues that the role of intention should not be downplayed, and that

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much language use is goal-directed, but that,

it would be equally unwise to claim that every type of communicated meaning is dependent on a definable individual intention on the part of the utterer. Such a claim would be patently false. (Verschueren 1999: 48)

Meanwhile, within the Cognitive-Philosophical approach to pragmatics,

there has seemingly been little question amongst theorists that (Gricean) intentions in some form or another lie at the heart of communication. (Haugh 2008: 100)

Epitomising the Cognitive-Philosophical approach, Levinson (2006a: 87; 2006b: 48) suggests that interactants possess a Gricean-based 'interaction engine' which attempts to infer the motivating intentions and goals behind the observed behaviour. This makes the existence in S's mind of Gricean intentions (about which H makes inferences) vital to communication (Haugh 2008: 99).

Closer inspection, however, raises questions about whether Gricean theory can fully account for interactional intentions (and interpretations). Grice's view of intention, which the definitions in §2.4.6 generally espouse, suggests that S meant *x* *only* if she,

intended the utterance of *x* to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention. (Grice 1957: 385)

Levinson (1983) postulates this same 'formula' (for want of a better term) perhaps more clearly when he explains that S meant something [*x*] by her utterance [*u*] if, (a) she intended [*u*] to produce an effect on H, and, (b) she intended (a) to be achieved simply by H recognising (a) (Levinson 1983: 16).

According to Levinson's formula, Grice postulated two types of intention.

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The first, captured by (a), I call the *motivating intention*. This intention, which is close to the folk notion, describes the trigger for S's utterance (Arundale 2008: 234), e.g. S's need for help prompts her to ask H for advice. *Motivating intention*, therefore, takes S's perspective. The second type of intention in the Grice/Levinson formula (GLF) is the *reflexive intention*:

What distinguishes a Gricean reflexive intention from other kinds of reflexive intention is that the communicator's goal is achieved simply by being perceived: recognition exhausts or realizes the intention. (Levinson 1995: 228)

So, if S asks H for advice, then a successful execution of reflexive intention occurs if H simply *recognises* that S wants help (regardless of whether he provides her with any). *Reflexive intention* therefore takes H's perspective¹¹.

2.5.2.—Intention(s) and interpretation(s) in theory

The GLF has several problems, which are discussed below.

2.5.2.1.—*Certainty*

Firstly, GLF fails to consider that S can profess her intentions unfaithfully or ambiguously, and H can profess his interpretation of S's intentions unfaithfully or ambiguously. In fact, one way for S to troll and also (attempt to) evade possible consequences is to manipulate how on-record¹² she is with her 'real' intentions. According to Brown & Levinson (1987),

¹¹ Whether H is obliged to convey his recognition of S's reflexive intention is unclear. For simplicity, I assume that H does, since there seems no other way to determine that H recognised S's intent at all, let alone whether he did so (in)correctly.

¹² This does not suggest that im/politeness is the only motivation behind on-recordness or off-recordness.

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an actor goes on record in doing an act A if it is clear to participants what communicative intention led the actor to do A (i.e., there is just one unambiguously attributable intention with which witnesses would concur). For instance, if I say 'I (hereby) promise to come tomorrow' and if participants would concur that, in saying that, I did unambiguously express the intention of committing myself to that future act, then in our terminology I went 'on record' as promising to do so.

(Brown & Levinson 1987: 68-9)

Equally, S may choose to be more off-record such that,

there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed [her]self to one particular intent.

(Brown & Levinson 1987: 69)

At the extreme off-record end of the cline, there will be multiple defensible interpretations of S's intention(s) available to S and H, allowing S to plausibly deny any one of those intentions (Brown & Levinson 1987: 12). Off-record attacks also minimise the risk inherent in incontrovertible, on-record attacks; namely that H may reciprocate with equal, or greater impoliteness (Culpeper 1996: 355; Andersson & Pearson 1999; Bousfield 2008: 220), potentially escalating into a conflict spiral which could get entirely out of hand (Lein & Brenneis 1978: 301; Felson 1982: 245).

No matter how on-record S may make her utterance, however, this does not mean that her intention is ever *retrievable*—merely that fewer interpretations of her intention become reasonably defensible for S and H. For instance, S may try to make her intention(s) quite clear, but H may (pretend to) attribute incorrect intention(s) to S's utterance. Alternatively, S may deliberately mislead H about her intentions, and H may in turn mislead S about his interpretations. In short, we cannot be *certain* about either S intentions, or H interpretations.

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2.5.2.2.—Multiplicity

The GLF's second issue is that it seems to assume that S will only have one intention, and that H will only arrive at one interpretation. In reality, S's one utterance (e.g. *I wouldn't do that if I were you*) may have multiple intentions, such as demonstrating her knowledge (by assisting H¹) and asserting her group position (by offending H², and amusing H³). Meanwhile, H¹ may struggle to decide whether S's utterance is a threat, warning, advice, humour, sarcasm, etc., or he may end up at a loss for *any* explanatory intention (Grimshaw 1990: 281). If the context and H's knowledge cannot assign the appropriate interpretation to the utterance, he may be unable to respond appropriately.

2.5.2.3.—Mutability

A third issue with the GLF is that it does not allow for ongoing renegotiation between S and H of each other's, and their own, intentions and interpretations. For example, S may attack H with the sincere intention of causing offence, but if confronted by H, she may reframe her attack as ritual impoliteness (e.g. jocular mockery), incidental impoliteness (e.g. just doing her job), or a faux pas (e.g. she didn't mean to cause offence). Via this, she can (try to) protect herself from (some of) the consequences by hiding or recasting the intention that motivated her utterance.

Similarly, a troll who asks naïve questions that trigger arguments may defend herself from trolling accusations by foregrounding her intention to get help,

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whilst denying any intention to trigger conflict. Alternatively, she may (dishonestly) foreground a secondary intention as though it were her primary intention. For example, in courtroom interaction, the Prosecution's cross-examination may ostensibly seek to investigate, but actually aim to aggravate a hostile witness into an emotional outburst that damages his image before the jury. If challenged, the Prosecution may foreground her intention to gather information, whilst denying any intention to offend (Penman 1990; Archer 2011b).

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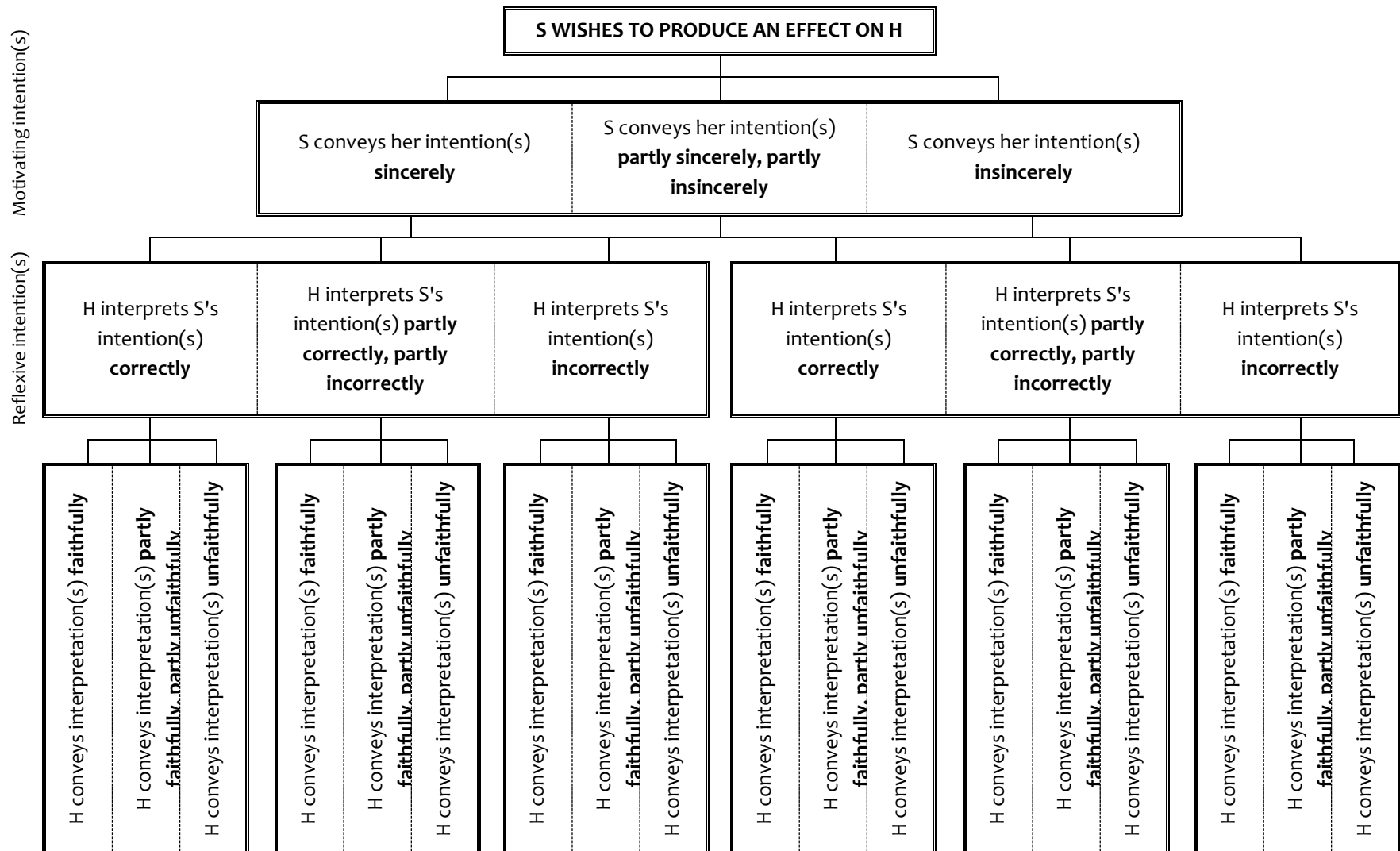


Table 2.3: The Grice/Levinson formula extended to include mistakes, deception, and the multiplicity of intention(s)/ interpretation(s)

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Just as S can be disingenuous and recast her intentions, so too can H be disingenuous with the expression of his interpretations. Table 2.4 above extends the GLF to incorporate the possibility of these mistakes, deceptions, and multiple interpretations and intentions. For example, if H believes that S attacked him on purpose, he may try to disarm the attack by conveying an unfaithful interpretation (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,566-7), such as responding as though S produced *mock impoliteness* (e.g. by laughing it off, see §2.4.6.1), *incidental impoliteness* (e.g. by behaving as though he is receiving useful criticism, see §2.4.6.2), or a *faux pas* (e.g. by 'enlightening' S to her 'gaffe', see §2.4.6.3). Alternatively, he may behave as though he has *not* interpreted impoliteness at all, to recast the attack as failed (see §2.4.6.4.1).

If S cannot be sure that H correctly recovered her intention(s), she may have to settle for what appears, to her, to be a failed attack, or increase her on-recordness and risk being called upon to account for her behaviour. H can also convey an unfaithful emotional response. If he is hurt by S's attack, he may relay a faithful interpretation of her *intention*, whilst trying to minimise any face-damage by reformulating her impoliteness as thwarted (see §2.4.6.4.1). (Examples of all of these strategies are discussed in Chapter Five.)

In summary, the debate involving the role of Gricean intentions in H's understanding of S's meaning has received some considerable attention (cf. Searle 1983; Recanati 1986; Bach 1987; 1990; Davis 1998; Gibbs 1999; 2001; Saul 2001; Jaszczolt 2005; 2006; 2007; Green 2007; Keysar 2007; 2008; 2008; R.J.

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Thompson 2008) but this has also involved,

challenges to Grice's emphasis on the reflexivity of (communicative) intentions, the drawing of attention to the relative neglect of conventionality in the Gricean account of meaning, and proposals that shared or "we-intentions", rather than individual intentions, underlie communication. All of these debates indicate that Gricean intentions may play a less central role in communication than traditionally assumed. (Haugh 2008: 101)

Most importantly, ongoing discussion shows that the once relatively uncontested place of Gricean intentions at the heart of Cognitive-Philosophical pragmatic theorising is increasingly problematic (Haugh 2008: 102).

2.5.3.—Intention(s) and interpretation(s) in this thesis

In this thesis, I use *intention* to refer to *motivating intention*—the motive for S's utterance, usually determined by the effect she wants to produce on H. (Note that this can have a strongly manipulative element.) Whilst the dataset exemplifies cases where mistakes, mutability, deception, etc. occur, there are few examples of Ss explicitly professing their intention to troll. The few examples Ss discussing their trolling intentions are typically straightforward denials. (See §6.4 for a range of responses by (alleged) trollers.) The majority of examples involve Hs discussing their own interpretations, so these are analysed more often. Whilst this inequality is not insurmountable, i.e. by increasing the corpus or bolstering the datasets with hand-picked S-interpretation examples, both solutions would introduce their own methodological problems.

As mentioned above (§2.5.2), the S intention/H interpretation grey area is precisely the habitat in which trolling thrives. Without it, trolling would

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probably vanish, since, if we knew that someone intended to troll, we could immediately move onto dealing with them. Instead, as also described at length, in ordinary interaction, we do not *categorically* know S's real intention(s)¹³, and even if we question interactants, we may still not uncover them (Mills 2003: 45). Instead, H is continually working from world knowledge, assumption, deduction, premise, etc., often under strict time constraints, whilst also processing his own response. Despite this, H may have such confidence in his *construction* of S's intention(s) that he believes himself to have *retrieved* it, particularly if the circumstance is trivial:

Speakers and hearers may be generally tolerant in relation to making judgments about whether an exchange is polite or impolite, accepting statements which may be a little ambiguous in terms of their function, as part of the give-and-take of interaction. It seems to be only at moments of interpersonal crisis that clear judgments about impoliteness are made. (Mills 2005: 264)

If the consequences of H's construction may be serious, or the utterance is unclear, or H lacks the necessary information, then he may take his efforts at constructing S's intentions on-record.

In this thesis, I am especially concerned with understanding how users contest and '(dis)prove' trolling intentions and interpretations, rather than whether a user conveyed her *actual* intention(s) or interpretation(s). Whilst it would be interesting to know them, given their inaccessibility, I do not second-guess them, but instead allow user discussions to guide the analysis. Further, whilst other methods are available for attempting to get closer to user intentions (e.g.

¹³ Given the inner workings of the human mind, even S may not always fully understand her own intentions.

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ethnomethodological field studies, questionnaires, etc.) I did not attempt these simply because nothing prevents respondents from lying even in these cases (cf. the fictional example in §2.4.2 above).

Our inability to access the thoughts of S and H and garner their actual intentions and interpretations, however, does not invalidate the pursuit of understanding im/politeness in interaction, and particularly NMOB, since interactants have been grappling with ambiguity, manipulation, and deception since *long* before research into im/politeness began. In the following section, I turn now specifically to the issue of deception, its types, and the ability of online users to detect deception.

2.6.—DECEPTION

Donath suggests that,

trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most players. (Donath 1999: 6)

This deception may be masked by attempts at appearing credible on the troller's part, leaving the user to assess the troller's (supposed) credibility, and attempt to detect deception.

Research by Vrij (2000) suggests that deception is,

a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue. (Vrij 2000: 6)

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Similarly, Ekman (1996) proposes two criteria that distinguish lies from other forms of deception. I adopt this definition for the types of online deception involved in NMOBs such as trolling:

The intent of the liar is one of the two criteria I (Ekman [1985] 1992) use to distinguish lies from other kinds of deception. The liar deliberately chooses to mislead the target. Liars may actually tell the truth, but that is not their intent. And truthful people may provide false information—bad advice from a stock broker—but that is not their intent. The second criterion for distinguishing lies from other deceptions is that the target is not notified about the liar's intention to mislead.

(Ekman 1996: 801)

Ekman (1996) highlights that some situations may permit *certain types of* deception, usually because schematically, other participants know or expect those types of deception to occur. For example, a player may bluff in a poker game (but not use marked cards), an actor may masquerade as someone else in a film (but not in real life), and a guest may feign admiration of his dinner (but not falsely claim that it poisoned him).

As later Chapters in this work show empirically, deception is a major factor in trolling and other NMOBs, whether in the form outright lies, or dishonest implications, or fabricated identities. However, one issue, especially for this thesis, is that the majority of academic research into deception is from physiology and social psychology, with very little from the field of linguistics. In fact, forensic linguist Shuy, recommends focussing on (in)consistencies which may point to deception rather than trying to look for deception itself, and in doing so, he uses analytical techniques such as speech act analysis and temporal discourse sequencing charts (Shuy 1998: 74-82).

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Given the shortage of linguistic research into deception itself (rather than the analysis of consistency), the following sections present work mainly from the field of psychology, including research into the types (§2.6.1), motives (§2.6.2), and detection of deception both offline (§2.6.3) and online (§2.6.4).

2.6.1.—Types

There are several types of deception¹⁴. We can deliberately convey that which we disbelieve, and we can deliberately withhold that which we believe:

Concealment is just as much a lie as falsification, if there is an expectation that information will be revealed. [...] Concealment and falsification are different techniques for accomplishing the same objective. The issue is the motive, not the technique employed to accomplish it. If the motive is to mislead, then the choice between falsifying or concealing is simply a matter of which technique will work better in a given instance. (Ekman 1996: 803)

The subtypes of deception occupy a scale, with *fabrication* (total falsification) at one pole, *exaggeration* (embellishing the truth) in the middle, and *equivocation* (technical truths and concealments) at the other pole (Memon, Vrij & Bull 2003: 8; Rubin 2010: 1). There are also levels of deception, from low-stakes (lies capable of few, or minimal consequences) through to high-stakes (lies capable of many, or extreme consequences). This leads us to motives for lying.

2.6.2.—Motives

Memon et al. (2003: 9) suggest five motives for deception. To distinguish each more readily, I have named them as follows: (1) *personal gain lies* aim to obtain

¹⁴ I do not consider self-deception here. Though interesting, this notion falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

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personal advantage; (2) *ego lies* aim to give the teller a good image (or avoid a bad one); (3) *self-protection lies* aim to protect the teller; (4) *other-protection lies* aim to protect others; and (5) *social lies* aim to promote social harmony.

These strategies are not strictly discrete. For example, embellishments on a CV could be classed as both *ego lies* and *personal gain lies*, since they make the holder look good and may gain her employment.

With regards to this thesis, however, we do not see any convincing motivation for a *troller* to engage in deception. The troller is likely to be viewed negatively if her motive is discovered, so it seems illogical to suggest that her deception is an *ego lie*. Trolling also typically does not protect the troller's self or others, making it neither a *self-* nor *other-protection lie*, and trolling actively seeks to reduce social harmony, so it is not a *social lie*. Further, trolling accrues little *material* gain, though it may be used as a means to an end (see §5.3.2). This is not the only motive for trolling however, so we must consider other 'rewards':

The three most common types of emotion associated with deceit are fear, excitement ('duping delight') and guilt (Ekman 1989, 1992). Liars might be afraid of getting caught, *they might become excited at having the opportunity of fooling someone*, or they might feel guilty (Ekman 1992).

(Vrij, Edward, Roberts & Bull 2000: 241-2, emphasis mine)

Rather than deceiving for gain, protection, or harmony, some trollers may deceive because (for them) duplicity is an inherently exciting, entertaining game. Some trollers may also achieve a sense of emotional or intellectual superiority from manipulating the feelings and responses of others. And for others, trolling may simply be a means to an end.

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2.6.3.—Detection offline

Accurately detecting deception presupposes the availability of a *base truth* against which competing stories can be checked. In lab experiments, analysts eventually discover the base truth. In reality, however, we may have competing stories, and insufficient evidence to identify a 'correct' version (if such a thing exists). Even in cases where an individual is later shown to have lied in part, it may not be clear *when* he is being deceitful, or even *if* he believes that he is lying. Without access to the base truth, or knowledge of *when* an individual is attempting to deceive, post hoc theorising about deception is inherently risky.

Because real-life data rarely provides clear-cut base truths, most deception research involves lab experiments where the base truth can be checked. However, experiments cannot ethically replicate real-life pressures and consequences. Instead, analysts typically try to engage participants via payment, or by relating successful deception to one's future career (e.g. Ekman 1989; 1996; Vrij 2004; Vrij, Mann, Fisher, Leal, Milne & Bull 2008). This deception research shows that the average untrained individual—even one who regularly, professionally deals with deception—is a fairly poor lie detector:

We found that customs officials, policemen, trial court judges, members of the F.B.I., C.I.A., B.A.T.F., D.E.A., forensic psychiatrists, and trial lawyers were not much better than chance generally performs at, or little better than chance [at catching liars].

(Ekman 1996: 803)

No perfect lie detection test exists, and lie detection experts make wrong judgements on a regular basis.

(Memon et al. 2003: 7)

A substantial empirical base shows that laypeople and even trained investigators (e.g.

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police) are often poor at discriminating between liars and truth tellers (Vrij 2000; 2004; 2008). Obviously, liars' behaviour often does not differ much from truth tellers' behaviour—at least not as we currently measure them—and so the task of discriminating between them is quite difficult. (Vrij et al. 2008: 253)

Many reasons have been posited regarding our inability to detect deception, including: (1) lack of evolutionary preparation, based on the assumption that prehistorically, lying would have minimal benefit, providing little advantage for deception detection skills; (2) inadequate childhood detection training and feedback, since parents lie to children to protect them, and strive not to be caught; (3) the social pay-off for being generally trusting rather than suspicious, paranoid, and accusatory; (4) psychological reluctance for facing unpleasant truths; (5) politeness socialisation which encourages lying and discourages investigating lies; (6) the lack of deception-specific behaviour (i.e. there is no Pinocchio's nose); (7) false 'deception behaviour' stereotypes which may divert attention from real deception markers; (8) idiosyncratic tells that need learning case-by-case; (9) infrequency or unavailability of data; and (10) the minimal behavioural differences between liars and truth-tellers (Akehurst, Köhnken, Vrij & Bull 1996; Ekman 1996; Vrij 2000: ch1; Vrij et al. 2000).

Deception detection can be split into roughly three categories: *physiological*, *behavioural*, and *linguistic* observation. *Physiological observation* involves measuring heart-rate, sweat, breathing etc., usually via a polygraph machine. Since this is beyond the scope of this work, it is not pursued further.

Behavioural observation includes emotional leakage; (micro) facial expressions;

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gaze-aversion and blink-rate; adaptors (e.g. scratching the face), illustrators (hand/arm gestures that supplement speech), and hand/leg movements (e.g. finger-tapping, knee-jiggling); prosody, pitch, stress, and intonation; and speech rate, errors, disfluency, hesitation, and latency (Vrij et al. 2000; Vrij et al. 2008).

Linguistic observation involves analysing verbal content via methods such as Criteria-Based Content Analysis (CBCA) (Steller & Köhnken 1989; Köhnken 1996), Reality Monitoring (RM) (Porter & Yuille 1996; Sporer 1997), and forensic linguistics or forensic psycholinguistics¹⁵. CBCA, for example, scores witness statements for credibility by looking at structure (i.e. coherence, consistency, chronology); detail richness (i.e. descriptions of places, times, persons, objects, events); interactional information (i.e. participant actions, reactions, speech); accounts of mental state (i.e. the witness' feelings, thoughts, or cognitions); and unprompted corrections or doubts (i.e. doubts of believability or accuracy, or spontaneous amendments or elaborations) (Vrij et al. 2000: 258-9).

Research suggests that whilst individuals can be trained to detect lies and truths with an average success rate of 70% via physiological or linguistic observation (Vrij & Akehurst 1998; Vrij 2000; Ekman [1985] 1992), observation of non-verbal behaviour provides an accuracy rate of 45%-60%—the region of chance (Kraut 1980; DePaulo, Stone & Lassiter 1985; Vrij 2000). Since the behavioural and physiological fall outside of the scope of this work, only linguistic observation is

¹⁵ CBCA and RM have been developed by psychologists, rather than (psycho)linguists, which in itself merits more attention. Further, CBCA was initially developed for assessing the statements of children who may have been victims of sexual assault.

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considered further.

2.6.4.—Detection online

Online deception is defined as,

a message knowingly and intentionally transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the perceiver. (Rubin 2010: 3)

CMC, and particularly ACMC (see §1.2 for definitions of ACMC/SCMC), is primarily linguistic in nature, with limited scope for speech-like errors, disfluencies, and latency (e.g. false-starts, mispronunciations, mid-message pauses, etc.). The average CMC user is also typically not trained in deception detection, therefore her chance of spotting deception may seem minimal. However, studies have shown that lay users are *more* likely to spot deception when focussing on fewer channels (e.g. *only* audio, or *only* visual, etc.):

A well known British political commentator (Sir Robin Day) was interviewed twice about his favourite films. In one interview he consistently told the truth, in the other he consistently lied. Transcripts of these interviews were published in *The Daily Telegraph*, broadcast on BBC Radio 1, and shown on the BBC Tomorrow's World television programme. People were asked to decide which interview contained the lies and to telephone the appropriate numbers to record their decision. There was a huge response from the public ($n = 41,471$). Radio listeners detected the lie 73.4% of the time, newspaper readers 64.2% of the time, and television viewers 51.7% of the time. (Wiseman 1995: 391)

In this case, ordinary (and we can assume, generally untrained) members of the public demonstrated an above-chance ability to detect deception when assessing the spoken (radio) or written (newspaper) version only, whilst the success of those using the audiovisual data (television) fell to the level of chance. In short, whilst there will be intragroup variation in the natural ability

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to detect (or perpetrate) deception, on average, individuals using written CMC are slightly more likely to recognise it than not.

2.7.—SUMMARY

The earlier development and elaboration of politeness theories and approaches have inevitably formed the backdrop of academic understanding against which impoliteness has been understood. In some respects, this has proven an advantage. For example, it has supported this new area in its journey towards acceptance. However, it has occasionally also proven to be a disadvantage. The pre-existing field of politeness formed an ideological, implicit benchmark against which impoliteness was (and sometimes still is) measured and described, as though impoliteness were a simple mirror-image to politeness. One of these mirrors includes the notion that since politeness is viewed as a rational strategy that works to serve our own goals (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987), impoliteness is therefore its irrational, non-strategic opposite (e.g. Kienpointner 1997: 280), and that politeness is the norm, making impoliteness abnormal, despite the fact that in some cases, impoliteness may be normal and politeness may be marked.

Later impoliteness research has departed from this dependence on politeness theories, and has begun to investigate impoliteness as a potentially strategic, deliberate, rational action, governed by its own rules. These newer theories have investigated whether intentions and interpretations should lie at the heart of im/politeness (Grice 1957: 385; Levinson 2006a: 87; 2006b: 48), at the

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periphery (Haugh 2010b: 10-1), or be entirely discounted unless the participants explicitly make them relevant (Locher 2006b: 252; Mills in prep.: 10).

I argue that if we are to develop a truly user-driven understanding of trolling and other NMOB, intentions and interpretations must be taken into account. I also argue that we must take into account S/H deception, not only because trolling and other NMOBs are typically highly deceptive behaviours, but also because users often demonstrate concern about being deceived, especially since CMC makes deception temptingly easy (see §3.4.6, §5.4.1, and §0).

As the data shows, with regards to trolling in particular, this deception can take the form of conveying false intentions or interpretations and/or concealing real ones, constructing an identity that is inconsistent with one's offline self and is therefore considered by others to be false (see §3.5 and §5.4.1), soliciting unrequired help for invented scenarios (see §5.4.1 and §7.5), and knowingly providing dangerous advice (see §5.4.1).

Finally, it is necessary to consider the context in which these behaviours occur. The next Chapter, therefore, is dedicated to considering some of the important aspects that can influence communication carried out via computers.

CHAPTER 3.

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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3.1.—PAST AND PRESENT RESEARCH

This Chapter reviews research into, and the effects of CMC. §3.2 defines the remit of CMC. §3.3 reviews the evolution of CMC research. §3.4 considers the strengths and drawbacks of online communication. §3.5 discusses offline and online identity. §3.6 considers academic research, media interest, and legislation that deals with NMOBs, and §3.7 concludes.

3.2.—DEFINING CMC

The overarching term *computer-mediated communication* is not necessarily clear-cut, so I will briefly define it. Firstly, *computer* typically refers to desktop PCs, but microchips also inhabit devices from mobile phones to microwaves (Santoro 1995: 11). We can also study CMC from at least two perspectives: *with* and *via*. Fields like human-computer interaction (HCI) and child-computer interaction (ChiCI) focus mainly on human communication *with* the computer. Computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), meanwhile, looks at human communication both *with* and *via* computers. In this thesis, CMC refers to communication occurring *via* any mediating, networked technology such as a laptop or mobile phone (Herring 1996; December 1997: 5; Ferris 1997; 2003: 612). I focus on *asynchronous* CMC (ACMC) rather than synchronous CMC (SCMC).

3.2.1.—Asynchronous versus synchronous CMC

SCMC is online interaction where users typically expect (a) the other(s) to be concurrently online, (b) messages to be delivered as quickly as transient net conditions will allow (i.e. fractions of a second), and (c) that the recipient(s)

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will typically respond quickly (i.e. within seconds). Given its speech-like aspects (see §4.8, and Figure 4.2 below), SCMC is suited to audio-only (e.g. **VoIP**), audiovisual (e.g. webcam) and text-based (e.g. **IRC**) interaction.

On the other hand, ACMC is online interaction where users typically expect (a) that the other(s) may not be concurrently online, (b) messages to be delivered as quickly as transient net conditions allow, and (c) that the recipient(s) will respond at their convenience (i.e. that day, week, month, etc.). Given its writing-like aspects, ACMC is suited to text-based interaction where graphics, if present, form a secondary, supporting dialogue. (Note, however, that **vlogs** are audiovisual and asynchronous, so these distinctions are not categorical.)

3.2.2.—The birth of CMC

The origins of CMC are widely attributed to America, where, in the 1960s, the U.S. defence department sponsored the wide-area computer network ARPANET to transfer programs and data for national defence purposes (Levy 1984; Rheingold 1993). By the 1970s, CMC was the preserve of computer scientists (Hafner & Lyon 1996), and by the 1980s, of elite universities and businesses. At this point, CMC began to garner wider academic interest. Through the 1990s, falling technology costs, rising awareness of social and business opportunities, and the arrival of commercial **ISPs** pushed CMC into the mainstream. By the millennium, global demands for improved technology led to online access becoming a norm (Herring 2003: 612-3):

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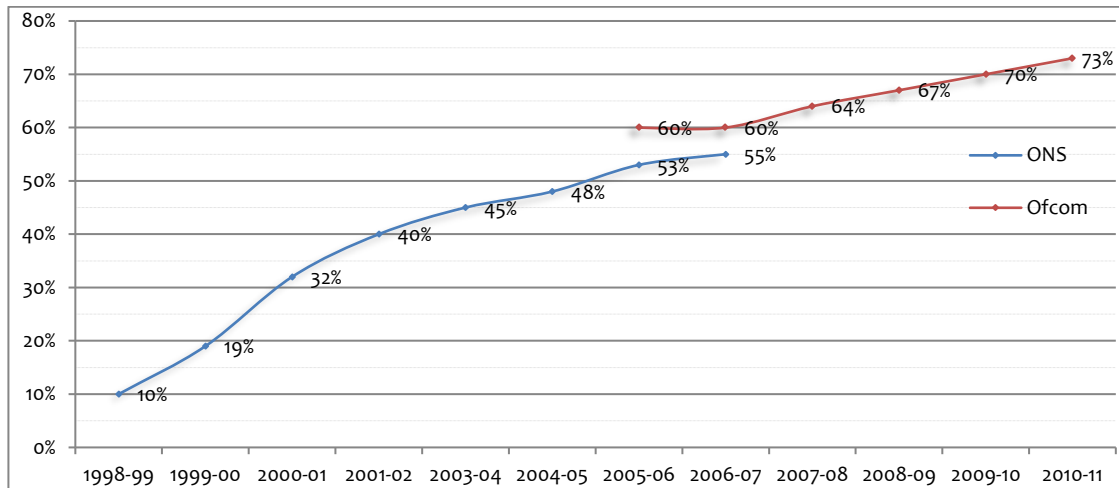


Figure 3.1: Percent of UK households online from 1998-2011 (ONS 2008; Ofcom 2011)

In 2007, 61.7% of all US households were online (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). By 2010, 73% of all UK households were online (Ofcom 2011: 233). These statistics only represent parts of North America and Europe, however, they do suggest that CMC is now a major aspect of our daily lives, whether for the relational work it mediates or for the tasks it performs (Murray 1997; Ofcom 2011: 236).

3.2.3.—Troubled beginnings

As with most developments that profoundly affect our lives (i.e. the printing press, telephone, and television) CMC has been the subject of heated debate.

For example, legislators and politicians tend to focus on its impact on social, behavioural, and psychological health, especially with regards to children.

Others are more concerned with the quality of communication CMC offers. For example, Herring (2003) describes text-based CMC as,

free from competing influences from other channels of communication and from physical context. (Herring 2003: 612)

However, Zdenek (1999) suggests that it is,

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clearly at a disadvantage, because [users] do not have access to the wide array of social cues that FTF speakers do. (Zdenek 1999: 390)

In much research, FtF is implicitly held as an interactional standard from which communicative forms such as CMC deviate. Kraut et al. (1992) argue that FtF is expressively and interactively 'richer' than CMC. Some research compounds this by dichotomising *virtual* and *real-life* activity (e.g. Baym 1996: 342; Strom & Strom 2005: 41; Chiou 2006: 547). To avoid devaluing CMC as a field of inquiry and as a form of communication, this thesis adopts the terms *online* (for CMC) and *offline* (for writing, sign-language, FtF). However, even this distinction is somewhat artificial, since online and offline communicative boundaries can easily blur. (See §5.5.2 and §5.5.4 for examples of this.)

3.2.4.—CMC and conflict

Evidence from this dataset and current research suggests that we are generally more predisposed towards conflict when communicating online. This is enabled by several factors, including the anonymity that CMC offers, combined with the linguistically, socially, and psychologically distancing effects of the medium (e.g. Lea & Spears 1991; Reicher, Spears & Postmes 1995). As long ago as 380BC, philosophers recognised that anonymity could facilitate negatively marked behaviour. Plato wrote of the shepherd Gyges, who found a ring that made him invisible. Discovering this, Gyges used the protection of this invisibility to infiltrate the royal household, seduce the queen, assassinate the king, and take the kingdom (Plato 2007: 2.359c-2.360d). Plato then writes,

If now there should be two such rings, and the just man should put on one and the

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unjust the other, no one could be found, it would seem, of such adamantine temper as to persevere in justice. (Plato 2007: 2.360b)

Plato felt that the protection of invisibility, or anonymity would corrupt even the most morally upstanding person. Similarly, Oscar Wilde wrote that,

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth. (Wilde 1891)

CMC can function as a mask or a ring of Gyges, allowing CMC users to behave unpleasantly whilst also avoiding the consequences of that behaviour. In fact, CMC environments are often built and managed with conflict in mind. For example, SCMC such as **instant messengers**, **chatrooms**, and **IRC** offer *ignore* features, whilst ACMC such as **usenet**, messageboards, and email provide *block* options (Sternberg 2000). As Donath (1999) writes,

an extensive description of **killfile** techniques in a group's **FAQ** is a kind of virtual scar-tissue, an indication that they have had previous trouble with trolls or flame-wars.(Donath 1999: 48)

Sites may also purchase automated software, or employ admins¹⁶ to moderate interaction. (Moderating CMC is discussed fully in Chapter Four.) Further, numerous online artefacts indicate CMC's conflictive nature. For instance, there are humorous guides on how to troll (e.g. The Troller's FAQ 1996), guides on how to score trolling (e.g. Newsbee 2000), and sites dedicated to organised trolling¹⁷. Further, RFC1855, a widely distributed **netiquette**, advises that:

¹⁶ Different systems use different names. **ISPs** use *SysAdmins*. **IRC** uses *channel operators (ops)* and *IRCCops*. **Bulletin-boards** use *sysops*. **Virtual worlds** use *gods* or *wizards*. Messageboards and **newsgroups** use *moderators (mods)* or *administrators (admins)*. Groups may also use their own specific names. For ease, I simply use the collective term, *admin*.

¹⁷ Some require software (e.g. **l2p**), knowledge (e.g. **IP addresses**), or credentials (e.g. passwords) to access.

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You should not send heated messages (we call these "flames") even if you are provoked. On the other hand, you shouldn't be surprised if you get flamed and it's prudent not to respond to flames. (Hambridge 1995)

Interactive sites also typically provide guides¹⁸ forbidding certain behaviours.

For example, video-hosting site, *YouTube* does not tolerate,

predatory behaviour, stalking, threats, harassment, invading privacy or the revealing of other members' personal information.

(*YouTube* 2012: YouTube Community Guidelines)

Social networking site, *FriendsReunited* states that members,

must not use the website for the purpose of bullying, intimidating or harassing any other members.

(*FriendsReunited* 2012: Terms & Conditions)

Online media forums that allow article comments also typically suggest that,

personal attacks (on authors, other users or any individual), *persistent trolling* and mindless abuse will not be tolerated.

(*Guardian* 2012: Community Standards & Participation Guidelines, emphasis mine)¹⁹

The existence of these documents is indicative of a reaction to ongoing issues with, or concerns over, NMOB that these sites have ended up dealing with.

Finally, it is also relatively easy to find NMOB. One need only view widely publicised memorial pages or groups dealing with sensitive topics and there are likely to be traces of NMOB, typically in the form of user complaints, if not actual examples of behaviours such as trolling and flaming.

¹⁸ These may variously be called community guidelines, acceptable use policies, terms of use, terms & conditions, etc.

¹⁹ Online news outlets may also revoke the option to comment on articles if the subject is sensitive or inflammatory.

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3.3.—EVOLUTION OF CMC RESEARCH

Partly following Androutsopoulos (2006: 420-1), the following sections identify two broader stages in CMC research.

3.3.1.—Computers mediating communication

In early research, CMC is generally viewed from a technologically deterministic perspective. Strong technological determinism posits that technology controls the user. For example, the following (real) headline, *How Facebook ruined my holiday: The Internet and mobile technology make it increasingly difficult to switch off* (Kirsh 2012) casts *Facebook*, the internet, and mobile technology in the role of autonomously self-aware and malignant actor, and the user as victim. Researchers such as Kraut et al. (1992: 375) argue that CMC not only impedes the formation of new offline social ties, but even damages those already in existence. In later research, Kraut et al. go on to suggest that,

greater use of the internet is associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness.

(Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhaya & Scherlis 1998: 1,017)

This view is exemplified in fiction (e.g. *I, Robot*; *Terminator*; *The Matrix*) and the media (e.g. Naughton 2010; Zhuo 2010), perhaps because technological determinism allows the media to target an entity that cannot defend itself.

Turkle (1990) describes this phenomenon as the *subjective computer*:

people tend to project on to computers and digital technology their own individual fears and aspirations. (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic 2004: 40)

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Weaker technological determinism can be found in work that describes linguistic choices as determined by CMC. For instance, Crystal talks of the "language of emails" (2001: 94) and the "language of chatgroups" (2001: 148), implicitly citing both the genre and its (a)synchronicity "as a pivotal point for linguistic description" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 420).

3.3.2.—Communication mediated by computers

Latterly, CMC research shifted its attention from technology to user in context (Androutsopoulos 2006: 420). This notion of self-determinism posits that we use, or allow ourselves to be affected by technology. For example, the sentence, *I ruined my life (via CMC)* casts the user as primary actor responsible for her own actions (Chandler 1995)²⁰. In short, technology, user, and context *all* determine linguistic choices and behaviour, and the focus of CMC research is on exploring the diversity, creativity, and meaning of linguistic choices, the construction of online identities, and the interplay between these two.

A major commonality of most CMC (which may change with the progression of technology) is that communication typically takes place through text. Graphics tend to form a secondary, supporting dialogue, if present at all. Zdenek (1999), talking of gender specifically, suggests that,

[b]ecause cybernauts (both humans and software applications) do not have a 'body' in text-based virtual realities, genders must be mediated or conveyed entirely

²⁰ It is important not to imagine that the technology has no influence whatsoever; technology determines, to an extent, how it can be used, by whom, when, and where. For instance, helicopters are restricted in their applications, cannot be operated by just anyone, and will not fly in certain conditions, but the helicopter doesn't *make* anyone (attempt to) fly it.

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through output on computer screens.

(Zdenek 1999: 381)

However, this applies to any aspect of appearance or behaviour. Since the CMC identities analysed in this dataset are constituted purely via text, a user can explore multiple online identities that have no parity with her offline self.

3.4.—BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF CMC

CMC is often attributed with a number of benefits (e.g. it allows us to keep in touch with friends over long distances) but equally, it is attributed with opposing drawbacks (e.g. it can allow a stalker to 'follow' a person from an entirely different country, unobserved). Below, I discuss the points most relevant to this thesis, but suffice to say, this account is far from exhaustive.

3.4.1.—Distance

The first of six benefits/drawbacks of CMC that I consider is distance.

Sunderland (2006) describes how,

academics can communicate perfectly satisfactorily on a topic with no idea of where on the globe their correspondent is writing from. (Sunderland 2006: 44)

CMC allows individuals to communicate quickly and easily over sometimes significant spatial and temporal distances, but this can also make enforcing boundaries extremely difficult. For example, a major development from pre-CMC school bullying is cyberbullying, which can follow a victim wherever her networked device goes. Unless the victim is able to entirely excise CMC from her life, or can adopt an online self-protection regime that even an adult would

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find challenging, then preventing undesired contact can be nearly impossible. More importantly, from the child's perspective, there is little point in having a social device if it cannot be used socially.

Socially, CMC can also complicate relational distances by encouraging users to feel a stronger sense of commonality with others than they might experience offline, due to the absence of visual differences (Spears & Lea 1992):

[F]orums can evolve into communities whose members share information, experience a sense of belonging, and provide mutual support (Rheingold 1993; Preece 2000). Moreover, the relative anonymity of the Internet can make people feel safe talking about issues that might be considered sensitive, inappropriate or dangerous in face-to-face public conversation (cf. Kiesler et al. 1984; Donath 1999).

(Herring et al. 2002: 371)

This sense of commonality may encourage individuals to assume or insist on closer relationships with others than those users might wish (i.e. cyberstalking). Offline, we may signal intimacy by when, where, and how much we choose to interact, but online, regulating how much others learn about and contact us is more difficult. In particular, **doxing** (finding and publishing sensitive personal information about someone) may intimidate the target by making her feel as though she has many aggressors who all know her and each other, but whom she in turn cannot identify or protect herself against.

3.4.2.—Information

The second of six benefits/drawbacks of CMC is information. CMC allows anyone to publish online, giving us access to unprecedented amounts of

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information. This democratisation of knowledge has led to breakthroughs, worldwide recognition, and the righting of wrong, but at the same time, it has given would-be terrorists guidance on weapons, and sex offenders access to children. It has also created the *signal-to-noise* problem. Since the internet is mostly impervious to quality control (Nasukawa & Nagano 2001), correct information (signal) may be drowned out by deliberately incorrect content such as trolling (noise) (Wasko & Faraj 2005: 37).

3.4.3.—Fluency

The third of six benefits/drawbacks of CMC that I consider is fluency. CMC cannot (fully) replicate FtF features such as prosodic cues (pitch, tone, speed), visual cues (gestures, gaze, facial expressions), and kinetic cues (shaking hands, hugging). Perhaps because of this, the default position in CMC research is that FtF is the standard against which CMC should be measured:

To a "newbie," posting to [Usenet](#) can be a daunting experience. It is impossible to know who will read the message, or to determine how they will react. Also, unlike face-to-face interaction, gestural, facial or prosodic cues are absent, and so many posters rely on smilies (Sanderson 1993; Elmer-Dewitt 1994) to function as indicators of emotion. (Baker 2001)

As above, a typical focus in CMC research is on what CMC *lacks* in comparison to FtF (e.g. instant audiovisual feedback). Little, if anything, is said about the CMC features that are impossible FtF. A few benefits of CMC over FtF include the ability to share multimedia, to overtly and anonymously rate user interaction, and to fully filter out undesired content, none of which can be done easily, or at all, FtF. (This is discussed further in Chapter Four below.) If we are

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to properly research CMC, we must not view it as a corruption of FtF which, in being typed out, has lost many features. Instead, just as literature, films, speeches, etc. are all viewed as independently valid forms with their own historical and cultural contexts, so too should CMC be thought of as an independently valid communicative form with *its* own culture and history.

3.4.4.—Assumptions

The fourth of six benefits/drawbacks of CMC that I consider is assumptions.

Most people's first-learned and dominant interactional type is FtF. As a result, an inexperienced CMC user is likely to draw on the communicative schema and norms she already possesses (FtF) and apply them to the new context (CMC).

For example, S may get an answer to her request for advice, and because FtF we do not expect to be deliberately tricked into doing something dangerous, H may not realise that S is a troll striving to achieve precisely this outcome.

Perhaps because of our heavy reliance on FtF schema, which is only gradually distinguished into a CMC schema (if at all, for some), research shows that even experienced users can over-estimate their online communicative abilities, and this over-estimation increases the potential for miscommunication (Zdenek 1999: 390; Herring 2003: 612; Kruger, Epley, Parker & Ng 2005). Added to this, should a user pay scant regard to [FAQs](#) and [netiquettes](#) painstakingly written to assist people like her, this can frustrate the group, who may attribute wanton disregard to her faux pas.

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3.4.5.—Meaning

The fifth of six benefits/drawbacks of CMC that I consider is meaning. Unlike traditional writing (e.g. newspapers, essays) CMC is dynamic, and is continually developing new genres and styles (Abbasi & Chen 2008: 812). Some of these genres cannot exist offline (e.g. **vlogs**; fan pages; synchronous, worldwide **social networks**). CMC has also developed a rich body of cues, including symbols, imagery, style, formatting, greetings, and signatures. These and many besides can all express complex and subtle relational, social, and pragmatic information, such as affect (Subasic & Huettner 2001), rank (Hara, Bonk & Angeli 2000), opinion (Nigam & Hurst 2004), genre knowledge (Yates & Orlikowski 2002), ingroup norms, power relations, and positioning (Henri 1992; Panteli 2002).

Attributing meaning to a CMC feature, however, can be tricky. Users often circumvent interactional limitations imposed by the technology to maximally enrich their communicative experience (Walther 1992; Thurlow et al. 2004: 51). Users have invented new linguistic features, constructions, or even language varieties (cf. **lolspeak**, the 'language' of **lolcats**), and imbued existing features with new meanings (Wilson & Peterson 2002; Vaughan & Gawne 2011). These can become standardised, valued markers which form a micro-culture, and knowledge of how to appropriately use them can be a key index of ingroup membership. These cultural informational packets can even become memes. Coined by Dawkins (1989), a *meme* is:

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a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'.

(Dawkins 1989: 192)²¹

Some memes such as **lolcats** and **rickrolling** have even become recognisable offline in mainstream, worldwide consciousness (Rutkoff 2007; Leckart 2009; Arthur 2011; Vaughan & Gawne 2011).

This highly fluid development can lead to many meanings for one apparently identical feature. An example of this is **lulz** (e.g. *I did it for the lulz*), a slang corruption of **LOL**. **Lulz** is typically used to indicate laughter at another's expense (akin to *schadenfreude*). On some sites, this feature may be amusing, whilst on others, it may be deeply offensive.

3.4.6.—Anonymity

The sixth and final benefit/drawback of CMC that I consider is anonymity. Anonymity can induce people to open up in ways that they cannot FtF, since, should the confidant(s) respond negatively, users can simply vanish and even reappear as 'someone else'. However, anonymity can also foster a sense of impunity, loss of self-awareness, and a likelihood of acting upon normally inhibited impulses—an effect known as deindividuation (Siegel et al. 1986). Psychologically, interactants may give less consideration to the recipient's

²¹ Whether Dawkins intended this to be extended to online cultural knowledge and imitation, this is indeed the direction this term has taken and is now much better known for.

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feelings. This, according to Douglas & McGarty, is manifested in NMOB like flaming and trolling (2001: 399):

Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. They show unusual acts of kindness and generosity, sometimes going out of their way to help others. We may call this *benign disinhibition*. However, the disinhibition is not always so salutary. We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people visit the dark underworld of the Internet—places of pornography, crime, and violence—territory they would never explore in the real world. We may call this *toxic disinhibition*.

(Suler 2004: 321, emphasis original)

CMC can offer a high degree of anonymity, and far more control over a self-presentation than FtF, greatly increasing the possibility of deception, whether intentional or accidental, or self- or other-imposed (Spears & Lea 1992; Rheingold 1993; Preece 2000). When we add to this,

the potential for reaching a diverse global audience, consisting of hundreds of cultures, it is unsurprising that conflict is a common phenomenon in [Usenet](#).

(Baker 2001)

In this thesis, I distinguish between *anonymity*, where users clearly indicate in some way that they are not posting as themselves (e.g. by choosing *Mickey Mouse* for their username) versus *pseudonymity* where a user's account *appears* to be valid, but is actually false (Zarsky 2004: 1,340). (See §0 for more on this.)

3.5.—IDENTITY OFFLINE AND ONLINE

When discussing identity, it is important to consider that the data is far more likely to exemplify lay notions of identity—as a static, unchanging 'outfit' that is either valid, or not, e.g. Example 44, Example 45, and Example 46—than academic viewpoints. As a result, whilst academic discussion may augment

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analysis, it cannot fully account for the examples in later Chapters. The following sections therefore consider how identity is manifested on- and offline.

3.5.1.—Theories of identity

Identity has received considerable attention in fields as diverse as gender, im/politeness, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics (e.g. Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997; Cameron 1997; Holmes 1997; Edwards 1998; Verschueren 2004; Terkourafi 2005b; Mullany 2007). However, identity may well be an analytic fiction (Simon 2004). It is not a 'thing', nor a purely cognitive phenomenon. Instead, just as dancing is a dynamic physical process that only becomes apparent when undertaken, identity is a dynamic behavioural, socio-psychological enactment carried out through relational, social interaction with others (O'Brien 1999: 78).

This identity is constructed from memories, beliefs, schema, and world knowledge (Campbell, Assenand & Di Paula 2000: 67), and rather as a whole dance is not learned from observing a few steps, a full identity is not displayed in a single utterance or conversation. Equally, just as a dancer's repertoire grows with training and practice, so a person's identity evolves many facets through a lifetime. And just as a dancer will select a style to fit the occasion, so too will the interactant be expected to adopt the most appropriate manifestations of her identity for each context and stage of her life (Bornstein 1994).

According to Spencer-Oatey (2007),

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[t]here are a number of different social psychological theories of identity and they reflect a variety of different approaches to the issue. *Identity Theory* (Stryker 1987) takes a sociological approach; *Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Intergroup Relations* (Tajfel & Turner 1986) and *Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)* (Turner et al. 1987) both take a psychological approach; and in North America, identity has traditionally been studied in terms of the social cognition of the self (e.g. Linville 1985).

(Spencer-Oatey 2007: 640)

Identity is sometimes simplistically discussed in terms of two (artificially dualistic) categories: *individual identity*, or one's self-definition as a person in one's own right, and *collective identity*, or one's self-definition as a person in relation to one's group memberships. These categories help to define each other, however:

The same self-aspect (e.g. German) can provide the basis for a collective identity at one time ('We, the Germans'), whereas at another time it may be construed as a constituent or element of one's individual identity ('I am a psychologist, male, German, have brown eyes and so forth'). In the first case the particular self-aspect defines a social category of which oneself is one member among others, whereas in the other case it is one feature among several other features of oneself, the ensemble of which constitutes one's individual identity.

(Simon 2004: 54)

Bucholtz & Hall (2005) offer a far more nuanced approach to identity by drawing on research from social psychology (e.g. Tajfel & Turner 1986; Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991; Meyerhoff 1996), linguistic anthropology (e.g. Silverstein 1976; 1979; 1985; Ochs 1992), and sociolinguistics (e.g. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985; Eckert & Rickford 2001; Mendoza-Denton 2002). From this, they determine that,

[i]dentity does not emerge at a single analytic level—whether vowel quality, turn shape, code choice, or ideological structure—but operates at multiple levels simultaneously. Our own approach privileges the interactional level, because it is in interaction that all these resources gain social meaning.

(Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 586)

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Bucholtz & Hall (2005) propose five principles that they consider fundamental to identity. Firstly, the *emergence principle* counters the notion that language reflects an individual's internal mental state. Instead they suggest that,

[i]dentity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon. (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 588)

Therefore, S does not act like a troller because she *is* a troller. Rather, she acts like a troller, and therefore, takes on a trolling identity. Later, she may act like an employee, customer, or student and take on those identities instead. Identity is continually enacted, however mundane the circumstances, but it becomes most salient when it transgresses expected norms (2005: 588-9).

Secondly, the *positionality principle* argues that identity is not a mere collection of broad social categories (2005: 591). Instead,

[i]dentities encompass (a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles. (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 592)

Importantly, whilst interactants may be from similar backgrounds, and share similar linguistic and social repertoires, they may still position themselves differently (i.e. as the comedian, the party-goer, the troller, etc.). Defining individuals by broad social categories cannot account for the diverse identities that emerge within sociocultural groups made up of members with similar backgrounds and repertoires (2005: 592-3).

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Thirdly, the *indexicality principle* is less interested in the ontology of identity. It focuses instead on the mechanism—indexicality—by which identity is enacted:

Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including: (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups.

(Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594)

On a micro-level, this relies on interactants overtly adopting referential identity categories (e.g. *troller*) including elaborations (e.g. *shill troller*), qualifications (e.g. *troll-like*), and contrastive positioning (e.g. *troll* versus '*real*' interaction), or covertly signalling identity via presupposition and implicature (e.g. *get back under your bridge!*). On a macro-level, language and dialect choice can be a part of the identity under construction (e.g. Standard British English versus a strong regional variation) (2005: 594-7).

Fourthly, the *relationality principle* argues that identity is relationally constructed in contrast to other identities and interactants:

[i]dentities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy.

(Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598)

An interactant can create an identity that aligns herself with legitimate, authentic, and/or similar identities (e.g. members) in contrast to delegitimised, artificial, and/or dissimilar identities (e.g. trolls) (2005: 598-604). This is supported by de Fina, who argues that conflicts and acts of resistance can be associated with socially shared group representations (de Fina 2006: 352).

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Finally, the *partialness principle* suggests that,

[a]ny given construction of identity may be in part deliberate and intentional, in part habitual and hence often less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation, in part an outcome of others' perceptions and representations, and in part an effect of larger ideological processes and material structures that may become relevant to interaction. It is therefore constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts.

(Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 606)

Identity is a (conscious and unconscious) patchwork of what the individual conveys (e.g. asking for help on a controversial topic), what others ascribe to her (e.g. advice-seeker is trouble-causing), and the result of interactional negotiations (e.g. all agree that she is trolling) (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 605-7).

Overall, for Bucholtz & Hall (2005), identity is produced intersubjectively rather than individually and across multiple dimensions. It also emerges and circulates in interaction rather than simply being assigned *a priori* (2005: 587).

3.5.2.—Identity online

The above section demonstrates the rich and growing body of research into offline identity, however, online identity research, including the *deception* and *mutability* of online identity, is still catching up. FtF, judgements about others may be made instantly based on appearance, behaviour, and speech, but via CMC, S has far more control over her self-presentation:

The potential for constructing alternative identities is one of the most salient features of Internet use. In face-to-face interaction restrictions are placed on the identity a person is able or permitted to construct for themselves at that particular point in

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time; for example, people cannot instantly change their physical appearance at will. However, as Reid (1994) notes, the anonymity and physical separation of cyberspace enables social experimentation, as well as explorations of identity and self. (Baker 2001)

S can invent and explore identities that she would struggle to enact offline. As discussed in §5.4.1 and throughout, however, users automatically seem to equate discrepancies between online and offline identities as perniciously motivated attempts at deception. This returns to the issue that whilst academic research may discuss theoretical perspectives of the mutability and multifaceted nature of identity, for lay users, the interpretation may be far more simplistic.

3.6.—NEGATIVELY MARKED ONLINE BEHAVIOUR

There is surprisingly little linguistic research on both impoliteness *and* CMC (see, however, Herring et al. 2002; Graham 2007; Shin 2008), and when attempting to discuss NMOBs, the first academic problem is,

variability in the perceptions of norms and expectations underlying evaluations of behaviour as polite, impolite, over-polite and so on, and thus inevitably discursive dispute or argumentativity in relation to evaluations of im/politeness in interaction. Yet with the exception of work by Locher (2006a) and Graham (2007; 2008), there has been little research on im/politeness in various forms of computer-mediated communication from this perspective. (Haugh 2010b: 8)

These problems are not limited to the analyst. Users also struggle to evaluate the im/politeness of online utterances in light of their own norms and expectations, and whilst there has been interest in *some* NMOBs, the focus particularly within the media, has tended to be on **spamming** (e.g. Stivale 1997; Barron 2006), cyberbullying (e.g. Strom & Strom 2005; Topçu, Erdur-Baker & Çapa-Aydin 2008), and cyberstalking (e.g. Bocij 2004; Whitty 2004), whilst

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academia has expended greater effort on issues such as aggressive video games (e.g. D. Scott 1995; van Schie & Wiegman 1997; Dill & Dill 1998), computer-related depression (e.g. Kraut et al. 1998) and flaming (Lea, O'Shea, Fung & Spears 1992; e.g. Herring 1994; Shea 1994: Ch. 7; Millard 1997; Kayany 1998; Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000). The following sections outline extant academic and legislative literature on various NMOBs, starting with trolling.

3.6.1.—Trolling

Until recently, trolling was largely ignored even by the media, and prior to 2010, there are only scattered reports of it (e.g. Black 2006; Cox 2006; Moulitsas 2008; C. Thompson 2009). In the media, typical definitions describe trolling as posting incendiary comments designed to provoke conflict:

Hiding behind the pseudonymity of a Web alias, trolls disrupt useful discussions with ludicrous rants, inane threadjackings, personal insults, and abusive language.

(Naraine 2007: 146)

Brandel (2007) adds that:

A troll is a person who posts with the intent to insult and provoke others. [...] The goal is to disrupt the normal traffic of a discussion group beyond repair.

(Brandel 2007: 32)

Heffernan (2008) highlights the unprovoked nature of trolling, along with another goal—amusement at another's expense:

Consider this question from David Hume: "Would any man, who is walking alone, tread as willingly on another's gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement?" [...] Internet trolls regularly tread on gouty toes. They trick vulnerable people with whom they have no quarrel; they upset those people; they humiliate them; they break their hearts; they mess with them. They do it for something Hume didn't perfectly name: the **lulz**—the spiteful high.

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(Heffernan 2008)

Further, much of the academic research that exists takes its definitions of TROLL from intuition, the media, and online ephemera like *The Troller's FAQ* (1996).

The result is that TROLL is used as an all-encapsulating term. For example, Baker (2001) starts his paper by talking about trolls, but then moves to discussing flaming, potentially conflating the troller's actions with the group's responses:

In this paper the concept of the "moral panic" is applied to computer-mediated communication through a qualitative examination of the case of a "troll" poster to the *Usenet* group alt.tv.melrose-place over a four month period. [...] This paper analyses a single case of what appeared to be a "flame war," in which one participant in a *newsgroup* was pitted against many other participants, over a prolonged period of time. [...] The case of Macho Joe can be interpreted as "pernicious spamming" (Stivale 1997) or "trolling" (Donath 1999, p. 45), the act of "baiting" a newsgroup, and then enjoying the resulting conflict. (Baker 2001)

Herring et al. (2002: 372) and Turner et al. (2005) describe trolling as luring others into frustratingly useless, circular discussion that is not necessarily overtly argumentative. Donath (1999: 45) and Utz (2005: 50) suggest that trolls can intentionally disseminate poor advice, provoking corrections from others. Tepper (1997: 41) explains how trolling can define ingroup/outgroup membership: those who 'bite' signal novice, outgroup status, whilst ingroup members will identify the troller, will not be baited, and may even mock those who are. Donath (1999) and Dahlberg (2001) suggest that trolling is a one-sided game of deception played on unwitting others:

The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns. (Donath 1999: 45)

Then,

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after developing their false identity and becoming accepted within a group, the troll sets about disrupting proceedings while trying to maintain his or her cover.

(Dahlberg 2001)

The main point, however, is that none takes definitions from extended analyses of user discussions of trolling. Since I dedicate Chapters Five, Six, and Seven to doing precisely this, I say nothing further here.

3.6.1.1.—Trolling in the media

On the 29th of October, 2010, Colm Coss pleaded guilty at Manchester City Magistrates' Court to §127 (1a) of the Communication Act (2003) after leaving offensive messages and jokes on memorial webpages (*memorial* or *RIP trolling*, see §6.2.3) (BBC 2010c; Fogg 2010). On the 13th of September, 2011, Sean Duffy also pleaded guilty to the same charge of improper use of a public electronic communications network at Reading Magistrates' Court (Camber & Neville 2011; Morris 2011). Both were given eighteen week custodial sentences, whilst Duffy was additionally given a five-year anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) banning him from using **social networking sites** and ordering him to inform the police if he buys an internet-enabled phone.

Individuals have also been arrested, but not charged, under §127 (1a) of the Communication Act (2003). When Yasmin Alibhai-Brown commented on a radio show that no (UK) politician was qualified to talk about human rights abuses such as the stoning of women, barrister and Birmingham Conservative Councillor Gareth Compton posted this response on *Twitter*:

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Can someone please stone Yasmin Alibhai-Brown to death? I shan't tell Amnesty if you don't. It would be a blessing, really. #R5L (Gammell 2010)

The tweet immediately triggered complaints, and a member of the public notified the police. Compton later attempted to clarify his intent by adding,

I did not 'call' for the stoning of anybody. I made an ill-conceived attempt at humour in response to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown saying on Radio 5 Live this morning that no politician had the right to comment on human rights abuses, even the stoning of women in Iran. I apologise for any offence caused. It was wholly unintentional. (Dolan 2010)

Compton was arrested under §127 (1a) of the Communication Act (2003), but since neither Alibhai-Brown nor the complainant would make an official statement, the Crown Prosecution Service dropped the case (BBC 2011c).

3.6.1.2.—Trolling legislation

One major issue to recur throughout this thesis is that users cannot *prove* the guilt of those they suspect, or accuse of trolling. This problem extends from lay-user interaction right up to successfully prosecuting a user for NMOB, and typically takes two angles: the physical, and the mental.

The physical aspect involves placing the suspect at the scene. For example, H may receive a trolling email from S's password-protected email account that is only accessible from S's laptop, which in turn requires a fingerprint to log on, and is locked in S's office. However, S may be able to cast doubt on her presence at the scene in several ways. She may have left her office unlocked with the laptop open and logged in, and a colleague may have sent the email.

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Alternatively, her laptop may have been infected with a **trojan** or other **malware**, allowing a third-party to use the laptop remotely. In cases where a message is sent anonymously from a public computer, a prepaid, unregistered device, or a device using identity protection (e.g. **proxy servers**, **Tor**, or **I²P**), the problem of sufficient evidence only increases.

The mental aspect, which recurs throughout this thesis, is captured simply by the fact that we cannot prove what any individual *intended*; we can only judge their actions and hypothesise their intentions from the evidence to hand (see §2.5, §5.4.1, and §7.1). If successfully shown to have authored a message, then S may still (try to) defend her behaviour as mock impoliteness (§2.4.6.1), incidental impoliteness (§2.4.6.2), or failed politeness (§2.4.6.3), rather than as premeditated and deliberately malicious impoliteness (§2.4.6.4).

In short, it is easy to heighten one's online anonymity, and extremely resource-intensive to undo that anonymity. Further, satisfying a court that a particular S produced the offending content can be very difficult for H, whilst S may easily cast doubt on that evidence. Even if H can overcome both obstacles, he may still be unable to prove that S behaved with deliberate malice.

3.6.1.2.1.—*Jurisdiction*

The lack of legal clarity—and at times, lack of understanding—surrounding NMOBs seems to reflect both the newness of these phenomena, and the problem with issues such as jurisdiction. One online offence can involve three

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(or more) legal jurisdictions: the laws applying to the user's nation, state, or homeland; the laws applying to the defendant's homeland; *and* the laws applying to the homeland of the server that hosted the offending transaction (Raysman, Brown, Neuburger & Bandon III 2002). At best, multiple jurisdictions increase complexity, but at worst, each region's laws may contradict each other. For example, a US politician may find a troll about his supposed infidelity on a UK [blog](#). If he wishes to file a private action, suing the troller for defamation under US law is difficult due to the First Amendment's provision that,

Congress shall make no law [...] abridging the freedom of speech. (1791)

As the plaintiff, the politician needs to prove, in line with the statutes of the state where the case is heard, that the posts were careless, harmful, false, and (since he is a notable figure) malicious, yet simply proving that the claims were false would be difficult. However, should he sue for defamation in the UK, then the burden of proof falls on the defendant rather than the plaintiff²²:

- (1) In defamation proceedings a person has a defence if he shows that—
 - (a) he was not the author, editor or publisher of the statement complained of,
 - (b) he took reasonable care in relation to its publication, and
 - (c) he did not know, and had no reason to believe, that what he did caused or contributed to the publication of a defamatory statement.
- (Defamation Act 1996)

In a UK defamation case, the troller must prove that she did not produce the post or that she took reasonable care and did not know that it was defamatory. In short, in the UK, the *defendant* must prove that defamation did *not* happen,

²² This is unlike most UK law, where in criminal court, the prosecution must prove the defendant guilty beyond reasonable doubt, and in civil court, the plaintiff must demonstrate the balance of probability that the defendant is liable.

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whereas in the US, the *plaintiff* must prove that it *did*.

3.6.1.2.2.—UK laws

There are several major UK laws (including the Defamation Act (1996), already reviewed above) which deal with CMC crimes and wrong-doings. However, only the one most relevant to trolling is dealt with here: the Communications Act (2003). This Act deals with television, radio, and the internet, yet was enacted prior to the peak of major **social networks** like *Facebook*. §127 specifically forbids improper use of public electronic communications networks:

- (1) A person is guilty of an offence if he—
 - (a) sends by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character; or
 - (b) causes any such message or matter to be so sent.

 - (2) A person is guilty of an offence if, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, he—
 - (a) sends by means of a public electronic communications network, a message that he knows to be false,
 - (b) causes such a message to be sent; or
 - (c) persistently makes use of a public electronic communications network.
- (2003: §127)

The interesting aspect of this law, however, is its general inability to deal with NMOB like trolling, flaming, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking. One may troll excessively without being indecent, grossly offensive, threatening, or false, thereby side-stepping §127 of the Communications Act (2003). The *purpose* of the behaviour in question could be characterised—or reframed—as giving well-meant advice, making a joke, or taking H to task for a misdemeanour of his own. Alternatively, S may defend it

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as an unintentional ambiguity in her meaning, a communicative impediment as manifested by certain conditions such as autism, or a misunderstanding on H's part of S's tone, character, or intentions, and so on. Indeed, this law struggles to capture all but the most severe cases of trolling, which, by such a stage, would be more accurately called cyberbullying, cyberharassment, or cyberstalking.

3.6.2.—Flaming

Flaming has received far more academic attention than trolling (e.g. Lea et al. 1992; Herring 1994; Chester 1996b; Millard 1997; Kayany 1998; Avgerinakou 2008). As such, defining it is less problematic, though as with trolling, some definitions also capture other NMOBs. Haugh (2010b) suggests that,

The vast majority of work on relational aspects of various modes of CMC thus far, including email [...] has focused on politeness (Harrison 2000; Bunz & Campbell 2004; Preece 2004; Davies, Merrison & Goddard 2007; de Oliveria 2007; Hatipoğlu 2007; Vinagre 2008). Impoliteness, on the other hand, has received much less attention (Graham 2007; Graham 2008; Nishimura 2008), with most such research being framed as "flaming" (Avgerinakou 2003), defined as "the antinormative hostile communication of emotions ... that includes the use of profanity, insults, and other offensive or hurtful statements" (Johnson, Cooper & Chin 2008: 419).

(Haugh 2010b: 8)

Haugh (2010b) argues that aligning flaming and impoliteness research could benefit both since they have marked similarities²³, such as the variability in perceptions of what constitutes impoliteness/flaming, and evaluations of degrees of hostility (Graham 2007: 743). However, there are still variable understandings of flaming. For instance, Jucker and Taavistainen (2000) vaguely suggest that flaming,

²³ In fact, in §5.5.1.6, I conclude that flaming essentially is (online) malicious impoliteness.

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appears to be particularly common in news groups, where a large number of participants can submit email postings under the cover of anonymity. In this context, flaming is considered to be bad style and is rejected by the code of behavior on the internet, the so-called *netiquette*²⁴. (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000: 90)

Baker (2001), defines flaming thus:

Antagonistic postings are known as flames (Siegel et al. 1986) and prolonged, escalating conflicts are often referred to as flame wars. In flame wars flames can give rise to other flames, involving more and more posters, some who may be angry that the flame war is taking over the *newsgroup*. The tone of flames is intentionally aggressive and numerous methods of attack are used, ranging from intellectualized debate, through biting sarcasm to scatological abuse. (Baker 2001)

Towards the end of this definition, Baker begins to move towards what might be considered *gratuitously* offensive behaviour, or trolling. As discussed above in §1.3.1, to distinguish trolling from flaming, in this thesis trolling is a *proactive* (covert or overt) behaviour undertaken to cause hurt, anger, or disruption. It may not necessarily correspond to any antecedent event (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990; Jay 2000). If the behaviour has (or appears to have) been provoked, and is primarily an aggravated (over-)reaction, then it is flaming²⁵. A troller is typically seeking to trigger a flamewar as an end in its own right, or as a means to an end.

3.6.2.1.—Flaming in the media

There are many media examples of individuals who have faced offline consequences for flaming. For instance, Gary Chaplin lost his £200,000-per-annum position after flaming a client. Emmanouil Katsampoukas emailed 4,000 people, including Chaplin, with:

²⁴ This rather worryingly seems to suggest the existence of only *one* universal netiquette!

²⁵ As discussed in §2.4, whether H *genuinely* felt aggrieved, or is using the ambiguity as an excuse to launch an attack disguised as a defence, is impossible to determine.

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Dear Sirs,

My name is Manos Katsampoukas and I am interested in finding a job in the banking/marketing sector in the UK. Please find attached my CV. Further information available upon request. Looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards

Manos Katsampoukas.

Chaplin, using the pseudonym Richard Vickers, replied not only to

Katsampoukas, but also to the other 4,000 recipients of the original email:

Emmanouil—I think I speak for all 4000 people you have emailed when I say, 'Thanks for your CV'—it's nice to know you are taking this seriously and taking the time to make us all feel special and unique.

If you are not bright enough to learn how to 'bcc' and thus encourage cock-jockey retards to then spam everyone on the list (yes Dan McCarthy from One Search I'm talking about you—you opportunistic thundercunt) then please fuck off....you are too stupid to get a job, even in banking.

I get enough retarded spam from idiots—I don't need the Dan 'fucktard' McCunthy's of the world thinking they are being smart and original by spamming back to your 4000 best friends. (PS—is 'One Search' what you've successfully completed on this year?).

Yours hitting the delete button. Have a nice day!

Chaplin's identity was traced through his **ISP**, and his employer, *Stark Brooks*, asked him to resign (Atkinson 2011). Flaming has also resulted in criminal action. In 2010, Paul Chambers lost his appeal against his criminal conviction for posting on *Twitter*:

Crap! Robin Hood airport is closed. You've got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I'm blowing the airport sky high!! (Wainwright 2010)

Whilst Chambers described the tweet as a failed joke prompted by frustration, Judge Davies said that it was,

menacing in its content and obviously so. It could not be more clear. Any ordinary person reading this would see it in that way and be alarmed. (Wainwright 2010)

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The conviction left Chambers with no job, fines and court costs of £3,000, and a criminal record (Wainwright 2010).

3.6.2.2.—*Flaming legislation*

Under the provision of the Malicious Communications Act (1988), it is an offence to send communication, by letter, electronic means (as defined by the Telecommunications Act (1984: ch12)), or in any other form, that is indecent, grossly offensive, threatening, or false,

if [the sender's] purpose, or one of his purposes, in sending it is that it should [...] cause distress or anxiety to the recipient [or recipients]. (1988: 1[b])

However, side-stepping the Malicious Communications Act (1988) is relatively straightforward, since one may flame excessively without being indecent, grossly offensive, threatening, or false. Perhaps most importantly, this law is predicated on the questionable assumption that we can judge S's "purpose, or one of [her] purposes". As already discussed in §2.5, however, we cannot prove an individual's intentions or motivations. We only reconstruct them, and our reconstructions are open to error, ambiguity, and manipulation.

3.6.3.—*Cyberbullying*

Whilst cyberbullying is increasingly researched in areas such as pedagogy, paediatrics, and psychology (Strom & Strom 2005; Willard 2007; Topçu et al. 2008; Hinduja & Patchin 2009), little linguistic research exists on this topic. Cyberbullying has some significant overlaps with trolling, in that both can involve (trying to) hurt, threaten, annoy, or humiliate H, usually for S's

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entertainment. The key difference however is that the cyberbully will usually know the victim in some offline capacity (e.g. at school or work). An important issue in the literature (and exemplified by the references above) is that cyberbullying is typically viewed as a child-only issue—not as something that an adult (employee, family member, university student, etc.) might experience. In fact, when adults are the target, the term automatically seems to switch to (cyber)harassment (Herring 1995; 1999; Tavani 2005; Whitty 2005).

3.6.3.1.—Cyberbullying in the media

There are several serious examples of cyberbullying in the media. In 2006, 13-year-old Megan Meier of Missouri was found hanged after being cyberbullied. Megan had self-confidence issues, and since eight years old, had been receiving psychiatric therapy and medication. In early 2006, Megan's best friend Sarah Drew came to believe that Megan was spreading malicious gossip about her. When Sarah told her 49-year-old mother Lori Drew, Drew created a [sockpuppet](#) *MySpace* account of a 16-year-old boy called Josh Evans²⁶. Megan accepted the *MySpace* invitation she received from Josh, and soon became friends with him. On the 15th of October, 2006, Josh's initially friendly messages changed in tone, and he wrote (amongst other things):

I don't know if I want to be friends with you anymore because I've heard that you are not very nice to your friends.

The last message from his account read:

²⁶ It should be noted that Drew did this with the assistance of her 18-year-old employee Ashley Grills.

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Everybody in O'Fallon knows how you are. You are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a shitty rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you.

Megan replied with, "You're the kind of boy a girl would kill herself over", and twenty minutes later, she was found by her parents, hanged in her bedroom closet (Bazelon 2008; Zetter 2008; PA 2009).

Megan is not the only victim of cyberbullying-related suicide. In 2007, British 13-year-old Casey Knibbs hanged himself after his ex-girlfriend and three others bullied him via *Bebo* (TIS 2007), and in 2009, British 15-year-old Megan Gillan overdosed on painkillers after being repeatedly bullied via *Bebo* (Moore 2009).

3.6.3.2.—Cyberbullying legislation

In the UK, we lack any specific law that deals with cyberbullying. Equally in the US, whilst many states have statutes for offline bullying, an exhaustive search shows that only thirty-four states have updated their statutes to include cyberbullying. The updates that have occurred are sometimes triggered by tragedies such as suicides, as in the cases of fifteen year old Jeffrey Johnston from Florida (Chang, Owens & Jonann 2008) and Megan Meier (Bazelon 2008; Zetter 2008; PA 2009). In Megan's case, despite the appearance of wrong-doing on Lori Drew's part, there was no state or federal law at the time that could clearly be applied to the circumstances²⁷. Drew was eventually tried for

²⁷ Drew was initially found not guilty of intentionally causing emotional harm whilst accessing computers without authorisation. On 03/07/09, she was tentatively acquitted of the lesser misdemeanour of unauthorised computer access. Finally, on 28/08/09, she was acquitted of all charges. Had Drew not been acquitted, the case would have set an extreme precedent that anyone breaching a website's *Terms of Service* could be charged with misdemeanour. The legislative issue here is not that Drew was not charged, but that there was no appropriate offence (then) to charge her with.

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conspiracy to commit an offence²⁸, and successfully charged with fraud and related activity in connection with a computer²⁹ (more commonly known as the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986). However, she later appealed this and was acquitted. As a result of the case, Megan's home state of Missouri (2008a) updated their bullying statutes to account for cyberbullying, and at the time of writing, California (1985, updated 2001), Washington (2007), Massachusetts (2010a), and Florida (2010b) have done the same.

In an effort to create a federal law that addresses the short-fallings relating particularly to cyberbullying, Representative Linda Sánchez introduced the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act to the House of Representatives in 2009. The aim of this act was to amend Chapter 41 of United States Code 18 to include cyberbullying. Sánchez described cyberbullying as the transmission,

in interstate or foreign commerce any communication, with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person, using electronic means to support severe, repeated, and hostile behaviour. (2009: 3[a])

However, this definition would capture a wide array of online behaviours, such as flaming, trolling, **sockpuppeting**, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking, and for this very reason, the proposal has met with little enthusiasm in Congress and in public. Concerns centre on its vagueness which would open up the Act to being stretched far beyond its intended scope (Kravets 2009; Silverglate 2011). This could both encroach on the First Amendment—a move which, by itself, will be

²⁸ Title 18 of the United States Code §371. This charge resulted in a deadlocked jury.

²⁹ Title 18 of the United States Code §1030(a)(2)(C): (a) Whoever—(2) intentionally accesses a computer without authorization or exceeds authorized access, and thereby obtains—(C) information from any protected computer.

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very strongly resisted, and also result in an act so broad as to be unenforceable.

3.6.4.—Cyberharassment

In academic literature, the term *cyberharassment* is used to capture behaviours from sending **spam** (Stivale 1997) to dangerously stalking someone with the risk of causing that person actual harm (Bocij 2004). It is also used for behaviour undertaken by those the victim knows (e.g. ex-partners), strangers (e.g. trollers), and even **hacktivists** campaigning against organisations (see §3.6.6).

Both cyberbullying and cyberharassment differ from trolling. Whilst trolling targets anyone who will take the bait, cyberbullying and cyberharassment are strongly personal and specific—S is targeting *that* H, not just anyone. However, trolling or flaming can readily graduate into cyberbullying or cyberharassment. For instance if H aggrieves a troller by exposing her, she might respond by **doxing** H, **slow-bombing** his **social network** profiles, emailing compromising information to his employer, sending indecent images to his family, or in short, following a course of conduct that amounts to harassment.

Interestingly, cyberharassment can also be carried out by **malware**. This is software that carries out malicious activities, such as remotely monitoring computer activity (i.e. via spyware or keystroke logging), deceitfully acquiring information (i.e. via **phishing**), remotely using computers to **DDoS**, **spam**, or otherwise attack others (i.e. via **trojans**, **viruses**, and **botnets**), and so on.

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3.6.4.1.—Cyberharassment in the media

One example of cyberharassment in the media is the case of the 'cat bin lady', Mary Bale. Bale was caught on security camera dropping Lola the cat into a bin. Upon discovering Lola and the footage, the owners posted the video on *YouTube*, with the description:

this footage is taken outside the Sacred Heart School in Coventry... We dont know who this woman is... But he anyone knows, please let of know so we can report her.... Thanks.³⁰

Within hours, the video was breaking news across most major news channels. Whilst the press initially withheld, or could not discover Bale's identity, CMC users quickly found and published her address, telephone number, employer name, work address, etc. (an action known as **dox dropping**, or **doxing**). Users then went on to create a *Facebook* page entitled *Death to Mary Bale*, and sent her hate-mail, abusive phone messages, and death threats (BBC 2010a; 2010d).

3.6.4.2.—Cyberharassment legislation

In the UK, the Protection From Harassment Act (1997) states that,

- (1) A person must not pursue a course of conduct—
 - (a) which amounts to harassment of another, and
 - (b) which he knows or ought to know amounts to harassment of the other.
- (2) For the purposes of this section, the person whose course of conduct is in question ought to know that it amounts to harassment of another if a reasonable person in possession of the same information would think the

³⁰ The mistaken *he* and *of* suggest that the video was uploaded with a phone or PDA using predictive typing. When typed with predictive text, 4 (GHE) and 3 (DEF) produces *he* first, then *if*, whilst 6 (MNO) and 3 (DEF) produces *of* first, then *me*.

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course of conduct amounted to harassment of the other. (1997)

For a behaviour to be defined as a *course of conduct* amounting to harassment, it must be carried out on two or more occasions (1997: 7[3]), so the Protection From Harassment Act (1997) would not capture one-off attacks, or several one-off attacks from multiple unique sources, particularly if those sources are (or can argue that they are) independent of each other. In reality, those many one-off attacks could all originate with the same individual cycling through **proxy servers, IP addresses**, or guises (i.e. **sockpuppeting**).

Further, the Protection From Harassment Act (1997) assumes that all people "know, or ought to know" what behaviour counts as harassment. This suggests the existence of unanimously agreed-upon views—a view inherited from the common law concept of a *reasonable person*; a decontextualised, normative, objective fiction whose knowledge, behaviours, and beliefs represent an idealised standard against which others can be measured. As already discussed in Chapter Two, however, im/politeness is highly contextualised and deeply personal. One person's joke is another's insult, and what may be admirable in one context may be highly offensive in another, even if carried out by the same person, in the same place, and amongst the same company.

In the US, an exhaustive search of state laws shows that twelve states do not have laws explicitly addressing cyberharassment. Equally, as early as 1999, the Attorney General to the Vice President recognised that there were also

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insufficient federal laws protecting individuals from NMOB:

Federal legislation also is needed to fill the gaps in current law. While most cyberstalking cases will fall within the jurisdiction of state and local authorities, there are instances - such as serious cyberharassment directed at a victim in another state or involving communications intended to encourage third parties to engage in harassment or threats - where state law is inadequate or where state or local agencies do not have the expertise or the resources to investigate and/or prosecute a sophisticated cyberstalking case. (Reno 1999)

However, this very quote exemplifies one of the most serious problems with legislation dealing with cyberharassment—this term is routinely used as a synonym for many types of NMOB. In fact, as I argue later (see §5.5.3), this term is better suited to a hyponymic position that subsumes other NMOB.

3.6.5.—Cyberstalking

Where NMOB is persistent, extremely threatening, and accompanied by a risk of physical harm, then it has essentially become cyberstalking (Bocij 2004; Whitty 2004). Online stalking can even be, or feel, far more invasive and threatening than offline stalking:

Offline stalking generally requires the perpetrator and the victim to be located in the same geographic area; cyberstalkers may be located across the street or across the country. Electronic communications technologies make it much easier for a cyberstalker to encourage third parties to harass and/or threaten a victim (e.g., impersonating the victim and posting inflammatory messages to bulletin boards and in chat rooms, causing viewers of that message to send threatening messages back to the victim "author.") Electronic communications technologies also lower the barriers to harassment and threats; a cyberstalker does not need to physically confront the victim. (Reno 1999)

A major issue in cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking, is that each is usually considered a *course of action*, i.e. more than one instance and/or carried out over a period of time. Determining whether the NMOB in question

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is simply a one-off and can be ignored, or is turning into a pattern and needs addressing urgently, requires setting a time or frequency threshold. Where the threshold is too low, time may be wasted on minor incidents (leading to the serious cases being drowned out), whereas if the threshold is too high, the consequences could be extreme (Mullen, Pathé & Purcell 2000).

3.6.5.1.—Cyberstalking in the media

The media also documents cases that might be deemed cyberstalking, or in other words, targeting individuals online with the intention of causing them offline harm. In 2009, 17-year-old Ashleigh Hall was befriended on *Facebook* by attractive teenager, Peter Cartwright. Ashleigh soon agreed to meet up with him, but arrived to find an emaciated, nearly-toothless man who was living in his car and looked considerably older than his thirty-three years. In fact, Peter Cartwright was a **sockpuppet** created by serial rapist and sex offender Peter Chapman. Aware that his appearance would probably make her suspicious, Chapman sent her a text before she arrived reading, "My Dad's on his way, babe" to which she replied, "He's here, babe." When she got into the car, Chapman attacked, raped, and murdered her, before leaving her body in a field (BBC 2010b; Carter 2010).

This case is somewhat atypical, however. Unlike ordinary cases involving anger or revenge, Ashleigh was not alerted to Chapman's motives for contacting her. It may therefore be worth considering defining between overt and covert cyberstalking, or in other words, cyberstalking (where the victim is aware of the

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behaviour) and cyberpredation (where the victim is entirely unaware of the danger, or is being groomed into a false sense of security by the perpetrator).

3.6.5.2.—Cyberstalking legislation

In the UK, there is no 'stalking' law. Instead, this behaviour is captured under the Protection from Harassment Act (1997). Likewise, an exhaustive search of US statutes shows that sixteen states do not have laws explicitly addressing cyberstalking. Whilst US laws are slowly appearing that deal with these issues, it remains difficult to successfully convict using them (Bazon 2008).

3.6.6.—Cybercrime

Finally, whilst NMOB that is motivated by criminal gain tends to fall under the generic banner of cybercrime³¹ (Schjolberg 2011), actions that are politically motivated tend to be termed cyberterrorism, and actions that are socially or morally motivated and involve the righting of (alleged) wrongs via the collective abilities of many users working together tend to be described as **hacktivism** (Last & Kandel 2005; Dunn Cavelti, Mauer & Krishna-Hensel 2007; Cornish, Hughes & Livingstone 2009).

3.6.6.1.—Cybercrime in the media

There are many media examples of **hacktivism**. For instance, one **hacktivist** group known as *LulzSec* claimed responsibility for **DDoSing**, testing, and

³¹ Since (serious) cybercrime such as copyright infringement, piracy, hacking, cyberfraud, espionage, cyberterrorism, child sexual exploitation and so forth fall outside of the scope of this work, laws pertaining to these issues will not be considered.

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retrieving data from sites and servers worldwide, including the *NHS* (BBC 2011b), *SOCA* (Meyer 2011), and the *US Senate* website (WSJ 2011). Another **hactivist** group known as *Anonymous* have campaigned against several high profile organisations such as the *Church of Scientology*³² (Coleman 2011), *MasterCard*, and *Amazon* (Mackey 2010), and taken part in large-scale, offline protests such as *Occupy Wall Street* (Kazmi 2011; Knafo 2011). Motivation(s) behind the various *Anonymous* campaigns have included protecting freedom of information (e.g. via supporting *Wikileaks*), abolishing digital-rights management (DRM), and expressing dissatisfaction with the current political, economic, financial, and social situation. *LulzSec*, meanwhile, has generally claimed to be acting for amusement's sake:

For all you new people that are watching us right now: this is what we do, this is how we do it. High-quality entertainment just for you. (LulzSec 2011)

CMC has also played a role in mass, (semi-)organised crimes such as the 2011 London riots. *BlackBerry Messaging* (BBM) was identified as a key method by which rioters organised their efforts (Halliday 2011), whilst *Facebook* and *Twitter* were used by others to incite further rioting (Telegraph 2011a; 2011b). For example, on the 23rd of August, 2011, David Glyn Jones pleaded guilty at Caernarfon Magistrates' Court to the improper use of a public electronic communications network after posting a *Facebook* event called "Let's start

³² The *Church of Scientology* cites its US tax exemption as proof of its religious status in the US, however, in the UK, despite efforts to attain charity status, it is designated a commercial enterprise since it is not seen as benefiting the general public.

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Bangor riots", scheduled for the 09th of August, 2011³³, with the description, "I don't see why everyone's complaining about the rioters. Given the chance I'd love to smash up a police car, wouldn't you?" Jones was given a four month custodial sentence (BBC 2011a).

3.6.6.2.—*Cybercrime legislation*

The International Criminal Court's Rome Statute (1998b) is most suited to serious international cybercrime such as cyberterrorism, international paedophile rings, and online drugs, human, and black-market trafficking.

However, even with regards to these sorts of crimes, we find that,

the most serious global cyberattacks in the recent year, have revealed that almost nobody is investigated and prosecuted, and nobody has been sentenced for those acts. Such acts need to be included in a global treaty or a set of treaties, and investigated and prosecuted before an international criminal court or tribunal.

(Schjolberg 2011: 3)

This inability to cope well with even the most serious cybercrimes seems to reflect the general provision for online crime across the board, from the least serious through to the most. It is not the place, or point of this thesis to suggest improvements to legal statutes and processes. However, it is important to note that this lack of formal or legal redress for NMOB which, offline, would meet with (extremely severe) consequences, may also explain why the behaviours that this thesis investigates occur with the frequency and openness that is repeatedly demonstrated in the dataset.

³³ This almost certainly received such a sentence due to the wider context of the then-ongoing UK 2011 Riots, which had started on the 06th of August, and did not fully end until the 10th of August.

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3.6.7.—Disambiguating NMOBs

A major issue is the difficulty of consistently distinguishing cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking from each other and from other NMOBs.

For example, in academic literature, Bocij (2004) defines cyberstalking as:

A group of behaviors in which an individual, group of individuals or organization, uses information and communication technologies *to harass* another individual, group of individuals, or organization. Such behaviors may include, but are not limited to, the transmission of threats and false accusations, identity theft, damage to data or equipment, computer monitoring, solicitation of minors for sexual purposes, and *any form of aggression*. *Harassment is defined as a course of action that a reasonable person, in possession of the same information, would think causes another reasonable person to suffer emotional distress.*

(Bocij 2004: 14, emphasis mine)

It is difficult to see how this definition could be used in such a way that it would not also capture flaming, trolling, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, *and* sex offenders grooming children online, as well as anyone whose CMC contribution is perceived to be objectionable or distressing for other reasons (e.g. posting a video of animal abuse).

The problem is little better when we consider legislation. US states which *do* have statutes for NMOB differ widely in how comprehensive, informed, and knowledgeable they are. Some treat cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and cyberharassment as interchangeable. In its cyberstalking statute, for example, North Carolina's provision states that it is unlawful to:

(2) Electronically mail or electronically communicate to another repeatedly, whether or not conversation ensues, for the purpose of abusing, annoying, threatening, terrifying, harassing, or embarrassing any person.

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(3) Electronically mail or electronically communicate to another and to knowingly make any false statement concerning death, injury, illness, disfigurement, indecent conduct, or criminal conduct of the person electronically mailed or of any member of the person's family or household with the intent to abuse, annoy, threaten, terrify, harass, or embarrass. (2000: b)

Even within the short section of the definition given above, 'cyberstalking' is used to cover NMOB from repeatedly annoying a recipient (i.e. **spamming** or trolling) through to terrifying H by lying about his loved ones (i.e. cyberbullying or cyberstalking). Despite the scope that this covers, all are dealt with as Class 2 misdemeanours, attracting a prison term of 30 days to six months (2008b: a[2]). In short, simply identifying behaviour with the appropriate term can be extremely difficult, let alone taking suitable action against the perpetrator of it.

3.6.8.—Positive aspects of CMC

Above, I have provided a *very* small selection of examples that demonstrate the potential negative consequences of CMC. This thesis could, therefore, give a skewed impression that CMC has no redeeming features. However, this bias is primarily motivated by the thesis topic (NMOB) and how *humans* use CMC (see §3.3.1). We should not forget that CMC also enables extraordinary acts of kindness and compassion. Whilst *BlackBerry Messaging* and **social networks** were cited as key factors in organising the London 2011 riots, those same CMC types were also used to coordinate later clean-up efforts. Similarly, media-sharing sites played a major role in the Arab Spring³⁴. Videos of human rights

³⁴ The Arab Spring refers to the series of minor demonstrations (Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia), major protests (Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Sudan), uprisings (Bahrain, Syria), and revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen) that swept across the Middle East from December 2010 to the present.

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violations, reports of attacks on civilians, and pictures of devastation triggered governments to supply aid, impose sanctions, and even engage in direct military action (Beaumont 2011; LAT 2011). Even notorious trolling sites like *4chan* and *Encyclopaedia Dramatica*, have carried out acts of 'social justice'. When 14-year-old Kenny Glenn uploaded a *YouTube* video of himself violently beating one of his cats, users soon tracked down and passed his details on to his local police department. The police arrested Glenn and took both cats to a veterinarian (Watson 2009)³⁵. Glenn was later released without charge.

3.7.—SUMMARY

CMC might be briefly defined as communication via computers (§3.2). CMC research has progressed since the early days of technological determinism, to the present day of user-determinism (§3.3). Likewise, CMC itself has developed from simple, specialist, and primarily email-based to the complex, ubiquitous, multimedia system that we use today (§3.4). This new system, however, has given its users access to unprecedented levels of anonymity and the ability to reinvent their whole identity on a whim (§3.5). Inevitably, not all users have chosen to employ anonymity in positive ways, and this Chapter explored not only the academic literature on a range of NMOB, but also examples of those behaviours available in the media, as well as legislation that is used to deal with those NMOBs (§3.6). Perhaps the most serious finding of this Chapter was the inadequacy, vagueness, and lack of understanding of both the academic and

³⁵ It is well worth noting that the online campaign certainly did not stop here. One need only Google "Kenny Glenn" to see a sample of the severity and breadth of reaction. This incident will probably overshadow Glenn for the rest of his life.

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legislative terminology as it currently stands (§3.6.7). Chapter Five goes on to empirically analyse user understandings of those terms, but before this, Chapter Four explains the data used in this thesis, including its collection, features, and relationship to other CMC types.

CHAPTER 4.

DATA, CONTEXT, METHOD

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4.1.—USENET VERSUS OTHER CMC

This Chapter outlines the data used in this thesis, particularly versus other CMC types³⁶. §4.2 specifically describes the data and its collection. §4.3 considers the impact of interactivity. §4.4 looks at the effect of transience. §4.5 looks at how CMC format affects NMOB. §4.6 explains the anonymity available to users. §4.7 considers automated and manual moderation of NMOB. §4.8 outlines the methodology applied to the research questions, and §4.9 concludes.

4.2.—THE CORPORA AND THEIR CONTEXTS

To undertake this research, I chose two corpora from two [usenet newsgroups](#).

These were chosen to offer a wider scope of data that could provide a more thorough understanding of trolling and other NMOB. Further, this allowed me to establish which corpora favour certain features, and whether issues such as topic, permanence, and anonymity impact how NMOBs occur.

[Usenet](#), which predates the current incarnation of the worldwide web, is,

an electronic forum for discussion of almost any subject, allowing access to millions of computer users who share similar (or very different) hobbies, interests and worldviews (McLaughlin, Osborne & Smith 1995). Characterized by its immediacy and sheer volume of traffic, [Usenet](#) groups based around the discussion of a particular topic afford a prime example of Internet communities. The main method of communication is text-based e-mail, although some groups permit the exchange of graphics, sound or video files. (Baker 2001: 1)

³⁶ This Chapter creates a frame of reference against which [usenet](#) can be understood by reviewing other sites and software. However, these reviews should not be taken as value judgements, not least because this section of the thesis will date very quickly, and in later years will give a false impression of any software, application, or business mentioned here.

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I chose **usenet** data for several reasons. Firstly, there are **newsgroups** on an extraordinary range of topics, spanning (in some cases) back to the 1980s, and posts to those groups can be downloaded. This makes creating large diachronic or synchronic corpora on specific topics fairly straightforward. Secondly, whilst there is no direct evidence for this, trolling is said to have begun on **usenet**³⁷.

There are drawbacks to this data type, however. **Usenet** is no longer as widely known or used as previously, probably due to the increasing dominance of feature-rich sites such as **social networks**. As such, the **usenet** age demographic may be dominated by older, long-term members rather than younger, new subscribers. Because of this, the NMOB found on **usenet** may be different than that on, say, **social networks**. This is a difficult hypothesis to test, however, and overall, the benefits of this data were considered greater than the drawbacks.

4.2.1.—RE dataset

The first source I use is a **usenet newsgroup** called *rec.equestrian*. This **newsgroup** was created on the 02nd of December, 1987. As of the 31st of May, 2011, it had a grand total of 795,348 posts (an average of 92.676 per day)³⁸. This corpus (hereon RE) is created from a subset of all *rec.equestrian* posts, and spans five years of interaction from the 01st of July, 2005 to the 30th of June, 2010. This span of time was chosen to capture current uses of the term, *troll*, whilst

³⁷ This is not unfeasible, since **usenet** was one of the earliest types of mass-CMC, but it is a difficult claim to prove.

³⁸ $795,348 \div 8,582$ days (02/12/87-31/05/11). The group is available at: <http://groups.google.com/group/rec.equestrian>.

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also providing an adequate size of corpus to work with. In total, RE is comprised of 170,634 posts, or approximately 69,816,162 words of running text. At the time of data collection, RE had 1,106 subscribers.

RE's central theme is equestrianism, along with related topics such as animal welfare, agricultural legislation, and livestock nutrition. Off-topic messages tend to coalesce around particular themes, such as non-equine animals (cat videos, ideal farm dogs), children (the peculiarities of offspring), and careers (time spent earning versus time spent riding). These posts, and others that don't adhere closely to the group's main theme, tend to have **OT** in the subject line, whilst in unmarked off-topic posts, users may protect themselves from complaints about relevance by including a minimal, token gesture of horse-discussion, known as an **OB-horsy** or **OBH** (obligatory horsy comment), e.g.³⁹:

Example 1

[RE050321]

1. **A** Silence only goes by when one takes the self knowledge of wanting to smack some horse on the head for being a clod. **OBH: no horse gets away with shit around me.**

By incorporating this, A protects herself from the criticism that her post is entirely off-topic. Failure to **OB**-horsy in a message that has not been marked as **OT** can provoke acerbic responses and criticisms:

³⁹ Note that to enhance user anonymity, I have changed all names to letters. In each set of examples, the letters re-start at A, i.e. A in one example is not necessarily the same person as A in another. This is discussed further in §4.2.5.

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Example 2

[RE050322]

2. **A** Just a small attempt to keep the **headers** in sync with the actual discussion, especially these many rabidly off topic ones that folks might like to pass by...

Example 3

[RE050528]

3. **B** I read this **URL** to the second paragraph below, then stopped. **I can see why you are posting this off-topic [frankly nutty] material anonymously! But why here?**

RE subscribers appear to be predominantly adult, female Americans in white collar positions such as teachers, lecturers, legal practitioners, dentists, etc..

However, this should be taken with a *high* degree of caution. Gender has been established from usernames, signatures, pronoun use, and other identifying data provided within the posts themselves. Age and position has been established by considering reference to employment and post-topic (i.e. it would be unusual for a child to—convincingly—discuss mortgage payments or irritation at middle-management bureaucracy).

An important aspect to bear in mind is that nothing prevents users from fabricating their whole identity (see §0). It would be remarkable if an entire group, or most of it did so, but even if users have not entirely falsified their identities, it is not unrealistic that some may have exaggerated certain aspects (income, employment, stature, experience, knowledge, etc.) to feel more important, or garner (greater) deference within the group, particularly if—as in RE—many other members appear to hold prestigious positions.

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4.2.2.—SF dataset

The second source I use is a **usenet newsgroup** called *uk.sport.football*. This **newsgroup** was created on the 04th of June, 1998. As of the 31st of May, 2011, it had posted a grand total of 288,163 posts (an average of 60.742 per day)⁴⁰. This corpus (hereon SF) is also created from a subset of all *uk.sport.football* posts, and spans five years of interaction from the 10th of March, 2005 to the 30th of June, 2010. As above, this span of time was chosen to capture current uses of the term, *troll*, whilst also providing an adequate size of corpus to work with. In total, SF is comprised of 57,734 posts, or approximately 16,596,565 words of running text. At the time of data collection, SF had 211 subscribers⁴¹.

SF's central theme is (English) football, along with related topics such as footballer wages, behaviour, and transfers, club management, event fixtures, and refereeing decisions. Subjects beyond this theme are not typically marked as off-topic by users, and do not tend to meet the same criticism:

Example 4

[SF050611]

4. **A** Stop trying to pick a fight, **B**. I know what you're like. It won't work on me. Be nice.
5. **B** I wasn't trying anything, snookybums.
6. **C** Pfft. **You love it when I post on-topic**. It's like a very disturbing form of foreplay to you.

⁴⁰ 288,163 ÷ 4,744 days (04/06/98-31/05/11). The group is available at: <http://groups.google.com/group/uk.sport.football>.

⁴¹ Wordcount is a very weak guide, since **usenet** posts frequently (re)quote, and discounting (re)quoted material to acquire a real wordcount (whether automatically or manually) is very time-prohibitive.

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Example 5

[RE050528]

7. D Heh. That's just excellent. It's so good, in fact, that we should have a "Tiny Penis" award for everything, not just the **SBL**. Written a rubbish post? Here, have a Tiny Penis. **Unhappy about the amount of off-topic posts while not actually contributing any, yourself? You, sir, can have a Tiny Penis for your troubles.** Been born E? Well, you get the idea.

As these excerpts from longer interactions show, SF is more tolerant of discussions that do not pertain to the group's central subject, and off-topic messages tend to focus on themes such as politics (e.g. whether it is right for UK teams to play in countries with poor human rights records) and sex (e.g. sexual orientation, attractive women).

SF subscribers appear to be predominantly British males, however, age groups and employment types are far more difficult to determine. One possible explanation for this is that there is less of a link between employment and hobby in SF than in RE. Equestrianism, even in a small way, tends to be expensive, meaning that income plays a major role, whilst following football, or playing informally with friends or a local team requires a far smaller outlay. As such, the relationship between the hobby's expense and the employment required to meet that expense is probably far less significant to SF subscribers, and is therefore not broached as a topic as frequently. After extensive reading, I was able only to gather that one user appears to work in a call centre and another works in an office, whereas for RE I have been able to identify a range of occupations, levels of experience in certain role, previous employments, current and past salaries, future career moves and promotions, job satisfaction

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etc.. To reiterate, though, these demographics must be taken as indicative only.

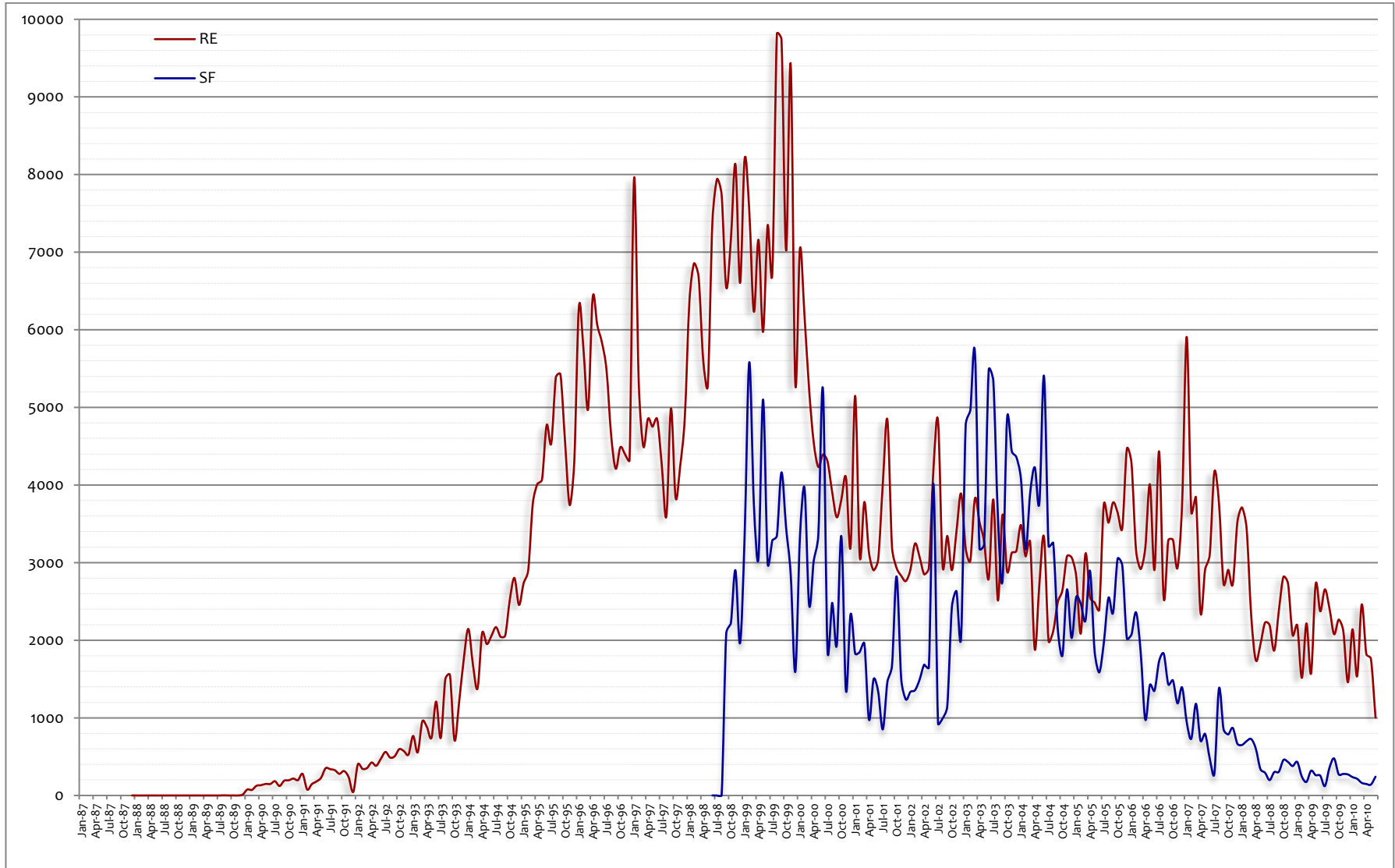
4.2.3.—Activity in RE versus SF

A primary distinction between RE and SF is their post frequencies⁴²:

⁴² Note that whilst the graph only shows the years in quarters (e.g. Jan, Apr, Jul, Oct), every month is represented, but these divisions are too small to print clearly.

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Table 4.1: Posting frequency of RF and SE from group creation to 30/05/11



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From creation, RE's activity increased gradually over many years (in fact, in the first three years the group was virtually dormant), whereas SF's initial activity rose very quickly. RE reached a peak in August 1999, when 9,811 messages were posted to the group that month (roughly one post every five minutes), whilst SF's peak was 5,711 posts in March 2003 (roughly one post every eight minutes). RE continually produces a higher average number of posts than SF, which may in turn account for the sheer amount of personal information on offer. There are, however, moments when SF has large posting spikes. These generally appear to coincide with major football events—particularly those involving the UK:

SF POSTING SPIKE	POSSIBLE CORRELATING EVENT
Jun 2000	<i>Euro 2000 UEFA European Football Championship, Jun-Jul 2000</i>
Jan-Mar 2003	<i>2003 Football League Cup Final, Mar 2003</i>
Jun-Aug 2003	No identifiable, coinciding major event
Oct 2003-Aug 2004	<i>Euro 2004 UEFA European Football Championship, Jun-Jul 2004</i> <i>Athens 2004 Summer Olympics, Aug 2004⁴³</i>

This may reflect the fact that the daily national media coverage of football increases dramatically during major events, particularly if the UK has qualified and is doing well. This coverage has more chance of reaching an audience that only takes interest in the largest events or when a home-team is winning (i.e. 'glory supporters'). These audiences may, in turn, join online forums to share their enthusiasm with other like-minded individuals, and, once the competition is over, they may then lose interest and leave.

⁴³ Interestingly, an analysis for a correlation between spikes in trolling, and spikes in posting proved negative. In fact, given the overall increase in the volume of posts, there is arguably *less* trolling in relation to 'sincere' content during peak times.

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Unlike football, equestrian pursuits⁴⁴ and international equestrian events typically only receive coverage in dedicated, country-pursuits media, which does not reach the same breadth of audience. This makes temporary, media-driven spikes of interest far less likely⁴⁵.

This leads to a further difference between the groups. Based on posting profiles of individuals who are only active in the group for short periods, SF appears to enjoy shorter bursts of many new members who generally disappear from the group once the event that brought them there is over. RE, meanwhile, tends to have a steadier influx of new members who are not necessarily motivated by a transient interest, and therefore has a larger cohort of long-term (e.g. up to ten years), and very long-term (i.e. ten years and over) members.

A further factor that should be taken into account when comparing the data is that from 2004 onwards, SF has been declining in post frequency, whereas RE's terminal decline only started in approximately 2007. Since the corpora are created entirely from this declining period, they may not be representative of each group compared to their more active periods. This is important to note because trollers looking to cause maximum trouble are more likely to target groups with high membership and activity levels. It may therefore be the case that during the same period, RE may have attracted more trollers than SF, due

⁴⁴ It seems relevant here to distinguish 'ordinary' equestrian pursuits (hacking, schooling, competition) from horse racing. Whilst strictly an equestrian pursuit, racing is so specialist that it is typically reserved for dedicated newsgroups and forums.

⁴⁵ This is not to suggest that equestrian sports do not gain any temporary new followers during major events, but if this does happen within RE, the impact is insignificant versus the drastic pattern-changes seen in SF during major events.

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to its greater number of subscribers and posts. For this reason (as well as others addressed in §6.2) it is not possible to meaningfully answer questions like,

Which group is trolled more? or, Which group has more trolls?

In short, the two corpora are distinctly different in their subscription, posting, and membership behaviour. RE activity is greater, more consistent and seems less influenced by media-covered events, whilst SF activity is lower, fluctuates more, and appears more influenced by media-covered events.

4.2.4.—Data collection

RE and SF were collected by downloading all posts sent between early 2005 and mid-2010. These posts were sorted hierarchically to map each thread from inception to termination. Since past interactions are downloadable, observer's paradox (in the case of the analyst) is not an issue, though this does not mean that the awareness of other observers in the form of subscribers, non-subscribed readers, or new members reading older posts did not affect posts.

After collection was complete, I preserved one unedited version of each corpus.

This provided the benefit of seeing each individual conflict in its larger context.

I then created a secondary subcorpora consisting purely of NMOB, as characterised by the definitions given in §3.6 (though realistically it was impossible to extract every NMOB from each corpus—see §6.1, §8.2.2, and §8.3.3 for further discussion of this). This provided the benefit of gathering many similar examples together.

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4.2.5.—Data changes

Both corpora are from public-domain sources, therefore permission is not required from the interactants to analyse the data. As far as possible, I have avoided altering the data. As such, all spelling, grammar, and (non-indenting) punctuation are original. However, some changes were necessary and this section presents the changes and my reasons for those changes:

- (1) To enhance user anonymity, I have changed all names to letters. In each set of examples, the letters re-start at A, i.e. A in one example is not necessarily the same person as A in another.
 - (2) I have exhaustively reinserted and corrected attributions (i.e. authors, recipients, etc.) that users have removed or misplaced.
 - (3) I have used italic text in square brackets to denote placeholders for removed information, e.g. [*web address*].
 - (4) I have removed indenting punctuation (e.g. >), since a subsequent reply already presents a chronological thread that the reader can intuitively follow.
 - (5) For further brevity and clarity, I have removed unnecessary line-breaks.
 - (6) I have used bold formatting to highlight the parts of an example being analysed.
 - (7) I have highlighted the individual (accused of) undertaking NMOB (e.g. trolling, flaming, etc.) by formatting their user letter in red.
 - (8) Whilst **usenet** now offers rich text, very few posts use this, so all are presented as plain text.
 - (9) I have given each example a number and a reference.
 - (10) I have numbered each 'turn' for greater ease of discussing longer examples.
- (See §4.5.1 for an example of these changes in action.)

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4.3.—INTERACTIVITY

The first of five characteristics of CMC that I present in order to contextualise the data is the notion of interactivity. The very existence of [usenet](#) is predicated on interaction, however, allowing online interaction automatically incurs numerous risks. This is especially the case if the theme of that interaction is sensitive or controversial (e.g. weapons research, alcoholism advice, immigration guidelines), or the admin lacks the resources to manage his group. A prominent risk, particularly with the recent advent of the super-injunction, is legal liability. Both *Wedding Ideas* and *You and Your Wedding* magazine have been threatened with legal action over libellous attacks by posters (Binns 2011: 4-5) whilst Gina Ford accepted an undisclosed out-of-court settlement from *Mumsnet* after a year-long legal battle in which Ford sued *Mumsnet* for failing to silence criticisms posted by users about her child management methods (Stokes 2006; Langdon-Down 2007). Similarly, the technical site, *Slashdot* (2011) state that their policy of never deleting posts results in,

a ton of legal correspondence [...] We regard this as a risk of doing what we do.
(2011: FAQs)

Despite the risk of the admin being held accountable for his users' behaviours, there are several potential benefits to offering interactivity. Sites with busy communities can generate enormous revenue from advertising, commission, and merchandise with relatively little effort on the admin's part. Users can be an excellent source of free content for media outlets⁴⁶, determine the

⁴⁶ In some cases, this has extended too far, resulting in infringement cases as independent photographers, [bloggers](#), and journalists have found their content reproduced without permission or acknowledgement.

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development of a brand (e.g. *Walkers'* 'Do us a flavour!' campaign) (Cothrel 2000), and give invaluable feedback. Users may also provide free troubleshooting and technical support to other users, thereby reducing the load (and expense) on the retailer. However, those same sites may later find themselves dealing with NMOB that brings their brand into disrepute, alienates others, and attracts legal action. As such, investing the resources into managing NMOB may make the interactivity of a site a self-defeating enterprise.

4.3.1.—Usenet interactivity

RE/SF posts are public domain, which means that they are available online in web-archives, and on commercial news servers. (Commercial news servers tend to maintain limited archives of, for example, the past year, the most recent 100,000, etc.). All posts sent to either group can also be read, searched, and responded to via the online version of [usenet](#) currently owned and hosted by *Google Groups*⁴⁷. The only exception in this case relates to messages flagged for deletion (discussed in §4.4.1). Where a user has given a real or recoverable email address (see §0) then a group member can choose to reply to an individual directly, rather than to the whole group. This then becomes a typical, one-to-one email conversation, and like other email conversations, this data is unavailable to all but those involved. However, this does not prevent users from forwarding private emails to select others, or the whole group, as is possible with any normal email interaction.

⁴⁷ Whether *Google* also takes legal responsibility for the content of those messages is unclear, but seems distinctly unlikely given the range of racist, homophobic, and other groups that exist.

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4.4.—TRANSCIENCE

The second of five characteristics of CMC that I present in order to contextualise the data is the notion of transience. The longevity of a site's interaction can markedly impact the interaction that takes place. Some sites and servers automatically purge or delete posts based on criteria such as age, rating, or relevance. Removing long-term artefacts may damage a community's sense of permanence and depth of personal investment, but it also reduces bandwidth and hosting costs, especially on busy multimedia sites. Further, a higher degree of content transience can make it difficult to hold the site to account for the comments posted on it (and can reduce that site's use of moderation) since offending material will soon vanish anyway.

4.4.1.—Usenet transience

RE/SF are closer to permanence than transience. Subscribers can download and save posts via a [newsreader](#). For example, in creating the datasets I was easily able to retrieve posts back to 2005 for both groups, and could, with a little more effort, retrieve all the messages back to the inception of most [usenet](#) groups.

Anyone, subscribed or not, can search and read *all* RE/SF posts via the web-based archives⁴⁸. This relative intransience is important when considering the interaction that takes place. Users can request to have a post deleted from the archive, but this is a timely procedure that is not well advertised. Posts set for

⁴⁸ <http://groups.google.com>

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deletion are left online for seven days and marked with the message⁴⁹:

Note: The author of this message requested that it not be archived. This message will be removed from Groups in [x] days (01 Jan, 00:01)

Afterwards, this message vanishes. It is therefore impossible to determine how frequently this feature has been used on RE/SF since deleted messages do not leave a trace. However, though deleted from the online archive, any copies received before the request takes effect, i.e. by subscriber's [newsreaders](#) or commercial news servers who do not honour delete requests are unaffected.

This intransience can also have offline consequences. Should the news of an individual's inappropriate online behaviour reach employers, family, friends, etc., the archive can be searched and read by anyone, subscribed or not. As already discussed in §3.6, online events can have (potentially extremely serious) offline consequences, and users could find themselves being held to account not necessarily on that day, but weeks, months, or even years after the event. An awareness of the potential for private, or even public repercussions may cause users to be more circumspect in how they interact, and in how much information they publish about themselves.

4.5.—FORMAT

The third of five characteristics of CMC that I present in order to contextualise

⁴⁹ The [x], date, and time is of course replaced by the actual number of days left and the future moment of deletion.

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the data is the notion of format. The format of the site and the way that the interaction is laid out can have a surprising impact on the type, quality, and extent of interaction.

4.5.1.—Bulletin-board CMC

There are two canonical interactive layouts: **bulletin-board** and threaded.

Bulletin-boards are laid out as linear lists of replies, usually chronologically ordered (though some can be re-ordered by popularity, rating, and responses). The prototypical⁵⁰ bulletin-board format is adopted in the comments sections of news outlets, **blogs**, and sites such as *4chan*, *Yahoo! Answers*, *YouTube*, and *GitHub*. By its nature, this format promotes many-to-one and one-to-many communication. For example, *one* user posts an item to *many* people, and then those *many* are invited to respond to that *one* user. Users can begin discussions amongst themselves, but **bulletin-boards** make this more difficult than threaded layouts. Further, not all **bulletin-boards** send 'reply alerts' that notify users when they have received a response. As such, the typical **bulletin-board** format makes trolling on a large scale more difficult, since potential victims answering the initial post may not read anyone else's comments. Even if the troller has an option to alert individuals to her replies, responding one at a time to many individuals is more arduous than being able to command the attention of a larger audience. As such, trolling attempts are likely to have a reduced

⁵⁰ Note that this distinction is, to an extent, artificial, since bulletin-boards can also incorporate threading. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is a useful formatting distinction to discuss.

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audience, consisting mainly of the initial poster (if he reads all the comments anyway), anyone directly addressed (assuming that she is notified of the reply, or sees it herself), and anyone else who happens to chance upon the trolling comments.

4.5.2.—Threaded CMC

Threaded or nested environments, like those employed by [usenet](#) and sites such as *Slashdot* and *Reddit*, promote many-to-many interaction. A post does not have to target one specific reader. A user may post a discussion topic, many others may respond, and still others may then reply to the responses, resulting in multiple sub-threads. Whilst this also can happen in [bulletin-boards](#), the difference in threaded environments is that these sub-discussions are clearly distinguished in some way. Because of this, threaded environments facilitate interaction between many users far more readily than standard, non-threaded [bulletin-boards](#). This means that the consumption of comments is likely to be higher. In turn, trolling and other NMOBs are likely to gain a wider audience.

The web and most [newsreaders](#) present [usenet](#) groups in a threaded format:

Subject	From	Date/time
Sports woes	A	Mon, 12 th March, 15:08
└─Re: You think that's bad...?	B	Mon, 12 th March, 15:13
└─Re: Mine's worse!	C	Tue, 13 th March, 22:19
└─Re: Mine's worse!	A	Tue, 13 th March, 22:45
└─Re: Mine's worser!	D	Thu, 15 th March, 09:09
└─Re: Mine's worstest!	E	Fri, 01 st June, 00:17
└─Re: Sports woes	F	Mon, 12 th March, 15:14

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In this (fictional) example, A's new discussion topic, or thread, has been directly replied to by B and F, B's answer has been replied to by C, etc.. As above, users can therefore usually⁵¹ identify the sender and (intended) recipient at a glance. Within posts, **newsreaders** will typically add metadata such as times and dates, indenting punctuation (i.e. angle brackets: >) before each quoted line, and the authors of quotes (e.g. via *X wrote...*) and replies (e.g. via *Y replied...*)⁵²:

```
> At 15:08, 12/03/07, Amy (amerie.may@email.co.uk) wrote:  
> Got bucked off at Willow's Yard today. :-(  
At 15:13, 12/03/07, Bret (b.baker@email.com) replied:  
Ouch!
```

Each time text is (re)quoted, more indenting punctuation is usually added:

```
>> At 15:08, 12/03/07, Amy (amerie.may@email.co.uk) wrote:  
>> Got bucked off at Willow's Yard today. :-(  
> At 15:13, 12/03/07, Bret (b.baker@email.com) wrote:  
> Ouch!  
At 22:19, 13/03/07, Amy (amerie.may@email.co.uk) replied:  
Ouch is right, Bret. I have a killer bruise on my elbow.53
```

This system of (re)quoting can become messy since different **newsreaders** (or their users) may choose different markers such as double-brackets (>>), pipes (|), colons (:), tildes (~), blank spaces, or nothing at all. Users may also interleave responses amongst quoted material, replace unwanted text with <snip>, (clipped), [edit] etc., and remove or incorrectly replace attributions (e.g.

⁵¹ Users may reply to quotes within posts (rather than to the original post), causing confusion over who the response is for.

⁵² Some have altered their newsreader to write these elements as, for example, *With no regard for personal safety or the comfort of others, the Great "Username" blathered: ...* [SF050929]

⁵³ In RE, users typically position new text at the bottom of the post. Some groups prefer new text at the top (top-posting).

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Amy wrote: etc.).

Different **newsreaders** also **wrap** text after varying numbers of characters. If a post wrapped at 76 characters is replied to through a **newsreader** that wraps at 60, any lines exceeding the 60 character limit will be re-wrapped, resulting in sentence fragments falling over many lines:

```
>> >> >>> Cal wrote>
>> >> >>> Dom <dom@email.com> wrote in message
>> >> >>> >news:A_B1c.12345$@abcdef123...
>> >> >>> > Bible is Fables so Provide Proof first Cal
>> >> >>> > 1- A wife cloned from his rib of a man would be the same genetic
>> >> >>> > person, so
>> >> >>> > their children would be the same genetically. Not enough genetic
>> >> >>> > material in
>> >> >>> > two different people to populate a planet.
>> >> >>>
>> >> >>> Wrong. The original pair had considerably more genetic material than
>> >> >>> any
>> >> >>> two people today. Every human gene trhat exists today was carried by
>> >> >>> these two
>> >> >>> plus a lot of genes that have been lost forever.
```

I have therefore removed indenting punctuation and line-breaks to make the format more accessible (see §4.2.5 for a list of all data changes). Therefore, throughout this thesis, examples are presented as follows:

Example 6 [RE-fictional]

8. **A** Got bucked off at [*place name*] today. :-(
9. **B** Ouch!
10. **A** Ouch is right, **B**. I have a killer bruise on my elbow.

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Example 7

[SF050410]

11. **C** Bible is Fables so Provide Proof first **D** 1- A wife cloned from his rib of a man would be the same genetic person, so their children would be the same genetically. Not enough genetic material in two different people to populate a planet.
12. **D** Wrong. The original pair had considerably more genetic material than any two people today. Every human gene that exists today was carried by these two plus a lot of genes that have been lost forever.

4.5.3.—Actions, signatures, and other creative features

A further formatting issue that should not be ignored is the option of using signatures, actions, or **ASCII art**. Given the general lack of rich-text formatting available, users have adopted other ways of expressing themselves and creating their own identities. (See §3.4.5 for further discussion of identity.) This includes posting 'actions':

Example 8

[RE060101]

13. **A** He also didn't have as much character as [Horse name]. ***hides***

Example 9

[RE060318]

14. **B** Had me going for a minute there. **<g>**

Example 10

[RE051027]

15. **C** All that sissy-looking stuff sure saves some serious wear and tear sometimes. **:::donning my flameproof undies and opening the Jack:::**

Users also employ signatures, which may contain genuine contact details (therefore none are reproduced here), or may be extensions of a user's identity, as seen in the example below:

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Example 11

[RE060615]

16. **A** Life's journey is not to arrive at the grave safely in a well-preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, totally worn out, shouting "...holy shit...what a ride!"

The relevance of some signatures, particularly in SF, are tied firmly to ingroup jokes or quotes from other users, and are almost certainly opaque to outsiders:

Example 12

[SF040705]

17. **A** " i used one trousers on this action, beckham is clearly to blame!" - [**B**].

Example 13

[SF040705]

18. **C** We do not share with Duke of Kent or you're both pig-plumber

Users also employ **ASCII art**—imagery made of (fixed-width) characters. Simple **ASCII art** includes smileys, whilst more complex images tend to be rarer since they may not display as desired on other computers:

Example 14

[SF060503]

19. **A** Traditionally, the winner gets to stand alone for one day in the beautiful man enclosure, and know that he is more beautiful than everyone else. Gloating is allowed.

```
-----  
|                                     |  
|       ,_o_ ,   [B]                |  
|       ||               |  
|       _/\_              |  
|                                     |  
-----
```

```
_____  
| beautiful man |  
|   enclosure   |  
|_____|  
  ||  
 _||_
```

20. **C** Man, you're crap at these fixed-width **ASCII art** games.

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Overall, as shown above, formatting has a major impact on CMC, from the scope of audience that NMOB is likely to garner, through to how users can construct their identities, interactive 'actions', and ideas.

4.6.—ANONYMITY

The fourth of five characteristics of CMC that I present in order to contextualise the data is the notion of anonymity. Discussion of the types, impacts, and issues of anonymity plays a dominant role in this thesis (see §3.4.6, §3.6, and §5.4.1) since it is a major factor in trolling and other NMOBs. On first glance, therefore, an admin may feel that removing anonymity will revoke the protection behind which perpetrators of NMOB hide. However, removing anonymity can not only have unexpected side-effects, but also fail to prevent the NMOB in question.

4.6.1.—High anonymity

Interactive sites can enable high anonymity levels by allowing users to interact (1) without accounts; (2) with temporary accounts that become available again once relinquished (as in [chatrooms](#) and [IRC](#)); or (3) with accounts that require minimal or unverified information. This leaves users free to choose just how much personal information they wish to convey (Chester & Bretherton 2007), and facilitates the exploration of other identities that may be deemed inconsistent with their offline selves (Bucholtz 1999; Bucholtz & Hall 2005).

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As discussed in §3.4.6 and throughout this thesis, however, this can encourage users to feel that they are beyond the reach of consequences for any NMOB, leading to toxic disinhibition (Suler 2004: 321). Users may be aware that the average admin lacks the resources to track down every problematic user and even if individuals can be caught, admins then potentially face a legal minefield involving issues with confidentiality, jurisdiction, and evidence (see §3.6.1.2).

It is also important to remember that anonymity provides some valuable benefits, including benign disinhibition:

[R]emoving anonymity might well destroy the *raison d'être* for the site. At Natmag's *babyexpert.com*, women upload medical, emotional and sexual details about trying to conceive, pregnancy, birth etc. Though some use their real names, the vast majority don't. Statements such as "I can't tell my husband this ..." are common. Many have turned to the site because of problems that cannot be understood in their offline world, such as repeated miscarriage while their friends move into motherhood. (Binns 2011: 13)

On sites where users are seeking assistance for sensitive or controversial problems, anonymity may allow them access to the help they require without harming their career, reputation, family, or welfare. Anonymity may also protect not only ordinary individuals from the backlash of having an unpopular opinion, but also individuals in hostile environments who are trying to release information about human rights infringements, corporate corruption, and war crimes. In such cases, removing anonymity would fundamentally harm those efforts, and at worst, risk lives.

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4.6.2.—Low anonymity

Some sites and admins may *attempt* to remove most or all anonymity by requiring users to not only register for accounts, but also to provide contact details that will be checked and validated (e.g. **ISP**-based email addresses rather than free webmail accounts, landline numbers rather than mobile numbers, etc.). However, in busy groups, ensuring that every new user has provided genuine contact details that belong to them is likely to be resource-prohibitive.

Other sites have taken the step of adding extra verification mechanisms, such as *Facebook's* plugin. This was launched on 01st March 2011 (He 2011) and within six weeks had been adopted by over 50,000 websites (Cain 2011). The plugin allows users to sign into external sites such as *TechCrunch* using their *Facebook* account, and depending on user settings, those comments are then published in each user's news feed. This plugin works on a peer-approval basis, where behaviour on other sites is made available for *Facebook* friends to read and judge. In reality, however, little prevents users from signing in with fabricated accounts, cloned accounts, or even their own accounts if social stigmatisation does not concern them (Phillips 2002; Zarsky 2004; Chester & O'Hara 2009).

One site known as *TechCrunch* had such an extreme trolling problem that the authors themselves recommended ways to block out the comments sections (Siegler 2010). In March 2011, *TechCrunch* decided to tackle the trolling by adopting the *Facebook* plugin. However, this resulted in complaints from users, and admins were concerned that the system was not just ousting trolls, but

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stifling interaction overall. Article comments dropped from hundreds as a norm (mostly trolls) to a hundred at the most (mostly sincere). This reduction mainly seemed due to trollers abandoning the site, but there was a subsequent, unexpected issue:

[W]hereas trollish garbage used to infest the comment section, now we're seeing almost the opposite. Many people are now leaving comments that gush about the subject of the article in an overly sycophantic way. It's quite odd. The cold pricklies have turned to warm fuzzies. Of course, neither is ideal. But nausea-inducing kindness is certainly better than rage-inducing assholeishness. (Siegler 2011)

The *trolling* reduction was deemed a bonus, but the overly-pleasant agreement left in its wake was considered less valuable than active debate, meaningful disagreement, and differing opinions. In short, the loss of anonymity also led to a loss of the sense of safety that allowed competitive discussion:

Of course, some people don't want to comment with their real names for good reason (they want to speak freely without fear of reprisals), but for the most part in practice anonymity was abused. It was used mostly as a shield to hide behind and throw out invective. Have the trolls really vanished or will they return? (Schonfeld 2011)

For *TechCrunch*, this outcome may not be felt too deeply, but on other sites such as news outlets that frequently deal with controversial topics, readers are unlikely to comment if they feel personally vulnerable to potential backlash. In 2009 the *Economist* surveyed its users about abolishing pseudonyms to increase the quality of its site interaction. The response, however, was clear:

You strongly objected to compulsory use of real names, and for some this is not advisable or safe. We agree with this response. You rightly reminded us that what looks like real names on the site may not be so. It is neither feasible or sensible for us to ask people to prove the 'realness' of their online names. Some said they feel personally safe to use their own name, but worry for others' safety and care for the candor and liveliness that safety makes possible. We received some insightful

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responses about the complexities of striving for freedom of speech, privacy and civility, among relative strangers online. (Economist 2009)

4.6.3.—Usenet anonymity

Regardless of the site's intentions or efforts, groups tend to choose their own point on the anonymity spectrum, from fully anonymous to fully disclosed:

While *Facebook* embraces real names (*Facebook* 2010), *Myspace* does not (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini 2007), and some **Usenet** boards allow posting from anonymous e-mail addresses (Donath 1999). Slashdot decided to enable anonymous commenting so users could feel more free to speak their minds, then controlled behavior with user moderation of comments (Lampe & Resnick 2004). However, while they may allow fully anonymous posting, anonymity is much less common in these communities than on /b/ [*4chan's* 'Random' board]. Gómez et al (2008) found that fully anonymous posts made up only 18.6% of Slashdot comments. Instead, pseudonymity tends to become the norm as usernames allow members to build a reputation. (Bernstein, Monroy-Hernández, Harry, André, Panovich & Vargas 2011)

The value and efficacy of anonymity is strongly predicated by the community and its aims and culture, and if the admin wishes for a livelier environment that promotes active debate, than anonymity can be beneficial:

While one would never dream of advocating needlessly unpleasant bile, as long as the lark is carried off with enough panache and good humour it can be a laudable enterprise. It also has one distinct virtue—it encourages disagreement, which in turn demands debate, the lifeblood of an online forum. Threads that tail off in agreement are strangely listless affairs. Mutual appreciation is singularly unpleasant, much like dancing with a blood relation. (Hughes 2010)

On **usenet**, identity concealment is easy. To subscribe and post to RE/SF, one need only provide a username, email address, and password. Despite this, many RE/SF subscribers *appear* (more on this below) to use email accounts that imply locations and employment. For example, the email suffix *rr.nc.com* indicates the

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North Carolinian ISP *RoadRunner*, whilst a *.gov.uk* suffix suggests a UK civil servant, etc.. However, a user *could* subscribe using an anonymous, web-based email account, such as *Hotmail*, *Google Mail*, or *Tor Mail*, thereby giving away minimal information (e.g. toxicfrog@tormail.net).

Further, if using a *newsreader*, individuals can change the *Reply-to Address* (the email address for one-to-one emails) to something other than their actual email address. This is because messages sent to the group usually feature the *Reply-to Address* in the *header*, instead of the actual address that the message was sent from. Normally, the *Sent-from Address* and *Reply-to Address* would be identical, or at least, the *Reply-to Address* would be valid, to provide the option of contacting someone privately. However, there are reasons why the *Reply-to Address* may be invalid.

Users may change this to one that *looks* real (e.g. c.hardy@nspcc.org), and via these false details, role-play, or masquerade as a non-member, or even attempt to pass themselves off as someone well-known, such as a celebrity, or an existing group member. Explicitly claiming, or implicitly including notable or extraordinary information (e.g. b.obama@whitehouse.gov), increases the likelihood of suspicion, however, so those wishing to deceive may adopt unremarkable details in order to pass themselves off as genuine⁵⁴. As already

⁵⁴ The individual may even base this identity on a real person (known as cloning) and add links to this person's online profile (e.g. work, personal, etc.) to 'prove' that she is who she claims to be.

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discussed above (§3.4.6), this pseudonymity is a deception of anonymity (Phillips 2002; Zarsky 2004; Chester & O'Hara 2009). The user is trying to persuade others that she is *not* anonymous, usually to invest her posts with the appearance of validity, particularly over those who do not provide real details.

Other reasons for choosing an anonymous *Reply-to Address* include trying to prevent **spambots** from harvesting addresses (e.g. nospam@nospam.co.uk).

Whilst a user may profess this as her motivation for a null *Reply-to Address*, this also means that she can send public posts to the group, but cannot be contacted privately. Due to the abuse of 'anti-**spam**' accounts, unsurprisingly, RE/SF users are openly sceptical of those using them (as shown later). This has led to users adopting recoverable email addresses aimed at both evading **spambots** and being (or appearing) less anonymous (e.g. CdotHARDYatCAMdotACdotUK).

Given that **newsreaders** are usually installed on, and used from an individual's personal (home, work, etc.) computer and that web-based accounts are password-protected, masquerading as a current group-member by posting from or taking over that member's account is beyond the scope of most ordinary users. However, it is possible to *clone* another user's account. Depending on the **newsreader**, one need only change the *Reply-to Address* and username to match the victim's, but unless posting from their account, differences can typically be found in the **headers** which document the servers that the post passed through. Comparing **headers** may enable experienced users to distinguish which is the

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close, and even to work out the real identity of the cloner if she has previously posted to the group as herself. In reality, however, this is beyond the scope of most ordinary users, and rather arduous even for the experienced user to bother with often. (Since this thesis is not meant to be technical, this will not be pursued further.)

RE/SF users can also have (multiple) accounts. These may be clearly linked (e.g. via very similar usernames) or the user may deliberately make them look different, so that she can use them to **sockpuppet** as several different people.

This **sockpuppeting** can be used for both positive and negative reasons. A typical 'benign' scenario involves S wanting the group's advice on a personal subject without identifying herself. S therefore removes the element of deception by acknowledging that she is hiding her 'real' identity. Negative examples of **sockpuppeting** can involve S conjuring up 'supporters' if she finds herself outmanoeuvred in an argument. She may also use **sockpuppeting** to create the illusion of an invading army of trolls when in reality she is the only troller.

On the technical side, should S try to post several messages apparently from different people whilst using the same **newsreader**-based account, then experienced users may recognise from the **headers** that the posts all originate from the same source. Should the user create accounts from several different web-based email addresses, however, or employ software such as **Tor** or **I2P**,

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then recognising **sockpuppeting** may become a matter of poster intuition (e.g. recognising unique stylistic choices). Otherwise, the **sockpuppeteer** may accidentally unveil the deception herself by using the wrong account with the wrong guise—a circumstance that occurs surprisingly frequently.

4.7.—MODERATION

The fifth and final characteristic of CMC that I present in order to contextualise the data is the notion of moderation. NMOBs have become so ubiquitous that numerous methods (e.g. applications, plug-ins, software) have been developed to assist users and admins in managing them. However, there is a fine balance between moderating interaction and stifling it. Small groups may put all new members through a (formal or informal) probation period, whereas in busy groups, doing so would almost certainly be too resource-intensive. Further, the character, culture, or nature of a group will determine the type and extent of regulation (Donath 1999: 47).

4.7.1.—Moderation of content

When attempting to moderate, some groups may employ *content* moderation which is done either by software (i.e. automated moderation) or by human (i.e. manual moderation).

4.7.1.1.—Automatically by software

There are several rudimentary applications that admins can use to moderate

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site interaction. One is the keyword filter, which flags up posts for moderation based on content. This can assist in capturing trolling posts that are off-topic (see §6.2.2) or controversial (see §6.2.4). If the site is busy, however, creating filters for every new topic may become arduous, whilst unsophisticated filters may flag up irrelevant comments or miss relevant ones. A frequency filter, meanwhile, limits the user to, for example, one post per sixty seconds, or fifty posts per day. Sites may stall, rather than block users via prompting them to complete a **CAPTCHA**⁵⁵, but an easy way to sidestep posting caps is to simply have multiple accounts. Therefore, whilst frequency filters may slow users down, they are unlikely to stop NMOB.

The most common filter is the swear-filter, which targets taboo words in the form of 'clear' or 'disguised' character strings (e.g. *shit*, *\$hit*). Admins may also customise filter-lists⁵⁶ and choose how targets are dealt with. For example the filter may block the whole post, disemvowel it⁵⁷ (*sht!*), or replace the target words with euphemisms (*poop!*), punctuation (*****!*), antonyms (*great!*), **leetspeak** (*\$#!ATzor!*), nonsense (*floogly!*), or nothing (*!*). Unsophisticated filters, however, can over-zealously target word or phrase fragments (e.g. *spic and span*, *Scunthorpe*, *finish it*) that coincidentally match the filter-list.

⁵⁵ *Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart*, i.e. a test to check that the poster is human. These are typically aimed at blocking **seeding spambots**—bots which automatically register for accounts and then post dozens or thousands of messages that are usually **spam**. See the Glossary for an example of a CAPTCHA.

⁵⁶ Lists typically include taboo insults and intensifiers, slurs (e.g. racial, sexual), certain activities (e.g. criminal, sexual), and certain slang terms (e.g. relating to anatomy, bodily functions, crime, sex, disability, race, religion, politics, class, etc.)

⁵⁷ This removes all vowels from the post, making it nearly illegible whilst also sidestepping any 'censorship' accusations.

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Importantly, the existence of swear-filters reinforces the notion that if looking at im/politeness from a lay perspective, we need to be aware that some users *do* view some utterances as inherently im/polite, regardless of context. However, precisely *because* this is not true, without the necessary sapience, filters alone will be unable to manage NMOB for the foreseeable future. Even advanced interactional chatbots (e.g. *Cleverbot*) which can currently pattern-match, parse literal propositional content, and even be extremely convincing romantic correspondents (Epstein 2007), still struggle to handle all but the most conventionalised allusions, implicatures, metaphors, hints, insinuations, and semantic prosody. For the time being, therefore, effective NMOB management will require human intuition, knowledge, and intervention.

4.7.1.2.—*Manually by admins*

Instead of using automatic methods of moderating the content on a site, admins may instead choose to moderate the site manually:

The precise responsibilities of rule-enforcers such as these vary as much as the technical features of their respective systems and the rules they enforce. But, like the "kick" and "ban" commands used by IRC channel operators, most enforcers or "superusers" have analogous special powers for disciplining those who break the rules. (Sternberg 2000: 55)

These admins may check all posts before publication. However, pre-approval is labour-intensive and delays between posting and publication can frustrate users by stifling (what would be) a fast-moving or hotly debated topic. To reduce workload, admins may only require a probation period of pre-approval, but this does not prevent users from behaving throughout probation, and then engaging

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in NMOB. Admins may instead post-moderate based on user alerts (i.e. a *report abuse* button), and moderation may involve editing or deleting offending posts. This may be done without a trace (i.e. a new reader would not know that a post has been edited or removed), or with a trace (i.e. a post may record the moderation time, date, and even reasons).

4.7.1.3.—Manually by users

Finally, instead of choosing to moderate a site's content automatically, or manually by an admin, some groups, such as RE/SF, may instead rely primarily on content moderation that is carried out by users. This is arguably the most democratic form of content control since it allows the group to agree on their own norms and limits.

Depending on how they are accessing the group, RE/SF users can self-moderate and block messages from individuals with whom they do not wish to interact. As discussed in §6.3.2, if using a [newsreader](#), users can [killfile](#) others, or filter messages containing certain words or phrases, and if accessing the group via a web-based email account, it is usually possible to mark all messages from a particular individual or thread as [spam](#). As such, each user can tailor her interactive experience to suit. However, several, dozens, or even thousands of users can collaborate in their efforts at moderation.

Perhaps the best known function is the *Report as abuse*, *Flag as inappropriate*,

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or *Mark as spam* option, which allows users to notify admins of problematic content. Where a post accumulates enough of these markers, it may be hidden and only reappear if users reveal the content, or it may simply be deleted.

The above said, neither SF nor RE are *officially* other-moderated by site-filters or admins with the power to censor or ban users. As discussed in the next section, and later throughout the analysis (see §6.3), though, both SF and RE do employ informal mass-moderation and self-regulation, and the type, extent, and effectiveness of this appears to depend on the issue(s) being tackled, and the individual(s) involved.

4.7.2.—Moderation of users

Instead of moderating site content, some groups and admins take the more holistic step of moderating, punishing, and rewarding user behaviour.

4.7.2.1.—FAQs, norms, and netiquette

One way of pre-emptively trying to moderate user behaviour is via the *netiquette*. *Netiquette* guides, such as RFC1855 (Hambridge 1995), are standard guides for how to behave courteously online which usually include suggestions such as, "Don't type in continuous capital letters", "Avoid sarcasm; this doesn't convey well online", and "Use the highest standard of spelling, punctuation, and grammar you are capable of" (see also Shea 1994). In reality, however, whilst familiarity with a group's *netiquette* or FAQ can help a user to avoid elementary

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online mistakes, it cannot always prevent her from breaching group norms, such as who should (not) be disagreed with, how a point should (not) be made, or whether raising a particular topic will get her flamed. Moreover, groups are continually evolving and FAQs tend to be static or only occasionally updated. As such, the efficacy of the FAQ in steering newbies through their first days of group interaction may be limited (Opp 1982; 2001; Hetcher 2004; Graham 2008).

The precise boundary between *netiquette* and norm is blurred, but one method of defining them would be to suggest that a group's *netiquette* consists of the *explicit* group rules that new users are referred to, whilst group norms are the *implicit* rules learned by observing (in both senses), or breaching them (Smith, McLaughlin & Osborne 1997; Graham 2008). In essence, groups develop into CofPs that determine their own notions of im/polite behaviour (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464; Spencer-Oatey 2000a: 3; Mills 2005: 264). (See §2.4.2 and §3.4.5.) Larger or more established sites typically formalise their *netiquettes* into contracts (e.g. *Terms & Conditions*) that users must agree to before being allowed to register or interact.

The RE/SF *usenet* groups are made up of *regs* (regular members) who contribute frequently and/or over a long time-period, *newbies* (new members) who have recently joined or are still inexperienced, *lurkers* who read but rarely or never post, and those who join, but quickly lose interest and leave or stop

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contributing. In both RE and SF, regulars have taken on moderation roles by welcoming and helping **newbies**, creating **FAQs**, and promoting or enforcing the group's norms and **netiquettes**.

As is typical of most collections of people, RE/SF have also each formed their own peculiar characters, established hierarchies, and determined that certain behaviours are marked, unacceptable deviations from the group's norms:

Example 15

[RE060519]

21. **A** I read and post to several groups about horses, and they're all a little different. **Things that would get you flamed here are glorified in other groups.** It's the horse world I guess. Two horse people, three opinions. :-)

Hierarchy plays a significant role in determining this acceptability, since senior members, those with a lot of knowledge or prowess in the group's topic, and those particularly capable in an argument, may be allowed far more latitude in bending, breaking, and enforcing rules:

Example 16

[RE080311]

22. **A** You seem like a nice person, but I have no idea what forum you have been reading. Seriously. Yep, lots of lovely people here. Tremendous amount of bad manners, lack of **netiquette**, bandwagon jumping, and all sorts of other juvenile **BS** as well. Including tirades, flaming and trolling, to name a few. **Over the years, requests to keep subject lines adjusted and marked **OT**, as well as other simple forms of **newsgroup** etiquette have met with disdain and suggestions to **STFU**.**
23. **B** I read **rec.eq**. Have so since 1987. The good and the knowledge far outweighs the bad. If I mark a couple of threads as "read" it doesn't ruin my day. [Quotes **A**: "Over the years, requests to keep subject lines adjusted and marked **OT**, as well as other simple forms of **newsgroup** etiquette have met with disdain and suggestions to **STFU**."] Oh, that's right. I **<gasp>**

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forgot to change a subject line. I am on A's Bad List. <rolls eyes> When you are perfect, get back to me.

Meanwhile **newbies** and less assertive members may be expected to adhere to the rules, and may rarely find themselves in a position to enforce them (Graham 2008). The broader **usenet netiquette**, which may also be found in other CMC, includes general maxims such as avoiding continuous capital letters (since this is perceived as shouting), using standard of spelling, grammar and punctuation (to minimise reader effort), and providing evidence for assertions (since presenting opinions as facts can be inflammatory). However, this is subject to wide variation and deliberate, creative misuse both within and across groups, for purposes such as group identity, humour, and emphasis.

Each group may have its own standards for what is (not) acceptable, and the application of these rules may be partisan and selective. The 'grammar rule' may only be invoked after a user has given other causes for annoyance (see Example 17 and Example 18) whilst the 'evidence rule' may only be applied to newer, inexperienced, or socially castigated members (see Example 18 and Example 19):

Example 17

[SF061125]

24. **A** I can see grammar is not your strong point...
25. **B** I think you mean spelling - or was your comment synechdometric? :-)

Example 18

[SF061222]

26. **C** You really as pompous are simple in your thinking. It worries that people like you are entitled to a vote.
27. **D** No argument then, just abuse. Not that I object to a bit of gratuitous knockabout during debate, but so far **you seem to be completely unable to back up any of your arguments with evidence** and you don't seem able

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to grasp the simple and basic idea that an economy is not a rigid system. **It might also help your case if you could manage at least something resembling basic English grammar.** The combined effect makes you look like a child trying to argue with adults. That would be an insult were you not losing the argument :O)

Example 19

[RE050802]

28. **E** Having been on more "lists" per say than **usenet** over the years, one flamer can be quite different from another, however i've found that those who get the ***most*** satisfaction out of flaming actually ***get off*** on ***getting*** flamed. It sounds a bit out there, but it is a psychological fact.
29. **F** **Can you site any peer-reviewed publications that support that "fact"?**

Usenet-specific **netiquette** involves being *extremely* careful with **crossposting** (i.e. sending the same message to multiple groups, particularly if they are on different topics). In Example 20 below, A has **crossposted** a controversial, irrelevant troll (see §6.2.2 and §6.2.4) across several groups, and B—who has taken the bait—has responded without checking where his reply is going. B's accidental **crosspost** is flagged up by SF user, C:

Example 20

[SF050410]

30. **A** Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens the hearts and enslaves minds. End of story. Take your bible-thumping elsewhere gOD boy.
31. **B** What better place for bible thumping than a **newsgroup** called [*religious newsgroup*]? Can't more on topic than that.
32. **C** **Whoever posted that was trying to cause a flame war between groups, in other words, a troll.** Just check what other groups it was **crossposted** to. You probably didn't plan to post to uk.sport.football or a bondage-related **newsgroup**, did you?

When RE/SF group-specific norms are breached, this can trigger responses such as norm discussion, enforcement, and explication, which re-emphasises the notion that im/politeness is a contextually-bound, co-constructed experience

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(Arundale 2005: 59; Locher & Watts 2005: 16). However, in such a short section as this (or even in a much longer one), it is impossible even to summarise all the features that make RE/SF unique, especially since a selection of these will be examined in detail throughout the rest of the thesis. It should already be apparent however, that what is acceptable and even applauded in one group, can attract severe criticism and disapproval in another.

4.7.2.2.—Metrics

Another method of trying to moderate user behaviour is via metrics. Groups may privately record, or publicly advertise which users have long-term memberships, high post-counts, formally conferred positions of authority, etc.. This embraces rewarding positively marked behaviour, and penalising NMOB. For example, ecommerce sites typically *risk rate* customers (i.e. based on factors such as registering with an ISP-based email account, landline number, and domestic address versus a web-based email account, mobile number, and overseas addresses). However, a now-ubiquitous *risk rating* method involves public grading on anything from contributions to sellers, buyers, and products.

Contribution ratings can work like credit ratings, by allowing others to quickly assess the quality, reliability, and usefulness of the user's posts they are reading. Should a would-be troller join a group, her new status, low rating, and lack of posting history may automatically reduce the impact she can have. Where ratings are also used to automatically promote or suppress posts (cf. *Slashdot's* karma, §4.7.2.3) this can foreground useful and productive members, whilst

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quietly backgrounding unhelpful, disruptive users. However, since it is a system whereby 'success' automatically encourages greater 'success', this method can also make it very easy to background legitimate newbies.

In [usenet](#), the web-based version of the groups offers star-ratings on posts, but in RE/SF this option is used extremely infrequently, perhaps because it is unavailable when using a [newsreader](#). Further, anyone, subscribed or not, can view the profile of a post's author via the web-based groups. A profile typically contains a snippet of the user's *Reply-to Address* and links to her other posts. This information alone can prove very useful, since it allows others to establish her behaviour across any other groups she happens to subscribe to:

Since all interactions are contextualized and interpreted within the frame of previous interactions and the expectations that grow out of them, examining the impact of prior interactions on how community members perceive acts as impolite or inappropriate is a necessary next step if we are to gain a better understanding of how impoliteness unfolds over extended interaction. (Graham 2007: 758)

In the case of [usenet](#), should an individual appear to have a habit of subscribing briefly to groups, posting a few inflammatory messages, and then leaving, it is far easier to establish that she may well be a troller. If, however, she has been a long-term member of the same group(s) and the behaviour in question is atypical of her, then users may establish with a greater degree of certainty that they are dealing with something other than trolling. Realising this, a would-be troller might try to hide such a history (especially if she has trolled the same group before) by joining with a new account, but as above, her lack of history may automatically act as a warning flag by itself.

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Another method used in some CMC involves actively advertising each user's metrics with every post she makes, e.g. via displaying her aggregate post count, accomplishments, seniority, etc.. An interesting effect of this which is particularly evident in RE/SF is that users with the highest post counts and/or longest histories may be automatically accorded, or may automatically expect more deference, regardless of their identities offline (cf. Example 16). These metrics may become part of those users' positionality (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 592), by indicating how that user should be viewed as an individual, and in relation to the group (see §3.5).

From this, these users may also develop the relationality aspect of their identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598), by reshaping and challenging group norms and rules to an extent, or in ways that are not allowed, or expected, from junior members (Opp 1982; 2001; Hetcher 2004). As in RE/SF, despite not being *formally* instated admins, these 'senior' users may accrue unofficial admin status from their group commitment and contributions.

4.7.2.3.—Peer-review

One of the most democratic forms of user-moderation involves a form of peer-review known as crowd-sourced mass-moderation (hereon CSMM). For instance, *Slashdot* employs CSMM based on a score called *karma*. This involves temporarily awarding qualifying users some admin powers (Poor 2005). For a short period, that user can then moderate the posts of others. Abusing the

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power results in its immediate withdrawal and reduced karma. Using it well is rewarded with increased karma and more future moderating opportunities.

Users are not given permanent moderation rights in order to keep the system as democratic and representative as possible.

These temporary admins can moderate a user's comments up (increasing his karma) or down (decreasing his karma) and that accrued karma impacts how visible, and how easy to suppress, one's posts are. Users can then choose to only view comments with karma above a certain threshold. The result is that low karma comments never appear, borderline comments need few negative ratings before they vanish, and high karma comments need many negative ratings to be suppressed. Whilst a cumulative system like this requires many users to proactively involve themselves in the moderation process, it also avoids personal grudges having a disproportionate impact.

In fact, this game-like, points-scoring aspect worked so well, and some users competed so hard to acquire the highest karma possible that the admins were obliged to cap the score, and change it from a number to a label (e.g. *terrible*, *bad*, *neutral*, *positive*, *good*, *excellent*). CSMM was also successful enough that *Slashdot* no longer deletes comments:

We believe that discussions in *Slashdot* are like discussions in real life—you can't change what you say, you only can attempt to clarify by saying more. In other words, you can't delete a comment that you've posted, you only can post a reply to yourself and attempt to clarify what you've said. In short, you should think twice before you click that 'Submit' button because once you click it, we aren't going to let you Undo it.
(*Slashdot* 2011)

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CSMM has numerous benefits, including sidestepping issues of censorship (users cannot suggest that an admin is running a dictatorship or suppressing freedom of speech), and allowing the group to organically develop its own norms and culture (see §3.4.5) rather than having one imposed on it. CSMM empowers users to take immediate action, rather than waiting on admins. It is also resource-efficient since it utilises a large number of unpaid volunteers rather than a few paid employees, and finally, it allows those users to take social responsibility for their own environment (Kelly, Sung & Farnham 2002).

4.7.2.4.—*Ban or block*

Another method of trying to moderate a user who continually engages in NMOB is a suspension of her account (i.e. ban), or her site access (i.e. block). Whilst these tactics may briefly stop the problem, they are far from perfect. Side-stepping a ban usually only requires registering with a new account. **IP address** blocks may be more effective, but if the individual is using a browser such as **Tor**, overcoming the block simply requires assuming a new **IP address**. The result is that the admin may end up in a never-ending battle of watching for, and banning, the user's newest incarnation.

One way of preventing this is to freeze all new registrations, however, it rather defeats the point of an interactive forum if genuine new users cannot join. Alternatively, should the problem involve several individuals (i.e. where a flamewar is threatening to take over a whole community) admins might

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suspend all *posting* until the group has cooled off, but this may aggravate the users, and encourage them to find other sites where they *can* interact. In extreme cases where the number of trolling/*sockpuppeting* accounts is unmanageable, admins may delete all the accounts, and instruct the genuine members to reregister. However, this may aggrieve members who had accumulated a valued history (see §4.7.2.2), and does not prevent problem-users from re-registering.

4.7.2.5.—Hide

The final method of group moderation considered here involves operating a system of limited or selective visibility. When S or her posts are down-voted enough, or she is *killfiled* by all group members, her posts become visible only to herself and, in the case of the *Facebook* plugin, to her *Facebook* friends:

The updated Comments Box provides moderation tools that were created based on developer feedback. Admins can choose to make the default for new comments entered either "visible to everyone" or "has limited visibility" on the site (i.e., the comment is only visible to the commenter and their friends), to help mitigate irrelevant content. In addition to changing the visibility of a comment, admins can also blacklist words and ban users. If a new comment is published from a banned user or contains a blacklisted word, this comment will automatically have limited visibility. (He 2011)⁵⁸

In the case of the *Facebook* plugin, when the user is flagged up as problematic, she is turned into a ghost without being aware that this is the case. This reduces the problem of continual re-registration since it is much harder for her to figure out *when* she or her comments have vanished, if she realises at all. If she does

⁵⁸ Note that this plugin also has an inbuilt keyword/swear-filter. See §4.7.1.1.

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suspect that she or her comments have vanished, however, she could create a new account and use this to check the visibility of her old one.

The *usenet* method of *killfiling* has two distinct advantages. Firstly, the group does not need to wait until the admin takes action for them—they may *killfile* at their convenience. Secondly, the *killfiled* user cannot check to see who has filtered her. In the cases of both *killfiling* and vanishing someone, the offending user can still access the site, post, and read all contributions including her own, but the rest of the users will be unaware of her existence.

4.8.—METHODOLOGY

The methodologies adopted in this thesis have evolved based on the data and the subsequent analyses. Though CMC is typically written, depending on both system and users, it can behave more or less like speech. Four major aspects that differentiate traditional speech (e.g. conversations, interviews, arguments) and writing (e.g. printed press, essays, books) are permanence, modifiability, (perceived level of) formality, and interactivity (Crystal 2001: 26-8):

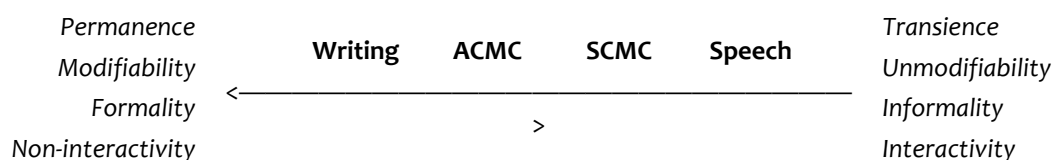


Figure 4.2: Speech-writing continuum

As Figure 4.2 shows, traditional writing is stereotypically more permanent, and

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tends towards informative content (Mladenec 1999), which may account for the perception of higher formality. It is usually also open to being redrafted, but it is interactively less rich; if a reader does not understand, the author may not be on hand to assist. Speech, meanwhile, is stereotypically highly transient, highly interactive, and like CMC, tends to be perceived as less formal, but once said, it cannot be changed.

Since these factors affect our understanding and interpretation of each, they must be accounted for. This also applies to the analysis of ACMC or SCMC which occupy different positions on the speech-writing continuum (see Figure 4.2). These positions are unfixed, and can be altered by user and system. Generally, however, ACMC is closer to writing through its greater permanence and modifiability. Unlike writing, though, it is generally perceived as less formal, and can be highly interactive (Sack 2000). This hybrid nature of the data—part speech-like, part writing-like, and my choice of research questions, have made it necessary to adopt several methodologies. The following sections briefly outline how the demands of each research question are met. Note however that more is said about the methodology at the start of each Chapter.

4.8.1.—Approach for research question one

The first research question (*what is trolling?*), addressed in Chapter Five, establishes how members understand and use the term TROLL, particularly in relation to other NMOBs. I adopt a corpus linguistics approach, and use *WordSmith*® (M. Scott 2009) to retrieve examples of trolling from RE and SF.

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After excluding false hits, the remaining results are then compared with a significantly larger CMC reference corpus—the *Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus*.

The remaining examples are qualitatively analysed and classified according to what seems to be the main point(s), or issue(s) of the user discussion. This results in surprisingly few categories—only deception and disruption clearly emerge as highly recurrent themes. These characteristics are discussed in Chapter Five in contrast to the academic and legal literature from Chapters Two and Three, and the other NMOBs with which trolling is sometimes viewed as synonymous. On the basis of this Chapter's findings, I start a user-driven definition of trolling which is developed and tested in subsequent Chapters.

4.8.2.—Approach for research question two

The second research question (*how is trolling carried out?*), addressed in Chapter Six, extracts the major strategies for trolling and responding to trolling from the dataset. These strategies were identified after all the examples extracted from the data were analysed for the features and formulae that appeared to have triggered accusations or discussions of trolling.

This Chapter also draws on the theoretical underpinnings of Chapter Two to demonstrate how these trolling formulae and strategies are typically not well accounted for using the impoliteness literature and frameworks that currently exist. Once the gaps in the literature are established, I conclude this Chapter by extending the working definition of trolling that was started in Chapter Five.

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4.8.3.—Approach for research question three

The third research question (*how is trolling co-constructed?*), addressed in Chapter Seven, investigates the co-construction of trolling in an extended case study. This Chapter draws on the theoretical underpinnings of Chapters Two and Three, and the working definition created in Chapters Five and Six.

Specifically, the current academic literature on impoliteness, conflict escalation, response strategies, and identity that has been outlined in Chapter Two, and the legal and academic literature on NMOB provided in Chapter Three are applied to the data in order to establish where those theories and frameworks are adequate, and where more work needs to be done.

4.9.—SUMMARY

This Chapter described and explained the data, including its method of collection and in particular, differences between *usenet* and other CMC. Whilst collecting the data was straightforward, deciding on the groups to use was more difficult. Too many dimensions of difference would make attributing those differences difficult, however overly similar data would potentially mask interesting findings. Further, this Chapter has explained the labour-intensive post-processing which was undertaken to make the data clear, anonymous, and usable.

This Chapter also considered this data-type in its wider context. In this case,

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usenet is only one type of CMC and it has some fairly unique features. Many of these are legacies of its origins, which predate the current worldwide web (or Web 2.0). In other respects, **usenet** exemplifies, or has possibly even been responsible for some features that we now take for granted in modern CMC. Specifically, **usenet** offers both public and private interaction—something we simply expect with most modern CMC (see §4.3), but it also offers an unusual degree of permanence stretching back over thirty years. (The oldest **usenet** post in *Google's* archive is from the 11th of May, 1981 (Google 2011).) **Usenet** also offers the ability to download those posts back to the inception of a group—an option that is now fairly unique versus other CMC.

Like other types of CMC, **usenet** allows users to adopt high levels of anonymity, but specific groups develop their own norms and (in)tolerance for behaviours such as posting with a false *Reply-to Address* (see §0). Aside from the informal, group-specific creation of hierarchies, norms, and boundaries, **usenet** newsreaders offered one of the earliest formal and technical methods of user-driven moderation in the form of the **killfile**, whereby users could quietly filter out posts based on authorship, word-content, size, etc. (see §4.7).

Overall, this supports the argument that CMC should not be treated as one homogenous mass, and that behaviour will not be evaluated the same way across all CMC. For example, it will be difficult to troll on a **bulletin-board** that

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uses CSMM and does not issue reply alerts, whereas it will be easier to troll on an unmoderated threaded site that issues reply alerts. RE/SF fall between these two points. **Usenet** typically displays in a threaded format and can alert individuals to replies if they desire. However, RE/SF have no admin who has the power to formally moderate users or content. (This is not the case across all **newsgroups**—some have dedicated admins who can ban users and delete content.) Instead, RE/SF use informal, self-regulated mass-moderation that relies on social, rather than technical methods. In doing so, they construct their own internal hierarchies with senior regulars at the top, and **newbies**, trolls, and outgroup members at the bottom. Both groups are therefore targets for NMOB, since they have little *technical* recourse to manage these behaviours.

Finally, this Chapter reviewed the analytical methods for each research question, including using corpus linguistics software to extract the examples in Chapter Five, qualitatively categorising those examples in Chapter Six, and applying the definitions and strategies to a case study in Chapter Seven. The next Chapter, therefore, seeks to identify what trolling is in this data in relation to other types of NMOB based primarily on user discussions of these terms.

CHAPTER 5.

WHAT IS TROLLING?

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Ch5: What is trolling?

5.1.—TROLLING

In this Chapter, I argue that current terminology in impoliteness (see §2.4) and in legislation (see §3.6.1.2) does not comfortably describe the phenomenon of trolling. Following Watts (2003), I take the view that,

investigating first-order politeness is the only valid means of developing a social theory of politeness. (Watts 2003: 9)

Further, adopting approaches used by, among others, Culpeper (2011a) and Bousfield (2010), and after establishing the significance of TROLL^a in the data, this Chapter builds a working definition of TROLL from lay user discussions of this term, in order to answer the first research question, *What is trolling?* This necessarily challenges, extends, and develops the definition of trolling offered at the start of this thesis, as far as this dataset allows. In other words, rather than accepting non-empirical, potentially skewed, or unclear definitions, this work seeks to discover empirically what users consider trolling to be.

§5.2 discusses the etymology of the term, TROLL. §5.3 discusses how instances of TROLL were retrieved from the data, and whether the frequency in RE/SF is statistically significant versus a larger reference corpus of [usenet](#) data. §5.4 analyses how users in RE/SF discuss, define, and use the term TROLL^a versus the extant impoliteness literature. I then formulate an academic definition of trolling based on the discussion of the preceding analyses. To situate this definition more fully amongst other NMOBs, §5.5 considers trolling in relation to flaming (§5.5.1), cyberbullying (§5.5.2), cyberharassment (§5.5.3),

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cyberstalking (§5.5.4), and spam and shill trolling (§5.5.5), especially since some of these NMOBs can be difficult, if not impossible, to consistently distinguish.

Finally, §5.6 concludes.

5.2.—ETYMOLOGY OF TROLLING

The origins of the word troll are somewhat disputed, but there are several clear themes that emerge: a mythical monster (TROLL^b), types of fishing (TROLL^c), searching (TROLL^d), and online antagonism (TROLL^a).

5.2.1.—TROLL^b: monster

In Old Norse and Scandinavian mythology from the late fourteenth century, a *troll* (or *tröll*) was a monster who may be giant in stature, but was typically strong and nasty. These creatures possessed supernatural powers, but would also turn to stone in the sunlight (MacCulloch 1930: 285-6; Jakobsson 2006: 1). These ancient myths persist in folklore tales such as the Norwegian fairytale, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. In this story, three billy goats wish to cross a bridge to find better grass, but as the littlest goat is crossing, the troll living beneath the bridge climbs up and threatens to eat him. The little goat tells the troll that his bigger brother is crossing next, and the troll, who wants a larger meal, lets the little goat pass. When the troll stops the middle brother, this goat tells the troll to that his eldest brother—the biggest of all—is crossing next, so the troll lets the middle goat pass. But when the troll stops the eldest brother, this goat is so big that he pitches the troll into the river, and the bridge is safe ever after.

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5.2.2.—TROLL^c: fishing

Trolling is, in its literal sense, a form of fishing (TROLL^c) that involves drawing multiple baited fishing lines through the water. (This should not be confused with trawl fishing which involves dragging a net mid-water, or over the sea-bed, and usually unselectively catching a wide selection of sea-life.) This literal fishing version does not appear in the dataset at all.

5.2.3.—TROLL^d: searching

TROLL^d is a metaphorical extension of TROLL^c that refers to exhaustively searching, usually in order to gather or acquire:

Example 21

[SF060109]

33. **A** As I said, I am not a secret. The regulars know who I am. You are just a little girl with no life.
34. **B** Is that how you like them pedo? Sick fuck, **you probably troll in the parks with pokemon cards.**

Whilst TROLL^d usage was rare in the corpus, it recurs again in this thesis in §5.5.5. Therefore it will not be discussed further here.

5.2.4.—TROLL^a: antagonising

With regards to the definition of primary interest in this thesis—TROLL^a, the OED suggests that the literal TROLL^c and metaphorical TROLL^d was extended to indicate fishing for angry responses, and other terms related to fishing such as *biting*, *baiting*, *netting*, and *hooking* appear in both RE and SF in this context (OED 2009). However, this term has also either developed from, or has

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acquired a cultural link to mythical TROLL^b. Accordingly, the data contains examples such as *it has a sub-bridge apartment* (Example 37) and *Underbridge can't have briefed him very well* (Example 149). The remainder of this Chapter explores these user discussions of TROLL^a further.

5.3.—RETRIEVING TROLLS FROM THE DATA

To find examples, *WordSmith* (M. Scott 2009) retrieved all instances of TROLL^{*59} from RE/SF. Searching the corpora with an open-ended wildcard retrieved around ~9% false hits (e.g. *Trollope*), but this also retrieved derivations, inflections, compounds, neologisms, and some typographic errors that might otherwise have been excluded from the search. RE contains 2,643 instances of TROLL*, whilst SF contains 1,456 instances creating an initial sub-corpus of 4,099 examples that reduced to 3,727 once the false hits were excluded. These results are collated into Table 4.3 below:

Table 4.3: Frequency per million words (FPMW) of TROLL* in RE and SF

Token	RE (62,884,032 tokens) FPMW (raw frequency)	SF (16,596,565 tokens) FPMW (raw frequency)
Troll	26.509 (1,667)	65.013 (1,079)
Trollboi	-	0.542 (9)
Trollbusters	0.031 (2)	-
Trolldom	0.063 (4)	0.060 (1)
Trolled	0.302 (19)	5.724 (95)
Trollerita	0.031 (2)	-
Trollers	0.015 (1)	-
Trollery	0.047 (3)	-

⁵⁹ The asterisk (*) wildcard denotes 'zero or more characters', so a search for CAT* will retrieve *cat, cats, catch, cathode*, etc.

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Trolley	0.254 (16)	0.421 (7)
Trollfare	-	0.060 (1)
Trollhunter	0.031 (2)	-
Trollies	-	0.301 (5)
Trolliest	0.063 (4)	-
Trollign	-	0.482 (8)
Trollin	0.429 (27)	-
Trolling	3.434 (216)	7.591 (126)
Trolling's	0.063 (4)	-
Trollish	0.079 (5)	-
Trollius	0.015 (1)	-
Trolll	-	0.180 (3)
Trolllled	0.031 (2)	-
Trollometer	0.031 (2)	0.060 (1)
Trollop	0.063 (4)	0.180 (3)
Trollops	0.015 (1)	-
Trolls	4.500 (283)	5.603 (93)
Troll's	0.143 (9)	0.964 (16)
Trolly	0.063 (4)	0.120 (2)
TOTAL	36.225 (2,278)	87.307 (1,449)

It is worth bearing in mind two points: firstly, these are by no means all possible variants. The *Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus* (see §5.3.3) contains 903 possible inflections, derivations, neologisms, compounds, and typographical errors of TROLL*⁶⁰, so for brevity and clarity, only those variants that also occurred in either RE or SF were considered. Secondly, troll appears to occur far less frequently offline. A search of the spoken part of the *British National Corpus* (BNC) revealed that whilst TROLL* occurs 1.729 times per million words (*trolls*: 11, *troll*: 6, *trolling*: 1), it is only ever used in reference to the fairytale monster, as

⁶⁰ The full list of TROLL* variants can be found in Appendix C. Note also that this only counts words *beginning* with troll. Lexical items containing these five letters in other positions are excluded.

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an insult for an unattractive person, and as a verb for searching. This should be taken with caution, however, since the BNC was compiled in late 1990, and it is comprised predominantly of British data, whilst RE in particular is primarily made up of American members. However at this time there is no modern, equally sized, equally well-balanced spoken corpus to use.

Although *WordSmith* retrieved an impressive array of results from RE/SF, no search is currently able to retrieve off-record or implicit TROLL references (e.g. *it has a sub-bridge apartment*, Example 37). Instances like this were only captured if TROLL occurred in, for example, a more explicit part of the thread. RE/SF were compared with a significantly larger CMC reference corpus to establish whether TROLL was significant in the individual corpora themselves or within [usenet](#) in general, and more particularly, which lexical variants were most significant.

Once the false hits were excluded, all remaining examples were analysed and classified according to what seemed to be the main point(s), or issue(s) of the lay user discussion. This resulted in surprisingly few categories—initially, only deception and disruption/aggression clearly emerged as highly recurrent themes. These characteristics are discussed in §5.4 and taken to form the basis of the working definition given in this thesis.

5.3.1.—Disambiguating trolling

It should be noted that words such as *trollop* have been left in Table 4.3 above, since these are occasionally used in relation to TROLL:

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Example 22

[RE070120]

35. **A** Because he is, like I said weeks ago - a moron .. idjit .. writing fairy tales .. making things up .. trying to inflame people ... **trolling for trollops** (which, **B** dearest, **you have been trolled thus you are a ... hmm, trollop?**)

Whilst these denotative uses were rare, this does serve to highlight the danger of discounting them out of hand without considering their wider co-text. Given their infrequency, however, they are not discussed further.

5.3.2.—Comparing trolling with a reference corpus

To establish whether the phenomenon under investigation—namely the discussion of trolling—is statistically significant in RE/SF, each was compared to a much larger reference corpus, known as the *Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus* (hereon WLUC, Shaoul & Chris 2010). This primarily establishes whether RE/SF discuss trolling unusually (in)frequently and gives some idea as to how these groups might inform an understanding of trolling. Quite simply, groups that discuss this phenomenon more frequently will automatically provide more data for analysis, and corpus linguistics provides a swift and reasonably thorough method of retrieving this type of data from a large dataset.

Significance can be defined in at least two ways: psychological, and statistical. In the former case, significance is defined by a feature's psychological salience. This could be due to its deviance from the norm, its markedness, or its importance. Statistical significance deals with probability, and typically focuses on items which occur more or less often than chance alone would dictate

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(Partington 1998). In this case, significance is used to refer to a token, or keyword, which is *unusually* (in)frequent in a corpus when compared with a much larger reference corpus. The following section looks specifically at the keyness of TROLL in RE/SF versus WLUC and establishes whether it is more frequent than chance alone would dictate (i.e. statistically significant), and if so, just *how* significant.

The assumption here is that WLUC stands as a normative background against which RE/SF can be measured, and there are equally valid arguments for choosing a reference corpus that is general (when compared with the specialist nature of the corpora under investigation) or equally as specialised. It is interesting to know how these words compare to 'ordinary' usage, but creating a representative corpus of 'normal' usage is a huge challenge (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998: 246; McEnery & Wilson 2001: 10; Mukherjee 2004: 114):

As we have no idea how to calculate proportions for "English as a whole", we have equally no idea what would constitute a corpus that truly reflected English.

(Hunston 2002: 9)

Equally, it is interesting to know whether these groups differ from other supposedly similar groups within the same genre. For the purposes of this thesis, which focuses on CMC, this second option—a similarly specialised corpus—was chosen.

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5.3.3.—Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus

The WLUC reference corpus is a 30-billion⁶¹ word,

collection of public **USENET** postings. This corpus was collected between Oct 2005 and Jan 2011, and covers 47860 English language, non-binary-file news groups. [...] The corpus is untagged, raw text. (Shaoul & Chris 2010)

WLUC is from the same domain (**usenet**) as RE/SF, and from a virtually identical time-span (2005-2010). Given not only the extraordinary size of this corpus, but also the enormous breadth of **newsgroups** that it covers, WLUC provides a uniquely comprehensive background against which to check the significance and (a)typicality of TROLL in RE/SF versus **usenet** in general. This said, results drawn from WLUC cannot be taken as representative of other CMC. Even between **usenet** groups (see §3.4.5), there are marked differences.

5.3.4.—Plotting the occurrence of trolling

It is possible, simply by analysing RE/SF individually, to ascertain that TROLL occurs reasonably often in each corpus. One method of demonstrating this is by illustrating the frequency and distribution of the occurrence of TROLL* via plots. These represent the corpus in question as a 'barcode' where the corpus is represented by the white strip, and each instance of the word is identified by a black vertical line. The more often the word occurs, the denser the 'barcode'.

The RE plot looks as follows:

⁶¹ Actual wordcount: 30,513,991,684. (The standard US billion is used as it is less laborious than the UK 'thousand million'.)

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There are fairly dense collections of TROLL* throughout this corpus, particularly in the earlier half. Meanwhile, the SF plot looks as follows:



This shows that earlier and later in the corpus, TROLL* occurs less frequently with a dense section in the middle. What this does not tell us, however, is whether this frequency is unusual versus other, similar datasets.

5.3.5.—Statistical significance of trolling

To check whether trolling really was significant in RE/SF, both were compared for the keyness of TROLL against WLUC. In essence, any relevant word containing 'troll' was considered. Keyness in this case is based on comparing *frequency per million words* (FPMW)—how often each word appears on average in every million words (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2 overleaf).

Table 5.1: Frequency per million words (FPMW) of TROLL* in RE, SF, and WLUC⁶²

	RE (62,884,032 tokens)	SF (16,596,565 tokens)	WLUC (30,513,991,684 tokens)
Token	FPMW (raw frequency)	FPMW (raw frequency)	FPMW (raw frequency)
TROLL	26.509 (1,667)	65.013 (1,079)	34.252876 (1,045,192)
TROLLBOI	-	0.542 (9)	0.006062 (185)
TROLLBUSTERS	0.031 (2)	-	0.002720 (83)
TROLLEDOM	0.063 (4)	0.060 (1)	0.031460 (960)
TROLLED	0.302 (19)	5.724 (95)	1.053549 (32,148)

⁶² WLUC's FPMW is calculated to six decimal places to distinguish between very low values which occur in super-corpora. Since these are not an issue in smaller corpora, RE/SF's FPMW has only been calculated to three decimal places.

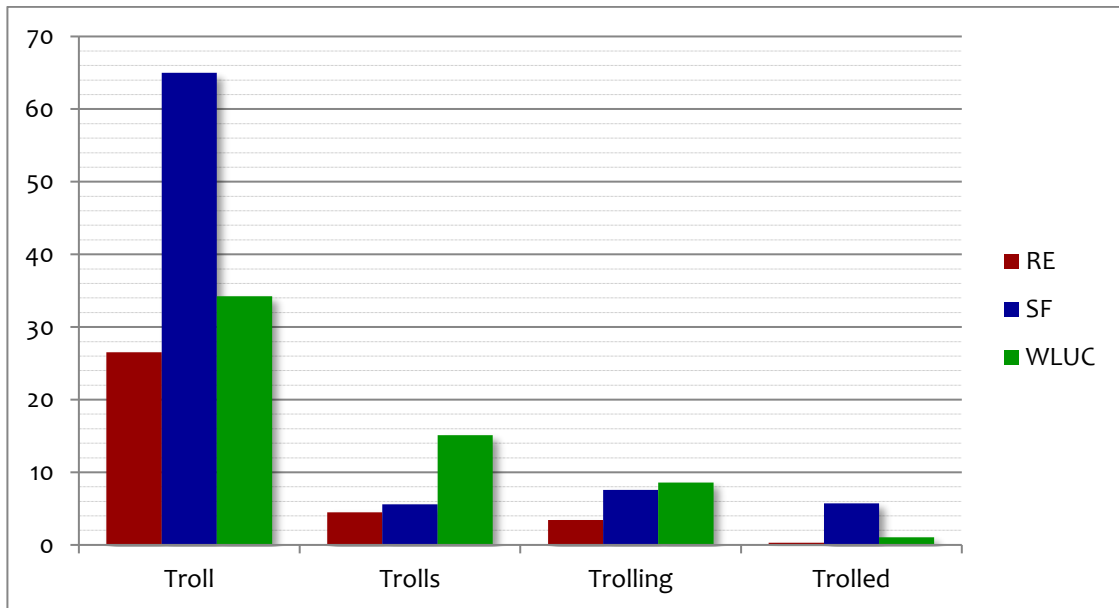
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TROLLERITA	0.031 (2)	-	-
TROLLERS	0.015 (1)	-	0.107491 (3,280)
TROLLERY	0.047 (3)	-	0.070525 (2,152)
TROLLEY	0.254 (16)	0.421 (7)	1.031887 (31,487)
TROLLFARE	-	0.060 (1)	0.005374 (164)
TROLLHUNTER	0.031 (2)	-	0.002818 (86)
TROLLIES	-	0.301 (5)	0.015501 (473)
TROLLIEST	0.063 (4)	-	0.000458 (14)
TROLLIGN	-	0.482 (8)	0.001835 (56)
TROLLIN	0.429 (27)	-	0.097660 (2,980)
TROLLING	3.434 (216)	7.591 (126)	8.591927 (262,174)
TROLLING'S	0.063 (4)	-	0.001343 (41)
TROLLISH	0.079 (5)	-	0.307105 (9,371)
TROLLIUS	0.015 (1)	-	0.000327 (10)
TROLLL	-	0.180 (3)	0.004424 (135)
TROLLLED	0.031 (2)	-	-
TROLLMETER	0.031 (2)	0.060 (1)	0.003539 (108)
TROLLOP	0.063 (4)	0.180 (3)	0.170774 (5,211)
TROLLOPS	0.015 (1)	-	0.012846 (392)
TROLLS	4.500 (283)	5.603 (93)	15.098385 (460,712)
TROLL'S	0.143 (9)	0.964 (16)	0.335878 (10,249)
TROLLY	0.063 (4)	0.120 (2)	0.179688 (5,483)

If WLUC is taken as a broad, normative indication of the frequency of the use of TROLL* use in [usenet](#), then as the table above makes clear, in SF, *troll* occurs nearly twice as often as expected, whereas it occurs slightly fewer times than might be expected in RE. Equally, *trolled* occurs five times more frequently in SF than in WLUC, and 19 times more frequently than in RE. With regards to *trolling*, RE and SF produce fewer instances than WLUC would suggest is normal, whilst both use *trolls* distinctly fewer times. Since no other variants generated significant results, these will be discounted from the remaining investigation.

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Table 5.2: Comparison of FPMW of TROLL* in RE, SF, and WLUC



Out of all the hits retrieved from both datasets (4,099) ~9% were false hits, leaving a body of 3,727 results on which the rest of this thesis is based. For reasons of space, not all could be used but as far as possible, representative examples are selected for each Chapter.

5.4.—USER DISCUSSION OF TROLLING

In §2.3.1, Social Norm im/politeness was discussed, including the fact that because this perspective is deemed a layperson, and therefore, unscientific view (Fraser 1990: 220) that lacks sufficient meta-linguistic articulation by lay users to apply it as a rigorous, scientific framework (O’Keefe 1989), some researchers have entirely divorced it from im/politeness² (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003: 1,464). For example, Fraser (1990) asserts that,

a viable theory of politeness cannot rest upon a set of rules based on social, normative behaviour. (Fraser 1990: 234)

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However, this perspective seems problematic not only with regards to the RE/SF dataset, but to interaction in general. Ordinary users can, and do, successfully assess im/politeness on a moment-by-moment basis (though, as already highlighted above, they may not have the terminology with which to discuss and analyse it explicitly). Further, for different interactants to consistently arrive at similar interpretations suggests the existence of some sort of principled system which may, like natively learned grammar, be implicit.

Finally, rejecting first order usages and understandings of im/politeness also appears to reject a rich area for im/politeness research, namely language itself. In English there are over four hundred synonyms for varying levels and types of impoliteness, and corpus semantic research by Culpeper (2011a) demonstrates that we do not select from these terms at random. As with any paradigmatic field, we favour particular linguistic choices in certain social contexts, and a better understanding of the metalanguage may cast greater light on the phenomenon being analysed. Further, a fuller understanding of the semantic relationships between the terms and their contexts of use may uncover the conceptual frameworks that ordinary users employ to handle im/politeness. From this, we can begin to develop a data-driven, theoretical, analytical framework. This section seeks to undertake precisely this aim of better understanding how lay users employ the metalanguage at their disposal, in relation to the current academic and legislative literature reviewed in Chapter Two on im/politeness (see §2.4) and in Chapter Three on NMOB (see §3.6).

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5.4.1.—Deception

Deception (see §2.6) in its various guises appears to be a defining feature that underlies all trolling, however unsophisticated that trolling happens to be. The main points of the deception seem to be, (1) to produce an identity that others, if they knew more of the individual, would consider false; (2) to convey false intentions or propositions; and in doing either or both of these, (3) to manipulate the context into one that is antagonistic and therefore conducive to disruption, conflict, and/or aggression. (Of course, disruption, conflict, and aggression are closely intertwined—conflicts are typically aggressive and/or disruptive, whilst disruption can lead to, or be perceived as, conflict and/or aggression, etc..) However, using deception to purposefully instigate conflict is not accounted for by any of the five motives that Memon et al. (2003: 9) propose (i.e. personal gain, egotism/vanity, self-protection, other protection, or social harmony). Instead, the deception involved in trolling may be motivated by *duping delight* (Ekman 1989, 1992), by the entertainment of manipulating (or trying to manipulate) the thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and actions of others, by the spectacle of the ensuing conflict or aggression, or by all of these (see §2.6.2).

Additionally, this deceptive dimension is not accounted for in the impoliteness literature. Potentially the closest matching term to trolling, *malicious impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.4), cannot provide an adequate definition for the following reason:

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for impoliteness to be considered successful impoliteness, the intention of the speaker (or 'author') to 'offend' (threaten/damage face) must be understood by those in a receiver role. (Bousfield 2008: 72)

In the case of trolling, however, as seen in the examples below, to have a chance at success, the troller typically aims to *conceal* her malicious, trolling intention(s) behind a pseudo-sincere identity. Instead of being on-record in her desire to cause offence, she is seeking to keep this hidden, and to even pass herself off as a legitimate member making a positive contribution to the group.

5.4.1.1.—Sincerity of intentions

Earlier, I reviewed the issues of deception⁶³, intentions, and interpretations (see §2.5.2 and §2.6). However, rather than critiquing the literature with invented scenarios and theoretical arguments, numerous RE/SF examples demonstrate the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the ways that the intention/interpretation grey area can be deliberately and subtly exploited by *all* interactants. Dividing interaction into the simplistic binary of *H recognises S's intention(s) accurately (and faithfully conveys this)* versus *H recognises S's intention(s) inaccurately (and faithfully conveys this)* is reductively misleading, and blurs over many subtle and deceitful behaviours that S and H may deliberately employ (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,552; Mills 2003: 136).

5.4.1.1.1.—Hearer accusations

With respect to the on-recordness of S's intention(s) and H's interpretation(s),

⁶³ Although in this analysis, the two major characteristics of deception and disruption emerged, this does not suggest that this list is exhaustive. In other groups and CMC genres, different characteristics may be found.

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the data contains a distinct bias. Most examples are H interpretation—or discussions and accusations by Hs of whether Ss intend to troll and are hiding this. In contrast, examples of Ss discussing their trolling intentions tend to be limited to denials, excuses, and so on (see §6.4). The explanation for this bias seems to be that, for trolling to have a chance of success, S must keep her intention(s) off-record for as long as possible, or attempt to manage accusations as they arise:

Example 23 [RE060318]

36. **A** **If you are a troll...I'm sure you'd never admit it.** If there even is a *real* pony in all of this, I feel very sorry for it.

37. **B** **I am not a troll...** I am only doing what my vet has advised me to do.

Example 24 [RE060314]

38. **C** But I note that our troll friend still used them incorrectly.

39. **D** At least I can handle it when someone corrects me. Also, **I am neither a troll, nor your friend.**

Example 25 [RE060717]

40. **E** Apparently they are asking for help or trying to find someone to give them sympathy for their abuse. Well, the authorities will give all the rewards necessary to this person. If this person is smart, they will sell their horse(s) immediately before the authorities arrive and charge them with animal abuse.

41. **F** Get a life. you are the lamest troll I've ever seen. **You don't even attempt to have a real, nontroll name.** Sad. Get a job or something, kid!

42. **G** **Ah! The good ol' days of the Gang of Hs. They, at least, were fun and made no bones of the fact they were trolls.**

These examples demonstrate that H does not retrieve, or *recognise* S's actual intention(s) in the way that one receives letters. Instead, based on the available evidence, H *reconstructs* S's intention(s) with variable levels of certainty (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,552; Mills 2003: 136; Mooney 2004: 900), and in doing so,

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he may arrive at one or more hypotheses of what he feels S intends. He may favour one or some over the others, or struggle to identify which ones he should act upon, or he may be unable to arrive at any conclusive intention at all that he feels adequately and reasonably explains the ongoing interaction (see §2.5).

Examples of each of these are discussed below.

5.4.1.1.2.—Proof of intentions

When discussing the sincerity of S's intentions, H is in the same position as regulatory legal bodies when attempting to find proof or support for his interpretation of S's behaviour (see §3.6.1.2). Since he cannot *prove* S's insincere intention(s), he must rely on aspects such as his standing in the group, reinforcement from other members, experience, intuition, and/or evidence that supports (but still does not prove) an accusation of trolling. Additionally, and unsurprisingly, there are few examples of Ss going on-record with their intention(s) to troll, and those which do occur tend to be retrospective (e.g. Example 26, Example 27, and Example 28), though some (e.g. Example 29) may occur beforehand:

Example 26

[SF051027]

43. **A** Your point was?
44. **B** **To Troll and catch idiots responding ?**
45. **A** Didn't work then.
46. **B** I think that just about makes my point for me.
47. **C** You had a point?
48. **B** I **have** a point, and it is standing quite proudly at the moment.

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Example 27

[SF070824]

49. **D** Dream on, **E**. I have to say, in all honesty, you're not very good at this trolling game, are you?
50. **E** On the contrary cunthead **I reckon I have realised my aim of getting your ng to make complete and utter fools of themselves by chasing me all over Usenet.**

Example 28

[SF050806]

51. **F** In a blatant attempt to blast my way to the top of the charts all over [*newsgroup*] I am going to start this completely pointless thread.
52. **G** **So basically you have become a troll.**
53. **F** **I wish I'd thought of it sooner.**
54. **G** **Cool, I know how to deal with attention seeking cunts like you...**
55. **F** Wise choice, my friend, you should have done that before you replied to half a dozen of my stupid fucking posts. Now you're only encouraging me.

Example 29

[RE050427]

56. **H** I love trolling on the horse news groups. It is just plain FUNNY. They have gotten used to my trolls. **Any ideas on a good troll for the horse people?**

Whilst an overt admission of trolling may seem, *de facto*, to explain B, E, F, and H's behaviour, in reality we still have no guarantee that we have each S's genuine intention(s) on-record. For example, S may join, be heavily criticised for breaching group-valued norms (Graham 2008) (see §2.5.2.1, §3.4.5, §4.7.2.1, and §5.4.3), and then claim to be trolling to save face⁶⁴. That said, an admission of trolling intent, or repeated norm-flouting may act as incriminatory evidence that sufficiently increases H's confidence in his interpretation of S's intention:

Example 30

[RE061124]

57. **A** There is a moral to this, I feel sure!
58. **B** The moral is that **when you come to this group and repeatedly write about doing stupid things with horses, and never show any sign of learning from the comments people post, it is easy for us to believe you are a troll and your horses are fictional.** A real person working with real

⁶⁴ For some, this may seem better than acknowledging that s/he has unintentionally managed to annoy a whole group.

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horses would normally be learning from the comments posted here, would be admitting when he had done something dumb.

In cases such as Example 30 above, it becomes a far less controversial affair for H to take action against the *intent*, rather than the *content* of S's posts, if S has a track record of refusing to amend inappropriate behaviour, despite numerous requests from the group to do so. (In this case, A is a long-term member.)

Additionally, where H or the group are already convinced of S's guilt, S is in a doubly difficult position. However arduous it may be for her to prove the sincerity of her intentions (e.g. via metrics or records of PMOB, see §4.7.2.2) it is virtually impossible for her to prove the *absence* of a secret desire to troll, since the very same posts that might vindicate her could easily be reconstructed by H as the clever guise of sincerity behind which she is hiding (see §2.5.3).

5.4.1.1.3.—Different interpretations

To complicate the issue of reconstructing (in)sincere intentions, other Hs may reconstruct S's intention(s) differently not only from S herself, but also from the H or Hs at whom S may have directed her utterance (Graham 2007: 743):

Example 31

[RE060929]

59. **A** That poster "C" is a troll. Have you guys not figured that out yet? Read his post on [web address] and elsewhere.
60. **B** A I don't think C is a "troll".

Example 32

[RE030925]

61. **D** **BTW**, E is neither a troll nor is she baiting you any more than you are baiting her **IMO**.

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In this case, B and D appear to have arrived at differing interpretations with sufficient confidence to correct the interpretations of others. This mutability of interpretation of S's intentions (see §2.5.2.3) is altogether unsurprising given the strong element of deception (see §2.6) involved in trolling.

5.4.1.1.4.—*Doubtful interpretations*

When attempting to determine (in)sincere intentions, users also explicitly highlighted their difficulty in judging what to do, or how to respond based on what S had written:

Example 33

[RE050629]

62. **A** I've been watching this thread develop and, **presuming you are not a troll (and I'll extend the benefit of the doubt)** you really don't need to be thinking about this. You lack the fundamental knowledge and experience necessary to be caring for any more than your own animals.

Example 34

[RE060418]

63. **B** **If you're not a troll**, x-ray's aren't that expensive so call a vet with a brain in their head and get some taken.

Both A and B go on-record to indicate their inability to confidently judge S's intent by explicitly acknowledging their suspicion that the recipient could be trolling them, yet also trying to offer the advice requested.

5.4.1.1.5.—*Changing interpretations*

The data provides many examples of users offering their hypotheses of the (in)sincerity of S's intent to the group, conveying their changing levels of confidence in their interpretations, and enquiring after other users'

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interpretations to see if these contrasted with, or supported their own:

Example 35 [RE060828]

64. **A** And then there's the (**rapidly solidifying**, at least for me) notion that **B** is your garden-variety troll desperately seeking something to fill an excess of spare time...

Example 36 [RE060531]

65. **C** **D** says I'm being unfair to you, but **you are surely starting to smell like a troll.**

Example 37 [RE060831]

66. **E** Y'know, **F**, I've been watching my troll-o-meter, and this one has been scoring high. **I haven't *QUITE* decided that it has a sub-bridge apartment, but boy, it sure looks suspicious :)**

Example 38 [SF090419]

67. **G** what has this got to do with DVD? Or cricket and football for that matter?
Or are you just a troll peddling his own form of racism?

Example 39 [SF070327]

68. **H** As for your serious debate quip, **it was never serious it was a troll from the very first post**

In all five examples, users allude to their (growing) belief that S's real intent is to troll but that this intent is being concealed (cf. *equivocation* in the form of lying by omission, §2.6.1 (Ekman 1996: 803; Memon et al. 2003: 8; Rubin 2010: 1)), and that it has taken several posts for these users to arrive at their interpretation with sufficient confidence. This leads on to the issue that since a troll is typically attempting to pose (however briefly) as legitimate user, it can take several posts for users formulate their interpretation:

Example 40 [RE060915]

69. **A** She keeps challenging and asking questions like she is really interested in understanding our belief and logic then acts like the victim. **Beginning to**

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wonder if she is a troll or trying to get some type of ego trip, emotional gratification, or neurotransmitter "high" from debating/arguing.

Example 41

[RE070807]

70. **B** Either 1) **You are a jerk.** 2) **You are stupid.** 3) **You are a troll.** 4) **All of the above.** By your comments you are suggesting that the girl have somehow prevented this tragedy by the introduction of more electrolytes.

Example 42

[RE060318]

71. **C** **I'm sorry, but I'm beginning to think you are a troll?**

In Example 40, A postulates two possible motivating intentions, namely, to troll, or an ego trip. In Example 41, B seems not only to have recognised several possible motivating intentions (to troll, to be a jerk, or possibly even to be stupid), but she also seems open to the possibility that S is not restricted to just one intention (see §2.5.2.3 and §5.5.1.4.3 for examples of this in relation to flaming). Finally, both Example 40 and Example 41 demonstrate users going on-record to document a change in their recognitions of S's intentions from sincere, to possibly insincere, and this reshapes both the interaction and the relationship between S, H, and possibly other H's too.

Overall, we can infer that a sophisticated troller may succeed in never being recognised as a troller at all, or her intent may never be interpreted with enough confidence for users to feel justified in taking action against her. This again differentiates trolling from 'ordinary' impoliteness, which *tends* to be triggered by an offending, antecedent event (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990; Jay 2000), such as a traffic warden placing a parking ticket on one's car (Bousfield 2008). A troller seeks to create an environment conducive to aggression, or to produce a

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behaviour which seeks to *be* the offending, antecedent event⁶⁵, though she may not wish other users to be aware that this is the primary function of her posts.

5.4.1.2.—Sincerity of identity

As discussed in Chapter Three, Donath (1999: 45) and Dahlberg (2001), who appear to view the phenomenon from S's perspective, describe how a troller will attempt to pass herself off as a legitimate member and then, after developing her false identity (or one which is inconsistent with her offline self), she will set about disrupting the group whilst trying to remain under cover:

Example 43

[RE060317]

72. **A** I suspect it is directed towards the woman who likes kissing her horse so much. **If I'm wrong about this, maybe it will be clarified.**
73. **B Bingo. It's following the classic troll pattern.... replying to replies with more and more "information", gradually luring the gullible into a conversation**
74. **C I think we are dealing with an exceptionally talented troll! She even has us talking about her in another thread. Without feeding the troll, we are feeding the troll.** There are some knowns that we know about the troll and some unknowns that we do not know about the troll. Also, there are some unknowns that we do not yet know we do not know about the troll.
75. **D** And doubtless there's a great deal more to know about the troll that I do not want to know.

In Example 43 above, B explicitly highlights one strategy adopted by would-be trollers such as A—that of gradually drawing others into legitimate-seeming discussions. As Donath (1999) and Dahlberg (2001) suggest, this involves the troller keeping her intent off-record. (After all, if the users know that she is trying to troll them, they are far less likely to let it happen.)

⁶⁵ Naturally, there are exceptions to this, such as when users attempt to troll a troller. See section 6.2.6 for examples of this.

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5.4.1.2.1.—Fictional identities

Another aspect to the deception found in the data aside from the sincerity of intentions involved users attempting to distinguish 'sincere' online *identities* from 'insincere' identities. There are many examples of users struggling to distinguish between what they cite as a 'fictional' identity (whose professed intent seems inconsistent with her real intent), and a 'real' identity (whose professed intent seems to be sincere):

Example 44

[RE090920]

76. **A** While it's certainly possible this is a real email exchange, **it would be a good idea to try to track down B and verify that this is a real person - not a troll.**

Example 45

[RE060313]

77. **C** Except that **unless you know either of these people in RL you have know way of knowing for sure they are not just trolling you.**

Example 46

[RE060601]

78. **D** **I tend to not think people who are known to others in the flesh to really own horses and really take care of them (unlike our own disappeared Mr. E -- I called that one -- pats self on back --) are here to be trolls.**

Example 44, Example 45, and Example 46 elaborate on the lay perspective that the only way to be certain that an identity is 'real', and not a (trolling) deception is to know the owner of that identity offline. This again contradicts the academic standpoint on identity (see §3.5) which argues that identity that is mutable, constructed moment by moment, and can be highly discrepant across different contexts (e.g. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985; Bucholtz & Hall 2005; Haugh 2008). Ordinary users seem to implicitly assume that each person has a

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default, 'real', 'sincere' identity (i.e. one that is a close approximation of the offline person, see §3.5) and that our online identity will be created from, and consistent with that offline self. In the dataset, therefore, users seem to automatically equate discrepancies between online and offline identities, or multiple identities as a form of deception (see §2.6) (Vrij 2000: 6; Memon et al. 2003: 8; Rubin 2010: 1), or an insincere representation, employed for illegitimate, pernicious reasons, such as trolling, harassment (see §5.5.3), or more rarely, shill trolling (see §5.5.4.1).

Deception (see §2.6), whether in the form of fabrication, exaggeration, or selectively editing (Ekman 1996: 801-3; Memon et al. 2003: 8; Rubin 2010: 1) is perhaps the strongest element identified within trolling behaviour. This deception is not simply carried out at the level of one's identity construction, but also at the levels of one's intentions, beliefs, and sincerity which constitute part of that identity:

Example 47

[RE060313]

79. **A** Here's my opinion about the difference. **Trolls are knowingly playing the group.** They need some minimal savvy and intelligence to do it. **Idiots, which I equate with netkooks, appear to seriously believe what they say.**

Example 48

[RE060328]

80. **B** I read his posts as coming from someone trolling the group. Not professionally, mind you; **I don't think he's some computer savvy teenager impersonating a 50 something 250 pound lascivious yet churchgoing English gent with too much time on his hands, full of himself and loving the sound of his own voice/words/prose, with or without a wife away in Europe. I don't know who or what he really is when he wakes up and looks at himself in the mirror every morning -- it isn't important for me to know either -- all I do think for sure is that he**

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gets his ya yas "playing with" his posts here and saying things that he expects people will react to with at least mild cogitation.

Example 49

[RE071129]

81. **C** Well, if "she" follows suit like the troll "she" has been, there will be a change of name and identity and perhaps even gender, before the eventual reemergence.

Example 50

[RE070210]

82. **D** I used to wonder why anonymous verbal abusers like "[E]" were so pre-occupied with trolls. But now, after a year or so, I have finally witnessed some troll posts. **Not just nasty, abusive and anonymous, like E's, but hostile imitations of other NG users**, intended to increase the sum of **NG** unhappiness - which in my view is quite high enough without their help..

Example 47 further elaborates that this identity deception—or insincerity—is wilfully and knowingly—or intentionally—carried out. Example 48 and Example 49 outline the full potential extent of the role-playing that might take place, and Example 50 goes on to highlight that the masquerading may even take the form of maliciously cloning other users (see §3.4.6 and §0). In this case, B describes what is presumably a 'recreational' troller as someone who uses the anonymity that CMC provides (Suler 2004: 321; Chester & Bretherton 2007; Binns 2011: 13) (see §3.4.6) as a means by which to enact an identity markedly inconsistent with his offline self. C, meanwhile, emphasises the mutability of the identity (or indeed, identities) that someone may create online (see §3.5 and §4.7.2.2).

5.4.1.2.2.—Sockpuppeting

An advanced form of identity deception is known as **sockpuppeting**:

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Example 51

[RE070129]

83. **A** Tired of hearing about all those poor people who still need help from Katrina. They reelected the same worthless mayor who left them high and dry to begin with ...
84. **B** "High and dry"? An unfortunate choice of phrases I think. ;)
85. **A** Bad phrasing, I suppose -- I meant HE was "high and Dry" having left the area!
86. **C** **B-- stop feeding the troll and its sockpuppets.**

Example 52

[SF070122]

87. **D** If he had actually read the words he would have got the message long ago that the main raison d'être has long been the sport of, "Poke the troll with the sharp stick". **We have often mentioned, E, F, G, H and a host of sock-puppets to him but he blunders on making even more of a fool of himself than they ever did.** I really do consider this one to have outdone the others by a considerable margin.

In its strict sense, **sockpuppeting** is not trolling *per se*—it is a means to an end, and that end could be anything from financial gain through to trolling.

Sockpuppeting involves creating multiple accounts, whether concurrently or consecutively, and assuming a different identity with each one. As described in Example 52, **sockpuppeting** can be used as a method for carrying trolling out.

For example, these multiple accounts can be used for supporting/praising oneself, attacking critics, and 'ganging up' on people. **Sockpuppeting** has also occurred in far more serious types of NMOB such as cyberbullying that has led to suicide (see §3.6.3 and §5.5.2) and cyberstalking that has led to murder (see §3.6.5).

With regards to the legal consequences of this behaviour, the legislation reviewed in §3.6.1.2 has limited scope to deal with deceptions of either

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intentions or identity:

- (2) A person is guilty of an offence if, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, he—
- (a) sends by means of a public electronic communications network, a message that he knows to be false,
 - (b) causes such a message to be sent; or
 - (c) persistently makes use of a public electronic communications network.
- (Communication Act 2003: §127, emphasis mine)

As above, rather unsurprisingly, the focus is on the propositional content of online interaction rather than any other type or level of deception, and whilst there are laws relating to cloning or masquerading other existing humans, there are (perhaps quite sensibly) none pertaining to having multiple 'fictional' identities or to harbouring undisclosed intentions.

In summary, deception is a fundamental part of trolling and occurs (or is suspected by H) at numerous levels, including the level of identity presentation (e.g. S pretends to be someone she is not), the level of the propositional content (e.g. S fabricates an inflammatory scenario), and at the level of intention (e.g. S purports to be sincere whilst intending to troll the group). However, by itself, deception is not enough. If S wishes to troll successfully, then she needs to provoke aggrieved responses, and this leads us to aggression.

5.4.2.—Aggression

In their discussions of trolling, users did not simply refer to deception. They also outlined a range of behaviours that were typical of malicious im/politeness (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546) (see §2.4.6.4):

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Example 53

[RE051015]

88. **A** Your comments, all too often, come with only **invective and insult and contain no content whatsoever**. This latter is well within the definition of trolling and baiting.

Example 54

[RE060812]

89. **B** Trolling means posting idiotic messages to rile up a **newsgroup or message board**.

Example 55

[SF060707]

90. **C** No, a few people want to see him face due process for **something that *you* see as trollign and others see as racial hatred and homophobia**.

Example 56

[RE060902]

91. **D** I dont have the time or interest to play with trolls and flammers like him. As far as I'm concerned, **anyone that has the time to sit in front of a computer and attack people for trying to discuss a legitimate issue**, most likely does not even own a horse, or they'd be with the horse or tending to other business.

Example 57

[RE060901]

92. **E** Look up the internet definition of Troll, and you'll see that **people who flame and attack others online are the trolls**.

Example 58

[RE070131]

93. **F** This poster is so **argumentative, hostile and snotty and has such disrespect for women or anyone with a different opinion** than he has, that reason can only conclude he is either a miserable human being, or a troll.

Group members cited global strategies such as racial hatred, homophobia, and insulting others. However, they also picked out specific and distinct behaviours such as being *hostile, snotty, and idiotic*. This aggressive dimension that users associate with trolling also seems most consistent with both academic research and media coverage on the topic, which tends to focus on the obviously incendiary, im/polite comments that trolls post to provoke conflict (Baker

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2001; Cox 2006; Brandel 2007: 32), such as the "ludicrous rants, inane threadjackings, personal insults, and abusive language" (Naraine 2007: 146).

As already discussed above (see §5.4.1), however, despite the fact that this aggressive form of trolling may seem to have an immediate and obvious overlap with *malicious impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.4), in reality, malicious impoliteness does not *always* provide an adequate definition. This is because malicious impoliteness is, in part, defined by H being aware that S is deliberately setting out to attack him (Bousfield 2008: 72), whereas trolling usually involves S keeping this intention hidden (however briefly). Even memorial trolling (see §3.6.1.1 and §6.2.3), which is typically openly offensive and hurtful, will often be carried out using a level of identity deception such as pseudonymity (see §0).

Additionally, the concept of *incidental impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.2) does not apply from S's perspective, since non-malicious impoliteness captures instances where the individual is not *deliberately* or maliciously causing offence, though she may be aware that offence may arise as a by-product of her actions (Goffman 1967: 14; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,549; Culpeper 2005: 36-7). For similar reasons, we cannot describe trolling as *failed politeness* from S's perspective (see §2.4.6.3) since this captures cases where S meant to express an appropriately polite attitude but her effort has somehow been insufficient, misconstrued, or unobserved by H (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 166; Culpeper 2005: 37, 63; Bousfield 2008: 73).

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The picture grows more complex when we consider how the behaviour might be viewed from H's perspective. H may misinterpret S's trolling behaviour as incidental impoliteness or failed politeness. More importantly, H may do this because S has *tried* to make him misconstrue her behaviour in this way so that she can keep her plan to troll disguised.

The shortfall in the ability to apply these terms comfortably to trolling may be due to the fact that impoliteness research has typically dealt with relatively 'transparent' (for want of a better word) datasets. Usually, these datasets feature individuals such as parking attendants, chefs, army recruits, politicians, and employees who happen to be carrying out duties that occasionally bring them into conflict with others (cf. Culpeper 1996; S. Harris 2001; Mullany 2007; Bousfield 2008; Holmes et al. 2008). There does not seem to be any research into data that contains individuals deliberately deceiving and/or manipulating others into conflict simply for their own amusement. It is not surprising, then, that terms built on 'transparent' aggressive data are difficult to apply to behaviour which involves a complex mixture of deception and manipulation. This said, recent research into courtroom interactions has shown that trolling is not the only form of behaviour that involves deliberate exploitation of the ambiguities inherent in conveying intentions (e.g. Archer 2008; 2011a; 2011b). It also seems reasonable to suggest that in adversarial political and television shows, the interviewer or presenter may deliberately manipulate her choice of utterances to provoke her subject, whilst attempting to keep this strategy off-record so that she cannot easily be accused of deliberate antagonism (S. Harris

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1991; Mullany 2002; Piirainen-Marsh 2005).

In short, trolling is not necessarily a totally new phenomenon that has arrived with CMC. Instead, it may have developed from pre-existing linguistic and social strategies, and when combined with the anonymity and the apparent lack of consequences that CMC offers, it has simply flourished.

5.4.3.—Norms of trolling

Depending upon the context, the group, and the user(s) in question, trolling can come close to being viewed as *mock impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.1), whereby users engage in ostensibly impolite behaviour that is actually done for the purposes of group cohesion and social in- or outgrouping (Labov 1972; Leech 1983: 144; Haugh 2008; 2010a). It may be that internet communities that deal with sensitive topics, or involve users who are vulnerable, who invest personal trust, emotional commitment, and private information into their group, or who are simply inexperienced CMC users, may find trolling particularly hurtful, distressing, and inexplicable, and in such contexts, trolling could not qualify as mock impoliteness at all.

On the other hand, it is more likely that communities dealing with less sensitive issues, or involving users who are less vulnerable, more emotionally detached, or more experienced CMC users, may in turn find dealing with trolling closer to a ludic enactment of conflict, akin to a competition (albeit at times a fierce one) (Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000: 90). Until the group has had sufficient fun with

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the troller (see §6.3.5, §6.3.6, and §6.3.7 for examples this) or the troller has left, the interaction might be categorised as mock trolling. However, it still could not be called *mock impoliteness*, since *mock impoliteness* aims to reinforce or enhance closeness and affect. Being identified as a troller, however, typically leads to being ostracised. Even if the troller is allowed to stay for the group's amusement, her position is that of an outsider, and usually a target for mockery, rather than that of a member enacting her ingroup identity.

5.4.4.—A working definition of trolling

A primary issue with formulating my own working definition of a behaviour such as trolling involves taking group norms of legitimate behaviour into account (Opp 1982; 2001; Hetcher 2004) (see §5.4.3). In the case of trolling, one person's active debate is another person's troll, and as Donath (1999: 47) suggests, a group's character will determine not only whether a troller is harmful to the individual or the community, but whether a user is even deemed a troller at all. To return to the earlier argument put forward in this thesis (see §1.2, §3.6.1, and §5.4), currently, there is no academic term that suitably captures trolling. In earlier research, I proposed the following, working academic definition of trolling (based on this data):

A troller is a CMC user who constructs the pseudo-identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying ostensibly sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for its own sake. Trolling can (1) be *frustrated* if users correctly interpret an intent to troll, but are not provoked into responding, (2) be *thwarted*, if users correctly interpret an intent to troll, but counter it in such a way as to curtail or neutralise its success, (3) *fail*, if users both do not correctly interpret an intent to troll *and* are not provoked by the troller, or, (4) *succeed*, if users are deceived into believing the troller's pseudo-intention(s), and are provoked into responding sincerely. Finally,

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users can *mock troll*. That is, they may undertake what appears to be trolling with the aim of enhancing or increasing affect, or group cohesion.(adapted from Hardaker 2010: 237-8)

This definition, however, is already insufficient to account for behaviours such as memorial trolling (see §3.6.1.1 and §6.2.3), since in these cases we could argue that the troller makes little to no effort to blend into the group, and therefore does not attempt to convey pseudo-sincere intentions. A better (though still working) definition of trolling, therefore, is as follows:

DEFINITION

A troller is a CMC user who uses aggression, deception, manipulation, or a mixture of these to create a context that is conducive to triggering, or aggravating conflict.

METHOD

Trolling may be carried out more or less covertly. At the covert end of the cline, the troller constructs an online identity that is inconsistent with her intentions (e.g. she masquerades as a sincere member of a group that she actually intends to troll). At the overt end of the cline, the troller constructs an online identity that is consistent with her intentions (e.g. she behaves in such a way that there is no other reasonably defensible explanation for her behaviour). In all cases, however, the troller may still hide her offline identity.

MOTIVE

Trolling may be done for amusements' sake (i.e. trolling is an end in its own right), to achieve a particular goal (i.e. trolling is a means to an end), or for both reasons.

This definition is expanded on in the conclusion of Chapter Six (see §6.5) once specific types of trolling formulae and user responses have been analysed.

5.5.—OTHER FORMS OF NEGATIVELY MARKED ONLINE BEHAVIOUR

This section aims to situate trolling amongst other NMOBs. Inevitably, there is not enough room to cover all NMOBs (see footnote 31), therefore only those behaviours most often interchanged with, or related to trolling are considered.

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5.5.1.—Flaming

As already discussed (see §1.2 and §3.6.2), flaming has been the subject of much more concerted academic interest (e.g. Lea et al. 1992; Herring 1994; Shea 1994: Ch. 7; Chester 1996b; Millard 1997; Kayany 1998; Jucker & Taavitsainen 2000; Avgerinakou 2008). Flaming also has much clearer overlaps with impoliteness than does trolling. In fact, it appears to be simply online malicious impoliteness that is perhaps more aggressive due to the protection that CMC offers (Graham 2007: 743; Haugh 2010b: 8). However, rather than accepting the academic viewpoint on flaming unquestioningly, I consider how *flaming* acquired the definition of *an online dispute* (§5.5.1.1), how individuals use and understand this term (§5.5.1.2), how flaming is constructed in interaction (§5.5.1.4), and the flaming norms that have developed in RE/SF (§5.5.1.5).

5.5.1.1.—Etymology of flaming

The use of FLAME to describe conflict, or a conflictive attitude, readily predates CMC. *Flame* (v.) was used as early as 1548 to mean a violent, passionate outburst, and it has several attendant metaphors such as, *to fire up*, *to burn* (with indignation, etc.), *to fan the flames*, etc., which all describe similar, emotional behaviours (OED 2009). CMC appears to have extended this definition to capture hasty, excessive ranting. The emphasis in this thesis, however, is not on dictionary records, but on how users define and perceive these terms. The next section therefore presents user metadiscussions of FLAME.

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5.5.1.2.—Retrieving flames from the data

Since FLAME is a homonym which, unlike TROLL, has other definitions that are in much wider use, retrieving relevant variants was more difficult. Whilst a search for TROLL* successfully retrieved mostly troll-related words with only ~9% of the 4,099 hits being false (see §4.8.1), a search for FLAM* retrieved 2,002 hits from RE/SF, of which 37.362% were false:

flammable (19), flammability (3), flamini (26), flamingos (499), flamingo (16), flamethrowers (1), flamethrower (1), Flame (7), flamenco (8), filename, e.g. flame2.jpg (70), flamboyant (41), flamboyancy (7), flamboyance (3), Flamborough (1), Flamboro (1), flambees (5), flambéed (2), flambé (5), Flambards (5), flammables (1), flamable (2), anti-flam (24), flim-flam (1) **Total = 37.362% (748)**

Once these obviously-false hits above were excluded, this left the following:

flaming/flamin' (167), flamewars (2), flamewar (4), flamethrowing (1), flames (318), flamers (8), flamer (6), flameproof (3), flamepost (8), flamefest (1), flamed (113), flame-a-thon (1), flame (622) **Total = 62.637% (1,254)**

A second aspect was that the distribution of 'true' hits was unequal across RE/SF. 'True' hits occurred 15.197 times per million words (pmw) in SF, versus 19.734pmw in RE. However, the third aspect is that even within the apparently 'true' hits, many were still also false (e.g. *sugar and a flaming splash of Grand Marnier; The Flaming Lips; lost the flaming lot; I like my TV loud, my beer cold, and my homosexuals flaming!*). Since I focus on only one definition, the remaining false hits are not considered any further.

5.5.1.3.—Disambiguating flaming

The usage I am most interested in—online hostility—seems to take its

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etymology from the 'passionate outburst' denotation (see §5.5.1.1). However it was sometimes difficult to determine whether this usage was being employed:

Example 59

[RE050702]

94. **A** There are lots and lots of posters who are outlandish or **kooky** or whatever, but only one **B**, who **picks fights and bombthrows and spouts really nasty talk** with utter abandon. You may have noticed that I rarely, if ever, scold people on this group, even when we really disagree on stuff. Its not my business, and we are all entitled to be whatever. But **B** is a **flaming hypocrit** and **bigot and snarks nastiness** across **usenet** like nobody's business.

In Example 59, A could mean that B is someone who flames *and* is hypocritical (certainly the behaviour that A describes sounds very like flaming, or even trolling), or A may be using *flaming* simply as an intensifying adjective. Most cases, however, were far more clear-cut.

5.5.1.4.—User discussion of flaming

In academic and media literature (e.g. Graham 2007; 2008; Nishimura 2008), flaming is described as an online over-reaction, and users themselves seem to support this definition by using flaming to indicate angry or offended reactions:

Example 60

[RE051218]

95. **A** Well, I am the sister and I think its really laughable that anyone could have taken this post that was rather just lamenting about THOSE days that EVERYONE has, **and turn it into a "you are stupid and idiotic" flame fest about horse care.**

In Example 60, for instance, A is aggrieved that the group have *reacted* to her post about her unhappy experiences with flaming. Flaming was sometimes also implicitly or explicitly linked with other NMOBs:

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Example 61

[RE050414]

96. **A** **B**, just curious..could you possibly be as **idiotic, cruel, lame, thoughtless, mean, inciteful, bomb-throwing, shallow, and small** in real life as you are on line? I read rec. eq through the **C** years, the **D** years, the gang of **Es**, the **Fs**, the various freak permutations and personalities and bizarre characters that come and go but you are absolutely the worst ever in combined **total ignorance, mean spiritedness, sheer weird groupiness, and flamethrowing unsubstantiated blanket statements** about ***whatever***.

Example 62

[RE081203]

97. **G** We were all getting along famously in here, no problems..... **I don't belong to boards were people bicker and flame and threaten... I get enough of bitching , whining and complaining already...why would I come here for more?**

In Example 61 and Example 62, flaming is associated with *ignorance, cruelty, mean-spiritedness, bickering, threatening, whining, bitching* and *complaining*.

This situates flaming in a wider semantic context of prototypically impolite and other negatively marked behaviour. However, it is not only the flammers who may be seen in a negative light. The results of flaming (from the non-flamer's perspective) are spelled out more explicitly in Example 63:

Example 63

[RE060117]

98. **A** I do like to hold my opinion until the end though because there are certain people on this **newsgroup** who will try to turn a "give and take" discussion like this into a "why **A** is wrong" thread. **That kind of flame war tends to chase away people who are honestly interested in watching or participating in the the discussion with the object of trying to learn something new.**

Discussions and definitions of this nature are generally consistent with the growing body of literature on flaming, which suggests that this behaviour is,

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the antinormative hostile communication of emotions ... that includes the use of profanity, insults, and other offensive or hurtful statements.

(Johnson et al. 2008: 419)

These user discussions are also highly consistent with a wealth of research into *malicious impoliteness*—impoliteness that S carries out not only with the intention of causing H offence, but of conveying that intent to H (e.g. Goffman 1967: 14; Bandura 1973; Lakoff 1989; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546; Bousfield 2007: 155; 2010: 112) (see §2.4.6.4).

5.5.1.4.1.—Entertainment

Just as *malicious impoliteness* is sometimes employed for functions such as *entertainment* (e.g. Kotthoff 1996; Culpeper 1998; 2005; Rudanko 2006), some users identified a relationship between flaming and the human nature of being entertained by violence:

Example 64

[RE050802]

99. **A Flaming is a sport. It's like the guys who go to the bar on Saturday night, toss back a couple of fingers of redeye, turn to the next guy, and say, "Yo mama." Except nobody gets arrested.** You're right that the flamer needs a target. The word is "enabler," not "appeaser." Flaming back is not appeasement.

A's description of flaming as a sport is a particularly telling perspective in that for some—usually the flammers—flaming is an entertaining form of linguistic combat in which one seeks to be victorious over another (Kotthoff 1996; Culpeper 1998; 2005; Rudanko 2006).

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5.5.1.4.2.—Cohesion

Further, just as malicious impoliteness is sometimes strategically carried out to enhance group *cohesion* (rather than to damage it) (Austin 1987: 17), some users described flaming as a method of weeding out unwanted members:

Example 65

[RE050601]

100. A B, **FWIW**, it's been my experience that those **newbies** who leave due to flame wars and complain loudly about them are rather unlikely to contribute anything of substance to the group. Lessee, I've been on rec.eq since (stops to count fingers) '96 or so. Seen a lot of **newbies** come in, bitch about the arguments, get involved with the arguments, whine because no one cuts them any slack about stupid mistakes, and leave in a huff. **No loss because, based on what they've posted, they didn't have much to contribute (usually all they do is complain and they're rarely on topic).** Then there's been the **newbies** who ease in, look around, and start posting without much if any comment about the other stuff. They're the true gems and they usually have a lot to contribute. **My feeling is that if the flame wars put someone off, then odds are they probably don't belong here anyway.**

This too is reflected in literature that draws together research into CMC and flaming as a form of impoliteness. In her discussion of impoliteness in comments on political *YouTube* videos, Blitvich (2010) suggests that in her data:

impolite behavior is seen as performing a double function: on the one hand, it is used to threaten the members of the outgroup's face and show their attributes as non-desirable. On the other, it creates a sense of *us versus them*, which enhances ingroup solidarity. (Blitvich 2010: 543)

The data, however, also moved beyond explanations currently offered in the academic literature in several ways, including multiplicity of intentions, critiques on flaming success, and meta-awareness of one's contribution being (incorrectly) perceived as flaming. These are discussed next.

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5.5.1.4.3.—Intentions

As discussed (see §2.5.2.3 and §5.4.1.1) interactants may have several intentions that they are seeking to fulfil during the course of an interaction, and flaming can be a method of obtaining these multiple goals (Penman 1990; Archer 201b):

Example 66

[RE060202]

101. **A** **Ask clarifying questions to understand, but not to NAIL the person and PROVE one's own superiority.** I really liked these discussions when they started, and I actually benefitted immediately and drastically by thinking about my hand aids more (lightening them, concentrating more on my hand position and on the finesse and yielding). But it's just deteriorated into a pissing match and it's long past the point of being helpful or interesting to me, **FWIW. Some may actually enjoy the "banter".** I don't. (I know, I can choose what I read, so no one needs to bother flaming me on that point).

Example 67

[RE051112]

102. **B** Not to flame anyone, but I'm beginning to regret posting this question here. **Is this a place to share ideas and questions freely and in a friendly manner or a place to show how much smarter than others we are?** Thank you to those whose intentions were to help.

In both cases, A and B suggest that flaming is a way of winning the argument, demonstrating superiority, and possibly even indexing one's ingroup status or affiliations. (A also cites entertainment, in line with §5.5.1.4.1.)

5.5.1.4.4.—Success

Like trolling (see §6.3.5), flaming is judged on its quality and finesse. Users occasionally judged flaming based on the challenge presented by the target:

Example 68

[RE050801]

103. **A** I'd just like to know what happens if someone posts out of turn. ;)

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104. **B** YOU GET FLAMED TO A SMOKING CINDER! HAVEN'T YOU BEEN PAYING ATTENTION? ARE YOU BRAIN-DAMAGED? Just kidding. :^) **There isn't half enough flaming as there ought to be, and what there is is sub-par. The blood is draining out of Usenet.**
105. **C** **It's sub-par because the recipients are either too fucking stupid to know when they're being insulted or too inarticulate to formulate good rejoinder. Or both. The best one sees these days are variations on "If I'm one, you're one too." It's not particularly satisfying to waste one's venom on morons, thus the overall quality suffers.** The end of an era, the netways taken over by the gentle nerf-people. Seems a shame, them being as disgusting as they are.

Both B and C (perhaps humorously) espouse the idea that flaming can be positive and beneficial, and that non-hostile behaviour is far less satisfying.

5.5.1.4.5.—Meta-awareness

Individuals indicated that flaming was not always hasty. In fact, on occasion, users indicated their own awareness that their current or future responses may be considered flaming, not only by themselves, but by others too:

Example 69

[RE060207]

106. **A** Deep breath. Sigh. **I think I'll go read to make sure that someone else has completely and thoroughly gone after this one before I start flaming on this issue.** I'll just say this: Soft and fuzzy doesn't matter. Short shank doesn't matter. A MECHANICAL HACKAMORE IS A SEVERE LEVERAGE DEVICE, DAMN IT!!!! It does not belong on a green horse that needs training.

A seems to implicitly justify her response by indicating that the unmentioned B has merited the anger, not just of herself, but of others too, and if others haven't already 'dealt' with her, then A will do so via flaming. Arguably, A already *does* flame via the capitalised declaration, taboo language, and exclamation marks that follow, which all indicate a frustrated, annoyed tone.

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Users also frequently demonstrated their awareness of the group's norms (see §3.4.5) by openly anticipating that their post might trigger flames. Users would explicitly identify that whilst their contribution might *seem* deliberately inflammatory, this was the *wrong* interpretation to arrive it:

Example 70

[RE060106]

107. **A** I don't mean this to be a flame, but I think you often extrapolate your personal experience too far.

Example 71

[RE031029]

108. **B** Please, no flames. We're doing the best we can here.

Example 72

[RE060413]

109. **C** Don't get all flame-y, but we let the horses grab a bite from time to time as long as it does not involve any change in the rate of forward progress.

As above, methods involved simply explaining that the post was not meant to be inflammatory (Example 70), asking others not to flame (Example 71), or even commanding others not to flame (Example 72)—strategies that have interesting parallels with the *no offence but...* disclaimer used FtF, typically as a signal of impending face-threat (Culpeper 2011a: 178).

The user would sometimes indicate that she was aware of the inflammatory nature of her post, *and* that she was willing to accept the consequences:

Example 73

[RE031021]

110. **A** My vet was apoplectic (sp) when he heard that one. I don't care. Flame me.

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Example 74

[RE060509]

111. **B** The tale is told that dressage was developed as a method of training cavalry horses and riders. Highly debatable. **Let the flames begin. :^)**

Example 75

[RE060807]

112. **C** I'll probably get flamed for saying this, but **IME**, quarter horses, especially geldings, are not real predictable.

Example 76

[RE051027]

113. **D** All that sissy-looking stuff sure saves some serious wear and tear sometimes. **:::donning my flameproof undies and opening the Jack:::**

Example 77

[RE051130]

114. **E** Discussion of this practice can lead to flame wars. **IMHO**, it is likely to shorten the horse's useful life.

As above, common manifestations of this included formulaic phrases such as *(so) flame me* (Example 73), *let the flames begin* (Example 74), predicting the risk of flames (Example 75) including metaphorically donning flame protection (Example 76), and predicting the risk of a group-wide flamewar (Example 77).

5.5.1.5.—Norms of flaming

Perhaps the most marked feature of flaming was that despite its distribution across both datasets, the majority of false FLAME hits occurred in SF (e.g. *Olympic flame, an old flame, flame grilled*; see §5.3 for false TROLL* hits). Usage in the sense of an online (over-)reaction was most frequent in RE, as the preponderance of examples above demonstrates. This again seems to identify a difference in the cultural norms of RE/SF. (See §5.4.3 and §5.6 for differences in trolling norms between RE/SF.)

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In Example 78 and Example 79 below, for instance, one norm seems to be that in RE, flaming is common enough that when it *doesn't* occur, this is notable:

Example 78

[RE051023]

115. **A** Wouldn't it be more productive to give the **OP** cautionary advice -- as a handful of posters have done -- **rather than to engage in the usual tired req.eq flame fest?**

Example 79

[RE060101]

116. **B** **Actually, I've been wondering what happened to the "You don't know what the f* you're doing -- get a bicycle" flames.** It must have to do with the sunspot cycle or something.
117. **C** Heh yeah **that's kind of what I was expecting too.... :)**

Particularly in Example 78, and in others already discussed above (e.g. Example 66 and Example 67), it is clear that not all users approve of flaming. Those who did not engage in it tended to view it as disruptive, harmful, or even indicative of psychological problems. As above, however, some RE users deemed flaming a useful, positive, entertaining, or even necessary facet of **usenet**, though these individuals were in a minority (see Example 64, Example 65, and Example 68). In SF, the balance occurred in the opposite direction:

Example 80

[SF050410]

118. **A** Whoever posted that was trying to cause a flame war between groups, in other words, a troll. You probably didn't plan to post to uk.sport.football or a bondage-related **newsgroup**, did you?
119. **B** **UKSF doesn't generally mind trolly crossposts. it gives us something to do. Oddly enough, we seem to have kept out of it so far.** Anyone'd think there was football and beer to keep us entertained, or something.
120. **C** **I think its just the crapness of the trolling that has kept us all away. Normally i'd be well up for a religious flame war. Shame really.**

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Example 81

[RE051130]

121. D Actually, one of the beautiful things about UKSF seems to be a general unspoken agreement not to put up with dumbshitism. It doesn't always work but it means the **froup** can be happy, cranky and ghey without falling for cliquey let's all be friends crap **or boring eternal flame wars**. Posters wandering in here should sit back for a short time and understand that before wading in.

This different evaluation of flaming between RE/SF illustrates why group norms are so important (Opp 1982; 2001; Hetcher 2004). SF, for example, tended to reflect a mixed sense of amusement, tolerance, and enjoyment of flaming, and as Example 80 demonstrates, B and C seem disappointed that the trolling is not of a sufficiently high standard to merit flaming. Even D's opinion relates to how boring he considers flaming to be, rather than to whether it might be damaging.

This reiterates that behaviours need to have their characterisation as, for instance, flaming, judged carefully, since what constitutes flaming in one group may be deemed witty banter in another. Further, judgements of the severity or acceptability of that behaviour must also be made with the group's norms and customs in mind. This doesn't mean that a user must be *part* of the group to understand or judge the behaviour (for further discussion of this, see §2.4.5). I have never interacted on either RE or SF, but many hours of reading the data and lengthy analyses of the corpora have allowed me to develop a thorough understanding of the members, idiosyncrasies, and norms in each group. It is this knowledge (which is doubtless possessed far more comprehensively by long-term group members) that allows judgements of flaming or trolling to be at least closer to those that the users may have reached themselves.

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One final important aspect of flaming is that, like offline impoliteness, one person's flame can ignite a whole flamewar, leading to a conflict spiral (Lein & Brenneis 1978: 301; Felson 1982: 245; Andersson & Pearson 1999):

Example 82

[RE090603]

122. **A** our trainer on a Gypsy at the Horse Expo [[link to YouTube video](#)]
123. **B** What are your comments on the ride **A**? I found the rider to be pulling the horse into frame. **In no sense was the horse soft and collected. Lots of grand standing, but little in the way of true horsemanship. Sorry to be negative, but I found it off putting.**
124. **C** the you tube said "young" gypsy vanner, so i would not expect to see collected. **I will say, uhm.... i like a different kind of horse and a different kind of rider.**
125. **A** [To **B**] I'm mixed. I watched him ride that horse a lot at home and I watch him ride others. **He doesn't pull them into a frame** - he picks up on their face and holds until they give, and then he gives a release, and then he asks again.
126. **D** (Quick side note to **B**) Your instincts are excellent and your reply is polite and kind. **The man was muscling the horse.**
127. **A** **I don't see him muscling her.** I see him asking for something that is hard for her to give, and then giving a release when she does it. It is worse in this video than when he rides the quarter horses, or even the warmbloods, for a couple reasons: pressure to make her "look pretty" for the show, and her conformation and overall ability. I am probably also colored by all the riding I watch him do that is so much better than this - better in terms of the horses' understanding and ability.
128. **E** **what on earth is he doing asking all this of a 2 year old ANYTHING? That shows his ignorance in one. The fact that he is a heavy handed, unbalanced, unsubtle show off cowboy who shows not one iota of "feel" in any vids you have shown us, is just more reasons to hate what he shows.**
129. **A** Obviously it's not about that... I don't know how much of a training business you want to have - I think I read that you don't want to train for the public anymore or at all - but obviously if you did, it would be good to have video, so there's a reason...
130. **E** **If you want to have some heavy handed clunk rip the bejeezus out of a 2 year olds mouth so that she evades to the extent that she can perform a few tricks for you to sell her, thats your ball game.**
131. **F** **A**, I think it's pretty much worthless to ask for any kind of objective commentary on Western trainers or Western riding here. **The pigpile**

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from some self-righteous English riders has been fairly disgusting to read. [...] And no, I'm not getting drawn into a flame war. It's one thing to get after A because of things she says and stuff she does. But folks, the commentary here has gone beyond the pale, and I'm fed up with it.

The above (extensively edited) thread starts off with a link to a video of A's trainer at a horse show, and ends up accumulating 599 increasingly heated responses over the next thirteen days. Initially the criticism is heavily mitigated or entirely off-record (e.g. *I found it **off putting**, and i like [...] a **different kind of rider***) but progressively it becomes more on-record and face-threatening (e.g. *the man was **muscling** the horse*) until it is openly attacking A and A's trainer (e.g. *he is a **heavy handed, unbalanced, unsubtle show off cowboy*** and *If **you** want to have some **heavy handed clunk rip the bejeezus out of a 2 year olds mouth...***), or in other words, flaming her.

As Example 82 and research into offline impoliteness shows, not only can the intensity of the conflict increase, so too can the number of people involved, as others begin to join in with equally inflammatory comments. Example 82 above shows how users may take sides which become increasingly polarised (Lee 2007: 385; Blitvich 2010: 540), how they may attempt to establish right from wrong, or how they may try to restore group harmony, though this typically does more harm than good (see §6.3.2 for examples of this).

5.5.1.6.—Flaming versus trolling

The analysis above suggests that two clear distinctions separate flaming from trolling: (1) Flaming tends to be on-record; unlike most trolling, there is no

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effort to hide the intention to attack. (2) Flaming tends to be a *reaction*, rather than the prime aggressing move. Each point is discussed more below.

Firstly, with regards to the on-recordness of flaming, much like chiding an individual that one is aggrieved at FtF, the flamer typically wishes H to know that he is being flamed—indeed, the point has rather been missed if H is oblivious to the fact. Where trolling would favour a public forum, flaming can be private (e.g. in a one-to-one email) or public (e.g. on a public messageboard). In either case, it is difficult to imagine how one would successfully flame off-record, since doing so would seem more consistent with trolling. This said, users may disagree about whether flaming has occurred, especially since flaming typically indicates an *over*-reaction. A user accused of flaming may genuinely feel, and protest, that she has *not*:

Example 83

[RE080330]

132. **A** One can only respond to what you write, my reaction to your statements was it seemed like a lot of time and self medication with no veterinary advice, masking unknown dead lame cause which erupted more violently with fever to which the vet is coming out sometime.
133. **B** Whatever. I sometimes, forget how absolutely, precise one must describe things on here for fear of getting flamed.
134. **A** **It was no flame, it was an honest response to your post.** Culturally one thing I am not so used to over here is the amount of serious drugs you can, and do use, over there, willynilly, without veterinary advice
135. **B** ok. :)

In this case, A is not necessarily attempting to deceive—her difference in judgement seems sincere, though as ever, we only have her assertion to go on. A indicates that she feels she has reacted appropriately (and been misunderstood)

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whilst B complains of being flamed. Unlike trolling, therefore, flaming is not predicated on deceiving others.

Secondly, prototypical instances, or accusations of flaming in RE/SF tended to describe the act of *(over-)reacting*—usually to limited provocation. This is unlike archetypal trolling, which involves creating a context (e.g. via aggression, antagonism, deception, etc.) that is designed to *trigger* flaming. Trolling, at least in its opening stages, tends to be *proactive*, though as a conflict gathers momentum, the troller may sit back and watch the argument develop.

These differences—a sincere (over-)reaction to provocation versus actively and/or deceitfully, provoking—may be clear on paper, but can be difficult to judge in reality. For example, an *apparently* aggrieved flamer may actually be a troller who is deliberately inflaming an already antagonistic context whilst dishonestly justifying her behaviour as having been provoked by others. As exemplified many times above (see §5.4 specifically) the deception involved in trolling makes interpreting the data more complex for both users and analyst.

5.5.2.—Cyberbullying

The datasets produced 799 examples of *BULLY* and 513 of *BULLIE* (e.g. *bully*, *bullying*, *bullies*, *bullied*, etc.) with 4.760pmw in SF, and 17.503pmw in RE. The false hits (e.g. *bully for you*, bullying related to *offline* behaviour) were ignored.

Of all UK and US legislation that deals with cyberbullying (see §3.6.3.2), the

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Massachusetts' Act Relative to Bullying in Schools (2010a) offers one of the fullest definitions of what this behaviour entails:

bullying through the use of technology or any electronic communication [and including] (i) the creation of a web page or blog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person or (ii) the knowing impersonation of another person as the author of posted content or messages. (2010a: Section 370(a))

As this definition suggests, and as mentioned above (see §3.6.3) cyberbullying can also include **sockpuppeting**. However, a more important issue is that in the legal and academic literature, cyberbullying seems to be thought of as mainly carried out by, and directed towards children (e.g. Topçu et al. 2008; Hinduja & Patchin 2009), and not as something which affects adults. The data, however, suggests that adult **usenet** users *do* identify certain behaviours by other adult members as (cyber)bullying:

Example 84

[RE051031]

136. **A** Why are such such a damn bully B? Its so clear and so ironic..**you are the bully here. You are the name caller. You are the hypocrit. [...] ALL YOU DO is bully, and name call, and change headers, and post links to freak far left websites.** Thats it. Big whoop.

Example 85

[RE051031]

137. **C** There are lots of people on this group with politics I dont agree with. I **dont call them names or bully them.**

Example 86

[RE050915]

138. **D** If E is so correct, so secure, why does she answer every question with **name calling, change headers, and play class bully?**

Example 87

[RE070130]

139. **E** Oh puhleeze. You **killfile** me because I ***am*** honest; about your bigotry and knee jerk ignorance, meanness, and smallness, **the way you bully**

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people who disagree with you, and you cant take it. You can dislike me for lots of reasons, suit yourself, but at least be honest about it!

Interestingly, in Example 84, Example 85, and Example 86, bullying is cited alongside, or as a result of, other prototypically 'childish' behaviours such as name-calling and pettiness, whilst in Example 87 it is associated with meanness and smallness—behaviours that are not restricted to children alone.

With regards to the academic literature, this behaviour might be automatically considered as cyberharassment purely on the basis that some or all involved are adults. The behaviours that the users cite, however, are inconsistent with courses of action that amount to genuine harassment (see §3.6.3), but this data does provide evidence that bullying occurs online between adults, and that this behaviour for them, involves name-calling and mean-spiritedness.

5.5.2.1.—Cyberbullying versus trolling

Consistently distinguishing (cyber)bullying from trolling is particularly difficult. However, there are three qualitative differences. Firstly, cyberbullying seems to be typically characterised by immaturity and juvenile forms of hostile behaviour (e.g. name-calling, pettiness, meanness). Secondly, unlike trolling which is a deliberate course of action (usually taken for amusement's sake), in the data, users seem to conceptualise cyberbullying as a defect in an individual's psychological make-up or personality, and possibly as one that they cannot help. Thirdly, and related to the second point, whilst trolling is typically predicated on deception (e.g. masquerading as someone antagonistic when, in

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reality, the troller may be a pleasant individual offline), a (cyber)bully actually seems to be thought of as someone who *is* genuinely offensive, abrasive, antagonistic, etc.. In other words, for users in this data, the cyberbully may cause offence, but this is done without deception.

As with flaming, distinguishing a (cyber)bully from a troller in the data can be difficult, since the major difference between the two stems from the fact that—in RE/SF at least—cyberbullies are thought of as offensive by nature, whilst trollers are offensive by design. For the members, however, the result of either is identical: an individual is *needlessly* unpleasant. Establishing whether this is simply personality or a deliberate course of conduct can be nearly impossible.

5.5.3.—Cyberharassment

Cyberharassment, according to both academic research (see §3.6.4) and legislation (see §3.6.4.2) captures behaviour as diverse as receiving unwanted **spam** (Stivale 1997) to being stalked and at risk of serious physical harm (Bocij 2004), whether from known individuals (e.g. ex-partners) or strangers (e.g. celebrity stalkers). To qualify as harassment, the behaviour must be a course of action, not a one-off occurrence. RE/SF produced 317 examples of *HARASS* (e.g. *harass, harassment, harassing, harasser, etc.*) with 2.973pmw in SF, and 4.817pmw in RE. A portion, particularly in RE, were false (i.e. horses harassing each other, owners, etc.). Only a small selection related to online behaviour:

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Example 88

[RE070114]

140. **A** Dont waste your time trying to get any support on this **newsgroup**. All you are going to get on here are rude comments from assholes. **This group is dominated by rude and uncaring people who would rather harass people than ever offer to help anyone**, even if that help only meant typing a few lines. This **newsgroup** gets my vote as the the rudest **newsgroup** on all of the internet, and has been this way for many years.

Example 89

[RE070616]

141. **B** ***You*** chose to come to this **newsgroup** and harass people. We're having fun with a troll in a more pleasant way than engaging in a flamfest. Flames are easy. Bogbashes are work. Fun, but work.

Example 90

[RE070526]

142. **C** Get a damn life and **stop following me around the internet lying and harassing me**. You are a piece of work. Man.

143. **D** **C, I did not follow you to [Group]. [Group] is a public forum. I have read it for years. Now, if I went to the [National Horse Event] and held a sign that said 'I think C is a dodohead!' then you could accuse me of following you around and harassing you. But me responding to posts on [Group] is neither following, nor lying, nor harrassing.**

From the above, we can see that HARASS, at least in Example 88 and Example 89, co-occurs with behaviours such as rudeness, lack of care, and flaming, i.e. not the most severe kinds of behaviour that the academic and legislative definitions propose. Even Example 90 really only suggests a pattern of annoying behaviour where C *suspects* that D is following her, but where D defends her presence as purely coincidental. In all three cases, rather than specifically referring to ongoing courses of action that victimise the individual in a personal or threatening manner, the users are capturing anything from being abrasive and unhelpful (i.e. flaming), as in Example 88, to being deliberately annoying (i.e. trolling), as in Example 89 and Example 90.

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5.5.3.1.—Cyberharassment versus trolling

Unlike trolling, within RE at least, HARASS appears to be used as a broad catch-all term to refer to any form of NMOB, from the minor (e.g. being irritating and unhelpful) through to the more serious (e.g. trolling or flaming). Whilst TROLL is used fairly consistent in the data, HARASS reflects the loose, vague breadth of meaning found in the academic and legal literature reviewed in Chapter Three above, and it may be that the vagueness within legislation is symptomatic of the vagueness inherent in this term in its daily usage.

In fact, the term *cyberharassment* appears better suited to a hyponymic position that subsumes other, more specific NMOB behaviours such as trolling, flaming, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking, rather than being thought of as a specific and identifiable behaviour in its own right.

5.5.4.—Cyberstalking

As discussed above (see §3.6.3) where cyberharassment becomes persistently and extremely threatening, to the point that the target is at risk of offline harm, the behaviour is considered to be cyberstalking (Bocij 2004; Whitty 2004). The dataset produced 741 examples of *STALK* (e.g. *stalk*, *stalking*, *cyberstalk*, etc.) with 19.409pmw in SF, and 8.675pmw in RE. A portion of these were false hits relating to offline behaviour or plants (e.g. *celebrity stalker*, *cats stalking birds*, *celery stalks*, etc.). When the usage did occur with respect to NMOB, the examples tended to indicate, or even occur *with* behaviour that could be considered as far more serious and threatening than any of the NMOBs so far

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considered. It was therefore highly consistent with the academic and legislative literature (e.g. Bocij 2004; Whitty 2004):

Example 91

[RE060512]

144. **A** If your kids read this **ng, killfile** me for the time being. Someone is posting under my username with some really raunchy stuff. I'll let you guys know when we've unplugged the little creep who's doing it.
145. **B** **I figured that you had really pissed off some jerk or were a victim of cyberstalking.**

Example 92

[RE070204]

146. **C** **I'm really looking forward to sending this thread on to your first employer after you finish vet school.** Boy will you have a LOT of explaining to do.
147. **D** **That's not appropriate behavior on your part, C.**
148. **E** I work for myself - she asumes I need to be employed by others. I do, however, appreciate her vote of confidence in eventual success in school endeavors.
149. **D** **Why do you fancy that you should be an internet predator?**
150. **E** Her real nature and character shines through?
151. **D** **Well, it's not appropriate to take **newsgroup** banter so seriously as to attempt to stalk someone in real life.** That's even worse than trying to insist that someone shouldn't post simply because one doesn't agree

In Example 91, A alleges that his account is being used by an unauthorised third party (see §3.4.6, §3.6.5.1, §0, and §5.4.1.2.2 for more discussion on cloning, masquerading, and **sockpuppeting**). More seriously, in Example 92, C threatens to post D's online behaviour to her would-be employers, presumably in an effort to have her discredited or even fired. However, RE contained one far more serious and extended instance. In Example 93, A posts a complaint which may even be an attempt to troll the group, and with which B and E have little sympathy. Apropos of nothing, C and D enter RE and begin attacking B and E:

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Example 93

[RE080126]

152. **A** In the interests of the human lives that may be saved by a thorough exposure of the current failure of the British government to test at the hospital door, pig and pork workers for MRSA. They ought to have been testing both the pigs and the workers at their workplace long ago. More than three advanced countries are telling us that MRSA is coming from pigs and people are dying. They tell us what we have to do. It is not as if we don't have MRSA here, we do. Britain's hospitals are riddled. Please will you allow me to post here, unhindered. Even if you think I'm wrong on the science and lying about my business record, still let me post unhindered.
153. **B** [Note: this post was deleted and has since been retrieved from the quote-sections within other posts.] **ROFL!!!** No-one is hindering you from posting here. Only you can do that. However, if you would prefer that no-one comments on your posts, then perhaps you have yet to realise, even after posting here for nearly seven years, that this is a public forum available worldwide. Anyone, anywhere, can comment on any other post, including yours, and you can't stop them, not even by your ludicrous threats/boasts that you could close the **newsgroup** down in ten minutes. Welcome to the Internet, **A**. So, if you don't want comments on your posts here choose another forum. **Put them on your website which I see you haven't touched for six months.** But before you do that, do get some advice on website design. You really do need it.
154. **C** **Bullying isn't funny but glad you [B] see it amusing it confirms the contempt we all hold you in is justified. Cyberstalking, bullying, libel and defamation are not *part of the internet*, they are no more acceptable here than in the real world, something you appear to have left years ago.** Since you have become unemployable due to various employees being informed about your bullying it would appear you have far too much time on your hands and we must all suffer for it. [B's webpage]'s got to be better than your one page that screams "LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME LOOK AT ME" which it appears you haven't touched for years! Like you it's a joke and a bad one at that. I think maybe we should start warning people about the [job position of government employer, second employer, and third employer]. I wonder how we could spread the word to them without you censoring the posts as you also run the websites. I suppose a direct mailing would help? [Lists B's web address, real name, book and journal publications, qualifications, current and past employments, official and personal club memberships, email address, fax and phone numbers, home address, spouse's name, and children's names.]
155. **D** I see [Government employer] employ you [B] as an adviser which is a great concern given [Government employer] are a public body. We need to be able to trust those we spend taxpayers money on. Perhaps we should voice our concerns about your behavior to [government employer's address]. As a government body they will be required by law to investigate your past and take appropriate action. Anonymously of

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course, with an explanation as to why you are afraid to give details due to the nature of the cyberstalker **B** and his past.

156. **E** If he [**A**] wants googles archiving it would be much better if he simply set up a group on google where he could post to himself quite happily. He might still get others interfering but there would be probably less who actually know anything than here so he could get away with more of his fictional inferences. Anyone who does know anything about the subject will still be able to see straight through him, buit it would serve his stated purpose better.
157. **C** Bullying is hardly the conduct of someone who is also trying to advertise their business is it, so here's some free for you. **HTH. [Posts E's full name, spouse's full name, business name, home address, email address, phone number.]** from that site it looks like you are very nice people although you are shouting! I see you are also known as [**E's second business name and address.**] So obviously someone else who thinks cyberstalking and bullying whilst running multiple public businesses is OK and the two can be kept separate. Do you honestly think your visitors would not be concerned to discover you are a bully? I think you're in for a big shock.
158. **C** **I should add obviously that if anyone wants to email me in the strictest confidence with information about the cyberstalker E I shall ensure their concerns about her are highlighted.**

It should be noted that C and D's accounts were only posted from for three days (this day being the first of those three) before being abandoned, and both users **crossposted** these replies to multiple other unrelated groups on conservation, politics, agriculture, walking, history, weather, and a particular **ISP**. These factors immediately suggest that C and D (or perhaps, one user with multiple accounts) was/were trolling. Unlike ordinary trolling, which generally only seeks to annoy, however, C and D take A's side (indeed, A, C, and D could all be the same individual) by **doxing** B and E (i.e. tracking down and publishing sensitive personal information about them, including names, addresses, employers, family members, etc.). In a peculiar twist, however, C and D accuse the very people they are **doxing** of *being* cyberbullies and cyberstalkers. Notably,

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B later goes to the trouble of having most of his *usenet* posts deleted, though they are still available in the quoted sections of other posts.

In this case, much of the information that C and D retrieve is publicly and freely available to those who know where to look for it (e.g. *WHOIS* domain lookups, employer websites, academic sources, etc.). Simply because information *can* be accessed, though, will probably not reduce the sense of threat that an individual experiences should her information appear to be deliberately harvested and published in a place that she cannot control, for a malevolent audience to use.

5.5.4.1.—*Cyberstalking versus trolling*

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between trolling and (cyber)stalking⁶⁶ is the pointedly personal and persistent nature of (cyber)stalking. The target is specific, rather than general (as in trolling), though we cannot assume on the basis of this data that the (cyber)stalker will always make her intentions or activities known. It seems reasonable to argue that whilst trolling is always about resulting in some sort of disruption, a (cyber)stalker may not necessarily wish her victim to have any idea that he is being stalked. Unsurprisingly, however, I did not find examples of covert stalking in RE/SF. This is probably precisely *because* those cases are unannounced (see §3.6.5.1 for the argument I make about distinguishing overt and covert types) therefore we have no way of telling whether the overt version occurs more or less than the covert kind.

⁶⁶ I use *(cyber)stalker* and not just *cyberstalker* to emphasise the potential offline consequences of this NMOB.

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5.5.5.—Spam and shill trolling

An issue that I will briefly consider, both because it is discussed in RE/SF and also because it is cited by academic and legislative literature (see §3.6.4 and §3.6.4.2) as a form of cyberharassment, is **spam**. Typical **spam** occurs frequently in **usenet** in the form of unsolicited mass-mailing of products or services. Users may be targeted by direct emails sent to them individually, or sent to the group in general. Since typical **spam** is commonly well-understood, I will only focus on a more unusual and interesting type which occurs in CMC, called *shill trolling*. In this case, the user is in fact a sales representative, politician, business owner, etc. who joins the group and (attempts to) construct the identity of a sincere group member by posting relevant, on-topic contributions, but her actual intention is some form of gain (e.g. commercial, political, etc.). For example, a shill troller may own an outlet, and when openings present themselves (or when she can subtly create them herself) she will recommend products from her own establishment and/or discredit other establishments. Importantly, as A attempts to do so below, she will conceal her vested interest from the group:

Example 94

[RE070526]

159. **A** Hi **B**, I hope your mare is doing better by the time I am reading this post! I am new here and I don't mean to butt in! But my friends mare who was bred had colicked with a 112⁶⁷ fever! The mare is 18 yrs old, when I arrived I immediately administered 10 cc of [*brand named product*]! Now this mare was down and lethargic! Within 40 min the mare was up and moving! I strongly recommend any horse owner to have this on hand!! It is re Fridgeratable up to 2 years. It really saved her allot of time with vet expenses. I know I will allways have this in my house! and on my trail

⁶⁷ At 106°F (41°C) a horse would have a life-threatening fever. Surviving a higher temperature is extraordinarily unlikely.

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rides!! Now this is an all natural probiotic that gets the horses gut rolling. You can order it online @ [website]. If you are interested and would like to save money please check out my site and email or call me!!

160. **C** dang...that's just above rare but not quite medium rare...tell me how did she ever survive the brain damage that accompanies that high a fever?? **For a shill-troll who lives so low that they couldn't reach the bottom of a rattlesnake's belly without an extension ladder, the truth seems not to be a particularly important commodity. BTW,** maybe things are different down your way **A**, but I remember 115 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit as the internal temperature range for "very rare" back before folks got so skittish I can only find "not recommended" when I look for it. **While I like good beef in the medium-rare range, local recipes call for exploitive shill-trolls to be fried to a crisp in rancid oil.** How about in your parts?
161. **A** I am not implying that it cured her colic, just brought her around! The vet was on call but in surgery.. and going to come if the owner felt it necessary and you tell me what the thermometer is reading when the red line is at 112! I joined this group to meet horse people not to get slammed, guess I was wrong!!
162. **C** **Rest assured that in the context of the thread to which this seemingly self-serving drivel was posted, my reacting by characterizing you as likely being a bottom-feeding shill-troll was restrained.** If you want slammed, just try getting us really riled up.

Whilst both **spam** and shill trolling may be unsolicited and driven by commercial gain, shill trolling seeks to be relevant by personally addressing specific issues that arise, whereas **spam** is generally irrelevant and impersonal.

5.5.5.1.—Spam and shill trolling versus trolling

Perhaps the most obvious difference between 'standard' trolling (§5.4), shill trolling, and **spam** is that neither shill trolling nor **spam** are intended to annoy recipients, since this is a poor promotional tactic. As such, the 'trolling' part of the term may be better understood as TROLL^c (i.e. seeking with the intent to gather), rather than TROLL^a (i.e. deliberately attempting to annoy others online). Ordinary **spam** can, of course, provoke irritation by its very nature. However, if

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discovered, shill trolling tends to trigger particularly aggrieved reactions due to its self-serving and exploitative nature, as demonstrated in Example 94, and particularly line 162 above. As in ordinary trolling, there is a strong element of deception, which involves utilising *personal gain lies* (Memon et al. 2003: 9) carried out via *equivocation* (see §2.6.1 and §2.6.2). S fails to convey her self-interest in the situation, despite (probably) knowing that H would want to be aware of this information (Ekman 1996: 803; Rubin 2010: 1). In this respect, shill trolling overlaps with 'standard' trolling as S endeavours to convince H of one set of intentions (i.e. assisting) whilst secretly harbouring another (i.e. profiteering).

5.6.—SUMMARY

This Chapter has investigated user discussions of trolling behaviour particularly in light of academic (see §2.4, §2.5, and §2.6) and legal (see §3.6.1.2) literature on the topic. It has also considered trolling in relation to other forms of NMOB, including flaming (see §5.5.1), cyberbullying (see §5.5.2), cyberharassment (see §5.5.3), cyberstalking (see §5.5.4), and shill trolling (see §5.5.5). As has been highlighted in the discussion, however, the ways that academic and legal literature defines these behaviours does not always concord with the ways that users think of, and use these terms. For instance, trolling has been used as a general catch-all term in much academic literature for anything from angry tirades (i.e. flaming) to posting off-topic advertisements (i.e. **spamming**) (e.g. Baker 2001; Herring et al. 2002: 372; T.C. Turner et al. 2005) (see also §3.6.1), yet in RE/SF, its usage was relatively consistent, and generally indicated the use of

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deception, manipulation, or aggression to bring about a context that could trigger, or exacerbate disruption (see §5.4). A variety of strategies and methods might be adopted to do this (these are discussed further in §6.2), but overall, most users seemed to have similar, overlapping conceptual views on behaviour that amounted to trolling.

Interestingly, whilst flaming demonstrated marked similarities to academic literature on the topic (e.g. Lea et al. 1992; Herring 1994; Chester 1996b; Millard 1997; Kayany 1998; Avgerinakou 2008) (see §3.6.2, §3.6.2.2, and §5.5.1), the most suitable legislation (i.e. the Malicious Communications Act 1988) could really only account for the most extreme and persistent examples which in fact, might be better termed cyberbullying or cyberharassment. Rather than implying that there is some oversight in the current legislation, however, this seems to reflect Haugh's (2010b: 8) suggestion that flaming is simply an online form of impoliteness which, providing it does not get out of hand, merits no more legal attention than any other ordinary instance of losing one's temper.

With regards to cyberbullying, both academic and legal literature (see §3.6.3, §3.6.3.2, and §5.5.2), typically make the implicit assumption that this behaviour is almost exclusively perpetrated by, and against, children, and particularly children who also come into contact offline as well (e.g. Strom & Strom 2005; Willard 2007; Topçu et al. 2008; Hinduja & Patchin 2009; Massachusetts' Act Relative to Bullying in Schools 2010a: Section 37O(a)). However, the data again suggests that for the users, this definition does not necessarily fit, as adults

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accused other adults of bullying types of behaviour.

Perhaps the closest fits between research and the data related to both cyberharassment and cyberstalking. In the academic and legal literature (see §3.6.4, §3.6.4.2, and §5.5.3), cyberharassment encompasses such a broad scope of behaviours as to almost make the term useless, spanning from mild annoyances at one end of the cline to threats, blackmail, and even stalking at the other (e.g. Herring 1995; Protection from Harassment Act 1997; 1999; Tavani 2005; Whitty 2005). The vague and general usage in this literature seems to reflect the vague and general usage in RE/SF (or vice versa), where the term (*cyber*)*harassment* is used to describe anything from irritating name-calling through to (the appearance of) stalking particular individuals.

The most serious instance that I considered was cyberstalking (see §3.6.5, §3.6.5.2, and §5.5.4), and RE/SF generally exemplified the academic and legal literature (e.g. Protection from Harassment Act 1997; Bocij 2004; Whitty 2004).

Users identified cyberstalking in relation to accessing accounts without authorisation, emailing incriminating information to employers, and in the most serious case, **doxing**, or publishing large quantities of sensitive personal information about individuals in an online, publicly accessible forum whilst encouraging others to make malicious use of that information (e.g. by sending complaints to that user's employers and colleagues).

In discussing these terms, three interrelated issues kept recurring. The first,

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which is expected and can be dealt with briefly, was terminological overlap.

This occurred partly because of the varying conceptualisations that each group espoused, and partly because of the different, sometimes idiosyncratic understandings of individual users.

This moves into the second issue which has now been mentioned several times, namely, norms, and the fact that the perception of behaviour, the judgement of behavioural boundaries, and the positive or negative evaluations ascribed to those behaviours differ not only between groups, but between members. RE/SF both provided examples of users who found flaming to be irritating or boring (e.g. Example 66, Example 67, and Example 78), but both also featured users who enjoyed flaming and even categorised it as useful and entertaining (e.g. Example 64, Example 65, and Example 68). Equally, whilst RE was broadly critical of trolling and evaluated the behaviour in light of its deception and disruption, SF was almost unanimously in favour of it and evaluated it in light of the entertainment and amusement it could provide.

The data clearly indicates that far from canonical, absolute notions of trolling, flaming, cyberstalking (etc.) that exist independently of users, these behaviours are individually, socially, and culturally defined phenomena that vary between users and groups. This makes the application of definitions subjective and open to complex debate and exploitation, since a user's behaviour, if shifted from one group to another, may be re-interpreted as something else entirely.

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This leads to the third and final issue: the user's dynamic application of these terms to an individual (or group) within the context of an ongoing interaction. RE/SF examples rarely demonstrated interaction that consisted of H accusing S of trolling, and S accepting the charge. Instead, the far more typical pattern involved H making an accusation, and S adopting some form of strategy of defence (e.g. claiming a lack of knowledge) or attack (e.g. accusing H of bullying). Depending on S's success, she may be collaboratively dealt with by the group as a troller, or exonerated of the accusation. From H's perspective, he may then be seen by the group as a savvy, knowledgeable member who has perceived S's wrongdoing quickly, or he may find his own behaviour being questioned and his identity being reconstructed by the group from legitimate member to malicious cyberbully. This co-construction of the identity of each participant (as troller, member, etc.) is investigated in two ways: in Chapter Six, the various (counter-)strategies of trollers and members are outlined, and in Chapter Seven, these are tested in an extended case study.

CHAPTER 6.

HOW IS TROLLING CARRIED OUT?

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6.1.—STRATEGIES AND COUNTER-STRATEGIES

Having started to establish, in Chapter Five, a working definition for trolling, and a contextual backdrop against which this behaviour might be measured versus other NMOB, the second research question (*how is trolling carried out?*) investigates how trolling behaviour is undertaken, responded to, and defended.

The following sections qualitatively analyse extended RE/SF examples, and to make the analysis as balanced and complete as possible, both the side of the (perceived) troller and that of the (perceived) victim⁶⁸ are assessed. §6.2 broadly identifies trolling strategies. §6.3 considers user responses and counters to these strategies. §6.4 investigates the defences and strategies employed by trollers, and §6.5 concludes the Chapter with a fuller definition of trolling.

6.2.—TROLLING STRATEGIES

This section identifies some of the linguistic and pragmatic features, formulae, and strategies in the data that appear to prompt users into thinking that they are dealing with a troller. In some cases, of course, the accused individual might not be trolling at all. (See §2.5.2, §2.5.3, and §3.6.1.2 for extensive discussions on this.) Whatever her innocence or guilt, however, other members deemed her behaviour, or aspects of it, troll-like enough to indicate a belief that she might be trolling. Since answering the question, *What is trolling?* (see Chapter Five above) necessarily entails also describing, to an extent, how trolling is carried

⁶⁸ To avoid the cumbersome repetition of (*perceived*) trolling or (*alleged*) troller, etc., I simply use troller/trolling, but this should not be taken as a final verdict on a user's identity or behaviour.

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out, there is some overlap between these two Chapters. Where particular sections could needlessly repeat, therefore, I refer the reader back to prior, fuller sections. An important distinction between the two Chapters to note though, is that whilst Chapter Five primarily focussed on H's assessment of trolling, this Chapter includes examples of S's behaviour that is cited by H as trolling, as well as H's response to it.

With regards to trolling strategies and formulae, it is also worthwhile briefly restating the position given in §2.5: we do not *know* or *retrieve* either H's interpretation(s) or S's intention(s). Whether as analyst or interactant, we do not have access to the interactant's real intentions (or their interpretations, for that matter) so any analyses presented below are drawing purely on what the interactants themselves claim or imply about their intentions and interpretations. As discussed in Chapter Two, rather than *knowing*, interactants continually reconstruct and hypothesise about the other's intentions and interpretations based on available contextual and cognitive information such as historical knowledge, schemata, and logic. S's *and* H's hypotheses are open to inaccuracy, whether due to ambiguity, disingenuity, or deception, and herein is the opening for the troller to exploit (Mills 2003: 45; Mooney 2004: 900).

In keeping with the rest of the thesis, I make no claims regarding a particular S's trolling guilt or innocence, nor do I claim to know S/H's intentions or interpretations for a fact. Instead, I aim to analyse how both S and H (re)construct their own and each other's identity and behaviour over the course

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of a given interaction.

A further fundamental consideration with attempting to quantify trolling features ties in specifically with the above issue of not knowing, for certain, whether a user is trolling. Since all the examples discussed were retrieved by searching for instances of TROLL*, and since, of these, nearly all involved H's discussing their perspectives on trolling, any statistical analysis of the data would be biased towards features that Hs interpret as trolling, rather than those that Ss intended to be trolling. (See Example 26, Example 27, Example 28, and Example 29 in §5.4.1.1.2 for some of the very few examples of S declaring their intent to troll in RE/SF.)

Whilst interpretation of behaviour is certainly important (and indeed, is one of the fundamental measures used in UK statutes relating to linguistic aggression, see §3.6.1.2, §3.6.2.2, and §3.6.4.2), as I argue above (see §2.4.1.2 and §2.4.5), H interpretation *alone* cannot constitute the only point of reference for determining levels of impoliteness, trolling or other NMOB, just as I argue that S intention alone is not enough (see §2.4.1.1). An additional complication is that many posts and/or threads cited by users as trolling typically contain multiple potentially antagonistic strategies (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,561), and it is not always possible to identify which specific one triggered H to suspect that he was being trolled. For the purposes of this thesis, *formulae* are conceptualised as smaller elements that make up larger *strategies* or *tactics*. A formula may occur in one post whereas strategies may be carried out over a whole interaction.

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The combination of these factors has made statistical, quantitative analyses highly qualified. This section therefore presents a qualitative overview of the *major* strategies that I have identified when analysing the data. (See §8.3.3 for more on this.) Given how endlessly creative individuals and groups can be, this selection is far from exhaustive, and should not be viewed as representative of all CMC, or even all of [usenet](#).

Finally, whilst deception is a fundamental property of most types of trolling, it is not, by itself, a sufficient for successful trolling. For instance, a troller may successfully integrate herself into a group without being discovered (Donath 1999: 45; Dahlberg 2001), but if she is unable to generate any disruption or provoke any conflict, then her efforts at trolling have essentially failed. This section therefore considers how (would-be) trollers are deemed to have manipulated (or have tried to manipulate) individual users, the group, or the context into one that is conducive to some form of disruption. Disruption in this case is used as an umbrella term that captures a wide range of disharmony from irritation and frustration through to targeted aggression and threats.

6.2.1.—Criticise

A strategy that was both on occasion deemed as trolling, and also used against trollers, was the use of pedantic (hypo)criticism, most commonly directed at issues such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.. The main presentation of the self in this data is via the written word, and as populist, prescriptivist guides

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to grammar, spelling, and punctuation demonstrate (Rozakis 2003; Truss 2003; V.J. Cook 2004), to lay users, linguistic dexterity—or a lack therefore—can be used by H as the primary index for S's identity, including her appearance, education, intelligence, trustworthiness, habits, and even hygiene. In short, the (non)standardness (or, to a lay user, the '(in)correctness') of S's linguistic self-presentation can be heavily invested with her notion of face and identity, and this can provide an easy and sensitive target for attack. In some cases, non-standard grammar, spelling and punctuation also provided evidence to support an assessment of someone as a troller:

Example 95

[SF061222]

163. **A** You really a as pompous are simple in your thinking. It worries that people like you are entitled to a vote.
164. **B** No argument then, just abuse. Not that I object to a bit of gratuitous knockabout during debate, but so far you seem to be completely unable to back up any of your arguments with evidence and you don't seem able to grasp the simple and basic idea that an economy is not a rigid system. **It might also help your case if you could manage at least something resembling basic English grammar. The combined effect makes you look like a child trying to argue with adults. That would be an insult were you not losing the arguement :O)**

Example 96

[RE050828]

165. **C** actually if you read it isnt that..... and no i didnt leave out the www. you must not be a true horse person than thats like a insult... you dont have to buy it but at least say something nice
166. **D** Approach: improved
Spelling: MUCH worse
Troll meter: 5

An intriguing extension of the above strategy involved what appeared to be a deliberate, ironic invocation of Skitt's Law (see [The Ten Laws](#)), or criticising another's grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. with a post that itself contains

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proof-reading errors:

Example 97

[RE060304]

167. **A** The next two days, I drug myself out of bed, went to teach the classes
168. **B** **Uh.....not to be nitpicky,,,,,but...the past tense of drag is dragged, not drug.** Otherwise it was an interesting post.
169. **C** She's a teacher. I think she knows. Not to be nitpicky, but more than three dots is considered improper for ellipsis, and five commas in a row is a no-no. The rest of your post was... Sorry, I can't resist wiseassdom after 4 on Fridays :).
170. **D** Nor is "uh" a word in standard English.
171. **E** Four "dots" (aka periods) are used correctly when an ellipsis appears at the end of a complete sentence.
172. **C** I didn't know that. Thanks, I will take your word for it. But **I note that our troll friend still used them incorrectly <g>**
173. **B** If she is a teacher, I pity her students. To confirm my observation, simply use the dictionary.
174. **F** ;-D Good grief! Go get that dictionary, **B**, and look up 'wet blanket'. Or 'stick in the mud'. 'Crank' would be a good one. While youre at it, look up 'colloquial'. Sheesh.
175. **B** [To C] At least I can handle it when someone corrects me. Also, I am neither a troll, nor your friend.
176. **C** **If you're not a troll, you have an unusual way of showing it. First post in some while, and not about horses but about grammar,** insult and condescension. I was going to ask if you limit your instruction to grammar, or also teach riding with a stick up your ass. But that would be rude. My Ides of March resolution is to cut back on rudeness. Probably you were just having a bad day.... 1. Peace. (1) Note proper use of four-period ellipsis.
177. **D** You used to post meaningful articles about horses. Then you took several months off and returned to bring up this business about colloquial usage and pitying **A**'s students. What happened?

As above, this pedantic hypocriticism (i.e. criticism from someone guilty of precisely the same offence, cf. the cultural phrase, *pot calling the kettle black*) provokes especially exasperated responses from C, D, E, and F, who each take pains to exhaustively point out to the alleged troller, B all the ways in which she could follow her own advice.

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The success of this trolling strategy seems to rest on the fact that for the online user, writing can become a particularly important manifestation of the self. With this comes increased sensitivity, especially about 'flaws' in that identity. Therefore, whilst corrections in an essay might meet with little objection, especially if critic and author know each other FtF, online writing alone becomes the whole embodiment of that person and her identity (see §3.5.2), and a correction may come to represent criticism of her whole self, including her intelligence, fluency, character, charisma, etc.. Depending on how this is carried out, this strategy can take on the *appearance of incidental impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.2), where S criticises H to—ostensibly—help H to improve, though in reality it may have far closer affiliations with *malicious impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.4), since S may carry this out to deliberately provoke or annoy H. As has been mentioned many times by now, however, the level of deception involved may make it difficult for users to tell in what spirit the corrections are made. Additionally, as exemplified in lines 176 and 177, this tactic can also prove aggravating due to its off-topic digression, and this is discussed more fully next.

6.2.2.—Digress

The data demonstrates that where S brings up weakly tangential or entirely irrelevant topics, this may be taken as an indication that she is trolling:

Example 98

[SF050410]

178. **A Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens the hearts and enslaves minds. End of story. Take your bible-thumping elsewhere gOD boy.**

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179. **B** What better place for bible thumping than a **newsgroup** called [*religious newsgroup*]? Can't more on topic than that.
180. **C** Whoever posted that was trying to cause a flame war between groups, in other words, a troll. Just check what other groups it was **crossposted** to. **You probably didn't plan to post to uk.sport.football or a bondage-related newsgroup, did you?**

Example 99

[RE060812]

181. **D** I don't believe I ever thanked you and I feel sorry for you - you are probably very lonely. If this is how you treat people you don't even know - how could you possibly ever make a friend. **You should find Christ in your life.**
182. **E** **<plonk> We have enough religious and anit-religious trolls in this newsgroup - I'm not going to feed this one.**

In Example 98, C has to point out that A's trolling attempt was deliberately **crossposted** to several (mostly) irrelevant groups, whilst in Example 99, despite the fact that D is responding to another user's attack, the introduction of a religious element into her post seems to be sufficiently off-topic and sensitive (see §6.2.4) enough by itself to convince E that D is trolling. (A fuller version of this particular example is analysed in depth in Chapter Seven.)

Digression was typically judged in relation to the user's pre-existing status and membership within the group (see §4.7.2.2 for further discussion of user metrics). There were no examples of longer-term, established users being accused of trolling on the basis of digression alone, though there were examples of those users being flamed for being off-topic if they failed to mark their posts **OT** (see Example 2 in §4.2.1 and Example 16 in §4.7.2.1). This suggests that digression may be viewed by the group as an indicator, to be weighed up

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against other evidence (e.g. newness, past record, etc.) and, unless especially marked, for example, by being on a sensitive (see §6.2.3) or controversial (see §6.2.4) topic, it was not necessarily seen as definitively trolling in its own right.

A more advanced form of digression included meaningless, irrelevant, irritating, or repetitive posts aimed at attention-seeking or response-generating:

Example 100 [SF050806]

183. **A** In a blatant attempt to blast my way to the top of the charts all over [newsgroup] I am going to start this completely pointless thread.

184. **B** So basically you have become a troll.

185. **A** I wish I'd thought of it sooner.

186. **B** Cool, I know how to deal with attention seeking cunts like you...

187. **A** Wise choice, my friend, you should have done that before you replied to half a dozen of my stupid fucking posts. Now you're only encouraging me.

Example 101 [SF050409]

188. **E** Go away, troll. Or at least try to make this relevant to the [Name] news group, would you? You're not proving anything other than you're an idiot spammer.

Example 102 [RE060106]

189. **F** No, like all trolls, your intent is to garner attention for your pathetic self.

Example 103 [RE051112]

190. **G** There's no way anyone who's followed this group with some attention over the past decade or so would imagine I'd be trolling, if they know the meaning of the word. I'm not interested in generating replies

Example 104 [RE060119]

191. **H** At this point, most of J's responses are blatant trolling and attention seeking behavior rather than an interest in the discussion.

In the above examples, trolling appears to be seen as a behaviour that is a general nuisance, though not necessarily *personally* aggressive towards the

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group or a specific member. For clarity, I have termed this *spam trolling*, related to, but distinct from *spam*. Whilst both *spam* and *spam* trolling are typically unsolicited, impersonal, and irrelevant, *spam* is usually driven by commercial gain and, one presumes, is not intended to annoy recipients, whereas *spam trolling* is driven by the intention of provoking (irritated) responses. (Note that this should not be confused with *shill trolling*—see §5.5.5).

Another variation of *spam* trolling is known as *cascading*:

Example 105

[SF060109]

- 192. **A** Take this to email.
- 193. **B** Choke on a snail.
- 194. **A** **tick**
- 195. **C** **tock**
- 196. **D** One o'clock!
- 197. **C** Two o'clock!
- 198. **A** Mind the Rule.
- 199. **C** Mind over matter.
- 200. **A** Mind the language: you'll wake E

In cascades such as Example 105, the same word or sentence may be endlessly reposted with little or no modification, and, as with *spam* trolling, whilst cascades do not generally attack particular individuals, they are probably annoying to all but those involved, since they negatively impact the signal-to-noise ratio by generating posts (noise), without adding substance (signal).

A final version found in the data which seems to exemplify the attention-

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seeking aspect of some types of trolling formulae, involved what might be described as ostentatiously trolling, apropos of nothing. The example below, posted by a new member using an anonymous email address, also exemplifies 'drive-by trolling', in that A never replies to any of the responses she receives:

Example 106

[RE071114]

201. **A** The end of your world is coming near. Most of you will die in horrible pain, grilled alive by nuclear fire. The survivors will have to resort to cannibalism in order to survive, but sooner or later they'll also die. Everyone will die.
202. **B** Good grief, are the teenybopper trolls home for the holidays already...

In such obvious cases like this, the attempts tend to provoke very few, if any responses (and in Example 106, the three that it received were more amused, wry, and sarcastic, than annoyed). This is arguably because not only experienced users are likely to recognise this behaviour for what it is, but even a **newbie** who is unaware of the concept of trolling *per se* may still recognise an inflammatory, silly, or controversial message that seems to be deliberately fishing for a response. In the case of Example 106, we might even say that an apparent intent to troll is so on-record that there are few, if any other defensible interpretations available either to S or to H.

This 'ostentatious' form of trolling does not match up with the academic literature on the type of impoliteness that might be most closely associated with it—namely, *mock impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.1). In Example 106, A's 'attack' is certainly so obvious that it can be taken as humorous, rather than serious, but there is no evidence that A undertook this behaviour to mark her ingroup

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solidarity or increase affect between herself and the other members, since in this case at least, she does not post anything further (Labov 1972; Leech 1983: 144; Haugh 2008; 2010a).

Likewise, **spam** trolling, or in other words, trolling via repeatedly irrelevant, annoying, or attention-seeking posts, cannot be neatly captured by any of the impoliteness terminology discussed in the literature review above. It is not necessarily overtly malicious (see §2.4.6.4) since there is not usually a specific target. It is also not failed politeness (§2.4.6.2) since this captures insufficient attempts at engaging in socially approved behaviour. It is also not mock impoliteness (see §2.4.6.1) since it does not aim to enhance affect with those not taking part. Instead, these examples are perhaps closest to those cited in research by Herring et al. (2002: 372) and Turner et al. (2005), who describe trolling as the luring of others into useless, circular discussion which, though not necessarily aggressive in itself, may frustrate others with its unproductive nature (Tepper 1997: 41).

UK legislation has the provision to capture **spam** trolling via §127 of the Communications Act (2003), which legislates that:

- (2) **A person is guilty of an offence if, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, he—**
- (a) sends by means of a public electronic communications network, a message that he knows to be false,
 - (b) causes such a message to be sent; or
 - (c) **persistently makes use of a public electronic communications network.**
- (2003: §127)

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However, in the US, whilst states vary in how they deal with NMOB, perhaps the most surprising match between **spam** trolling and state legislation is North Carolina's cyberstalking law, which makes it unlawful to:

(2) **Electronically mail or electronically communicate to another repeatedly**, whether or not conversation ensues, **for the purpose of** abusing, **annoying**, threatening, terrifying, harassing, or embarrassing **any person**. (2000: b)

Rather than suggest that spam trolling is extraordinarily distressing and puts recipients at risk of physical harm, I would instead argue that this definition of cyberstalking needs a great deal of work.

6.2.3.—Shock

Combining digression, attention-seeking, and deception, a classic and even hackneyed strategy in RE/SF was to be insensitive or explicit about a sensitive or taboo topic such as religion, death, politics, human rights, animal welfare, etc.. Specifically, online users and the media refer to *RIP trolling* or *memorial trolling* (see §3.6.1.1), which involves leaving offensive jokes, messages, or other content on a deceased person's memorial site (BBC 2010c; Camber & Neville 2011). Notably, there may be little or no pseudo-sincerity of *behaviour* (see §5.4.2, and §6.2.3), though users may still employ deception of *identity*, by posting from anonymous or pseudonymous accounts (see §3.4.6). In doing so, the troller is using *equivocation* (see §0) since she is withholding information (her offline identity) that H would wish to know if he could (Ekman 1996: 803; Memon et al. 2003: 8; Rubin 2010: 1).

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Despite how 'obvious' the trolling intention may be, this behaviour may prompt angry and offended responses primarily *because* of its shocking nature, as the responses of C, D, E, F, G, and H below seem to indicate:

Example 107

[RE070320]

203. **B** On the last blustery cold snowy day of this month, all of my horses were tearing around the paddock in the snow.. underneath that snow was a fresh layer of ice which had formed due to a freeze thaw situation. All was fine for the AM feed everybody standing bright eyed and moving sound on four legs. When I went down the hill for the evening feed, I noticed Little Boy, my six year old arab stallion was standing on three legs. He had snapped his right hind leg mid shannon bone and it was blowing side to side in the stiff wind. I drove the truck at breakneck speed back up and told my husband to load up the rifle. Within fifteen minutes of my discovery, Little Boy's suffering was over. We put him down in the paddock with the other horses present and left him there overnight.
204. **A** **So he had been left mortally injured and in shock all day then?**
205. **C** Such a nasty little man.
206. **D** He really is a prick, isn't he?! Too bad he won't just go away.
207. **E** **A!!** I have never answered one of your posts, but that was totally uncalled for and the nastiest thing to say, regardless of how you may, or may not have been, treated by this group in the past/present. I was shocked to my bones by such a remark which I find completely out of place. It shows more of your personality than I ever care to know. An apology is in order.
208. **B** **Bite me, Weeny girl. I am here to break a few mares.**
209. **F** I'm glad he [A] wrote that. Now the few who still thought he had some redeeming features, and were responding to him conversationally, can see what a disgusting person he really is. **To take a swipe at someone who just lost her beloved horse is unconscionable. He has proven once and for all that he is nothing but a troll.**
210. **G** You are hereby **killfiled** by me forever and ever - Amen!!
211. **H** Yes. **I hope J, K and others who have stood up for him can recognize him for the troll that he is, now, and ignore him.**
212. **B** Twirp; actually nasty ex divorce-lawyer twirp. There: I said it: and I promised I wouldn't use foul language. Bang goes another resolution. Perhaps, if I only get down to your level, you will finally **kill file** me - then we shall both live happier, more fulfilling lives, don't you think?
213. **H** As I said... **J, K?** Ilya icta est.

In this example, as in memorial trolling proper (see §3.6.1.1), A responds

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insensitively to a distressing topic that typically expects tact. However, this is done off-record via implicature and reframing. The question is formulated as a passive, leaving the reader to infer who the horse was "left by", and arguably, the most salient agent is B herself (i.e. "by you"). The question also reframes the potential duration of the injury to "all day" to maximise the length of suffering (when the injury could have occurred only moments before B caught sight of it). This implies that B did not take the necessary steps to shorten—or that she even manifestly prolonged—her horse's suffering. By suggesting that the horse was "*left all day*", A also implies that B was negligent because she was absent and not keeping a watchful eye on her horses. B's reply sparks a flurry of angry responses from C, D, E, F, G, and H who come to B's defence. (Note that members J and K are referred to but have not taken part in this discussion up to this point.)

One possibility is that A may have been unaware of the group's relevant norms (Graham 2007: 743) (see §3.4.5 and §4.7.2.1), or may have misjudged how his post might be interpreted, but his next response (line 208) is unrepentant.

Whether he assumes this behaviour to save face, or he genuinely espouses what he has written, both original post and subsequent unapologetic stance appear to materially damage his already compromised legitimacy within the group. (It is well worth noting that A in this example is a long-term member, and is the same individual as A in Example 128 and Example 129 in §6.3.3 and Example 156 in §6.4.1 below.)

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The success of memorial trolling appears to stem from commenting on a taboo or sensitive topic with a clear desire to be shocking or offensive about that topic. Despite how obvious the troller's intent to trigger aggrieved responses may seem to be, it is possible that the strength of feeling provoked by the extraordinary and deliberate nature of the insensitivity may overcome H's desire to refuse the troller what she wants, and prompt him to respond anyway. This therefore links this form of trolling very closely with *malicious impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.4), in that S carries her actions out not only with the intention of causing H offence, but of conveying her intent to cause offence to H (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546). However, this form of trolling can also be defended by S as *failed politeness* (see §2.4.6.3) where S misjudges the appropriate level or type of politeness. Specifically, the troller herself may (dishonestly) deny the presence of premeditated antagonism in her utterance that characterises malicious impoliteness.

6.2.4.—Antipathise

Antipathy involves being deliberately provocative or controversial. Much like shocking insensitivity (see §6.2.3), antipathy is predicated on emotional manipulation. Unlike insensitivity, however, where the troller *reactively* and usually overtly takes advantage of a sensitive and/or antagonistic context that happens to present itself, antipathising involves *proactively* and usually covertly creating a sensitive and/or antagonistic context to then exploit:

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Example 108

[RE061120]

214. **A** OK, aside from those that replied with useless comments, it seems that everyone thinks I SHOULD get her a pony. **Dont get me wrong. I think ponies are cute animals and I would not mind having one around, but I think my daughter will be the laughing stock of the town. I mean, who really has ponies or horses anymore, aside from those in the horse business. It's like ponies went out of fashion in the early part of the 1900's when people got cars.** Today thinks like Ipods and video games are the rage. **Why can't my daughter be normal like all the other kids? I dont know. I want her to be happy more than anything, but a pony? That's so stupid for a kid in 2006.**
215. **B** **OK; I'll assume for a moment that you're not just trolling.** Firstly: plenty of people who are not "in the horse business" have horses. Kids, teenagers, adults. For pleasure riding, sport, just as a pet, you name it. Secondly: plenty of kids (girls especially) want a pony. It's definitely not just your daughter. She's perfectly normal. Thirdly: should your daughter really get a pony of her own, she'd be more like the envy of half her school (assuming everyone else haven't got ponies themselves already).

In this case, after setting a patronising tone by describing ponies as 'cute animals', A then describes equestrianism an outdated, derisible pastime that her daughter is abnormal and stupid for taking an interest in. The level of offensiveness is arguably increased when A demonstrates a high degree of general ignorance about horses, and seems more concerned with superficial issues such as her neighbours' opinions than she is about daughter's happiness.

In implicitly maligning equestrianism, A puts forward a controversial and—logic would suggest—minority opinion (in this forum) likely to meet with strong disagreement. In short, the success of this strategy rests on nettling or aggrieving the group on a subject that they have invested a lot of face in (i.e. the one that their group is founded on).

Unlike trolling via insensitivity, because trolling via antipathy or controversy

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can occur off-record, as in Example 108 above, it too cannot be easily captured by *malicious impoliteness*, where S's intention to offend must be understood by H (Goffman 1967: 14; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,549; Culpeper 2005: 36-7; Bousfield 2008: 72). At best, it might be considered a type of *faux pas* or *failed politeness* (see §2.4.6.3), but this does not capture the fact that a troller is *trying* to annoy H, whilst failed politeness is not premeditated (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 166; Culpeper 2005: 37, 63; Bousfield 2008: 73).

It is perhaps worth noting that specific subtypes of trolling via controversy occur on sites outside of this dataset. These formulae are sometimes informally known as *care trolling* (responding to (usually non-existent) animal or child abuse with outrage, accusations, threats, etc.), and *concern* or *political trolling* (pretending to support the opposition's (political, football, etc.) group whilst spreading doubt from within). Since these subtypes do not occur in the data, they cannot be pursued further here, but it does serve as a reminder that despite the size of the RE/SF dataset, this thesis still does not fully capture the phenomenon of trolling.

6.2.5.—Endanger

A trolling strategy that combines shock (see §6.2.3) and antipathy (see §6.2.4), and which features in the case study in Chapter Seven, involves portraying an (alleged) emergency, crisis, or other situation of danger or concern, particularly where this involves animal or child welfare. This type of troller, which Donath (1999: 30) calls the *pseudo-naïve* troller, is described by both Donath (1999: 45)

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and Utz (2005: 50) as one who intentionally disseminates poor or false advice under the guise of being innocently unaware that the advice is wrong (see §3.6.1). The troller's *apparent* motive may be to help, but in reality, she is trying to cause harm, upset, or disruption, or a situation that forces others to respond in order to prevent harm (or both):

Example 109

[RE050802]

216. **A** Vet came out today... 2 days ago she was trotting in her bare small paddock, yesterday and today she is lame again. Vets says she has inflammation of the white line on both front feet, but couldn't see an abcess. **She has 1 week to improve or she will be having an x-ray. Two shots will be taken, one for pedal bone rotation and one to see if she has a pedal bone fracture.** In the meantime she is to saty on 1 sachet of bute per day and to keep treating her as a lamanatic.
217. **B** **Delaying for a WEEK to take x-rays and start treatment for pedal bone rotation is a very very bad idea. If there is rotation, it needs to be diagnosed and treated immediately.** The longer you wait the worse the damage becomes and the greater the chance that you will NOT solve the problem and the horse will be lame for life. If you suggested "wait and see" when the vet wanted to x-ray immediately, then you are failing in your obligations to this horse. If the vet suggested "wait and see" instead of "let's take x-rays today", then you need a better vet.
218. **C** **I'm sorry, but I'm beginning to think you are a troll? I mean...come on. How many times are you going to post *again* that you are waiting to take an xray? Just to get everyone's hackles up? If you're not a troll, x-ray's aren't that expensive so call a vet with a brain in their head and get some taken. If you are a troll...I'm sure you'd never admit it. <sigh> If there even is a *real* pony in all of this, I feel very sorry for it.**
219. **A** I am not a troll... I am only doing what my vet has advised me to do.
220. **D** **Keep on waiting and you're likely to kill the pony.** Get your x-rays while you still have a chance.

In this case, A presents a scenario in which her horse is at high risk of suffering from laminitis⁶⁹, yet despite the increasing number of users who are becoming

⁶⁹ Laminitis is a hoof disease which can develop rapidly, causes severe agony, and (if not treated quickly enough) can result in severe and/or permanent, work-ending lameness. Since horses that cannot perform any kind of work tend to have very bleak futures, failing to deal with laminitis as a serious emergency is equivalent to gambling with that horse's life.

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exasperated, explaining the gravity of the situation, and urging her to take action, A does not demonstrate any alignment with their views that she should be doing more, but instead simply defends her inaction by abrogating responsibility onto her vet in line 219 (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,565).

For group members, the commitment to engaging in positive, constructive behaviour for the group's benefit can outweigh the personal aggravation and face-loss of responding to, or 'feeding', a troller but, as illustrated by the annoyance of the users, especially in Example 113 and Example 114, it gives a troller a method of continually forcing the group to re-engage with her:

Example 110

[RE060815]

221. **A** I don't know why I'm responding to the troll again, except that he is once more putting out false information.

Example 111

[RE060922]

222. **B** Somehow you expect people to be diplomatic to you when you have been trolling us. [...] **We only reply to your BS to keep others from thinking that you might be giving them useful advice.** Each and every time you jump in with more of your dangerous advice you can rest assured that someone is going to call you on it.

Example 112

[RE061017]

223. **C** Most **newbies** will not have the ability to recognize a troll post amid all the good advice posted, or the bad advice that is suggested and then refuted. **Leaving bad (troll) advice un-refuted *will* mislead newbies who are diligently trying to educate themselves.**

Example 113

[RE070130]

224. **D** **E is a troll and posts dangerous advice to newbies....** trust me, I would filter him in a second if I didn't think his advice is dangerous and could hurt someone.

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Example 114

[RE061122]

225. **F** The real problem is that we have to keep an eye on these trolls and be sure to post the appropriate followups to their incredibly stupid activity suggestions to avoid leaving others with the impression that these activities aren't actually incredibly stupid.
226. **G** Last I heard, the proper response to a troll was to stop feeding it.
227. **F** That may work to stop the troll from posting but it does nothing to help stop others from mistakenly assuming that the advise is good advise, since it wasn't refused.

All five examples highlight the bind that users find themselves in when they suspect that an ostensibly sincere user is giving out pseudo-naïve advice. As suggested by B, C, D, and G above, and discussed both earlier and later (see §4.7.2.3, §4.7.2.5, and §6.3.2), a typical method of dealing with a troller involves simply not engaging with her, or **killfiling** her so that one does not receive any more of her posts. However, in the case of pseudo-naïve trolling, users are caught between personal convenience, and the social and moral obligation of protecting **newbies** (and, in the case of RE, their animals) from potential harm.

Pseudo-naïve trolling can also include the act of *seeking* advice in such a way as to provoke emotional responses:

Example 115

[RE060403]

228. **A** I led her out of the pasture unusually, so she could feed on a manger filled with 10% sweet feed, unbothered by the others.
229. **B** Is there any doubt now that this guy is a troll? "a manger ***filled*** with 10% sweet feed."
230. **C** It would take a lot of cleverness to produce the nonsense he is sprouting, and I don't think he's got that much brains. I'm just pissed off reading his little 'adventures'.
231. **D** **Trolling generally doesn't generally require anything more than the lukewarm IQ he has thus far exhibited.** That said, his little "adventures"

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will likely land him in the hospital sooner or later. It's not a question of if he will be injured by those animals, just a question of when.

Example 116

[RE031125]

232. **E** I'm a new horse owner...
233. **F** a troll posing as **E** wrote.. I'm a new horse owner
234. **G** who has the sign ??
235. **H** Oh **G**, how COULD you? That just wasn't very nice! **We should not make such assumptions that this poor, poor creature is not genuinely looking for help!** And now we've missed our opportunity to help! My oh my!
[snork]

These examples describe, or allude to a *pseudo-naïve question* strategy that typically involves posing as a new, inexperienced user with a highly naïve question or 'cry for help'. Canonical examples within RE typically involve animal welfare (e.g. a young horse in pain or at risk of harm), child safety (e.g. a young child being partnered with a dangerous animal), or a similarly emotive topic (see §6.2.4).

The success of both giving out pseudo-naïve advice, and asking for advice on a pseudo-naïve scenario, rests on the difficulty of distinguishing a genuine cry for help from a sophisticated troll, which places conscientious members in a moral dilemma. If the group ignores or rebuffs posts asking for help, and S is sincere, the group may be (unintentionally) allowing a preventable situation to occur or continue, but if they assist and S is trolling, they may waste considerable time, effort, and emotional investment in an interaction that destabilises the group's harmony. Likewise, if the group ignores posts offering false advice, other well-intentioned, but inexperienced Hs may follow it, yet if the group addresses the

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advice, they may find themselves arguing with the troller who insists that the advice she has given is correct. In both cases, the group is caught in a net of its own conscience and sense of social responsibility (Culpeper 2011a: 205-6).

Finally, as with other strategies already given above, this tactic is not easily captured by any of the notions of impoliteness given in §2.4.6—there is no collateral threat to face, as in *incidental impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.2), no failure to convey an adequately polite attitude, as in *failed politeness* (see §2.4.6.3), nor any clear target as in *malicious impoliteness* (see §2.4.6.4).

6.2.6.—Aggress

A final formula that was perhaps the most stereotypical, and yet was not particularly frequent in the data, was to deliberately attack, insult, or goad others with the aim of antagonising them into retaliating in kind:

Example 117

[RE070324]

236. **A** I have plenty of manners, I just prefer to save them for use in plaes other than this **NG**. It amuses me to piss you off, thus I forego the manners in favor of biting words.

237. **B** That would make you a troll. How special.

This version of trolling has close ties with memorial trolling (see §3.6.1.1 and §6.2.3) and most closely exemplifies the academic literature with regards to malicious im/politeness (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546) (see §2.4.6.4 and §5.4.2). As this was more fully discussed in §5.4.2, nothing further will be said here.

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6.2.7.—Pre-empt

A final, interesting aspect that occurred in the data was that on occasion, users seemed to bring to bear their implicit knowledge of trolling norms to pre-empt accusations of trolling (see §3.4.5 and §5.6 for discussions of group norms). If a user felt that her own post was too close to the group's norms and expectations for trolling behaviour, she would take pre-emptive steps to prevent herself from being subjected to the usual responses to trolls (as discussed in §6.3):

Example 118

[SF091123]

238. **A This is not a troll honest!** Just reading some of the match reports from the weekend and im still surprised that so many things that other professional sports take for granted still havnt infiltrated into football. It can only be a matter of time before they do. But its more than that. There seems to be an immaturity entrenched into the game like its never left the playground mentality.

In stating that her post is not a troll, A both highlights her awareness of how likely the group is to arrive at this interpretation due to her post's controversial content (see §6.2.4), and attempts to pre-emptively suggest that this would be the wrong conclusion. However, as has already been discussed above, A may be deceiving the group (see §2.6 and §5.4.1). Her intent *may* be to troll, and this could be a strategy to (attempt to) secure the group's trust and interest in her post. Indeed, A's post subsequently receives many responses that genuinely engage with the content, and which do not take anti-trolling steps against her.

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6.3.—USER (HEARER) RESPONSES

This section considers how users respond to (alleged) trolls. In particular, it considers whether the responses in question fall within the scope of the four response strategies suggested by Harris et al. (1986) and later developed by Culpeper et al. (2003: 1,562-5) and modified here to account for trolling. These involve (1) not responding to the trolling, (2) accepting the trolling, (3) countering the trolling *defensively* (i.e. by protecting H's own face) or, (4) countering the trolling *offensively* (i.e. by attacking S's face).

6.3.1.—Engage

The first response-type involved one or more users sincerely engaging with a troller. A first, cautionary note, however, is that if a troller successfully encourages many users to respond without anyone ever realising what she is about, then such an example will not have been captured by the search conducted using corpus software⁷⁰ (see §5.3). This is because the search looked purely for TROLL* and if this string or any of its variants did not occur in the thread, then the thread was ignored. Therefore the examples I have captured involve one or more users sincerely engaging, followed by at least one user identifying her suspicions that the post being responded to is a troll.

Where examples involved users sincerely engaging with the troller, those Hs were responding to the troller's *pseudo-intent* (the deceitful, faux-sincere

⁷⁰ A strange irony of trolling research is that the best trolls will never be identified, since they will successfully keep their intentions hidden from start to finish and will therefore seem just like any other sincere member of a CMC group.

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impression, given by the troller, of wishing to be a genuine group member) in such a way as to suggest that those Hs had taken S's pseudo-intention(s) to be genuine, and were unaware of her 'real' intention(s). As in Example 119 below, these sincere H-responses can include aggravated retaliation (i.e. flaming, see §3.6.2 and §5.5.1), interest, dismay, and shock. The H-responses are not easily captured by the response strategies (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5), particularly if S's trolling strategy was off-record:

Example 119

[RE060830]

239. **A** I spotted an old usable horse trailer, while taking my wife on an anniversary trip yesterday. So I drove out, and [Name Surname], the seller, pulled a tractor and backhoe out from in front of the trailer I wanted, so I could try a short tow, with my anemic S10 truck.
240. **B** **You're going to try to pull a loaded horse trailer with an S10? I think you're going to be minus an S10 in a hurry.**
241. **C** **He's a troll. You bit.**

In this case, B engages with A's genuine-seeming intent by critiquing his choice of vehicle for pulling a horsebox, and in doing so, constructs both himself and A as users having a sincere discussion in which neither is deceiving the other. C, however, not only assesses and constructs A's behaviour as trolling, but also explicitly identifies that B has taken the bait, recasting B's response from a sincere answer into a waste of time.

As in Example 119, sincere engagement with a troll is sometimes termed *biting*, *being trolled*, *being hooked*, etc. (cf. the derivation of this word from fishing in §5.4), and as with most instances where a person finds out that she has been taken in, there is an associated loss of face or damage to pride. Experienced

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users endeavour to avoid being cast as one who has taken the bait due to the implications this has of naiveté, ignorance, and gullibility, and also strive to position themselves as knowledgeable members with the foresight to avoid, predict, and deal with trolling. The greater the member's status, the greater the loss of face is if that member is then trolled:

Example 120

[SF060117]

242. **A** Who is to say this fabled other recipient of Best's new liver would have treated it any better? What if it went to someone who had lived a decent, healthy lifestyle that had suddenly been struck down by liver disease because he had offered a smoker a lift to the fish factory one morning? What, then, if Mr Fabled Recipient then thought to himself, 'Fuck me, Nigel (for that is his name)! I have just wasted 42 years of my life being a stupid goody two shoes and yet I still nearly died of liver disease. Fuck this for a lark, I'm going on the biggest bender of all time.' And then our Nigel is found dead from snowball OD six months later. How can you say that wouldn't have happened? You know, George Best wasn't the only cunt on the planet capable of fucking up a new liver.
243. **B** How the fuck does offering (or even giving, for that matter) somebody a lift, to a fish factory, give nigel liver disease?
244. **C** **The question we all wanted to ask, but didn't want to feel trolled.** I love you, I do.

Whilst B's response to the troller, A, seems rather wry and sarcastic, it is C's response that most clearly encapsulates the tension between responding to someone out of curiosity, interest, irritation, etc., and not wanting to expose oneself to the ignominy of being trolled. As Donath states,

trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most players. (Donath 1999: 6)

Sincerely engaging with a troller is akin to participating in a large, public game where one player is cheating, but, moreover, where other, honest players are aware of this. Whilst some honest players may try to educate the dupes, others

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may enjoy simply sitting back and mocking the naiveté of those who have been duped. This therefore makes being trolled a publicly embarrassing affair, and as with impoliteness, the size of audience can directly correlate to the extent of face-damage involved.

6.3.2.—Ignore

A strategy that occurred extensively in RE, but never (properly) in SF, was to ignore trolling via blocking (see §4.7.2.4), **killfiling** (see §4.7.2.5), or simply not reading the troller's posts. Where users do this silently, i.e. without alerting others, there is, of course, no trace in the data, and this is most consistent with the *do not respond* option suggested in Culpeper et al. (2003: 1,562). However, that leaves me nothing to analyse, so I do not discuss it any further.

Instead, I focus on the strategy of 'overtly' ignoring the troller, akin to Culpeper et al.'s (2003: 1,566) strategy of *opting out on record*. Users commonly (purport to) act in the group's interest by alerting others to their suspicions, and suggesting methods of dealing with the problem. This strategy is predicated on the idea that trollers are seeking attention, and if sufficiently starved of it, they will eventually get bored and leave:

Example 121

[RE090723]

245. **A A troll who/which gets no response, has failed.**

Users, particularly in RE, frequently tried to curb responses from others by not only highlighting the suspect's status as a troller, but also by advising, asking, or

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telling other members what to do:

Example 122

[RE030929]

246. **A** **Killfiles, girls. Use your killfiles and send this troll to the muck pile.**

Example 123

[RE060515]

247. **B** **FOLKS THIS IS A TROLL STOP FEEDING IT**

Example 124

[RE060807]

248. **C** All I asked was "where have you been!?". I wasn't encouraging anything.

249. **D** Yes you were. **Trolls should be ignored, not engaged in conversation.**

All three examples demonstrate the notion that ignoring or blocking the troller in some way denies her what she is after, and A, B, and especially D construct their identities as experienced members who not only know how to deal with trollers, but are willing to take steps to protect their group from disruption. In doing so, these members position trolling as an inappropriate, undesirable behaviour that is socially marked, and that needs to be stopped quickly to maintain group harmony. As mentioned above, however, this strategy was notable in its absence from SF, with one interesting exception:

Example 125

[SF050417]

250. **A** **Ok, ok, ok, folks, let's not feed the troll and maybe he'll go away.** I've already warned him privately that censure will be taken if he continues to **spam**. There's only one **newsgroup** here for which this post is on-topic.

251. **B** **Oh well that's sure to scare him off !**

252. **A** **lol** It did, well, nearly.

This is the only SF example that contains a user commenting on a discussion about ignoring trollers. On further investigation, however, whilst B is a member

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of SF, A is a member of another group that the troller has **crossposted** to. When replying, A has then (probably accidentally) **crossposted** back to all the groups caught up in the initial trolling attempt, including SF. SF member B is more concerned with mocking A's attempts at solving the problem than supporting A's strategy of ignoring the troller, and in doing so, B does not construct trolling as problematic or marked—rather, he constructs A's efforts as laughably futile.

Whilst RE users took frequent, and sometimes heated steps to prevent each other from responding to trollers, SF produced no examples of this nature. In fact, the general trend, as seen below, is that SF treats trolling as a game (albeit sometimes a *very* hotly contested one). In RE, trolling is predominantly treated as aberrant and undesirable behaviour that needs suppressing quickly.

However, attempts to manage trolling sometimes caused *more* irritation than the trolling itself, since those efforts needlessly prolonged, and drew attention to the unwelcome interaction:

Example 126

[SF060502]

253. **A B, somebody is helpfully cancelling C's posts** and the only reason I am aware of them is because of **your** posts, which are not only foolish, as **he is just a troll and best ignored**, but also being sprayed across numerous **newsgroups** because you don't trim them. **Please, just hold back**. Or at least, don't post to [**newsgroup name**].

Example 127

[RE060717]

254. **D** Back to smells: ammonia doesn't work. [*Name*] like that so much he tried to put his nose in the baggie and snort up all the ammonia soaked cotton balls.

255. **E** Yep, take a plastic bag, fill it with ammonia soaked cotton balls, and put it over your horse's muzzle..... Real **f**king** smart.....

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256. **D** Smarter than you, who appears to be really fucking DUMB.
257. **F** PLEASE DON'T FEED THE TROLL!!!! damnit.
258. **E** It's my thread, I get to feed whomever I want in it. **BTW**, do you think posting "PLEASE DON'T FEED THE TROLL!!!!" a zillion times ISN'T feeding the troll? Silly you.
259. **F** Fine. Whatever. Not feeding trolls is usually a choice of wisdom. Clearly some of you prefer to be taken in.

In Example 126, which is also from SF, A (a member of another group) responds to B (a member of a third group) and though this is also **crossposted** to SF, the SF members do not support or add their agreement to A's strategy. In Example 127, F's efforts at preventing E from continuing to engage with D only aggravate E, despite the fact that E seems to accept the probability that D is trolling.

A notable feature of the ignore strategy was that in most examples, users choose to speak to each other, instead of addressing the troller directly. However, indirect conversations between members which aim to exclude the troller and stifle any further interaction from her, can still give her an opening to respond to, and attempts to stem or suppress trolling can actually exacerbate the problem, not only with other users, as alluded to above, but also with the trollers. As E points out in Example 127 above, even an 'overt non-response' (e.g. where members openly declare their intentions to ignore the troller) automatically self-cancels its intended aim, since it is still a response that the troller can reply to or attack. (See §6.4 for further examples of this).

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6.3.3.—Expose

As described in §6.2.5, members did not always have the choice of simply **killfiling** users that they wished to ignore, since sometimes, those individuals offered advice or information that could be dangerous to an unsuspecting **newbie**. Instead, some users felt obliged to take note of those who gave bad advice, and refer back to this past behaviour as a form of character reference, as in the examples below. (In these cases, A is the same individual both times):

Example 128

[RE070201]

260. **A** Hi **B** - pretty - and they grow so fast.... My eye caught up on a detail of Mom's forefoot: I compared it with Mystic's forefoot in a shot on a trailing lead I took earlier this evening: [*link to photograph of a young horse, tacked up and grazing loose (i.e. not held by anyone), its reins thrown over a rock, and a lead trailing on the ground around its forefoot*] ...and I noticed a difference in angle - just a passing step probably?
261. **C** There are so many scary things in your picture, **A**. I 'm not going to rise to the troll's bait. In re your observation about angles: Joints look different depending on whether they are standing still or moving. That's how joints work. Duh.
262. **A** Sorry if I frightened you, but I'm glad you spoke up. **I already read what happens when someone here tries to do the kind of simple thing I do without a problem**, I need a cautionary note every time.
263. **D** That's because there's a huge difference between safe practices, and **unsafe practices where you have been lucky, so far. [...] Given your propensity for doing unsafe things, some day your luck will run out too.**
264. **C** Some of the time you will get away with leaving a young horse tacked up and grazing with a rope on the ground. But just like when you pass on the blind corner, when you don't get away with it, the result is so messy, and often so tragic, that people with functioning brain cells find that taking reasonable precautions (**AKA** good horsemanship or good driving) is smart. FAilure to take these precautions is the origin of most Darwin Awards. Sheesh.
265. **A** Hi **C**. No offence intended. But may I ask, are you a rated riding instructor, or possibly a show judge? I have found it's very important to check my sources when reading this **NG**. And I accept some risks because I am handling several green horses every day - nearly always quite alone. The picture that got you excited was a snap I took after ground walking two young geldings in tack yesterday. I dropped both their lines while I took a

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picture. I walked another two today. And I dropped their lines for a few moments too. And probably will continue to do so every day. Sorry.

266. **B** No, I'm not a "rated" riding instructor, whatever that is. **I do, however, know better than to leave a fully tacked up young horse loose with a long rope while I take pictures to impress rec.eq.**

Example 129

[RE090125]

267. **A** Rendered animal fat - such as neatsfoot oil for leather tack - is probably as close as animal fats should get to horses I think - if that. I add a splash of Canola to feed, along with sunflower seed.
268. **E** **And I doubt I will **ever** follow any of your advice, troll.**

Despite the fact that the advice given by supposed troller A in Example 129 is not momentous or particularly risky, E is quick to discount it based on A's prior behaviour as exemplified in Example 128, a post from two years previously. (See also A in Example 107 in §6.2.3 above, and Example 156 in §6.4.1 below, who is the same individual as A in these examples. Example 107 predates Example 128 by twelve days, but demonstrates the sort behaviour from A that has almost certainly affected the responses that he receives not only in Example 128 but also in Example 129.) As a result, even though E may be unable to **killfile** A, she can still effectively moderate his interaction in the group in another way, by drawing attention to his status as an outcast and an untrustworthy source.

The *defensive* counterstrategy arguably most closely fits with C, D, and E's responses, yet still falls far from the mark. In both examples, C, D, and E are not really protecting their own faces—rather, they are trying to protect other, innocent users from potential harm, and in doing so, they are arguably using *offensive* strategies that damage A's face. This said, if A is trolling, then he is

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using a *covert* offensive attack to trigger an *overt* (offensive or defensive) counterattack that appears to be the prime aggressing move (rather than a response to some prior trigger). In doing so, he attacks whilst assuming the position of the victim, and the victims (the group) are positioned as the attackers if they attempt to defend themselves (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5). To even categorise the response as an attack or counterattack, we must first establish each participant's role, since the proactive and wrongful aggressor may cast herself as the reactive and wronged victim, and then place the actual victim in her own position of aggressor.

6.3.4.—Challenge

Within the data, it was evident that not just any response was a success for trolls. Some users adopted response strategies which aimed to fall outside of what the troller, and other users, might consider as biting. In doing so, those users attempted to avoid the appearance of having been trolled, and espouse the identities of being knowledgeable members capable of recognising, and dealing with trolling. This offensive counterstrategy occasionally occurred indirectly, where users would talk amongst themselves about how trolls ought to be dealt with (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5):

Example 130

[RE031201]

269. **A** Haven't we used up all the troll food yet?

270. **B** Yeah, but I've got some D-Con left. And a night scope on my shotgun.

Example 131

[RE060622]

271. **C** Personally, I'm thinking the most appropriate treatment would be a 150 grain copper/lead bolus administered intracranially, but unfortunately,

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that's considered an "off-label" use for trolls, and there's so much paperwork involved in getting approval that it isn't worth the effort.

The benefit of an indirect response is that, should a troller respond, H can deny that his post was about her, but indirect challenges also carry the risk that the troller may not realise, or may choose to pretend not to realise, that this post targets her. Challenging also occurred directly, where the user would openly confront the troller:

Example 132

[RE051108]

272. **A** I am a civilized person. If you defeat me that is fine.
273. **B** Fine or not, you went down in flames when you entered this [newsgroup](#).
Even the dullards on this bunch eat trolls breakfast and use their bones for toothpicks.

Such attempts, however, whilst they seek to expose a troller and scare her off, can easily fall into the category of flaming (see §3.6.2 and §5.5.1), or in terms of the impoliteness literature, as a provoked, defensive form of malicious impoliteness, especially if H responds with equal, or greater impoliteness than S produced (Culpeper 1996: 355; Andersson & Pearson 1999; Bousfield 2008: 220). He may then find his response being reconstructed by the troller and/or other members as taking the bait and being trolled, particularly if the troller is amused enough by his response to keep the interaction going.

6.3.5.—Critique

One of the most interesting aspects that came to light was how trollers are appraised by users for their degree of success in relation to the quality of the

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trolling itself, and with regards to how others responded to the trolling. Trollers and their efforts were open to criticisms on quality, effectiveness, and success, and users from RE/SF were quick to criticise 'bad' examples:

Example 133

[RE060504]

274. **A** I am boarding my pony at a stable and the dumb bitch that runs the place is having a fit because I am 3 months late in my board money. I told her I planned to pay in full as soon as I win the lottery this month, and I know I will be winning because it's my turn to win. Instead of being happy that I plan to get paid up, she mailed me a letter that said "You must pay all your back board in full by May 15, 2006, or you will be dealing with the po lice". (Exactly in those words). I know that po lice means pony lice. The bitch is going to intentionally infect my pony. That is not fair to the pony. I think I am going to have to sue this bitch. By the way, If anyone plans to board their horse in the [Location] area, DO NOT board at [Business Name]. The owner is a fucking bitch, and she beats and starves all the boarders horses.
275. **B** Well aren't you a friendly girl. **You might have to keep practising your trolling though. It's not very good.**
276. **C** **Worst troll I've seen in a LONG time.** Must be a preteen.

Example 134

[SF050419]

277. **D** **Please make more of an effort when you want to troll.**

Example 135

[SF070420]

278. **E** **Bad troll, back in your box! I would be ashamed of crappy troll material like that...**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, A's efforts are roundly criticised, and intriguingly, C, D, and E suggest that the trollers in question should actually try *harder* to do a better job and come up with better material. This strategy is notable for two reasons. It (implicitly or explicitly) positions the users as having already identified that S is a troller, and it also constructs the troller as particularly poor, inept, or stupid. By comparison, the users can themselves adopt identities of knowledgeable members whose experience with trolling puts them in a

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position to advise and appraise the efforts of would-be trolls (see §3.5).

This strategy was also used to judge the troller's entertainment value:

Example 136

[RE050907]

279. **A** Why is anyone responding to this troll? In the history of the trolls we have had here, **he is not entertaining.**
280. **B** Yes, but he's a new troll. And he's really dumb, no matter what he says. **Don't tell me you've never watched a cat tossing around a dead mouse and been amused...**

Example 137

[RE060112]

281. **C** You know not who you are dealing with...
282. **D** Indeed I do- **an exceptionally inept and entertaining troll.**

In casting the troller as a form of entertainment, the users position themselves as an audience choosing to observe and be amused by the troller's antics, and the troller is then cast as one who is succeeding, or failing, to live up to their expectations and requirements. The troller is then shifted from someone who has chosen to aggravate the group, to someone who is performing for the group and is expected to do a good job of it, or be metaphorically booed off stage. This moves the assumption of authority and autonomy from the troller, who is (supposedly) covertly in possession of greater knowledge because she is aware of what she is about and is deceiving the group, to the users, who are overtly in possession of that 'secret' knowledge and are choosing to allow the troller to behave in that way for as long as they see fit. This repositioning of the would-be troller to an inferior position in the group's hierarchy is extended yet further when she is recast not only as a particularly lowly form of entertainment, but

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also as one in need of a home or looking after, rather like a stray pet (line 289):

Example 138

[SF070828]

283. **A** Dream on, **B**. I have to say, in all honesty, **you're not very good at this trolling game, are you?**
284. **B** On the contrary cunthead I reckon I have realised my aim of getting your **ng** to make complete and utter fools of themselves by chasing me all over **usenet**.
285. **C** **YRNRFTNG, AY?**
286. **B** If I was not good at what I do then why do you continue to reply to me ?
287. **C** **YRNRFTNG, AY?**
288. **D** **HRNRFANG not even au.clueless.trolls**
289. **E** Perhaps we should make him a little more welcome. **It's been a while since we had our own really shit troll**. The seat is starting to get cold. Someone go grab him a hood and give him a number, I'll go bake a battenburg.

In the above cases, the trolls were appraised and critiqued by users for their lack of talent, their entertainment value, and the value of retaining them (presumably for further entertainment purposes). However, adept, clever, and successful trolls were also regularly directly (see Example 139 and Example 140) and indirectly (see Example 141, Example 142, and Example 143) appraised and critiqued by users. Interestingly, this was markedly less common in SF:

Example 139

[RE060531]

290. **A** Ah...now it makes sense. You ***are*** a troll! I suspected as much. I give it to ya, **you were a bit (only a bit) more clever than most at the start** but you couldn't help yourself could you...

Example 140

[RE060317]

291. **B** Ok, I get it. **Nice subtle troll**. Fair play to you, you had me going there for a bit..

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Example 141

[RE070114]

292. **C** **It was a successful troll.** I don't know why people do it. It must be a sort of perverted hobby, like graffiti or crapping in dressing rooms.

Example 142

[RE070213]

293. **D** One thing I can say for **E** is that **he's the most successful troll here**, and everyone keeps contributing to his cause! Duh. STOP already.

Example 143

[RE060317]

294. **F** **I think we are dealing with an exceptionally talented troll!** She even has us talking about her in another thread. Without feeding the troll, we are feeding the troll.

This suggests that even though trolling is meant as an aggravation to users, it can become a two-sided game of point and counter-point where a troller seeks to deceive and attack, and users parry with critiques on the effectiveness and quality of the deception and the trolling. In doing so, users are addressing the troller's real intent (i.e. to troll the group), rather than her pseudo-intent (i.e. to sincerely engage with the group). Where this occurs, the users appear to adopt something close to mock impoliteness (see §2.4.6.1), however, as discussed many times now (see §5.4.3 in particular), whilst mock impoliteness aims to enhance social cohesion and affect, in these cases, the troller is still the ostracised outgroup member (Labov 1972; Leech 1983: 144; Haugh 2008; 2010a).

Troll-critiquing can become a game where trollers and users struggle to assume the higher position of power. This position can be determined by who has the greater knowledge of what is going on (i.e. is the user aware of the troller's hidden intentions? Or is only the troller aware of what she is up to?), who is seen to control their own behaviour and manipulate the behaviour of others

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(i.e. is the user *permitting* the trolling? Or is the troller behaving as she wishes?), and who has the experience or knowledge to judge the quality of the trolling being undertaken (i.e. by virtue of critiquing a troller, a group member has already positioned himself as one with greater experience and authority).

6.3.6.—Mock

Users would occasionally use an offensive counterattack to a trolling attempt by mocking or parodying the troller (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5). This occurred both indirectly between users, and directly at the troller. This strategy, whilst it occurred occasionally in RE, was most popular in SF:

Example 144

[SF060601]

295. **A** Take your little net-kiddie wars to another dimension in time. If you are men, I feel embarrassed for all who reply -- because you act like women.
296. **B** I refuse to respond to this obvious troll.
297. **C** Errrr...didnt you just reply?
298. **D** You just did!

Example 145

[RE051007]

299. **E** geez, it's tough to be a troll on this group....<g>
300. **F** how come [Name], [Name], [Name], [Name], etal, haven't joined in? <snort>
301. **G** Too much pride to waste their talent on a whack job? ;-)
302. **H** Aw, the pickin's have been sorta thin in the troll department lately...you keep your hand in on what's available, ya know? ;>)
303. **J** **My horse is laying on the ground barely breathing. Until I can get medical/surgical on him and can then call the vet (not before next week), can you tell me: 1. what's wrong with him? and 2. do I even deserve a horse? Thanks in advance! Love, trollerita**

Example 146

[RE060812]

304. **K** Trolling means posting idiotic messages to rile up a **newsgroup** or message board. **I should explain that we get at least one character a week saying something like, "Every time my horse bites I hit him in the**

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head with a hammer, but he keeps doing it." (You're not supposed to hit horses with hammers or anything else.)

B, a long-established user with a reputation for humour, uses a reply to a troller's efforts as an opportunity to not only potentially troll the troller, A, back (see §6.3.7), but also to mock troll to enhance her solidarity with her own ingroup at the same time. Similarly, J draws on ingroup knowledge and norms to produce an example of mock trolling that is recognisable to, and therefore socially shared by, and amusing to her group (de Fina 2006: 352). Meanwhile, K provides a sarcastic example of a typical, shocking, pseudo-naïve scenario (see §6.2.5).

As mentioned above, by indirectly mocking a troller, this incorporates an element of safety since the users could plausibly deny the relationship between their humour and the troller. This strategy also serves the function of strengthening group cohesion by identifying those ingroup members who can understand and enjoy the humour appropriately from those who are excluded or outgrouped by a lack of knowledge or because the humour targets them.

Cultural differences between RE/SF may also be one reason why this strategy occurs more frequently in SF. Specifically, SF is characterised by a more jocular, relaxed, unserious nature, unlike RE which tends more towards serious discussion and is less tolerant of behaviour that falls outside of the group's norms of interaction. (See §4.2 for the differences between RE/SF.)

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More often in SF, users directly challenged the troller via mockery or sarcasm:

Example 147

[SF090123]

305. **A** Heh. I'm starting to like you, **B**, I really am. It's precisely your self-righteous attitude which is going to save the world from everything. You're my second-favourite troll of 2009. Although I do actually suspect you of being **C**.

In this case, A works to neutralise the threat that alleged troller B poses by reframing her and her efforts from a potentially serious danger to the group's harmony and cohesion, to an entertainment that can be enjoyed, particularly by A, but also by the rest of the group as well. By further classifying B as the *second-favourite*, this adds the extra insult of suggesting that B isn't even the best at *this*, either. Sometimes this tactic was taken much further, into the realms of 'educating' the troller on how to do her 'job' properly:

Example 148

[SF051129]

306. **A** This is the best bit of all. Here **B** uses the method of 'selective snipping' to make a funny joke. Ultimately though **B** has failed on two counts. Any really successful troll would have utilised three other response approaches: 1) The 'typo-bait'. Perhaps I didn't make any typos. This is for next time **B** - Please don't make fun of my tyops **B!!!!11** 2) The 'repetition'. **B** has not responded to my posts with an attempt at a catchphrase. May I suggest that he use something like 'I hear a faint yapping' as made famous by **C**. 3) The 'post edit'. Where a responder will alter the text of the person they are responding to, so as to make out that that person has made a ridiculous statement. I feel for you **B**, really I do. I can see that you're trying to get the wondrous approval of the people in your **newsgroup** (people, I may add, that you will never meet) by trolling me. If trying to do that makes you happy so be it. You carry on.

In the above case, A extensively mocks B's overall trolling tactics, and by explicating his knowledge of these strategies, A also makes it difficult for B to use them, or similar tactics without A then being able to mock her for doing so.

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Sometimes users mixed, or employed multiple strategies, such as mocking troller directly, and also taking up the running joke between themselves:

Example 149

[SF070820]

307. **A** Only on your tongue perhaps
308. **B** Excellent. Reports of this **froup**'s demise may have been exaggerated, nothing says 'healthy **newghey**' more than a fully-fledged troll. Tell me, **A**, did the agency send you?
309. **C** I dunno, **B. A** doesn't even know what a **Froup** is. Underbridge can't have briefed him very well. I think we ought to send him back stamped "**RNRFTNG**" and demand an immediate refund. And some booze for **E**.
310. **B** I recruited him myself, and I'm expecting the usual commission. Well, to tell the truth, he's been following me around like a little puppy dog for the past couple of days and he seems a bit lost and bewildered. Still, he's definitely ghey and a bit of a Kunt and we should welcome him. **BTW**: He answers to 'Prince'.
311. **E** How much booze do you think we'll get for **D**?
312. **C** I dunno. Has anyone ever tried fermenting him to see?

Whilst B addresses the troller, A, directly, C and E pick up the humour with B, and involve another group member, D, in the discussion. As mentioned above, this helps to stress the solidarity between those who have ingroup knowledge and are, therefore, legitimate, fully inducted members (in this case, B, C, E, and D), versus those who are merely passing through, outsiders, or in this case, the butt of the joke. When using this particular strategy, rather than explicitly suppressing or trying to prevent the troller from responding, the users even encourage further replies that allow them to continue mocking her. For this reason, the troller may become unwilling to respond since she might find herself gradually being positioned as one who is being trolled herself.

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6.3.7.—Reciprocate

In some instances, users endeavour to jeopardise the troller's success by demonstrating their awareness of what they feel is her real intent, alluding to, or explicitly informing her of their ability to deal with trolls effectively (see §6.3.4), and further, by making sport of trolls:

Example 150

[RE060515]

313. **A** Yes, of course it's a troll. So what? Troll-baiting can be fun.
314. **B** Precisely :) Especially when it reveals its weakness in its first post.

Example 151

[RE051008]

315. **C** Aw, the pickin's have been sorta thin in the troll department lately...**you keep your hand in on what's available, ya know? ;>**)

Users A and C above indicate their interest in attacking and baiting, or in other words, deliberately choosing to challenge and battle the trolls. Example 152 and Example 153 below, however, demonstrates the ability of users such as A and F to *entirely* switch roles and take on a trolling identity in order to play the trolls, C and D, at their own game:

Example 152

[RE060318]

316. **A** Umm... **B?** Do you think **C** made up her hot_ail address all special for us, just for this post? (Google is your friend.) Do you think she really has a husband? Do you think she is really even a she? Wait. I get it!!! **You're trolling the troll.** Had me going for a minute there. <g>

Example 153

[SF060330]

317. **D** There's a delete key?
318. **F** Assuming you haven't deleted it, then yes, yes there is. It's right next to the 'ignore' key.
319. **E** Good ol' **F.** Always trolling teh trolls. I do hope life is treating you well.
320. **F** Oh it is.

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321. **G** You know, he's just got a big shiny new van with the words 'Good ol' F - Always trolling teh trolls' printed in big red letters on the side. And his number so you can call him any time day or night when you want some trolls trolled. I think the business will do really well. It's also got a "How's my driving?" sticker on the back but cleverly the phone number goes to his own house rather than the mysterious driving police.

This retaliation-in-kind is captured in a range of literature on impoliteness, particularly where individuals reciprocate with equal, or greater impoliteness (Culpeper 1996: 355; Andersson & Pearson 1999; Bousfield 2008: 220), that can potentially escalate into a conflict spiral (Lein & Brenneis 1978: 301; Felson 1982: 245; Andersson & Pearson 1999) (see §2.5.2.3).

From this and the previous strategies, it is clear that trolling is a far more complex issue than simply launching unprovoked attacks on others; it is open to criticisms on its quality, effectiveness, and success, and it can be turned around on the troller so that she is reconstructed as the naïve, gullible victim instead of the successful aggressor. However, whilst the above strategies may put some trollers off and encourage them to behave appropriately or leave, others may choose to respond, particularly to accusations or attacks. The following section deals with the strategies that the (perceived) troller employs to justify, defend, or entrench her position.

6.4.—TROLLER (SPEAKER) RESPONSES

This section considers the types of reply, and the attempts at manipulating users, the group, or the context that those accused of trolling can undertake in

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response to their accusers. As above, I consider whether those responses fall within the strategies of (1) not responding to the trolling, (2) accepting the trolling, (3) countering the trolling *defensively* (i.e. by protecting H's own face) or, (4) countering the trolling *offensively* (i.e. by attacking S's face) (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5).

It is worth considering, however, that users face an ongoing problem: someone who *appears* to be a troller may simply be an inexperienced user who has misunderstood some aspect of CMC, or who has acted upon expectations that others do not share, or someone young, or emotionally unstable:

Example 154

[RE071116]

322. **A** But in truth **it is at times hard to distinguish a mentally questionable, emotionally dysfunctional, lonely individual from a troll....** and many times **the intent to troll might not be there but the impact is the same** (because the individual cannot control his/her emotions.)

Example 155

[RE060317]

323. **B** If you think I'm a troll. I am not. **I am a newbie. Learning how to use Usenet.** (not a discussion board as I have been corrected)

A and B above clearly demonstrate this problem for the users who feel they may be dealing with a possible troller. Judging how to respond is not simply a matter of protecting one's own pride from accusations of having been trolled, but it can also include moral and social implications about how one may be treating someone who is vulnerable, young, or inexperienced. This must be weighed up against the fact that the user may also be a troller who is playing on these possibilities. Where the behaviour is clearly unacceptable, imposing penalties

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becomes relatively simple, but dealing with a user who appears to be acting, or trying to act, close to the accepted norms for that activity type (Levinson 1979) can be far more problematic. Meanwhile, confronted individuals may deny the accusations, plead ignorance or inexperience, brand attempts at blocking them as censorious or cowardly, or even accuse the confronting individuals of being trolls themselves (Herring 1999: 151; Herring et al. 2002: 377). These strategies are discussed further below.

6.4.1.—Deny

The most common strategy that individuals accused of trolling adopted in RE was a defensive counterattack in the form of denying the accusations as they arose. These denials correlate with the *direct contradiction* strategy outlined by Brenneis & Lein (1977: 56-7) and later developed by Culpeper et al. (2003: 1,564). These denials could be of involvement (e.g. *someone hacked my account and posted that*), or, more typically, of intention (e.g. *I didn't mean to cause offence*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, the denials also frequently co-occurred with offensive counterstrategies or shows of affront (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5):

Example 156

[RE070210]

324. **B** **A** is a troll.

325. **A** **B** is a very, very silly girl who is not quite sure what a troll is, but she knows how to repeat sneers from other happy group readers.

Example 157

[RE090603]

326. **C** **I think "F" is a troll.** Who would pay lots of real money for a Friesian X?

327. **D** Someone whose only alternative is a purebred Friesian?

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328. **E** Now wait a minute. Some of the sporty ones are sporty.
329. **D** Define "sporty." "Looks like they MIGHT be able to get out of the way in a real emergency" doesn't count.
330. **F** **I am not a troll, you little jealous children.** I own and breed pure friesians and I have crosses. And **D**- the jumping world is filled with what we call warmbloods who carry so much diverse breeding that genetically the breeds are a mix- and so the sport horse was born. Just like a national show horse is to some wonderous, and an appendix qh is a great hunter type, andtb's dot all the warmblood registries, so are friesian sport horses. **D** if you can actually ride at all- go ride one- if you can- I am sure they can move much better than you actually think you can ride.

A, a long-time but unfavoured group member (the same user as in Example 107, Example 128, and Example 129), takes the risky strategy of not only denigrating B, but also the rest of the group, whilst newcomer and alleged troller F rather thoroughly undoes any good work that her denial may have achieved by insulting all those who have accused her, and then specifically attacking D's riding ability. Whilst such responses may be understandable, particularly if the accused is innocent, it is easy to see how this behaviour will tend to support the co-constructions of the accused's identity as a troller, rather than challenge them, and in doing so, exacerbate and entrench the positions adopted by the group, rather than resolving the conflict.

6.4.2.—Investigate

A more complex version of denial that occurred in the data involved the accused not simply contradicting the accuser, but also turning the tables on him and requiring an explanation for his actions. This too involved a mixture of defensive (self-protecting) and offensive (other-attacking) strategies (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5).

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As already mentioned throughout this thesis, it is not always possible for H to confidently determine that S is causing trouble *intentionally* and to then uncontroversially label her a troller. It is perhaps easier (for H and analyst) to identify *behaviours* that are troll-like, and then to determine that someone who continues to engage in these behaviours even after being warned otherwise is probably a troller. If H cannot be certain enough that S intended to troll, then he may be forced to err on the side of caution in his response. As discussed in §6.3.3, this is because, should H actively retaliate or confront S on-record (see line 3 in Appendix B below), then S too could utilise an *apparent* mismatch between S intention and H interpretation by denying malicious intent and reformulating her behaviour as misunderstood. For instance, she may argue that her utterance was *incidental impoliteness* (e.g. greater causes than face were at stake, see §2.4.6.4), *failed politeness* (see §2.4.6.3), or *mock impoliteness* (e.g. a joke or sarcasm, see §2.4.6.1). If S is able to plausibly deny any impolite intention (line 333), H may inadvertently find *himself* cast in the role of prime aggressor, and being called upon to account for *his* behaviour:

Example 158

[RE031127]

331. **A** I never said I was having trouble instilling simple stable manners in my horse (or as you so rudely put it..my WP drudge) I am just PLAYING with this method out of boredom. And having a great time at it.
332. **B** Ah, you're trolling. That explains a lot.
333. **A** **B, explain to me exactly how I am being a Troll.** I am participating in a **ng** about horses. Thats all. We are discussing a method of horse training that I like and you don't. I have stated from my original post that I was just playing with this method because I was bored. **So how exactly does that make me a troll? Despite what everyone has said, I have not been dishonest with any of my posts, I have not been rude to any one, and I**

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have not bashed their chosen method of training. All of which has been done back to me. If you think I am a troll I would like to know why.

In Example 158 above, the user accused of trolling, A uses three strategies—one that is mixture of offensive and defensive, one that is mainly defensive, and one that is mainly offensive. She both defends her own face and attacks B's by requiring him to justify his accusation, including a better explanation of its basis. She defends herself by providing her own summary of how her behaviour does not fit the accusation. And she attacks the others in the group by highlighting how they *are* engaging in that behaviour, but crucially, are *not* being accused of trolling (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5).

This example also demonstrates to an extent how groups can develop off-record, implicit hierarchies of privilege that some may be allowed to climb (e.g. the senior, knowledgeable, dominant, etc.). Those higher-ranking members may then take on a role of authority and leadership, and expect or receive far more latitude from the group with regards to the behaviours they can engage in, whereas low-ranking members (e.g. the inexperienced, new, passive, etc.) may be subjected to behaviour that the group does not allow them to engage in themselves without strong repercussions (see §3.4 and §4.7 for discussions of norms and boundaries). In this case, new member A's description of how others have behaved towards her in a way she has not behaved herself, hints at her perception that different norms and rules of acceptable behaviour are being enforced for different members to her disadvantage. By calling this explicitly into question, it allows her to overtly take the moral high ground and position

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herself as one who is being unfairly treated by others who have no formal, official authority to do so.

Example 158 also problematises the issue of the offensive-defensive strategies proposed Harris et al. (1986) and later developed by Culpeper et al. (2003: 1,562-5). To reiterate, these strategies posit that should a victim choose to retaliate to an attack, he will choose to do so *offensively* (i.e. by attacking the face of his attacker) or *defensively* (i.e. by protecting his own face). In Example 158 above, however, what B seems to view as *defensive* behaviour that has been justifiably triggered by an off-record, or impending attack, A seems to view as *offensive*, unjustifiable, and unprovoked behaviour. Both A and B possibly perceive themselves as the innocent victim, and entitled to *defensively* counter the other's *offensive* behaviour, meaning that the way each utterance would be categorised would depend on the viewpoint adopted (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990).

6.4.3.—Excuse

Along with both the simpler and more complex forms of denial, another strategy adopted by individuals accused of trolling involved attempting to excuse the behaviour as a result of a problem, such as a lack of knowledge, a failure of pragmatic or experiential understanding, misjudgement, etc.. This overlaps with Labov's (1972) Culpeper et al.'s (2003: 1,565) *abrogation* strategy, but rather than deflecting the responsibility onto another person, S is usually passing the responsibility onto some sort of problem. With regards to the response strategies outlined above (see §6.3 and §6.4), this response type came

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closest to the *accept* option (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5):

Example 159

[RE060516]

334. **A** Since everyone thinks I am a troll, I wont post here anymore. **I didn't mean to come across the way I did**, and this group doesn't mean anything to me anyway, I used to post about a year ago, just remembered it again, and after seeing the videos and of course being horrified by what I saw, thought I would ask what I asked in my first post. **As i go back and read the posts, I can see how I came across, and really don't blame ya for thinking what you thought.** I remembered this group as one that had some real knowledgeable folks, and maybe some who could give me some decent advice on a few things, but oh well, so be it.

This is typical of many examples, in that users rarely adopted one clear strategy.

In this case, A mixes attempts at accepting responsibility for leading the group into forming a particular interpretation of her behaviour (i.e. *accepting the attack*), with attempts at saving her own face by suggesting that the group isn't important to her (i.e. *defensive counterstrategy*), and insinuating that none of the members are knowledgeable or able to assist her anyway (i.e. *offensive counterstrategy*). In this way she attempts to construct her identity not as someone who is trolling, but as someone who has made a mistake and received rough treatment from the group that has also failed to meet her expectations.

Some users, however, opt for greater levels of attack as a form of defence:

Example 160

[RE060812]

335. **A** The four replies were somewhat helpful, however to **B** - why is it out of the realm of possibility that **a person has no knowledge of horses** - your comments are rude and full of contempt - **I don't know what a RL is either or trolling** - does that make me a criminal!

In the above example, A does not to accept that her actions may have triggered

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the accusations, but instead claims ignorance of what trolling is (as well as the abbreviation RL). She constructs an identity of inexperience, both with horses (the group's topic) and with CMC (the group's medium), implicitly suggesting that she is unlikely to engage in a behaviour she knows nothing about, making B's accusation seem unjustified. A also exaggerates B's accusation of trolling to an accusation of criminal behaviour, and by arguing that her lack of knowledge is not a 'crime' that merits the treatment she is receiving, A reconstructs B's behaviour as rude, severe, and unjustified.

The relative success of either strategy may be judged to an extent by how the interaction subsequently continued. Example 159, for instance, only attracts one response from a user who simply reiterates that A should check her facts and be willing to listen, and A makes no further response, presumably because she has left the group as promised. Example 160, however, becomes part of a larger, ongoing discussion that I analyse in more depth later (see Chapter Seven).

6.4.4.—Accuse

Rather than simply settling for defensive options such as straightforward denials or excuses, (alleged) trolls can adopt offensive counterstrategies that are potentially far more damaging to the accuser (see §6.3 and §6.4) (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5):

Example 161

[RE031112]

336. **A** You tried to falsely accuse me of being a troll, and **that's not something a responsible adult would do**. I pointed out to you that I am not a troll, which you can verify, as I've advised, by looking it up to find out what the

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term really means. **I don't know what would drive you to try to tell lies about me in public, but it can't be something that'd be beneficial to you.** For the uninitiated, "Troll ... An electronic mail message, **Usenet** posting or other (electronic) communication which is intentionally incorrect, but not overtly controversial (compare flame bait), or the act of sending such a message. Trolling aims to elicit an emotional reaction from those with a hair-trigger on the reply key. A really subtle troll makes some people lose their minds..." [web address] Firstly, there's nothing intentionally incorrect in any of my posts (except that one about the corpus callosum). Secondly, the contents of my messages are in fact openly, not overtly, controversial, when that's relevant and ontopic. Thirdly, my interest in being used by you as some feeble excuse to kneejerk yourself into a frontal lobotomy is less than nil. Do make a note of that.

In Example 161, the strategies adopted by long-term user A involve not simply defensively denying the accusation, but also explicitly defining what trolling is (according to A), and pointing out how her behaviour does not accord with this definition. She also then adopts offensive strategies of suggesting that it is the accuser (the unmentioned B), and not A, who is causing trouble both by lying about A, and by not behaving like a responsible adult.

A therefore instantiates her own indexical identity as a knowledgeable, experienced user via her overt use of identity labels, her presuppositions regarding her own and B's positions, and her evaluation of her own and B's interactional footing (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594). In particular, A's argument seems built on her awareness of her own behaviour and its limits within the group's norms and boundaries (see §3.4.5), which challenges B's construction that her behaviour is problematic or trolling. Instead, A turns the accusation back onto B by suggesting that *he* is behaving inappropriately. This challenges *his* identity of righteous indignation by demonstrating that he is actually (in her

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view) a surreptitious, irresponsible trouble-causer who is spreading false accusations. At its mildest, this strategy might involve A suggesting that it is B who has issues, but it may span through to A suggesting that it is B who is actually trolling.

6.4.5.—Attack

A relatively unusual response in the data was for the accused to simply retaliate with an outright, aggressive, offensive counterattack on the accuser(s) (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5). The rarity of this strategy is perhaps accounted for by the fact that it seems to confirm the accusations of trolling rather than have any effect on mitigating them:

Example 162

[SF060502]

337. **A** **B**, somebody is helpfully cancelling **C**'s posts and the only reason I am aware of them is because of **your** posts, which are not only foolish, as he is just a troll and best ignored, but also being sprayed across numerous **newsgroups** because you don't trim them. Please, just hold back. Or at least, don't post to [**newsgroup name**].
338. **C** **So, not only are they [A, B, C, etc.] netcops, but they're gutless cancellers too. Thanks for the heads up. Time to get out the toys.**

Example 163

[SF060503]

339. **D** +-----+
| PLEASE |
| DO NOT |
| FEED THE |
| TROLLS |
+-----+
||
||
340. **E** **Oh how sweet, some dipshit thinks he's witty, psoting a torll sign. How original...NOT!.....LOL GIT-R-DONE**

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341. **F** Shove that fucking sign up your ass.

As mentioned in §6.3.2, user attempts to manage trolling behaviour can actually trigger more problems than they solve, even if those attempts are indirect and discussed between members without explicit reference to the trolls in question. For instance, despite the fact that A is talking about alleged troller C with someone else, C decides to respond to this, also indirectly, as though she is addressing others (presumably also trolls) who in turn support her. She both openly insults C and the canceller, and implicitly threatens that more is to come, with, *time to get out the toys*.

In Example 163, although D's post is meant to manage the behaviours of other members, it triggers in indirect attack from E which is again carried out as though shared with others, followed by a direct attack from F. In both cases, rather than trying to excuse or deny their behaviour, C, E, and F seem rather to confirm the interpretation of their intentions that A, B, D, and other members have arrived at, by collaboratively co-constructing their posts as deliberately offensive, and reinforcing their identities as trolls.

6.5.—SUMMARY

This Chapter analysed the common strategies identified in RE/SF as trolling behaviour, and essentially distilled these down to six strategies: (1) criticising posts, e.g. via proof-reading them, rather than engaging with their content, which demonstrated some links with incidental and malicious impoliteness; (2)

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digressing from the topic at hand (e.g. by proof-reading, attention-seeking, cascading, etc.) which had no clear overlap with any of the impoliteness definitions from §2.4.6 but did have some links to the legislation reviewed in §3.6.1.2; (3) (shocking) insensitivity, which had some links with failed politeness and malicious impoliteness; (4) antipathy, which, like digression, was not comfortably accounted for by any of the impoliteness definitions; (5) (pseudo-naïve) endangerment, which was not accounted for by any of the impoliteness definitions; and (6) aggression, which was both rarer than the other strategies, yet also the one that had the clearest and most unproblematic affinity with malicious impoliteness. In short, aside from overtly aggressive trolling, most strategies in RE/SF could not be accounted for well, or at all, using the existing definitions of impoliteness.

I also analysed the responses that users typically made to these strategies, followed by the third move in the interactional chain—the troller's response, in particular using the response strategy framework suggested by Harris et al. (1986) and later developed by Culpeper et al. (2003: 1,562-5). In reality, it quickly became clear that rather than opting for one of response or another, users were frequently mixing strategies (e.g. acceptance and defensive, defensive and offensive, or even all three). This said, these strategies did cast some light onto the increasing level of face-threatening retaliation that attacked users and accused trolls employed.

Whilst this Chapter has covered some strategies, it is important to note (as

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described in Chapter Four) that **usenet** is only one CMC type, and only two groups have been selected which are, in turn, quite different. RE/SF alone cannot represent all of **usenet**, and certainly not the whole of the internet, which means that these strategies and responses should only be viewed as an indicative first step towards understanding trolling.

Building on this, in Chapter Five I began a working definition of trolling, which has been reproduced in brief below. (See §5.4.4 for the full definition):

DEFINITION

A troller is a CMC user who uses aggression, deception, manipulation, or a mixture of these to create a context that is conducive to triggering, or aggravating conflict.

METHOD

Trolling may be carried out more or less covertly, but in all cases, however, s/he may still hide his/her offline identity.

MOTIVE

Trolling may be done for amusements' sake, to achieve a particular goal, or for both reasons.

This remains incomplete, however, as it does not provide examples of the types of strategies that a troller may adopt, nor how users can respond, and the ways in which trolling can play out (i.e. trolling outcomes). I therefore extend the definition above to include these elements:

TYPES OF TROLL

Note that this list is not exhaustive. However, examples include:

- (1) *Spam trolling*: post irrelevant, meaningless, or repetitive content (see §6.2.1 and §6.2.2)
- (2) *Memorial trolling*: post deliberately offensive or hurtful comments when compassion, empathy, or tact is expected (see §6.2.3)
- (3) *Pseudo-naïve trolling*: post incorrect advice or ask deliberately naïve questions designed to trigger arguments (see §6.2.4 and §6.2.5)
- (4) *Care trolling*: respond to (usually non-existent) animal or child abuse with

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outrage, accusations, threats, etc. (see §6.2.5)

- (5) *Concern trolling*: pretend to support the opposition's (political, football, etc.) group whilst spreading doubt from within (see §6.2.5)
- (6) *Mock trolling*: undertake ostensibly trolling behaviour that aims to enhance or increase affect and group cohesion (i.e. this is not sincere trolling, therefore the outcomes below do not apply)

TROLLING OUTCOMES

Trolling can be:

- (1) *Successful*: users are provoked into responding as the troller desires (see §6.3.1, §6.3.3, and §6.3.4)
- (2) *Frustrated*: users correctly interpret an intent to troll but do not respond (see §6.3.2)
- (3) *Thwarted*: users correctly interpret an intent to troll but counter in a way that reduces the troller's success (see §6.3.4, §6.3.5, §6.3.6, and §6.3.7), or
- (4) *Failed*: users both do not perceive an intent to troll *and* are not provoked.

As is evident from the *types of troll* presented above, though I have covered several different types, such as those identified in (1) to (3), this does not exhaustively cover all types of trolling in existence. For the sake of completeness, it is worth noting that groups may also have problems with *skill trolls* (discussed in §5.5.4.1), or other types that do not occur in this thesis, such as *concern trolls* or *care trolls*. Despite the fact that concern trolls could easily have joined SF, and that care trolls could have joined RE, neither dataset features these specific terms. This does not automatically suggest that this behaviour has not occurred—only that the users have not explicitly named it as such. It does, however, raise the issue that whilst this work has covered *some* aspects of trolling, and certainly all the major types in RE/SF, it cannot (nor does it) claim to be a comprehensive and exhaustive work on all types, forms, and strategies of trolling in existence.

Finally, it is important to see how trolling actually starts, plays out, and ends in

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an extended example of data to put these definitions and strategies to the test.

Chapter Seven now presents a case study which seeks to do just this.

CHAPTER 7.

HOW IS TROLLING CO-CONSTRUCTED?

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Ch7: How is trolling co-constructed?

7.1.—ASKING FOR HELP OR TROLLING FOR FLAMES?

This Chapter addresses research question three (*how is trolling co-constructed?*) by investigating a single, extended example of trolling (see Appendix B) to see how users variously (re)construct the interaction, each other's identities, and each other's contributions, in different, complex, and contradictory ways. To do so, this Chapter utilises the trolling definition from Chapter Five, and trolling strategies and counterstrategies from Chapter Six.

§7.2 identifies the problem of identifying a trolling event, the chosen case study and its important contextual information. §7.3 identifies problematic elements in A's opening post. §7.4 investigates how B and E work to understand A's intentions. §7.5 analyses C's assertions that A is *pseudo-naïve trolling* (see §6.5 for a definition of this). §7.6 analyses B, D, E, F, G, and H's counterarguments that A is sincere. §7.7 investigates A's changing counter-accusation defence strategies and their impact on her position as a wrongfully accused user. §7.8 considers C, F, and J's final counter-trolling strategies. §7.9 discusses the evidence with regards to whether A was indeed trolling, and §7.10 concludes.

7.2.—FINDING A TROLL

Finding trolls⁷¹ is not as simple as it may seem, since there are at least two immediate problems: (a) identifying a troll to start with; before then (b) establishing the start and finish of that troll. Each is discussed in turn below.

⁷¹ Note that I'm using *troll* in this context to denote a whole trolling incident, from inception to termination.

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In the first case, a new user could post for days or weeks before members sufficiently established her typical norms of interaction versus their own, or her (lack of) convergence towards the group's established norms (see §3.4.5). It could therefore take that same amount of time before pre-existing members decided that her behaviour merited accusations of trolling (Graham 2007: 758).

This made it difficult for me to decide whether the analysis should start at the *trigger point*—the post that finally incites H to question or accuse S of trolling (a fairly clear moment in most examples), or the *manipulation stage*—S's earlier groundwork posts designed to culminate in an antagonistic context (a much more difficult stage to clearly define). Since H accusations can occur long into a troll, starting from the trigger point can exclude a lot of relevant interaction, but if S has produced hundreds (or thousands) of posts before she is accused of trolling, determining which of her posts to retrospectively include becomes a methodological minefield.

This returns us to the issue that unlike *malicious impoliteness* (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546) (see §2.4.6.4 and §5.4.2), which typically has a reasonably clear set of triggers or antecedent events (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990; Jay 2000)—even if S and H disagree about the precise nature, motives, and severity of those triggers—off-record forms of trolling such as *pseudo-naïve trolling*, *care trolling*, *concern trolling*, and *spam trolling* (see §6.2 and §6.5) are typically functioning as invisible catalysts for conflict. The troller

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may be actively trying to both produce triggers, and to disguise those triggers so that they are difficult for others to (confidently) identify.

The problems were no less complex when attempting to determine the end of a trolling event, since the resolution of the issue (however 'resolution' might be defined) rarely coincided with the natural termination of a thread. For instance, an accused user might not respond for some days or weeks to the accusations (perhaps to allow a cooling off period) and then return to the group, only to be excised again, even if her behaviour on her return was unexceptionable. (See Example 128 and Example 129 in §6.3.3 for examples of the same user being characterised as a troller for at least two years.) Alternatively, an accused user might leave the group, closely followed by the arrival of a new, suspiciously similar member, leading the group to openly suspect this new—and possibly innocent—person of being a **sockpuppet** (see §3.6.3.1, §4.6.3, and §5.4.1.2.2) of the old one. Some users, despite trolling accusations, endure the initial storms of controversy, continue to (try to) contribute, have all future posts ignored or only tersely responded to, and then eventually leave. It is difficult, in any of these scenarios, to determine when the situation can be thought of as 'resolved'. For accusers, this may be the moment they **killfile** or screen an individual, block her thread(s), or decide that she has left. For the accused, the issue may not seem resolved for days or weeks—or ever—especially if she continues to attempt to convince the group that she is not guilty.

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To add to the complexity of these issues, accusations of trolling are not always restricted to the thread, or group, in which they started, but can follow users across every thread and group they take part in. It is not unusual for trolling, or arguments about trolling, to start on one or several groups, be widely **crossposted**, and terminate on one or several other groups. (See Example 20 in §4.7.2.1, Example 93 in §5.5.4, and Example 126 in §6.3.2 for instances of this.) Additionally, accusations made in public may be resolved via private exchanges (or vice versa), or carried into different communicative forms such as **social networks**, telephone, or FtF. In rare cases, the situation has become so serious that the police have been involved (e.g. BBC 2010c; Camber & Neville 2011; Goodman 2011), though there is no evidence of such an occurrence in RE/SF.

As a result of these many possibilities, whilst trolling is demonstrably frequent in RE/SF, trolls that start and finish cleanly in one thread are not. This makes the case study below atypical. The thread fully encompasses the whole troll, from the problematic post that instigates accusations, through the responses from defending and attacking members, to the resolution, whereafter the (alleged) troller, A, does not appear to post anything further to the group⁷². *Because of its atypical tidiness, this example provides an excellent, encapsulated instance that exemplifies how users variously deal with trolling, and how, for some, the interpretation of this interaction markedly differed.*

⁷² If she does return by using **sockpuppet**, it is disguised well enough not to raise on-record suspicions from anyone.

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7.3.—A: EXPLAIN, JUSTIFY, REQUEST

The case study involves a 1,799-word thread which can be found in full in Appendix B. (For the subsequent analysis to make sense, it is worth reading this thread in full first.) The following information further contextualises this data:

A joins the group, and in August of 2006, she starts a thread entitled, *How old should a horse be....?* She presents a scenario in which she has contractually leased a horse for \$240 from an unscrupulous, unethical horse dealer. The horse is for her seven-year-old daughter to ride, but after being presented with very young, untrained horses, A now wishes to know whether she should break the lease and/or ask for her money back.

Over the next three days, the thread accumulates seventeen posts from nine members, including three further posts from A. The users divide into roughly two sides—those who defend, support, or assist A (B, D, E, F, G, H), and those who accuse, attack, or challenge her (C, F, and J). Of all users involved, only F *openly* changes sides. After her four posts in this thread, A never produces any further *usenet* posts from this account. (Note that she could have had, or created, other accounts. See §3.4.6, §3.5.2, and §0 for more on this.)

A's first post (both to the group as a *newbie*, and in this thread in particular) immediately and explicitly constructs an indexical identity of someone with a very low level of equine knowledge or experience, via her participant role and

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her use of linguistic structures ideologically associated with the outgroups (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594). Specifically, she claims, *I know less than nothing about horses* and her request for help positions her socially as someone who has been wronged and taken advantage of by an unscrupulous dealer. However, her post also—perhaps inadvertently—casts her as having potentially, if unwittingly, harmed a young horse, and put herself and her small child into a potentially lethal situation. In doing so, she (intentionally or otherwise) uses two major trolling strategies in one post: asking for help on a controversial topic (see §6.2.4) that involves endangerment, in this case of a child, an animal, and herself (*pseudo-naïve trolling*—see §6.2.5).

7.4.—B, E: DETERMINE INTENTIONS

Of the nine user who respond, two (B and E) draw attention to the relational aspect—or the genuineness or artifice, and authority or delegitimacy—of A's identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598). They do this by highlighting that, in their view, A's post is *potentially* problematic in the multiplicity of intentions that it supports (Penman 1990; Archer 2011b) (see §2.5.2.2). B and E's on-record declaration of *their own* willingness to accept that she is telling the truth presupposes that it would not be unreasonable for *others* to believe that she is deceiving them:

2. **B I'm going to be a nice guy and assume that you are telling the truth.**

8. **B Trolling means posting idiotic messages to rile up a *newsgroup* or message board. I should explain that **we get at least one character a****

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week saying something like, "Every time my horse bites I hit him in the head with a hammer, but he keeps doing it."

9. E You're not a criminal, but we get a LOT of trolls here who pose impossibly naive scenarios in an attempt to start "flame wars." Your story does sound like one of them. I'll ride with B and assume your being straight, here.

Both users identify the fact that A's request for help sounds so improbable that it could appear *to others* to be trolling in the form of pseudo-naïve questions, designed to trigger flurries of angry or contradictory responses, but as discussed above (see §5.4.1 and §6.2.5), this strategy places the group in moral dilemma. If they ignore her or treat her as a troller and she is sincere, the consequences for her child, the horse, and herself are potentially extremely serious, since a young, untrained horse, however small, can be dangerous in inexperienced hands. However, if they engage with her and she is trolling, they may waste time, energy, and emotional investment in a frustrating, pointless argument.

Additionally, the post is controversial (see §6.2.4) in that A's lack of knowledge (*I know less than nothing about horses*) and insufficient financial commitment (*the cost of training is more than I want to pay*) may provoke exasperation from members who feel that horse ownership is a serious step that is irresponsible to take without adequate knowledge, dedication, and funding.

Despite all of this, B and E indicate that, appearance aside, *they* are each willing to take the chance and treat A's request for help as sincere. However, the very fact that B and E have bothered to go on-record with this is in itself interesting.

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They may be aiming to guide the interpretations of others, or this may later offer an element of protection from face-damage if A turns out to be trolling, since it would allow B and E to signal that they had known of the possibility but had taken the morally defensible route of acting in a disinterested and helpful manner, regardless of the risk. To an extent, therefore, B and E's strategy supports the discursive approach which suggests that rather than being 'given' by S, or 'received' by H, A's meaning and intentions are being negotiated (Mills 2005: 264-5). In short, as discussed in §2.4.2, S's utterance, H's assessment of S's meanings, im/politeness, motives, and intentions, S's assessment of H's assessment (etc.) are continually emerging, and both being shaped by, and shaping, the context and the interaction (Mills 2005: 265).

7.5.—C: EXPOSE, CHALLENGE, CRITIQUE

Whilst B and E give A the benefit of the doubt, C is much less credulous, and opts for an on-record, offensive, *malicious impoliteness* (§2.4.6.4) counterattack (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5):

3. C Since I can't possibly imagine that anyone could really be this naive or dumb in RL, the best information I could offer would be to **go do your silly trolling in another newsgroup.**

An inductive analysis of C's answer suggests C's possible chain of reasoning. C's assertion that *I can't possibly imagine that anyone could really be this naive or dumb in RL* leaves two reasonable alternatives: either A's naïveté is not real (therefore she can take care of the situation), or the situation is not real. In

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either case, A does not need advice, so why ask for it? C's answer to this question, which we can also infer from her answer, is that A is attempting to troll the group. In fact, C seems so confident that A's post has no other *reasonably* defensible motive, that she does not even bother with a preliminary accusation. Instead, by commanding A to *go do your silly trolling in another newsgroup* she simply moves to the offensive counterattacks of exposing (§6.3.3, *your silly **trolling**...*), challenging (§6.3.4, ***go do your**...*), and critiquing (§6.3.5, *your **silly** trolling...*).

In choosing this course of action, C implicitly constructs her indexical identity (§3.5.1) as a shrewd, knowledgeable member who has the group's interest at heart, and the wisdom and experience to see that A is deceiving the group. C also overtly categorises, evaluates, and positions A as a troller whose real intention(s) involve trolling the group (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594).

Interestingly, however, after A defends herself, and perhaps because several other members agree that A is probably sincere (discussed further in §7.7), in her next post to A, C subtly shifts some of these positions:

6. C **LOL**. Hopefully you haven't just slandered the man. You didn't like my words? Oh, well. For all you know I may be one of the nicest persons you'll never meet. As for my other advice... you're welcome. **I make no apology for being "contemptuous" or "rude" to someone who says they were going to put their 7 year old child on a horse when they self-professedly "know nothing about horses" --and enters into a lease or contract knowing that nothing -- and then seeks advice over the internet. When I do something dumb and naive, I call myself on it, too.** My advice is, get smart and get over it. You're welcome again.

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Instead of continuing to argue that the scenario is fictional and that A is a troller, C instead moves to listing A's errors (putting a young child on an untrained horse, entering into a lease without adequate knowledge, seeking advice on the internet). This recasts A as someone who is genuinely *dumb and naïve*, and therefore deserves C's treatment. By adopting this tactic, C can make a very implicit concession that perhaps A is not trolling after all. At the same time, she can still position A's first post as a suitably provocative antecedent trigger (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990; Jay 2000), which in turn allows her to defend her decision to use a maliciously impolite offensive counterattack (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5). This tactic also allows C to maintain her relational identity as a legitimate group member who does not suffer fools such as A lightly (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598). C's response also escalates the conflict as she takes up an even more antagonistic position by laughing at A's defence, being indifferent to A's annoyance, and even sarcastically implying twice (via *you're welcome* and *you're welcome again*) that A is—or should be—grateful for C's response (Lein & Brenneis 1978: 301; Felson 1982: 245; Andersson & Pearson 1999) (see §2.5.2.3).

C's interpretation of A, and her responses are shaped not only by A's prior contributions, and the ones she may make next, but also by those of the rest of the group (Arundale 2005: 59). As discussed in Chapter Two (see §2.4.3), communication is an ongoing heuristic cycle in which each interactant adds another link to the chain of interaction by adapting their response not only to

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what went before, but also to the desired effect that they wish to produce later.

In this case, C's desired outcome appears to be to unmask C as a troller and given RE's general intolerance for trolling (see §5.4.3) expel her from the group.

7.6.—B, D, E, F, G, H: DEFEND, SUPPORT, ASSIST

In partial reaction to C's construction of A as a troller, B and D suggest that A's request for help, far from being unlikely, is actually quite possible. They sincerely engage with A (see §6.3.1), and even partially defend her from C:

4. **D** I hate to say, but its very possible that this is true. Ive known more than one BO [*barn owner*], 'trainer', breeder, what have you that would do exactly what this person described. So, if it indeed unfortunately true, then A, just leave.

8. **B** It certainly is possible to know nothing more about horses than you see on TV and in movies like "The Black Stallion." I used to work at a livery stable and saw it all the time.

In the examples above, D gives anecdotal evidence of unscrupulous horse sellers, and B provides instances of inexperienced owners. Whilst line 8 may not be a ringing endorsement of A's knowledge, it does support her need for assistance, and the authenticity of her relational identity as a legitimate group member (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598). After this, users E, F, G, and H then go on to support this construction of A's identity by offering her advice on how to understand the group (line 9), what books and websites to read (line 12), a website with useful listings close to A (line 14), and general advice on lessons, costs, equipment, and safety (line 15). In doing so, these users construct the

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indexical and relational aspects of their identities both implicitly and explicitly as helpful members who are willing to support **newbies**. They also align themselves with the majority opinion of A's legitimacy and innocence that is starting to emerge (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594-8). In return, however, A only weakly supports these constructions of herself:

5. **A** The four replies were **somewhat helpful**, however to **C** [...]

11. **A** It is a written lease. I have decided to call him tomorrow - **I am signing off - thank you to those with helpful suggestions and comments.**

In line 5, A only describes the others as *somewhat* helpful, and in line 11, she answers very briefly to B's question only, which asks whether the lease is written. (Line 11 may also not have initially told the group that A was permanently leaving, hence the fact that they continue to respond to the thread for some time after this post.) Notably, by failing to support the construction of her identity and intentions as sincere, A arguably weakens her own position. Instead, A spends more effort on defending herself from, and attacking C. This is discussed next.

7.7.—A: EXCUSE, ACCUSE, ATTACK

A defends herself and her identity as a wronged, innocent victim via the excuse strategy (§6.4.3) that she does not know what trolling is (and therefore is unlikely to engage in it):

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5. **A** I don't know what a **RL** is either or trolling - does that make me a criminal! I suppose I needed to do more research, but you definately need anger management classes!!! I live in the [location] and the name of the man I leased the horse from is [full name] in [city, state] if anyone else wants to check my story!!

In this case, it seems clear that A has not only perceived face-threat in C's behaviour, but has been offended by that face-threat. In turn, A has escalated her response (cf. the conflict spiral (Lein & Brenneis 1978: 301; Felson 1982: 245; Andersson & Pearson 1999)) via choosing an offensive, malicious impoliteness counterstrategy of attacking C's need for anger management and the defensive counterstrategy of validating her integrity and sincerity by 'proving' her need for assistance (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5). If we consider the social-psychological approach to facework,

there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed (or denied, in the case of negatively evaluated traits) and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others.

(Spencer-Oatey 2007: 644)

The mismatch in this case appears to be A's belief in her own integrity and truthfulness versus C's belief in A's insincerity. A works to construct an indexical and relational identity of inexperience that encompasses both horses and CMC—an identity that would account for this inflammatory scenario (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594-8). This implicitly invokes the (troller) excuse defence strategy that if she does not know what trolling is, she is unlikely to engage in it (see §6.4.3). A also upgrades the severity of C's accusation from *trolling* to *criminal*, and takes the position that ignorance is not a 'crime' and does not merit the treatment it is receiving. By further suggesting that C has

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accused A of being criminal, and that this has been triggered by anger management issues, A attempts to recast C, and her behaviour, as even more angry, rude, severe, and unjustified.

However, this introduces an interesting dilemma. If we take C's position (that A is a troller) then A is employing the troller response strategies of excusing her behaviour (see §6.4.3) and openly attacking C in return (see §6.4.5). However, if we take A's position (that she is innocent and that C is attacking her) then A's replies are better categorised as the *user* response strategies of challenging (see §6.3.4) and reciprocating (see §6.3.7).

When A's initial rebuff to C meets with C's increased contempt and antagonism, rather than continuing to argue with C, A switches to a new defence strategy:

7. **A** I don't believe I ever thanked you and **I feel sorry for you - you are probably very lonely. If this is how you treat people you don't even know - how could you possibly ever make a friend. You should find Christ in your life.**

In this, the third of her four posts, A switches from *overtly counterattacking* C via on-record malicious impoliteness to *covertly attacking* C via off-record patronising and pity (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546) (see §2.4.6.4). She changes roles from the one being subjected to judgements and face-threat, to the one doing the judging and face-threat. This shifts A's position from that of a would-be troller defending herself by using an accusation strategy (see §6.4.4) to that of a would-be member fending off a

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troller using a challenge strategy (see §6.3.4) against a lonely, angry, friendless individual who lacks religion and, as a result, deserves pity. A seems to try to instil her indexical and relational identity with religious, moral, *and* social superiority by being willing to sympathise over, and excuse C's faults (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594-8).

An important issue for any user, however, is that within the interaction (but perhaps more so in an argument), the response must be viewed as appropriate to its antecedent trigger (Corsaro & Rizzo 1990; Jay 2000). Should A react, (1) with offence at an (apparently) inoffensive utterance; (2) too strongly to mild provocation; or (3) using an inappropriate form of defence vis-à-vis the trigger, then despite the existence of some form of provocation, she may find her own actions being called into account. In particular, the religious element to this post appears to trigger a partial turn against A. One possible reason for this is that by using this religious element, A has (inadvertently or otherwise) introduced the trolling strategies of digression (§6.2.2) but particularly onto a controversial and sensitive topic (§6.2.4).

7.8.—C, F, J: CRITIQUE, MOCK, CONCLUDE

Only F changes her mind about her interpretation of A's intention on record:

12. **F** Get the books by [author], in particular [book title] is EXACTLY the book you need. [Book's web address] And ditto on everything else **B** said.
13. **F** **<plonk>** We have enough religious and anit-religious trolls in this **newsgroup** - I'm not going to feed this one.

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These two posts are only a minute apart. Additionally, F almost certainly read A's request for help and the replies to it before arriving at A's third post (line 7). Having just offered A advice (which suggests that she had taken A seriously), F promptly reverses her judgement. She determines that A is a *religious troll*, thereby employing the expose strategy (§6.3.3). She also 'overtly' ignores A by both **killfiling** her (signalled via <plonk>) and by stating that she is *not going to feed this one* any further (§6.3.2).

Whether F is concerned about the potential face-loss from having 'fed' A the minute before is impossible to determine, but certainly she felt strongly enough to post her change of mind publicly, since she could have **killfiled** A without telling anyone. F may have done this to let A know that she had discovered the deception (i.e. to expose A), to encourage other group members to reconsider A's innocence (i.e. encouraging others to ignore A), or for other reasons besides. Additionally, though there is no further evidence that anyone else changed their minds about A, it is possible that others may have gone on to **killfile** A too. However, they may not have told the group to avoid losing face (especially if they had already earlier supported A), challenging other core members, or implying that they had somehow known all along.

One individual *does* post late in the discussion to the effect that *she* had known all along, however. J's first contribution to the thread arrives three days after it

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began, and a day and a half after the last comment. She responds directly to A's pitying post (line 7):

16. J And THERE it is. (**How did I know it was coming?**)

J implicitly suggests that she had always known, or strongly suspected, that A was trolling, thereby employing the strategy of tacitly criticising the trolling attempt as obvious (§6.3.5). This aligns J with C and F, by also attempting to assume the relational identity of a legitimate, experienced member who can identify illegitimate trollers (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598). In the final post, C takes up J's comment and addresses her own and J's (apparent) prescience:

17. C **yep... now if only we could find a way to make money on this troll detection stuff** we'd be ... (scratching head) ... well, speaking for self, probably owning even more horses and thus even more horse-poor
<vbg>

By pondering if those who had been wise to the (apparent) plot could *find a way to make money on this troll detection stuff*, C uses the strategies of critiquing (see §6.3.5) and mocking (§6.3.6) A's supposed trolling attempts. More importantly, however, C subtly resumes the position she had taken in her first post (line 3, where she determines that A is a troller) and moved away from in her second post (line 6, where she allows that A might not be a troller, but still positions herself as the more legitimate member of the two). In this final post, C reconstructs the relational and indexical identities of herself, J, and possibly also F as the legitimate, knowledgeable members with the experience and

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insight to perceive A's attempts at trolling, unlike all the other members who were duped into believing A (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 594-8).

7.9.—FINAL VERDICT

The unfolding thread neatly demonstrated many of the strategies reviewed in Chapter Six, and the discursive struggle between multiple users who each attempt to construct particular identities for themselves and for each other. In the process, those users also attempt to resolve whether A is or is not being deceitful. At different times through the interaction, users focus on highlighting *why* A's posts might be seen as problematic and on offering help and advice. Users also struggle over whether the identities that have been constructed by A of herself (as inexperienced and wronged) and by others of her (as dangerously irresponsible and naïve) are believable or valid.

As the interaction progresses, it is not the probability of the situation's reality that causes a shift in the majority-view that A is sincere. A's third 'religious' post is sufficient to alienate one former supporter (F), to trigger one new poster to the thread (J) to go on-record with her disbelief in A's sincerity, and to provide an established antagonist (C) with further evidence to bolster her position. Additionally, despite all of the support and advice A received, A's affront at C's response appears to overcome any desire to stay or request further advice, and it is, of course, impossible to determine whether A ever returned to read any subsequent posts after she had posted that she was *signing off*.

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So, was A trolling? Based on the data, different users clearly arrived at different interpretations which fluctuated, were challenged, and reformed as the interaction progressed. Some users signalled the potential for uncertainty of interpretation (B, D, E). Some adopted positions that appeared to more fully trust A's sincerity (G, H). One user took up an increasingly antagonistic position (C), and one changed her mind (F). It is easy to understand these varied positions, however. If A and her serious problems (i.e. the welfare of a small child, a young horse, and herself, and the potentially fraudulent contract costing her several hundred dollars) were sincere, then her affront at one poster's rebuff seemed to overcome her urgent need for help, and when others did offer assistance, she did not seem to engage with it, or give many on-record indications of pursuing any of the advice offered. Yet if A really was a troller, and was seeking to disrupt and aggravate the group, then she had abandoned a thread, and a group, that had provided a good level of success. Out of the nine respondents, seven went on-record to assist her in some way, and she generated sixteen responses in all. She might have remained in the group and continued to post 'updates' and 'questions' for weeks or months. In short, if she *was* trolling, then why leave such a promising thread or group?

Throughout the data, the most prevalent issue for both accuser and accused has been deception, and in particular, the deception and manipulation of identity and intention in order to achieve particular goals (Vrij 2000: 6; Memon et al. 2003: 8; Rubin 2010: 1). This deception pervades all levels and forms of trolling. Whether a troller is directly insulting someone, or indirectly sowing

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disharmony by presenting an inflammatory scenario, trolls are engaging in role-play, such as assuming the identity of someone naïve requiring help with an inflammatory problem (when no such problem, or naïveté, exists).

The success of the deception appears to rest on how convincing the enactment of identity is, since it is more difficult to convince others to take one's posts seriously if one's character is already in doubt. As deception research has shown, users have an above-average chance of detecting deception online (Wiseman 1995: 391), therefore the story will need credible-sounding content that is not internally inconsistent, and that contains an appropriate amount of detail given in a suitable style or format. Further, any reported reactions, speech, and (alleged) cognitive processes will need to relate logically and plausibly to the alleged events (Vrij & Akehurst 1998; Vrij 2000) (see §2.6.3 and §2.6.4.). As in A's case, where C could not believe that anyone could be that naïve, should any one aspect of an entire story or character not sound suitably credible then, regardless of whether S is telling the truth or not, her identity and her whole story may be thrown into doubt.

Secondarily, if a user insults someone, as A insults C in her third post, for that insult to succeed, she needs the other members to believe that her attack was the product of *genuine* anger or offence, such as a justified retaliation to an antecedent offence, and not simply a result of boredom and a desire to instigate trouble for amusement's sake. Where other members perceive, or begin to perceive dissonance between content and intent (i.e. that the request for advice,

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or the insults, are actually only attempts to antagonise), this will typically cause them, as in the case of C, and later, F and J, to publicly state their (new) interpretations of A's character, usually in an effort to pre-empt further sincere responses from other users.

A further issue is that even where a user's intent to troll seems clear to some users (as in this case it seemed so to C), the user may still be able to defend her behaviour, and indeed A opts for the excuse of inexperience. Identifying a user like A as a troller may require becoming familiar with her behaviour over many days or weeks, and in the case of an individual who only posts briefly (as A did), establishing their norms and patterns of behaviour may be impossible. Even if A had remained in the group for a long period and provided far more evidence for the others to assess, it may still not have been possible to categorically determine that she was causing trouble for its own sake. Instead, it is easier to distinguish behaviours that are troll-like, and then identify users who indulge in these behaviours despite being warned to the contrary as trollers.

7.10.—SUMMARY

In closing this Chapter, it is vital to consider group norms of legitimate behaviour (Opp 1982; 2001; Hetcher 2004) (see §5.4.3). One person's active debate is another person's troll, and what one person or group considers to be an offensive, hurtful troll, another may find entertaining, amusing, and even desirable. As Donath (1999: 47) suggests, a group's character will determine whether a troller is harmful to the community, or enhances cohesion between

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members, or whether she is even deemed a troller at all. Groups dealing with sensitive topics, and frequented by users who invest personal trust, emotional commitment, and private information into their group may find trollers particularly distressing if that trust is suddenly breached, particularly if it is done so in a public, hurtful, and/or embarrassing manner. However, groups dealing with less sensitive issues, or frequented by users who invest less private and sensitive emotional commitment, may in turn be less susceptible.

The difference in the *perception* of trolling also seems to be mirrored by a perception in *managing* trolling. As §6.2 to §6.4 exemplify, there are many strategies involved in trolling and counter-trolling on **usenet**, and whilst one (anti-)trolling strategy may work in one group, that same tactic may fail in the next. This particularly interesting distinction was evident even between RE and SF. Though both are **usenet** corpora, and the subject of each could be broadly termed as outdoor leisure pastimes, there was a marked difference in how each group responded to trolling, which is well-demonstrated by this example:

Example 164

[SF050410]

342. **A** Whoever posted that was trying to cause a flame war between groups, in other words, a troll. You probably didn't plan to post to uk.sport.football or a bondage-related **newsgroup**, did you?
343. **B** **UKSF doesn't generally mind trolly crossposts.** it gives us something to do. **Oddly enough, we seem to have kept out of it so far.** Anyone'd think there was football and beer to keep us entertained, or something.
344. **C** **I think its just the crapness of the trolling that has kept us all away. Normally i'd be well up for a religious flame war. Shame really.**

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Whilst RE generally took a dim view of trolling, as evidenced by the sheer number of ignore and challenge strategies employed by that group (see §6.3.1 and §6.3.2), with only occasional use of mockery and humour, SF overall seemed to find trolling at worst, unremarkable, and at best, entertaining. This is further supported by prevalence of mocking strategies found in the SF data, compared to the very few found in RE (see §6.3.6). In itself, this attitude of not taking trolling seriously could be a deliberate counterstrategy by SF since it would mean that rather than being *duped* into a flamewar, SF members are knowingly *choosing* to respond, usually with sarcasm and mockery. This conscious decision to respond nullifies any claim that the troller can make that she has successfully trolled or deceived someone from the group. However, it may also be an aspect of that group's cultural norms and values (Graham 2007: 743). Even from the examples given throughout this thesis it is clear that SF features far more taboo language, mock impoliteness, and competitive arguments than RE. This suggests a more competitive culture, with a far higher tolerance, or even stronger desire for potentially offensive arguments or challenging interactions. For RE, meanwhile, where aggressive interaction is mostly frowned upon, rather than encouraging trollers, users seek to identify and eject them as quickly as possible. However, as the case study above demonstrated, without access to an individual's thought processes, it can be nearly impossible to determine for certain whether an individual is trolling.

CHAPTER 8.

CONCLUSION

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8.1.—TROLLING AND OTHER NEGATIVELY MARKED ONLINE BEHAVIOUR

This thesis has covered much ground, and several predominant themes have emerged. These are discussed more fully below, but can be encapsulated as follows. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, there is an underlying assumption in much impoliteness research that when malicious impoliteness is occurring, *S intends* H to realise that she is deliberately attacking him, and that the primary purpose of her attack is to offend H (Bousfield 2010: 112). However, as we have seen, many types of trolling are carried out on the premise that H does *not* know that he is being *deliberately* aggravated by S (see Chapter Two).

Secondly, from a dataset and methodology perspective, a large portion of the impoliteness literature is based on very particular FtF and stereotypical written interaction (e.g. from the media, fiction/drama, courtroom, etc., see §2.4).

Where linguistic research has looked at *online* impoliteness, it has tended to focus on flaming (see §1.2 and §3.6.2), whilst other NMOB such as trolling, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking have been largely ignored. Equally, UK and US legislation have offered, in some cases, no definitions at all of these NMOBs, or contradictory, vague, and overlapping definitions (see §3.6.1.2, §3.6.2.2, §3.6.3.2, §3.6.4.2, §3.6.5.2, and §3.6.6.2). Because of this, it has been necessary for me to firstly establish what terms such as *troll* and *flame* mean, since this must be in place before any meaningful analysis of *how* these behaviours are carried out can then take place.

This final Chapter summarises the main findings. Specifically, §8.2 discusses

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how I addressed each research question and the main results and issues I encountered. §8.3 considers the limitations of this thesis and future developments for research in this area, and §8.4 draws this thesis to a close.

8.2.—RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following sections address how each research question (*What is trolling?* *How is trolling carried out?* and *How is trolling co-constructed?*) was answered, the findings that RE/SF produced, and issues that arose during the analysis.

8.2.1.—RQ1: Concepts and definitions

Chapter Five addressed the first research question (*what is trolling?*). I began by taking the view that it is vital to understand how *users* understand and employ terminology, rather than imposing my own view on the data (Watts 2003: 9). To lay the groundwork, I outlined the etymology of trolling (§5.2), then set about retrieving examples of trolling from the data using *WordSmith*® (M. Scott 2009) (§5.3). Having excluded the false hits and disambiguated the unclear examples (§5.3.1), I compared how prevalent TROLL* was in my datasets—RE and SF—versus a much larger reference corpus of *usenet* data, known as the *Westbury Lab Usenet Corpus*, or WLUC (§5.3.2, §5.3.3, §5.3.4, and §5.3.5).

8.2.1.1.—User discussions of trolling

Once this background was established, I analysed the data to discover how users understand and employ TROLL (§5.4), and this immediately exemplified

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the first major issue in this thesis—namely the lack of academic research, particularly from a linguistics perspective, on trolling. In particular, I found that users primarily define trolling in relation to deception (§2.6 and §5.4.1), including deception involving intentions (§5.4.1.1) and identity (§5.4.1.2), yet most impoliteness research works on the basis that S will be, by and large, sincere in the way that she conveys her intentions, the information she conveys, and the identity that she assumes whilst doing so, *and* that H will, in turn, be sincere in the way he conveys his interpretation, his understanding of S's information, and his (non-)acceptance of her identity. Likewise, legislation typically works on the assumption that we can *know* or *prove* S's intentions (or *purposes*—§3.6.1.2). In trolling, however, deception could occur many levels (i.e. identity, intention, interpretation, scenario, etc.). This led to a more complex analysis than the impoliteness frameworks (§2.4), theories of intention and interpretation (§2.5), and approaches to identity (§3.5) allowed for.

The dimension of aggression in trolling (§5.4.2) was also prevalent, but clearly secondary in RE/SF, since overtly antagonising users was not a particularly successful method of trolling, due to its obvious, easily identifiable nature. However, this dimension of trolling fitted more closely with the impoliteness frameworks (§2.4)—particularly malicious impoliteness (§2.4.6.4), theories of intention and interpretation (§2.5), and approaches to identity (§3.5), since it was a less deceitful behaviour.

Once the analysis of the user discussions was complete, I considered the first

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major issue in creating any definition—namely the norms of any particular group (§5.4.3) which is discussed further below (§8.2.4.2), and I then formulated the first part of a working definition of trolling which was completed in Chapter Six and tested in Chapter Seven (§5.4.4).

8.2.1.2.—User discussions of flaming

Having established how RE/SF users employ and understand the term TROLL, I set about situating this term in amongst several other NMOBs that are used interchangeably with TROLL, or that capture behaviours that have some similarities to trolling (§5.5). I gave significant attention to *flaming*, a term that is most commonly used as a synonym for trolling, and as I had done with TROLL, I outlined the etymology of flaming (§5.5.1.1), demonstrated how examples were retrieved from the data (§5.5.1.2), disambiguated unclear instances (§5.5.1.3), and then analysed the user discussion of this term (§5.5.1.4). I found that unlike trolling, flaming was ideally encapsulated by the impoliteness concept of *malicious impoliteness* (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546) (§2.4.6.4). Accordingly, just like malicious impoliteness, flaming was used as a form of entertainment (§5.5.1.4.1) and a method of maintaining group cohesion (§5.5.1.4.2). Despite this, flaming did not function as a form of mock impoliteness since it was used against an outgroup, rather than within the ingroup (Labov 1972; Leech 1983: 144; Haugh 2008; 2010a) (§2.4.6.1). Flaming was further judged in terms of the multiplicity of the flamer's intentions (§5.5.1.4.3) and the calibre of the flaming itself (§5.5.1.4.4). Users also demonstrated meta-awareness of behaviour that might be considered as

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flaming or that might attract flaming (§5.5.1.4.5), thereby demonstrating their awareness of the norms of their group (§5.5.1.5). Once this groundwork was established, I compared flaming to trolling and found that flaming was typically a *reactive* response to prior provocation that was carried out more 'transparently', rather than a *proactive*, unprovoked attack which may be carried out deceitfully (§5.5.1.6).

8.2.1.3.—*User discussions of other NMOB*

I then turned my attention to cyberbullying (§5.5.2), and established that this differed from trolling in terms of the personal and targeted nature of the attack, which might follow an individual over several sites (§5.5.2.1). However, whilst both academic (§3.6.2) and legislative (§3.6.2.2) literature implicitly or explicitly determined that cyberbullying typically involved children, the adult users in this data employed this term, though they typically used it to describe petty, juvenile-type behaviours such as name-calling and meanness.

I also considered cyberharassment (§5.5.3), and found that, as in the academic (§3.6.4) and legal literature (§3.6.4.2), this term was used to broadly capture behaviours spanning from irritating a group through to aggressively stalking an individual (§5.5.3.1). As such, I suggested that it was better to elevate this term to a hyponymic position that encapsulates other, more specific NMOBs.

With regards to deliberately aggressive behaviours, I finally considered cyberstalking (§5.5.4), and determined that the overlap here between the

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academic literature (§3.6.5), legislation (§3.6.5.2), and user employment of this term was very close. Both users and literature employed this to capture behaviour with a specific target, and that was persistently and personally intimidating, unlike trolling which was a more general, and less personally threatening behaviour (§5.5.4.1).

The final behaviour that I considered was shill trolling (§5.5.5), a behaviour that is not mentioned in any academic literature but which users identified as the act of passing oneself off as a disinterested member whilst harbouring a vested interest that involves, for example, profiting from the group. Like a 'standard' troller, the shill troller does not wish to be discovered, but unlike 'standard' trolling, she does *not* wish to aggravate users, since this is counterproductive to her aims (§5.5.5.1).

The Chapter then finished by outlining the first part of a working definition of trolling (§5.6), and by reviewing of some of the major, overarching themes that arose in undertaking the analysis. (These are discussed in §8.2.4.)

8.2.2.—RQ2: Formulae and strategies

Chapter Six addressed the second research question (*how is trolling carried out?*). This was done by categorising the examples drawn from the data into major attacking, defending, and re-attacking or re-defending strategies. Note that the theoretical shortcomings of §8.2.2.1 to §8.2.2.3 are discussed in §8.2.4.1.

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8.2.2.1.—Trolling strategies

Several major strategies emerged from the data (§6.2), including: (1) (pedantically) criticising or hypocriticising users, e.g. by proof-reading posts rather than focussing on their content (§6.2.1)—a tactic that could not be accounted for by the existing impoliteness definitions; (2) digressing from the topic or theme, especially onto sensitive topics (§6.2.2)—a tactic that could at best only be weakly accounted for by *failed politeness* (§2.4.6.3); (3) being shocking or insensitive about a topic or scenario that typically expects tact or sympathy (§6.2.3)—a tactic that might be perceived by H as *malicious impoliteness* (§2.4.6.4) yet presented by S as *failed politeness* (§2.4.6.3); (4) antipathising by raising a controversial or inflammatory subject likely to trigger arguments (§6.2.4)—a tactic that might also be perceived by H as *malicious impoliteness* (§2.4.6.4) yet presented by S as *failed politeness* (§2.4.6.3); (5) presenting a scenario which implied, described, or expressly encouraged endangerment (§6.2.5)—a tactic which, at best, might be only weakly accounted for by *failed politeness* (§2.4.6.3); and (6) using outright aggression (§6.2.6)—the only tactic which had clear, strong links to *malicious impoliteness* (§2.4.6.4). This section also considered the strategy of pre-empting accusations of trolling by identifying that whilst the content of the post might seem troll-like, the poster's intention(s) were sincere (§6.2.7).

8.2.2.2.—Anti-trolling strategies

I outlined the responses, as well as the defence and attack counterstrategies that users adopted in reply to (alleged) trolling formulae (§6.3). These involved

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users: (1) sincerely engaging with the troller, or 'taking the bait' (§6.3.1)—a response unaccounted for by the impoliteness literature (though this is unsurprising since trolling itself is also not accounted for); (2) 'overtly' ignoring the troller and encouraging others to do likewise (§6.3.2)—a response closely fitting Culpeper et al.'s (2003: 1,562) *do not respond or opt out on record* strategy; (3) exposing the troller and her intentions to others in order to minimise the troller's success (§6.3.3)—a response partially accounted for by the defensive counterstrategy; (4) challenging the troller directly or indirectly (§6.3.4)—a response closely accounted for by *malicious impoliteness* and both the offensive and defensive counterstrategies; (5) critiquing the troller's efforts—usually as bad or unsophisticated, but sometimes as good or clever (§6.3.5)—a response accounted for by the offensive counterstrategy of *malicious impoliteness*; (6) mocking the troller and her attempts (§6.3.6)—a response also best accounted for by the offensive counterstrategy of *malicious impoliteness*; and (7) trolling the troller in return, or reciprocating with like-minded behaviour (§6.3.7)—another response best accounted for by the offensive counterstrategy of *malicious impoliteness* (L. Harris et al. 1986; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,562-5).

8.2.2.3.—Pro-trolling strategies

In the third and final move of the interaction, I considered how the (alleged) troller responded to the user's reply, defence, or attack (§6.4). Strategies adopted by those accused of trolling included: (1) simply denying the intent to troll (§6.4.1)—a tactic accounted for by the defensive counterstrategy of *direct contradiction* (Brenneis & Lein 1977: 56-7; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,564); (2)

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investigating or exhorting the accuser investigate the grounds of the accusation (§6.4.2)—a tactic that was both offensive and defensive; (3) excusing the behaviour (§6.4.3)—a tactic using the defensive counterstrategy of *abrogating* the behaviour onto some sort of problem such as miscommunication, inexperience, failed politeness (§2.4.6.3), etc. (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,565); (4) accusing the accuser of being the individual who is doing the aggressing (§6.4.4)—a tactic using the offensive counterstrategy of *malicious impoliteness* (§2.4.6.4); and (5) counterattacking the accuser with on-record *malicious impoliteness* (§6.4.5).

8.2.2.4.—Working definition of trolling

Once the above had been carried out, this Chapter finalised the trolling definition that had been started in the conclusion of Chapter Five:

DEFINITION

A troller is a CMC user who uses aggression, deception, manipulation, or a mixture of these to create a context that is conducive to triggering, or aggravating conflict.

METHOD

Trolling may be carried out more or less covertly. At the covert end of the cline, the troller constructs an online identity that is inconsistent with her intentions (e.g. she masquerades as a sincere member of a group that she actually intends to troll). At the overt end of the cline, the troller constructs an online identity that is consistent with her intentions (e.g. she behaves in such a way that there is no other reasonably defensible explanation for her behaviour). In all cases, however, the troller may still hide her offline identity.

MOTIVE

Trolling may be done for amusements' sake (i.e. trolling is an end in its own right), to achieve a particular goal (i.e. trolling is a means to an end), or for both reasons.

TYPES OF TROLL

Note that this list is not exhaustive. However, examples include:

- (1) *Spam trolling*: post irrelevant, meaningless, or repetitive content (see §6.2.1 and §6.2.2)

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- (2) *Memorial trolling*: post deliberately offensive or hurtful comments when compassion, empathy, or tact is expected (see §6.2.3)
- (3) *Pseudo-naïve trolling*: post incorrect advice or ask deliberately naïve questions designed to trigger arguments (see §6.2.4 and §6.2.5)
- (4) *Care trolling*: respond to (usually non-existent) animal or child abuse with outrage, accusations, threats, etc. (see §6.2.5)
- (5) *Concern trolling*: pretend to support the opposition's (political, football, etc.) group whilst spreading doubt from within (see §6.2.5)
- (6) *Mock trolling*: undertake ostensibly trolling behaviour that aims to enhance or increase affect and group cohesion (i.e. this is not sincere trolling, therefore the outcomes below do not apply)

TROLLING OUTCOMES

Trolling can be:

- (1) *Successful*: users are provoked into responding as the troller desires (see §6.3.1, §6.3.3, and §6.3.4)
- (2) *Frustrated*: users correctly interpret an intent to troll but do not respond (see §6.3.2)
- (3) *Thwarted*: users correctly interpret an intent to troll but counter in a way that reduces the troller's success (see §6.3.4, §6.3.5, §6.3.6, and §6.3.7), or
- (4) *Failed*: users both do not perceive an intent to troll *and* are not provoked.

This definition attempted to overcome the theoretical issues and shortfalls of existing definitions by introducing the element of deception that is inherent in trolling. These theoretical shortfalls and the implications of this are discussed more below (see §8.2.4).

8.2.3.—RQ3: Interaction and construction

Chapter Seven addressed the third research question (*how is trolling co-constructed?*). This was undertaken by analysing an extended example of data, found in Appendix B. In particular, this case study exemplified how users do not simply enter a group with a pre-given identity, or produce utterances which have clear intentions, but how instead, users co-construct identities and intentions, disagree about them, and reshape them as the interaction unfolds. Users engage in a discursive struggle that can involve challenging each other's

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definitions, evidence, characters, and arguments in order to arrive at a final judgement on the matter. Depending on S's and/or H's success, S might then be categorised, and dealt with by the group as a troller, whilst H is credited for his quick insight and action. Alternatively, if H's accusation is unsuccessful and S defends herself well, she might be exonerated, and H might find that his own legitimacy is called into question (see Example 158).

Precisely because of this issue, identifying an example of trolling, including its start and end points, is not usually a straightforward business (§7.2). The case study in question, however, was unusually tidy, though for the users it was no less difficult to determine whether A was, or was not trolling the group. After A joined the group, explained her position, and requested help (§7.3), some early users identified the problematic nature of her posts and their potential for being perceived as trouble-causing by others (§7.4). C in particular quickly ascribed trolling intentions to A, and set about exposing, challenging, and critiquing her (apparent) trolling efforts (§7.5). Meanwhile, others supported, defended, and assisted A as a legitimate new member (§7.6). In return, A primarily excused herself, and counterattacked C by accusing her implicitly and explicitly of personal failings (§7.7). This triggered a minor shift in the number of those who supported C's earlier assessment that A was trolling (§7.8). The Chapter then concluded with our inability to *prove* the intention(s) of another user (§7.9) and a final summary of the emergent nature of interaction (§7.10).

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8.2.4.—Overarching themes

The analysis undertaken in Chapters Five, Six and Seven identified three major issues. These were: (1) the sometimes widely-different (but also, sometimes surprisingly consistent) terminological usage of the ordinary CMC user versus the inconsistent terminological usage of, and distinctions between **spamming**, flaming, trolling, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking that occurred within legislative, media, and academic sources (see §8.2.4.1); (2) the importance of group norms in formulating definitions (see §8.2.4.2); and (3) the theoretical implications of the differences between this data, extant research, and legislation (see §8.2.4.3).

8.2.4.1.—Theoretical implications

Firstly, within the academic literature, the notions of *mock impoliteness* (Labov 1972; Leech 1983: 144; Haugh 2008; 2010a) (§2.4.6.1), *incidental impoliteness* (Goffman 1967: 14; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,549; Culpeper 2005: 36-7) (§2.4.6.2), *failed politeness* (Beebe 1995: 166; Culpeper 2005: 37; Bousfield 2008: 73) (§2.4.6.3), and *malicious impoliteness* (Goffman 1967: 14; Beebe 1995: 159; Culpeper et al. 2003: 1,546) (§2.4.6.3, §2.4.6.4.1, but mainly §2.4.6.4.2) were conceptually inadequate to accurately describe or understand trolling. As discussed above (see especially §5.4.2), this shortfall may be due to the fact that im/politeness research has typically dealt with relatively 'transparent' datasets where the chefs, politicians, employees, etc. convey their intentions and interpretations with a higher degree of faithfulness (cf. Culpeper 1996; S. Harris 2001; Mullany 2007; Bousfield 2008; Holmes et al. 2008). There is a shortage of

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research into data that contains individuals deliberately deceiving each other in order to manipulate a context into conflict, whether for amusement or for other reasons (see, however, S. Harris 1991; Mullany 2002; Piirainen-Marsh 2005). It is not surprising, then, that terms built on more 'transparent' aggressive data are difficult to apply to behaviour which also involves a complex mixture of deception and manipulation.

This suggests that there is a clear need for im/politeness research to look into far more deceptive data types, not least because politeness has clear links to *social lies* (see §2.6.1)—white lies designed to enable or enhance social harmony, whilst impoliteness in the form of trolling has significant links with deception of all kinds, including equivocation, exaggeration, and fabrication, at all levels, and for reasons including manipulation, self-aggrandisement, entertainment, etc. (see §2.6).

The problem of inadequate definitions was no less serious when considering legislation that deals with some of these behaviours (see §3.6). The definitions for trolling and other NMOB in the legal literature were variously defined so loosely, or so broadly, that each one could readily account for many others (cf. Bocij's (2004) definition of cyberstalking in §3.6.3 above, and the legal definitions of cyberbullying in §3.6.3.2, cyberharassment in §3.6.4.2, and cyberstalking in §3.6.5.2). In particular, cyberharassment seemed to cover an extensive range of behaviours from receiving unsolicited **spam** (Stivale 1997) through to blackmail, threats, and the risk of physical harm (Herring 1995; 1999;

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Bocij 2004; Whitty 2005). Such variation within the literature makes rigorously applying that terminology difficult. From this it logically follows that if one cannot consistently identify a behaviour, then taking the appropriate legal, parental, or private action to manage or prevent it can be nearly impossible.

Whilst terminological accuracy is useful, it can of course, only go so far. These terms do not exist in a contextual vacuum, in isolation from each other, or independently of users. Each behaviour must be understood in relation to the others, the context, the users, and the group's expectations, norms, and values (see §7.10). This issue is considered next.

8.2.4.2.—Group norms

An important aspect that surfaced within the analysis was that despite the fact that users and groups *generally* had consistent notions of trolling and other NMOB, there was evidence of a difference in the application of these terms, whether this difference occurred in the moment, or target, of its application.

In the first place, the terms for trolling and other NMOB are not simply applied by one and accepted by all (see §3.4.5, §5.4.3, §5.5.1.5, §5.6, and §6.5). Their employment is struggled over, challenged, and even redefined as users work to (re)construct the behaviours, intentions, and interpretations of themselves or others to validate their perspectives and arguments. Users employ their ranking within the group (see Example 119 and Example 149), the support of others (see Example 43 and Example 116), and evidence of behaviour (see Example 43 and

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Example 158) to enforce their positions. This means that rather than the terms being applied fairly and rigorously across all users, in reality, the most senior or successful users have their perspective adopted. As such, two members of the same group might engage in the same behaviour (e.g. a sarcastic insult), and whilst one might be interpreted as an amusing ingroup marker, the other may meet sharp criticism, accusations of trolling, flaming, bullying, or harassment, and swift exclusion from the group.

Additionally, behaviour that some may think of as innocent and naïve, others may feel is distinctly trolling (see Chapter Seven), and interaction that some judge to be amusing banter, others may deem to be destructive argument (cf. flaming, §5.5.1.4.1). This is not to suggest that users had different notions of trolling or flaming overall—rather, individual users have different judgements of when that behaviour crosses a particular line. Users might coincide on a notion such as, *highly naïve stories are consistent with trolling*, but differ on what *highly naïve* actually is. The data therefore exemplifies Haugh's (2010b) notion, as discussed in Chapter Two, that there was a remarkable amount of,

variability in the perceptions of norms and expectations underlying evaluations of behaviour as polite, impolite, over-polite and so on, and thus inevitably discursive dispute or argumentativity in relation to evaluations of im/politeness in interaction.
(Haugh 2010b: 8)

The discursive disputes that arose encompassed differences in areas such as habits, assumptions, and definitions; perceptions of behaviour, hierarchy, and social proximity; and judgements of users, their idiosyncratic behaviours, and behavioural boundaries. These differences occurred not only between

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individual members, but also between entire groups as they developed, expressed, and to an extent, even enforced their own particular norms of interaction (Donath 1999: 47; Graham 2007: 743; 2008) (see §3.4.5, §4.7.2.1, and §5.6). Whilst RE was broadly critical of trolling and evaluated it primarily in light of its deception and disruption, SF generally favoured trolling and evaluated it primarily in light of its entertainment and quality—if it was of a high enough calibre (see §5.6). Further, whilst RE generally disliked flaming, both datasets provided examples of individuals who were irritated or bored by flaming, and individuals who enjoyed and promoted flaming (see §5.5.1.4). In RE particularly, some members supported the idea that **newbies** who left due to flaming were probably not going to prove valuable members anyway, thereby suggesting that flaming may actually be doing the group some good.

8.2.4.3.—Consequences

Extended analyses of RE/SF suggests that far from absolute notions of trolling, flaming, cyberharassment (etc.) that exist independently of users, these NMOBs are individually, socially, and culturally constructed phenomena that vary between interactions, users, and times. This makes the application of definitions subjective and open to complex debate and exploitation since a behaviour which is encouraged as admirable and entertaining in one group may be reconstructed as offensive and inappropriate in another (see §5.5.5.1). However, for users within their groups, defining and identifying concepts such as flaming, trolling, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking were *generally* (though not always) clear enough issues (see §5.4, §5.5.1.4, §5.5.2, and §5.5.4).

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This apparent ease of distinction, however, is likely spring from the limited consequence of misjudging. Should a user identify and respond to a would-be flamer, troller, cyberbully, etc., by flaming her, **killfiling** her posts, and complaining to her **ISP**, but later turn out to be wrong, these actions will generally not have far-reaching consequences. Hasty responses, over-simplistic research, and/or inadequate legislation, however, can have permanent and harrowing consequences for victims and their families.

The ways that academic literature defines NMOBs did not necessarily concord with how users thought of and used these terms themselves (see §5.4.4).

Trolling occurred as a general term in various academic literature to capture angry tirades (i.e. flaming, cf. Baker 2001), pointless discussions (Herring et al. 2002: 372; T.C. Turner et al. 2005), etc., yet in RE/SF, its usage was typically fairly consistent, and generally indicated going online with the intention of provoking others into conflict. Would-be trollers might adopt a range of trolling strategies (see §6.2), but overall, users seemed to have similar, overlapping conceptual views on behaviour that amounted to trolling. Likewise, in the academic and legal literature, cyberbullying typically referred to behaviour experienced, and undertaken, by children who also came into contact FtF (Strom & Strom 2005; Topçu et al. 2008), yet within the data, adults accused other adults of (cyber)bullying behaviours (see §5.5.2).

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One of the closest matches between academic/legal literature and data related to cyberharassment and cyberstalking (see §5.5.3 and §5.5.3.1). In the literature cyberharassment encompassed such a broad scope of behaviours as to almost make the term useless, spanning from mild annoyances at one end of the cline to threats, blackmail, and even stalking at the other (e.g. Herring 1995; Protection from Harassment Act 1997; 1999; Tavani 2005; Whitty 2005). However, the data likewise exemplified this scope, as users employed it for behaviours from irritating arguments and name-calling through to concerted campaigns against particular individuals.

Cyberstalking was perhaps the most serious case considered, and the data provided examples that generally exemplified the literature (e.g. Protection from Harassment Act 1997; Bocij 2004; Whitty 2004), including users accessing accounts without authorisation, threatening to email incriminating information to employers, and in the most serious case, publishing large quantities of sensitive personal information in a public online forum.

The differences between the academic/legal literature, and user employment of these terms leads to two important implications. Firstly, it is vital that definitions of NMOB are developed and made more robust, since it is extremely difficult to manage (or prosecute) a behaviour that is poorly defined or poorly understood. Secondly, however, and perhaps in contradiction, it is vital that those definitions are developed in line with a particular group's norms of interactions, within larger societal and cultural norms.

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8.3.—LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This work has tackled an area which, by any standard, is greatly under-researched (Haugh 2010b: 8) and is also changing rapidly in line with advancing technology (see §8.3.1). Additionally I have used data that cannot begin to represent all CMC or even all types of trolling (see §8.3.2) and I have used a methodology that cannot capture off-record NMOB (see §8.3.3). I have also been unable to cover all types and subtypes of trolling and NMOB (see §8.3.4), and there are many areas with scope for far more research than could be undertaken in this thesis (see §8.3.5). These aspects are discussed below.

8.3.1.—Literature

As mentioned above (§1.2 and §3.2.4) the study of online impoliteness from a linguistic perspective, as a social, relational, and cultural phenomenon remains scant. As a result, I have been obliged to draw upon work from outside of linguistics such as communication studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and computer science, and from areas within these fields that are based upon different historical paradigms, and have different methodological considerations. Fortunately, this did not create any serious incompatibility with the collection and analysis of data, but it again emphasises the need for more thorough linguistic research into the nature of CMC as a social communicative medium which is having a real impact on our daily lives.

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8.3.2.—Data

The data itself is also not without limitations. Whilst it is extremely rich, as already hinted at above, the corpus does not contain *all* types of trolling or all types of NMOB (cf. *care trolling*, *concern trolling*, etc., see §5.4.4 and §6.5), and what is not present cannot be investigated. Further, the data comprises only two groups, both based on leisure pursuits, giving no idea of what might be found in forums dedicated to topics such as politics, religion, academia, etc.. Whilst no single CMC type can represent the internet at large, the data in this thesis is also entirely from *usenet*, an increasingly defunct platform, and this very fact could readily impact the type or age of user who is even aware of its existence, let alone who uses it, and therefore the types of NMOB that occur and the ways that they are carried out.

The quantity of data, from a corpus linguistics perspective, proved adequate for a qualitative study of the phenomena in question, but when dealing with a complex, involved, and sometimes lengthy behaviour such as trolling, RE/SF did not yield enough examples to provide reliable statistics that would be worth extrapolating⁷³. Specifically, SF was too small to be comparable either to RE or the rest of *usenet*, and conflating the results of RE and SF would have been more methodologically unsound than excluding those results altogether. This said, WLUC (see §5.3.3 and Appendix C) contained 1,920,809 hits for TROLL*. If, like RE/SF, ~9% of these are false, this leaves ~1,730,456 examples versus the

⁷³ Due to the highly qualitative and subjective nature of the phenomena under investigation, it is worth considering whether statistical evidence would have been useful anyway, so this is, perhaps, a moot point.

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3,727 from RE/SF that thesis is based on. In short, whilst the size of RE/SF may have had some minor limitations on this thesis, this problem can be overcome in future work (though larger corpora necessarily entail larger time-resources).

8.3.3.—Method

Another issue surrounds the methodological framework for retrieving examples from the data. The method used was to search the corpora for every instance of TROLL* (as well as FLAM*, *BULLY, *BULLIE*, *HARASS*, and *STALK*) and then analyse the examples (excluding the false hits) qualitatively. This brought to light two problems. Firstly, it relies on someone using this word in a thread. If the user instead makes an off-record allusion (e.g. *get back to Underbridge!*), or realises what the would-be troller is up to but simply happens not to know of, or use the term, then these instances passed by unnoticed.

Secondly, this method relies someone recognising (or thinking that they recognise) that trolling is happening in the first place. In different words, if a troller is trolling exceptionally well by subtly instigating group-wide arguments, yet at the same time, passing herself off as a sincere, credible, and committed member, then she may never be identified as a troller at all. This actually means that the most sophisticated trolling would not be detected by either the method used to find the examples, by the group (though some members may have suspicions that they do not feel confident enough about to voice), or even by the analyst. As a result, such examples would not have been investigated in this thesis. Ironically, this suggests that what I do analyse is (perceived) trolling that

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has failed, or has been deemed to have failed, at whatever stage in the (alleged) attempt. Overall, in fact, the most advanced instances of trolling may be completely invisible, and impossible for the group, computer, or analyst to distinguish from sincere attempts at interaction, unless and until the troller herself confesses to trolling.

Finally, whilst it was possible to qualitatively identify trolling strategies, it was far more difficult to provide a *quantitative* analysis of these strategies. This was due to several reasons: (1) we cannot know, for certain, whether a user is trolling, since we have no access to S's actual intention(s); (2) statistical analysis of the data would be heavily biased towards H's interpretation of trolling behaviour; (3) many posts/threads cited by users as trolling typically contained multiple strategies; and (4) related to this, it is not always possible to identify which specific feature triggered the accusation. Future research, however, could work towards providing a more robustly quantitative analysis of this data in order to prioritise those strategies that occur with greatest prominence.

8.3.4.—Scope

The last issue, but certainly not the least, is that whilst trolling was the primary focus of this thesis, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking all require *at least* as much attention if NMOB in all of its guises is to be properly understood and managed. Whilst trolling may be generally annoying and hurtful, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking specifically target individuals, follow them across different communicative platforms, and can

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cause severe distress, fear, and anxiety. Yet it is with respect to these issues that this work is the furthest from complete. Despite this, I hope to have added to the current groundwork that exists, by situating these behaviours with regards to each other, to flaming, and to trolling.

8.3.5.—Future research and developments

In my view, the first and most important step necessary to follow on from this thesis, both within my own research and in general, is to work on clarifying current terminology and elaborating on those terms which are, at present, under-explicated. This has a practical benefit in that it helps individuals such as parents, guardians, teachers, and legislators to understand the behaviours they may end up having to deal with. It also enables those individuals to produce suitable guidelines for themselves and those in their care.

I have already attempted to define trolling, and to situate it amongst other NMOBs, not necessarily as an always distinct and clear-cut behaviour, but as a behaviour which—like its parent, im/politeness—is open to (re)interpretation by users, and which may be difficult at times to distinguish from other, similar, behaviours. To take this work further, other parts of the terminological jigsaw—in particular, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking—need more clearly defining and distinguishing from each other. As already suggested by Haugh (2010b), aligning *flaming* with current impoliteness theorising can bring potential benefits for both sides, and additionally, drawing in cross-disciplinary research from fields such as psychology, sociology, law, and computer science

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can assist in creating a body of research which not only aims to understand these behaviours, but also to provide suitable social, legal, and technical mechanisms for managing them.

As already indicated above, in some respects, this thesis has only scratched the surface of trolling and NMOB. In particular, I feel that there are three key theoretical areas in need of far more attention than I was able to give them in this thesis. The first is the issue of manipulation. In particular, there appears to be a strong psychological connection between trolling and power or control, since trolling is predicated on manipulating the feelings, thoughts, behaviours, responses, and actions of others. As such, it is vital that the ways in which manipulation is carried out and what motivates it. This thesis touched on the fact that individuals may (attempt to) carry out deception simply because they find this behaviour inherently entertaining (Vrij et al. 2000: 241-2), or they may (attempt to) manipulate others into producing certain types of response because they enjoy their (apparent) control of the responses of another, or they may simply enjoy the disruption or conflict that trolling causes. In psychology, manipulation has received considerable attention, whereas in linguistics, the focus has typically been on conductivity, questioning strategies, and response types in interviews and interrogations (Danet, Hoffman, Kermish, Rafn & Stayman 1980; Woodbury 1984; S. Harris 1991; Wichmann & Cauldwell 2003; Piirainen-Marsh 2005). Much of the field of linguistic manipulation therefore remains unexplored, and a thorough investigation into trolling motivations could also prove especially enlightening.

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The second aspect that requires more attention from linguistics is deception. Whilst I reviewed some major aspects of this (see §2.6), the research in this thesis was drawn mainly from the field of psychology. Research into deception from a linguistic perspective is almost non-existent, which gave me little to base this thesis on. The entire field of deception, therefore, is open to—and I feel, would benefit enormously from—linguistic research, but in respect to this thesis, specific useful developments would include qualitatively and quantitatively profiling the language of the same user across several **sockpuppeting** accounts. This could then build up a body of proof of a particular NMOB (especially for the purposes of pursuing formal action), and establish key linguistic markers that might indicate that a scenario or identity is fabricated. (Both of these aims are already underway in my current research.)

The third aspect that merits further attention from linguistics and related fields is, of course, conflict and aggression online—but particularly deception-based NMOB such as trolling. This thesis has taken some steps in this direction, but large, unexplored areas remain in darkness.

8.4.—FINAL WORD

It seems clear that part of the human condition is to find entertainment in conflict, whether in the form of high-risk sports, action films, violent computer games, or linguistic aggression in television programs (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003; 2005; Bousfield 2008). However, unlike these situations where the

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individual typically only watches or simulates conflict, online, with the protection of anonymity and distance, CMC users can exercise aggression against other real humans, with reduced risk of being identified or held accountable for their actions. Given the extraordinary prevalence of CMC in our daily lives, linguistic impoliteness research into NMOBs such as trolling is surprisingly scarce. I hope to highlight the urgency of developing this area, and at the same time, to add to the existing the body of important theoretical research on linguistic and legislative understanding.

APPENDIX A—RE AND SF CORPORA

This thesis is supplied with discs containing the RE and SF datasets. WLUC, however, has not been provided since this corpus is 34GB+ when compressed, and 169GB+ when extracted. WLUC, and a range of other datasets, can be obtained from the *Westbury Lab* site of the University of Alberta at the following address: <http://www.psych.ualberta.ca/~westburylab/index.html>.

APPENDIX B—CASE STUDY DATA

Example 165

[RE060812]

- A** Please help!!!! I have leased a horse for my 7 yr old daughter. My intention was for her to actually ride it. I know less than nothing about horses!! The first horse that was selected for her by the owner of the farm was a 6 month old foal - I asked the owner if it was ok for her to ride such a small baby and he said "sure...ain't nothin wrong with it" I then did some more research (I guess I should have done that before I leased) and realized that you shouldn't ride them until they are at least 2 years old. I went back to the farm and he selected a yearling (don't know exactly what that means) - "he was last year's foal" was what he said. He does not have any trained horses for lease. I hesitantly agreed and left and again realized he isn't trained at all!!! I looked into hiring a professional trainer, however the cost of training is more than I want to pay (\$400-\$800 a week) I now know that I have chosen the wrong farm in which to do business with - he appears to be very unethical in the treatment of his horses? How should I proceed? Should I break the lease? Should I ask for my first payment back (\$240)? Should I let him just keep it? Please give me any information that would be helpful...thank you
- B** I'm going to be a nice guy and assume that you are telling the truth. The person you are dealing with is borderline criminal. Don't go near him again or answer his phone calls. You're not likely to get any money out of him. A yearling is a horse that is between one and two years old. A riding horse should be two or three before training is started. A beginner should be riding a horse that is in its teens or older. Please take your next \$240 and buy a dozen or so books for beginners. I don't have a particular recommendation. They will all give you some good information and contain some gaps. Then find out where the honest riding schools are in your area. A beginner should not lease a horse. Beginners should ride many horses, and beginners usually improve quickly enough that the first horse is no longer a challenge. If you state your location, someone may have a recommendation.
- C** Since I can't possibly imagine that anyone could really be this naive or dumb in **RL**, the best information I could offer would be to go do your silly trolling in another **newsgroup**.
- D** I hate to say, but its very possible that this is true. Ive known more than one BO [*barn owner*], 'trainer', breeder, what have you that would do exactly what this person described. So, if it indeed unfortunately true, then **A**, just leave. Try to get your money back but if he is a juerk just let it go. Do you have a feed store? Go there, and ask for references on barns in your area that will start your child riding in a safe ethical way. Where are you? Is there a United States Pony Club in your area? Is there 4-H? You, as a well meaning but niave and know nothing about horses parent, are a sitting duck for horse oriented losers. Good luck.

Appendix B: Case study data

5. **A** The four replies were somewhat helpful, however to **C** - why is it out of the realm of possibility that a person has no knowledge of horses - your comments are rude and full of contempt - I don't know what a RL is either or trolling - does that make me a criminal! I suppose I needed to do more research, but you definately need anger management classes!!! I live in the [location] and the name of the man I leased the horse from is [full name] in [city, state] if anyone else wants to check my story!
6. **C** **LOL**. Hopefully you haven't just slandered the man. You didn't like my words? Oh, well. For all you know I may be one of the nicest persons you'll never meet. As for my other advice... you're welcome. I make no apology for being "contemptuous" or "rude" to someone who says they were going to put their 7 year old child on a horse when they self-professedly "know nothing about horses" --and enters into a lease or contract knowing that nothing -- and then seeks advice over the internet. When I do something dumb and naive, I call myself on it, too. My advice is, get smart and get over it. You're welcome again.
7. **A** I don't believe I ever thanked you and I feel sorry for you - you are probably very lonely. If this is how you treat people you don't even know - how could you possibly ever make a friend. You should find Christ in your life.
8. **B** **RL** = real life (as opposed to online). Trolling means posting idiotic messages to rile up a **newsgroup** or message board. I should explain that we get at least one character a week saying something like, "Every time my horse bites I hit him in the head with a hammer, but he keeps doing it." (You're not supposed to hit horses with hammers or anything else.) Contempt is just one of those things you have to put up with online. It certainly is possible to know nothing more about horses than you see on TV and in movies like "The Black Stallion." I used to work at a livery stable and saw it all the time. The [location] area is big enough that there should be riding schools in the phone book. There are also online directories of such things. Good luck with whatever you decide to do.
9. **E** You're not a criminal, but we get a LOT of trolls here who pose impossibly naive scenarios in an attempt to start "flame wars." Your story does sound like one of them. I'll ride with **B** and assume your being straight, here. He has given you good advice. Follow it. "*I suppose I needed to do more research, but you definately need anger management classes!!!!*" No, not really. You might as well resign yourself to some Fundamental Wreck-Ek Truths. First, this is **Usenet**. Everybody pretty much gets to post what they want, when they want, how they want. We don't have any "word police" or "thought police" around here (unlike some moderated groups). A second Truth is that some the THE best information here comes in the form of short, declarative sentences. It is often devoid of any "softening" language. Consider it "full contact posting." :-). Third, many here have decades of high quality experience in the equine world. All were beginners once, but are not beginners now. Many bear lots of scars from the School of Equine Hard Knocks. Challenge their opinions at your peril!!!! "*I live in the [location] and the name of the man I leased the horse from is [full name] in [city, state] if*

Appendix B: Case study data

anyone else wants to check my story!!" **K** is in the [location] and I'll bet money she can give you some Good Words on people to deal with (and people to stay away from). One Last Thing: The horse trader is the lineal ancestor of the used car salesman, and has about the same level of moral and ethical sense. It is a world where "caveat emptor" is not just a saying but a literal truth. Find yourself a teacher before you get burned again. Good luck in your search.

10. **B** I didn't think this through earlier. Do you have a written lease? In that case, you might want to talk to a lawyer about your options. It is possible that the horse dealer could go to court if you simply stop paying, but you can usually break a lease if deception is involved.
11. **A** It is a written lease. I have decided to call him tomorrow - I am signing off - thank you to those with helpful suggestions and comments.
12. **F** [Quotes **B**: *Please take your next \$240 and buy a dozen or so books for beginners. I don't have a particular recommendation.*] I do. Get the books by [author], in particular [book title] is EXACTLY the book you need. [Book's web address] And ditto on everything else **B** said.
13. **F** [Quotes **A**: *I don't believe I ever thanked you and I feel sorry for you - you are probably very lonely. If this is how you treat people you don't even know - how could you possibly ever make a friend. You should find Christ in your life.*] **<plonk>** We have enough religious and anit-religious trolls in this **newsgroup** - I'm not going to feed this one.
14. **G** Hi - there is a very nice [site brand name] list in your area [state] on which I'll bet folks can help you. It is called [name of list], but I've seen folks of all horse disciplines post there. There also seem to be quite a few informational clinics, open barns, etc. posted on the list in your area. Hope this helps. [Website for list.]
15. **H** You break the lease and find a stable that gives lessons to other LITTLE children on small calm older horses for an hourly rate. Go and watch the lessons, they should be slow and calm and safe with no more than 4 children riding in the lesson. One lesson a week should be fine for her age. After at least 18 months of lessons if you are happy with the stable ask if you can lease one of the lesson horses she has been riding. She should always have on a helmet from the time she arrives at the stable until she gets into the car to go home. A RIDING helmet not a bike helmet. She should also have riding boots and well fitted riding pants or jeans. Expect to pay 20-50\$ an hour for lessons.
16. **J** [Quotes **A**: *I don't believe I ever thanked you and I feel sorry for you - you are probably very lonely. If this is how you treat people you don't even know - how could you possibly ever make a friend. You should find Christ in your life.*] And THERE it is. (How did I know it was coming?)
17. **C** yep... now if only we could find a way to make money on this troll detection stuff we'd be ... (scratching head) ... well, speaking for self, probably owning even more horses and thus even more horse-poor **<vbg>**

APPENDIX C—WLUC TROLL* VARIANTS

This list only contains TROLL* variants. *TROLL* and *TROLL variants are omitted because many English words contain these strings (e.g. *controlled*, *patrolled*, *stroll*), and the task of filtering the false hits would not be rewarded by any real addition to the thesis. As noted in Chapters Three and Four, it is risky to discard words like *trolley*, *trollop* and *Trollope* since these can occur in both their standard senses and creatively as neologisms that refer to trolling.

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLL	1,045,192	34.252877	TROLLINGS	399	0.013076
TROLLS	460,712	15.098385	TROLLOPS	392	0.0128466
TROLLING	262,174	8.5919274	TROLS	380	0.0124533
TROLLED	32,148	1.0535495	TROLLOCS	365	0.0119617
TROLLEY	31,487	1.0318873	TROLLEE	352	0.0115357
TROLL'S	10,249	0.3358787	TROLLSKI	352	0.0115357
TROLLISH	9,371	0.307105	TROLLPA'S	325	0.0106509
TROLLY	5,483	0.1796881	TROLLEYBUS	307	0.010061
TROLLOP	5,211	0.1707741	TROLLEN	298	0.009766
TROLLPA	4,987	0.1634332	TROLLSLOB	291	0.0095366
TROLLER	4,955	0.1623845	TROLLHUNTERS	284	0.0093072
TROLLEYS	4,342	0.1422954	TROLLBOT	267	0.0087501
TROLLERS	3,280	0.1074917	TROLLFEST	263	0.008619
TROLLIN	2,980	0.0976601	TROLLEYBUSES	257	0.0084224
TROLSKY	2,947	0.0965786	TROLLENE'S	255	0.0083568
TROLLERY	2,152	0.070525	TROLLSPAMMER	249	0.0081602
TROLLBERG	1,806	0.059186	TROLLUP	247	0.0080946
TROLLKILLER	1,692	0.05545	TROLLZ	229	0.0075048
TROLLOPE	1,224	0.0401127	TROLLSBURY	225	0.0073737
TROLLENE	1,106	0.0362457	TROLLGAR	210	0.0068821
TROLLDOM	960	0.031461	TROLLI	205	0.0067182
TROLLSBY	853	0.0279544	TROLLISHLY	200	0.0065544
TROLLINESS	785	0.0257259	TROLLBOB	186	0.0060956
TROLLISHNESS	706	0.0231369	TROLLMETER	186	0.0060956
TROLLIE	648	0.0212362	TROLLBOI	185	0.0060628
TROLLWATCH	629	0.0206135	TROLLER'S	182	0.0059645
TROLLBUSTER	610	0.0199908	TROLLNIG	180	0.0058989
TROLLABLE	545	0.0178607	TROLLAGE	178	0.0058334
TROLLIES	473	0.0155011	TROLLSBANE	175	0.0057351
TROLLBASHER	465	0.0152389	TROLLUS	173	0.0056695
TROLLTECH	465	0.0152389	TROLLSHIT	171	0.005604
TROLLEYFAN	464	0.0152061	TROLLFARE	164	0.0053746
TROLLBOY	454	0.0148784	TROLLNESS	156	0.0051124
TROLLBAIT	450	0.0147473	TROLLSBY'S	150	0.0049158
TROLLEES	430	0.0140919	TROLLETTE	148	0.0048502
TROLLISM	412	0.013502	TROLLGARS	138	0.0045225
TROLLZILLA	402	0.0131743	TROLL	135	0.0044242

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLEY'S	129	0.0042276	TROLLAIDS	49	0.0016058
TROLLINISS	120	0.0039326	TROLLCHILDREN	45	0.0014747
TROLLSOME	120	0.0039326	TROLLENBERG	45	0.0014747
TROLLSTER	113	0.0037032	TROLLIED	44	0.001442
TROLLKIND	109	0.0035721	TROLLTECH'S	44	0.001442
TROLLMETER	108	0.0035394	TROLLENSLAPPER	43	0.0014092
TROLLPOSTS	106	0.0034738	TROLLIEASSHOLIE	43	0.0014092
TROLLLOC	104	0.0034083	TROLLPOINTS	43	0.0014092
TROLLZILLA'S	104	0.0034083	TROLLEYCAR	42	0.0013764
TROLLISMS	102	0.0033427	TROLLING'S	41	0.0013436
TROLLA	101	0.00331	TROLLPROPHET	41	0.0013436
TROLLP	98	0.0032116	TROLLMAIL	40	0.0013109
TROLLOPE'S	97	0.0031789	TROLLFEEDERS	39	0.0012781
TROLOGY	96	0.0031461	TROLLIP	39	0.0012781
TROLLHOOD	93	0.0030478	TROLLLS	39	0.0012781
TROLLMEISTER	92	0.003015	TROLLY'S	38	0.0012453
TROLLEN'S	87	0.0028512	TROLLFILTER	37	0.0012126
TROLLHUNTER	86	0.0028184	TROLLBAITERS	36	0.0011798
TROLLBUSTERS	83	0.0027201	TROLSBURY	36	0.0011798
TROLLMAN	80	0.0026217	TROLLOING	35	0.001147
TROLLIST	74	0.0024251	TROLOX	35	0.001147
TROLLISTIC	74	0.0024251	TROLLERIZING	34	0.0011142
TROLLBEGONE	72	0.0023596	TROLLESE	33	0.0010815
TROLLHOUSE	69	0.0022613	TROLLEYED	33	0.0010815
TROLLE	68	0.0022285	TROLLHAETTAN	32	0.0010487
TROLLHATTAN	66	0.0021629	TROLLNIG'S	32	0.0010487
TROLLOCKS	65	0.0021302	TROLLBANE	31	0.0010159
TROLLIS	63	0.0020646	TROLLISTA	31	0.0010159
TROLLSTERS	61	0.0019991	TROLLB	30	0.0009832
TROLLBRIDGE	60	0.0019663	TROLLBUSTING	30	0.0009832
TROLLPING	60	0.0019663	TROLLCUTUS	30	0.0009832
TROLLSKY	60	0.0019663	TROLLESS	30	0.0009832
TROLLSPEAK	59	0.0019335	TROLLFUCKFACE	30	0.0009832
TROLLNET	58	0.0019008	TROLLING	30	0.0009832
TROLLOMATIC	57	0.001868	TROLLSWORTH	30	0.0009832
TROLLIGN	56	0.0018352	TROLLYBUS'S	30	0.0009832
TROLLINGER	56	0.0018352	TROLLDOMR	29	0.0009504
TROLLTARD	56	0.0018352	TROLLOCK	29	0.0009504
TROLLPOST	55	0.0018025	TROLLZO	29	0.0009504
TROLLFINDER	53	0.0017369	TROLLBOMB	28	0.0009176
TROLLO	53	0.0017369	TROLLLIKE	28	0.0009176
TROLLFEEDING	52	0.0017041	TROLLNG	28	0.0009176
TROLLBAITING	51	0.0016714	TROLLKIN	27	0.0008848
TROLLDUNG	51	0.0016714	TROLLBABY	26	0.0008521
TROLLFEEDER	51	0.0016714	TROLLIAN	26	0.0008521
TROLLSHAMMER	51	0.0016714	TROLLIER	25	0.0008193
TROLLSINSA	50	0.0016386	TROLLOLOGIST	25	0.0008193
TROLLABLY	49	0.0016058	TROLLSCORE	25	0.0008193

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLSHAWS	25	0.0008193	TROLLOONIE	14	0.0004588
TROLLVILLE	25	0.0008193	TROLLSTER'S	14	0.0004588
TROLODYTE	25	0.0008193	TROLLTRICKS	14	0.0004588
TROLLPANTS	24	0.0007865	TROLLWORTHY	14	0.0004588
TROLLOP'S	23	0.0007538	TROLLETRY	13	0.000426
TROLLABILITY	22	0.000721	TROLLIMNG	13	0.000426
TROLLSKII	22	0.000721	TROLLNAMES	13	0.000426
TROLOGICAL	22	0.000721	TROLLOUT	13	0.000426
TROLLAH	21	0.0006882	TROLLSAY	13	0.000426
TROLLES	21	0.0006882	TROLLSHIP	13	0.000426
TROLLFUCKINGCENTRAL	21	0.0006882	TROLLSTRANGLER	13	0.000426
TROLLKILLA	21	0.0006882	TROLLBERG'S	12	0.0003933
TROLLARY	20	0.0006554	TROLLCUM	12	0.0003933
TROLLBORTS	20	0.0006554	TROLLDUMMMMMMMB	12	0.0003933
TROLLIAGE	20	0.0006554	TROLLFREE	12	0.0003933
TROLLDOLL	19	0.0006227	TROLLITA	12	0.0003933
TROLLERIFEROUS	19	0.0006227	TROLLMONSTER	12	0.0003933
TROLLLLLLLLLLLLLL	19	0.0006227	TROLLSARE	12	0.0003933
TROLLONG	19	0.0006227	TROLLSTAKEYOURMEDS	12	0.0003933
TROLLOPES	19	0.0006227	TROLLSTO	12	0.0003933
TROLLSPEW	19	0.0006227	TROLLTIME	12	0.0003933
TROLLDOME	18	0.0005899	TROLLTYPES	12	0.0003933
TROLLFESTS	18	0.0005899	TROLLWORLDORDER	12	0.0003933
TROLLMANSHIP	18	0.0005899	TROLO	12	0.0003933
TROLLPOSTING	18	0.0005899	TROLLACK	11	0.0003605
TROLLYBOY	18	0.0005899	TROLLBAITER	11	0.0003605
TROLLERATION	17	0.0005571	TROLLEAN	11	0.0003605
TROLLESQUE	17	0.0005571	TROLLERING	11	0.0003605
TROLLHAUGEN	17	0.0005571	TROLLET	11	0.0003605
T'ROLLING	17	0.0005571	TROLLFAQ	11	0.0003605
TROLLWORK	17	0.0005571	TROLLFILE	11	0.0003605
TROLLYS	17	0.0005571	TROLLGUN	11	0.0003605
TROLLHÄTTAN	16	0.0005243	TROLLHAVEN	11	0.0003605
TROLL'N	16	0.0005243	TROLLMAN'S	11	0.0003605
TROLLSECTICIDE	16	0.0005243	TROLLMASTER	11	0.0003605
TROLLSHITE	16	0.0005243	TROLLOLOGY	11	0.0003605
TROLLCZY	15	0.0004916	TROLLAYOUY	10	0.0003277
TROLLEDED	15	0.0004916	TROLLBOTS	10	0.0003277
TROLLERI	15	0.0004916	TROLLBOY'S	10	0.0003277
TROLLITY	15	0.0004916	TROLLDAR	10	0.0003277
TROLLLOCKING	15	0.0004916	TROLLERLY	10	0.0003277
TROLLBOB'S	14	0.0004588	TROLLEYOLOGY	10	0.0003277
TROLLFORS	14	0.0004588	TROLLHEIM	10	0.0003277
TROLLH	14	0.0004588	TROLLHERDS	10	0.0003277
TROLLIC	14	0.0004588	TROLLIEDOG	10	0.0003277
TROLLIEST	14	0.0004588	TROLLIUS	10	0.0003277
TROLLIING	14	0.0004588	TROLLGER	10	0.0003277
TROLLKILLERS	14	0.0004588	TROLLPAGE	10	0.0003277

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLSA	10	0.0003277	TROLLBY	7	0.0002294
TROLLSLIKE	10	0.0003277	TROLLDUM	7	0.0002294
TROLLSTONE	10	0.0003277	TROLLEST'S	7	0.0002294
TROLLSTRA	10	0.0003277	TROLLETTES	7	0.0002294
TROLLWARS	10	0.0003277	TROLLEYING	7	0.0002294
TROLLWOOD	10	0.0003277	TROLLFUCK	7	0.0002294
TROLLYPOLE	10	0.0003277	TROLLGIRL	7	0.0002294
TROLOGER	10	0.0003277	TROLLHAENA	7	0.0002294
TROLPA	10	0.0003277	TROLLHATTEN	7	0.0002294
TROLSKY'S	10	0.0003277	TROLLINGKNIIGHT	7	0.0002294
TROLLARD	9	0.0002949	TROLLIO	7	0.0002294
TROLLBLOCKER	9	0.0002949	TROLLISTS	7	0.0002294
TROLLBOIS	9	0.0002949	TROLLITE	7	0.0002294
TROLLINA	9	0.0002949	TROLLOPSING	7	0.0002294
TROLLINGWIZ	9	0.0002949	TROLLSBOROUGH	7	0.0002294
TROLLIPOP	9	0.0002949	TROLLSKOV	7	0.0002294
TROLLITIS	9	0.0002949	TROLLTER	7	0.0002294
TROLLKILLING	9	0.0002949	TROLLTRASH	7	0.0002294
TROLLISH	9	0.0002949	TROLOLO	7	0.0002294
TROLLOCHONDRIAC	9	0.0002949	TROLLBERGS	6	0.0001966
TROLLOPY	9	0.0002949	TROLLEARS	6	0.0001966
TROLLPIT	9	0.0002949	TROLLECTOMY	6	0.0001966
TROLLSÂ€	9	0.0002949	TROLLERBK	6	0.0001966
TROLLSEYE	9	0.0002949	TROLLFODDER	6	0.0001966
TROLLSLAVES	9	0.0002949	TROLLHTTP	6	0.0001966
TROLLSS	9	0.0002949	TROLLICIDE	6	0.0001966
TROLLAMATIC	8	0.0002622	TROLLIEASSHOL	6	0.0001966
TROLLATHON	8	0.0002622	TROLLIJNG	6	0.0001966
TROLLBOYS	8	0.0002622	TROLLINITIONS	6	0.0001966
TROLLBUD	8	0.0002622	TROLLIUNG	6	0.0001966
TROLLBY'S	8	0.0002622	TROLLLLLLLLLLZZZZ	6	0.0001966
TROLLDISENABLERMAN	8	0.0002622	TROLLMANNEN	6	0.0001966
TROLLERIES	8	0.0002622	TROLLMINARY	6	0.0001966
TROLLFIGHT	8	0.0002622	TROLLOC'S	6	0.0001966
TROLLINGLY	8	0.0002622	TROLLOHA	6	0.0001966
TROLLION	8	0.0002622	TROLLOON	6	0.0001966
TROLLISNESS	8	0.0002622	TROLLOWEEN	6	0.0001966
TROLLIVERSE	8	0.0002622	TROLLPROPHET'S	6	0.0001966
TROLLMESITER	8	0.0002622	TROLLQUOTE	6	0.0001966
TROLLMITE	8	0.0002622	TROLLSHAW	6	0.0001966
TROLLNEST	8	0.0002622	TROLLSITE	6	0.0001966
TROLLOCITY	8	0.0002622	TROLLSKOOL	6	0.0001966
TROLLODYTETM	8	0.0002622	TROLLTRICK	6	0.0001966
TROLLPALL	8	0.0002622	TROLLTURPEDO	6	0.0001966
TROLLSIGN	8	0.0002622	TROLLUCINATIONS	6	0.0001966
TROLLTARDS	8	0.0002622	TROLLWARE	6	0.0001966
TROLLWANKERY	8	0.0002622	TROLLAMPLIFIE	5	0.0001639
TROLLZILLEAN	8	0.0002622	TROLLANUS	5	0.0001639

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLARE	5	0.0001639	TROLLARRHEA	4	0.0001311
TROLLBALL	5	0.0001639	TROLLAXOR	4	0.0001311
TROLLBEAD	5	0.0001639	TROLLBELL	4	0.0001311
TROLLBEEF	5	0.0001639	TROLLCOT	4	0.0001311
TROLLBITCH	5	0.0001639	TROLLDOC	4	0.0001311
TROLLCHILD	5	0.0001639	TROLLEMARKETER	4	0.0001311
TROLLCOUGHTROLL	5	0.0001639	TROLLERPRISE	4	0.0001311
TROLLCRITERIA	5	0.0001639	TROLLERSHIP	4	0.0001311
TROLLERATING	5	0.0001639	TROLLEYFUL	4	0.0001311
TROLLETARIAN	5	0.0001639	TROLLEYMEISTER	4	0.0001311
TROLLEYBU	5	0.0001639	TROLLEYRIDE	4	0.0001311
TROLLFEED	5	0.0001639	TROLLFACE	4	0.0001311
TROLLFLEET	5	0.0001639	TROLLFARTS	4	0.0001311
TROLLHELPERS	5	0.0001639	TROLL'FOR	4	0.0001311
TROLLIA	5	0.0001639	TROLLGARGATE	4	0.0001311
TROLLIMG	5	0.0001639	TROLLGORE	4	0.0001311
TROLLINSUM	5	0.0001639	TROLLHAMMER	4	0.0001311
TROLLISCOUS	5	0.0001639	TROLLHAVENER	4	0.0001311
TROLLISHY	5	0.0001639	TROLLHEADQUARTER	4	0.0001311
TROLLIZM	5	0.0001639	TROLLHIT	4	0.0001311
TROLLJTROLL	5	0.0001639	TROLLHITS	4	0.0001311
TROLLKIßER	5	0.0001639	TROLLHOLE	4	0.0001311
TROLLKKKID	5	0.0001639	TROLLHUNTING	4	0.0001311
TROLLLLL	5	0.0001639	TROLLICIOUS	4	0.0001311
TROLLLLLLLLLLL	5	0.0001639	TROLLICUS	4	0.0001311
TROLLNAME	5	0.0001639	TROLLIEM	4	0.0001311
TROLLOF	5	0.0001639	TROLLINGOF	4	0.0001311
TROLLPEDO	5	0.0001639	TROLLINGTACTIC	4	0.0001311
TROLLREADER	5	0.0001639	TROLLINGTACTICS	4	0.0001311
TROLLSAREL	5	0.0001639	TROLLINH	4	0.0001311
TROLLSHITSPAMMER	5	0.0001639	TROLLIONG	4	0.0001311
TROLLSLAYER	5	0.0001639	TROLLITES	4	0.0001311
TROLLSPAMS	5	0.0001639	TROLLITTY	4	0.0001311
TROLLSPOTTING	5	0.0001639	TROLLJOHN	4	0.0001311
TROLLSQUAD	5	0.0001639	TROLLKINGDOM	4	0.0001311
TROLLSTA	5	0.0001639	TROLLLAND	4	0.0001311
TROLLSTARVERS	5	0.0001639	TROLLMANS	4	0.0001311
TROLLTOLERANCE	5	0.0001639	TROLLMEISTER'S	4	0.0001311
TROLLTRAPPER	5	0.0001639	TROLLMIESTER	4	0.0001311
TROLLVANA	5	0.0001639	TROLLNES	4	0.0001311
TROLLWOVEN	5	0.0001639	TROLLNYMS	4	0.0001311
TROLLYCAR	5	0.0001639	TROLLLOGERS	4	0.0001311
TROLLYCAR'S	5	0.0001639	TROLLOID	4	0.0001311
TROLLYING	5	0.0001639	TROLLON	4	0.0001311
TROLLYKINS	5	0.0001639	TROLLOPED	4	0.0001311
TROLON	5	0.0001639	TROLLOZA	4	0.0001311
TROLLACIOUS	4	0.0001311	TROLLPIC	4	0.0001311
TROLLAPAULTS	4	0.0001311	TROLLROD	4	0.0001311

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLSÂ€™	4	0.0001311	TROLLHEAP	3	9.83E-05
TROLLSKIS	4	0.0001311	TROLLHOLES	3	9.83E-05
TROLLST	4	0.0001311	TROLLIBRATION	3	9.83E-05
TROLLTABULOU	4	0.0001311	TROLLIDAYS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLTAGGER	4	0.0001311	TROLLIERY	3	9.83E-05
TROLLTALK	4	0.0001311	TROLLIET	3	9.83E-05
TROLLTANIC	4	0.0001311	TROLLIFICATION	3	9.83E-05
TROLLTOTROLL	4	0.0001311	TROLLIFIED	3	9.83E-05
TROLLTOWN	4	0.0001311	TROLLIMINATOR	3	9.83E-05
TROLLVEGE	4	0.0001311	TROLLINGÂ€	3	9.83E-05
TROLLVEGGEN	4	0.0001311	TROLLING'ABOUT	3	9.83E-05
TROLLYWORLDVIEW	4	0.0001311	TROLLINGHE	3	9.83E-05
TROLPA'S	4	0.0001311	TROLLINGLILYLIVEREDNIT NATS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLÂ€™	3	9.83E-05	TROLLINGPANTS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLAGORY	3	9.83E-05	TROLLINGRATHER	3	9.83E-05
TROLLBADOR	3	9.83E-05	TROLLITUDE	3	9.83E-05
TROLLBATERS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLKING	3	9.83E-05
TROLLBEATER	3	9.83E-05	TROLLKOOK	3	9.83E-05
TROLLBIE	3	9.83E-05	TROLLIKKER	3	9.83E-05
TROLLBLE	3	9.83E-05	TROLLMISS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLBOBSQUAREPANTS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLMISSES	3	9.83E-05
TROLLDALADYWH	3	9.83E-05	TROLLMOVE	3	9.83E-05
TROLLED	3	9.83E-05	TROLLNADO	3	9.83E-05
TROLLDETECTOR	3	9.83E-05	TROLLNINNYS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLDIAC	3	9.83E-05	TROLLOCRACY	3	9.83E-05
TROLLDOMS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLLOGIC	3	9.83E-05
TROLLDON'T	3	9.83E-05	TROLLOPISH	3	9.83E-05
TROLLDOZER	3	9.83E-05	TROLLOPOLY	3	9.83E-05
TROLLEAR	3	9.83E-05	TROLLOVISION	3	9.83E-05
TROLLEGIANCE	3	9.83E-05	TROLLPATROL	3	9.83E-05
TROLLEMENTARY	3	9.83E-05	TROLLRATBASTARDSLAYER	3	9.83E-05
TROLLENOSCOPI	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSAVANIA	3	9.83E-05
TROLLENS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSCHITT	3	9.83E-05
TROLLENSTEIN	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSCILLATIONS	3	9.83E-05
TROLL'ER	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSHERE	3	9.83E-05
TROLLERCOASTER	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSNEST	3	9.83E-05
TROLLERGY	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSPAM	3	9.83E-05
TROLLERIFIC	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSPOTTER	3	9.83E-05
TROLLERIZUM	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSSSSSSS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLETTA	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSUSATATION	3	9.83E-05
TROLLETTING	3	9.83E-05	TROLLSUX	3	9.83E-05
TROLLFAG	3	9.83E-05	TROLLTECTION	3	9.83E-05
TROLLFLAPPER	3	9.83E-05	TROLLTECTON	3	9.83E-05
TROLLFOOD	3	9.83E-05	TROLLUBE	3	9.83E-05
TROLLFOOLERY	3	9.83E-05	TROLLUPS	3	9.83E-05
TROLLFRIENDS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLVE	3	9.83E-05
TROLLGNAWS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLVIKA	3	9.83E-05
TROLLHAUSEN	3	9.83E-05	TROLLWANNABE	3	9.83E-05

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLWORKS	3	9.83E-05	TROLLEYBUSES	2	6.55E-05
TROLLYWOOD	3	9.83E-05	TROLLEYCOACH	2	6.55E-05
TROLOGDYTE	3	9.83E-05	TROLLEYDOSSER	2	6.55E-05
TROLOL	3	9.83E-05	TROLLEYLINES	2	6.55E-05
TROLSBY	3	9.83E-05	TROLLFEEDINGS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLSL	3	9.83E-05	TROLLFISH	2	6.55E-05
TROLLÅ€	2	6.55E-05	TROLLFUKKER	2	6.55E-05
TROLLAND	2	6.55E-05	TROLLGATE	2	6.55E-05
TROLLANIMATE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLGEDDON	2	6.55E-05
TROLLAS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLGUNS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLASS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLHALLA	2	6.55E-05
TROLLAVAL	2	6.55E-05	TROLLHAMMAREN	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBACK	2	6.55E-05	TROLLHOUND	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBAITS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLICA	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBANK	2	6.55E-05	TROLLILNG	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBASHERS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLINATOR	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBASHING	2	6.55E-05	TROLLINGAND	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBATE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLINGNESS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBEADS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLINGSKILLS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBERGIAN	2	6.55E-05	TROLLISA	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBILDE	2	6.55E-05	TROLL'ISHNESS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBILGE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLISMA	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBLASTER	2	6.55E-05	TROLLISMUS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBLOG	2	6.55E-05	TROLLITUS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBLOOD	2	6.55E-05	TROLLIX	2	6.55E-05
TROLLB'S	2	6.55E-05	TROLLJ	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBUDDY	2	6.55E-05	TROLLKIRKA	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBUG	2	6.55E-05	TROLLED	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBURP	2	6.55E-05	TROLLLEER	2	6.55E-05
TROLLBUS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLLLLLL	2	6.55E-05
TROLLCO	2	6.55E-05	TROLLLLLLLL	2	6.55E-05
TROLLCROSS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL	2	6.55E-05
TROLLD	2	6.55E-05	TROLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL	2	6.55E-05
TROLLDART	2	6.55E-05	TROLLMAJOR	2	6.55E-05
TROLLDAVEINLAKEVILLAS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLMOORS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLDEATH	2	6.55E-05	TROLLMUCK	2	6.55E-05
TROLLDUJOUR	2	6.55E-05	TROLLNOISE	2	6.55E-05
TROLLEDNESS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLNY	2	6.55E-05
TROLLEDYNGJA	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOBFUSCATOR	2	6.55E-05
TROLLENBUSCH	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOGISTS	2	6.55E-05
TROLLERATED	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOLLY	2	6.55E-05
TROLLERBOY	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOMANIA	2	6.55E-05
TROLLERISM	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOOP	2	6.55E-05
TROLLERIZE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOPELY	2	6.55E-05
TROLLE'S	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOPHOBE	2	6.55E-05
TROLLETE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLOPIAN	2	6.55E-05
TROLLETT	2	6.55E-05	TROLLORGAN	2	6.55E-05
TROLLEYBOOKS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLORMORON	2	6.55E-05

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLOTINE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLARGUMENTS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLPERV	2	6.55E-05	TROLLARONI	1	3.28E-05
TROLLPOLL	2	6.55E-05	TROLLATARIAT	1	3.28E-05
TROLLPOOL	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBABE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLPROPHETE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBABIES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSB	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBAGGERS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCAPE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBASE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCAT	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBATH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCHCHANGE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBEASTS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCHEMEDES	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBERSERKER	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCORING	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBIES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSDALE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBIN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSHAPE	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBIRD	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSHASWS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBOI'S	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSHOP	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBOOBSHITPANTS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSLAYERS	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBOOTH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSOMENES	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBOOTH'S	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSPAWN	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBREAKER	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSRADICAL	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBREATH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSŠ	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBROOK	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSTORM	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBUCKET	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSWHO	2	6.55E-05	TROLLBYTE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSY	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCHOW	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTAK	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCITO	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTARDZ	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCLAIMED	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTASTIC	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCLAMFAG	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTESTANT	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCRAFT	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTOAD	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCRANKPOTTERS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTOWN'S	2	6.55E-05	TROLLCRAP	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTRAP	2	6.55E-05	TROLL'D	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTURD	2	6.55E-05	TROLLDANCING	1	3.28E-05
TROLLU	2	6.55E-05	TROLLDAVE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLWAGON	2	6.55E-05	TROLLDEVNULL	1	3.28E-05
TROLLWATCHIN	2	6.55E-05	TROLLDOLT	1	3.28E-05
TROLLWATCH'S	2	6.55E-05	TROLLDUMB	1	3.28E-05
TROLLYDODGER	2	6.55E-05	TROLLEATER	1	3.28E-05
TROLNWO	2	6.55E-05	TROLLEBOTTEN	1	3.28E-05
TROLOBITES	2	6.55E-05	TROLLECH	1	3.28E-05
TROLOD	2	6.55E-05	TROLLEDKOOK	1	3.28E-05
TROLOOK	2	6.55E-05	TROLLEDS	1	3.28E-05
TROLRI	2	6.55E-05	TROLLEDSUCCESSFULLY	1	3.28E-05
TR'O'LL	1	3.28E-05	TROLLEIES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLÅ€™S	1	3.28E-05	TROLLELL	1	3.28E-05
TROLLABYTE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLELLEL	1	3.28E-05
TROLLADYNGJA	1	3.28E-05	TROLLENKELDER	1	3.28E-05
TROLLALO	1	3.28E-05	TROLLENNIUM	1	3.28E-05
TROLLALONGS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLENSLAPPER'	1	3.28E-05
TROLLARCHIVE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLERANCE	1	3.28E-05

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLERGAGS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLISHSHIP	1	3.28E-05
TROLLERISTS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLISIMS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLERIZATIO N ¹	1	3.28E-05	TROLLJACKED	1	3.28E-05
TROLLERIZED	1	3.28E-05	TROLLJTEM	1	3.28E-05
TROLLERIZI	1	3.28E-05	TROLLJUDITH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLERSON	1	3.28E-05	TROLLKARLENS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLERZING	1	3.28E-05	TROLLKICKING	1	3.28E-05
TROLLESON	1	3.28E-05	TROLLKONOR	1	3.28E-05
TROLLETS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLKYO	1	3.28E-05
TROLLEYCARS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLKYRKA	1	3.28E-05
TROLLEYEME	1	3.28E-05	TROLLM	1	3.28E-05
TROLLEYFULS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMAINS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLEYLOAD	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMAKTER	1	3.28E-05
TROLLEYSTOWAGE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMANN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLEYWAY	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMATES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFAIL	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMEAT	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFIGHTER	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMEISTERS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFIJORD	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMMY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFJORD	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMODE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFLESH	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMONKEY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFOLK	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMOON	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFOODDISPENSE R	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMORIEN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLFRIEND	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMORON	1	3.28E-05
TROLLGOON	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMOUTH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLGROUP	1	3.28E-05	TROLLMUNCH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLHAGEN	1	3.28E-05	TROLLODITES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLHATTON	1	3.28E-05	TROLLODITESTM	1	3.28E-05
TROLLHAUGEN'S	1	3.28E-05	TROLLODYTEST A ¹	1	3.28E-05
TROLLHAUNT	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOFFLOL	1	3.28E-05
TROLLHOO	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOI	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIDIOT	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOLLITY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIFERIOUSLY	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOLOGICAL	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIFFIC	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOLOS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIFIC	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOMA	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIFICARUM	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOMAINIA	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIKE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOMETERS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLINÂ€™	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOMITE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLINGB	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOPEY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLINGBAIT	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOPHILES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLINGCOME C	1	3.28E-05	TROLLOPSHIP	1	3.28E-05
TROLLINK	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPACK	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIN'S	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPAN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIN'TROLLIN	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPRETENDING	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIOS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPROOF	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIPING	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPUNTER	1	3.28E-05
TROLLIPSIS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPUPPET	1	3.28E-05
TROLLISATROLL	1	3.28E-05	TROLLPUPPIES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLISHISHLY	1	3.28E-05	TROLLQUEEN	1	3.28E-05

Appendix C: WLUC TROLL* variants

VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW	VARIANT	RAW FREQ.	FPMW
TROLLRADAR	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTAXONOMY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSBOT	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTEC'S	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSBRUY	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTHERE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSBTHE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTOOTH	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSBWILD	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTRIPLETS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCALE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTURDS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSCENT	1	3.28E-05	TROLLTWINKYSHANE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSDEAD	1	3.28E-05	TROLLUCATION	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSFUCKINGSHEE P	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWANKE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSGROUP	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWANKER	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSHIFT	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWARRING	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSHIFTS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWAY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSIDE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWHACKERS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSIES	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWHY	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSIGNORE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWISE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSLAVE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWOMEN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSLAYING	1	3.28E-05	TROLLWON'T	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSLOBS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLYBARN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSMACKED	1	3.28E-05	TROLLYBUSES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLS'NDOLL	1	3.28E-05	TROLLYLOCKS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSPACE	1	3.28E-05	TROLLYLOX	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSPELLCASTERSR ULEZZZ	1	3.28E-05	TROLLYNESS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSPERMIA	1	3.28E-05	TROLLYPEEP	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSTAKES	1	3.28E-05	TROLLZARA	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSTORMS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLZERKERS	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSTRANGLERS	1	3.28E-05	TROLLZINES	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSTRYING	1	3.28E-05	TROLLZONE	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSUCK	1	3.28E-05	TROLMAN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSVILLE	1	3.28E-05	TROLSAN	1	3.28E-05
TROLLSWITHSMALLDI CKS	1	3.28E-05	TROLSPIRALSFROMPIERCE COUNTYPOLICESHOOTING	1	3.28E-05
TROLLTAG	1	3.28E-05			

GLOSSARY

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

BLUSHES or <YAWNS>
or [WONDERS WHY SHE
BOTHERS] or
<SARCASM>WOW.
</SARCASM> etc.

Punctuation can be adopted to narrate actions, behaviours, thoughts, and feelings, much like the stage directions in a play. User preference will often determine precisely how this is done. Conventions from other languages or forums may also be used (e.g. HTML, Perl, etc.) for a variety of purposes. The most common is to indicate the start and/or finish of a particular tone or attitude, as in the example, but see also AOL.

<AOL>ME TOO</AOL> or
<AOL> or AOL etc.

AOL is literally *America Online*, an internet service provider, but these examples and similar variations are used satirically to mean 'me too', 'same here', 'as above' or similar. This meaning surfaced in the 1990s when AOL distributed millions of CDs across Europe and the US offering easy, 'no-strings' free internet trials mainly marketed at the technologically suspicious and inexperienced. The campaign resulted in large numbers of inexperienced users who, going online for the first time, were typically unaware of, and therefore frequently breached, netiquette norms. This led to a general perception that all AOL users were ignorant and rude—a stigma which still exists today. A behaviour typically associated with AOL users involved responding to a long, involved discussion with, 'me too', thus increasing post-quantity without adding anything useful (cf. the signal-to-noise ratio). Parodies of this behaviour appeared in forms such as <aol>me too</aol>, and gradually shortened to just <aol> or AOL. See also *netiquette*.

AKA Also known as.

ASCII American Standard Code for Information Exchange: the 95 standard letters, numbers and punctuation symbols. See also *ASCII-art* and *leetspeak*.

ASCII-ART Text-based graphics created from the 95 standard letters, numbers and punctuation. Smileys are very basic ASCII-art. See also *ASCII*.

BLOG
-GED, -GER, -GING, -S

'Biographical' and 'log', or a clipping of, 'web-log'. A (usually public) online journal, which may be dedicated to a topic (e.g. politics, sport, business) or just document day-to-day happenstances and matters of personal interest. These usually allow people to subscribe, and to comment on the articles. See also *vlog*.


BOT
-S

Abbreviation of 'robot'. Bots are a small pieces of software designed to undertake particular tasks. Bots can be malicious (e.g. *spambots*) or beneficial (e.g. FAQ *chatbots*). Some are programmed to masquerade as real people, whilst others work 'invisibly' in the background. Bots can also be used to form botnets. See also *botnet*, *flamebot*, *malware*, *spambot*, *trojan*, *virus*, and *web-crawl*.

**BOTNET (also ZOMBIE
BOTNET)**

'Robot' and 'network'. A botnet is a collection of devices such as computers which are connected (technically this can apply to much of the internet as it stands). More specifically, a 'zombie' botnet is a network of devices which have

Glossary

-S	all been infected with the same botnet virus or trojan (cf. the Storm Botnet), and are part of a botnet without their owners' knowledge or consent. These computers may be used by the individual controlling the botnet to supply information, provide storage, or to carry out distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks. See <i>DoS and DDoS</i> .
<BG> or *BG* etc.	Big grin. See also <g> and <vbg>.
BS	Bullshit.
BTW	By the way.
CAPTCHA	<p>Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. CAPTCHA is a form of challenge-response authentication, in that it challenges a user for a specific response which the computer then grades in order to authenticate the user's identity (in this case as a human). Typically, the computer produces a distorted image of text, as shown on the right. The human is then required to accurately type and submit the text back to the computer before being allowed to continue. This is mainly aimed at combating spambots since even advanced optical character recognition (OCR) software may struggle with particular kinds of text distortions. See also <i>spambot</i>.</p> 
CHATROOM -S	A synchronous CMC (SCMC) environment. A typical public chatroom may have a theme, e.g. music, UK chatters, teens. Depending on the room, users may enter with only a username (sometimes called a nickname, nick, nym, etc.), or may need as much as a fully validated, password protected user account. Some may be moderated by superusers, whilst others may be unmoderated.
CRAWL -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	See <i>web-crawl</i> .
CROSSPOST or X-POST or XP -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	To send the same post to several newsgroups or individuals at once. Crossposting can be employed by trolls as a method of starting flamewars between groups. For example, a troll might crosspost "Harry Potter does not encourage Satanism" to newsgroups on Harry Potter, Christianity, and bridal wear. Respondents who fail to check where their replies are going will unwittingly crosspost to all of these groups. If the troll is successful, the Harry Potter and Christianity newsgroups may each think that the other sent the message and begin arguing, whilst the bridal group may complain about off-topic posts. Accidental crossposting is seen as poor newsgroup practice, and crossposting even to relevant groups tends to be discouraged due to the heightened potential for misunderstandings. See also <i>newsgroup</i> .
DOS and DDOS (ATTACK) -ED, -ES, -ING	Denial of service (attack) and distributed denial of service (attack). In the first case, this involves one computer sending repeated requests to a server, usually in an attempt to exceed the number of requests that the server can handle, thereby taking the server, and any services or sites it hosts, offline. Since a DoS attack usually originates from one IP address (unless the user has taken steps to keep recycling their address), blocking the offending IP address is usually

Glossary

sufficient to stop the attack. However, in the case of the *distributed* denial of service attack, the attacks come from several (possibly thousands) of computers, using many different IP addresses. The attacking computers are usually part of a zombie botnet, however users may deliberately organise and carry out attacks on sites using readymade software such as LOIC.exe and HOIC.exe. Since the requests from the attacking computers are the same as an 'honest' request from a user wishing to access the service hosted on the site, and since the attack comes from so many IP addresses, a DDoS attack is very difficult to manage, short of simply taking the site offline (which is, of course, usually what the attackers are aiming to achieve anyway). Sites can be DDoSed for innocent reasons, usually when many users flood the site at the same time. This can occur when a site releases a high-demand product (e.g. tickets to a major event) at a specific time and users rush to purchase before that product runs out, or when a large, busy site links to a small site with limited server capacity, and the influx of visitors overwhelms the capabilities of the smaller site's servers, taking the site offline. See also *botnet*.

DOX OR DOXING OR DOX DROPPING -ED, -ES	Document, documenting, or document dropping. The discovery, collection, and publication—usually online—of as much personal and private information about an individual as possible, including home and work addresses, phone numbers, next of kin, all online profiles, usernames, etc.. The primary effect of this, arguably, is psychological, since much of the retrieved information is often readily available, e.g. on employer websites, via WHOIS searches, through social networks, etc.. In more serious cases, however, the information may be used to contact the individual offline, and in the most serious instances, private information such as log in details and other private credentials may be unearthed in order to carry out criminal activities such as identity cloning, fraud, or impersonation. See also <i>WHOIS</i> .
DNFTT OR DNFT OR DFT	Do not feed the troll.
FLAMEBOT -S	A small piece of software designed to insult and attack users. Depending on its sophistication, it may attack at random or target individuals, and repeat itself or produce a range of utterances. See also <i>bot</i> , <i>malware</i> , <i>spambot</i> and <i>web-crawl</i> .
FAQS	Frequently asked questions. A database of questions that are (supposedly) commonly asked by site-visitors and/or users.
FROUP -S, -Y	A slang corruption of 'group' (from 'newsgroup'). Depending on context, this can be jocular, affectionate, insulting, etc.. See also <i>newsgroup</i> and <i>newghey</i> .
FWIW	For what it's worth.
HACKTIVIST (ALSO HACKTIVISM, HACKTIVITIES, etc.) -S	'Hacker' and 'activist'. One who accesses other sites, software, or computers (usually without permission) to carry out a political, moral, or personal agenda. For instance, in <i>Operation Avenge Assange</i> which campaigned for freedom of speech and information, the hacktivist group <i>Anonymous</i> DDoSed a range of major sites, including <i>MasterCard</i> , <i>PayPal</i> , and <i>Visa</i> when these businesses decided to cease handling transactions for Julian Assange, owner of the controversial <i>Wikileaks</i> website (Mackey 2010). See also <i>DoS</i> and <i>DDoS attack</i> .

Glossary

HEADER -S	An email header or message header provides background information about the message it is attached to, including where it was sent from, where to, which servers it was routed through, what time it arrived at certain points, how it is encoded, etc. Header information can help to distinguish between real and falsified emails.
HRNRFANG	He's really not read for any newsgroup. See also <i>RNRFTNG</i> and <i>YRNRFTNG, AY?</i>
HTH	1) Here to help. 2) Happy to help.
I²P	Invisible Internet Project. A decentralised, anonymous/pseudonymous, peer-to-peer overlay network that hosts services such as email, instant messenger, blogging, IRC, file-sharing, usenet, etc.. I ² P uses end-to-end encryption so that both sender's and recipient's IP addresses remain anonymous to each other, and to third-parties. See also <i>blog, IP address, IRC, proxy server, and Tor</i> .
IM -ED, -S	Instant messenger. See also <i>instant messenger</i> .
IME	In my experience.
IMHO or IMO	In my honest/humble opinion, or, in my opinion.
IMMD	It made my day.
INSTANT MESSENGER or INSTANT MESSAGING or IM etc. -ED, -ING, -S	Software used to interact with others who also have the same, or similar software (though many are now available in web-based 'lite' versions). Typically, users add contacts to a list and can then see when they are online and/or available. When users send messages, their contact's IM will play a noise and/or display a notification. Many IMs are freely available.
IP ADDRESS	Internet protocol address. All websites have an IP address consisting of four sets of numbers from 0-999, e.g. 82.35.36.190 . IP addresses can identify locations and ISPs. For instance, in the example above, 82 refers to the UK, and 35 refers to London. See also <i>VoIP</i> .
IRC	Internet Relay Chat. This technically refers to a specific type of SCMC software which allows users to connect to a network (e.g. <i>DALnet, Undernet</i>) and join a channel (e.g. <i>#bubbles, #irchelp</i>) to chat to others. More commonly, IRC is used to mean any SCMC.
ISP	Internet service provider.
KILLFILE -D, -R, -ING, -S	To block a user's message by filtering them out. See also <i><plonk></i> .

Glossary

KOOK NET-, -ED, -ERY, -INESS, - ING, -S, etc.	The kook culture is vast, complex and grounded in both self- and other-directed satire. Kookery involves not only behaving in a bizarre manner by, for instance, spinning fantastic stories, but apparently believing those stories to be true.
LEETSPEAK or 1337 etc.	'Elite' and 'speak'. Sometimes just <i>leet</i> . The language of an internet subculture with its own morphology, grammar, and lexis. Orthographically, it is usually comprised of ASCII characters, and was supposedly designed to both evade swear-filters (see §4.7.1.1) and be unreadable to the uninitiated. See also ASCII, <i>lolcats</i> , <i>lolspeak</i> and <i>lulz</i> .
LOL -!D, -LED, -LING, -S	Laugh(ing) out loud. This can be extended for emphasis, e.g. <i>llloooolll</i> , <i>looooool</i> , <i>lololol</i> . See also <i>lolspeak</i> and <i>lulz</i> .
LOLCAT -S	Image macros of cats with humorous captions on them. This meme's origins are generally attributed to 4chan's /b/ board. The meme was allegedly triggered by the lolcat on the right, and has become so popular that there are now major sites (e.g. http://icanhascheezburger.com) dedicated to producing lolcat pictures and merchandise. The captions, and often the user's comments on those lolcats are written in lolspeak, as though written by the cats themselves. See also <i>leetspeak</i> , <i>LOL</i> , and <i>lolspeak</i> .
LOLSPEAK	The 'language' of lolcats, derived from <i>leetspeak</i> . Lolcat captions, and often the commentary on those pictures by site users are written in lolspeak, as though actually written by the cats themselves. Lolspeak incorporates features of text messaging, non-native errors (e.g. lack of subject-verb concord), and deliberate clumsiness, as well as several structural patterns, such as: [x] cat is [x] e.g. <i>helper cat is helping</i> [x]—ur doin it wrong e.g. <i>thesis—ur doin it wrong</i> I's in ur [x], steelin ur [y] e.g. <i>I's in ur PhD steelin ur smarts</i> For an excellent introduction to the language play of lolspeak, see Vaughan & Gawne (2011). See also <i>leetspeak</i> , <i>LOL</i> and <i>lolcats</i> .
LULZ -Y	A slang corruption of LOL, lulz is used to indicate laughter at another's expense (akin to the German concept of <i>schadenfreude</i>). Its origins tend to be attributed to 4chan, though this is impossible to validate. It is frequently used in phrases such as, "I did it for the lulz" and "do it for the lulz" as explanation or encouragement for reprehensible behaviour. See also <i>LOL</i> , <i>lolcats</i> , and <i>lolspeak</i> .
MAIL-BOMB -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	To flood someone's inbox or forum with messages, in order to make that account or forum unusable. This is usually done by software but can be done manually.
MALWARE	'Malicious' and 'software'. A general term for any malicious software, such as <i>spambots</i> , viruses, spyware etc.. See also <i>bot</i> , <i>flamebot</i> , <i>spambot</i> , and <i>web-crawl</i> .



Glossary

MB -S	Messageboard.
MEATPUPPET -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	Also known as a strawman meatpuppet, or strawpuppet. A false identity set up and operated by a user for them to argue with and defeat, in order to look better.
NETCOP -S	A derogatory term for those who (try to) take action against others, e.g. by reporting them to their ISP, the group admin, etc. See also <i>ISP</i> .
NETIQUETTE	The general rules of 'polite' online behaviour that users are broadly expected to adhere to, best typified by RFC1855, and including instructions such as, don't write in all-caps (since it's like shouting), try to spell and punctuate well, keep the message brief and to the point, don't reduce the signal-to-noise ratio by adding meaningless comments like 'me too', etc.. See also <i>AOL</i> .
NETKOOK -S	See <i>kook</i> .
NEWBIE or NOOB or NOOB etc. -S	A new or inexperienced group member. See also <i>reg</i> .
NEWGHEY -S	A slang corruption of 'newsgroup'. Depending on context, this can be jocular, affectionate, insulting, etc. See also <i>froup</i> and <i>newsgroup</i> .
NEWSGROUP -S	A discussion forum where messages are sent and received via a newsreader, such as <i>Windows Mail</i> or <i>Mozilla Thunderbird</i> . The posts (collectively, <i>news</i>), like emails, are sent to every member of the group, but unlike emails these can be retrieved months, or even years after posting. Newsgroups are divided into super-categories: <i>rec</i> (recreation), <i>alt</i> (alternative) etc., and into further categories (<i>rec.equestrian</i>) and subcategories (<i>alt.alien.vampire</i>). See also <i>froup</i> , <i>NG</i> , <i>newghey</i> , and <i>usenet</i> .
NG -S	Newsgroup. See also <i>newsgroup</i> .
OB	Obligatory. In RE, often used thus: "Ob-horsy: got Snaffles a new saddle."
OMG or OMFG or ZOMFG or ZOMGWTFBQ! etc.	Oh my (fucking) god. Sometimes prefixed with Z, and suffixed with 'what the fuck barbecue!' for a superlative exclamation of excitement.
OP -S	Original poster.

Glossary

OT	Off-topic.
PHISH -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	Usually 'phishing email' or 'phishing scam'. To email someone with the intention of gathering valuable information such as IDs, passwords, and bank details. This may be done by sending an email to a user that appears to be from her bank, asking her to 'reactivate' her login-details. The site she is directed to will belong to the phisher and any information entered will be harvested by him. He may then defraud her via identity cloning (using the falsely acquired details to masquerade as her online in order to buy goods and services). See also <i>spam</i> .
<PLONK> or *PLONK* etc. -ED, -ING, -S	The 'sound' of someone being killfiled, used because "in cyberspace, no one can hear your killfile" (anon) and because online, silence is highly ambiguous (the person may have had a power cut, technical issues, etc.). Using *plonk* disambiguates the silence by making it clear to the killfiled user that she is being deliberately ignored.
PROXY SERVER	A proxy server is a mediating server that stands between the client and the service that the client wishes to access. The client sends a request (e.g. she types in a URL and presses enter), the proxy server then assesses this request based on rules such as IP address, the request type, etc.. If the proxy server approves the request, it may then contact the service on behalf of the client, retrieve the requested data (in this case the webpage) and then pass this back to the client. Proxy servers have a variety of uses, such as filtering unauthorised traffic, caching (the server holds recent versions of pages in its cache and sends these instead, thereby decreasing both response-time and service requests placed on the service), and anonymising the client (these proxies are sometimes simply referred to as <i>anonymisers</i>), especially if several proxy servers are 'daisy-chained' together. However, proxy servers can also be used to eavesdrop, since the first server in the chain receives the client's information direct from her IP address, and if this is unencrypted, the information may be logged and used by third-parties, e.g. for identity fraud. See also <i>IP address</i> , <i>I²P</i> , <i>Tor</i> , and <i>URL</i> .
RICKROLL -ED, -ING, -S	A 'bait and switch' tactic derived from the duckroll. The duckroll originated on <i>4chan</i> as a result of a word-filter which changed <i>egg</i> to <i>duck</i> (and therefore <i>eggroll</i> to <i>duckroll</i>). Users began to post links to supposedly enticing content, but which actually led to an image of a duck on wheels. Users who fell for this were said to have been duckrolled. Later, duckrolling developed into rickrolling, where the link would lead to a video of Rick Astley's <i>Never Gonna Give You Up</i> .
RL	Real life.
RNRFTNG	Really not ready for trolling newsgroups. See also <i>HRNRFTNG</i> and <i>YRNRFTNG</i> , <i>AY?</i>
ROFL OR ROTFL	Rolling on the floor laughing.
SBL	Sports Betting League.

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SEED -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	Search criteria given to a <i>web-crawler</i> . Seeds can be a list of web addresses, a range of lexical items, etc.. Depending on how the crawler is programmed and set up, each time it visits a page, it will add all the hyperlinks on that page to its list of new pages to visit (termed its 'crawl frontier').
SLOW-BOMB -ED, -ING, -S	Derived from mail-bomb. A signs B's email address up to as many newsletters, unscrupulous websites, and spambots as possible. Initially the user may only receive a small amount of spam (hence the 'slow') but as the email address is continually distributed and sold on, the influx builds until the account can become totally unusable. See also <i>mail-bomb</i> and <i>spambot</i> .
SOCIAL NETWORK SITE -S	A site with the (ostensible) purpose of connecting people socially, or enhancing existing networks with friends, families, colleagues, past school peers, etc.. Contemporary examples include <i>Facebook</i> , <i>Bebo</i> , <i>FriendsReunited</i> , and <i>MySpace</i> .
SPAMBOT -S	Software that crawls the internet harvesting email addresses. From these, it builds mailing lists, usually for unsolicited mass emails (spam). See also <i>bot</i> , <i>flamebot</i> , <i>malware</i> , and <i>web-crawl</i> .
SOCKPUPPET -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	1) v. To set up a false account pretending to be someone else, particularly if one then uses that account to praise one's own work, attack critics, etc.. See also <i>meatpuppet</i> . 2) n. A derogative term for a user who joins a group purely to defend someone (e.g. a friend) who is under attack.
SPAM -MED, -MER, -MING, -S	Unsolicited junk email, somewhat equivalent to ordinary junk-mail. Frequently etymologically grounded in <i>Monty Python's Flying Circus</i> and the now-infamous 'spam scene'. See also <i>phish</i> and <i>bot</i> .
STFU	Shut the fuck up.
SYSADMIN	System Administrator.
TOR	The Onion Router. Anonymising software that encrypts data multiple times and routes this data through a network of bi-directional relays. Each relay decrypts a layer at a time until the fully decrypted information leaves a Tor exit node and is sent on to the desired service. Tor aims to provide anonymity, privacy, freedom, and confidentiality, however research has shown that if enough relays can be successfully controlled, then a request's origins and destination may be deduced, and the unencrypted data leaving the exit node may be intercepted. Tor provides individuals access to anonymised email, instant messenger, and hidden services. The domain names of these hidden services are typically a collection of letters and numbers, end with .onion, e.g. http://silkroadvb5piz3r.onion (The Silk Road is an anonymous marketplace notorious for selling illegal drugs), and can usually only be accessed by a Tor client. See also <i>IP</i> and <i>Proxy server</i> .
TROJAN	A malicious application that usually allows a third-party user to take some form of remote control of a device. See also <i>bot</i> , <i>botnet</i> , <i>virus</i> , and <i>malware</i> .

Glossary

A selection of humorous 'laws' from across the internet that have accumulated into what is sometimes referred to as *The Ten Laws*. The actual ten laws, and their names, remits, and incarnations vary, but in general, they are roughly as follows:

Godwin's Law: As a discussion gets longer, the probability of a reference to Hitler or the Nazis approaches 1.

Poe's Law: Without overt humour signals (e.g. smileys) it's impossible to parody fundamentalism without someone mistaking it for real.

Rule 34: If it exists, there is porn of it.

Skitt's Law (also known as Muphry's Law): Any post correcting errors will contain at least one error. The stronger the criticism of an error, the greater the errors within the criticism will be. The likelihood of an error also correlates with the degree of embarrassment it will cause the author, and everyone but the proof-reader will see the error.

THE TEN LAWS

Scopie's Law: In any academic discussion, citing *Wikipedia*, *Yahoo! Answers*, etc. results in an instant and humiliating loss of the argument.

Danth's Law (also known as Parker's Law): If you have to insist that you won an argument, then you probably lost. Badly.

Pommer's Law: Reading the internet can change your mind—from having no opinion, to having a wrong opinion.

DeMyer's Second Law: Arguments consisting mainly of quotes can be safely ignored. They've lost already.

Cohen's Law: Whoever resorts to the argument that 'whoever resorts to the argument that [...] has automatically lost the debate' has automatically lost the debate.

Punctuation Law: Over-use of punctuation and all-caps negatively correlates with veracity. One exclamation mark = emphasis. Five = crazy.

URL

Uniform resource locator. Often used (inaccurately) as a synonym for a web address.

USENET

'User' and 'network'. The collective name for the system of newsgroups. Usenet was originally distinct from the World Wide Web, and just as the web requires a web browser to access, usenet newsgroups required a newsreader to access. Now, newsgroups are also available on the web. Usenet was one of the earliest forms of interactive internet and many of the behaviours and concepts discussed in this thesis, e.g. trolling, flaming, etc. are said to have their origins there.

<VBG> or *VBG* etc.

Very big grin. See also <g> and <bg>.

VIRTUAL WORLD or VW

-S

A computer-based environment simulation. Older VWs were usually text-based. Current VWs tend to be graphics-based with audio and text. VWs may be 'populated' by scripted characters that follow exact routines, by simulated characters (sims) that undertake pre-programmed, context-dependent behaviours, and/or by other CMC users.

VIRUS

A malicious segment of code that triggers a computer, mobile phone, or similar device to take some form of (usually self-damaging) action. A simple virus may email itself out to every contact in the user's address book before formatting the device's hard-drive, whilst an advanced one may change the security settings on the user's device and connect to a zombie botnet without the

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owner's knowledge. See also *bot*, *botnet*, *trojan*, and *malware*.

VLOG -GED, -GER, -GING, -S	'Video' and 'blog'. A blog with video-based content. See also <i>blog</i> .
VOIP -ED, -GING, -S	Voice over IP. A protocol that allows a user to use their internet connection much like a telephone. Typically, each user will have the same VoIP software installed (e.g. <i>Skype</i>) and will use their computer mics and speakers to interact. Some VoIPs also allow concurrent video streaming. See also <i>IP address</i> .
WEB-CRAWL or CRAWL -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	Web-crawlers, also known as ants, (web-)spiders, worms, bots, auto-indexers, or scutters, are types of software that automatically 'crawl' or 'spider' the internet. Crawlers may harvest email addresses (see <i>spambot</i>), perform maintenance by checking sites for broken links, or simply copy all the pages they visit into a cache, such as those typically used by search engines. Seeds are used to indicate which pages a crawler should visit. See also <i>bot</i> , <i>flamebot</i> , <i>malware</i> , <i>seeds</i> , and <i>spambot</i> .
WHOIS or WHOIS LOOKUP or WHOIS PROTOCOL	'Who' and 'is'. A query/response protocol typically used to retrieve results from a database storing information (i.e. name, address, telephone, fax, mobile, email) on the registered or assigned user of a domain name, IP address, or IP address block. See also <i>IP Address</i> .
X-POST or XP -ED, -ER, -ING, -S	See <i>crosspost</i> .
YRNRFTNG, AY?	You're really not ready for trolling newsgroups, are you? See also <i>HRNRFTNG</i> and <i>RNRFTNG</i> .
YTMND	You're the man now dog. A comic allusion to the cartoon featuring a dog surfing the internet, with the caption, "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog."



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

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