

Christina Romeo

Guest Lecturer

St. Stephen's College,

Uzhavoor, Kerala, India

### Siting the Web: The Neo Counterculture of Creative Resistance through Internet Trolls

#### Abstract

The paper entitled *Siting the Web: The Neo Counterculture of Creative Resistance through Internet Trolls* is an enquiry into the emerging status of trolls as a form of a new generation counterculture, based on the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault. Trolls are specifically works of art or general comments intended to disrupt the internet society. Trolls have been used as a form of resistance against the power-bloc along with the hope for a better tomorrow. The paper analyses the power gained by internet trolls as a counter discipline, effectively interpellating the subjects with the help of the notion of panopticon. It also analyses the role of trolls in the gradual development of techniques of surveillance, whose function was far more complex and subtle than massive and spectacular displays of power. It also throws light on how the modern day troll culture reverses the concept of discipline through which docile bodies are created. That is, how the gaze is reversed. The paper aims to analyse the notion of trolls as a form of counterculture rather than as an innocent medium for entertainment.

**Keyword:** Internet Trolls, Panopticon, Counterculture, Resistance.

#### Introduction

India's public life is now occupied by the countless satirical and ironic trolls produced by netizens. Not only authorities, but also powerful personalities, situations and institutions are being ruthlessly trolled. Covered in sugar-coated satire or low-comedy, these internet trolls and picture spoofs induce thoughts among the citizens. Trolls have been used to criticise or reject the currently powerful institutions, with accompanying hope for a better life or a new society from a common man's perspective.

The Wikipedia describes an internet meme as

an activity, concept, catchphrase or piece of media which spreads, often as mimicry or for comedic purposes, from person to person via internet. An internet meme may also take the form of an image, hyperlink, video, website or hashtag.

Internet trolls can be seen as a variety of these memes. The internet defines a troll as a person who sows discord on the internet by starting arguments or upsetting people, by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion, often for their own amusement. Regardless of the circumstances, controversial posts may attract a particularly strong response from those unfamiliar with the robust dialogue found in some online rather than physical communities. Thus internet becomes the ultimate arena for mass cultural production and popular creation, imperializing control and popular resistance. It is important to understand trolls not only as a subculture, but as a source of common identity formation, a popular form of implicitly political participation, and valid form of cultural communication.

### **The Foucauldian Power Model**

Technology has widened the application of trolls and it has made everything come out in the open. Everybody is constantly watched over by others. Not only does the State watch over the public, but the public also constantly surveils the State. So a kind of panopticism is created and internet trolls form the mouthpiece of such surveillance by the public. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* says:

The peculiarity of the disciplines is that they try to define in relation to the multiplicities a tactics of power that fulfils three criteria: first, to obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost; second, to bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either failure or interval; third, to link this 'economic' growth of power with the output of the apparatuses within which it is exercised (22).

If one takes internet trolls, they can be found to fulfil the three criteria of discipline. The first criterion of low cost is fully attained by trolls. Mobile applications like 'Troll Malayalam', 'Malayalam Meme Editor,' etc. are free of cost and hence everyone can download them and create trolls. For the transmission and propagation of trolls too it does not require any monetary aids. Since social media and the Internet have now become part and parcel of one's daily life, trolls come as a side dish. Posting, forwarding and sharing trolls have become a

habit of the people. The second criterion of bringing the effect of power to its maximum intensity in a limited time is also done by trolls. Within minutes, trolls get transmitted from profiles to profiles and from timelines to timelines. So the political message or the protest contained in it gets wide access. Within seconds of the occurrence of an event, the opinions regarding it, both positive and negative, come out. The wide acceptance and transmission of trolls regarding the salary hike of the private hospital nurses in Kerala can be seen as an example. For years they have been fighting for a salary rise. But now due to trolls, their fight gets wide attention and more people are actively posting their opinions on social media. Thus social media sites become a place for political contestation. They have become the bee hives wherein the initial eggs of revolutionary changes are laid.

Finally the third criteria of economic growth of power is also fulfilled as numerous people participate in the troll campaign and thus help in the spread of ideologies. The protest against the Beef Ban Campaign was one such example. The Central Government's policy of banning the sale of beef and the slaughter of cows was fraught with vigorous and violent trolls criticizing the ban. Compared with the input, the output that one gets from trolls is a large one. They become more extended and complex in nature. They give voice to the general sentiments of the people and raise them against the anti-democratic mentalities of the State. Trolls also help to bring the effect of power to the minute and distant elements in the society. Through trolls even the seemingly powerless people get access to power and can question the government and the dominant class. By incorporating these three criteria, internet trolls arrest or regulate movement; they clear up confusion; dissipate wandering netizens in the cyber space and bring them together; they also help in the bringing together of like-minded people for a just cause. That is, the troll created by a single artist or activist can become a spark of an upcoming revolution. Thus trolls become a substitute of power that is manifested through the brilliance of those who exercise it, a power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied; to form a body of knowledge about these individuals, rather than to deploy the ostentatious signs of sovereignty. In short, disciplines like trolls are the ensemble of minute technical inventions that make it possible to increase the useful size of multiplicities decreasing the inconveniences of the power which most control them.

### **Trolling Tyranny**

Trolls provide a space for others to be bolder. Trolls become a place where they can express their anger and self-righteousness without feeling wholly responsible. There are no

perceived repercussions, but at times changes also happen. Not many people would freely express their views on an article or subject with such force in the physical world and yet many people feel able to do so in the virtual. They have found an outlet for their emotions, especially resentment and anger. Through trolls a powerful kind of counter panopticism is formed. According to Foucault, Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is the paradigm of disciplinary technology. He says it is:

A generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men . . . [I]t is a diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form . . . it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use. (32)

The panopticon consists of a large courtyard, with a tower in the centre, surrounded by a series of buildings divided into levels and cells. In each cell there are two windows: one brings light and the other faces the tower, where a large observatory window allows for surveillance of the cells. In the case of trolls, the dominant or the power-bloc become the surveilled and trolls become the towers through which they are monitored. The two windows become the input and the output. The window which faces the tower becomes the input of the trolls, i.e. through which the actions of the power-bloc are monitored which include the watchful eyes of the media – electronic and print. Their actions, comments and attitudes form the raw-materials. The other window of the panopticon which throws light to the inmates becomes the output, i.e. it is the troll itself. Creative artists make use of the raw materials and merge them with humour and trolls are thus created. They are transmitted far and wide through social media sites and thus form a counter discipline through which the power-bloc can be converted into docile bodies that can be “transformed and improved”.

Thus, through spatial ordering, trolls bring together power, control of the body, control of the groups and knowledge. They locate individuals in space, in a hierarchical and efficiently-controlled organization. It was such an effective use of power, rather than the mechanical power, that Foucault had in his mind. This new power is continuous and anonymous. Anyone could operate the technical mechanisms as long as he was in correct position, i.e., have the applications for making trolls, and anyone could be subjected to it. The network is in such a way that even if there is no guardian present, the power apparatus still operates effectively. The power-bloc cannot see whether or not the public is watching, so they must behave as if they are perpetually being surveilled. In any case, in the space and

during the time in which trolls exercise their control and bring into play the asymmetries of their power, they effect a suspension of law that is never total, but is never annulled either. This new counterculture can be at times, so over the top and so ridiculous that it reads as an elaborate performance. And in its own specific way, taken on its own terms, much of this troll culture can be read as satire: morally indignant storytelling that uses exaggeration and humour for shock value to ridicule contemporary culture.

For example, we can take the trolls starring American President Mr. Donald Trump and the former Mr. Barack Obama where Obama, through the troll, is questioning Trump about abolishing the Eid celebrations at the White House. Another instance is the numerous trolls about the Kerala Government's inefficiency in managing the dengue epidemic in the State. The troll shows a communist party member praising the government's rule while on the other side, a non-member signifying the public asks about the condition of his father who is under treatment for dengue fever. These trolls become the output for effective political surveillance. People with like-minded ideas, who feel that their perspective has no place in the increasing dominant media, come together and express themselves through trolls.

The panopticon here includes a system for observing and controlling the controllers. Those who occupy the central position in the panopticon are themselves thoroughly enmeshed in a localization and ordering of their own behaviour. Trolls come into existence by utilizing this feature. The controllers, that is the power-bloc, are constantly monitored and are corrected through trolls. Foucault says:

Such is perhaps the most diabolical aspect of the idea and of all the applications it brought about. In this form of management, power is not totally entrusted to someone who would exercise it alone, over others, in an absolute fashion; rather, this machine is one in which everyone is caught, those who exercise this power as well as those who are subjected to it. (26).

Thus, although the universal juridism of modern society seems to fix limits on the exercise of power, its universally widespread panopticism enables it to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports and reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law.

The internet is a massive area in which we are able to express ourselves in a multitude of ways, all whilst pushing against the norms of society but in a different way than before; in perceived anonymity. No wonder many people get addicted to this new counterculture which

allows them an exercise of power. It allows them to express their emotions in an otherwise repressive society whilst also feeling that they are changing the world and the society.

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