

## Encounters with trolls: Ginger Gorman's *Troll Hunting*

Review of *Troll Hunting* by Ginger Gorman, Hardie Grant, 2019.

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Cyberhate has become a significant problem for governments, law enforcement and policing, Internet site owners and social media platforms let alone users. The response to it has been poor as social media companies and governments worldwide have been slow to act on this problem (Jane 2017, 2). Investigative journalist Claire Ginger Gorman's 2019 book *Troll Hunting: Inside the World of Online Hate and its Human Fallout* builds on the work of cyberhate scholars however her interactions with trolls, and the mix of her narrative with others bring new insights to the problem and the players in this complex issue.

Trolling has been defined by scholars as involving someone or a group performing the characteristic behaviours of baiting, provoking, disrupting, threatening and deceiving someone else on any part of the Internet (Phillips 2015; Bishop 2012; Hardaker 2010). The term cyberhate, as understood and defined by Gorman in the early part of her book, is aligned with Jane's (2017, 187) definition as threatening, sexually explicit and violent rhetoric online behaviours. Gorman references this agreeing with Jane that it is a form of personal and economic vandalism inflicted on victims. Online misogyny, demonising feminists and their beliefs and the idea that women invite sexual attention and deserve punishment (Jane 2012) are reflected in the words and images posted online. Jane (2012, 2) also suggested the term 'e-bile' to describe the extravagant invective, the sexualised threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that Gorman refers to in her book.

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Decades of trolling and other negative online behaviour studies have long acknowledged that women have been main targets. Studies such as the United Nations Broadband Commission for Digital Development (2015, 2) recognised cyber violence against women and girls as an ongoing human rights issue. Early in the history of the internet however it was argued that physical markers like gender would not have a bearing on Internet use; in fact it was optimistically imagined as an escape from the visibility of gender (O'Brien 1999). This utopian vision was disrupted by Julian Dibbell's compelling essay 'A Rape in Cyberspace' (1993) arguing that not only emotional but virtual physical violence happened online.

This occurred in a Multi-User Domain Object Orientated program called LambdaMOO, a text-based program where people role-played and socialised. The troll was eventually identified, and the consequences of their sexual attacks on the female characters in the room was widely publicised. Strikwerda (2014) calls Mr. Bungle's actions sexual harassment, not rape, despite the LambdaMOO members considering it rape. Gorman's argues in *Troll Hunting* that social media platforms are still not taking cyberhate seriously, as Jane and other scholars repeatedly state. Only recently economic costs of cyberhate (Swann 2019) and its implications in a digital divide for women (Jane and Vincent 2018) have been acknowledged by law makers and Internet companies.

Gorman is an Australian award-winning print and radio journalist while she is also called a social justice and investigative journalist, as well as hosting an ABC Local Radio show in Cairns Queensland during 2010. She identifies as a feminist in the book, and on many websites and stories written about her. Her previous journalism has been about those marginalised in society including LGBTIQ people and crime victims, and her 2016 TEDx Talk was titled 'There is nothing virtual about online trolling'.

Gorman's decision to interview trolls including those who had posted cyberhate against her (Gorman 2017) was the prompt for writing *Troll Hunting*. Conducting an interview with two men in Cairns in a relationship with each other, she finds they have a five-year-old son Gorman calls Boy 1. The boy's mother was a Russian surrogate and one of the men was the biological father. She questions the men about whether their family arrangement looks to be suspiciously paedophilic; the men agree it may look that way but claim they are a normal family. Subsequently the two men were criminally investigated by the Queensland Police in 2012 and in the United States where the men moved. In 2013 the men were sentenced to 40 and 30 years prison respectively on charges of conspiring to exploit

Boy 1 by giving him to be used by other men, and the possession of child exploitation material.

Gorman received hate Tweets mostly from the US accusing Gorman of collaborating in the crimes. The tweets contained photos and names of Boy 1, and threats of harm, compounded by the activation of location services on Twitter which meant Gorman's home could be found on Google Maps. One person on a fascist social network site urged people to gas their house. After the demise of these threats Gorman decided to investigate the world of trolls.

In the book many people are given an opportunity to talk about their experiences as trolls and as those trying to solve the problem of cyberhate. Gorman highlights that it is a common fallacy that solving this issue is by turning the computer off, something she repeatedly mentions. Women especially have experienced economic disadvantage such as missed career opportunities because of using the Internet less due to the trolling they received (Jane and Vincent 2018). Secondly, an interesting claim made is that Internet users have developed the habit of checking what is said about us online. This does suggest why trolling can harm because of giving in to the desire to see what is being said about us, though this can sometimes be important to do to gather evidence of troll activity.

The book is written in three major sections with a conclusion and a short emotional reflective final part in the book. The sections are: trolls and the behaviours they do, victims, who are mostly women and one man's story, and lastly troll hunting activities and people involved in them, including an encounter with a less than enthusiastic international social media company representative. The wavering between factual research material presented and cases of trolling, personal reflections and interviews with trolls weaves a compelling narrative. The conclusion and post script reflect her difficulties of writing the book, but also she writes of her husband's concerns for the family from more trolling and how Gorman was emotionally consumed writing the book.

Gorman's aim is to try to understand why trolls practice cyberhate and try to ruin reputations. The trolls she interviews, especially one named Mark, argue that it is fun and freedom of speech is being stifled by Internet users and companies. She is constantly abused by Mark and other trolls with name-calling. One point she makes is that there is not one stereotypical troll. For example she interviews conservative United States blogger Robert Stacy McCain who wrote that Gorman had aided a paedophile network

(Gorman 2019). In a conversation about him to Dr Heidi Beirich, who is associated with the Hatewatch blog, Gorman and Beirich agree that trolls can be intelligent, educated people seeking political influence and power. This is a world far removed from the days of Usenet where such trolling was often confined within bounded systems affecting fewer people; McCain's trolling is open, public and unchallenged.

The victims of trolling in this book have horrific and difficult to read stories about ruined reputations and resulting in offline physical abuse, property damage and self-harm. Gorman mentions Charlotte Dawson who suicided in 2014, though it is still unclear if the trolling was the main reason for Dawson's decision. Gorman argues that public discussion of trolling characterises what is happening in cyberspace as not real, a continuing debate since Dibbell's (1993) essay was written. There is evidence that managing trolls and punishing them is happening worldwide, but what Gorman reports is still a part of the Internet landscape; legal action is difficult as police forces do not have time, resources or even take it seriously and social media companies like Twitter admit being lax about solving the issue. She clearly describes the emotional impact each victim has experienced and explicitly details where trolls carried out their threats of physical and property damage retribution.

Finally, the troll hunter section follows cases of hunting terrorist trolls, taking the acts of trolls to another level. When Australian employment lawyer Josh Bornstein's reputation is smeared by trolls, he finds little legal help like others Gorman reports. While reporting on troll Joshua Ryne Goldberg who was jailed in 2018 for attempting to bomb a September 11 Memorial event in the United States, however, Gorman seems to develop some empathy for Goldberg and other trolls. Gorman does not change her initial view of trolls but claims she developed involuntary grief for Goldberg and his family, including sleepless nights. Readers might question her empathetic view, considering the cyberhate she experienced previously, but it also challenges us to view a troll's action from a different perspective.

Gorman's book has much to recommend as investigative journalism. It is well researched: cyberhate and troll researchers such as Phillips and Jane, and major incidents since 2010 like Dawson's trolling are mentioned. Clearly, she has taken many risks to talk face-to-face with trolls who come across as arrogant performers. She has empathy for the victims of trolling, but as with any book we wonder how much detail has been left out. There is some contempt for the social media companies slow responses to trolling,

though she has a polite interaction with one manager, and criticism of police who often do not want to help the victim.

The book functions as a narrative of the trolling landscape between the years 2010 to 2018, clearly demonstrating cyberhate is on the rise and a serious societal issue. It shows nothing has changed in terms of the professionally organised trolling that originated from sites such as Usenet over 25 years ago. Readers with little knowledge of trolling, or who have not been victims, can benefit from reading it, although some may view with disbelief the consequences of trolling. Even with my research reading over the years I found it confounding that trolls would use the Internet like a game played with victims and law enforcement that Gorman effectively details. It would have been valuable for her to provide more detail on feminist online hatred, but overall the book has succeeded in showing a world where cyberhate is increasing and the law is struggling to keep pace with managing it.

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