The Politics and Ethics of Social Media Trolling Research: Challenges and New Frameworks

Abstract:

This paper uses previous literature to illustrate the political and ethical challenges faced by criminology while studying content posted by social media trolls in an attempt to provide a working framework for criminology to meet those challenges.

After having found a lack of research in the practical application of political and ethical approaches to research on digital data, this paper used case law and international law on human rights to conclude that a balancing act is required between freedom of expression and censorship when that freedom of expression is used by social media trolls to harm others.

The final challenge examined in this paper concerned the application of long-established academic ethics to the ever-changing social media landscape, concluding that unlike normal social media users, social media trolls intend their scathing and upsetting comments and posts to be seen by the wider world and that, therefore, a more thorough analysis of the content they share is needed. This analysis, although not targeted at identification and shaming of single users, should help researchers and, in the future, the authorities, to better understand these subjects in order to apprehend their peers more effectively. Starting by the different terms and conditions presented my each social network, this paper provides various suggestions to partly anonymise the content posted by social media trolls, also considering that the importance of understanding rogue users’ motives and to limit the harm they cause trumps the issue of privacy and informed consent.

Proposal:

Seen as disruptive online behaviour carried out for no apparent reason other than the troll’s own amusement, trolling is one of the major impediments to a healthy online discourse and can often degenerate into criminal forms, such as cyber harassment, stalking and threatening of victims (Maltby et al., 2015; Mantilla, 2015; Philips, 2015; Keats Citron, 2014). Although both academia and the authorities are attempting to understand the reasons behind this distressing behaviour, researchers, and criminology researchers in particular, face a number of challenges in examining the content posted by social media trolls.

Despite the fact that trolling content has yet to be defined as and of itself, trolling as a practice and trolls as agents of chaos have been covered in various pieces of research in the past decade. Whitney Phillips has defined trolling as disruptive towards healthy Internet discourse, “a major, if not the major, impediment to online community formation,” (2015: 16). Buckels et al. stated that trolls are users behaving “in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose,” (Buckels et al., 2014: 97), while Clare Hardaker’s research focuses on trolls’ intention “to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement,” (2010: 237).

Various authors have found that, when cyber harassment is carried out in order to drive victims out of online discourse through fear, the practice can be considered a crime (Phillips, 2015; Massanari, 2015; Mantilla, 2015; Keats Citron, 2014). Yet, uncertainty about defining and spotting cyber crime often results in victims not
reporting it (Francis, Davies and Jupp, 2016; Keats Citron, 2014). Therefore defining trolling content would be more beneficial to future research and to the authorities in order to regulate this practice. Indeed, as I have stated elsewhere, the lack of a widely agreed definition of the two major players in the trolling sphere - trolling content and social media platforms themselves – is concerning as it has resulted in widespread confusion among victims who do not know how and if to report it to the police, and among authorities and social media platforms who do not act upon the practice (Are, forthcoming; Maltby et al. 2015; Keats Citron, 2014; Davies, Francis and Jupp, 2011).

However, defining and researching upon social media trolling content also presents political and ethical challenges, which have been raised with regards to research on digital data, but have yet to be applied to studying content produced by rogue users. The former challenge is related to establishing when trolling stops becoming an issue of freedom of expression and starts becoming a concern for the Criminal Justice System; the latter challenge is related to conducting research on digital data without endangering participants or infringing their rights. This paper hopes provide a framework to meet the above challenges the discipline of criminology faces while studying social media trolls.