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Trolls and The Negative Space of The Internet

edited by Glen Fuller, Christian McCrea and Jason Wilson

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The Fibreculture Journal: Issue 22 2013
Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet.

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

Editorial:

Troll Theory?

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We only talk about trolls inside a polemic. To aver that someone is trolling is to allege that their participation conceals the aims of their disruption; by implication, they are to be excluded or dismissed. The Internet's folk wisdom for trolls says: 'Do not *feed* them!' This remedy rests on a belief that acknowledgement and interaction are the barest matters of subsistence in an attention economy. To call out a troll is thus to recognise who ought or ought not speak or be listened to. Since to describe an interlocutor as a troll is to invite a third party to put them beyond the pale, the charge is often contested. We can understand this as, at once, an artefact of agonistic politics and as an attempt to avoid it. It is reassertion of the 'table manners' (Arditi, 2006) of liberal civility; like any such insistence it can be a way of forestalling political demands made outside the current limits of acceptability in political contention (Tomlinson, 2010; Shaw, 2012). It can also be used to redefine these demands as so much unintelligible noise (Rancière, 2011).

At the same time, to admit that you are trolling shows that you hold a target—a forum, a discussion or a user—in far lower esteem than the target holds itself. This reveals an obvious conflict of values. To own up to trolling is, moreover, a boast. As the troll, you affirm a playful mastery of Internet lore and practice that outstrips that of my target. You assert your distinction in a positional game which mobilises and accumulates

technological, cultural and social capital. You aggrandise yourself as a puppeteer, maintaining control over your own passions while asking the other to question the bearings of their affects: 'u mad?'. You remind them of values that preceded them, which you stand for, and propose to reinforce. The troll is proprietorial of particular forums, or even of the network as a whole. The troll looks to repel incomers, to deter the masses, or at least introduce a tiny break-flow into the circuit of discourse. Occasionally, the troll seeks to disrupt nodes of power from a perspective that looks to maintain the idea of the Internet as a space where manners and norms are suspended. But even in these circumstances, it is necessary to recognise that the exercise of the freedom to disrupt can impede the use of particular spaces for deliberation, support, or mutual aid.

The way that we talk about trolls and trolling as a phenomenon of post-Internet culture places us in a broader, longer fight over the ethos, the history, and the politics of the digital. Critical Internet studies has often come down on one side or another of the question of who or what trolling 'really is'. In this issue of the Fibreculture Journal, we have chosen to try to teach the controversy. We hope to avoid the moralistic (and thus antipolitical) work of closing conflict down (Brown, 2001). We hope to leave room for the understanding that politics is ineradicably conflictual (Mouffe, 1992; Mouffe, 2005), and that this has not changed in the era of networks (Dahlberg, 2013). We have attempted to attune ourselves to the tensions, dynamics, injuries and productivities of negativity and disputation.

The crowdsourced mirror of the vernacular, the Urban Dictionary, usefully maps the terrain over which the concept of trolling is fought. Its second most upvoted definition at the time of this writing is one that has found purchase in long-standing online subcultures and in Internet studies. Trolling is:

> *The art of deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off, usually via the internet, using dialogue. Trolling does not mean just making rude remarks: Shouting swear words at someone doesn't count as trolling; it's just flaming, and isn't funny. Spam isn't trolling either; it pisses people off, but it's lame. The most essential part of trolling is convincing your victim that either a) truly believe in what you are saying, no matter how outrageous, or b) give your victim malicious instructions, under the guise of help. Trolling requires decieving; any trolling that doesn't involve decieving someone isn't trolling at all; it's just stupid. As such, your victim must not know that you are trolling; if he does, you are an unsuccesful troll. (sic)*

In the foreground is a guiding concern with delineating what trolling is not — flaming or spam. Eventually it is positively defined as an art of mediated, dialogical performance. To distinguish between trolling and not-trolling involves judgements of value, and pushes us in the direction of aesthetics — rude remarks and swear words are not trolling because they aren't 'funny'; spamming is not trolling because it is 'lame'. We are asked to become *connoisseurs*. But we get edged back again towards epistemology by the unsettling matter of deception, and the questions it opens up around truth and meaning in the Internet's City of Words, which is either too noisy or too silent for certainty. We zig back towards politics as we return to fret over what we can hope for in relations between strangers. What does it mean to issue 'malicious instructions, under the guise of help'? How does that stand in relation to real help, and how much of it can our City accommodate?

This tricksterish sensibility that informs this definition is shared in many of the redoubts of self-described trolls, and now and then in Internet scholarship. Early on, Judith Donath emphasised the ludic dimensions of trolling — for her it is a shared ritual:

> *Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns; the newsgroup members, if they are cognizant of trolls and other identity deceptions, attempt to both distinguish real from trolling postings and, upon judging a poster to be a troll, make the offending poster leave the group. Their success at the former depends on how well they — and the troll — understand identity cues; their success at the latter depends on whether the troll's enjoyment is sufficiently diminished or outweighed by the costs imposed by the group (Donath, 2002, p.45).*

Donath emphasises the play of identity and intention, a dance of veils that transpires between troll and moderator. Trolling here is not just a game, but a well-structured one. Its passage through rituals of detection and ejection seems almost collaborative. The lone troll is individuated against the field of the newsgroup's virtual community. This normally operates in Rheingoldian informational good faith (Rheingold, 1993), but it can sustain some disruption. Notwithstanding virtual communities' essential openness (and vulnerability), online interpersonal relationships are figured as manageable, the truth of identity as knowable, and intentions as legible. Negativity and playfulness can be contained by a community with the agency and authority required for self-protection. And the game is underpinned ultimately by shared understandings of truth, legitimacy (the situational set of normative forces that frame the conduct of conduct), and what would

count as their violation. Trolling is something that passes between *initiates*. The name given by the cognoscenti to trolling and its consequences – *drama* – resonates with this account of its ludic performativity.

The appreciation of lulz that we see in the first definition, and in Donath's work, also motivates scholarship that would redeem trolls, or at the very least nuance our appreciation of a set of practices that are often the stimulus for media panics and censorious reflexes. Work such as Gabriella Coleman's (Coleman, 2012b; Coleman, 2012a) and Whitney Phillips's (Phillips, 2011) has tried to extract trolling from the temporality of periodic outrage in order to consider how it emerges from longer subcultural histories, including critical and oppositional Internet cultures, and others who have resisted the privatisation of commons. Trolls on this view are provocateurs with historical links to absurdist avant-gardes. Links are made between trolls and what other researchers have demonstrated to be the Internet culture's formative countercultural ethos (Turner, 2011). For Coleman, trolling partakes of

> *a rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle and transgression... which includes the irreverent legacy of phreakers and the hacker underground (Coleman, 2012a: p.45).*

Because Coleman draws on a scholarly tradition of subcultural recovery, placing trolling in a longer history – taking in punk and Dada – of transgressive, obfuscatory spectacle, her emphasis is different than Donath's. For Coleman, trolls are not the disruptors of the originary communities of Internet culture, but their defenders. They are the long-term habitués of online spaces who constitute a kind of immune-system response to the recoding of the Internet for corporate and mainstream sensibilities. They stand against the hegemonic values and a corporatised Internet; they respond to the massification of digital life. Their pranks serve as a form of resistance to the incursion of n00bs into spaces that were once 1337 preserves. However problematic their tactics, they are definitely trolling up, standing up to power and homogenisation, and keeping open the possibility of the Internet as a zone of freedom.

This is, in some ways, an old story about the friction between mass culture and subculture, avant-garde and mainstream, punk and consumer. If, in the days of institutionally restricted access, trolls and flamers used to focus on 'educating' new users in 'netiquette' at the beginning of each academic year, twenty years into the 'eternal September' that began with the influx to newsgroups of AOL subscribers, values have been revalued, certain conflict has become intractable, and some platforms and spaces have been defined permanently as fair game. In the social media era, where broadband penetration, proprietary platforms and

network effects have produced mass uptake, there are not only more n00bs than ever, there is, after all, now a suburban user-base to shock.

On the other side of this divide, a different understanding of trolling emerges. Elsewhere on Urban Dictionary we find that trolling is: :

> *Being a prick on the internet because you can. Typically unleashing one or more cynical or sarcastic remarks on an innocent by-stander, because it's the internet and, hey, you can.*

This does not register a performative game so much as it does a pervasive, nihilistic, ungovernable incivility. This is not the world of 4chan's rough wit, but the YouTube comment thread. Urban dictionary is not the only place we can find this perspective. Online abuse has become one of the things around which anxieties about the Internet are arrayed. Australia and the United Kingdom have both experienced broad-scale media panics about online bullying and abuse. In Australia, there has been concern over the treatment of celebrities in social media, but also so-called 'RIP trolling' where Facebook memorial pages are defaced or seeded with mockery. Internationally there have been media campaigns round trolling, and moves to strengthen regulation or enforcement.[1] 'Doxxing', or unmasking troublesome pseudonymous users, has crossed over from blogwars to become the basis of new forms of muckraking journalism. Major media corporations and tech giants have become bogged down in nymwars, post-hoc jerry-rigging and outright comment bans as they attempt to erase conflict around perenially divisive topics. All the while, as media companies are all too happy to trade on clickbait and outrage, there's a suspicion that they have appropriated and mobilised the figure of the troll in order to constrain a new outpouring of political speech. Trolling has perhaps displaced pornography as the obscenity which underwrites the demand that the Internet be brought under control.

In the face of all of this, the for-the-lulz understanding of trolling is somewhat embattled, even as, for some, the figure of the troll becomes subject to acts of preservation. The insistence that mere abuse isn't trolling as such works not just as an attempt to hold onto the categories of an earlier phase of Internet culture, it has a covert function – anyone who misuses the word might be the kind of n00b that trolls seek out. But that tends to undo itself. It leads us back to the realisation that what counts as abuse, and what counts as lulz, may just depend on which end of the stick we have grasped. The neutral standpoint from which a sure distinction could be made is not available in such a sphere of roiling conflict. The word itself is a battleground, and any word with political

force that threatens exclusion or promises valorisation, is unlikely to be easily hammered into procedural agreement. Hence, what defines a troll will continue to be disputed broadly, and situationally.

Perhaps now we are tilted back in the direction of ethics. What trolling is, and how we judge it, may turn out to rest less on the lulz derived from it, less on the murky intentions of the troll or the inherited categories of Internet culture, and more on the character of each trolling event. We need above all to understand trolling in its entanglements with desire and power. How are nonsense, lulz, play, non-communication, violence, noise and negativity being marshalled? Against whom, and by whom? What is it that's at stake in each fight about the way in which the word 'troll' is being mobilised? How is the troll being produced in disagreement? How is our judgement being appealed to and exercised? Is trolling being used as a tool of leveling or entrenchment? It is fortifying existing privileges or mocking them? Who is laughing at whom? Should we be asking trolls to back up, or join in? Are we trolling up, or trolling down?

Finally, we should ask why and how trolls, what they are and what they do, and what is discursively legitimate and what isn't, have come to preoccupy us. Jack Bratich's (2008) work on another staple of liberal Internet anxiety, conspiracy theory, considers how panics about it indicate its problematisation, its being taken up as an object for thought. Conspiracy panics are seen as windows not so much on the culture that produced them or the people who believe in them as on the forms of political rationality that take them up as problems. They 'demonstrate that trust, truth, and rationality are at the heart of the current political context' (19). In the extended liberal meditation on conspiracism and 'extremism', we see it positioned both as proximate to liberalism's own style of thought and as finally illegitimate. It is figured in discourses of expertise as a deformation of liberal scepticism, and a form of dissent that needs to be managed with forms of preventative rationality. Panic is a strategy of visibility that serves to build consent around normative judgements, including the capacity to discriminate between reason and paranoia:

> *The cohesion of liberalism's political rationality comes with this injunction: to modulate thought and behavior with an eye toward limits and extremes. Responsible thought is an ethos as modus: a modulation through moderation, and vice versa. Within this will-to-moderate, dissent itself is problematized, and reasonable skepticism and rational critique are promoted (49).*

The will-to-moderate is also present in media demands to 'stop the trolls', and in the injunction that we – in distributed acts of what is known as *moderation* – work to sift trolls

from legitimate participants, trolling from responsible speech, and in doing so perform the limits of truth, rationality and trust. Acts of moderation are judgements about the range of authentic political utterance, and these acts of problematization take place in the work of institutions, in the 'netiquette' policies of the social media giants which have harnessed so much of our mutuality, and across the diffuse platforms of Web 2.0. Troll-hunting becomes an act – even an aesthetics – of liberal citizenship, in which we consent to and enact the discursive limits of liberal rationality. Although we may agree with Auerbach (2012) that the 'A-culture' of 4chan and anonymous trolling provides a space of refuge and resistance to the mandatory microcelebrity of mainstream social media, it also provides a defining outside for the 'authentic' self-revelatory performances of Facebook, where Mark Zuckerberg's single, integral self is produced as a resource for monetization and surveillance. It is the uncertain, shrinking terrain between Facebook's flat profile-self and /b/'s blank no-self that a politics of lulz might occupy for the new, playful productivity of identity.

The work of defining trolls and the consequences that flow from that work preoccupy a number of essays in this issue of the Fibreculture Journal. Nathaniel Tkacz uses Goffman and Bateson's accounts of framing to critically engage with the Wikipedia Art project as a way of organising experience and action. By showing how edit wars take place in relation to frames, Tkacz builds a critique of optimistic versions of the spontaneous emergence of non-hierarchical or meritocratic cooperation on Web 2.0 platforms. Andrew Whelan's article offers a detailed ethnomethodological analysis of an Australian current affairs segment, made in the midst of a media panic, which shows how trolls are produced, how they sit in relation to other categories, and the moral work this does. Immediately before this issue was made public the news arrived that Charlotte Dawson had died. Whelan's article concerns her activities in calling-out trolls, but it is directed at the discursive and moral work that defines trolling, not with her personally. That 'discursive and moral work' around trolling is visible in the precarious public discussions around illnesses, suicides and other deaths connected to harassment, abuse, bullying and trolling. Media engagement with trolling in the wake of deaths such as Dawson's often occurs before facts are known, since the grieving period is when discussions of morality are most useful for the media. We present Whelan's article here as it was edited during the course of 2013 and including factual changes by the author where appropriate.

This fight has lately been taking place in a number of places. Women who have managed to leverage the attention economy to feminist ends are ever more likely to encounter misogynist swarms, whom they and often the perpetrators themselves refer to as trolls. Over the last half decade this has emerged as a pattern – from Kathy Sierra in 2007, to Anita Sarkeesian in 2012, to Adria Richards and Caroline Criado-Perez. Beyond these prominent and much-discussed cases, the tools of user-generated content creation have

been used to intimidate women and make reputational attacks globally available – the genre of 'revenge porn' is an example. Just as women have found ways to create networks of feminist 'discursive activism' and support online, feminist backlash has continued in the [subreddits](http://www.reddit.com/r/mensrights and [blogospheric haunts](http:// mensrights.com.au/_ of the 'manosphere' that defines the 'Mens Rights Movement'. Too often, 'free speech' is defined in terms of the language and actions with which privilege is reiterated and defended.

Such swarms show us how well-worn ideals of free speech do not scale. Spreadability, instanteneity, labyrinthine backchannels and nodal proliferations do not inevitably secure a pluralist conversation – they are also used to fortify privilege. Liberal myths of a neutral space of communicative equality cannot accommodate emergent infoglut (Andrejevic, 2013), nor do they allow us to take stock of the difference between public space, which are universally accessible, and public spheres, which facilitate democratic interchange (Papacharissi, 2010). 'More speech' is no strategy for a hyperabundance that allows some voices to be overwhelmed. The Internet has afforded multiplications, a proliferation of atmospheres and interiorities (Sloterdijk, 2011), endless recombinations, and the performance of emergent identity. But this dynamism necessarily calls forth 'fundamentalisms that demand reinstatement of a unified faith, race, reason, gender duality, normal sexuality, nation and/or territory that never was secure' (Connolly, 1995). [2]. This can be seen in the ostentatious use of racial epithets and misogynist language in the key subcultural sites of trolling. But full-blown reactionary social movements thicken in the infrastructures of social media, just as the far right early on used the Internet and other media to build counterpublics. Distinctions like Papacharissi's (2004) between the 'impoliteness' of rude words and the 'incivility' that threatens democracy might be useful in understanding the points where simplistic cyberlibertarianism ceases working. But the nature of that distinction will itself be the subject of polemic, and reactionary movements will always attempt to defend themselves as avatars of freedom. This double movement is anticipated in versions of agonistic-pluralist political theory, but not as clearly in sunnier versions of new media scholarship (Hartley, 2010). Responses may exceed the polite, sober, deliberative turn-taking, and encompass the protection of separate sphericules of support, aggressive disruption, and play.

In this context, Ryan Milner examines the production of memes dealing with gender and race on 4chan and Reddit. He finds that while some of the material circulating under the 'hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced' logic of lulz is narrowly stereotypical, abusive or repressive, in other instances it surfaces what the table manners of liberalism would leave unsaid, and provokes an agonistic response that builds and sharpens activism. Frances Shaw's article shows how networks of Australian feminist bloggers develop and deploy common resources to work through the difficulties posed by

internet-powered antifeminist activities. Drawing on her conversations with bloggers, Shaw complicates both cyberlibertarian and liberal feminist accounts of dialogue, recognising the necessarily conflictual dimension of feminist discursive activism as well as those activists' need for self-protection. Vyshali Manivannan offers a rich historical account of the way that misogyny has come to function on 4chan as the glue of affiliation, and as a means of raising the barriers to entry into the space and its culture. Without apologising for the tactic, Manivannan understands it as primarily reflecting a 'desire for subcultural preservation'.

Also examining 4chan, Tanner Higgin shows how its coordinated trolling raids on virtual worlds like World of Warcraft might be motivated by the desire to preserve white male privilege and to shut down politics online, but unintentionally interrogate the unmarked categories of whiteness and masculinity, and the racial politics of game culture. There are further considerations of how the meaning and use of categories of race and identity becomes complicated when they meet the ethics and dynamics of network culture. Steve Holmes develops a Rancièrean framework for understanding griefing practices, bouncing off the [Patriotic Nigras'](#) vigilante raid on the virtual world [Habbo Hotel](#). While the PN were in part responding to rumours that black avatars had been banned from various spaces in Habbo, their real importance is in challenging seriousness, and reaffirming a playful procedural equality.

For better and worse, familiar political institutions and principles splutter in the face of a networked 'uprising' that exceeds the limits that the mass media era have placed around what could be shown and said (Breen, 2011). Some argue that the communicative flows of contemporary networks are simply recuperated by informational capitalism (Dean, 2003), others that liberal systems are robust enough to contend with the 'chaos' of changes in the way in which politics is communicated (McNair, 2006). But there is evidence – from North Africa, to the liberal democracies of the west – that the massive expansion of access to the means of political communication has caused political talk to burst its banks. The consequences are unpredictable. The inoperable US congress is in part the outcome of the right's construction of a hermetic infosphere. Occupy spread from its origin point as a hashtag, and the movements of the Arab Spring were able to route around sclerotic official public spheres. Australia's first female Prime Minister was undone in part by the way the obsessions of ['misogynists and nutjobs on the Internet'](#) were able to infect mainstream reporting. The scale, speed and affective range of political communication has outflanked the pragmatic, managerialist liberalism that has been hegemonic in the post-Cold War era. Now, everywhere, polities struggle to respond to the complexity of populism – democracy's 'internal periphery'.

Several essays that follow weigh the consequences of the expanded registers of political talk after the Internet. Anthony McCosker and Amelia Johns discuss the way in which the urban conflict in London in 2011 opened up a space for talking about race, policing and austerity, not only in the charged atmosphere of Clapham Junction during the events but later, on YouTube. Once again, the practice of subverting liberal politesse is shown to be generative of politics. Benjamin Burroughs considers the agonistic circulation of visual memes during the 2012 US Presidential election that implied that Barack Obama was unpatriotic, and shows how they are indicative of a broader and more intensive circulation of political emotion. Shannon Sindorf shows how demands for civility were used to shut down the comments space of a local newspaper, even though it could be seen to function well as a clearing house for community debate.

Proprietary social media platforms are more imbricated with/as everyday life. Forms of digital labour have become more pervasive. Cultural practices and institutions have come to reside more completely in forum threads, Tumblr posts, the blue lines of Twitter stoushes, and Facebook groups. The terms of Internet culture have changed as they have undergone a broader circulation. Troll panic, for example, not only makes more people conversant with the 'problem' of trolls, but relies on a certain level of awareness already existing.

Several papers examine what happens when the grammars and ethos of trolling meets the popular, hybridises with other practices and cultures, and becomes normal. Tama Leaver writes on the adoption of the techniques and iconography of troll culture in Facebook groups dedicated to hating on Channel Nine's Olympics coverage, showing how television viewing becomes social in the negativity of complaint. He makes the important observation that

> *While scholarly work on trolling is at an early stage, distancing hard core trolling from online abuse and bullying will inevitably make our understanding of each area more precise.*

The cultural practices of trolling have generative effects. Steven Jones's paper examines a specific forum, the Guardian's Bike Blog, and with the help of Bourdieu's work on distinction shows how hostility and negativity helps to construct cycling as a cultural practice and social identity. Flaming and trolling not only work to build traffic and comments on the site (and the economics of 'click-bait' in the attention economy are important in discussions of trolling), they are generative of a sense of community and its boundaries. Internal tensions – between different styles of cycling – are shown to be as

important as the agonistic relationship between cyclists and motorists. Tero Karppi shows how trolling is defined and produced by Facebook's rules, FAQs, and media discourses around it. Drawing on Gabriel Tarde, Karppi shows how trolling on Facebook, and user interaction more broadly, emerges from networks of human and non-human actors. Lastly, Gabriele de Seta challenges the Western and largely English-language focus of much discussion around the identity of trolls and character of trolling practices with examples from the Chinese-language internet. De Seta strongly argues in favour of appreciating localised internet cultures, presenting trolling as a culturally-specific construct that has come to embody disparate kinds of online behaviour.

New media scholarship is not exempt from the uncertainty that has descended on the limits of debates, the solidity of frames, the nature of rhetorical performance, the boundaries of fields of contention, and the qualities of disruption. The email list that gave birth to this journal was, during its most active phase, in the period between the dot com crash and the Web 2.0 wave, not only a venue for theory-building, political cooperation, and extraordinary dialogue, it was racked by flame wars, miscommunications, incoherent debates, axe-grinding and difficulties in finding a shared basis for public intellectual practice. At times there were off-list attacks, long debates about the sincerity of interlocutors, off-topic digressions and, possibly, staged fights. The tensions and centrifugal forces that finally made it unsustainable were, for a while, also the condition of its vitality.

Anger is an energy, and any good troll knows intuitively the powers and desires that circulate in the vicinity of a well-placed, well-timed disruption of networked politesse. In that same spirit, we hope that as you read this issue of the Fibreculture Journal, you will encounter something that gives you at least a momentary rise, that you take the bait, that you find yourself inside a polemic. Trolololol.

Acknowledgements

Biographical note

Jason Wilson is a visiting fellow at the Swinburne University of Technology Institute of Social Research. He has published widely on digital aesthetics and politics, with particular focuses on videogame aesthetics, digital political communication, online activism and citizen journalism. After previous positions at the universities of Canberra, Wollongong and Bedfordshire (UK) he is now based in the United States.

Glen Fuller is Assistant Professor of Communication and Journalism at the University of Canberra. His research focuses on the relation between media and enthusiasm, histories of specialist magazines, contemporary developments in media technologies and media philosophies. He has written widely on enthusiasm, media philosophies, moral panics, complexity and social relations, and car culture. He is also interested in genealogical accounts of the relation between popular specialist or niche media and the enthusiast markets and scenes that they service.

Christian McCrea is an essayist writing on videogame materiality and popular digital arts. He has recently published or is publishing essays such as "We Play in Public: The Nature and Context of Portable Gaming Systems", "Comic Effects and the Composite Digital Image" and "Hunter, Monster: The Cultural Valences of Questing". He is the Program Director for Game Design at RMIT University.

Notes

[1] In the UK in 2011, 1286 people were convicted for online abuse under the Communications Act which makes it an offence to send 'send 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'. In 2007, the number was 498.

[2] The extraordinary Internet-driven resurgence of libertarianism is best understood in this light: as the desire in place of a state of affairs that benefits an already-privileged minority who are able, citing free speech rights, to drown out the emergence of new voices and identities.

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