

How trolls are ruining the Internet

By Joel Stein, *Time*

This story is not a good idea. Not for society and certainly not for me. Because what trolls feed on is attention. And this little bit—these several thousand words—is like leaving bears a pan of baklava.

It would be smarter to be cautious, because the Internet's personality has changed. Once it was a geek with lofty ideals about the free flow of information. Now, if you need help improving your upload speeds the web is eager to help with technical details, but if you tell it you're struggling with depression it will try to goad you into killing yourself. Psychologists call this the online disinhibition effect, in which factors like anonymity, invisibility, a lack of authority and not communicating in real time strip away the mores society spent millennia building. And it's seeping from our smartphones into every aspect of our lives.

The people who relish this online freedom are called trolls, a term that originally came from a fishing method online thieves use to find victims. It quickly morphed to refer to the monsters who hide in darkness and threaten people. Internet trolls have a manifesto of sorts, which states they are doing it for the "lulz," or laughs. What trolls do for the lulz ranges from clever pranks to harassment to violent threats. There's also doxxing—publishing personal data, such as Social Security numbers and bank accounts—and swatting, calling in an emergency to a victim's house so the SWAT team busts in. When victims do not experience lulz, trolls tell them they have no sense of humor. Trolls are turning social media and comment boards into a giant locker room in a teen movie, with towel-snapping racial epithets and misogyny.

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