Beyond Vandalism: Trolls in Wikipedia

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Talk preceded by an informal gathering with cookies, tea, and coffee, available at 1:45pm.

ABSTRACT

Trolls engage in actions of vandalism, such as character assassination, ideological crusades, and outright vandalism. For example, one troll planted the sentence “The Holocaust never happened” into the Holocaust entry and another troll added “Wikipedia is Communism!” Trolls are perceived by Wikipedia volunteers as troublemakers who routinely make mischief on the site and are compared to internet Trolls who are motivated to cause harm. Trolls in Wikipedia are similar to hackers in the sense that they strongly believe that their activities have a positive impact on society. Yet, unlike hackers and crushers they are not engaged in materialistic or system damage; their activities are confined to information sharing and idea exchange. Research on online hacktivism has only begun to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of hackers, and studies in this area are scarce. The literature on Wikipedia is mostly anecdotal, and most of the research has focused attention on the accuracy of entries in Wikipedia compared to established online encyclopedia. However, although policies and procedures have been established to counter Troll activity because they threaten Wikipedia accuracy and reliability, understanding their motives and rational is anecdotal at best and previous studies have not examined this type of activism from the perspective of Trolls. This study aims to bridge this research gap and contribute to a better understanding of Wikipedia Trolls’ online activism through interviews that identify their motives, ideologies, and ethics.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Noriko Hara is an Assistant Professor of Information Science at Indiana University. Her research focuses on studying collective behaviors with information technologies, including online learning, communities of practice, and online activism, from a social informatics perspective. Her publications have appeared in journals such as Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology, Information, Communication & Society, The Information Society, and Instructional Science. She held a position as an NSF postdoctoral research fellow in the School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, before joining the faculty of the School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University in 2002. See her web site for more information: http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~nhara
Pnina Shachaf is an Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research focuses on the use of technology by distributed teams, virtual services, and information ethics and their relationships with cultural diversity. Her publications have appeared in journals such as *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, *Library and Information Science Research*, and *Libri*. For more information: [http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~shachaf/](http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~shachaf/)