Truth-Telling and Trolls: Trolling, Political Rhetoric in the Twenty-First Century, and the Objectivity Norm

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Abstract: Trolling has received increasing scholarly attention both as an online phenomenon and as an allegedly new strategy of political communication. This article moves trolling out of the digital realm and applies 'trolling theory' to political communication by well-known and influential figures on the political front stage. To establish consistency between the online and the offline phenomenon, this paper will focus on a (broadly defined) style of political communication that seems to focus more on provoking outrage, establishing itself as speaking from an outsider position to defend free speech to counter an allegedly totalitarian opponent, and to trigger political sensitivities of opponents and thus cause outrage on 'the other side.' Contrary to the vast majority of trolling research that simply dismisses trolling as 'antisocial,' 'nonnormative' behavior, I argue that trolling in contemporary politics gains effectiveness by reproducing some of the patterns of 'objective communication' on a discursive and an emotional level. Political trolling embraces the notion of a universal truth, with the speakers often branding themselves as 'disinterested' and thus not emotionally involved and incorruptible, thereby gaining credibility by pointing to their position as discursive outsiders. When trolling rhetoric succeeds and the trolls' claims are met with outrage by the people the trolls deem to be totalitarian and censors of free speech, the speakers can downgrade their opponents as weak, biased, emotionally involved and thus necessarily illegitimate, gaining a superior position in the conversation.

In May 2018, *The Atlantic* published a lengthy feature about Stephen Miller, President Donald Trump's "top speechwriter and senior policy advisor" (Coppins). In the article, Miller is portrayed as a provocateur, an agitator, a rebel, and—a troll. The entire article relies on this characterization as well as on the complicated rhetorical and political implications of witnessing "a right-wing troll

[...] grow[ing] up to run the world." Trolling as an online phenomenon has received increasing scholarly attention over the last years (cf. Bishop, "Dealing"; Bishop, "Representations"; Cole; Sparby; Cheng et al.), and the familiarity with the term led to a quick labeling of a variety of phenomena as 'trolling' and a variety of people as 'trolls.' Many journalists—and some scholars—apply the term as a one-fits-all description for 'unconventional' or 'disruptive' political and/or communicative behavior, yet the actual meaning of trolling remains contested and muddy. This project is informed by attempts to understand where this term is coming from, what it denoted originally and how this meaning has evolved to include a broad range of behaviors and rhetorical strategies, to detect the commonalities and differences of these strategies, and to find out why this term is increasingly used to refer to right-wing politics and politicians. Analyzing the basic rhetorical strategies at work both in labeling something as 'trolling' and in political communication thus described will not only provide insights into the current political moment but detect key features of disruptive rhetoric and contribute to an understanding of its success.

Surveying the research on trolling[1] reveals an urge to brand trolls as deviant, unsocial, immoral, and subhuman (Reader 501) and to categorize them according to the degree of disruption they cause (Bishop, "Representations" 11-12), which seems questionable as a basis for understanding their motivation and their specific rhetorical strategies. Wilson et al. caution that any such "moralistic (and thus anti-political) work of closing conflict down" limits the potential of inquiry into the dynamics of trolling (2). While vitriolic and damaging rhetoric should not be excused or downplayed, any attempt to further demystify trolling, to understand why it can succeed under particular circumstances and why it is adopted as a term to describe much of contemporary politics, should refrain from pure condemnation and vilification. Thinking about the aspects of trolling that make it an effective communication strategy can be more rewarding in understanding the phenomenon than only emphasizing its potential for disruption of conversations and debates.

When trolling is moved out of the digital realm and applied to describe political communication by prominent figures in the public eye, some of the rhetorical dynamics inevitably change. Online and offline trolling do, however, significantly

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1   Trolling is still primarily researched as an online phenomenon. When I specifically refer to offline trolling as behavior purportedly displayed by people like Miller, Donald Trump, Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos, etc., I will make this clear in the text.

influence each other, and attempting to understand one without the other would be a scholarly shortcoming. To establish consistency between online and offline phenomena, this paper will focus on a (broadly defined) style of political communication that seems to focus more on provoking outrage, establishing itself as speaking from an outsider position to counter an allegedly totalitarian opponent, and to trigger political sensitivities of their opponents and thus cause outrage on 'the other side.' Contrary to the vast majority of trolling research that simply dismisses trolling as 'antisocial,' 'nonnormative' behavior, I argue that trolling in contemporary politics gains effectiveness by reproducing some of the patterns of 'objective communication' on a discursive and on an emotional level. Political trolling embraces the notion of a suppressed truth; the speakers often brand themselves as disinterested and thus not emotionally involved and incorruptible, and they gain credibility by pointing to their position as discursive outsiders. Objectivity, here, rests on the notion that trolls do have access to a truth that is allegedly neglected or consciously stifled by the media and the established political elites. To add new topics and perspectives to the debate, then, seems to be an imperative informed by a steady referencing of the freedom of speech. Especially in the United States, where broad protection is traditionally provided for a variety of speech, this becomes an important defense strategy. When trolling rhetoric succeeds and the trolls' claims are met with outrage by the people the trolls deem to be totalitarian censors of free speech, the speakers can dismiss their opponents as weak, biased, overtly emotionally involved and thus necessarily illegitimate in a (political) debate, and gain a superior position in the conversation. To defend this type of communicative behavior, speakers often point toward the freedom of speech and their own interest to advance the conversation by adding new perspectives to the debate and by branding particularly fierce opposition to their claims as a totalitarian attempt to silence resistance.

To prove this point, I will start with an overview of 'trolling theory.' This part of the paper first provides definitions of online trolling, points toward the origin of the term and its practice, and sketches its evolvement over time. Furthermore, this online phenomenon will be analyzed with regard to its applicability to offline practices and the recent spike in labeling provocative political behavior as 'trolling.' Adding to this, I will discuss why this specific political rhetoric is deemed dangerous and outline on which basis it is criticized so fervently. Then, my focus will shift to show that trolling is not merely anarchic disruption but that large parts of its

offline success owe to a reproduction of the influential and pervasive objectivity norm. To analyze the specific connection between trolling and objectivity, I will discuss the emergence of the objectivity norm in positivist science and knowledge dissemination. Here, the intentionality of trolling and the emotional (dis)investment of political trolling play an important role. Subsequently, when looking at trolling as the alleged bogeyman of liberal reporting, it becomes evident that the current media environment, time constraints, and a desire for provocative content fuel the phenomenon. Lastly, I will point to some examples of successful frame shifting by political trolls in the United States to point out that this communicative strategy has indeed made its way out of online discussion forums and into the realm of not only political rhetoric but also political decision-making. This illustrates that trolling can indeed be a successful communicative strategy, which is difficult to refute since it invokes principles that have long undergirded a Western understanding of political debate.

Throughout the paper, I will refrain from drawing straight lines to separate the online from the offline phenomenon since online and offline communities, rhetorics, and political communication overlap to a significant degree and are difficult, if not impossible, to separate. Pointing to and exploring these contingencies, instead, helps explain the success of this communication strategy. This understanding, then, can enable leaving the realms of the 'outrage economy' when dealing with and responding to political trolling. Here, the term 'outrage economy' refers to a rule-shifting in broadcast media and online communication that reverses "commercial considerations [...]. People are building careers out of being so unpleasant that a plethora of websites cannot resist giving them the publicity they so crave. It is fame without shame" (Shrimsley). This points to debates that primarily consist of provocation and boundary violations, which are then met with emotional and repelled responses.

In the course of my argument, I posit that trolling as a political communication strategy has been successful not because of anarchic, deviant, or purely reckless communication—as a large bulk of previous inquiry into the phenomenon suggests —but because it capitalizes on concepts once mostly invoked by progressive social movements. Freedom of speech, for example, has been prominently evoked by Civil Rights activists, abolitionists, and government critics. When trolls point to broadly accepted norms invoking objectivity, (necessary) emotional distance in the political process, and democratic resistance against totalitarian (knowledge) regimes,

trolling claims a position of heroic—and desperately needed—political interventions.

THEORIZING TROLLING—BOTH ONLINE AND OFFLINE

The Origin of the Term and a Brief Overview of the Main Currents in the Research

The term 'trolling' has been used to describe multiple communicative phenomena that are wide-ranging, but according to most definitions, the term has decidedly negative connotations. John Bishop maintains that "*Internet trolling has become a popularly used term to describe the posting of any content on the Internet which is provocative or offensive. This is different from the original meaning online in the 1990s, which referred to the posting of provocative messages for humorous effect*" ("Dealing" 1). Where exactly the term comes from is a subject of debate; some scholars—and websites such as *Urban Dictionary*[2]—trace it back to "a kind of angling where a lure is dragged through the water to provoke a feeding frenzy among the fish"; thus, "the troll may be subtly or blatantly offensive in order to create an argument" (Binns 547; "Trolling" 2014). Additionally, Bishop speculates that the word 'troll' "might have originated in the US military in the 1960s prior to the realisation of the internet for mass communication, with the term '*trolling for MiGs*'" ("Representations" 8). Andy Bodle clarifies that this expression was "used by US navy pilots in Vietnam, with the sense of 'searching/lying in wait for/ trying to provoke a reaction from' enemy planes." Yet another understanding of trolling and trolls refers to "the Scandinavian tradition of 'trolls' as horrific characters that lurked under bridges" (Bishop, "Representations" 9).

The general tendency in research and reporting on both the practice and the people engaging in said practice seems to lean toward a moral condemnation, since "[t]rolling [...] [constitutes] a new pathology of democratic dialogue" (Whelan 38). While this already picks up on the political implications of this new communicative

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2   While *Urban Dictionary* is not a scholarly source, it has been enormously helpful throughout the research for this article since the most illuminating definitions are provided by online communities. Users can keep track of the rapid developments in informal communication, and *Urban Dictionary* ranks its definitions according to ratings of other users. Because of the temporal and formal restrictions print publications and established dictionaries have to adhere to, they are of limited use when it comes to understanding trolling.

practice, it also relies on a narrow classification and grouping of specific types of trolls. This grouping suggests a gradability of trolling, in which the "E-Venger" engages in the practice "in order to trip someone up so that their 'true colours' are revealed," whereas the "Iconoclast" is "[d]riven by destructive forces" and the "Snert" is "[d]riven by 'anti-social' forces" (Bishop, "Representations" 12). While the usefulness and the distinction mechanisms of these categories are debatable, the urge to portray trolls as deviant and "sociopathic individuals" that may possess a certain "predisposing personality (e.g. sadism [...]) and biological traits" (Cheng et al. 1218) points to the current compulsion to "[dehumanize] [...] anonymous writers themselves" (Reader 501).

Researchers and journalists who describe trolling as an antisocial, pathological, and potentially criminal act likely only address the most vile forms of trolling, so-called flame-trolling that resembles hate speech and personal attacks. *Merriam-Webster* also provides definitions of trolling that portray it solely as a negative activity, communication "to antagonize (others) online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content" ("Troll"). On the other hand, *Urban Dictionary*'s second definition of trolling portrays it as

> [t]he 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. ("Trolling" 2009)

This comparison of the many different definitions of trolling calls for a certain caution whenever the term is used. For this paper, the focus will mostly lie on the kind of trolling that primarily seeks to provoke and disrupt the ordinary flow of communication instead of outright insult. Thus, my argument will stick more closely—although not neatly—to the definition provided above and to a line of thought that tracks trolling back to the fishing practice and that refrains from portraying it as a specific dysfunction of malevolent individuals. To address the trolling that more closely resembles cyberbullying or stalking, and to point to the disproportionate amount of sexist and racist slurs hurled at women and/or people of color in the depths of the Internet[3] remains a core task of both research and

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3   Many scholars and journalists have written on the hierarchical and demographic aspects of trolling, see Milner; Shifman; Shaw; Friedersdorf; Cole; Sparby.

reporting. However, suggesting that this is everything one needs to look at when analyzing trolling practices and discourses on the phenomenon does not do justice to the varieties of trolling and is often of little help to explain the success of political trolling.

Adapting Online Practices for Offline Phenomena

For a discussion and analysis of official political communication and what it means to label such communication 'trolling,' it is helpful to employ a definition of this practice that pays special attention not only to the perpetrators but to the reactions. Political trolling, here, does not necessarily refer to government statements. It rather points to public utterances made by members of either a recognized party, a youth organization, a social movement, or a government which are accessible for and aimed at a broad audience and, in one way or another, shape public discourse. Thus, this definition includes social media posts, which already indicates that the line between online and offline trolling might not be as easily detectable as one might think. While online trolling succeeds when "[y]our victim [is] screaming in all-caps at you," your victim engages in "[p]ersonal attacks (Calling you a retard, idiot, etc)," and when your victim is "[m]aking a crude remark, before quickly logging off before you can retort" ("Trolling" 2009), offline trolling by right-wing politicians or activists succeeds when their claims are met with outrage by liberal "snowflakes" (Coppins). The vast majority of the coverage that brands a certain style of political communication as trolling deals with (populist) right-wing politics. While there are many different actors involved and this branch of the political spectrum does not have a unified approach to most issues, overlapping topics include an opposition to political correctness, the longing for a heteropatriarchal social order, and a virulent defense of free speech.[4] For these real-life trolls, the political position of a person and her sensitivities become the target for provocation and disruption. Thus, we do not necessarily see the complete derailing of a conversation or interaction but rather a redirecting, or an intensification of a debate to the point where one of the speakers—the 'troll'—pointedly challenges core beliefs of her opponent in a manner that usually leads to an emotional, angry, and often desperate response.

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4   See Ovenden; Abramson; Stolz; Coppins; Douthat; Osnos; Gebreyes; Cillizza; Schultheis, "Fear"; and Kampf.

Political trolling, as discussed in recent newspaper articles and public debate, marks a perceived shift from consensus-oriented, majority-generating, moderately political rhetoric to a rhetoric grounded in provocation and aiming to undermine opposing arguments by casting them as emotional, biased, totalitarian, and unrealistic. The general assumption is that when there were still relatively few mainstream media, the editorial board screened all the content that would eventually go on to shape public opinion. Thus, access to non-edited information was limited, as was the dispersion of anonymous criticism. Political trolling changes these dynamics by capitalizing on new possibilities for mass communication. To reach this critical mass, however, it remains integral to have some sort of public standing and recognition in order not to be drowned out by the mass of content. *Urban Dictionary* describes political trolling as "[t]he act of using emotions, lies, false accusations and broken logic to undermine your opponent and win an argument in a political arena [...]. Motives include, but are not limited to: For money, power, fun and for the lulz" ("Political Trolling"). To rail up your opponent, however, is not an irrational move in the realm of the political when rationality is defined as "adopt[ing] suitable means to [an] end" (Kolodny and Brunero). The end, here, seems to be first and foremost the delegitimization of opposing voices. This aspect of political trolling has been tied to the phenomenon of a clear grouping of and alignment with the people who share the same opinions. Said grouping has been discussed as "political tribalism," which denotes "the human instinct to want to belong to a group of people who are like you" (Chua; Felton). Here, a close interconnection of online communication and offline political choices can be seen (Yudkin). Trolling seems to capitalize on this increasingly clear division of the electorate. This holds especially true for political debates revolving around and occurring within a two-party system where the stances on most issues seem to be fairly easy to distinguish.

For the troll, the delegitimization of her opponents takes place by establishing a clear emotional hierarchy and by positioning herself—as the troll—in the role of the emotionally stable and distanced mastermind. The troll solidifies her discursive power through trolling since,

> [a]s 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?' (Wilson et al. 1)

If this type of political communication is successful in delegitimizing opposition and thus bolstering one's argument, then why is it observed with grave concern by some politicians, journalists, and researchers? It is crucial to note that the advancement of a specific political argument does not seem to be the primary concern of political trolls. Instead of the accuracy of particular ideas, one's own discursive advantage and communicative power are the crucial components for political success.

Political trolling seems to oppose established norms about 'political rationality,' and discussions about it position trolling as a threat to a previously unblemished public sphere. Here, another analogy to perceptions of online trolling becomes visible since anonymous commenting and the negativity this potentially entails taints "'the virtual village square'" (Reader 495). To combat online trolling, proposed solutions that will safeguard the public sphere include "banning anonymity" (Reader 502), "designing better discussion forums" (Cheng et al. 1127), and, potentially, legal charges ("Internet Trolls Targeted"). Most of these measures, however, aim specifically at flame trolling, i.e., hateful, personal attacks that are not adequate to describe the political trolling aiming to emotionally engage—and expose—opponents. Another aspect that needs to be considered when differentiating between online trolling and political trolling is that the latter is not marked by anonymity but often by its opposite—a worldwide visibility and a front-stage position. How can a public space be protected from trolling when these very trolls "grow up to run the world?" (Coppins), and—more importantly even—why should it be protected at all, what does it endanger?

To engage these questions, it can be helpful to not look at political trolling for its deviance—its subversion of established communal norms or its alleged abandonment of all morality—but to point out which established values and principles these political trolls use and why they are part of their success. How established and how communal and consensual these norms are is yet another huge question that I cannot explore in more detail due to space constraints. This paper works with the implicit assumption of many journalists and scholars writing and worrying about political trolling that there is such a thing as an established consensus around public communication. According to this position, the consensus fundamentally rests on a general commitment to 'serving the nation,' sticking to

firm principles that ideally align with party politics, to 'honestly' communicating your interests, and to acting on more than mere personal ambition (Birrel; Strolz; Coppins). While some of the actors whose communication strategies will be analyzed further down differ over both communication and policy practices, there are strands of justification that are common to most of them. These justification strategies include referencing the freedom of speech, intentionally provoking opponents and subsequently pointing to their responses as emotional, biased, and totalitarian, as well as casting oneself as a political underdog that is standing up for fundamental rights amid an almost or completely authoritarian climate. All of these strategies are invested in the evocation and reproduction of an 'objectivity norm' that emerged in the 1850s (Kaplan 11) and undergirds much of today's scientific and political discourse even though it has been criticized, discarded, amended, and expanded by thinkers from Quine to Foucault (Mohanty 803-05). The following part of this paper will explore the specifics and discursive strategies of this norm, its importance for professional journalism, and the ethics of objectivity in politics.

THE OBJECTIVITY NORM AND ITS DISCURSIVE POWER

The early version of objectivity that became a powerful idea in science and journalism emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century "when the owners of the printing presses decided to make money rather than score political points" (Kaplan 11). By toning down coverage and providing information that was not overtly partisan anymore, the publishers enlarged their target audiences and "the more objective news organizations were the more successful they became. They sold more newspapers, which attracted advertisers" (11). Objectivity, built up on notions of "accuracy, fairness, balance," thus helped generate revenue and subsequently led to a professionalization of journalism (11). In the sciences, objectivity came to refer to

> scientific claims, methods and results. It expresses the idea that the claims, methods and results of science are not, or should not be influenced by particular perspectives, value commitments, community bias or personal interests, to name a few relevant factors. Objectivity is often considered as an ideal for scientific inquiry, as a good reason for valuing scientific knowledge, and as the basis of the authority of science in society. (Reiss and Sprenger)

Here, a decisive feature of objectivity is mentioned: it is "at once a moral ideal, a set of [...] practices, and an observable pattern of [...] writing" (Schudson 165). A particular danger lies in the assumption that factual knowledge is liberated from all bias and can be "unmediated and self-evident" (Mohanty 803). When "everything that science relies on—its methodology, its understanding of what 'facts' are, its practices of confirmation and even observation—is always necessarily theory-dependent rather than innocent, filtered through our values, presuppositions, and ideologies" (803), then paying attention to these biases, employing comparative perspectives, admitting one's own limitations, and being open to revisions becomes crucial for both scientific inquiry and reporting. Stepping back from those insights and claiming a position that allows a privileged access to 'truth' and referring to this truth as amoral and to oneself as 'just stating the facts' alludes to a practice engaged in by the 'iconoclast.' This type of troll "takes part in trolling to help others discover 'the truth,' often by telling them things completely factual, but which may drive them into a state of consternation" (Bishop, "Representations" 12). Looking at this specific practice and connecting this notion of 'brutal truth-telling' to investigative journalism and a resistance towards 'those in power' will further illuminate the reproduction of subversive practices and values in right-wing political trolling.

When the muckrakers in the early twentieth century began to report on the social malaise that characterized the lives of many Americans, from working children to workers in the meat-processing plants in Chicago, they set the precedent for countless investigative journalists to follow (Kaplan 11). The most well-known cases of investigative journalism have been lauded with Pulitzer Prizes[5] and restaged in popular culture, the most recent examples being *Spotlight*, the 2015 cinematization of the team of investigative journalists working for the *Boston Globe* who exposed decades of child abuse in the Boston diocese by Catholic priests (Baron 2018), and *The Post*, a 2017 movie on the publication of the Pentagon Papers that detailed the failures of the US government in the Vietnam War (Dargis). Those moments of investigative journalism seemingly embody the ideals of independence, fearlessness, incorruptibility, and the determination to do 'whatever it takes' to inform the public. In 2018, the *Time* magazine person(s) of the year were "The Guardians," investigative journalists around the world (Felsenthal). To earn these

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[5]   In 1973, *The Washington Post* received the Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Watergate case; Jack White and James R. Polk received a prize in 1974 for investigations into President Nixon's campaign finance irregularities. ("1973 Pulitzer Prize"; "1974 Pulitzer Prize"); the Spotlight team of the *Boston Globe* received the prize in 2003 ("2003 Pulitzer Prize").

laurels, the journalists have to position themselves against an overly powerful enemy, which in modern, liberal democracies is best embodied by either specific institutions or groups attempting to take over institutions or the state. This dynamic mirrors conspirational thinking, where "a conspiracy from within [national boundaries] and above [the elites, the political caste]" is assumed (Butter 31; my translation). Investigative reporters, thus, are the defenders of the objectivity norm since they cannot be manipulated by powerful special interests and pursue their research for the advancement of the greater good in the face of danger. Thus, they always inhabit an underdog position that lends them credibility. They have nothing to lose except their journalistic reputation, which ideally should rest on the very values they defend with their reporting. Their work also creates a window of opportunity to hold complex, technocratic governments accountable. John Hartley summarizes this attitude of fierce opposition when he states that for journalists, "[t]ruth is violence, reality is war, news is conflict" (40).

For the political trolls, the dynamics of 'truth-telling' and the exposure of governments and elites working against them take on a seemingly counterintuitive dynamic when these very trolls occupy positions of power. To position themselves in the role of the *parrhesiastes*[6] who, according to Foucault, "says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk" (13), remains essential for invoking the ideals discussed above and gaining moral justification for claims that are often met with vehement opposition. Maintaining this underdog position neatly aligns with the trolls' self-perception and stylization online as "outsiders to the mainstream, or as individuals who are always on the margin" (Sparby 89). This collective identity is forged despite the fact that most members of those communities are white males with considerable "economic privilege" and thus the least likely to be actually disenfranchised (Sparby 88). Mirroring this divergence between self-perception and external perception, Stephen Miller refers to himself as a "nonconformist," adding that "in today's culture, the nonconformists are conservatives" (qtd. in Coppins). When the alleged underdogs work for the very institutions that hold the power to shape politics, their enemies are not necessarily these institutions but everyone criticizing their work, which explains the massive focus on the media, their "'cosmopolitan bias'" (Coppins), political correctness (Green), feminism, and its proponents ("If You Don't Have Anything"; Cole 357).

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6 *Pharresia* can be "defined as 'frank speech and telling the truth as one sees it'" (Burch 72). It is envisioned as courageous and honest speech, a parrhesiastes is thus a truth-teller.

The political trolls argue that the "mainstream media" are marked by censorship (Kaplan 15), dishonesty (Trump), and bias against conservative views (Coppins). Portraying oneself as suppressed and affirming one of the most often invoked constitutionally enshrined rights—the freedom of speech—provides a moral high ground that lifts trolls out of the lower echelons of the Internet and allows for an ascension to talk shows, prime time interviews, and legislative positions.

When the concept of objectivity is equated with 'neutrality,' this creates an argumentative basis for the ridiculing of emotional responses. Satya P. Mohanty points out that "neutrality, [as] a complete divestiture of the thinker's subjectivity and her socially situated values, ideologies, and theoretical presuppositions [...] is profoundly flawed because such divestiture is never possible for humans" (804). As a communicative strategy that originates in primarily anonymous online practices, trolling takes advantage of this conception of emotional divestment. When "emotion is thought of ultimately as the complete other of political reason; that is to say [...] as a symbol of everything that has been left behind by civilization and progress, and that has no proper place in the enlightened realm of liberty created by the moderns" (Máiz qtd. in Whelan 44), then political trolls solidify their superior position in an argument when their opponents react visibly angry. They productively exploit the economy of emotions, which has long been an established practice by the new media to "generate attention and viewing time, which converts to advertising revenue" (Bakir and McStay 155). In the case of political trolls, their revenue here is presumably best understood as the attention and coverage that will be directed towards crass statements by public figures.

Another aspect that troubles those commenting on political trolling is the question of intentionality. Milner references Shifman, who argues that "even when we can easily read content and form, stance has more subtle dimensions. Tone and intent are hard to read," and he furthermore points out that in any assessment of trolling, "the problem is the ironic norms foundational to the logic of lulz"[7] (Milner 89). Even though much of online trolling is carried out anonymously and we do not have this anonymity in political trolling, 'Poe's Law' seems to apply, too. This 'law' posits that "it is difficult to distinguish extremism from satire of extremism in online discussions unless the author clearly indicates his/her intent"

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7   One of several *Urban Dictionary* definitions of the phrase defines it as follows: "When you do whatever you want, when you want, because you can. And you do it with pleasure. It's an epic thing, just epic. LULZ is seen as a God, it just is" ("I Did It").

(*Know Your Meme* qtd. in Milner 74). Part of the enduring fascination with trolling —both on- and offline—lies in this uncertainty (Coppins). The people hurling racist insults at others or claiming that an American president is not truly an American citizen might subscribe to racist views, they might be angry at a particular person and thus denigrate them in an attention-generating way, or they might just want to provoke for provocation's sake and revel in riling up the political establishment.

This joy in and desire for provocation for its own sake might explain some of the worries expressed by both political theorists and journalists when writing about trolling's implications for the realm of the political. This unknowability of intention also serves to bolster a position of alleged objectivity since it at least toys with the idea of complete emotional divestment from political demands. However, this is not seen as a weakness that undermines the political credibility of the trolls but as a strength emphasizing their adaptive, nonnormative approach, which becomes a virtue. For the journalists commenting on political trolling, the feared consequences of this constellation is that the "lack of a vision" is compensated by "a will to power" (Strolz; my translation) and the subsequent reckless pursuit of said power. The vision, however, might also be well-hidden by statements so controversial that neither taking them seriously nor ignoring them seem to be fitting responses.

DISRUPTING EVERYDAY BUSINESS—FRAME SHIFTING AND GENERATING ATTENTION VIA OUTRAGE

The urge to label a variety of statements, political strategies, and moments of communicative disruption as trolling is a rather recent phenomenon and related to the moral panic associated with online trolling and politics that disrupt or break away from the status quo in liberal democracies. By now, the concern about growing populist sentiment and movements and the challenges these pose to 'open societies,' European integration, transnational trade, and liberal ideals of a system of globally cooperating states has become a topic dominating not only feuilletons and the politics section of newspapers but also research and the very institutions that feel threatened by these developments (Müller 9-23). Trolling, as a phenomenon coming from the same place many right-wing movements and theories allegedly come from, the Internet, feeds right into a larger concern about this specific

political moment. In discussions of the alt-right or right-wing populist parties, the assumption that the theoretical foundations for these groups are generated online, however, dismisses the centuries-long traditions of ethnocentric, racist thought in both Europe and the United States. It is undeniable that many fringe opinions generate large followings via the digital spreading of their messages ("Right-Wing Extremists" 5). When trolling is understood as "[t]he art of deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off [...] via dialogue" ("Trolling" 2009), then this communicative strategy is much older than the movements it is most often attributed to today (Green). The practice of provoking political opponents alone does not seem to merit such a frenzy over trolling, which suggests that the cause for concern lies not in the provocation but in the particular makeup of who is trolling and the fear that these trolls lack the moral compass and stability required for occupying certain positions. These concerns come to the fore in discussions on the Trump administration (Coppins; Osnos; Moran qtd. in Gebreyes), President Putin's visit to Germany (Schultheis, "Putin's Weekend"), Russian interference in the last American presidential election (Douthat), President Trump's communication strategies (Osnos), or Europe's squad of anti-immigration politicians rallying around the Austrian prime minister Sebastian Kurz and Hungary's Viktor Orbán (Strolz).

The newspaper articles laying the ground for this discussion argue that trolls on today's political stage lack the acknowledgment that freedom in liberal democracies "constrains us to an extraordinary responsibility for ourselves *and for others*" (Brown 24; my emphasis). These articles portray this specific political communication and the actions that follow as "self-serving" in the case of Boris Johnson (Birrell), as "professional and callous" and "eloquent and unscrupulous" in the cases of Viktor Orbán, Sebastian Kurz, Matteo Salvini, and Horst Seehofer (Strolz; my translation), and as making "political discourse more crude and belligerent" in the case of Donald Trump (Dowd). This shared concern about vastly different people with a range of distinct political situations at home shows that the common thread seems to be the fear that these actors bring back the political "in its antagonistic dimension" (Mouffe). Mouffe argues that

> the political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it and wishing it away, which is the typical liberal gesture; such negation only leads to impotence, an impotence that characterizes liberal thought when confronted with

> the emergence of antagonisms and forms of violence that, according
> to its theory, belong to a bygone age when reason had not yet
> managed to control supposedly archaic passions.

The liberal fear that is so visible throughout the reporting on political trolls by leading newspapers unveils that this very antagonism embraced by these actors, the alienation of those who do not subscribe to your views, and the political opportunities arising from fueling these conflicts make them so dangerous. The confrontation with people who 'professionally and callously' embrace conflict and rhetorical forms of violence that should belong to the past stuns these journalists as well as established liberal politicians and some scholars. This disinterestedness in values that have been fought for and are held dear by many liberal and/or progressive political actors seems disturbing considering how hard they have been won and how much injustice still persists. For the trolls, discarding, ridiculing, or simply opposing these values allows them to claim a position vested in nothing as much as in the freedom of speech and an objective, rational worldview that has not fallen prey to the liberal antics linked to political correctness, feminism, nor other left 'identity politics' movements.

On a discursive level, these antagonisms are the very dynamic that fuels trolling. That the conflict lines are so clearly visible, and that it is so easily foreseeable how people will react to certain statements, make this kind of trolling both incredibly easy and successful. Online, there are numerous scripts on "How to Trigger Liberals" and why they react furiously to certain words and phrases (Welles; "52 Ways"; "What Is the Most"; Blake). When one of the goals of trolling is to provoke a knee-jerk reaction, which is characterized by reacting "without thinking[,] [t]o form an opinion without paying attention" ("Kneejerk"), this illustrates the expectation of standard responses and the implications of the space constraints of online or news media discourse.

Due to these constraints, public dialogue seldom allows for more than immediate reactions that are almost never the result of a debate as imagined by models of "a sufficiently deliberative public culture," which is characterized by judgments and decisions based on "mutually recognized criteria and evidence" (Nussbaum 900). In news reporting and TV news, this has led to a notion of balanced coverage that is severely restrained. Forrest Carr notes: "In point of fact, there are almost always more than two sides to any story. It's a journalist's duty to be diverse in our coverage and that means presenting multiple voices, not just two for

any given issue. And journalists seldom if ever give equal time to even two sides, much less several" (qtd. in Kaplan 13). Trolls move in a climate where attention seems to be a motivation and a reward for stirring up opponents (Bishop, "Dealing" 2). Kühne and Sandowski also point out that "[s]uch scandals and moral panics are inherently relevant for the mass media as massive public attention provoked by transgressions is both a constituent element of scandals and the ultimate purpose of mass media organisations to increase audiences" (qtd. in Bishop, "Representations" 13).

Successful 'Troll Politics' in the United States

To secure this attention, successful trolling often entails frame shifting, and the actors mentioned above have succeeded in advancing political goals that once seemed to be untouchable corner stones of the political system. When such a frame —the lens through which we filter and perceive our surroundings and events—that is shaped by organizational premises that are "something cognition somehow arrives at, not something cognition creates or generates" (Goffman qtd. in Adams 602), is shifted, this can alter the course of debates and politics. Since this shifting, changing, and evolving is a necessary feature of politics, actors attempting to advance their goals pay particular attention to it. Recent examples of successful shifts and potentially long-lasting changes in US politics and culture by people deemed trolls include Donald Trump's questioning of established alliances, agreements, and organizations such as NATO or the Paris Agreements (Hirschfeld Davis), ongoing investigations of his campaign that linked his campaign manager to Russian operatives attempting to manipulate the US election and which is frequently denied by the President ("Twelve Russians"; Layne et al.), and continuing lies emerging from the White House on things both trivial and important. Here, President Trump's assertions that the Democrats want to abolish border security and the allegations that the California wildfires occurred mainly because of poor forest management—among other claims—come to mind ("All False Statements").

While the American president has been accused of trolling on multiple occasions and even by some of his acolytes[8]—which again indicates that trolling can be used

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8   Rush Limbaugh referred to President Trump's firing of Comey as "trolling extraordinaire," and
     Paul Ryan said the President was "trolling people, honestly" after President Trump announced to

as an excuse for otherwise unacceptable statements or behavior—his rhetorical and political style suggests that this break with protocol seems to be part of his agenda and, arguably, part of his success. Another prominent example of his unusual, but memorable, rhetoric is his frequent use of nicknames for his (political) opponents (Flegenheimer). The insulting names often stick precisely because they constitute a breach of protocol and imply a frankness that is frequently connected to, and sometimes confused with, honesty and truth. While some of these names pick up physical traits (or age, such as "Little Marco Rubio"), others take on character or behavior—"Lyin' Ted" or "Crooked Hillary" come to mind (Flegenheimer). All of these nicknames are intended to expose the opponent in a non-argumentative way. They are statements, matters of fact, they can even reveal objective 'truths,' and they are very hard to get rid of. This exposure does not allow for principled counterarguments other than responses that employ the exact same tone and then seem uninspired because they are obviously responses and not original, revealing insights.

To shift the frame, to change the debate, and to add new perspectives underline the rhetorical allusion to truth-telling traditions and once again evoke freedom of speech arguments. When trolling also refers to "the Iconoclast, who will do all that it takes to make sure everyone knows the 'truth' [...] [who] will post facts that users do not want to hear as it puts them into a state of dissonance by dashing their worldview" (Bishop, "Representations" 11), then the justification for adding provocative and/or discredited truths to a discussion is the enlightenment of the other (Coppins). While this strategy rests on the assumption that 1) any absent perspective is consciously banned from the debate and that 2) freedom of speech thus requires the trolls to oppose this kind of censorship, it also embraces a particularly grand vision of the trolls' own access to 'truth.' Thus, the assumption that there is a certain kind of knowledge that shakes their opponents' worldview underlies the trolls' arguments. For the current US President, his stance on issues seems to be justified by having been voted into office and by his ability to "get away with" all sorts of wrong statements (Rauch). Often, his unconventional bluntness is itself seen as more honest, approachable, and—although often more than impolite —necessary to expose a hidden truth. In defense of his personal attacks of Omarosa Manigault-Newman, President Trump tweeted:

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strip some officials of their security clearance (qtd. in Abramson).

> While I know it's 'not presidential' to take on a lowlife like Omarosa, and while I would rather not be doing so, this is a modern day form of communication and I know the Fake News Media will be working overtime to make even Wacky Omarosa look legitimate as possible. Sorry! (Trump)

Here, the President portrays himself as being forced into this sort of exposure by the unfairness of the media coverage. Thus, branding Manigault-Newman as a 'lowlife' becomes necessary in order to convey an otherwise obscured or contrarian (but 'wrong' and unfairly biased) assessment of her character and, in turn, of his rationale for firing her.

Another prominent strand of troll politics in the US that is not—or only marginally—connected to the President concerns the recent debates over free speech on college campuses. When speakers such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Ben Shapiro, and Ann Coulter are invited to often primarily liberal universities, the debates surrounding these events often follow a certain script. A conservative, nonpartisan, or debate society invites speakers whose advocacy and politics are often clashing with the opinions and political beliefs of most of the student body (Jandhyala). The plot following the announcement inevitably includes rejection of that invitation, student protests, administrative concerns over students' and speakers' safety, and national media coverage. While the speakers very rarely want to be challenged on their stance or actually engage in a debate, they revel in strong opposing reactions and cast themselves as underdogs in an oppressive environment (Evans-Nakamura). When they advocate certain positions that have been broadly pushed back against because of racist, sexist, islamophobic, or otherwise derogatory aspects, the goal often is not to challenge someone's assumptions or beliefs but to trigger someone, to arouse anger, to expose academics as intolerant, narrow-minded, and overly sensitive, and to portray themselves as courageous defenders of free speech. Here, it is clearly about conveying that they take a brave stance and that they do what must be done to dismantle or shake up their opponents' worldview. They portray themselves as truth-tellers by virtue of facing fierce opposition and by claiming a position of emotional superiority since they remain composed and are—very clearly—the 'adults in the room.' This truth-teller position, then, does not rest on the content of their speech but on the discursive position they claim for themselves and that their opponents often grant them.

Today, many prominent speakers and news outlets see themselves in a tradition of heroically opting for the 'inconvenient truth.' In the context of enlightened

truth-telling, another Internet term that appears in multiple right-wing forums and publications serves to illustrate the heroism of that truth: the 'red pill.' Originally from a scene from the movie *The Matrix*, the red pill has become code for accessing ugly truths and rejecting a comfortable existence of established patterns in the pursuit of truth ("Red Pill" 2016).[9] This entire concept rests on the assumption that truth is always inconvenient and that truth requires bravery and sacrifice, which, again, evokes Foucault's analysis of the truth-teller. Stephen Miller also alludes to this image of bravery when he casts himself as a "nonconformist" and adds that "nonconformity is part of the American DNA. And in today's culture, the nonconformists are conservatives" (qtd. in Coppins). The insinuation that right-wing perspectives are not officially featured in most public debates not because they have been discredited due to historical and normative arguments that have been the result of tedious and contested democratic processes but because they contain truths that pose a threat to powerful elites further bolsters claims to objectivity. The US President, again, frequently accuses the media of lying, covering up real threats facing the American people, and then casts himself as the only one knowing and combating these threats (Rutenberg; Will).

The assumption that something gains value by virtue of being an 'underrepresented' opinion in some places is equally as flawed as the assumption that something gains value by virtue of having majority support (Rauch). These assessments have little to do with content, method, evidence, or argumentative rigor. The reliance on provocation and reaction, however, is one of the constituent elements of political trolling. While this can add value to debates by actually exposing assumptions that otherwise go unchallenged, it barely ever aims at or allows for an actual engagement with a variety of ideas. By portraying the choice between free speech and inclusive communities as a dichotomy, little room is left for argumentative disagreement and protest. As things do not become acceptable just because an elected official says so, things also do not become virtuous talking points just because they evoke protest.

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9   There is also a more misogynist usage of this phrase; the popular subreddit "The Red Pill" is built upon the second meaning of the phrase, "[s]ignif[ying] the recognition of the true nature of female behavior, including her attraction to traits of dominance, preference for men with status, attraction to men who have been pre-selected by other women, and hypergamous nature. Red Pill men are aware that women are strongly influenced by the culture and that their attraction cues are often outside of their conscious awareness" ("Red Pill" 2014).

CONCLUSION

Through the ranking of emotions, the shifting of debates, the subsequent expansion of the public realm for right-wing content, and the continued evocation of freedom of speech, trolling as political provocation scored points in the political arena of the United States. Even though claims that trolling features an anarchic lack of concern with moral values and guidelines remain popular in both journalistic reports and scholarly research on the topic, the rhetorical and philosophical dynamics that constitute this specific form of political communication suggest that trolling does, indeed, successfully capitalize on nineteenth-century ideals of objectivity. Objectivity, here, rests on the notion that trolls do have access to a truth that is neglected or consciously hidden by the media and the established political elites. To add new topics and perspectives to the debate, then, seems to be an imperative informed by a steady referencing of the freedom of speech.

Labeling these specific strategies 'trolling' and the perpetrators 'trolls' points to the contingency of online debates, media coverage of said phenomena, talking points that emerge from online discussions, and the acknowledgment that successful campaigning includes catering to audiences both online and offline. Drawing straight lines to separate the online from the offline phenomenon, thus, remains difficult if not impossible and does not seem to be the most insightful approach to the topic. Pointing to and exploring these contingencies, instead, helps explain the success of this communication strategy and can help to go beyond the realms of the outrage economy when dealing with and responding to political trolling. 'Red pillers,' iconoclasts, trolls that target their opponents' weak spots, and politicians and pundits who exploit an anger towards political correctness and societal changes merge into a dynamic and often efficient rhetorical force in the public realm.

When understanding the allure of the outsider position, it becomes easier to understand the underlying hierarchical dynamics and the evocation of truth-telling traditions by trolls. According to this analysis of trolling, any challenge to existing norms often automatically casts them as a superior insight, and this nonconformity per se establishes a claim as a truth independently attained. The concepts of both 'truth' and objectivity briefly discussed here are far too complex to end the debate around their uses by trolls here and thus I suggest to further research these dynamics

and to pay special attention to trolling as a social phenomenon, a communicative strategy used to diverse ends, and a rhetoric that—despite its modern emergence—rests upon long established ideas of truth and their pervasiveness in today's culture that still sticks to naive empiricism and clearly privileges some knowledge and insights over others. When answering to trolling—or dealing with it theoretically—it remains imperative to understand and expose how trolling uses culturally ingrained concepts that have been embraced by progressive movements and that undergirded many political battles. To assume that we deal with reckless underdogs that move in a lawless realm that is so far beyond any established political arena is naive, does not do justice to the phenomenon, and ultimately cannot do much to confront the trolls.

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