?rolling IR About Trolling in International Affairs

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'That's a troll!' Unless this statement is made while fishing or narrating a fairy or folk tale, it would likely be found when referring to either a provoking – possibly insulting – message or its conveyor. If a social or political scientist is merely asked to analyse trolls, then she would, in all probability, refer to neither fish, nor dwarfs nor giants but to someone being a provocateur or something disrupting in a communication, usually taking place on the internet and/or social media. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary addresses this meaning by defining 'to troll' as 'to antagonize (others) online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant or offensive comments or other disruptive content' or 'to harass, criticize, or antagonize (someone) especially by provocatively disparaging or mocking public statements, postings or acts' or 'to act as a troll'. Succinctly put, the phenomenon includes targeting, defaming and humiliating (Coleman 2014, 19). Even so, the meaning of trolls/trolling is fairly varied and not fixed, as is highlighted by the relevant scholarship, in respect to the acknowledgement of the term's initial appearance. Earlier manifestations seemed to predominantly refer more to humour or trickery than to merely offensiveness and harassment of individuals or of collective identities.

In this context, and addressing trolling with just a bit of a trolling spirit, this chapter constitutes an exercise in self-reflection and critical pedagogy, within the field/discipline of International Relations (IR). That is achieved by invoking the concept and its use, with the aim of contributing to the tackling of the post-truth predicament in world politics. On the one hand, the disruption of one's official narrative has increasingly become a challenging feature in a variety of arenas of social and political engagement. As shown below, those arenas include (dis)information, public diplomacy, cyberwar, communication and manipulation and lastly, identity, digital or social media politics.

Indicatively, trolls may well reflect socio-political and diplomatic antagonism. They may interfere in elections, affect political activism or be ultimately perceived as some sort of 'weapon'. At the very least, these aspects relate to the instrumental relevance of trolls in the conduct of global politics. On the other hand, trolls may even compel scholars, students, citizens or collectivities to reflect upon the nature of politics and knowledge. Trolling thus becomes relevant in the discussion and problematisation of IR as a discipline, something that does not come out of the blue. Social science and particularly IR, even with some delay, have turned towards critical thinking about authority struggle and knowledge regulation. Notably, emphasis has been given on the very existence of an age of disruption and what the latter entails for IR and its critical interrogation, depicted as 'teaching International Relations in a time of disruption' (Smith and Hornsby, 2021).

In this regard, this chapter unravels the respective intricacies by discussing firstly the invocation of trolling in current global politics. Following this, the merits or challenges of a possible re-entry of the concept – in addressing this invocation within IR self-reflection – are discussed. In sum, the chapter is about what IR and the broader Social Sciences tell us about trolling and, respectively, what trolling may tell us about IR.

Trolling in international affairs

In the age of globalisation and a full-grown information society, a mere reference to the impact of social media on

social or political affairs and cross- border communication is well anticipated. With all its intricacies, social media drives scholars to think on the dynamics and trajectory of the 'social' or of the 'political' (including the 'international') as well as on corresponding relations. Even diplomatic routines are subject to adjusting to the digital logic, illustrated by the growing employment of informal or humorous rhetoric as a resource of digital public diplomacy and nation-branding. The respective aims relate to attracting attention, agenda-setting, values projection and to the articulation of straightforward yet comprehensible diplomacy to broader audiences (Manor 2021, 61–64). Overall, digitally mediated communication is ideally characterised by Lemke and Habegger (2021: 239–244) as expansion (huge amounts of participants), acceleration (abundant information, immediacy) and divergence (polarisation, outrage culture, radicalisation, normalisation of trolling practices).

Attributing trolling as an essential characteristic of social media is subject to debate. Whether essential or not, the logic and practice of trolling are far from uncommon in the media, thus having a strong presence in socio-political affairs and communication. Mazarr et al. (2019) address this trait and trace 'the emerging risk of virtual societal warfare' as its major characteristic. Information-based aggression is asserted and it is subsequently considered to be the sum of a series of trends. These include the unfolding of large-scale social institutions with little accountability or trust, a diminishing faith in established institutions, the weakening of social capital, a rising polarisation pattern and the rise of populism. This aggression is further reflected in certain features. These are a trolling ethic, self-reinforcing echo chambers and the infosphere's fragmentation, along with the viral expansion of information within networked dynamics, general sensationalism, the concentration of information platforms, the role of influencers and lastly the immense growth of data collection. The first three features in particular are seen as principally differentiating the evolving situation compared to the past. As far as the trolling ethic is particularly concerned, it denotes the use of satirical memes, of inflated and fabricated stories or of merciless attacks. The purpose is to suspend dialogue, create trouble and strengthen argumentation. Therefore, it constitutes a viewpoint comprising irony, insolence and sensationalism aiming for humour, disruption or aggression (Mazarr et al. 2019, 14–21; 36–38).

Similarly, research in the politics of social media, with an emphasis on twitter and its role in international affairs, verifies the broader impact of technological shifts in temporality and functionality of communication. Furthermore, this specific case encompasses not only the logic of the latter (e.g. broadcasting and public diplomacy) or of low politics but also one of conflict and high politics. This is done by both representing and provoking emotions with a noticeable impact on the processes of conflict and on its (de)escalation. Trolling sharply reflects the links among wider shifts, the range of emotions and the power of social media. Transgressive behaviour is distinctively facilitated by the latter's structure, not least regarding Twitter, which intensifies individuals' or groups' proclivity for identity construction based on harassing and shaming (Duncombe 2019, 422–425).

Subsequently, this 'obvious' role of trolling as part of propaganda, disinformation, information manipulation or information warfare and indeed the very existence of what was termed '[Cyber] Troops, trolls and troublemakers' by Bradshaw and Howard (2017). The manipulation of social media, particularly in an organised fashion, involves an array of tactics: e.g., comment posting, individual targeting, government-sponsored sites/ applications or accounts, fake accounts, automation and content creation. Equally notable is the range of forms of participants such as government, politicians and parties, private contractors, volunteers and paid citizens (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, 8–17). In any case, it is important to note the growing articulation of troll groups with war-related terms and images, reflecting the portrayal of the internet – particularly on behalf of states – as a site of violence (Kamis and Thiel, 2015). References to troll farms, troll factories and troll industries are frequent enough – as is also the case with troll troops or troll armies.

An archetypical example, often quoted within the relevant literature, is the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – and it has included trolls from both sides. The Russian entity closely associated with the respective activities was eventually known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA). The equivalent Ukrainian entity is the Ukraine Information Army, founded by Ukraine's Ministry of Information Policy. Although there has certainly been no monopoly of state-sponsored trolling on behalf of a single country, the Internet Research Agency faced charges for interfering on various occasions, usually in electoral processes: e.g., in the US (2016), in Germany (2017) and the UK (2016). It was not just an issue of quantitative or of geographic expansion. A qualitative evolution has also been ascertained in terms of scope or targeting and sophistication. Specifically, there has been a rapid evolution beyond the framing of

conflict, with an increasing aim of contributing to division, polarisation and uncertainty. In this respect, it would even make sense to target opposite groups, as long as there was message susceptibility. A major development that was also observed refers to tactics such as fake website making, local news outlet impersonation, micro-targeted campaigns and finally an increased robotisation or automatisation, i.e. bot activities and artificial intelligence with personalised and adaptive features (Pavlíková et al. 2021, 43–44; 54–58). The lines between trolling and diplomacy or other political means are often fine and unclear. This was seen in the case of the December 2016 'lame duck' tweet created by the Russian Embassy in London as a critique of US President Barack Obama who was nearing the end of his presidential term. Such humour employed by diplomats had a global impact and yet it faced critique for trolling (Manor 2021, 71–72).

According to research by Twitter, Internet Research Agency accounts with notable presence in the 2016 US presidential elections were found to be active also in the Brexit debate earlier that same year in the UK – essentially a form of repurposing. Moreover, the aim seemed to be making noise rather than exerting direct influence towards a specific direction. Finally, indications stood out for the existence of cyborg accounts, i.e., the addition of automated bot behaviour to human activity (Llewellyn et al. 2019, 1061; 1148). What may evidently rise here is the manipulation of public opinion in the digital sphere by means of coordinated campaigns, often in light of important political events. It is often state-sponsored, but not necessarily.

A comparison between trolls originating from specific countries (in this case, Russia and Iran) revealed a series of traits. In both examined cases, the respective campaigns were affected by the course of events, while behaviour (for example, the use of language) was not necessarily consistent over time, rendering detection complicated. Differences were discerned regarding ideology (for example, pro-Trump and anti-Trump) and the degree of influence and efficiency in respect to pushing URLs, whereby Russian trolls were particularly successful. The variance was also found with regards to the discussed topics depending on platforms and communities (Zannettou, et al., 2019, 353–354). This diversification is verified by a broader and global survey of organised manipulation by Bradshaw and Howard (2017). In fact, the latter relates to quite different countries. In authoritarian regimes, the process is often funded and coordinated by the government. In democratic states, it may also involve other entities such as political parties. Multiplicity might also characterise troll and cyber armies in respect to affiliation, funding and clientele which includes governments but also goes beyond them (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, 22–23). Furthermore, a similarly illustrative comparison of digital information warfare between a distinguished pair of countries hostile to each other (in this case, India and Pakistan) found the engagement of citizens of both states acting in a similar way. Human troll armies (rather than bots) posed as ordinary citizens. Most importantly, the plurality of contributors posted on hashtags of their corresponding state, without entering in counterarguments with the other side's contributors. The outcome was a favourable stance to the hashtags of one's own country, manifesting mentalities of jingoism and nationalism that served the policy choices of the respective governments (Hussain et al. 2021, 8–9).

Besides the impact of trolling in reflecting and exhibiting harsh bilateral or multilateral relations within the international arena – or its usual understanding in terms of propaganda – attention is also warranted towards domestic and cultural processes. For example, the case of Russia is cited as an example of a phenomenon called 'neutrollization' (industrialised trolling) – a process of a desecuritising nature whereby trolling is encouraged by the regime to preserve itself and to tackle civil society's perception of said regime as a societal security threat. Instead of obstructing the internet in an overtly authoritarian fashion, internet activism is used in such a way that the possibility of meaning is precluded via political disengagement and the breeding of doubt in a non-securitising manner. Here, there is a disruption not of an official viewpoint but of a context that could enable acts of securitisation against the regime (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2018, 345–348). Another example refers to the emergence of political trolling through the lens of mediated populism. In this case, trolls are engaged in power networks and discourses which eventually help the establishment consolidate power within the respective country. Trolls are essentially used by the state and government to enforce citizen mobilisation in certain pathways. It may reflect features of populism, like the adoration of people and the demonisation of outsiders – or even a culture of lynching and censorship and attacking non- government-friendly individuals (Bulut and Yörük 2017, 4093–4095).

In the aforementioned cases, trolls 'bite' or fight on behalf of the government or regime. However, trolls may 'bite' or fight back or against established structures of power. A notable example of this is the case of the movement known

as Anonymous – since it reflects the potential and limits of trolling. In its initial appearance, the movement was seen, fairly justifiably, as just another form of trolling. Yet, it turned out to be a politically motivated insurgency that cannot be reduced to its undisputable trolling roots. This feature has been presented in terms of a 'metamorphosis from trolling misfits to the misfits of activism' (Coleman 2014, 8) or a shift 'away from ungovernable trolling pandemonium to engage in the global political sphere' (Coleman 2014, 3). Trolling's global reach and wide range are reflected not just in phenomena like Anonymous but also in global trolling. An example relates to the inauguration speech of Donald Trump in January 2017. Trolling attitudes related to provocation, repetition and satire or even a pseudo-sincere stance. These were exhibited regardless of country of origin – thus transcending national lines. Then again, the cultural dimension makes some difference, with the example of respective instances originating more from individualistic countries rather than collectivist ones (Fichman 2020, 13–14).

Overall, the instrumental relevance of trolls comes up as pertinent in a variety of aspects: interstate antagonism, exerting influence in major events, and state-sponsored (or not) activism. In a discourse characterised by the heavy presence of information warfare, the weaponisation of trolls seems nearly inevitable.

The problematisation of IR through trolling

The above narration addresses trolling as a phenomenon with multiple dimensions and manifestations. In the end, though, it gets down to the conceptualisation of trolls in terms of weaponisation, i.e. the use of trolls in manipulation and confrontation within interstate relations or in favour of a certain power structure – usually (though not always) a state. Interestingly, the employment of the war metaphor on behalf of states in the analysis of cyberspace and the internet was once perceived as trolling itself – insofar as it was presumably contributing to a shift in the respective discourse (Kamis and Thiel 2015, 2). There is validity in this claim as the aforementioned metaphor helps states to preserve their role. Regardless of the metaphor's actual origins, though, this employment has essentially become the norm, if it was ever the exception. One need not say that there is something wrong per se with this neatness, the state-centric highjack of trolls and power-focus.

Since, however, trolling has much to do with disruption, it is intriguing to reflect upon how the former may serve to disrupt the field/discipline of IR and another key practice, apart from war – diplomacy. First, a brief note on reflection is necessary. The literature on IR identity, which extensively manifests reflective or critical concerns, has been dubbed as 'reflexive studies on IR' by Grenier (2015). Schematically, it includes three perspectives. A geo-epistemic dimension relates to the hierarchy-oriented inquiry of the field's evolution at multiple geographical settings. A historiographical dimension refers to the unravelling of dominant and of dissident or alternative narratives concerning the field's history and, eventually, story or identity. Finally, the sociological perspective includes the exploration of the patterns of communication and the power relations in knowledge production (Grenier 2015, 74–76). Whether in philosophical, historical or sociological terms, disciplinary identity is at the epicentre regarding content, context, features and the practice of IR. In fact, there has been no shortage of voices that assert or request the death or end of 'IR', as we 'know' it, and its 'theory' (see Sjoberg 2017, 167–8), usually meaning its Westphalian straightjacket.

Problematisation within IR is enhanced in light of the trolling phenomenon. It is exemplified in the relation of the latter to diplomacy – a core feature of IR- related practice. Compared to the image of conflict or of war, and its incorporation of trolling as already shown above, there has hardly been an equivalent success as regards to the diplomatic practice of hijacking trolls. Evidently, 'diplomacy itself is not immune to trolling' (Duncombe 2019, 423). It is considered not only scarcely compatible with the latter, but also threatened by it. Pessimism and scepticism for the prospects of digital diplomacy rise. They are based on the divergence in structures and logic, i.e. traditional diplomacy's formalisation and consensus-orientation versus the openness or looseness of social media (Lemke and Habegger 2021, 231). In this sense, states and international organisations face a predicament: 'to be a diplomat or to be a troll, that is the question before us' (Lemke and Habegger 2021, 260). Drenzer (2015) expressed a more pragmatic view that trolling presumably constitutes an option adopted by statesmen and by officials or a part of great power rivalry as well as a sign for a possible shift of diplomatic norms. What seemed as undiplomatic would rapidly become part of diplomatic and political exchange. This emergence of diplo-trolling was enabled by the difficulty in avoiding a dispute, especially in instigations by prominent politicians or diplomats. Despite the small space for meaningful dialogue, negotiation is possible but not without the toll of troll, namely increased costs and the

interpretation of failed communication as a lack of international respect.

Concerning the game-changing potential of diplo-trolling, it eventually seems to follow the general trend of communication technology's impact on global affairs. Three phases appear concerning optimism, disillusionment and lastly realism, i.e. acceptance of both hopeful trajectories and troubling facets (Drezner 2015). So, Drezner seems to answer affirmatively, if cautiously, to the provocative question: 'it is diplo-trolling, but is it diplomacy after all?'. However, the key issue is how this question arises from the respective discussion – constituting a disruptive reflection on the nature of diplomacy and showing that, in light of trolling practices, the conduct or conceptualisation of diplomacy is not so neat. Trolling doesn't replace diplomacy or make it disappear. But along with the replication of the confrontational logic, it sets the ground for attempts at (re)considerations of diplomacy.

The aforementioned disruptive reflection does not limit itself to the subject matter of IR. It is also applicable to its (meta)theory. Beier (2021) highlights this by presenting the field's history in a non-neat fashion, particularly in terms of a discordant mixture of voices and stories – which allows for the critical engagement of students and for the appraisal of problematising and defamiliarising accounts, particularly those of a commonsensical nature. The challenge of internet trolls and alternative facts to the shifting boundaries of political imagination cannot but be noticed, raising worry about indeterminate knowledge claims. Similarly, fake news evidently challenges established ways of teaching. However, it is a different issue whether a 'stable truth' perspective is the solution to addressing the respective problem, when taking into account that it often leads to overlooking the regulatory practices for the production or the validation of knowledge (Beier 2021, 64–67).

At the same time, the critical lenses towards disruption, related to conspiratorial discourse or fake news and post-truth, seemingly invite the very disruption of the right for freedom of expression. This postulation does not mean the denial of that right. Yet, it is a reminder that such a rights claim should be uttered in connection with responsibility instead of merely defying it. The acknowledgment of disruption as a right or even as a duty, on behalf of scholarship and a critical perspective, necessitates critique against disruption of responsibility, i.e. against the process of equating ideas with opinion and rendering the latter as valid on the basis of the right for its existence. Thus, a collegial ethos involving the mutual and common responsibility of those who engage in knowledge practices serves as an important criterion. In this rationale, it is not an issue of juxtaposing 'good' or 'bad' knowledge claims but an issue of knowledge as a social practice as well as of the unfolding of the power of expertise, along with the politics of knowledge authority. Subsequently, criticising the weaponisation of fake news or trolls (especially when refusing or silencing dissident viewpoints) needs to be complemented by the awareness of the possibility for reification of knowledge claims. From the point of view of critical pedagogy and the decolonisation of scholarly knowledge production, disruptive thought and practice (with a range from conspiracy theories to trolling) can even be addressed as a thinking mode that contributes to the problematisation of authority – or of power – as well as to the enhancement of critical potential and of political imagination. However, this is the case only as long as the criterion of responsibility in knowledge practices is fulfilled (Beier 2021, 70–72).

The aforementioned vision falls within critical pedagogy which emphasises the varied role of disruption, namely: 'teaching as disruption', 'disrupting the discipline through teaching' and 'disruptions to teaching IR' – the broad aim here is to transcend the IR mainstream (Smith and Hornsby 2021, 3–5). Furthermore, it is compatible with the call for 'undisciplined IR', meaning IR characterised by 'thinking without a net' (Sjoberg, 2017). The logic of trolling here is latently present in one of the features of such an IR undiscipline, namely the very notion of the undisciplined. The latter is synonymous with terms such as unruly, disorderly and disruptive – appraising the absence of demands for methodological compliance or for political correctness or rules within the state and academic institutions. Like the aforementioned vision, a criterion for the disruptive practice is deemed crucial, namely the existence of purpose. Facets of undisciplined IR also include the following. Firstly: a non- orthodox stance towards epistemology, particularly appraising incoherence, a rogue mentality and the rejection of knowledge accumulation. Secondly: a purposefully unruly conduct. Thirdly: the pluralist search for approximation of knowledge, e.g. in terms of gratification, justice or rebellion. Finally: the perception of knowledge accumulation as misguided and hollow (ibid., 161– 163). Certainly, the celebration of trolling here is not an appraisal of internet trolls who fight with each other and reproduce power relations. Instead, it emerges as a means for the contestation of academic hierarchies and dominant patterns.

Evidently, there are affinities of the above rationale with the emphasis, from a critical standpoint, on the possibility for trolling rising within cultural politics in a counter-hegemonic fashion as a way of struggling against dominant ideological frameworks. This may be done in cases of subversive affirmation on behalf of trolls who mock hegemonic discourse, performing the transgression of the limits of identities by means of not only humour but also over-identification. Indeed, a relevant option on behalf of a troll is to conceal themselves as the 'other', in order to forge a counter-identity against a prevalent discourse. This predicament doesn't negate the quite often reactionary manifestations of trolling and it doesn't equate all threats to normalcy with each other. However, awareness is raised on the emergence of trolling as a cultural feat that affects political ideologies. Transgressive passions are awakened, bringing up emotions and subsequently (dis) empowering identification (Mylonas and Kompatsiaris 2021, 35–36).

Overall, there is some margin for trolling as a method of critical inquiry and contestation. But this occurs only through the fulfilment of certain criteria. Taking into account the variety of aggression and transgression's forms and motives with a range including randomness, revolutionary mood, specific symbolic frameworks, justice or just 'the lulz' – 'a spirited but often malevolent brand of humour' (Coleman 2016, 4) – in such a critical process, a highly pertinent question is raised over 'what kind of trolling' emerges or 'whose trolling' occurs. The chapter's previous section ended with a reference to the inevitability of the weaponisation of trolls in the conduct of politics and international relations. In this section, a critical attempt of a discussion of trolling as a means against thought processes that privilege stability, reification or even the notion of inevitability was made. IR Scholars who want to present a not-so neat story of their discipline may adopt the spirit of trolling as a method, though with caveats like responsibility and purpose. In that way, there is no legitimisation of the trolling ethic on the internet, as discussed in the previous section.

Final Remarks

Overall, (international) politics is barely an exception to the general trend of manifold participation in trolling on behalf of multiple tight-knit groups, genres often assorted in respect to the target, political movements and even individuals. Succinctly put, it may well stem from either the ad hoc self-organisation of individuals or the collective orchestration in line with a regime agenda (Coleman 2014, 4, 19). This variety is the very reason for the difficulty and implausibility of presenting a neat story over trolling and IR in which trolling and its disruptive effects would either be absolutely condemned or unequivocally praised. It is the reason for the choice of naming this final section of the chapter 'final remarks' rather than naming it a conclusion. This choice serves as a reminder that the evaluation of the phenomenon and its effects relies on answering the 'whose trolling' predicament – that is, addressing its particular manifestations.

Subsequently, is a world of IR – which is increasingly characterised by troll(ing) – substantially different or even better? The analysis of trolling in international affairs entails what is here termed as 'instrumental relevance of trolls', with aspects such as manipulation, confrontation and antagonism which are further stressed by the notable use of the war metaphor. In this sense, trolling and its corresponding ethic, manifested in the digital sphere, seem to mark an IR trajectory in a business-as-usual mode. Despite trolling instances of resistance to power structures, the state-centric embracement or hijacking of trolling can hardly be missed, along with the 'disrupt the opponent/rival' mode. At the same time, this embracing is certainly not the end of the story when taking counter-hegemonic instances with a 'disrupt the system' mode into consideration. Those instances can be construed as pointing to a 'make troll, not IR' direction. And, they do not make up the whole of the story which does not emerge as neat. Given that the key concept here is disruption, this, probably, hardly comes as a surprise.

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