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TROLLING AS A DIGITAL LITERARY PRACTICE IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE INTERNET

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Abstract

This article explores trolling as a form of literary activity. It presents a number of specific types of trolling on the Russian-language Internet in connection with digital literature and the literary practices of various groups of Internet users. Techniques for writing provocative “troll-texts” were created and developed within subcultural groups in the 1990s. Later, from being a subversive practice known only to a few insiders, it became a mass technique described in meta-texts that identified rules for trolling and shared facts about its culture with all interested users. In the 2010s, the now popularised techniques of trolling came to be seen as effective strategies to deploy in online debates. At the same time, trolling began to be exploited as a weapon in online political campaigns. This study also shows that trolling texts are often structured around the fight for voice, and it is this conflict that dictates the formal properties of the discourse of trolling.

Keywords: *Runet; Internet Communication; Digital Literature; Troll; Trolling*

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The many Faces of Trolling

Everyday internet users are now well acquainted not only with the positive forms of online interaction, but also with its darker side. Internet use brings everyone into contact with spam and unpleasant information; any statement, even the most innocent post on a user's personal page, may attract attacks from aggressors whose aim is to destroy the communicative scenario in hand or cause harm. Many users have encountered inappropriate, aggressive, insulting or distracting comments on their own and others' posts which may in turn, prompt attempts— often futile – to bring the troll “to heel” and put the conversation back on track. Yet, while some users may have experienced trolling as an invasion of their communicative space, for others, trolling is part of their online behaviour.

The concept of internet trolling exists in several languages, and the phenomenon itself is widespread throughout the world. The word “trolling” – from an English verb that describes fishing with a baited line – is used to refer to communicative provocation designed to infuriate other users: to provoke anger and fury or to make them feel frustration and fear. Trolling implies creating a situation of conflict and violating the unwritten rules of online communication. The association of the concept with the trolls of mythology, which could, if we adapt folklore to the realities of the internet, be described as dwelling under the “cyber-bridge”, has turned out to be so pervasive that the word has changed its semantics (Fichman, Sanfilippo 2016). The word “troll” is now used to describe a person who practices trolling.

The concept is a broad one, however, and has changed over time as online practices have moved from the sub-culture to the mainstream. Several forms of aggressive communicative behaviour online are classed as trolling by scholars: these include bullying, phone pranks and even hacking. Trolling became the subject of research in the social sciences and humanities in the 1990s with the analysis of communicative practices on Usenet (Donath 1999). At that time, social psychologists began studying the interaction of users within “virtual reality”. Studies appeared of aggressive behaviour on chat rooms and internet forums, and uncontested mockery or persecution of some users by others. This was seen as a type of compensatory behaviour not normally available in real life to the people involved, but possible in the conditions of anonymous communication. Trolling was interpreted as a way of attracting attention, improving one's status on the internet, and channelling offline aggression (Tepper 1997; Baker 2001). Studies of trolling concentrated on how individuals behaved when interacting on internet forums and websites.

In the 2000s, trolling began to be discussed within the framework of cyber-bullying: the hounding or intimidation of a victim by a group of

internet users. The phenomenon of collective violence against weaker individuals on social media aroused serious concern among commentators writing about the vulnerability of young people and adolescents on the internet. As social networking sites involve the posting of private information by users, and competition for social status, young users will post texts and photographs which make them an easy target for bullying. In the 2000s and 2010s, scholars examined the link between online aggression, collective trolling and adolescent suicide; they tried to find ways of protecting victims from persecution of this sort and described successful strategies for moderating forums and internet communities (Binns 2012; Bishop 2013; Herring et al. 2002; Hitchcock 2017; Nail, Simon 2016; Trolley, Hanel 2010). The importance of understanding the structure of interactions between provocateurs or persecutors and their victims led researchers to investigate trolling as an interactive communicative process on social media (Hardaker 2015; McCosker 2013).

The actions of online provocateurs can be seen from the perspective of cyber-interaction ethics, with researchers simply passing judgement on the trolls' "anti-social behaviour" (Shin 2008; Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Leskovec 2015) or even writing about how practitioners of trolling have a tendency towards "everyday sadism" (Buckels, Trapnell, Paulhus 2014). At the same time, as the infrastructure of web-based interaction becomes ever more complex, an approach described by its own practitioners as "ethnographic" has come to the forefront. Internet ethnography involves studying online behaviour with the help of longitudinal insider research and interviews. Studies of this kind have allowed researchers to define trolling as a sub-cultural phenomenon with its own rules and history. They have made it possible to study trolling communities, ask questions about the aesthetics of trolling (Coleman 2012, 2014; Knuttila 2011; Phillips 2011a), and try to understand actions that arouse extreme disapproval in outside observers (such as RIP-trolling; Phillips 2011b). Studies by anthropologists have enabled the establishment of a more complex history of trolling. For instance, Whitney Phillips (2015) has painstakingly traced the links between trolling and the culture of mainstream media, showing that in its most radical features, internet trolling perpetuates and builds on practices legitimated by tabloid newspapers and journals centred on celebrity culture and sensationalism, so that it may be said to reflect that culture in a "crooked mirror". At the same time, Phillips has argued that nowadays, mainstream and consumer culture, by popularising and appropriating internet memes and "lulz" has almost destroyed the trolling subculture, and that the concept is fast losing all meaning.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, another important shift occurred in the behaviour of internet users themselves, whose activity had previously been presented as little more than virtual hooliganism. At this time, trolls and

hackers began to participate in internet activism and become involved in collective politically directed campaigns. Researchers have described how the “anonymous” movement arose from sub-cultural activities and how trolls began to play a part in political processes. They have also examined the links between stunts by hooligans, campaigns by activists (such as the trolling of scientology sites in 2008) and the involvement of trolls in pre-election political campaigns (Coleman 2012, 2014; Virkar 2014). As a result of the greater role played by the internet in mediating all types of social interaction, among other factors, the delineations of “political” and “legitimate” activity are becoming more and more blurred, so that the idea of participation in political processes has been gaining importance. Confusion and lack of clarity as to what actions qualify as “legitimate” allows some agents without a political programme (trolls, in this case) not only to be active within the field of politics, but to have a serious influence within that field (Coleman 2014).

In the 2010s, internet trolling underwent a serious change. Both governments and businesses spotted the advantage that could be gained from trolling – not as a subculture, but as an activity by hired agents designed to disrupt or destroy online communication and damage the reputations of individuals and organisations. The hiring of trolls and hackers to discredit political opponents became widespread in the Russian political mainstream (Zakharov, Rusiaeva 2017). Since the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 American presidential elections, and the ensuing allegations of interference by Russian hackers in that election campaign, Western journalists and politicians have begun to comment actively on the deliberate flooding of sites with misleading or irrelevant information.

Thus, it would be inaccurate to link trolling with just one type of practice or phenomenon, describing all its manifestations as parts of a single whole. Trolling exists as a type of game, as a type of communicative violence, as a strategy used by anonymous political activists and as a pro-governmental propaganda strategy. Some trolling is witty, some can be understood only by those in the know; some garners mass approval, while some arouses disgust. Some trolling goes no further than teasing; some crosses the line into harassment. Trolling is an umbrella term used to describe several phenomena which do have features in common: for instance, various types of trolling can be seen as provocative communicative behaviour designed to stir up negative emotions in the “victim”. There is also a general strategy recommended for use against trolling: refusal to enter into a dialogue with the provocateur or aggressor, as expressed in the motto “don’t feed the trolls”. But there are also significant differences. These may relate to the age or social status of trolls, whether they are one-time or repeat offenders, whether they act as individuals or take part in collectively planned campaigns, why they say what they do, the specific features of trolling in different countries, and so on.

This study concentrates on just one aspect of this multi-faceted phenomenon, by examining trolling as a kind of literary activity and part of the wider phenomenon of digital literature in the Russian language segment of the Internet. This is a fairly loose approach as various types of trolling produced very different types of text. Moreover, as a technique that developed on image boards, trolling may involve no more than posting memes that include insulting, unpleasant or comical images. Nevertheless, this study will explore several aspects of trolling as a written practice, which show that it is valid to approach trolling as a literary activity.

Trolling as a Form of Literary Activity

Literature as a body of written works and as the process of producing texts has undergone changes with the spread of digital technology. Researchers face the question of how to classify and study the growing body of texts produced using computers. Summarising the results of research in this field over more than 20 years, Scott Rettberg, in his book *Electronic Literature*, demonstrates that our ideas about what literature and literary genres are have become more complex, because they must take into account the new affordances of digital technologies and the constant transformations of cultural practices of internet users (Rettberg 2019). He claims that “electronic literature is significantly resistant to clear lines of demarcation. Hybridity and perhaps monstrosity (see Leclair 2000) are par for the course in a multimedial field whose cycles of creation move at the speed of technological change” (*ibid.*: 9).

When defining the characteristics of the literary text, scholars have often referred to Roman Jakobson’s description of the poetic function of language. Thus, according to Roland Barthes, “the ‘poetic’ (i.e., the literary) refers to that type of message which takes as its object not its content but its own form” (1967: 897). Trolling, considered from this point of view, largely pursues the pragmatic goal of ridiculing or angering the interlocutor. Its techniques, as the examples below will show, relate to those of classical rhetoric used to win a dispute. According to this logic, trolling should not be defined as a literary practice. At the same time, however, notably many troll texts can be found on the Russian-language Internet in which the line between pragmatic and poetic is blurred. Partly, the subject of such texts is indeed its own form, the skills of its author(s), and the art of trolling.

This study will demonstrate that some troll texts are close to a new form of digital (electronic) literature, in particular to those genres that Rettberg defines as collaborative writing that invites readers to contribute to the text (2019: 5). A large troll text, including all the reactions of the participants, is open for co-creation and collective writing. Such texts are produced using

digital technology as networked. Any user can try to become a co-author-troll, or join sides with the targets of the trolling, or act as a reader-referee who evaluates the success of trolling or provides ethical assessment. It often happens that communication which starts as a trolling, takes on the character of a network performance. Often the collective text so created is designed to be read with pleasure by readers “in the know” who share the aesthetics of trolling. In social networks, users comment on these texts, share likes and dislikes, and assess the trolls’ skill. On Runet, troll texts are often evaluated from an aesthetic point of view: how creative, absurd, and funny for the reader they are. Both trolls and readers explicitly assess the formal qualities of these messages. Thus, despite its pragmatic function, a troll text as a hybrid genre of digital literature often has a poetic function too.

The following factors suggest that trolling as a type of text can be considered to have some relation to literature. In the first place, the result of interaction with a troll or of a troll attack on a community or group is often (though not always) a collection of texts consisting of communicative exchanges between participants. These networked texts share certain formal qualities, which involve: the way in which roles dictating a limited number of scenarios are allocated to participants (trolls, their victims and referees); the aesthetics of “lulz” behind trolling; and, up to a point, the poetics of the text (a poetics implying the verbalisation of anger and a range of negative emotions; mimicry of the original discourse of the trolling’s victims; and production of absurd texts.)

Secondly, the logic of such an approach is indicated by meta-literature about trolling on Runet. In the 2000s, texts on the subject of “effective trolling” became popular. These took the form of various instructions and pieces of advice offered by experienced trolls to beginners. There are numerous examples on social networks of ironic self-reflection by trolls: stories about successful acts of trolling, and screenshots of dialogues involving trolling. These reflections on practice, and this desire to record the experience of trolling as a worthwhile marginal activity – citing “model” examples, giving prominence to certain actors, and passing on the genealogy and legends of trolling to “future generations” – indicate attempts to formalize a digital literary genre. The popularity of demands such as “trolling expressions” or “how to troll” appearing on auto-prompts in Russian-language searches on Google or Yandex testify, albeit indirectly, to an interest in trolling as a bag of rhetorical tricks that can enable the user to create a “winning” text in an online interaction.

At the same time, trolling should be seen from a historicising perspective. The “golden age” of trolling of the 2000s witnessed the development of techniques associated with the trolling subculture, the gradual migration of trolling into mainstream culture and a mass craze for the techniques and aesthetics of trolling, and activism by anonymous users. This was

followed by a period in which interest in trolling fell, due to its increasing commercialisation and its appropriation by pro-governmental political institutions.

The appearance of trolling as a phenomenon on Runet in the 1990s took place at a time when the Russian literary canon was being re-evaluated – a time that saw an increased interest in new forms of literature and literary games, experimentation with new verbal forms and new literary techniques (Lunde, Paulsen 2009; Gorham, Lunde, Paulsen 2014). Trolling is often carried out with a very different objective in mind than the creation of an expressive text; but for all that, the techniques of trolling were honed within the context of a “literary-centric” Runet (which, moreover, was a fairly compact cultural milieu at the time) and the establishment of digital literature.

The language and aesthetics of digital literature of the 1990s reflected the dismantling of the literary norm, the inclusion of subjects previously considered “lowbrow”, and the use of “dirty” and insulting material in attempts to be witty and amusing (Zvereva 2012). A distinctive feature of digital literature is its interactive nature: its creation involves not only the author’s own text, but the texts of readers and commentators, and of participants in literary flashmobs. An author’s initial post may be rewritten many times, sometimes in response to requests, suggestions or criticism by readers. As for the comments, they are often more interesting or witty than the text to which they are addressed. On sites such as udaff.com and fuck.ru¹, the art of the short written reply or comment putting the reader on the same level as the writer, or elevating them above the writer, developed into a genre in its own right. It is obvious why short forms enjoy such popularity in internet literature. Online, authors compete among themselves, battling it out for the attention of readers who spend progressively less and less time scrolling through posts and commentaries – in keeping with the popular formula among readers used to criticize an author’s long-windedness: “ni asilil, mnoga bykff” (“didn’t read, too wurdy”). The space allocated on social networks to text is also becoming smaller. As a result, works of digital literature do not necessarily have to be long in order to be striking and effective: as shown by the hugely popular short verses known as “pirozhki” and “poroshki”.² In this context, trolling acquires value as a literary device or even a minor genre.

Long before the digital era, people were using certain text forms to provoke, amuse or enrage others, and these were reproduced on the internet. It is, therefore, quite natural that trolls appeared on forums and chatrooms. As mentioned above, due to the organisation of early networks, trolling developed initially among small groups of users and was aimed at a small circle of people “in the know”. The first type of trolling described in an academic study, by Donath in 1996, involved user interaction on the network Usenet. Notably, one of the legends of Usenet was a user (or probably several

users) with the expressive name of Netochka Nezvanova,³ a programmer, star of underground computer art and music, and famous troll and flamer, who terrorized users of this network. The playful mask used by this web-character – NETochka, uninvited guest of bulletin boards and electronic conferences, was an ironic borrowing from the work of the same name by Dostoevskii,⁴ and clearly indicates an essentially artistic character.

In the Russian-language virtual environment of the 1990s, there were certain factions which, interacting within closed groups, encouraged trolling as a type of language activity involving the art of facetious comments, mockery or abuse. Thus, for instance, on the network FidoNet, a type of trolling featuring specific messaging techniques became a noticeable phenomenon. For Russian-language users there, the reference point was a type of internet trolling known as “Kashchenism” (“Kashchenizm”). The language and imagery used by the “Kashchenites” was worked out in a so-called “echo-conference” (a space devoted to posts on a particular theme) on Fido, su.kaschenko.local, supposedly affiliated to the famous psychiatrist Petr Kashchenko.

Подписчики делились на медперсонал и пациентов, а случайные прохожие, не понимающие, что происходит, автоматически попадали в категорию неизлечимо больных. [...] В конце 90-х годов [...] Стали проявляться такие характерные особенности кашченизма, как еврейский акцент и переименование русских слов на манер иврита и идиш. (“Kashchenizm”)

(Subscribers were divided into medical staff and “payshunts”. Those who came upon the site by chance, who did not understand what was going on, were immediately put into the category of “incurable cases”. [...] in the late 1990s [...] various characteristic features of Kashchenism appeared, such as a Jewish accent or Russian words written in a Hebrew or Yiddish style.)

The trolling of Kashchenites was exaggeratedly polite (in the style of a doctor speaking to a patient) and the text would be constructed from series of questions. An argument between two Kashchenites might develop without a single affirmative statement.

The subculture of Kashchenism is described on the web-encyclopedia Lurkmore and other Runet resources as the origin of the art of trolling. Formulae and expressions used by Kashchenites are often quoted: “Ah you Jewish? – Vy you ask? – you anti-Semitic? Vy you ask? You want to find anti-Semitic allies?” Etc. (“Ви евгг’ей? А почему ви спг’ашиваете? Ви антисемит? А почему ви спг’ашиваете? Ищите сог’атников-антисемитов?”) Some literary texts written using the techniques of Kashchenite

trolling are also cited, such as ‘Dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate’, in which both sides behave like internet trolls:

П: Имя?

И: Иисус. А ваше? [...]

П: Ты еврей, Иисус?

И: А почему вы спрашиваете?

П: А почему ты отвечаешь вопросом на вопрос?

И: Вы антисемит?

П: А почему тебя это беспокоит?

И: Нет, почему ВАС это беспокоит?

П: А кто тебе сказал, что меня это беспокоит?

И: А зачем вы спрашиваете? [...]

П: Это ты называл себя сыном Божьим?

И: Что вы хотите чтобы я ответил? [...]

П: А если я велю тебя казнить? На кресте распну?

И: А за что?

П: А разве недостаточно всего вышеперечисленного?

И: А может все-таки потому, что я еврей?

П: А ты таки еврей?

И: А разве не сын Божий? [...]

П: Ты мне надоел! Казнить его немедленно!

И: Вы таки антисемит.

П: Ты таки еврей.

(‘Dialog mezhdu Iisusom i Pontiem Pilatom’)

(P: Your name?

J: Jesus. And yours? [...]

P: Are you a Jew, Jesus?

J: Why are you asking?

P: Why are you answering a question with a question?

J: Are you anti-Semitic?

P: And why does that bother you?

J: No, why does that bother YOU?

P: Who told you it bothers me?

J: Why are you asking? [...]

P: Was it you who called yourself the son of God?

J: What do you want me to say? [...]

P: What if I give the order to have you executed? Crucify you?

J: What for?

P: Isn't everything listed above enough?

J: But maybe just because I'm Jewish?

P: Are you Jewish?

J: Am I not the son of God? [...]

P: I'm sick of you. Execute him right away!

J: You ARE anti-Semitic.

P: You ARE a Jew.)

The exchanges of Kashchenite trolls can be seen as digital literature due to their use of language and style, and the way in which they reflect on words and communication. Notably, some of the Kashchenites' favourite targets were authors of fiction – for instance, the fantasy writer Sergei Lukanienko (famous for supporting a pro-Russian “patriotic” position, jokingly nicknamed “Schnovelist” (“Peisatel”)) and the writer and journalist Aleksandr Eksler.

Memes, entrenched forms of trolling understood by insiders, were developed within closed groups and image boards (4chan, 2chan, 2ch), as in-jokes targeting an “in-crowd” or those who came into their orbit. It appears that witty and insulting literary tricks and methods of communicative provocation were perfected not only out of a love of verbal art; trolling fulfilled another function, too: to patrol the borders of such groups and communities, in order to keep out random visitors, newcomers, or uninitiated users. With regard to this function, the texts and visual images of trolling could be referred to as “border-zone literature and art”. For instance, as Phillips (2015) notes, image boards were open platforms. However, for every attractive photograph posted, there would be a dozen deliberately repellent images that would discourage uninitiated users from becoming better acquainted with the site. For a long time, this prevented the commercial use of image boards, as it scared off advertisers.

The territorial nature of trolling, its link with place, with “native” or “hostile” spaces imbued with corresponding values, is also evident from the aggressive raids made by trolls on other groups. Typically, during a “raid”, trolls will invade space belonging to another group and forcibly introduce their own material – texts and images – both for the sake of entertainment, and in order to seize a platform.

According to Lurkmore, a raid is a type of internet vandalism with assaults on poorly protected online groups. The attackers on a raid destroy everything as they go. It is most likely that trolls would attack groups devoted to subcultures, or groups violently opposed to something (here the trolls will disguise themselves as the objects of hatred and start to defend the honour of the insulted); or groups which attract aggressive but rather stupid people, who have no idea of the etiquette of digital interaction, etc. (“Nabeg”.) In relation to raids, it is not appropriate to talk of the honing of a literary technique or style. For a mass attack, other text types are used: for instance, the wall of another group may be flooded with copy-and-pastes of some text – usually disgusting in content, including coprophilia, pornography or streams of

invective. Those who take part in “raids” thus operate their own set of canonical texts: copy-and-pastes⁵ which are explicitly aggressive, or tongue-in-cheek versions of bizarre or inane texts that have become memes within narrow groups of users.

However, trolling as a form of text production on Runet was not restricted to situations of conflict between different subcultures and communities. According to Coleman, over time, a new type of trolling – which she calls populist trolling – developed on the imageboards 4chan and 2chan. This was simpler, more appealing to a mass audience, and presented trolls’ memes and mockery as an entertaining game (2014: 41). Something similar took place on Runet, where users began to learn about trolls as a result of planned leaks of information from closed groups, or through the borrowing and mass popularization of fashionable jokes using memes and wordplay, as well as through the proliferation of meta-texts about trolls.

In the second half of the 2000s, a great number of texts about trolling aimed at a wide audience appeared on the internet. On the one hand, the huge popularity of “Padonkoffsky slang”⁶ aroused interest in sub-cultural practices on Runet, prompting journalists and bloggers to devote some time to acquainting users with the culture of Runet creative writing and commenting, and the characteristics of aggressive and sarcastic communication on the internet. An awareness of what trolling was, “how it [was] done” and “how to fight it” became part of general awareness of the new media. On the other hand, the desire among active participants in Russian internet culture to codify their knowledge and preserve the memory of a disappearing age on Runet also contributed significantly to the growing interest in memes and trolling techniques. This resulted in the appearance of the Russian Wiki-encyclopedia Lurkmore (2007) – a resource that compiled and presented to the public various internet memes, subculture figures and stories from Runet; as well as the internet folklore anthology Netlore (2007); and Wikirealnost’ (2009) which describes internet communities and their culture. The popularity of texts about trolling also contributed to an awareness of the commercial potential of Runet culture. “Old-timers” – users who had witnessed and taken part in the creation of the Runet myth in the 1990s – began to publish print books containing their digital texts, books recalling a “Golden Age” before the advent of LiveJournal, Padonkoffsky culture, and internet troll-provocateurs. Among them, for instance, was the “Padonkoffsky Bible” by the founder of Udaff.com and the “Godfather” of Padonkoffsky slang Dmitrii Sokolovskii. Encyclopedias and portals on internet subcultures started to post advertisements on their pages that stressed that they were aimed at readers of all sorts, without restriction.

Articles on the site Lurkmore brought an awareness of trolling to a wide audience. Written in a simple, witty, pseudo-scientific style, these articles afford anyone who wishes a glimpse into the depths of internet subculture

and insight into its language, memes and narratives. The main article on trolling from Lurkmore presents the phenomenon as follows:

[Троллинг –] постинг заведомо провокационных сообщений. Помимо попыток довести одиночного поциента до так называемого баттхерта – потери самоконтроля [...], Т. Может проводиться и с расчетом на то, что за поциента начнут заступаться его соратники или собратья по увлечению, с целью [...] Получения негативной реакции пользователей некоего сайта [...]. Обычно целью троллинга является лулз [...] Если провокация сетевого тролля удалась, то считается, что тролль нашел еду. (“Trolling”)

(Trolling is “the posting of messages deliberately designed to provoke. Apart from attempts to drive a “payshunt” to so-called “butthurt” – loss of self-control [...], trolling may be carried out in the expectation that the payshunt’s comrades or those with similar interests will begin to stand up for him, in order to [...] Get negative reactions from a particular site. Usually, trolling is carried out for lulz. [...] If an internet troll’s provocation is successful, it is said that the troll has managed to “feed”.)

It is significant that the authors try to set out the rules of trolling, to identify a set of strategies for creating texts, to divide trolling into successful and unsuccessful examples and to categorise it into subspecies, to show solidarity with successful campaigns and to distance themselves from crude aggression. Thus, according to Lurkmore, trolling can be divided into unsubtle (“fat trolling”), subtle and ultra-subtle – or nano-trolling (in this scenario the troll forces others to troll for him). Articles about heroes of Runet subcultures describe “legendary” trolling campaigns. Through this sort of meta-description, the symbolic status of the art of trolling is increased. Trolling is something that should be known about and remembered; it can bring the hero fame and immortality on the web. In texts about trolling, a significant role is assigned to parallels between the art of communicative provocation today, and examples from classical literature. For instance, the Lurkmore site includes quotes from trolls from Herodotus, Tolstoi, Kipling and Ibsen. All this helps to raise the status of behaviour that could be regarded as no better than hooliganism to that of an object of intellectual appreciation.

[...] тонкий элитный тролль. Эти горделивые существа столь же редки, сколь и прекрасны в полете. Как правило одиночки, они обладают неким подобием системы ценностей, контролем над собственным аппетитом и определенной артистичностью в подходе к поставленным целям. (“troll”)

([...] a subtle troll. These proud creatures are as rare as they are beautiful in flight. Solitary as a rule, they have something resembling a value system, control over their own appetites and a measure of artistry in how they approach their goals.)

This concern to delineate the difference between art and visceral aggression, and the identification of “correct” and elite” forms of trolling is, in part, the result of a generational divide between younger and older users that took place within the culture of Runet at a certain point. It is clear that the authors of many texts on the subject of blogging, including articles on Lurkmore, are fairly mature and well-educated, have some literary skills and are able to dress up counter-cultural and anti-social activity in a form that appeals to a wider audience. They show a desire to disassociate themselves from “schoolkid trollers” (“shkolota”) criticising them as crude and ignorant of the finer nuances of the art of trolling. For instance, the following view appears in an article on Lurkmore:

[набер] обычно очень скучен и не несет в себе ни капли лулза. [...] ничего смешного и интересного в набигании и закидывании говном унылого быдла нет, и мэдскиллз годного тонкого тролля не требуется. (“Набер”)

([a “raid”] is usually very boring and lacking in any lulz whatsoever. [...] there is nothing funny or interesting about “attacking” or shit-sliding by boring sheep [bydlo] and the mad skills of a subtle troll are not required for this.) (“Raid”)

And in popular culture, too, a number of poems and songs about internet trolls written on their behalf have appeared. Thus, a sanitised and more appealing interpretation has emerged, which plays down the sub-cultural and counter-cultural tendency of trolling, classing it as an intelligent, edgy and thus more interesting verbal activity.

Живем мы в интернетах кучу чертовых лет;
Наш дом – вся сеть, но есть места, где пищи нам нет.
Любой из нас сумеет отменный срач затеять,
Являясь с провокацией в блог.
Хоть мы и неприятны, приглядишь и замети,
Что доставать людей ведь тоже нужно уметь!
Смотри на нас тревожно – чрез нас, вполне возможно,
Над всеми издевается бог!
(Kotovskaia)

(A devilish long time we’ve roamed the internet,
Though on some sites the food is hard to get
Each one of us a master of the art

Of winding bloggers up until they climb the walls;
 You might not like it, but you must admit:
 There is a skill to stirring up the shit!
 Look at us with dismay – we just might be the way
 God laughs at one and all.)

It is unsurprising that people involved in the subculture react negatively to the revelation of trolling secrets and the popularisation of trolling techniques:

Луркмор – говнопортал, убивший троллинг. [...] Раньше я мог троллить любого, абсолютно не заморачиваясь, и никто не кричал “толсто!” Или “фу, тролль!” [...] Теперь же этот говнолуркмор и говноимиджборды популяризировали троллинг, и каждый школьник счел своим долгом максимально толсто потроллить все, что видит. (Lurkmore Contributor Moshchnyi Galoperidol)

(Lurkmore is a shitty portal that has killed trolling. [...] Before I could troll anyone, no problem, and nobody would shout “not very subtle!” Or “ugh, a troll”. Now shitty Lurkmore and shitty image boards have popularised trolling and every schoolkid has decided that it is his duty to troll everything he sees as unsightly as possible.)

Lurkmore articles have been cited all over the web. A whole series of instructions on “how to troll” (a guide for beginners) and “how to protect yourself from trolls” have appeared on Runet; these are based on revelations of trolling techniques. In the “Padonkoffsky Bible”, Sokolovskii has written on the art of using commentaries to insult and provoke. The use of quasi-academic language allows the author to treat “shitstorms” as a type of literary activity (2008: 261-265):

Приступая к срачу, необходимо выбрать субъект, оскорбление которого доставит вам наибольшее удовлетворение. Наиболее перспективными, с нашей точки зрения, субъектами являются мужчины и женщины “за тридцать”, отягощенные высшим образованием и грузом моральных, социальных и иных убеждений.

[...] Добавление красочных эпитетов придаст вашему срачу экспрессивности и художественной насыщенности изложения. [...] наиболее эффективным является безосновательное, но действенное обращение “пидор”, позволяющее сразу низвести оппонента на нижнюю, относительно вас, ступень социальной иерархии. [...] Путем несложных манипуляций с вышеприведенными примерами ты, камад, сможешь достойно обгадить практически любого собеседника.

(Before beginning a shitstorm, it is essential to choose a subject whom it will give you the greatest level of satisfaction to insult. From our

point of view, the choice that offers the best prospects is a man or woman “over thirty” burdened with higher education and a number of moral, social and other convictions.

[...] The addition of colourful epithets will lend your shit storm expression and artistic intensity. [...] the most effective is the unwarranted but forceful “Faggot” which immediately puts your opponent on a lower hierarchical level than yourself. [...] If you use the aforementioned techniques you, too komrade, will be able to shit good and proper on practically anyone with whom you interact.)

Here, the use of words from the vocabulary of literary criticism (“expression and artistic intensity”; “colourful epithets”) emphasises the literary nature of the texts in question. Later, the expressions “thick-horned nanny-goat” (“koza tuporogaia”) and “crooked-snouted fuck-face” (“eblan kosorylyi”) are also cited as examples.

In the 2010s, a great many internet articles appeared which described techniques and formulas used in trolling – often understood in terms of successful communication (“how to be a successful troll”),⁷ winning an argument, or enhancing one’s symbolic status. The sort of texts that appeared included both texts written by those who considered trolling an experience worthy of study, and texts by people opposed to trolling, who nevertheless explored its techniques in some detail.

Есть некоторые техники, которые используются большинством опытных троллей. Вот несколько из них: 1. “И кто тут тролль?” Популярная тактика форумных троллей – обвинять своих оппонентов, что троллями являются именно они. [...] 2. “Просто шутка”. Если спор достигает своего пика и против тролля ополчилось весь форум, тот может просто объявить, что все им сказанное – шутка и спорщики, воспринявшие все слишком серьезно, глупы. (Sery Pavlyuk)

(There are some techniques which are used by most experienced trolls. Here are a few of them: 1. “Who’s the troll here?” A popular tactic used by trolls on forums is to accuse one’s opponents, suggesting that they are actually the trolls. [...] 2. “Only joking”. If an argument reaches a peak and the entire forum turns on the troll, then the troll may simply announce that everything he/she said was a joke and that those who are taking it all so seriously are stupid.)

Thus, trolling was transformed from a type of literature associated with the subculture and understood only within particular groups, into a set of techniques familiar to a wide circle of users. Encyclopaedic articles, instructions and textbooks on trolling exposed and popularised the techniques of creating trolling texts, making it possible to identify particular types of

trolling and analyse their literary qualities. They recorded the transition from an “active” period of trolling, characterised by cruel playfulness, to a “fatigued” stage, in which trolls described their own practice for future generations, and documented the decline of spontaneous creativity.

“A Art of Trolling is Simple”

In 2015, the news that one of the founders of Lurkmore, Dmitrii Khomak had published a book called *Art of Trolling (Iskusstvo trollinga)* which had attracted a number of positive reviews, spread over Runet. Anyone trying to find this book was directed to a site on which it was posted. On opening the link, users would see a PDF file with the title page and the publication details loading; however, 302 pages of the book would fail to load, and stay blank. Impatient readers would go to try to find the book on a better site; readers familiar with the art of trolling would scroll down to the end and see that they had guessed right: all the pages of the book were blank and at the very end they would see the phrase “A Art of Trolling is Simple” (“Trollit’ legko”). Although the author of the book did not enter into a dialogue with his readers, this publication can be seen as an example of as trolling, as it forced readers to experience pre-determined (negative) emotions and to carry out pre-planned (futile) actions.

Is it possible to identify features that distinguish trolling as a particular form of literary or written activity? We have already discussed certain formal similarities between trolling texts; we will now take a closer look at this aspect of trolling. The first thing noticed by researchers who describe trolling as a form of behaviour is a particular aesthetics “the aesthetics of lulz” - (from LOL – laugh out loud), which refers to a type of humour (“I did it for the lulz” means something done not for gain or advantage or in order to achieve a practical aim, but in order to laugh at somebody, at somebody’s expense. In academic literature, the concept of “lulz” is often classed as “black” or “sick” humour; (for instance, commentaries left on the page of somebody who has died, insulting them and angering their friends and relatives). “Lulz [...] speak foremost to the pleasures of transgression” (Coleman 2014: 31).

According to Phillips, the aesthetics of lulz are constructed on violation or subversion of any ideas which are considered sacred, revered or valued in any way, either by a culture as a whole, or by the groups targeted by the trolling attack. This explains the advice given in instructions on trolling on Runet. You need to find your victims among groups which are united by some shared interest, and attack the symbols of this interest: for instance, “children” in the case of Mumsnet groups, “Tsoi”⁸ for lovers of Russian rock, etc., expressing scepticism or mocking those communities’ most important values. Trolls act as “agents of cultural digestion (who) scavenge the

landscape, re-purpose the most offensive material, then shove the resulting monstrosities into the faces of an unsuspected populace” (Phillips 2011b). It follows that, by identifying what supplies trolls with lulz, we may also better understand the vulnerabilities and the cultural consensus on certain subjects relating to society, ethics, politics and a number of other “sensibilities” (Coleman 2014: 33).

Another important component in the aesthetics of trolling is to provoke “butthurt” – the indignation of the victim of trolling following an attack on something they hold sacred. Thus, any theme that divides users into supporters and opponents is a cause for trolling. The apparently passionate assertion of a particular point of view on a site frequented by those who oppose such a view will invariably arouse indignation and result in an argument. Thus, trolling texts often involve social or cultural simulation, the assuming of the rhetorical guise of other users, whose views the troll purports to share.

In this way, the trolling of Kashchenites chose to target a particularly sensitive issue within Russian culture: public denials of day-to-day anti-Semitism. The insincerely polite questions: “maybe you’re saying that because you are a Jew?” “or maybe because you are anti-Semitic?” Provoked angry and defensive reactions among users who were seen as holding positions from which they wished to distance themselves. Thus, the exchange of comments takes place around some topic that polarises opinion. Trolls provoke either supporters or opponents of a certain view, about which they themselves are largely indifferent, by masquerading as users on both sides of the argument.

We can take a closer look at both these components – lulz and butthurt, using an example from the network “Russian in Finland”. In this group, Russian-speaking immigrants in Finland discuss practical questions concerning life in the country they have made their home. One Friday (the day is significant; clearly, the author of the post felt that the end of a working week was a good excuse to have fun), a member of the group posted the following (“Kela” is the short name for the Finnish Social Insurance Institution):

#1 Вопрос по Келе. Как все знают, Кела оплачивает поход в кино раз в месяц всем членам домохозяйства. Мы всегда ходили на обычные 2D фильмы, которые по новому тарифу финнкино стоят 14,40 €. На них потом заполнить заявление в Келе проблем не возникало, там все просто. Но в эти выходные хотим сходить на “бладе руннер” в 3D, где билет по новому тарифу стоит 19,90 €. В заявлении на компенсацию на этот случай есть отдельная графа, где надо объяснить, почему вам было необходимо смотреть кино именно в 3D, а не в 2D. Что вы обычно пишете в этом пункте? [...] и еще, слышал, что Кела фактически оплачивает только входной

билет, а за очки ты должен доплатить сам. Достоверная ли это информация?.. (‘Vorpros po Kele’)

(#1 I have a question about the Kela. As you will know, the Kela pays for one trip to the cinema once a month for every member of a family. We have always gone to the ordinary 2D showings of films, which, according to the latest Finnish cinema tariff cost 14.40 euros. However, this week we want to go to see *Bladerunner* in 3D; and tickets for this, according to the new tariff, cost 19.90 euros. When applying for getting your ticket price refunded, there is a separate section for situations like this, which asks for an explanation of why you needed to see the film in 3D and not in 2D. What do people normally write in this section? [...] I have also heard that the Kela will only actually reimburse the ticket price; you have to pay for the 3Ds glasses yourself. Is this information reliable?)

This text is, from the start, based on the fantastic claim that the Kela pays for families to go to the cinema. The post is written convincingly: the phrases “as you will know” and “what do people normally write?” indicate that this is a routine question; the fictional scenario is described using familiar concepts (real ticket prices; the need to fill out all sorts of forms for public bodies; the typical confusion over “what to write in this section”; etc.) At the same time, it is not merely a joke on some abstract topic. The text touches on a sensitive topic for Russian immigrants: the different levels of social security payments received by different categories within the population. It is implied, but not stated in the post, that the author is unemployed (in reality this is not the case). The “butthurt” for the victims in this case of trolling is the result of the “revelation” which confirms what some members of the group suspect: namely that it is more advantageous for an immigrant to Finland not to work and that hard-working individuals (which is how most readers see themselves) will receive less social assistance than “scroungers” (normally associated in users’ minds with refugees from the Middle East and from Africa).

Reactions from readers were divided: some took the post as a clever joke and joined in with the ironic discussion of a world in which the Kela pays for people to go to the cinema, the circus, and pays for “free tickets to the Crimea in order to enhance national solidarity”. Other users, however, fell into the trap. Some began to send the author questions about how to take advantage of this possibility, or expressed regret at missing out, while others expressed anger towards the author, towards “unemployed spongers” and “us Russians” as well as the whole Finnish social security system. As the situation developed, a number of users from the first group took up the position of “friends of the troll”, that is, they continued to write absurd claims, creating still more “flaming” and openly discussed the lulz, and the pleasure

afforded them by the stupidity of gullible users (who also lacked curiosity, as they had not read to the end of the thread of comments). For instance:

#2 Это шутка?

#3 Нет

#2 Кела за учебники не хотят оплачивать, с чего они кино будут спонсировать?

#4 потому что покупка учебников – это инвестиции в самого себя. Вы их сами потом отобьете.)

#5 можете поподробнее рассказать, как это так Кела оплачивает Кино? Надо быть безработным?

#8 там не только сам билет компенсируют, но и поездку на такси туда – обратно из кабака

#9 Серьезно? Это безработным?

#10 работающим только в одну сторону-в кабак

#11 Посмотрел на того, чей пост... Человек работал и в Microsoft и в Lg и в Huawei [...] инженером [...] Это че такие бедные рабочие места, что в кела нужно возврат за кинобилеты брать? Или это психология такая: “ни копейки из своего кармана”?

#10 Ну и что тут такого. Я тоже с семьей хожу в кино, в цирк, на карусели-все кела оплачивает до копейки

#12 Офигеть как легко живется холявщикам. А мы работаем.

#1 Ответ интересующимся: работать не пробовал и не буду, не предлагайте. Я не за тем сюда приехал.

#13 А если по теме – стыдно должно быть константин!!! [...] вы за 14.40 не хотите, вам за 19.90 подавай! Позор!!!

#24 [...] я охренела от таких холявщиков.

#25 Глубоко больны те, кто привыкнул сосать всех, и государство в том числе!

#14 Живу 30 лет в Финляндии и никогда на халяву ничего не получал и не просил! Работать нужно

#15 За 16 лет жизни в Финляндии ни разу не была бесплатно в кино... Оказывается КЕЛА оплачивает????

#17 Блин, ребят! Вы че гоните??? Кела оплачивает кино???

#18 Да. Но только безработным.

#20 [...] Капец, как стыдно. Работаю, нет, пашу как лошадка... 20 евро нет на кино? Я переведу на счет 20 евро. Пишите! Потом обсуждаем беженцев. Они конечно совсем того, но мы(((

#21 А можно поподробнее. Как это Кела оплачивает походы в кино. Тоже хочу

#19 ООО господи дай мне не описаться

#10 новые клоуны постоянно подтягиваются, этот цирк надолго
 #4 ...я потихоньку перехожу в стан мизантропов и човекофобов.
 Ну как можно быть настолько тупыми, чтобы не понимать, что это
 шутка юмора?

#18 Дорогие соотечественники! Как же мы любим халяву. Если бы
 на конезаводе разрешили брать бесплатно навоз, наши бы не
 только в миг разобрали всю кучу, но стойла выскребли бы до
 блеска.

#10 как я и предполагал, праздник продолжается. (“Вопрос по
 Келе”)

(#2 is this a joke?

#3 [VZ – Commentary by a “friend” of the troll] no

#2 The Kela doesn't want to pay for school textbooks, why would it
 pay for the cinema?

#4 because buying textbooks, you're investing in yourself. You will
 end up being able to pay off any expenses :)

#5 can you give me more information about how you can get cinema
 tickets paid for by the Kela? Do you have to be unemployed?

#8 [Vz – comment by a “friend” of the troll] they don't just pay for
 your ticket, they also pay for a taxi there and back from the pub.

#9 Seriously? For unemployed people?

#10 people in work only get the taxi to the pub paid.

#11 I had a look at who left this post... the writer worked at Microsoft
 and at Lg and at Huawei as an engineer. What sort of poorly-paid jobs
 are these, that the Kela has to pay for his cinema tickets? Or is it just a
 particular psychology – “I refuse to pay for anything myself.”?

#10 [VZ – comment by a “friend” of the troll] what's the big deal? I
 also take my family to the cinema and the circus and to the fairground,
 and the Kela pays for it all, down to the last kopeck

#12 Unbelievable how these scroungers have it so damn easy, while we
 have to work

#1 [Author of the post – VZ] to anyone who is wondering: I have never
 worked and never intend to work, so don't ask me to. That is not what
 I came here for.

#13 [This user is pretending to be indignant, and thus also acting as a
 troll – the comment provokes similar comments, but these are serious
 – VZ] To get back to the topic, Konstantin should be ashamed of
 himself!!! [...] A ticket for 14.40 isn't enough for you. You need one
 for 19.90. It's a disgrace!!!!

#24 [...] I'm f**ing sick of these scroungers.

#25 People who just screw everyone are sick. And the state is sick too.
#14 I've been living in Finland for 30 years and I've never asked for any freebies and never got anything. People should work.
#15 I've been 16 years in Finland and never been to the cinema for free. And it turns out the KELA pays people to go????
#17 Damn, what is this, guys? The Kela pays for cinema tickets????
#18 Yes, but only for unemployed people.
#20 [...] It's screwed-up. A disgrace. I work like a dog. You don't have 20 euros to go the cinema? I'll send you 20 euros. Write. Then we can discuss refugees. They're like that, of course, but we (((
#21 Can you give more details about how the Kela pays for cinema tickets? I want to get free tickets too.
#19 [VZ – comment by a “friend” of the troll] Oh my god I'm gonna piss myself!

#10 new clowns just keep on coming – this circus will run and run.
#4 ...I am gradually becoming a misanthrope. How can people be so thick that they don't understand it's a joke?"

#18 [VZ – this commentary appears when it seems that everybody has understood the joke] Dear fellow-Russians! How we love freebies! If we were told that we could take free horse manure from a farm, we wouldn't just take away the whole lot immediately, we'd scrape the floor so clean it shone.
#10 As I thought, the party is still going on.)

In this example, consistently with some literary practices, the topic-starter initially demonstrates his ability to imitate the tone of “serious” posts on practical topics. Then, a large troll text is produced jointly: some members of the group join the trolls and compete in adding ever more grotesque and exaggerated details that make the whole conversation absurd. The art of writing is what enables the trolls to prolong the absurd text in the guise of a regular “practical” one. The readers who realise this are especially pleased by the fact that despite its parodic and absurd, monstrous details, all the new “trolling victims” join the thread and read the text literally as a set of practical tips, taking the discussion seriously.

A distinctive feature of trolling texts is the way in which roles are distributed among the participants and, as a result, among the text's co-authors. Lulz and butthurt are components of an interaction in which one side has provoked or imposed an interchange and therefore the relationship between the participants is unequal and hierarchical – a relationship between those who are superior and inferior. Texts created by trolling involve more than two roles (that of author and reader), and the potential for the reader to become an author and commentator, but three roles – troll – victim – reader (while each role may be represented by one or many people.) Kashchenite

lore features “doctors” and “patients” and this is significant: the troll is a psychiatrist and the troll’s victim is a patient in need of harsh treatment. Lurkmore describes the victim of trolling as “food” and in the example given above, one of the “friends of the troll” describes those who took part in the thread as “clowns [who] just keep coming” thus providing fun, a “circus” or a “party” for the trolls.

Thus, trolling texts employ a limited number of scenarios and communication structures to stimulate the desired emotions in those involved, whether as producers or consumers. The troll may take pleasure in superiority and in laughter; the victim, on the other hand, will feel bewilderment, annoyance, fury, indignation and often fear. The feelings of the troll may be more or less impossible to detect within the text, whereas the negative emotions experienced by victims will, on the contrary, be clearly evident and will tend to increase.

The interactive nature of trolling and the fact that the text – and replies to it – are created spontaneously, means that none of the participants in the communication can predict how the conversation will develop. The troll attempts to control the situation, while the victim is almost incapable of doing so. The troll has far more opportunity to turn the conversation in an unexpected direction, given that the participants in this type of communication have completely different goals. The victim is concerned, from the outset, with the substance of an argument; the troll, on the other hand, does not actually hold any view, but merely pretends to do so, assuming one or other position at different points in the conversation. The troll does not want to debate, but to make other participants in an exchange lose their cool. While this position gives the troll endless freedom, trolling becomes an art when the user controlling the conversation shows the ability to think like a psychologist, display wit, and set logical traps for the victim.

Let us take an example from the blog by the famous Runet blogger “Lena Miro” (aka miss_tramell), an expert troll famous for her ability to provoke readers, lure them into traps and then unexpectedly take out her aggression on them. Typical topics chosen by Miro are women’s fitness, beauty and politics (supporting the Russian pro-governmental “patriotic” position). In this example, Miro had written a post about the terrible conditions in a hospital in Voronezh. One of the commentators on the post, a user from the Ukraine, tried to steer the conversation towards politics (referring to Russians’ faith in a benevolent Tsar):

user X: Ничего, раз в год на “Кривой линии” покажут и ОН все исправит. Многовековая вера в доброго царя, которому бояре не докладывают истинное положение дел.

miss_tramell: а ты во что веришь?

user X: Я верю в силу духа нашего украинского народа, в его трудолюбие и чистоплотность.

miss_tramell: всего народа?)

user X: большинство именно такие

miss_tramell: на чем основано это утверждение?

user X: Докажи! – кричит моя страна. – Докажи, что укры – не уроды! Докажи, что там идет война, а не помощь братскому народу!

miss_tramell: а никто и не говорит, что вы уроды, в принципе, не верю в то, что большинство людей трудолюбивы и чистоплотны вне зависимости от национальности большинство людей – ленивые свиньи. (miss_tramell 2017b)

(user X: It doesn't matter, once a year they'll show it on "Krivaia liniia" and HE will sort it all out. The age-old belief in a benevolent Tsar who isn't informed by the boyars about the real state of affairs.

miss_tramell: so what do you believe in?

user X: I believe in the spiritual strength of the Ukrainian people, in their diligence and integrity.

miss_tramell: ALL the people?

user X: most of them answer that description.

miss_tramell: and on what do you base that claim?

user X: prove that ukrainians are not monsters! Prove it! – cries my land! Prove that they've got war there, not a brother's helping hand! [VZ – User X quotes a popular poem by Andrei Orlov]

miss_tramell: nobody's saying you're monsters. In general, I don't believe in the diligence and integrity of most people, regardless of nationality. Most people are lazy pigs.)

Without entering into the proposed debate concerning the “benevolent tsar”, Miro poses the type of question usually designed get a partner in a conversation to reveal their own beliefs, and describe their own values (“So what do you believe in?”). In most of the comments to her post, she asks readers about their personal creed: as becomes clear from the conversation that follows, she does this not to discuss their beliefs, but in order to identify a topic that can be used to generate “butthurt” – to work out whom, and how to attack. In the reply that follows (“I believe in the spiritual strength of the Ukrainian people”) Miro spots a weak point in the argument (“ALL the people?”). The other participant evades her question about the basis of this claim, and by doing so, reveals still more weak points. But for an experienced troll, this is unimportant. The victim is ready to receive the final blow. The blow follows swiftly, in an answer that shows paradoxical logic. “I’m not saying that your people is bad”, claims the troll sardonically – “only that it can be included in the broader category of “people in general”, and most of them are not only bad, but disgusting (the assumption being – therefore, *your*

nation, too, is like this.) It is quite difficult to respond to an indirect insult of this sort.

Miro's replies may seem more like rhetorical exercises than literary craft. However, her trolling did not necessarily have a clear pragmatic goal: it was often practiced for the sake of art. It attracted readers whose pleasure, judging by their comments, was in seeing how successive users daring to converse with the blogger would be wrong-footed by her unpredictable remarks.

Famous Runet trolls, aware that trolling is often based on manipulating logic, and that this requires an awareness of the formal techniques of that discipline, have, on occasion, set out rules on how to twist or manipulate logic, and, in so doing, revealed the secrets of their own texts. One example is the user Oleg Makarenko ("Fritzmorgen"), who, before becoming one of the leading pro-kremlin bloggers on Runet in the 2010s, published a whole selection of his texts on rhetoric and techniques for twisting logic (Fritzmorgen 2008) and who carried out a translation into comical and indecent language of the famous textbook by Chelpanov on logic (2013). Trolling texts often use such structural devices as the attribution of a particular position to one's opponent, the extrapolation of a generalised argument from a single example, and the impersonation of an opponent's argument.

An effective strategy for victims of trolling is either to refuse to continue the conversation (not to "feed the trolls") or to answer using the same methods as the trolls themselves use. In this case, the conversation will quickly fizzle out. Now and again a user who appears to be a victim manages to "out-troll" the troll; in this case, the roles within the text are quickly reversed. Here, for example, is Miro writing on a favourite topic – criticising feminism and America.

miss_tramell: Изначально феминистки боролись за равноправие полов, а на выходе получилось, что один из полов – тот, у которого есть вагина – стал чем-то вроде священной коровы. [...] в отношении священной коровы нельзя почти ничего: мало ли, что может ее задеть, и какие нежные чувства оскорбить. [...]

user N: не переносу мужеподобных женщин как и женоподобных мужчин

отклонение, аномалия, всех феминисток – лечить, всех оладухов – на фронт

miss_tramell: на фронт? Тебе нужна война? Вообще, ты рассуждаешь, как жена типичного оладуха, если чо

user N: я кстати стала замечать в себе какую-то недалекость и женскую глупость в некоторых вопросах. Видимо, это всегда и

было, но я только сейчас разглядела в себе черты обычной курицы. теперь думаю как с этим быть. (miss_tramell 2017a)

(miss_tramell: Initially, feminists were fighting for sexual equality, but now it appears that one of the sexes (the one with the vagina) has started to resemble a sacred cow. [...] It is impossible to say anything about such a sacred cow. You never know, it might insult her, and hurt her delicate feelings. [...])

user N: I can't stand butch women and sissy men, any sort of weirdos or freaks. All feminists should be cured, and all "pancake-heads" [*VZ – "oladukhi" – a word from Miro's vocabulary, which she uses to describe a fat lazy man who is incapable of "earning an honest living"*] should be sent to the frontline.

miss_tramell: to the frontline? Do you need a war? Your reasoning is like that of a typical pancake-head's wife, if you want to know.

User N: it's true I've started to notice a sort of stupidity in myself lately, a sort of female silliness in relation to certain issues. I suppose it was always there, but I've started to see that I share some of the features of a typical wifey. I don't know what to do about it.)

The commentator is parodying the type of arguments used by Miro, exaggerating them to the point of absurdity and leaving her effectively in the position where she is arguing with herself.

As mentioned above, trolling is designed to be read. A reader may take either side; however, if a text is being assessed as a piece of literature, it may well follow that the reader will identify with the more successful party in the exchange: i.e. the troll. This can be more clearly shown using the example a traditional genre: the trickster story, in which the victim often gets their "just deserts" – an outcome that appears self-evident. The victims of these stories are usually punished for their stupidity – their gullibility or naivety. Edgar Allan Poe in his story 'Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences' describes the art of the diddler. It is significant that the victims are not guilty of anything. Were readers to come across such a case in real life, it is likely they would side with the victims. However, the story's being mediated through literature enables them to identify themselves playfully with the trickster. The same is true for readers of "stories about trolling" and trolling texts: they prefer to identify with the more cunning and experienced party.

Readers who participate in producing the texts – other trolls, or those who merely witness trolling – have an opportunity to evaluate the troll's subtlety, or lack thereof, and to evaluate it (as in the example above about the "Kela" in which readers praise the author of the post "Konstantin did a great job there - stirred up the anthill"). It is often just such an intermediate evaluation, becoming part of the text, that puts everything in its place, stating

who has been most successful, and even who has been trolled. In this way, the culmination in the production of a text is reminiscent of flyting, poetry “slams” and rap battles where the contribution of different participants is judged by an audience of spectators. Thus, commentators will at times intervene in the conversation with their assessment of who has been the most successful troll in the thread, or their comments on the relative merits of the trolling text.

For example, certain groups on the social network site *Vkontakte*, now rebranded as *VK*, are a favourite target for trolls. The group “Go on – boast!” (“*Davai, khvastaisia*”) encourages users to “boast” about something they have done that is important to them. The marking out of certain values as precious or important to certain users quickly attract trolls. In the following example, a user posts an entry that seems too sweet and sincere to the other members of the group who immediately start mocking it, posting ever nastier comments. After a while, commentator Y attempts to change the scenario and troll the trolls, but does so unsuccessfully; another reader, commentator Z, intervenes with a verdict pointing this out, and commentator Y apologises:

Хвастаюсь тем, что крестила свое маленькое счастья и отдала господу богу Иисусу Христу. Теперь бог будет оберегать моего ребенка.

Комментатор 1: Бога нет

Комментатор 2: Бога нет, аутисты

Комментатор 3: Бог охраняет эго ребенка? О.о [...]

Комментатор Y: Вы че тут все сука безбожники собрались? бог есть и это доказано наукой, а кто не не верит тот сгорит в аду нахуй!!!!!!Атеисты чертовы, еретики недоделанные!!!!

Комментатор Z: Y, слишком толсто

Комментатор Y: Z, ну, сори. (“*Davai, khvastaisia*”)

(I am boasting about christening my little sunshine and giving him into the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now God will protect my child. [*VZ – On the picture – a woman’s arms holding a baby after a Christening ceremony*])

Commentator 1. God doesn’t exist.

Commentator 2: god doesn’t exist, autists

Commentator 3: god will protect your child? Uh-oh! [...]

Commentator Y: what is it with all you heathens? There is a god and science has proved it and anyone who doesn’t believe will f**ing burn in hell!!!!!! Damn atheists, heretic morons!!!!

[*VZ – the author of this comment is parodying not only a type of aggressive pronouncement against atheists but also the spelling and punctuation of a typical trolling victim – carelessness over misprints, small letters instead of capitals and repeated explanation marks, all of which show emotion in writing and the “anger” of the victim.*]

Commentator Z – Not v subtle, Y.
Commentator Y: Ok, Z. Soz)

From the 2010s onwards politics began to set the agenda in internet communications in Russia. The “literary” quality of texts, while it did not disappear entirely, became less important. Then, tried-and-tested trolling techniques began to be used in political contexts, not only by political activists but by pro-governmental structures which hired trolls to carry out various types of information campaign. During the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of the Crimea, users of social networks posted messages accusing each other of “patriotic” or “anti-Russian” trolling, exposed literary techniques and formulas being used in their opponents’ texts, and drew up a typology of trolls which could be applied to the new situation. There were discussions in Russian media of a “troll factory” set up to block communication on political opposition sites and to spread pro-governmental propaganda (Zakharov, Rusiaeva 2017). In recent years, Russian trolls have been active on the international scene and comment constantly on materials in American and Western European online media. From this, it is clear that the techniques associated with trolling, and elements of its aesthetics, may be appropriated and applied in completely new areas (a process greeted with indignation by the “old timers” among trolls, who complain indignantly that such trolling is “incorrect”).

Is political trolling simply a continuation of the existing digital literary tradition? Formally speaking, the texts of “political” trolls – those employed by “troll factories”, share many traits with the types of trolling texts already described in this study. For instance, the aim of making a statement is, in both cases, to interfere with the victim’s communication – be it a visitor to a Russian opposition site, or the reader of an American paper online. Political trolls may also assume false identities and appear in the guise of other people – “ordinary housewife”, “sceptical female student” or “African-American from Charlottesville” according to the situation. They often use tried-and-tested tactics – “raiding” sites and posting copy-and-pastes – that prevent any further exchange of information (Paulsen, Zvereva 2014). The texts themselves show much in common with the language activities of “unsubtle trolls”: comments that are formulaic in character and which repeat the same arguments again and again, applying common-sense reasoning. Lastly, in political trolling, one of the features of “classic” trolling comes to the fore: the ambivalence, vagueness and essential uncertainty of everything that is going on (given that the troll has no ideological position, and the comments the troll makes depend entirely on what is written by the troll’s opponent or victim.)

At the same time, despite this similarity, political trolling posts and comments are distinguished by an absence of literary creativity and by highly

standardised formulas, as they are commissioned texts, produced using “assembly line” methods. The most noticeable difference is the disappearance of the aesthetics of *lulz*, which could be considered an essential component of trolling as a literary activity. The formula “I did it for the *lulz*” no longer describes the aim of trolling. Instead, the practical aim behind the creation of a text becomes the basis on which the trolling rests.

Conclusion

Trolling is such a multi-faceted phenomenon that it is difficult to talk of any general logic behind it, or to come up with a single history and genealogy. This article has looked at a particular type of trolling connected with digital literature – small forms of verbal creativity produced within the context of a literary-centric Runet. This type of behaviour and writing activity first appeared in various user groups on computer networks; its techniques were honed within subcultural groups, who, in many respects, used trolling to distance themselves and their own values and spaces from those of others. Later, in connection with the broad spread of internet use, the establishment of social networks, the appearance of different generations of users and the commercialisation of Runet, trolling developed in new directions. From a subversive practice known only to a few insiders, it became a mass technique described in meta-texts, which recorded the rules of trolling and shared details of its culture. On the one hand, works of this type viewed trolling as a type of literary activity; on the other hand, they popularised its techniques. In turn, these techniques came to be seen as successful strategies to use when conducting an online debate. At the same time, trolling began to be exploited in another significant way, as a powerful weapon for online political campaigns. In both cases, the literary component and the specific aesthetics of trolling were relegated to secondary importance, displaced by more obvious pragmatic goals.

In conclusion we should note one distinctive feature of trolling on Runet. The textbooks, instructions and sites devoted to the history of trolling all present ideal ethical conditions for a troll to operate in. They assert or strongly imply that the troll is justified; the idealised troll seeks to provoke annoyance and fury in their victim, but never fear or persecution. The troll feels that the victim has “deserved” to suffer as a consequence of being either wrong or having no moral right to state their opinion. This attitude towards the victim resembles that in an abusive relationship.

In such meta-texts, the subtle troll is presented as a skilful trickster, one who ridicules others: an individual, not one of a herd. The troll’s ideal model of trolling is the battle between David and Goliath, with the troll assuming the part of David, the lone warrior challenging the received opinions of the

hidebound masses whom the troll's victim represents. In this scenario, the troll is sickened by the "common sense" of the crowd, by dogmatism, the parroting of truisms, or a lack of critical or independent thought. However, these instructional texts on trolling are outdated in avoiding mention of the now often reported situation in which multiple trolls in concert single out a lonely and frightened victim or persecute vulnerable individuals.

To their victims, in texts devoted to dealing with trolls, the ethical situation is also presented as a clear one: the troll (whether a lone persecutor, a herd, or a political troll) is understood as an aggressor, a destructive force to be countered by developing methods of defence and counterattack. There is no attempt, as a rule, to consider the trolls' own logic or their reasons for writing as they do.

Trolling can be seen as a contest to enforce one's preferred norms on the internet and be vindicated. Given that, as we know, "not everybody is right on the internet", some users believe they are justified in provoking those who are "wrong". This approach is also found in communication between individuals, in which one opponent depersonalises the other, regarding them as stupid, or as an enemy who has forfeited the right of free speech that the internet in theory affords. The same is true of political trolling that aims to take over and block channels of communication used by the opposition. The opposition here is seen as having no right to speak. In texts against trolling, the same argument can be found, that trolls wish to acquire a voice by illegitimate means; therefore, trolls should not be allowed to speak. Trolling texts are structured around this fight for voice, and it is this conflict, too, that dictates the formal properties of the exchange – both where that conflict is obvious, as in political trolling, and in cases of "classic trolling" where it appears only tangential to the discussion.

NOTES

- ¹ In the 2000s, on Runet forums, certain formulas used in commentaries written in so-called Padonkoffsky slang (involving incorrect spelling) – such as "afftar zhzhot" ("orthor rocks") or "afftor vypei iadu!" ("drink poison, orthor!"), "KG/AM" ("kreatiff gavno / afftar mudak" – "shit textt / orthor asshole") – became so widely popular that by the mid-2000s the use of these formula on Runet was already considered bad form and evidence of a lack of originality (see Kukulin 2016).
- ² Types of humorous verse with strict rules on metre and rhyme that became popular on the Russian-language internet.

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- ³ “Netochka Nezvanova is the pseudonym used by the author(s) of nato.0+55+3d, a real-time, modular, video and multi-media processing environment. [...] Besides her audio-visual software art, the fame and notoriety of ‘Netochka Nezvanova’ stems from the complex and intricate online behavior she displayed through her various identities on countless mailing lists and websites, by which she mesmerized and vexed some internet users [...] Disregarded by some for openly neglecting western morals and etiquette, her personas (at that time mostly ‘integer’) gained admiration among the Internet art scene...”
([https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Netochka_Nezvanova_\(author\).html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Netochka_Nezvanova_(author).html); Accessed 8 September 2017).
- ⁴ Netochka Nezvanova (“Nobody No-name”) is the heroine of an unfinished story by Dostoevskii.
- ⁵ See for example: <http://lurkmore.to/Вован>, <http://lurkmore.to/Копипаста:Шindows>, <http://lurkmore.to/Копипаста:Wh> (Accessed 15 September 2017).
- ⁶ Padonkoffsky slang is a subcultural phenomenon involving the phonetic spelling of Russian words, deliberately simulating the style of less literate users.
- ⁷ For example: “Trolling: glupoe razvlechenie ili poleznyi navyk”. 10.03.2015. http://www.internet-technologies.ru/articles/article_2391.html (Accessed 12 September 2017).
- ⁸ Viktor Tsoi was a hero of the Russian rock scene of the 1980s.

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