

Trolling can be Harmless or Downright Malicious

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IF BLOGGER Aaron Loy were to troll others, it would "probably be to get a point across, like being sarcastic, or because it will be funny".

The 28-year-old, who visits various forums and live chats, makes it clear that he has yet to troll anyone - but would be up for such pranking if it did not cause injury or death.

It will be "amusing to troll people who are really dense or thick in the head", said the marketer.

On local online forums, trolling - provoking and antagonising others - comes in many forms.

At one end of the spectrum is pranking with no serious malicious intent, such as mischievous mocking or insulting. Some post annoyingly outrageous or untrue comments.

"I have not brushed my teeth since the day I moved into hall, a day before matriculation," an anonymous netizen, claiming to be a female Nanyang Technological University student, recently "confessed" on Facebook.

"It feels so liberating and happy. Of course I fake my roomie by bringing my toothbrush to the toilet. I just don't use it," went the post.

These trolls are just bored, said communications researcher Claire Hardaker in a piece in British newspaper The Guardian.

For them, trolling is a good way of killing time. They tell tall tales because they crave and enjoy attention, whether positive or negative.

But other trolls are meaner and more aggressive. Some insult, and are deliberately insensitive on topics such as religion.

Government feedback arm Reach said that on its online forum, there have been cases of users resorting to name-calling - "snake", "liar", "terrorist", "bigot", "traitor" and "coward" - when they disagreed with others. This led to personal attacks which derailed conversations.

Mr Loy said these individuals may not be pranksters per se, but people unable to properly articulate their thoughts in a discussion.

"These characters are the same people you'll find in real life - the one who can only think from his point of view, the one who does not listen to reason, the one who mixes his frustrations about something else into the argument," he said.

Dr Hardaker noted that trolling can also come from feeling disenfranchised and powerless, due to being unable to get a job or buy a house, for example.

These trolls drag others down to their level of misery so that "they won't feel quite so bad about themselves", she added.

But trolls usually form the minority in a "regular" community, said new media watcher Carol Soon of the Institute of Policy Studies, except for those on sites which promote sensational material or discrimination against certain groups.

On Reach, for example, 8 per cent of the 2,000 "feedback inputs" it averages a month are trolling comments.

"The site and its users set the norms for acceptable and unacceptable behaviours," Dr Soon said.