Pest control
By Edmund Tadros
Sydney Morning Herald
August 28, 2004

A few years ago, a man turned up at a regular meeting of American feminists. Before he joined in, however, he told the group they would eventually throw him out because, in his words, all feminists were "bigots and liars".

He then proceeded to undermine many of the group's discussions, using a combination of disingenuous comments, intentionally outrageous claims and, eventually, direct insults.

Despite this, he was not immediately ejected. Instead, group members argued with him, argued about arguing with him, argued that everyone should just ignore him, until the meeting organiser took matters into her own hands and kicked him out.

This drama didn't play out in a real-world meeting place but on an internet-based discussion board. These electronic discussions, which cover almost any imaginable interest, allow like-minded people from around the world to post messages.

And the man, who probably would never have behaved this way in real life, is a classic example of an internet troll - a cyber prankster whose sometimes playful, sometimes abusive, mostly puerile and occasionally useful behaviour can tear an online community apart or leave it more bonded than ever.

Trolls take pleasure in disrupting online discussions by posting controversial messages, explains Susan Herring, a professor of information science at Indiana University in the United States, who wrote a paper about the troll attack on the feminist discussion board.

"The group was infiltrated by a couple of different men. One person [who they referred to as Kent] came on the group and announced from the outset that he was going to get kicked off the group. He said that feminists were intolerant," says Herring.

"He said he wanted to discuss the issues but all he really wanted to do was disrupt the group. He actually manipulated the ideologies of feminism, which is open and tolerant, and if people in the group tried to shut him up overtly they would prove they were intolerant. He won either way."

Kent's posts to the feminist discussion group, which had about 200 active participants, were provocative enough that someone would inevitably take the bait. In one post, Kent the troll, oozing false sincerity, wrote: "Incidentally, I take the silence over the gender wage gap hoax to mean that no feminist here even wants to TRY to defend their biggest lie: that men are paid more for the same work than women are."

Fighting with Kent was difficult because he was never specifically offensive, just subversive. In another message, he challenged the group: "In summary, what exactly is offensive about my posts? If you can tell me I will either stop doing it or leave the board. If, however, you refuse to tell me, and I’ve not been shy about asking SPECIFICALLY what standards I’m supposed to live by, then I will carry on doing it, of course."

Then, when people tried to ignore him, he would write: "Every poster here has told me that I’m wrong and they are right about feminism. Do you see that? I at least offer proof. I want to discuss, not just drop a slogan and ride out throwing dismissive insults."

The result was chaos, Herring says.

"They didn't know about trolling and I think that would have helped them act more actively. Half the people said ignore him because they figured out he was getting off on the attention. But there were always newcomers or someone else who would take the bait.

"There was another group that said we should just ban him. Then they had the whole discussion about banning him. Finally, the webmistress took matters into her own hands and did ban him. In the process they devised guidelines on how to deal with disruptive people."
Kent the troll focused his energy on upsetting feminists but other trolls are happy to upset a wider range of people. "Ari" told Icon his favourite technique was to write messages that were nominally on-topic.

Other trolls are a little more sick and twisted than Ari. On a discussion board about pet rabbits, one troll wrote the message: "Please post rabbit recipes." Unaware it was a troll, one of the rabbit lovers reacted in horror: "How inhuman can you be? This is a rabbit LOVERS newsgroup not a rabbEt EATER [sic] newsgroup." Others, confused by the message, actually provided their favourite food-for-rabbits recipes.

So why do it? Why purposely find people who have a common interest and upset them? Like bullies, trolls feel alienated and want attention, says Rebekka Sommer, from the health psychology unit at the University of Technology, Sydney.

"If you're a troll, you're feeling fairly disconnected. Because you're not feeling OK, you go into a discussion group where people are sharing vulnerabilities or passions but you're not experiencing any sense of belonging, so you trivialise that sense of belonging and you feel better about yourself. It is a kind of power trip. It comes down to self-esteem."

Herring says trolling is the cyber version of schoolyard or workplace bullying. "The analogue for trolling is bullying at school but rather than overt bullying, the far more insidious type of bullying. The victim gets a sense that something is going on but you can never confront anyone. I think it's driven by the same thing, which is jealousy." The impersonal nature of the internet also gives rise to this anti-social behaviour.

"There is less accountability online because trolls don't know what you look like and in some ways they can disassociate from the effect they're having on people. It's almost dehumanising," Sommer says.

"I can say something nasty because I don't have to look you in the face. If I don't have to look at you it's easier for me to be hurtful and it still serves my purpose which is to make what you're doing look silly and make me feel better about myself."

Ari tells us he trolls because: "It's fun and easy. Also, it makes me feel all superior and stuff. I like feeling all superior and stuff. It's comforting."

Trolls are most common on open internet discussion boards but have also invaded closed online communities such as orkut.com, an invitation-only social networking service. Michael Jones, an active Orkut member, says he has a troll stalking him online.

"I'm not sure where I got this guy from but he's got this doctored photo of me [on his profile]." says the 32-year-old PhD student. "The guy shows up and randomly invites people to my apartment ... and I don't even know who [he or she] is. Why me?"

Jones believes trolls can be a problem but says they also spice up an otherwise dull discussion: it's no fun when a group of people who agree with each other get together. "If everyone is there to agree with each other, no one is doing anything. You can be a devil's advocate and stir things up then."

Trolls become a nuisance when they descend into direct abuse, he says. "They're just being outright stupid, it's not even entertaining. It's abusive language for the sake of abusive language."

Another Orkut user, 19-year-old university student Yi Shi, says she has helped track down trolls on the site. Orkut trolls will typically create a fake identity before finding discussion groups to disrupt and people to upset.

"'Leonie Obermeier' was a troll we collectively hunted down," she says. "The German-speakers concluded that none of her posts sounded feminine. Others were getting upset that she kept spamming people to get profile views."

The proof Leonie was a troll came when a sharp-eyed web-surfer discovered Leonie's profile photo actually came from a copyrighted website by typing "blond teen" into Google.

"The trolls are generally not very intelligent," Shi says. "A quick Google images search will yield their photo on a copyrighted website, their grammar/syntax/punctuation is often atrocious and they slip up in many places."

As for dealing with trolls, that's simple: ignore them, says Jones. "Ignore it and delete it without any further comment if you can. The worst thing you can do is give them the attention that they are seeking. It's a kind of social terrorism - if you really appease them and give them what they want, they'll terrorise you."