

DO NOT FEED *the* trolls!

Hitting back at deliberate provocation online, as in life, only encourages it. Don't get even – get smart

People with red hair are intellectually inferior and should not be employed.' This statement makes you see, er, red, right?

Even if you don't have red hair! It's not uncommon to come across this kind of comment online, but rather than firing back at the attacker, recognise the person for who he or she is – an Internet troll.

'Posting disruptive comments such as this is typical of what Internet trolls do to elicit a response from a group,' says Craig Blewett, a senior lecturer in information technology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Durban, who runs the Internet Dangers website www.internetdangers.org. 'Normally they target groups that are easy to incite (religious, political or gender-equity ones), posting sweeping, offensive statements. But sometimes they target an individual, especially if he or she attempts to engage the troll in a reasonable discussion.'

Another space they love to lurk in is YouTube, says fellow UKZN IT lecturer Rosemary Quilling. 'YouTube provides a space for people to upload their own content and invites comments. But when singer Tay Zonday uploaded his music video *Chocolate Rain*, not only did people post their opinions on the music but trolls made comments such as "you r gay" and "I'm callin' a fake". While the first comment is offensive, it's trying to get a response. But the second comment

is an example of a more subtle troll approach – to engage in pointless debate. In this case the troll was spotted and put in place with the post "Shut up, Troll!"

TROLL TRIGGERS

There are many reasons why people display trollish behaviour, both online and in life, says Durban psychologist Akashni Maharaj. 'Trolls are typically antisocial and/or depressed, or have attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They tend to have problems at home or with their social life and wear a virtual "mask" to hide their insecurity.'

Those with depression and ADHD are often trying to feel something, and can use the computer as an escape, which becomes an addiction, she says. 'Like other addictions, it feeds a need for something they lack – in this case, to feel good, which they do by making others feel bad.' They can become oblivious to the fact that they are harming real people, and feel no remorse. They judge their success by the degree of harm they inflict. Yet it's all an attempt to make them feel 'powerful' and 'in control'.

'Trolls probably have low self-esteem, exhibit poor social skills and experience extreme insecurity,' Maharaj says. 'They're sad people, living vicariously through others they see as strong and successful.'

TROLL CONTROLS

The way to deal with trolls, whether cyber or real-life ones, is to ignore them or to name them – "Troll alert!" – and then never to engage them again. 'They'll soon get bored and seek their power fix elsewhere,' says Quilling. Trolls can only be as disruptive as the members of the group allow them to be, she says. 'Ignore them and they will go and work out their weird power trips someplace else.'

Maharaj agrees but cautions that sometimes being ignored can fuel anger. 'Since the troll's need for security is so great, they may become agitated and spam you, becoming a real nuisance for a while.'

Trolling becomes more serious when it mutates into bullying or stalking – persistently targeting someone with anonymous abuse and threats. This can't be ignored, say Maharaj and the lecturers. If it's online, report it to the webmaster of the site. Offline, depending on the level and context (is someone leaving nasty notes on your desk or in your postbox?), report it to your boss, your building supervisor or the police.

'It's especially important to report it if trolls have access to personal contact details,' says Maharaj. 'You need to limit the information they can get hold of.' ❧

