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THE TROLL, THE PRESS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: This paper explores the transformation in online troll behavior, its relationship with the press, and its impact on the configuration of public discourse in Costa Rica. It proposes to explore the figure of the troll in relation to the journalistic practice of the six most popular media (television, radio and written) in Costa Rica. It concludes with a reflection on the normative role of the troll, its relationship with disinformation and social media platforms, as well as its relationship with democratic life.

Keywords: Public discourse, press, troll.

The troll, that user whose behaviors and discourses are constituted from antagonism and confrontation in online communication spaces, has become, over time, an emblematic figure in the construction of public discourse. The troll appears whenever it is conjured; without a voice that invokes it, it is difficult for him to perform his function. For the troll to come into existence, it depends on a particular set of behaviors that are recognized and legitimized by a collective by challenging its norms and values. Its existence can emanate from an eminently personal satisfaction or it can be motivated by other agents as a strategy to assert power. The troll can also be understood as a metaphor that allows us to analyze mediated interactions and the construction of public discourse.

This paper explores the transformation in the behavior of online trolls, their relationship with the press and their impact on the configuration of public discourse. It proposes to observe the evolution of this antagonistic figure from four metaphors that coexist to represent, on the one hand, the breadth of its field of action in mediated spaces and, on the other, a displacement from group or community identities towards political and ideological identities. In order to situate the phenomenon at the Costa Rican level, the perspectives of journalists and editors of the press in that country are analyzed. It concludes with a reflection on the normative role of the troll, its relationship with disinformation and with social media platforms, as well as its relationship with democratic life.

Although there are multiple ways to categorize trolls and their behaviors (Hardaker, 2013; Buckels et al., 2014; Bishop, 2014; Cook et al, 2017; Parson, 2019), the authors Sanfilippo, Yang, and Fichman (2017) describe the troll from two dimensions, the social dimension and the political dimension. The social troll is one who seeks to generate a sense of belonging or improve their self-esteem, or one who discusses the limits and boundaries of what is or is not allowed in a group or an online community. Political trolls are understood as users who "express opinions motivated by political or ideological factors" (1808) and situate them in a range of practices that go from partisan political provocation to generating discussions with ideological opponents in discussion forums, systems from comments and social media platforms, to coordinated efforts to send spam or generate civic protests online. A good part of these practices are based on opposition discourses related to sensitive issues that concern nationalities, race, age, gender and sexual diversity.

METHODOLOGY

The data that feeds this text are part of a broader investigation that seeks, on the one hand, to identify the ways in which trolling is conceived in Costa Rica and, on the other, to characterize and understand its practice in that context. In this text, the conceptions and practices of trolling are addressed from the vision that journalists and editors of various Costa Rican media construct from their daily journalistic practice.

As can be seen in the previous section,

the breadth and fluidity with which the troll is defined derives, for the most part, from research related to incidents and behaviors carried out by users in different online spaces (Hardaker, 2013; Herring, 2002 ; Graham, 2019; Jenks, 2019). Despite the fact that the literature reflects a wide range of behaviors, from hacking to gratuitous offense, the richness of the conceptualizations carried out runs the risk of illustrating an incomplete panorama as they show practices circumscribed to singular communication spaces and located in other geographies.

On the other hand, there is relatively little research that supports the way in which journalists, content producers and media managers understand and share their professional activities with this type of user. In particular, although the different perspectives and readings of what constitutes a troll or not allow us to account for a fluid and diverse phenomenon, it is necessary to understand its adaptation to the national reality and, particularly, to its role in the production of news., of the public sphere and of the generation of discourses and political and ideological identities.

The work is developed from a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the phenomenon from the point of view of the people who experience it on a daily basis. This approach places emphasis on subjective visions of the phenomenon and allows trolling to be understood as a situated practice.

The research corpus consists of a sample of the six most popular news media in Costa Rica with an equitable distribution between television, written press and radio media. In total, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted; two for selected news outlets and an additional one for ``*Double Check*``*,* a pioneer news verification project in the country. Five topics were addressed in the interviews: (1) the definition of the troll, (2) its modus operandi,

(3) professional or personal experiences with trolls, (4) the mechanisms used by the media to manage this type of users, and, finally, (5) the effects of trolling for the media and for our society. The results we present below represent common patterns identified through such analysis.

RESULTS

The journalists interviewed point to the different types of challenges that trolls represent for their union and for their profession.

David Bolaños of ``*Double Check*`` underlines the professional ethical dilemma of carrying out the fairness process with this type of profile:

> The intention of these people is not to maintain a dialogue or argue a position. It is rather to attack the motivations or to attack the person who questions. So, is it pertinent and necessary to look for them for the sake of the balance of journalistic notes? Always in journalism, there is a need and an obligation to contact the parties involved, but in this case the party involved is hiding (personal communication, February 2, 2021).

In this sense, the position of Josué Alfaro from AmeliaRueda.com is very forceful: "if as media we try to respond to these people, what we do is validate them, validate their positions (...) and that is very dangerous" (personal communication, 19 March 2021). For him, the remaining resource is to ignore. For Andrés Martínez, the professional challenge is considerable: "The networks absorbed us. The journalist or communicator has not been able to adapt to a world of social networks and how to act before them, especially on the issue of misinformation." (personal communication, August 16, 2021).

When asked what strategies and protocols journalists and the media they work for follow in relation to trolls, the answers were varied.

A first strategy is to contact and work

with technology companies to protect the medium and its distribution channels. To do this, they monitor messages, block accounts that are created to be used by trolls, and make constant reports and complaints. Kattia Bermúdez from La Nación advises sticking to the evidence, documenting everything with screenshots, audio, video, etc. and report the platform so that reporting or blocking also works at the algorithm level. The journalist is of the opinion that it is important that within the same newsrooms and working groups, what may be happening to a journalist be shared. If, through this socialization of the problem, it is detected that there is a person who is constantly attacking certain journalists or certain content, then it can be investigated if it is a real user, if it is a robot, if it is a false profile and measures can be taken such as suspending the account or deleting comments, trying not to make your message visible.

On the other hand, David Bolaños from Double Check explained that the project has generated an editorial debate on what to do in cases in which the misinformation comes from a false and anonymous profile. The question is whether the troll must be contacted under the same conditions as those required by the rules of journalism in the case of a person who participates in public discourse showing their identity or if it must be weighed up, have a protocol of a process different journalistic:

> In the case of a troll or an anonymous fake account, the person who is posting is not putting their face, they are not associating that information with a name and therefore the editorial question is, ¿must they be considered as a person? As an understood person who is actively participating and in the same conditions as others in public discourse (David Bolaños, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

Regarding policies and protocols, the spectrum seems to be wide: it was found from media that do not have them: "I have never been told that there is a protocol and I believe that there is not," said Josué Alfaro of AmeliaRueda. com (personal communication, 2 March 2021), even the media that have them very clear and strict. Érick Murillo from CRHoy. com explained that in the case of his outlet, they block and report users who post insults; "Criticism is one thing and insult is another thing," he clarified (personal communication, February 23, 2021). However, he regrets that sometimes this is of little use because trolls quickly make another user or connect from another IP. However, he reiterates that "there is a protocol, what happens is that since it is so dynamic, it evolves. We have to prepare for what comes. Networks are becoming more sophisticated every day. The people too. You have to go one step ahead and not feed the troll. Not giving it wings" (Érick Murillo, personal communication, February 23, 2021). Meanwhile, other media outlets have more lax protocols: "in Double Check, we agreed that we must expand that range a little more, so we let them stone us a lot" (David Bolaños, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

Another important editorial discussion that was mentioned by the journalists consulted is related to the platform that the media (or verification services) could be giving to trolls. For example, if the link to the disinformation that is being verified or denied is posted, this false content is being given more diffusion. So, as a general rule, it is avoided to give place to the subject who misinforms. However, Bolaños from Double Check also points out that it is not as simple as making these types of profiles invisible, since one must not lose sight of the fact that they are also part of the public discourse. That's why he makes it clear that

People share and disseminate that information, validating them and believing that they are valid actors in public discourse and that the information they are disseminating is real or relevant to their lives or the lives of

others. So yes, they are definitely part of the public discourse and we consider them as such (personal communication, February 2, 2021).

Kattia Bermúdez from La Nación agrees that journalists and the media are faced with a dilemma and they always have a question about what to do and if they are doing the right thing:

… if I ignore them I am allowing their message to spread on my own channels; If I fight with them I am putting myself on their level, I go down to their court and I am getting into their speech, that is, I fall for their provocation, then they achieve the objective. And if I start to deny them, it is also a way of giving them that legitimacy and in a certain way I am also spreading their message (personal communication, March 19, 2021).

In this sense, all the people interviewed express a marked concern for the implications that the phenomenon of trolling generates for their profession, for the media for which they work and for Costa Rican society. Although they attribute considerable value to freedom of expression and civic participation as part of the public debate of ideas, their professional and personal approach to the figure of the troll denotes an ambivalence between, on the one hand, ignoring it and considering it an uncomfortable part of the contemporary news reality and thus not give it entity and agency capacity and, on the other, identify it and expose it as a measure of control and protection of public discourse. Both in the practices identified in the scientific literature and in the interviews, the first option is absolutely dominant.

THE DILEMMA OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE: BETWEEN RISKS, FREEDOMS AND RIGHTS

The journalists consulted agree that the aggressiveness of the trolls has become a real and worrying personal threat for them. On the one hand, they mention a kind of "psychological warfare" (Kattia Bermúdez, personal communication, date) that can go from something more "harmless" --but that is exhausting-- such as constant and always negative reactions, with insults and disqualifying content that the journalist is publishing, to more threatening practices.

Gustavo Arias from La Nación mentioned cases similar to those described by Bermúdez; for him, the attacks on his professional work are "like daily bread, all journalists now suffer from it" (personal communication, January 20, 2021) and it is framed in what he describes as a level of hatred and polarization in the prevailing discourse on social networks today. However, the experience of suffering personal and direct threats, beyond the professional field, has led them to take some extraordinary measures that the journalist describes as "self-censorship": "In my social networks I cut off relationships with my sisters and my parents to not expose them. I completely removed personal photos. To those who start working at 'No Coma Cuento', it is not that I force them, but I recommend that they have the same self-censorship" (personal communication, January 20, 2021). To these precautions, the Double Check journalist, David Bolaños, also added that of not contacting trolls from personal accounts or telephones due to the risk involved, but only through official channels of the project. The perception of growing insecurity and vulnerability coincides with the challenges and risks implied by the public nature of journalists' social identities (Waisbord, 2020) and with the need to establish separation

strategies between personal and professional life (Wolfgang, 2018; Bossio et al, 2019).

Faced with the intensity of the trolls and their harmful effects, Bolaños mentioned the labels that warn about content that misinforms or incites violence (labels such as: "This information has been identified as false by different media, see more") that have become one of the responses of social networks to combat trolls. For the journalist, although this means that now there are a little more consequences, filters and warnings about false content, it is about social networks "trying to stick to a definition of freedom of expression where on their platform it is possible to say those things" (David Bolaños, personal communication, February 2, 2021), because the content is not deleted, it is still available, even if it has a warning.

Kattia Bermúdez from ``La Nación`` agrees on the importance of exposing trolling practices and continuing to talk about it; because, for her: "to the extent that they are spoken of, pointed out, identified, given a certain face and sometimes even a proper name, this contributes" (personal communication, March 19, 2021)., as it also contributes to "continue insisting on initiatives such as ´No Coma Cuento` [initiative for verification of information] and that other media outlets also orchestrate them; or that each medium has its own" (personal communication, March 19, 2021).

In the same sense, Gustavo Arias advocates digital literacy in all areas, but for him, the most important is that linked to civic education: "We do not have digital literacy to face the phenomenon but, furthermore, I do not I'm so sure that with just literacy you can pick up a conversation because it's too polarized. There are people who benefit from this polarization and the discussion is very virulent" (Gustavo Arias, personal communication, January 20, 2021). For the journalist, we must question

ourselves as a society why we are allowing social networks to monopolize all the debate and public conversation.

There is a consensus among the people interviewed that there is a responsibility of the users of social networks to be more aware, more careful and more attentive in relation to the profiles with which they can interact or react and the information that can be shared. But there is also a consensus that, if collective measures that transcend individual responsibility are not taken, the challenges for civic life, for public discourse and for the legal society may be insurmountable. The concerns expressed derive, on the one hand, from a concern related to his professional work. Part of his responsibility in the social construction of the news requires respect for the process, for the sources, for fairness and for a relative neutrality. These values associated with the profession are systematically violated by figures who associate trolls with the production and circulation of wrong or biased news. On the other hand, they reveal a marked concern for the role of the troll in the construction of the public square and the problem implied by the polarization of discourses, their political-ideological biases and the damage they cause to democratic life.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As it has been argued, the troll becomes an overarching metaphor through which members of a social group attempt to discern good from evil in their quest to define and stabilize their collective identity. To explain it, Graham (2019) conceives its function as that of border maintenance ("boundary maintenance") that makes it possible to distinguish between those with a sense of belonging to an online community and those who are intended to be left outside its borders. From there, the troll becomes a suggestive metaphor to the extent that, despite the fact

that its identification is fluid and polysemic, it is generally and collectively constructed as an archetype of opposition.

The troll exists, then, between the individual sphere and the collective sphere, from a wide range of interests and motivations, but to which the people interviewed seem to emphasize its political dimension, associated with an exercise of discursive power in order to impose their opinions, their beliefs and, finally, their values. These attempts at domination, provoked in part by the logic of algorithmic audiences (Gillespie, 2014) inherent in social media platforms, configure a symbolic space and a polarized and violent public discourse in which individual and collective identities are confronted. The antagonism, natural in the troll, becomes xenophobia, discrimination and contempt for the difference or, rather, reification of the difference. Its function already transcends communities of interest or practice, transcends the media and is exercised in the public square.

Although the displacement of the understanding of the phenomenon towards the political-ideological troll has been forceful for the interviewed journalists, the various forms that it assumes coexist. One of the most suggestive aspects of the figure of the troll and its role in the construction of public discourse is the dilemma faced by the press between promoting open and plural spaces for participation, and preventing, moderating or controlling it. From this perspective, one of the common strategies of the media consists of not feeding the troll (Binns, 2012; Clucas, 2020), a phrase that explicitly refers "to the idea that the troll seeks to disturb discussions, incite desperate responses and, with it, becoming the center of attention so the best way to stop trolling is to ignore the individuals who exercise it, thus eliminating their reason for trolling" (Britt, 2019: 3). It is frequently used by "legitimate" members of online groups and communities as a way of warning their peers not to give the troll the attention it wants. The troll's actions are then understood as a catalyst for conflicts based on dialogue and participation; if the dialogue is eliminated -in principle- the troll is eliminated. Although the solution seems reasonable on the part of the media, it is problematic for two reasons: the first is that it assumes that the troll always depends on discussion with other people to exist, but, as we have pointed out in previous pages, the troll it embodies many ways of acting, many of them without requiring dialogue (Britt, 2019).

The second is that not giving it entity and legitimacy implies giving it a form of agency; give him a free hand to play his role. The media then becomes, and unintentionally, an accomplice in a discourse that is made public in its own space and that, in a certain way, represents it. The lack of moderation and control seems to promote tolerance of this type of practice and this tolerance is generally based on a right that seems to rise above others: freedom of expression. In general, the medium does not warn its users of the existence of trolls and, with this, participates in the conflict, controversy and polarization of discourses.

People who practice journalism tend to consider their work as a public service, as an essential part of the balance of voices that democratic life requires; constitutes an essential component of their occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005). The decision not to intervene is understood as a way of sustaining a certain degree of impartiality or neutrality - after all, it is part of professional journalistic deontology - but it is still surprising in that it distorts the discourse intended by the media and, as has been documented in several investigations (Wolfgang, 2018; Porlezza, 2019; Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020), it normalizes toxic behavior that tends to

promote symbolic violence online.

Another reason why journalists prefer not to intervene or moderate troll behavior is related to their personal safety (Waisbord, 2020). Here the balance between his public identity, related to his profession, and his private identity, related to his personal and family life, suggests challenges that need to be explored more carefully. The lack of protocols and clear strategies on the part of the media to deal with the trolling phenomenon has not only discursive and ideological implications, but also professional and personal ones (Gorman, 2019).

Finally, although a crucial aspect of the discussion about trolls and their behaviors is their situated nature and it is necessary to understand it from the particularities of the mediation spaces from which they act,

it is still worrying that their antagonism is perceived as a strategic resource to guide conversations according to the interests of whoever represents. As has been established throughout this text, the troll seems to lose his individual agency to represent political-ideological interests through noise and misinformation. This is particularly worrying as long as it becomes a good for the market and an object of consumption.

As Massimo Leone (2018) states, "unfortunately, the toy that an increasing number of trolls enthusiastically seek to destroy is no less: it is public discourse" (p.13). In a contemporary society constituted by constant flows of crisis of representation, this type of troll constitutes a threat to co-existence and social organization.

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