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Reclaim the Comments: A Call for Technorhetoricians to Conserve Spaces of Online Public Discourse

Slide 1: **Reclaim the Comments: A Call for Technorhetoricians to Conserve Spaces of Online Public Discourse**



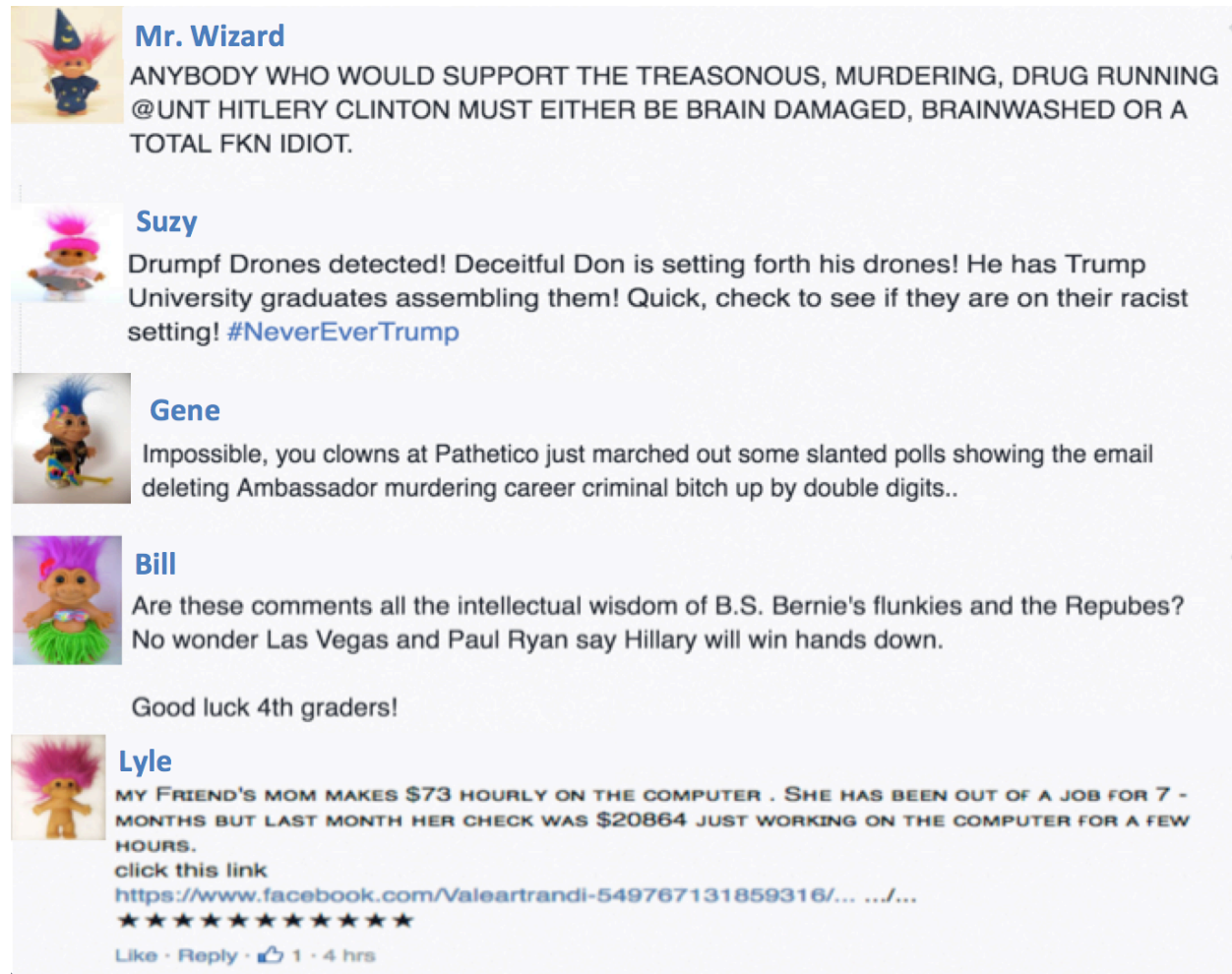
Figure 1 A childish drawing of a bridge over a river. There is a smiling sun in the blue sky and white clouds.

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Slide 2:



Mr. Wizard
ANYBODY WHO WOULD SUPPORT THE TREASONOUS, MURDERING, DRUG RUNNING @UNT HITLERY CLINTON MUST EITHER BE BRAIN DAMAGED, BRAINWASHED OR A TOTAL FKN IDIOT.

Suzy
Drumpf Drones detected! Deceitful Don is setting forth his drones! He has Trump University graduates assembling them! Quick, check to see if they are on their racist setting! #NeverEverTrump

Gene
Impossible, you clowns at Pathetico just marched out some slanted polls showing the email deleting Ambassador murdering career criminal bitch up by double digits..

Bill
Are these comments all the intellectual wisdom of B.S. Bernie's flunkies and the Repubes? No wonder Las Vegas and Paul Ryan say Hillary will win hands down.

Good luck 4th graders!

Lyle
MY FRIEND'S MOM MAKES \$73 HOURLY ON THE COMPUTER . SHE HAS BEEN OUT OF A JOB FOR 7 - MONTHS BUT LAST MONTH HER CHECK WAS \$20864 JUST WORKING ON THE COMPUTER FOR A FEW HOURS.
click this link
[https://www.facebook.com/Valeartrandi-549767131859316/... ..](https://www.facebook.com/Valeartrandi-549767131859316/)
★★★★★★★★★★
Like · Reply · 1 · 4 hrs

Figure 2 Sample comments from a Politico news article

“No wonder he’s a Bernie supporter. Dumb as a bag of rocks.”

“Deceitful Don has a copy of Hitler speeches by his bed!”

“My friend’s mom make \$73 hourly on the computer. Last month her check was \$20,864. Click this link.”

These are just some of the 210 comments posted on the Politico article, “Dead heat: Trump, Clinton tied in 3 swing-state polls” published on May 10, 2016. The article itself lists results from the first Quinnipiac Poll, which surveyed potential voters in Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania about their likelihood to vote for the remaining 3 candidates. The comments range from spam such as work-from-home pyramid schemes and

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unbelievable weight loss supplements to candidate critiques with various levels of credibility and support to ad hominem attacks on the candidates, their supporters, other commenters, and the website itself.

I bring this article and its comments up not because it is a particularly interesting piece of journalism or because the comments are shocking. In fact, I provide this example because the article and its comment section are not extraordinary at all. These generic categories of comments, including spam, sound-bites, and slurs, are present on many of the other articles on Politico or across the internet, even on the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Elections are only one example of a public issue that warrants conversation in a public forum composed of people with different perspectives and experiences. However, I believe we can agree that the type of engagement presented in these comment selections, ranging from the nonsensical to the rhetorically fallacious to the bigoted and hateful, is not what we imagine for rhetorical engagements in the public sphere.

Slide 3:

In this presentation, I argue that we as technorhetoricians and Internet citizens need to reclaim the comment section. Comment sections, for good reason, have become increasingly viewed as cesspools or troll habitats. However, I argue that comment sections may function as a productive space for civic engagement and participation. To reclaim the bridge from the trolls, I suggest ways that we as technorhetoricians are uniquely situated to rehabilitate trollish discourse.

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“This is why we can’t have nice things”: The Problem of Internet Comments

Slide 4:



Figure 3 A childish drawing of a bridge over a river. On top of the bridge is a troll doll with an angry face saying "RAWR!" and "GRR!" The sun has a shocked look on its face.

As illustrated in the introduction to this presentation, comment sections on many sites, social media platforms, and other interfaces are not the rhetorical productions that we as rhetoricians, or even just as plain people, want to read or take part in. The problematic comment sections have become so ubiquitous that phrases like “Don’t feed the trolls” and “This is why we can’t have nice things” have become mainstream shorthand to describe negative online discourse and its effects. As disturbing as the comments from the Politico article are, these comments are relatively mild as far as internet comments go.

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Slide 5: In early 2016, the UK media outlet *The Guardian* published a series, “The Web We Want,” focused on making visible the “dark side” of online comments. The Guardian team collected over 70 million comments from the Guardian website to analyze the trends of the 1.4 million comments blocked by website moderators. Articles written by women were more likely to result in blocked comments labeled “abusive or disruptive.” Content produced by women in male-dominant sections like World News or on controversial topics like the Israel/Palestine conflict were more likely to have blocked comments. The ten Guardian writers with the most blocked comments on their work included eight women and two black men.

Slide 6:

What do we mean by ‘abuse’?

'Imagine going to work every day and walking through a gauntlet of 100 people saying "You're stupid", "You're terrible", "You suck", "I can't believe you get paid for this". It's a terrible way to go to work'

Jessica Valenti, Guardian writer

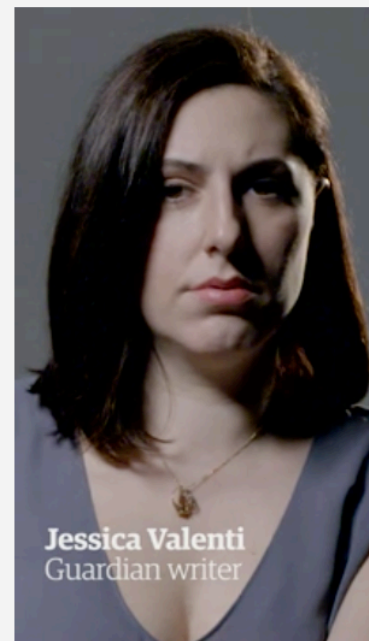


Figure 4 A photo of Jessica Valenti, a white female writer for The Guardian. The image includes a quote from Valenti about internet abuse.

Moderators on *The Guardian* block comments based on the site’s community standards for abusive or disruptive comments. According to the Guardian’s community standards, comments that may be considered abusive or disruptive and therefore blocked include: author abuse (insulting speech directed at the writer or other commenters) ranging from ad hominem attacks to violent threats; dismissive trolling that mocked others; hate speech including xenophobia, racism, sexism, and homophobia; and “whataboutery,” or off-topic remarks that prevent constructive conversations.

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Slide 7:

What harm is done?

'Even if I tell myself that somebody calling me a nigger or a faggot doesn't mean anything, it has a toll on me: it has an emotional effect, it takes a physical toll. And over time it builds up'

Steven Thrasher, Guardian writer



Figure 5 A photo of Steven Thrasher, a black male writer for The Guardian. The image includes a quote from Thrasher on the physical and emotional effects of internet abuse.

People who are not the target of these abusive and disruptive comments may be initially dismissive; after all, these are only textual comments online. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but Internet trolls will never hurt me. However, writers on these sites detail how internet comments negatively impact their daily lives.

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Slide 8:



Figure 6 An image of Anita Sarkeesian, a white woman, standing in front of a screen that says "Online Harassment"

The threat of online comments and trolls to particular individuals may be even more extreme than the experiences shared in this video. Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, are just two cyberharassment victims who have been subjected to innumerable violent threats in comments and social media messages to the point that they have had to leave their homes, cancel events, and file protective orders with law enforcement. However, I want to make it clear that although online harassment, cyberbullying, doxing, and other forms of digital intimidation and abuse are very real and cause tremendous damage, these comments are the exception rather than the rule. As mentioned previously, The Guardian found that only 2% of comments were blocked by moderators. Even so, 2% or 1.4 million comments is still too many, and multiple changes must be made to decrease the number of abusive and disruptive comments.

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The Political and Rhetorical Potential of Comments

Slide #9: Why should we even try to reclaim the comment section? The trolls have taken over, so let them have it. However, I argue that at their best comment sections can be a productive space for online public discourse. Comment sections can be:

Slide #10:

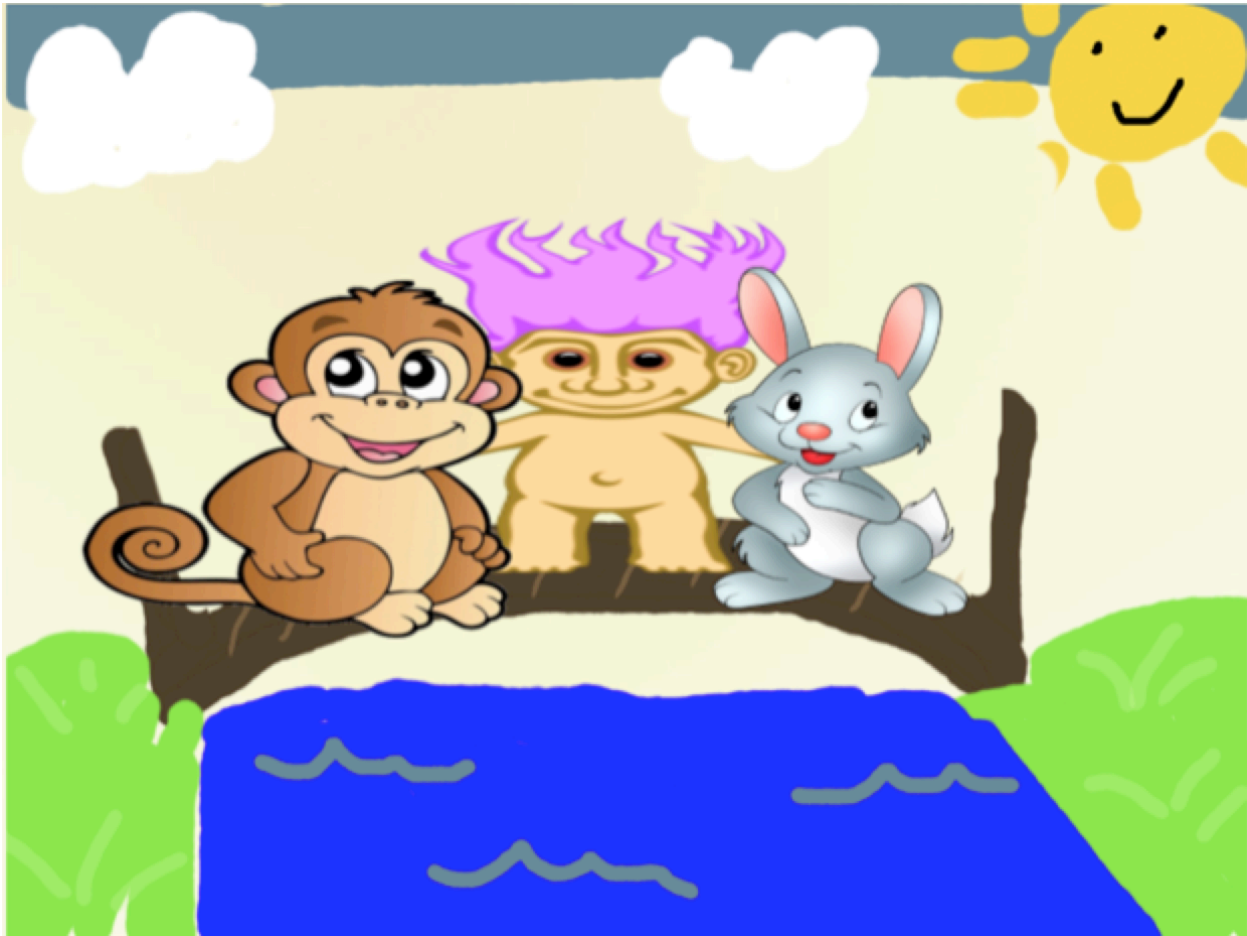


Figure 7 A childish drawing of a bridge over a river. On top of the bridge are a smiling troll, a smiling monkey, and a smiling bunny standing next to each other. The sun is smiling.

A space to collaboratively understand issues: When thinking about the rhetorical purpose of comment sections, why do users go to comment sections, one primary reason is because the comments can function as annotations on the presented content. One study found that 84.3% of online news users reported reading the comments at least once a week to better understand a topic presented in content (Na and Rhee 2008, Lee 2012, Weber 2014). Several studies have shown that comments influence users' response to the content, yet most of these studies have focused on the negative

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impact of uncivil comments. More research is needed to understand how civil comments, which are the majority of comments, may positively impact site users. For example, comments may provide more elaboration, explanation, or evidence to readers. Additionally, comments may provide feedback to writers to help them more effectively engage with their audience, whether it's through minor corrections, revising for clarity, or introducing additional view points.

Slide #11: A space for coalition: The distributed nature of the comment section means that anyone with Internet access can take part in conversations of interest. Many smaller, niche sites tend to form commenting communities; when preparing this paper, one member of my writing group told me about her experience reading women's major league soccer sites and the importance of reading the comments. But even within larger sites it is possible to find individuals with commonalities. Additionally, comments may provide a safer space for marginalized individuals to engage without fear of consequences. The comment section may be one space for users to form social ties.

Slide #12: A space for diverse perspectives: Comment sections may function as public sphere contact zones, spaces where differing ideologies, political perspectives, and life experiences meet. In a technological age when users increasingly exist in a filter bubble, or only shown perspectives that already align with their own, comment spaces present a potentially more representative spectrum of ideas.

Slide #13: A space for citizenship practices: There are multiple forms of citizenship, and within these forms of citizenship are a variety of practices that are contextually applicable. Comment sections can function as spaces for citizens to engage in civic participation in a variety of ways. The comments section can be a space for political deliberation on public topics. Many studies and articles that decry comment sections present uncivil comments as evidence that deliberation is not occurring in the comments. With the exception of abuse and hate speech, I would suggest that the majority of comments are deliberative in nature if we rethink our assumptions and values about what qualifies as deliberative speech. Furthermore, online civic engagement has been positively linked to other citizenship practices, so people who participate in civic issues online are more likely to participate in other civic actions like campaigning or voting. As such, comment sections can have a positive impact on citizenship practices beyond the digital.

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How Tech Sites and Companies Have Tried to Fix the Problem

Slide 14: The potential benefits of the comment section are many, yet comment sections as they currently exist may not be consistently achieving these positive factors. Multiple changes must be made to reclaim the comment sections. Media outlets have tried several approaches including:

Slide 15:

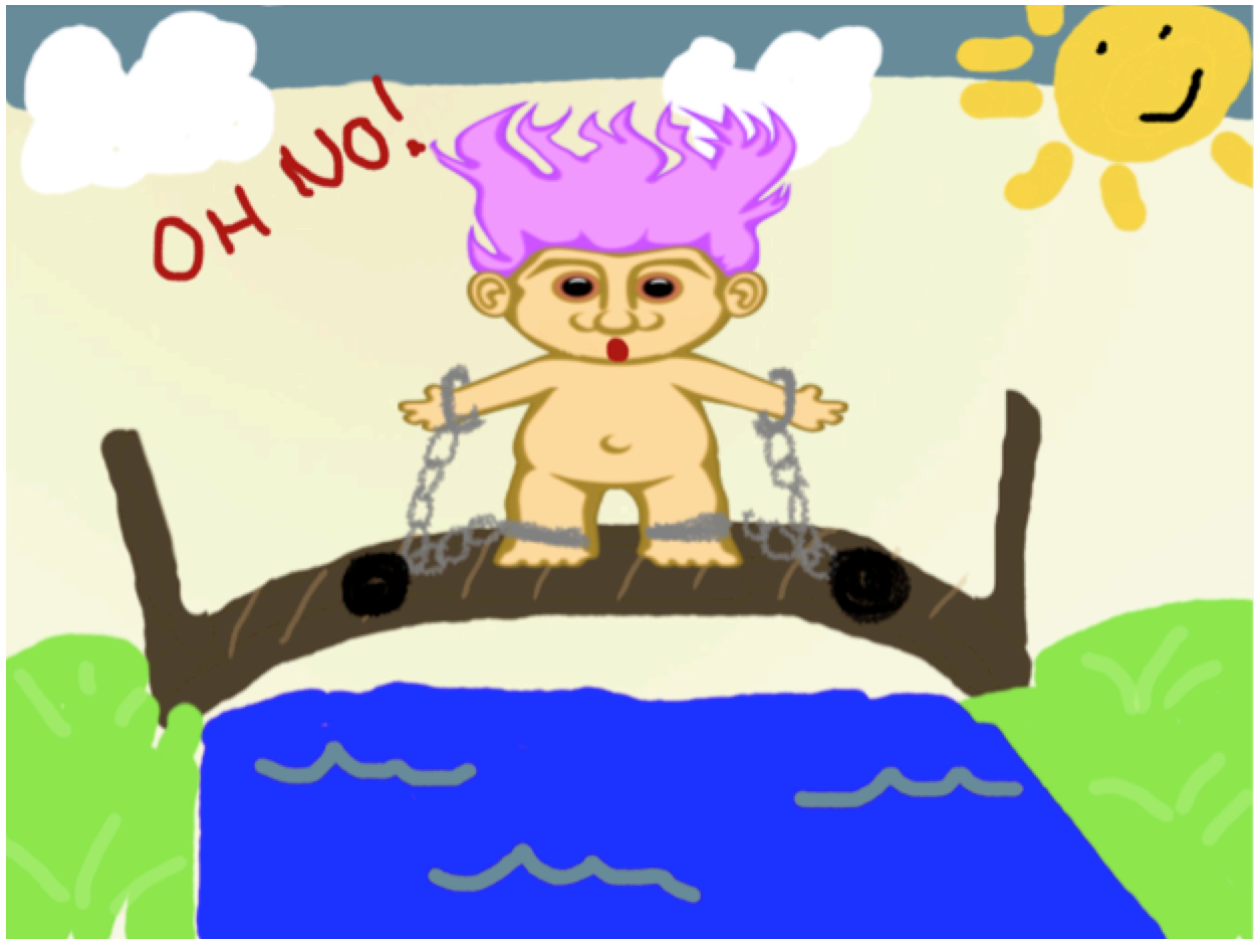


Figure 8 A childish drawing of a bridge over a river. On top of the bridge is a troll in chains. The troll looks surprised and says "Oh no!"

Controlling the trolls: With this approach, sites attempt to regulate the behavior of users, especially the trolls. Generally this approach begins with the establishment of community standards, such as those developed by The Guardian. Discussion groups like Reddit and even 4chan have certain community standards that must be respected (even if the standard is as base as “no child pornography”). The efficacy of the “control” approach is debatable. The approach requires all users to know the terms and conditions of community, which like most terms of service agreements, users tend to

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ignore. When a user posts disruptive content, it's up to the moderators to quickly review the comment and to use the community standards supplemented by personal discretion to decide whether or not to block. Moderation relies primarily on human labor; algorithms have not been very effective at detecting subtler forms of rhetorical violence. The labor of moderation also requires additional critique; for example, Facebook and other media sites increasingly outsource moderation to the Philippines, where primarily young women work for low-cost to moderate the content deemed too hazardous for American workers. The "control" approach relies on users to self-police, and when that fails, for the rest of the community to regulate comments, but often at a personal, emotional, and ethical cost.

Slide 16:

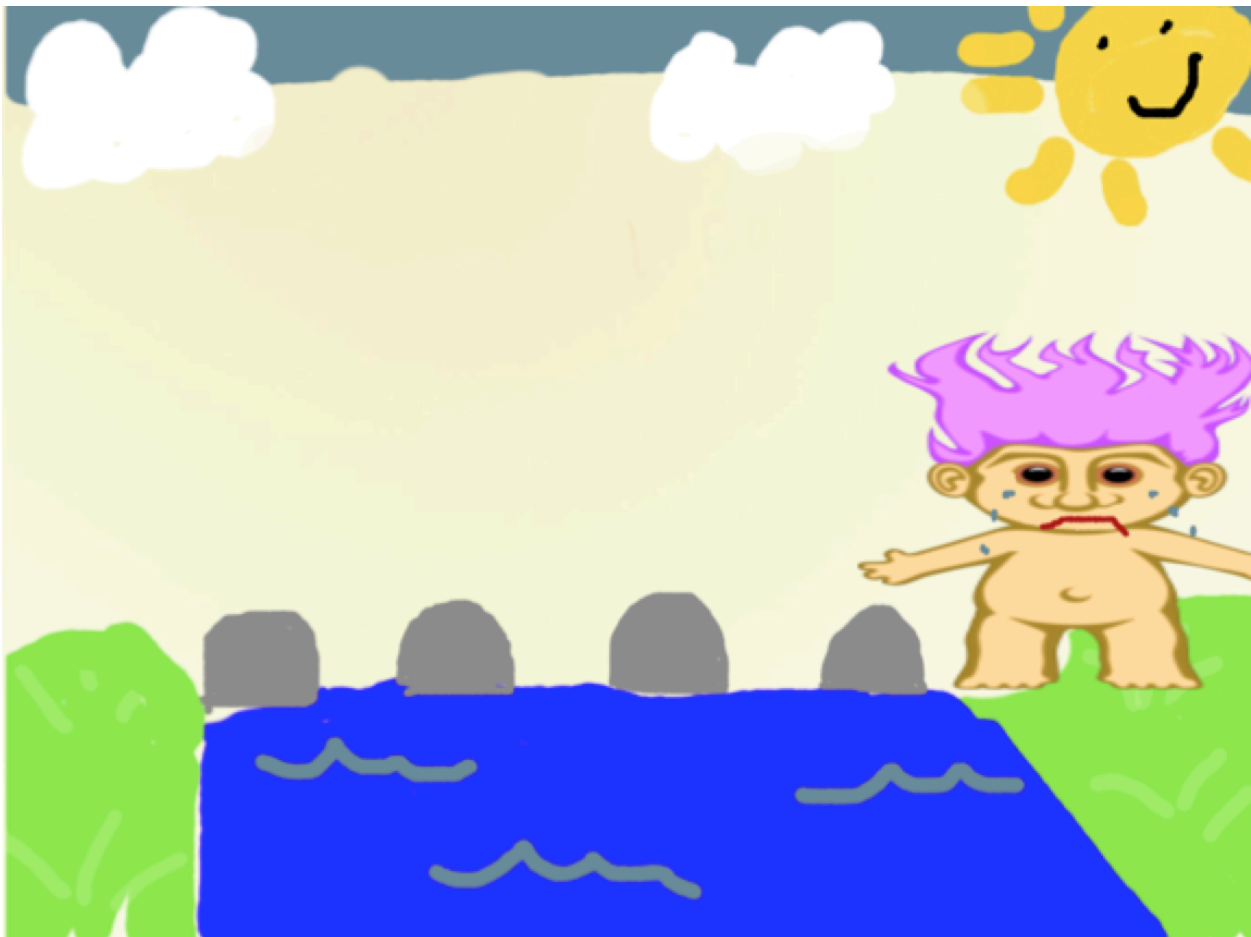


Figure 9 A childish drawing of a river with several grey stones in it. On the right side of the river bank is a troll crying.

Retrofitting the bridge: This approach involves sites modifying the forms of engagement possible for users, often by making changes to the commenting interface. The

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philosophy here is if the trolls are using the bridge in a way that you don't like, change the bridge. Some sites have moved comments away from the content to external sites as a way to "protect the content" from the commentary. For example, The Verge turned comments off on their posts and re-located discussion to their forums. Other sites have invested in interfaces that make it more difficult to incivility to occur. Civil Comments is one product that changes the commenting interface. Users must rate 3 other comments for civility and quality before posting their own comment, which they must also rate. This user-rating provides data to an algorithm, which can then weed out abusive, disruptive, or non-productive comments.

Slide 17:

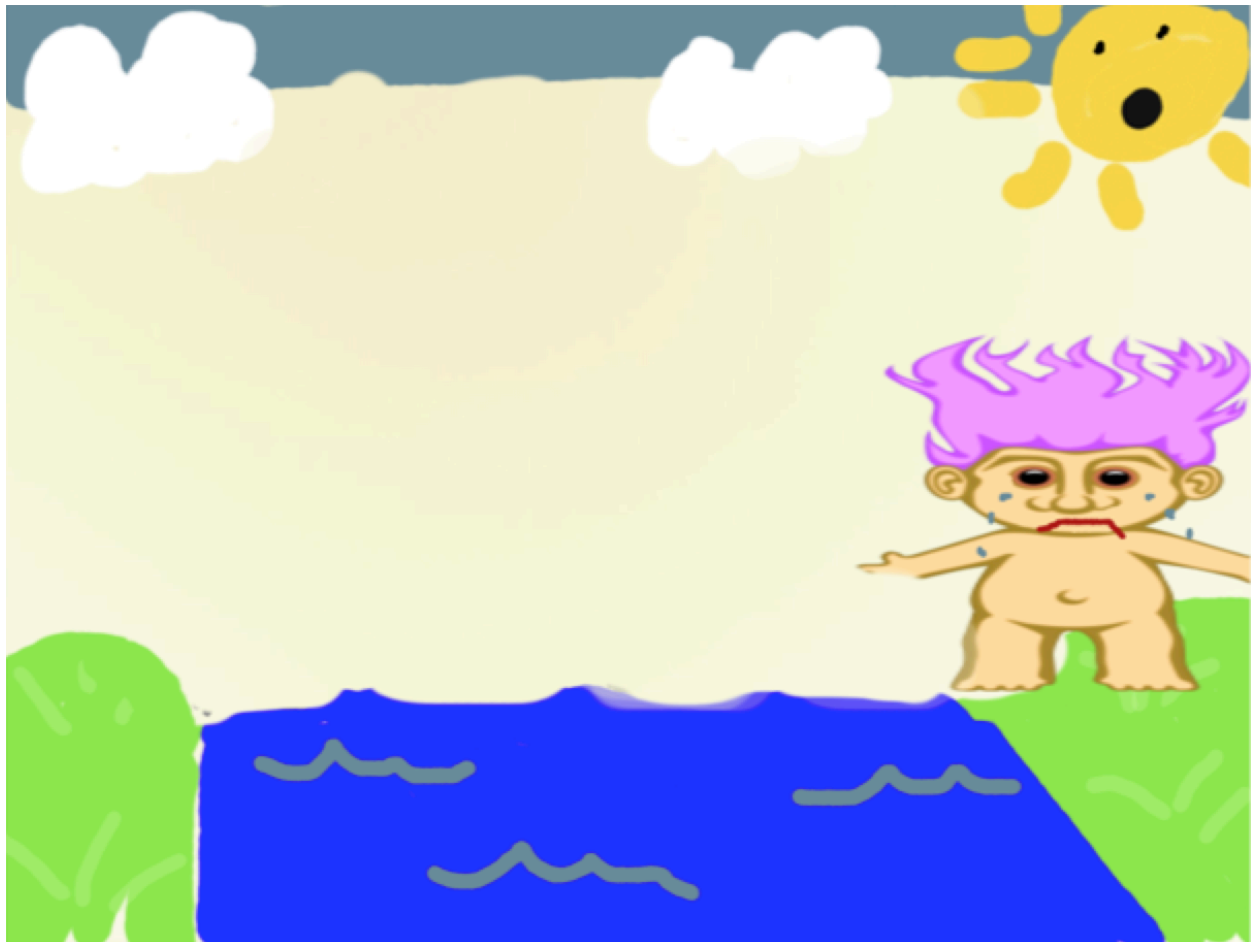


Figure 10 A childish drawing of a river. A troll stands on the right river bank and cries.

Destroying the bridge: If your bridge is infested with trolls, destroy the bridge. PopSci, The Establishment, The Chicago Sun-Time, CNN, Bloomberg, are only some of the sites that have removed comments sections from their pages. These sites still engage

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readers, as engagement is an important metric for online content. Recode executive editor Kara Swisher justified Recode's decision to shut down their comment section, saying, "[Social media] is just a better place to engage a smart audience that's not trolling."

Slide 18: The approaches I describe are valiant attempts to deal with the troll problem, but these approaches are also reactionary. They are responses to an already existent problem, what to do when you look under the bridge and find trolls. But if you destroy the bridge, the trolls don't disappear, they just find another bridge.

Why Technorhetoricians Should Intervene in Internet Comments

Slide #19: Throughout this talk, I presented the potential benefits of comment sections as well as the current problem and attempted solutions. I want to end with a call for technorhetoricians to intervene in the comment section.

Why are comment sections something that should concern technorhetoricians? For one thing, comments are popular. Chances are good that you have posted a comment somewhere, and it's also highly probable that your students have posted a comment somewhere. Even so, whether or not we actively participate in the comment sections, the presence of comments can impact our understanding of public issues as well as our civic engagement on these issues.

Slide #20: As technorhetoricians, one of our goals is educate student-writers. Kathleen Yancey argued that writing instructors should "help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future." One approach to fixing the comments that sites have not attempted is troll prevention or remediation through education. As technorhetoricians, we can work with students to provide them the necessary rhetorical and ethical tools to become citizen writers, not trolls.

Slide #22: Current commenting systems do a good job of blocking comments, but this is where the process ends. As technorhetoricians, we can also consider how we can integrate our pedagogical training, including what we know about summative and formative feedback, to develop commenting systems that provide feedback to users about their abusive or disruptive comments.

Slide #21: As technorhetoricians, we are also uniquely qualified to analyze the intersection of technology and rhetoric, which is what comment sections are. In composition and rhetoric, there have been many studies that examine comment sections for their discursive moves, and there have been various interface analyses, but we have not yet entered the comment section with our tools to say we can help. I call for us to continue the work of cultural analysis, and to use this analysis as a foundation for commenting systems that better facilitate rhetorical discourse and civic engagement.

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Slide #23: The current state of online comments is the digital manifestation of a patriarchal, racist, homophobic, nativist, classist, ableist, and all the other -ists society. Until we create the revolution, spaces of hatred and ignorance will continue to exist, whether it's on cable TV news stations, the street corner, or the comments section. But if we have hope for online spaces where people can participate in various forms of meaningful civic engagement, we must consider how we can make those spaces more accessible, equitable, and safe for all. This requires a multidimensional change to users, interfaces, and cultures, a change I believe that technorhetoricians are uniquely situated to begin.