Negative Behaviors in Online Communities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of negative behaviors in online communities. We focus specifically on communities characterized by anonymity, such as Reddit, 4chan, and Voat. Our research aims to understand these negative behaviors at the individual, community, and organization levels of analysis.

There is increasing media attention towards negative behaviors associated with online community participation. At the individual level, individuals may create deliberately offensive content with the intent of enraging or upsetting a victim – a practice called trolling. Trolling is negative because it targets specific individuals with the hope of eliciting negative emotions in them. Individuals can also seek to expose the identities of anonymous users of online communities – a practice called doxxing. Users join communities such as Reddit where they can communicate their opinions anonymously. However, other users can threaten this anonymity by searching for the targeted user’s identifying information so that his/her public identity is revealed. Doxxing is negative behavior because it threatens user anonymity and privacy.

At the organization level, commercial companies and political campaigns can pay people to post supportive content regarding a product or political candidate hence creating the impression that the product or candidate has grassroots support – this is called astroturfing. At the group or community level of analysis, sub communities may coordinate to enhance the popularity of certain content in other sub communities – this is known as brigading. Astroturfing and brigading are negative behaviors because they distort the accuracy of content popularity.

The evolution of online communities has also resulted in the creation of communities unified by unconventional interests. However, there has emerged a trend where socially negative interests have unified certain sub communities. For example, on Reddit, racist communities unified against minority populations in the US have expanded their memberships. Other communities unified by their dislike of overweight and obese individuals have also emerged. The negative attention brought by these sub communities resulted in Reddit shutting some of them down, which brought to the fore issues to do with freedom of expression. Our research aims to understand online community company strategies to respond to the emergence of undesirable but powerful sub communities.

We ask two research questions: first, what are the factors that enable negative behaviors in online communities at the individual, community, and organizational levels? Second, what are the strategies that online community organizations employ to combat these negative behaviors?