**Trolls in Online Political Communication in Social Media: Roles and Perception**

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In social networks, communication between ordinary users and Internet trolls is becoming more common. Political trolling on social media recently has turned into a new manipulative technology in the field of digital politics. We consider Internet trolling as a form of modern strategy in political communication. Political trolling is the publication of political messages on social network sites that ridicule the agenda under discussion, provoke interlocutors or insult them. Most of the latest research is devoted to investigating the activities of the so-called Russian trolls in the American political context[[1]](#footnote-1),[[2]](#footnote-2),[[3]](#footnote-3). It is without doubt an important area of ​​research. However, it does not cover another significant aspect of trolling and does not answer the question how trolling is perceived by social media users. The question of what political factors determine the willingness of some users and the unwillingness of others to spot trolling remains largely unexplored. The purpose of this study is to to identify the relationships between respondents’ political attitudes and their reaction to the ideologically different trolling examples.

In this study we plan to investigate how users with different political attitudes perceive Internet trolls who defend either pro-government or opposition standpoints. We define political attitudes as “set of predictions about the world and other people that facilitates group cooperation when shared with other members of the group”[[4]](#footnote-4). We consider trolls as overly aggressive users, who aim to provoke an argument by posting contradictory or absurd comments. Studies of the interaction between common SNS users and Internet trolls are significant since they can become a milestone for the developing trolls’ detection mechanisms, creation of trolls’ classification, and tracking various effects that can emerge after contacting with trolls. It is important to investigate perception of trolls through the lens of ideology since if pro-government and opposition users cannot distinguish pro-government and opposition trolls respectively, it means that “troll” is just another way of name-calling your political opponents.

There are plenty of works that is dedicated to the Internet trolls’ goals, strategies, or to the ways of trolls’ detection. Researchers point out several goals pursued by Internet trolls: a) to perform "political astroturfing"[[5]](#footnote-5), b) to “shape the contours of public discussion"[[6]](#footnote-6), c) to troll and suppress vulnerable groups of people[[7]](#footnote-7),[[8]](#footnote-8). In addition, many researchers tried to develop the methodology for Internet trolls’ detection. We analyzed previous studies to build our own methodology needed to create questionnaire. As the result, we highlighted criteria that can be used to identify Internet trolls in comment sections to the posts published on the social network site Vkontakte.

We rely on a theoretical framework suggested in the current literature on media effects and political communication. Individuals’ personality and political beliefs may affect the way they decode the information received from trolls. In other words, political attitudes may affect the perception of information: people may draw opposite conclusions about the same events around them[[9]](#footnote-9). In terms of the theory of media effects, it is called selective perception: «the same media message would be perceived differently by individuals with differing needs and interests»[[10]](#footnote-10). People pay more attention to information that confirms their position and consistent with their ideology and political preferences[[11]](#footnote-11). They tend to avoid facts that contradict their beliefs[[12]](#footnote-12). Previous research has found a positive relationship between people's bias and the amount of information that is consistent with their original position[[13]](#footnote-13). Messages that do not contradict the original ideas of a person are more meaningful for them and have a greater impact on them[[14]](#footnote-14). Considering results of previous research, we assume that people with certain political views will tend to trust information that correlates with their position. They are less likely to critique messages that support their beliefs, and they will more likely take them for granted. Therefore, it will be more difficult for users to spot trolls who defend a position close to the positions of these users. On the contrary, ideas that contradict our respondents’ perceptions they will more often refer to trolling.

These assumptions are tested based on original empirical data collected during Internet survey conducted by the authors. To analyze data regression model with mixed effects was used. Results reveal that only one groups of respondents under consideration - opposition-minded respondents - is more likely to label as trolling messages with an opposite political position. At the same time, supporters of the current government do not demonstrate systematic differences in the perception of pro-government and oppositional trolling. On the one hand, obtained results indicate the methodological limitations of empirical research based on manually marked data; on the other hand, current results raise several new questions about the political factors that determine the perception of political trolling in Russia.

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