

The problem posed by agenda trolls

Written by Cory Zaroni, Community Manager, The Conversation

Marc Burrows used to be a comment moderator for The Guardian. In April 2016, he wrote an [article](#) about his time in the role. In it, he identified what he thought was the biggest problem in online comment threads: agenda trolls.

Ultimately, the biggest problems in comment threads come down to “agenda trolls”: the people so convinced they are right that they ride into a conversation not to join it, but to rip it apart.

[...]

They are comment-thread poison – men’s rights activists who act as if articles about women’s issues are their gender’s single biggest problem, climate change deniers who will drag any conversation about energy policy into murky pseudo-science, and borderline racists for whom there is no issue that cannot be pinned on immigration (UK) or black people (US). It is often known as “whataboutery” and is a tactic designed to throw a conversation off course.

Agenda trolls don’t arrive in a comment section for a discussion – as Burrows mentions in his article, you can’t have a discussion with someone who doesn’t care about nuance or can’t admit when they’re wrong. This type of person comments to push a worldview at the expense of all others and disrupt anything that doesn’t align with that worldview.

They are, in effect, antithetical to what we’re trying to accomplish with The Conversation’s community.

Setting the non-agenda

We want our community to be a place where as many people as possible can be involved in constructive, illuminating discussions.

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That means, in part, creating a space where no one agenda dominates all others and where people are willing to engage with perspectives that don't align with their own.

As we've said before: [we don't remove comments just because we disagree with them](#) . Moderation isn't about ensuring one idea dominates all others; it's about letting as many ideas as possible be shared.

We've developed our [community standards](#) around that goal. But, unfortunately, those standards can be an imperfect tool: agenda trolls can work around the rules of a site by staying on just the right side of them while still disrupting a discussion.

In a sense, they violate the spirit of our goals but not the rules in place to achieve those goals. That makes life difficult for everyone, moderators and commenters both.

What can be done?

We're fortunate here at The Conversation: we have a community that, for the most part, respects and values robust discussion. For every comment that tries to derail a comment thread, there's often one trying to steer things back.

That varies from topic to topic, of course, and it doesn't mean that there's not more work to be done on our end. But it does speak to the importance of culture in addressing agenda trolls.

I think Burrows takes a worthwhile approach:

The only way to fix this problem is for us all to take responsibility for it. That means embracing comments wholeheartedly, it means steeling ourselves for the bad stuff and ignoring it, while engaging with the good stuff. It means believing in our arguments but allowing them to be points of discussion, not rigid, fixed points. It means not letting the trolls win.

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It means striking a fine balance. We want people to engage with others in good faith and to assume the best of their fellow commenters whenever possible. That won't necessarily work with agenda trolls.

We here at The Conversation will continue looking for better ways to manage problems in our community, from agenda trolls and beyond. We'll keep moderating comments, encouraging intelligent discussion and creating a space for worthwhile arguments.

However, relies on some help from our community too. It calls on our commenters to have high standards for our discussion and not let others drag that down. It means, like Burrows said, ignoring the bad stuff and engaging with the good.

With that in mind, this part of our community standards might be the most important when it comes to dealing with agenda trolls:

Take responsibility for the quality of the conversations you participate in; only reply to things you consider worth your attention.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/the-problem-posed-by-agenda-trolls-67843>