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The art of trolling and its connection to innovation

by Nikola Milošević - Saturday, November 04, 2017

<https://inspiratron.org/blog/2017/11/04/art-trolling-connection-innovation/>

Recently I watched the following talk from DefCon named "The art of trolling", which reminded me of my earlier days and stuff I did:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHqGV5WjS4w>

Also, interestingly enough, I was on an event where we had a number of speakers (academics and policy makers) talking about innovation policy, innovation management and similar. However, from all these talks, one point was missing: very often innovation is made **for Lulz**.

Let me start with two examples of trolling I was involved with, which required quite some bit of work and let's call it out of the box thinking, with some degree of innovation.

Introducing trolls

Trolling politically motivated news commenters

I guess this my most recent trolling as it was happening in 2014. To give context, in Serbia we had elections. Couple of parties discovered (I can't say they were progressive about it, since internet was in Serbia since like 1990) that they can shape opinions of the voters on the internet. They even found the way to make it relatively cheap. Instead of paying ads, they would get their members hover over the news portals, and each time any news were published about either their or any other candidate they would leave a comment. Now, these comment became recognizable, as they were repeated all over the place, without much relevance to the news article. Soon after this started, people gave these people a name "bots" or "party bots". However, in the most cases they were people leaving messages.

Around the elections, as I am started my PhD in NLP, I decided to make these people pointless and this strategy useless by developing a real internet bot that would crawl the news portal, read the article, recognize the main protagonist of the article, and generate a comment about him. So I wrote a piece of software doing it. However, while doing it, I realized, why parties are using bots. All these news articles have captcha and other bot protection mechanisms. Therefore, I had to find a way around it, developing also captcha solver using optical character recognition.

More about this in more technical depth can be read here: <https://inspiratron.org/blog/2014/03/02/political-bot-fighting-human-bots/>

I would like to think that this made all these employed people pointless. The blog post was featured in some python mailing lists and got quite high retention a loads of visits, however, I believe even today, 3 years later, parties in Serbia are using people to comment on articles. At least they build an Android/iPhone app to upvote comments on the news portals left by people (software is called Walter. There are some articles analyzing it in Serbian, for example <https://www.facebook.com/anonymoussrbija/posts/595952760516382>).

This was completely made for lulz and I quite enjoyed learning some new things, that I was not anticipating when starting, for example OCR thing with captcha detection.

IRC trolling

Back in the time, IRC channels was quite popular and people were using it for different purposes, from communication about technology, managing open source projects to flirting. One quite large chat platform with many IRC rooms in Serbia was hosted by Krstarica, which I believe is still alive. One day a colleague and I decided to have some fun. Firstly, we experimented how easy it is from guys on it to get contact details (real names and phone numbers). We realized that back at that time, people were quite willing to provide their details, even though relatively sensitive. So at some point we built an IRC chatbot, just for lulz that would wait for the private message from someone, and then exchange couple of small talk messages and ask for real name and contact phone or email. We put the bot in the room, calling it some quite provocative female sounding name (something like "sweet_lola") and let it work in the afternoon and at night. The next day when we had a look, we realized that file where bot was dumping contact details is quite large, containing couple of hundreds of phone numbers and another hundreds of email addresses and some Skype ids.

Of course we haven't done anything with this data. It was again made for lulz and it was overly big laugh for us. However, this also made us think about making some campaign about securing your data and privacy, how to respond on simple social engineering techniques, especially, it was unbelievable that people were not able to recognize social engineering made by bot. Unfortunately, none of two of us did anything serious about this campaigning, however, now there are more and more organisation doing it all over the world. Here we are speaking about 2009-2010.

Innovation and lulz

Generally, hacker's community is quite famous on being very innovative and doing the most of the things just for laughs. Second aspect of it is, that people are doing quite interesting/innovative stuff, in order to prove the point. I believe that the first example, with political bot, can be seen through that lenses. It was proving a point that people should not be employed to do things that can be automated. Also, that some people are not that stupid not to spot the difference between genuine comment and bot comment (human or programmatic).

Another source of innovation is wondering about something. This often comes in the time when someone is bored. Nowadays, it seems there is less and less of this, as people are engaged with something on the internet and their phones all the time. However, if someone has a knowledge, curiosity and is relatively bored, that person can push the boundaries in the area where he/she is wondering about things. This often can lead to both technological innovation and social innovation. All in all, education and access to the technology and knowledge that is necessary for solving the problem is the prerequisite.

The things done for the lulz can also shape opinions of the masses. The point made for lulz, can made people think differently and act differently in the future. There are plenty of examples of this, some in the mentioned talk, some quite intuitive.

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