

# Defeating the trolls

## *Promote inclusion and acceptance on social media*

BY CARLING VESCIO

WITH THE INFLUX of social media websites and applications in recent years, it is not surprising that racism and discrimination have reached new levels.

With Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat in almost every media-savvy user's repertoire, seeing blatant displays of racism has become much more common, or at least more public.

Reading through the online comments of any race-based news story, one is sure to discover an unhealthy amount of negativity aimed specifically at the culture/identity/race of the people involved.

The worst comments generally stem from anonymous "trolls" who seem to find enjoyment in getting people riled up by making the most hateful comments possible.

The goal of these anonymous keyboard warriors is to create shock value and gain attention. While this is concerning, trolls have been around since the dawn of the Internet and are unlikely to disappear any time soon.

What's more concerning is the people who aren't afraid to let their racist views fly in the name of "free speech."

Click on their public profiles and you will find, unfortunately, that some of these commenters are respected community members. Many discriminatory comments are in the guise of concern for the community; many include the epithets of "I work hard to support my family!" or "I pay my taxes!" as if these factors are enough to justify their racism.

One of the joys of social media is finding like-minded individuals who



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**Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.**

share your interests. Although many Facebook groups are positive in nature, when the common interest is thinly-veiled racism, these groups can take on a more sinister tone.

Thunder Bay is no stranger to these groups, harbouring a number of hate-based pages with the goal of, essentially, creating an "us vs. them" mentality against some of the more disadvantaged people in society.

Rather than discussing solutions to the very real social issues of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse and lack of support systems, these groups single out struggling individuals, very often based on their race, and "bring them down a notch." Many of the individuals featured on these pages are working hard to get their lives together.

A YOUNG WOMAN I am acquainted with was doing just that when she found herself to be the focal point of an extremely cruel post. She faced it with more strength than most others would, carrying on with her goal of self-improvement despite this very public humiliation.

There is a silver lining to this bleak vision of social media. After the notorious Facebook page gained more public attention, a number of groups emerged which highlighted more positive aspects of Thunder Bay. For many, hurt and anger led them to take positive action in the community, whether volunteering for organizations or events that work to promote social harmony or by simply having conversations with misinformed family members and friends.

Additionally, social media pages for local events and organizations (i.e. National Aboriginal Day, the Folklore Festival, and Rockin' Recovery Day, to name a few) have been steadily gaining more interest and followers.

Despite a focus on negativity in social media, these pages can help Thunder Bay move toward the goal of eliminating racism. Rather than "feeding the trolls" on the dark side of the Internet, fellow citizens should look at the array of cultural events Thunder Bay has to offer, using social media as a guide. Invite family and friends to these events as well, even if they have expressed discriminatory opinions in the past.

Racism and discrimination are born from misunderstanding and a lack of knowledge. Exposure to the traditions and events of different cultures is a primary way of battling racism, and social media can be a useful tool.

3/1/16

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