



## The War Against the ‘Trolls’

*Anne Applebaum goes Soviet in online anti-"troll" campaign*

By [Justin Raimondo](#)

December 03, 2014

Poor [Anne Applebaum](#). Every time she writes one of her interchangeable neocon screeds on how [Putin](#) is responsible for all the world's evils or why we need to invade this or that country, her mortal enemies – the *commenters!* – launch an attack. They wonder why we should listen to anyone who was [such a big fan of going to war in Iraq](#), and – when she's writing about US foreign policy in Eastern Europe – they make acerbic references to her [routine refusal](#) to disclose that she's married to the former Polish Foreign Minister, and a citizen of Poland, relationships that just might possibly have an impact on her worldview. [Her latest neocon screed](#) is designed to put an end to her torment: now she wants curbs on online commentary and a ban on online anonymity. There's all this "rude commentary" out there, you see, an alarming proportion of it directed not only at her precious inviolable self but also at her fellow neocons:

*"If you are reading this article on the Internet, stop afterward and think about it. Then scroll to the bottom and read the commentary. If there isn't any, try a Web site that allows comments, preferably one that is very political. Then recheck your views."*

Citing various studies that supposedly prove how easily people are swayed by the opinions of others – such a revelation! – she then proceeds to make her case not only against comments sections but also against anonymity on the Internet. She wants names, at the very least, if not passports or some other form of identification, attached to *every form of commentary*.

In Applebaum's World, [Thomas Paine](#) would've been put in the hoosegow. He would be bunking with [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon](#), the pre-Revolutionary pamphleteers after whom the Cato Institute is named, whose anonymously published *Letters* were instrumental in stirring up the people to overthrow the English king and establish a republic. She's not very good at her history, is she: or is it only American history she's not so conversant with?

Her history of the Internet is equally flawed:

*"Once upon a time," she scolds, "it seemed as if the Internet would be a place of civilized and open debate; now, unedited forums often deteriorate to insult exchanges. Like it or not, this matters: Multiple experiments have shown that perceptions of an article, its writer or its subject can be profoundly shaped by anonymous online commentary, especially if it is harsh."*

*One [group](#) of researchers [found that rude comments](#) 'not only polarized readers, but they often changed a participant's interpretation of the news story itself.' A digital analyst at Atlantic Media also discovered that people who read negative comments were more likely to judge that an article was of low quality and, regardless of the content, to doubt the truth of what it stated."*

In short, the opinions expressed in ostensible "news" articles are subject to the judgments of the readers: the free market of ideas, expressed however contentiously, is fully operational. Applebaum thinks this is a "threat," as the title of her jeremiad puts it. A threat to whom or to what? She never quite says. My attempts to ask her have been in vain: she has blocked on [Twitter](#) anyone who expresses the least amount of criticism of her. I'm just another one of those Internet "trolls," i.e. people who hold opinions other than those given the Good Applebaum Seal of Approval.

Applebaum's revisionist history of the Internet as the online equivalent of the Ladies Home & Garden Club suggests she's been operating in some alternate Internet universe, a kind of Bizarro-Internet, because that's the complete opposite of how it all began.

Back in the day, say in the mid-nineties, you basically had [bulletin boards](#): people posted articles from the "mainstream" media and their commentary was the meat and potatoes of the thread, which was "curated" – we called it "moderated" – to some degree or other by the owner of the site. In short, the Internet was *people talking to one another*, plain and simple: they weren't looking for "content" because they *were* the content.

That was before [the age of the bloggers](#) evolved past the bulletin board model, and famous (and infamous) commenters took advantage of the new technology to create individualized sites that replicated the old conversational mode. Attached to every post was a box enabling comments, and one would often read a particular blog precisely because the comments sections were so informative. Also the length of a thread, or the number of links back to it, was a sign of prestige. It meant people were actually reading your blog or web site or whatever and taking it seriously enough to actually comment on it.

The interactivity principle was important not only for its entertainment value, but also for its corrective function. We've been around since 1995, and had comments installed pretty early on, and I can't tell you how many times I've gotten the facts wrong and been corrected by an alert reader.

This is actually one of the greatest compliments a writer can receive because it denotes the one thing we all crave: attention. I mean here you are writing about, say, the history of Bulgaria, and some real expert comments on your post and lays out the real facts. I mean the experts are reading you! Now that's a compliment, or at least it was in the early days that Ms. Applebaum doesn't seem to remember with any degree of accuracy.

Applebaum wants to "prevent waves of insulting commentary from periodically washing over other parts of the Internet, infiltrating Facebook or overwhelming Twitter." This wouldn't be anything but "an interesting psychological phenomenon" except, guess what, it's all a bit of a conspiracy. You see it's "rumored" that political parties and corporate entities of all sorts actually

*pay* people to make comments online on behalf of this or that cause or product. Imagine that! The natural impulse of the person with the soul of a commissar is to ask: how can we prevent this?

Ah, but how to do this without going full on Soviet – that's a good question. Commissar Applebaum has some ideas: instruction in schools about how to distinguish "truth from state-sponsored fiction." That might sound like a good idea to the simple-minded, and yet even the most lamebrain statist can hardly fail to note Applebaum's highly selective proposed curriculum. She talks about "state-sponsored" infiltration of allegedly subversive ideas online, but only points to the "well-documented" examples of Russia and China. Even more [well-documented](#) is the so-called *hasbara* organization run by the Israeli government. Yet it somehow escapes Applebaum's otherwise ruthless attention.

Indeed, after condemning the very idea of "state-sponsored" online activities, she makes the case that maybe – since we can't (yet) engage in outright "censorship" (her scare quotes) – we need to start funding "civic organizations or charities" – such as the one the authors of the cited "study" [work for](#) – to expose "the new tactics of disinformation." Yes, there's a conspiracy out there to "sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods"! How to stop these nefarious online intruders into the Free World? Aside from state-subsidized counter-speech – a scheme proposed by former Obama administration official [Cass Sunstein](#), who wants the government to fund "cognitive infiltration" of suspected "conspiracy theorists" – Applebaum wants to start taking names and social security numbers:

*"Sooner or later, we may also be forced to end Internet anonymity or to at least ensure that every online persona is linked back to a real person: Anyone who writes online should be as responsible for his words as if he were speaking them aloud. I know there are arguments in favor of anonymity, but too many people now abuse the privilege. Human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, should belong to real human beings and not to anonymous trolls."*

Sooner or later, the authoritarians among us are unmasked: or, more precisely, they unmask themselves, as Comrade Applebaum, the famous chronicler of Soviet outrages against humanity, has just done.

Anonymity isn't a privilege: it's an essential element of the human condition. When we walk down the street in a big city or down a country lane we do so anonymously – indeed, that's part of the attraction of big cities and out of the way country lanes. The freedom that anonymity gives people is the very essence of what it means to be human, i.e. to enjoy an entirely inviolate realm of privacy. All of us have things we would never say aloud and yet think about – and may even write about. Every anonymous pamphleteer of the past few centuries – every evader of censorship, either by church or state – is an outlaw in Applebaum's book.

Furthermore, who would carry out the "tracing back" procedure she prescribes: [the government](#)? So we'll all have to be registered, in a sense, in order to even use the Internet.

That's the logical conclusion of Applebaum's crusade against anonymity – Neocon World, a place where anyone who points to Applebaum's brazen hypocrisy and "insults" her by pointing

out the oddly neo-Soviet nature of her proposals, will be instantly identified and noted in a [government database](#). So, you disagree with Comrade Applebaum's theory of "[total war](#)" between the US and Russia? May I see your identification, citizen?

We've all run into people like Anne Applebaum: it started in high school, where the notorious Hall Monitors would grab you by the collar if they caught you ambling along, demand to see your hall pass, and interrogate you as to the exact purpose of your journey. Things got worse – much worse – as you got older, especially if you happen to be in an area where people of your skin color aren't all that common:

["Can I see your identification, sir?"](#)

The online world, the last remaining frontier of freedom, is an eyesore as far as our neocons are concerned. They long to regulate it, either by applying pressure to corporate providers or declaring it a "[public utility](#)" that must be regulated for The Public Good. On the [agenda](#): "hate speech" legislation that would outlaw the Boycott and Divest movement aimed at Israel. On the downlow: the "cognitive infiltration" [boondoggle](#) proposed by Sunstein, where a group of anonymous pro-government trolls – who naturally think of themselves as anti-trolls – "corrects" the nefarious "conspiracy theorists" who doubt the pronouncements of our Wise Leaders.

The neocons absolutely hate the Internet: it's the biggest single thorn in their side. That's because their program of perpetual war abroad and authoritarianism on the home front has been so widely exposed that every expression of it is met with a storm of "rude commentary" in the comments sections of newspapers worldwide. Their strategy of appealing to and influencing the elites is faltering because the radical unpopularity of their views is undercutting the careers of neocon journalists. (Indeed, every other neocon is some kind of journalist, even if its only for a "news" site subsidized by an embittered Russian oligarch, [son of the West's favorite billionaire "dissident."](#))

Applebaum's proposals have no place in a free society. As such, they disqualify her as some kind of brave opponent of totalitarianism: instead, they enshrine her as a major league hypocrite. So that in future times the phrase "You've gotta be *Applebaum-ing* me!" will be universally understood.

## NOTES IN THE MARGIN

You can check out my Twitter feed by going [here](#). But please note that my tweets are sometimes deliberately provocative, often made in jest, and largely consist of me thinking out loud.

I've written a couple of books, which you might want to peruse. [Here](#) is the link for buying the second edition of my 1993 book, [Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement](#), with an Introduction by Prof. [George W. Carey](#), a [Foreword](#) by Patrick J. Buchanan, and critical essays by [Scott Richert](#) and [David Gordon](#) ([ISI Books](#), 2008).

You can buy [An Enemy of the State: The Life of Murray N. Rothbard](#) (Prometheus Books, 2000), my biography of the great libertarian thinker, [here](#).

