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A Bridge over the Troll: Non-Complementary Activism Online

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ABSTRACT
Previous research has identified phenomena such as cyberbystander intervention and various other forms of responses to aggressive or hateful behaviours online. In the online media ecosystem, some people from marginalized communities and their allies have attempted to enhance organic engagement by participating in organized activism, which is sometimes characterized as "non-complementary" or "indirect". This paper attempts to identify, recognize, and label this phenomenon, as well as provide suggestions for further research in this area.

ACM Reference Format:

1 INTRODUCTION
Various paradigms exist for addressing aggression, hatred, and violence (or threats of violence) as an ally or "bystander". Bystander intervention occurs in such cases in different ways. Sometimes these methods are described as "direct" or "indirect"; some are also described as "non-complementary". In the case of aggression towards marginalized groups on the internet, various techniques have been developed along these lines which mirror, but also differ substantially from, similar techniques for intervention offline.

It is proposed that a "non-complementary activism" exists as a distinct methodology of indirect intervention towards hate and aggression online. Developing from the classic advice of "Don’t feed the troll", non-complementary activism methodology seeks to give support to a victim or target of online aggression, while deflecting or circumventing their aggressor.

2 KEY TERMINOLOGY
"Activism" in this paper is used as a byword for "social activism", which is in turn defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Social Media as "Intentional action to promote positive social change within a community." [2]

"Non-complementary" in this paper is used in multiple senses, which differ according to academic or popular use, as noted below. Where necessary, these are denoted "non-complementary[a]" (academic) and "non-complementary[b]" (popular).

3 USE OF "NON-COMPLEMENTARY"
The word "non-complementary" was derived from a theory of "complementary differentiation" developed by Gregory Bateson from the 1930s onwards to describe, in his words, a type of "cultural differentiation", in which different and at times competing types of "behaviour patterns" are evident within a human relationship [1]. Bateson’s primary interest is in relationships within a cultural subgroup, e.g., between two people in a marital union, or within a hierarchy. For example, Bateson illustrates a typical complementary response to aggression to be one of defiance [1]. In Bateson’s view, these can be observed at a cross-cultural level; indeed, his primary interest is in social anthropology. It also implies a power imbalance; that is, person or group (B) are “responding” to a person or group (A), where (A) is in a position of power, influence, or simply has the initiative in a given interaction. Person or group (B), conversely, is situated in a position of subordination, obedience, or weakness relative to (A). Where this power imbalance is less evident, Bateson suggests an alternative categorization of relationship behaviour patterns, which he calls “symmetric” [1].

From the 1970s onwards, multiple authors have used and expanded on Bateson’s typology to arrive at a description of “non-complementary behaviour” (cf [4]). A non-complementary behaviour response differs from and replaces the complementary response. A non-complementary response to aggression, for example, may be one which is not defiant, but something else, for example, responding to an insult with friendliness.

"Non-complementary behaviour" has since become more precisely defined in popular discourse to explain responses to aggression, hatred, or violence which do something which is similarly “unexpected”. In the internet age, this phrase has been used by a number of activists, small organizations, and journalists to describe preferable, effective, or useful responses (be they online or offline) to aggression. One oft-cited example is a 2016 infographic by Parisian artist Maeril that presents a method of responding to Islamophobic attacks, which was described as an example of “non-complementary behaviour” by the artist (see Figure 1) [9]. This has been widely shared as official advice by various organizations, including local government.

Popular historian Rutger Bregman uses it in this more precise sense, but in a somewhat expanded form [10]. He, and others, re-expand the notion of "non-complementary behaviour" to describe various behaviours in history and popular myth and legend which are often ascribed to great figures of activist history. For examples, Bregman and others associate this non-complementary [b]

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behaviour with the non-violent activism of Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jesus Christ, to name a few.

A further shift in understanding between the anthropological-academic view of Bateson and the contemporary popular view may be summarized as moving from a *morally neutral* to a *morally good* perspective; "non-complementary" is described in popular literature almost exclusively as a "good" or "right" method of responding, sometimes in contrast to complementary responses, which are seen as inferior by some of these authors [7]. Arguably, it has also moved towards an *activist* methodology, that is, it takes place in the promotion of certain social or sociopolitical values. Normally, the social value is the support for a victim or target [9], but at other times, the social value (or aim) is actually to change the behaviour of an aggressor or hate actor by responding to their aggression or hate in such an unexpected way [7].

![Infographic](image1.jpg)

**Figure 1:** An infographic demonstrating how to use non-complementary behaviour to support a victim of Islamophobic harassment. (c) Maeril "itsmaeril", 2016 [9]

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### 4 "DIRECT" VS "INDIRECT" RESPONSES

An similar differentiation to complementary vs non-complementary, which has also been described in recent popular discourse, is a differentiation between "direct" and "indirect". This differentiation is used in bystander intervention theory and practice [6]. In such examples, a "direct" act is that which confronts or is directed at an attacker or abuser. Conversely, an "indirect" act is that which does not; rather, it supports the victim or target of the attack or abuse in a different way. Some examples of indirect responses given in bystander intervention training include taking notes on what one has observed, reporting an incident to an authority, or speaking or engaging with the victim or target in a friendly way while ignoring the aggressor. The last of these is virtually identical to methods identified as "non-complementary behaviour" in the popular sense given above.

However, not all non-complementary(b) responses identified in the popular literature are indirect. Moreover, not all responses identified as "non-complementary" in such literature are bystander activities; some are responses by the target or victim themselves.

**Figure 2** illustrates how responses may be direct or indirect in environments where non-complementary responses are also used or advocated.

![Diagram](image2.png)

**Figure 2:** A diagram by the author of non-complementary responses which are common online (shaded blue) and other common direct and indirect responses to an aggressor.

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### 5 ROLE OF NON-COMPLEMENTARY RESPONSES IN ONLINE SPACES

A substantial body of research has emerged in recent years examining the nature of cyberbystanderism, in comparison and contrast to the wider phenomena of bystanderism and bystander intervention [5] [10] [3].

In this context, *direct* responses which are non-complementary may be more prone to organic reach and more visible. One method is to respond to aggressive or hateful online content by making irrelevant "off-topic" replies, often to a more friendly (but public) audience. This may be defined as a kind of direct, non-complementary
activism; it is direct because it engages the attacker (at least in part), but it is non-complementary in that the response is not "defiant" or combative; indeed, it is intentionally tangential to the aggression.

However, features of the internet, particularly on large social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, make it more difficult to engage in indirect non-complementary activism. If one draws a victim or target of aggression to one side in a public space to support them (see Figure 1), this is visible and, it may be argued, makes a powerful statement. If one does this online - perhaps the best analogy would be a supportive private message - this action is invisible.

Indirect non-complementary activism, therefore, often operates through supplementary organizational structures which do not rely on the tools inherent to the platform where the attack took place, or even where the targets or victims are active. For example, they may leverage a private or semi-private space, such as a Discord channel, Facebook group, group messaging app, or even an offline space to co-ordinate and respond. That is, after identifying an aggressive act on the internet, there is a kind of "rallying cry" to affected targets and allies to intervene in a specific non-complementary(b) way. They also sometimes provide allies and targets a chance to network with one another.

This type of indirect response may stem from the internet mantra of 'Don’t feed the troll', that is, 'Don’t offer further debate to a person on the internet who is not adding to the debate'.

Direct and indirect forms of non-complementary activism online are often similar in their final output, e.g., supportive, positive messaging which uplifts a victim or target. However, they differ widely in their process, as noted above.

6 FURTHER STUDY

The present author is researching, as part of a funded PhD project, how non-complementary activism can be identified and supported through existing internet infrastructure and (potentially) newly engineered tools. Some working proposals either considered or undergoing by the author include the following.

Ethnographic case studies

It may be informative to communicate with practitioners of non-complementary activism to see how they construe the phenomenon, and how they situate their activity in the broader online community.

Machine learning detection models

The author is experimenting with a "bag of words" model to identify instances of non-complementary activism on social media which occur in text form.

Design theory

The design of the internet may inform and/or affect whether non-complementary activism is a preferred method of interaction, and why. Experiments in cyberbystanderism, for example, has suggested that design elements - such as the visibility of post views - may be a predictive factor in determining whether a person may intervene. Understanding why and how common features of internet platforms either promote or hinder non-complementary activity will likely be informative. A natural extension would be to develop tools to help indirect non-complementary activists co-ordinate more efficiently or effectively.

Analysis by research

It is likely to be beneficial to further examine the phenomenon of non-complementary activism in other contexts and in comparison to other similar or correlating phenomena, such as cyberbystanderism, emergency response, conflict resolution, peacemaking, etc.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Non-complementary forms of activism online have been, since at least 2016, regarded as a useful or preferential means of responding to attacks, aggression, and "trolls" online. This type of activism may constitute a direct or indirect form of bystander intervention. It is sometimes enabled, but sometimes hampered, by internet design elements.

Further research may help define this type of activism further, examine it in computational terms (e.g. via a labelling model), provide means of enhancing internet design to promote socially cohesive and affirming content, or provide tools to activists and members of marginalized groups to combat internet aggression through these unconventional means.

REFERENCES

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