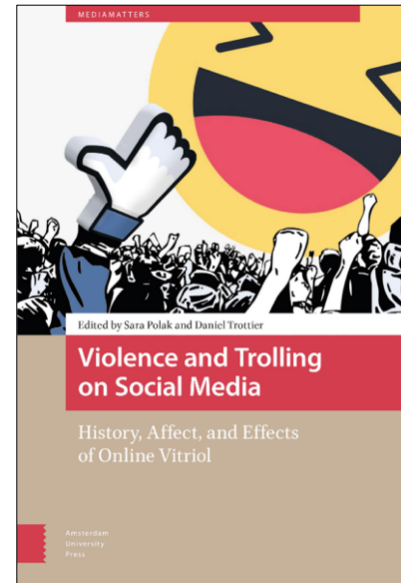


Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier (Eds.), **Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol**, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 266 pp., \$120.00 (hardback), open access (ebook).¹

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Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol is the latest contribution to the *MediaMatters* series from Amsterdam University Press. Furthering conversations of emerging and transforming social and cultural practices within (new) media, Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier have edited a collection of essays that explores how “vitriol” is translated from “offline” to “online” environments of engagement. Polak and Trottier tie the concept of online vitriol to bullying and other forms of public shaming to understand the methods and characteristics of what Jane (2014) has termed “e-bile” (pp. 531–532). The widespread practices of “doxxing” (revealing someone’s location and/or personal information online) and the emergence of “shame campaigns” (a mass mobilization of shaming a certain person or group online) illustrate some of the types of online vitriol that have been the product of Web 2.0, according to Polak and Trottier (pp. 10, 14; see also: Eckert & Metzger-Riftkin, 2020, p. 1).



The authors in this collection use a wide array of qualitative methods to understand how online participation changes the structures of vitriolic speech acts. As such, the authors present a compelling read for scholars from a variety of disciplines, such as digital media studies, communication studies, gender and ethnic studies, and cultural studies, who wish to understand the affective undercurrents of agonistic online engagement about topics including political affiliation, comment culture, and resistance. Further, the use of contemporary social media events lends this collection nicely to an upper level undergraduate or graduate audience.

The book is divided into an introduction and four subsequent sections. The first three sections feature three articles each, whereas the last section features two pieces by activist-scholars. The first section, “Dynamics of Online Vitriol,” focuses on the ontological and medial facets of online vitriol to understand how online environments create the conditions of possibility for “digital vigilantism” (pp. 17, 27–28). The three case studies in this section connect practices of shaming and trolling to the constitution of online collective identities across a variety of platforms. Daniel Trottier, Qian Huang, and Rashid Gabdulhakov look at vitriol as civic engagement in three different national contexts: China, Russia, and the UK. Arguing that the denunciation and sustained visibility of others editorializes an event to mobilize a volatile audience, the authors consider how online engagement can have offline, embodied consequences. Nuancing these dynamics of “digilantism” (p. 57), Tom Clucas’s article turns to comment culture to elucidate how the “thread logic” disavows the conventional rules of

¹ To access this ebook, please visit: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1b0fvrn>

argumentation to prize combative discourse to gain popularity among fellow “trolls” (pp. 48–49). Sara Polak’s essay argues that the practices of trolling can become fecund ground for building political constituencies, as evidenced in the collective known as Trolls for Trump, which formed around Trump’s tweets about the 2013–2015 Ebola epidemic in West Africa and became more active surrounding the 2016 presidential election. Together, these chapters outline the environments in which actors circulate violent and agonistic discourses.

Zooming out to historical precursors, “Histories of Online Vitriol,” the second section, illustrates the online life of cultural memory. Frans-Willem Korsten’s chapter opens the section by comparing the dynamics of vitriolic memes used by alt-right extremists to those of mass-printed pamphlets in the 17th-century Dutch Republic. Korsten’s analysis reveals how speed is a necessity to spreading online vitriol to escalate political tensions. Turning to the intersections of race and gender, Ewelina Pepiak analyzes the discourse surrounding the New Year’s Eve 2015/2016 Cologne sexual assaults. Members of the far right used the attack of White women by non-White immigrant men to circulate anti-immigration rhetoric that used the same tropes as Imperial-era European propaganda to justify the colonization of non-White bodies, which underscore the lineages of White supremacist visual media throughout history. Gerlov van Engelenhoven looks at the collective memory of a train hijacking in the Netherlands by examining how a documentary film and accompanying online forum construct differing judgments toward the Dutch-Moluccan migrant community. Rather than fostering a multiplicity of perspectives on the same topic, Engelenhoven argues that online communities create echo chambers that reify in-group ideologies that sediment over time. The chapters of this section illustrate the structures of feeling (Williams, 1977) that animate the experiences of online vitriol.

“Affects of Online Vitriol,” the third section, ties Sara Ahmed’s (2013) concept of affective economies to the *MediaMatters* series’ focus on media ecologies and participatory practices that bridge on- and offline publics. Greta Olson’s chapter offers an overview of affect theory and its implications for studying online vitriol by using the U.S. “meninist” movement as a case study. Couching her argument in the era of Trump’s “Twitter presidency,” Olson argues scholars need to reimagine affect through concepts of virality to better conceptualize online engagement (p. 154). Ann-Marie Riesner’s chapter furthers this by turning to the online vitriol that Stefanie Sargnagel’s satirical news article elicited. Riesner uses Sargnagel’s own discourse to show how online vitriol is aimed at manipulating subjects into certain affective responses, such as hate or shame through viral moments of (digital) discourse. Kathleen Gabriels and Marjolein Lanzing also argue affect’s capacity to bridge the digital online and embodied offline worlds. Their term “onlife” explores the ethical implications of online vitriol as it animates physical violence (pp. 198–199). Vitriol, and many other affective performances, exceeds the confines of the digital to impact our offline lives.

The last section of the book, “Activism and Online Vitriol,” offers first-person analyses of navigating public trolling and shaming from two activist-scholars. First, Sophie Schwarz’s chapter reflects on the project “Why I Need Feminism” and the acerbic responses of misogyny it received. In a campaign inspired by a blog project, university students were asked to anonymously respond to the prompt of “I need feminism because...”; but anti-feminist trolls used the space to rehearse common chauvinist comments, which Schwarz argues proves trolling is not limited to online spaces (pp. 219–221). The second chapter by Penelope Kemekenidou turns to self-care in the face of online vitriol. Kemekenidou offers an autoethnography of the affective toll violent discourse takes on activist bodies, as well as tactics of fighting against and recovering from trolls. The chapters

of this final section illustrate the challenges online vitriol poses to activists who often encounter it more frequently than typical digital public actors, while still ending the collection on a note of hope.

Although the book is coherently organized, moving from the contours to the contexts of online vitriol before turning to the affective waves that emerge as a result, it also presents problems. The second section's emphasis on the contexts of vitriol sheds new light on the essays in the first. For example, both Korsten and Pepiak's chapters focusing on the raced and gendered dynamics of political agonism better contextualize Polak and Clucas's chapters on how thread culture builds communities/constituencies. While, perhaps, risking a more linear timeline, beginning the collection with the histories of offline vitriol might better highlight the restructuring that these speech acts undergo when deployed online.

In total, however, this collection serves as an excellent resource for understanding the communicative phenomenon of online vitriol, and teachers could assign chapters out of order. Each article explores a different side of the concepts to offer a compelling theorization of combative and violent online discursive engagement. The contributors trace the shift from interpersonal, localized vitriol to the anonymous, wide-spread possibilities afforded by digitally networked publics. *Violence and Trolling on Social Media* offers an important starting place, as we see the dynamics of online engagement shift with mainstream services like Twitter banning trolling and other forms of violent discourses and fringe services like Parler emerging under the banner of "free speech" (see, for example, Nicas & Alba, 2021; Twitter Inc., 2021). Further, the collection contributes to ongoing conversations of far/alt-right digital tactics (Ahmed, 2013; Hartzell, 2020), as well as conversations as to how marginalized actors respond to online vitriol (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles, 2020; Rambukkana, 2015). The authors of this volume raise important questions for exploring the affective nature of online engagement that can not only wound and divide digital public actors, but can also afford the necessary connections to imagine our worlds otherwise.

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