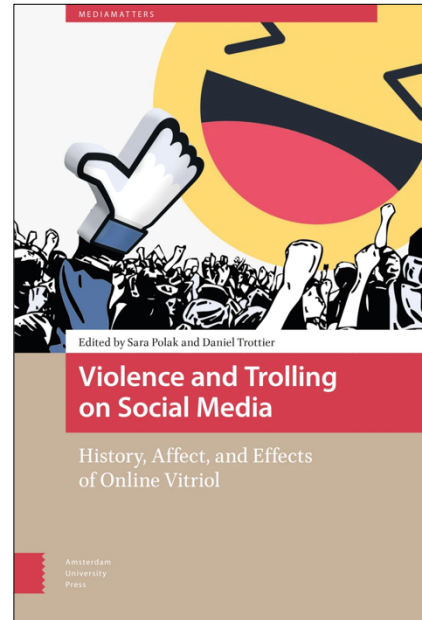


Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier (Eds.), **Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol**, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 266 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover).

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Two decades into the global experiment in networked technology and social media, we remain caught in an existential bind: how to reconcile the chasm between the liberatory promise of the Internet (in all its utopian guises) with the banality of its everyday practice and use. How do we address and scrutinize the sprawling wealth economies that underpin it and seemingly determine the vectors of further social, political, and economic transformation? Despite recent advances in artificial intelligence and cautionary predictions of a new age of automation, we still do not understand much about how current networked technologies have already reconfigured public debates, political choices, and patterns of self-expression and identification. **Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol**, edited by Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier, represents an engaging and systematic attempt to think through a particularly pernicious aspect of these ongoing changes: the appearance, dissemination, and seeming ubiquity of online vitriol.



In their introduction, the editors define online vitriol as the “violent, bullying, demeaning or otherwise antagonistic expressions on social media platforms” (p. 13). Their emphasis is on the violent and uncontrollable aspects of the phenomenon and its manifold, multiplatform manifestations and technical variety, as well as its historical antecedents. The book’s chapters are grouped into four sections that unpack the dynamics, historical precursors, affective contours, and activist responses to online vitriol. A recurring motif throughout the book is the inseparability of offline and online worlds: Online attacks, pile-ons, and “shitstorms” have kinetic effects in the offline world of those targeting and targeted, as well as their networks and social circles.

Drawing on three case studies in the United Kingdom, Russia, and China, chapter 1 explores the phenomenon of *mediated vigilantism*, where social media users denounce those that violate shared norms and collective expectations in semipublic spaces (e.g., car parking lots, train carriages, and grocery stores). The “mediated visibility” that ensues is characterized by vitriolic discourses and shaming practices but is also catalyzed by the news industry’s transformation of a denunciatory post into a news item. Traditional news media expands the reach and visibility of the original post, illustrating how reporting on toxic and antisocial discourse has become a core aspect of routine news cycles. Chapter 2 focuses on the development of “comment culture” on social media platforms (i.e., the set of rules and practices that

regulate the content, tone, and format of comments; p. 45) and charts the shift from a traditional understanding of free speech (once tempered by notions of collective responsibility) to an absolutist model that champions one person's unlimited right to self-expression above all else. The latter has solidified against the backdrop of social media's erosion of the boundaries between the public and private sphere, promoting a comment culture where users are combative and disinhibited, favoring passionate display over and against traditional modes of rational argumentation. Chapter 3 examines the evolution of former U.S. president Donald Trump's Twitter practices as they played out in the context of the Ebola scare of 2014 and 2015. Polak argues that Trump's ability to weaponize the dynamics of outbreak narratives in the case of Ebola anticipated the rhetorical strategies that would later make him a superspreader of viral content.

The second section of the book tackles the historical antecedents of online vitriol. Chapter 4 offers an elegant genealogy of vitriol, drawing on the history of rumor and gossip in the 15th and 18th centuries as well as its contemporary manifestations. Particularly effective and useful in the historical reconstruction is the point that vitriol's efficacy is a factor of its velocity and temporality. More broadly, the author contends that vitriol is always an antistatist, antiestablishment force that reflects global elites' priorities and redirects public indignation and anger away from substantive social questions such as addressing power asymmetries or structural inequalities. Chapter 5 considers the anti-immigrant vitriol surrounding the sexual assaults that occurred on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne, Germany, in light of 19th-century imperial and colonial-era narratives concerning miscegenation and anxieties over the sexuality of White women. These narratives and their rich, racialized iconographies were important referents in the online racist and sexist violence that flourished in the aftermath of the assaults, reenacting the instrumentalization of White women and scrambling positions generally understood to be feminist and antiracist. Chapter 6 examines the Dutch feature film *De Punt* (2009), a direct-to-TV film that sought to spur public deliberation over the collective memory of a train hijacking in 1977 staged by second-generation Dutch Moluccans—a postcolonial migrant community in The Netherlands. The chapter analyzes this culturally polarizing event through a comparison of the film's narrative structure with an online discussion forum set up in conjunction with the film's release. The contrast between the two is particularly illuminating: It is the noninteractive film rather than the comment forum set up to discuss the film that proves most effective in breaking down polarized perceptions of the hijacking, thus exposing the self-selecting, self-reinforcing logic that animates online forums.

Section three moves into the unique affective dimensions of online vitriol. Chapter 7 explores the visceral sense of solidarity and in-group loyalty generated by vitriolic misogyny. Drawing on social media vernacular like the term "basic bitch," as well as the social media practices of Trump supporters, the author argues that although on their face, these misogynous practices seemingly exemplify a genuine hatred for women, they also generate a fierce sense of loyalty in supporters and marshal a broader, collective sense of nostalgia. Chapter 8 discusses the case of Austrian writer Stefanie Sargnagel and the "shitstorm" generated by her 2017 fictional travelogue in the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*. Sargnagel's case illustrates the dynamics of how online hate spreads as the audience expands through reposts across different networked communities within the same medium or social media platform. In the process, the factual and intellectual facets of the original news item are progressively filtered out as the animating logic behind subsequent posts becomes one of provoking an affectual response. Chapter 9 turns

to the ethical terrain of online vitriol. Drawing on three case studies involving revenge rape, body shaming, and cyberbullying, the authors emphasize the increasing difficulty in sustaining a clear ontological separation between online and offline worlds. This is nowhere more evident than in the practice of "coveillance," which could only function in a world in which most people carry camera-equipped smartphones in their pockets with instantaneous access to social media platforms with millions of users. This "new normal" is problematic not just because of the speed and ease with which acts of vitriol can be transmitted but also because their easy reproduction ensures that victims will likely experience ongoing repetitive violence.

Finally, section four discusses the strategies of resistance and activism against online vitriol. Chapter 10 reports on an offline 2017 poster campaign inspired by a popular 2012 social media campaign that asked users to post their thoughts on the importance of feminism today. Despite the author's attempts to protect participants from vitriol by ensuring anonymity and staging the campaign in the humanities department of a major university, the posters were targeted and trolled offline much like the original 2012 social media campaign. Chapter 11 focuses on the practical strategies that feminist activists can take to counter online misogyny and vitriol, and protect themselves from being targeted.

Technological change moves at a rapid and restless pace. In the short year since Elon Musk completed his takeover of Twitter, the userbase of decentralized alternatives such as Bluesky and Mastodon has flourished, Facebook launched a rival platform named Threads, Twitter (now known as X) underwent internal restructuring that significantly transformed its content moderation practices, and TikTok's popularity continues virtually unchallenged. It is difficult for a single book to capture such changes, and although it would be correct to say that this book perfectly articulates the prepandemic state of online vitriol, this does not make its insights any less valuable. Indeed, in the time that has elapsed, the very dynamics of online vitriol the authors analyze and draw attention to have only intensified in character and become more prominent.