

BOOK REVIEW

Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Effects of Online Vitriol

Polak, S., & Trottier, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Effects of Online Vitriol*. Amsterdam University Press.
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‘Trolls for Trump’, virtual rape, fake news — social media discourse, including forms of virtual and real violence, has become a formidable, yet elusive, political force” (from book jacket). Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier have assembled an eclectic group to address *Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol*.

This book is part of Amsterdam University Press’ MediaMatters, which is “an international book series... on current debates about emerging and transforming cultural practices that engage with (new) media technologies” (p. 2). The goals of the series are reflected in this title.

Although there are several scholarly publications available that discuss bullying and online violence, this text is different in its focus of vitriol. One of the main goals of the authors is to ask questions. They start with trolling and “doxxing”: Are they violent? Who are the victims? How or should platforms deal with them? Can they be controlled? Then the questions move to online vitriol: What is it? How does it relate to our past? How does it relate to our offline lives? What might we do about it? What is the intent? Can it be measured objectively? The authors try to answer these and other questions through their

areas of expertise, including: American media and politics; US presidents and their media; activism; gender in media; online freedom; digital rights; privacy; ethics of technology; politics; academic expression; law; sexuality; postcolonial theory; cultures; intersectional analysis; representations of immigration; white femininity; and digital media for the purposes of scrutiny, denunciation and shaming.

Each chapter contains material that supports and enhances the analysis of online vitriol. Yet, should the reader examine the text as it is laid out, the connections between each essay and those around it are made clear – and further enriches the experience.

The text is organized by four topics: Dynamics of Online Vitriol, Histories of Online Vitriol, Affects of Online Vitriol, and Activism and Online Vitriol. The first section discusses how social media networks are naturally conducive to online vigilantism and how trolls should be addressed. The second delves into the antecedents of online vitriol and cultural memory. Affective responses are addressed in the third section by answering questions about vitriol's effect on emotions, driving activism, and offline lives – including the transition to tabloid media. The fourth section, written by activists with academic backgrounds, tells their narratives of dealing with and responding to online vitriol.

In addition to the interesting variety of contributors and topics, there is a mix of scholarly, theoretical, and in-practice information. The first two chapters provide a scholarly analysis of “digilantism,” the calling-out of online and offline behaviors digitally, followed by a look at Trump’s tweets around the “Ebola scare” of the mid-2010s. The tweets called out his dissatisfaction with President Obama’s handling of the Ebola situation which became a “superspreader” event due to the many tweets and increasingly shocking information disseminated. This also “called out” Trump supporters to join the frenzy. The scholarly look at the history of vitriol takes the reader as far back as the god Momus and his daughter Rumor and their masks, to visual rhetoric within past stock figures, tropes, memes of nationalist and racist cultures, and including postcolonial influences. In this context, the stock figures, tropes, and memes include Arabs or Muslims who are coming to hurt you and yours, which are a legacy of colonialism.

Affect theory is discussed through several scholarly views. The first is a general introduction and the application to misogyny in social media. The second looks at affective responses becoming vitriolic ordeals in the online and offline worlds. The third delves

deeper into the similarities and differences of “onlife” vitriol – onlife being the combination of online and offline life, which cannot and should not be separated.

The scholarly narrative of a social activist’s project reflects the serious online and offline intense reaction to an offline discussion on feminism. Included are lessons learned from the process and reflections on the project, including how emotional and intense people’s reactions to a seemingly “simple” academic question. Lastly, online hate and its effects are shared through personal experience, personal examples of efforts against it, and a discussion of where and why the dialogs take place through the filter of “the capitalist, sexist, racist, and classist roots of our Western society” (p. 233).

This book also presents a worldwide look at social media and online vitriol. In the first chapter, events from China, Russia, and the UK are studied. In other chapters, the cultures and histories of the UK, the Netherlands, Europe in general, Germany, the US, are explored, as well as the world of Trump.

For scholars of social media, social justice, emotions, as well as anyone interested in these topics or who have been confronted by online vitriol, this is a fascinating look at various aspects of the phenomenon.