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Conference Report on "Online Vitriol: Advocacy, Violence, and the Transforming Power of Social Media"

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen) in cooperation with The Centre for Media and Interactivity (ZMI)

Justus Liebig University Giessen, 28 June – 1 July 2017

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The principal premise of the international conference on "Online Vitriol" was to bring together two often separately treated worlds – that of academia and that of professionals working with social media in a broad sense (journalists, online activists, but also PR staff of e.g. charities or NGOs). Trying to grasp the origins and *modus operandi* of online vitriol, interdisciplinary efforts were brought together by SARA POLAK (Leiden University & GCSC, JLU Giessen), ANN-MARIE RIESNER, and RAHEL SCHMITZ (both GCSC, JLU Giessen).

Theoretical problems and empirical investigation were combined with more immediate questioning of the economic and political *status quo* of the different social media platforms (twitter, Facebook, etc.) and countries. The abundance of case studies ranging from offline activism on campus to online shaming and harassment were flagged by a fairly evident consensus: the need for action. The "Online Vitriol"-conference raised a salient question: How to resist against the structures of exclusion deployed in online narratives? While most of the case studies focused on denouncing vitriolic practices serving white male privilege, the space scrutinized by the international team of scholars often reached beyond the Western world. Ranging from case studies from Europe (Austria, Germany, GB), the Americas (U.S., Canada, Colombia) to Russia, Turkey, and China, an alarming global practice of vitriol and online violence found its critics during the three-day conference in Giessen in the last week of June.

The conference was opened and closed by the American independent journalist and anthropologist,

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
50 / 2017
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

SARAH KENDZIOR. It featured panels on theory and practice, historical perspectives, exclusion practices, and on legal issues relating to online vitriol. The vast scope reflected the need for a cross-professional debate on the internet's unquestioned freedom to troll. For social media, despite their alleged anonymity and aloofness, are capable of transforming the practices of global citizenship into mobbish violence at the service of extremisms.

The Era of Trolls, Bots, "Alternative Facts" and Beyond: Political Use and Origins of Vitriol

SARAH KENDZIOR (independent journalist), a St. Luis based expert on Central Asian totalitarian states, currently a journalist renowned for her anti-Trump activism, denounced a growing authoritarianism on the internet. In her view, journalism has become an elitist enterprise, or has almost completely disappeared from the rural areas of the United States. Kendzior's opening and closing lectures have acquainted the JLU public with disastrous consequences of Trump's presidency and the authoritarian practices of the current U.S. government.

FRANS-WILLEM KORSTEN (Leiden University) opened the first day of sessions with a fascinating account of the cultural history of vitriol. Momus, a figure known from the Antiquity as "a mocker of Gods" re-emerges in the course of European history as not only a spokesman of common sense against the follies of the monarchies and other hegemonic structures responsible for atrocities in the name of ideologies, but also as an opponent of pure reason for the sake of a sardonic laugh. The function of vitriol has historically thus been both utilized to criticize the power beholders, but also allowed a mob to establish anarchy.

However, apart from resistance and disobedience, vitriol can also be interpreted as opportunism. In her account of a historical rise of the American far right, ELIZABETH TANDY SHERMER (Loyola University Chicago) exposed the strategies of manipulating masses that are well-entrenched in political traditions and only seem new due to technological advances. In her subsequently presented intriguing analysis of "The Birth of the Alt-Right on Twitter", SARA POLAK (Leiden University & GCSC, JLU Giessen) proposed a salient distinction between online cultural memory and a nation's memory. According to Polak, a reality-driven approach could be a solution to the problem of online vitriol. In light of the adage that "sunlight is the best disinfectant", Sara Polak suggested pointing at the trolls in order to get them out of their basements and to hold them accountable as an effective strategy for bringing justice to those affected by vitriol. However, defiance is a two-pronged issue, as anger sustains critique as much as it manufactures considerable rage online. As SONJA SCHILLINGS (GCSC, JLU Giessen) pointed out, quotes, contexts, medialization, and harsh debate culture (even amongst an offline group of academics) are hinting at the limits of online anonymity alone enabling vitriol and public attacks.

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
50 / 2017
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

The metaphor of the "viral" – as also addressed in the title of Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's book *Spreadable Media Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (NYU Press, 2013) – puts forward a very positive approach to the potentiality of social media platforms and its bottom-up politics. A less optimistic approach to the metaphor was provided by RAHEL SCHMITZ (GCSC, JLU Giessen) in her analysis of the TED-talk by Monica Lewinsky on "The Price of Shame" held in March 2015. While showing how Lewinsky re-narrates her experience of public shaming after the Bill Clinton sex scandal in 1995 by presenting herself as "patient zero" of today's online vitriol culture, Schmitz advocated for a more nuanced use of the virus-metaphor, stressing the need for further research on the interconnection of the contagious metaphors in the context of online vitriol and information culture in the digital age.

Despite the empowerment which enables online activists to strike back, the cyber sphere quite often becomes a space for highly politically polarized discussions and outward bullying itself. As BURCU ALKAN (GCSC, JLU Giessen) argued, online polylogues take place in parallel universes limited by closely tied communities of "followed-followers". While "preaching to the converted" occurs within those filter bubbles, vitriol is the only occurrence between them. Hence, the destructive power of social media jeopardizes any possibility of a consensus. Not unlike the Turkish tweets polarizing the communities in the aftermath of 2013 Istanbul revolt following the Gezi Park protests, an online chat room for Dutch audiences to discuss the burning issue of Moluccan terrorism and violent Dutch post-imperial practices seem to perpetuate political violence rather than create a safe space for negotiating political representation. GERLOV VAN ENGELENHOVEN (GCSC, JLU Giessen) presented a case study of *De Punt*. The telefilm is interpreted here as a Dutch invitation to revisit Moluccan identity politics in an all too stereotyped format of a fictionalized TV program offering not much more than well-known clichés. Moreover, by providing a limited platform for the audience to hold an exchange on their viewing experiences, the state-controlled online discussion sparked a question echoing Alkan's doubt about whether such reconciliation can ever be real. The reality is for some a depiction of Moluccans as "deviant outsiders", framing Muslims as "rapists" as EWELINA PEPIAK (IPP, JLU Giessen) showed in her talk on the public and journalistic debates after the New Year's Eve incidents in Cologne.

Visibility as Weapon: Online Bullying, Shaming, and Digital Vigilantism

The access to public visibility offered by the internet and social media platforms, turning a person into an online persona, can be an enriching tool for gaining public attention and assuming power – as MARIE JUDE BENDIOLA (University of Marburg) described. In her talk she elaborated on the context of celebrities, politicians, or citizen journalists bypassing the general press. However, the obtained power and autonomy in marketing one's own persona online and the personal affective surplus of visibility and popularity is easily taken advantage of by others, resulting in shit-storms, shaming,

or cyber-harassment. This was strikingly illustrated by ANN-MARIE RIESNER (GCSC, JLU Giessen) in a case study on the female Austrian author and artist Stefanie Sargnagel. Sargnagel, who was celebrated as the new enfant terrible in the Austrian literary scene with her atypical, provokative first two books *Binge Living: Callcenter-Monologe* (2013) and *Fitness* (2015), not only received a shit-storm over her Moroccan travel diary on *derstandard.at* in January 2017, but subsequently became victim of 'doxxing' (the practice of collecting private information and publishing them online) by the populist Austrian newspaper *Krone*, which published her private home address in a defaming article. The problem of public figures and online vitriol was also addressed by TOM CLUCAS (GCSC, JLU Giessen) in his talk "'Broadcast Yourself': The Public Hypersphere and the Limits of Free Speech". Clucas related his critique of the on- and offline trend to put the right of free speech on the same level as the right to hate with case studies from YouTube, the BBC and Facebook. In his exemplary case, he focused on the British Labour Party politician and first black Member of Parliament Diane Abbot, who faced extensive media scrutiny after presenting in radio station interview incorrect figures on the costs of the Labour Party's police policy regarding the latest terrorist attacks in London. His talk helped to highlight the shift in online commenting from a "car-crash interview" to hateful death fantasies calling for her to be "hanged from a tree, if there was one strong enough for her weight."

These issues of race, gender, and body-related shaming and online vitriol also informed the presentations by MONICA WILLIAMS (independent journalist) and STEPHANIE LOTZOW (JLU Giessen). Lotzow showed in her analysis of a self-conducted, interactive offline poster campaign on "I need feminism, because…" that trolling practices can also be found in the 'real' – even academic – world. Vitriolic statements, like "I need feminism, because I am fat and need to blame someone other than me", that were written anonymously on the campus posters, mirrored gendered body-shaming attacks that one comes across in online vitriol as well as broader misogynist tendencies. Williams, on the other hand, took the problem of trolling and vitriol back to the online (and more specific) journalist world. Along the line of several case studies of female journalists from the U.S. and Great Britain she illustrated that female, LGBT, and non-white journalist face more severe forms of online harassment and, given journalists' often blurred public/private-life-division, have limited numbers of effective counter-tools at hand. Williams' case study of KTBS 3 News African-American meteorologist anchor Rhonda Lee thereby stressed the real-life consequences of such actions. Lee was fired after responding to a racist comment on the station's official Facebook page in 2012.

How academics, journalists, and activists should best deal with online vitriol in theory and practice was also the theme of the panel discussion of the first day, chaired by Greta Olsen (JLU Giessen). Olsen diplomatically brought into conversation journalist ANDREAS SCHWARZKOPF (Frankfurter Rundschau), activist PENELOPE KEMEKENIDOU (Stop BILD Sexism), and renowned Media Studies

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
50 / 2017
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

scholar RAMÓN REICHERT (University of Vienna). By referring to the project "Geography of Hate" (conducted by Monica Stephenson at the Humboldt State University in California; http://www.floatingsheep.org/2013/05/hatemap.html), Reichert also problematized the blurring boundaries of online vitriol spreading actions and real life for research subjects by rendering their deeds visible.

Whereas online vitriol of journalists may have real-life consequences, it is less linked to real-life bullying as cyber-harassment amongst Turkish youth, on which SEDA GÖKÇE TURAN (Bahçeşehir University) reflected in her talk "Justification of Cyber-Harassment in Terms of Digital Media Literacy". While cyber-harassment amongst kids and teenagers presents itself commonly as an online extension of real-life bullying, actions on social media platforms and community Facebook-pages are far more anonymous and require less personal effort.

Another complicated issue in this regard was addressed by Media Studies scholar DANIEL TROTTIER (Erasmus University Rotterdam) in his keynote lecture on "Visibility as Vitriol: Exploring User-led Shaming" that addressed the practice of "digital vigilantism". Trottier presented several transnational case studies, such as the Facebook groups on "Women Who Eat On Tubes" (GB), "Crappy Parking in Melbourne" (Australia) or "Let's Get These People Locked Up – 2011 Vancouver Riot Pics" (Canada). He investigated the blurry lines between citizen action that subverts state legislation, vitriol, and real crime (particularly when leaning towards collecting private information and publishing them online, known as 'doxxing'). Furthermore, Trottier pointed to the difference of state reactions to such online vigilante actions by referring to group pages from Russia and China, which were endorsed by the state via direct financial support.

Online Political Engagement, Activism & Initiatives Fighting Cyber-Harassment
In the context of online political engagement, the person/persona-bias becomes translated into a user/citizen-dichotomy. In his talk on "Disrupting and Deceiving: A Phenomenological Approach to Online Political Violence", BERNARDO CAYCEDO (University of Amsterdam) presented two case studies of online civil resistance, which he linked to the concept of peaceful civil obedience. The case study from Germany focused, for example, on the breakdown of the Lufthansa airline homepage via a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) action organized by libertad.de as part of the wider Deportation Class actions against the deportation of refugees in 2001. This intervention – though perceived as violent and its initiators prosecuted – was inherently symbolic and hence rather resembles a form of peaceful sit-in in the digital age.

The blurred line between activist action and criminal deed was also addressed by PENELOPE KEMEKENIDOU, who herself is an engaged activist and member of the Stop BILD Sexism campaign.

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
50 / 2017
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

In her presentation on "'It's Nothing Personal': Misogyny as a Hate Crime", Kemekenidou raised the issue of 'doxxing' as practice both used by pick-up artists to vilify former lovers and by groups like Anonymous to fight against misogynistic violence preachers, as in the case of V. Roosh in February 2016.

The last panel on the second day of the conference, however, ended on a more optimistic note. While particularly female, non-white, LGBT journalists face severe cyber-harassment with often real-life effects of either them quitting or losing their jobs, MONICA WILLIAMS (independent journalist) finished her presentation by introducing the academic audience to already established tools for female journalists with homepages and communities such as HeartMob (https://iheartmob.org/) or TrollBusters (http://www.troll-busters.com/).

Conclusion & Further Discussions

Symbolic figures well known from European cultural history, colonial, and imperialist iconographies, as well as public debates in decades preceding the internet have contributed to the present shape of vitriol.

Certain concepts will not appear in the press or blogs, since their complexity requires more space than online journalism can provide. Therefore the "Online Vitriol"-conference, with its highly diverse contributions (from the US, the UK, Turkey, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands), addressing the global scope of the issue (Russia, China, France) in a broad chronological perspective (from the antiquity to the latest tweets), has opened the question of combining interdisciplinary efforts to combat online vitriol for further debates.

The conference will be followed by a related book project entitled: "A Rough Guide to Online Vitriol: Dealing with Violence and Activism on Social Media in Theory and Practice" (working title).

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Program

Pre-conference lecture organized by the ZMI (see lecture series "Zwischen Hetze und Meinungsfreiheit")
Moderator: Greta Olson (JLU Giessen)
• Sarah Kendzior (independent journalist): "Coping with Social Media under a Post-Truth President"

Keynote lectures
• Frans-Willem Korsten (Leiden University & Erasmus School of History, Communication and Culture): "Vitriol as an Attack on Culture: the Logic of Surplus Value and the Aestheticizing of the Political"
• Daniel Trottier (Erasmus University Rotterdam): "Visibility as Vitriol: Exploring User-led Shaming"

Session 1: History & Memory of/in Online Vitriol
Chair: Wibke Schniedermann (JLU Giessen)

• Gerlov van Engelenhoven (GCSC, JLU Giessen): "Telefilm De Punt's Online Discussion Forum: Participatory Space for Political Discussion, or Echo Chamber for the Polemical Few?"
• Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (Loyola University Chicago): "What's New About Online Vitriol? Pamphlets, Protests, and Letter Writing Campaigns and the Rise of the American Right"
• Sara Polak (Leiden University & GCSC, JLU Giessen): "Memory-making and the Birth of the 'Alt-Right' on Twitter"
• Tom Clucas (GCSC, JLU Giessen): "'Broadcast Yourself': The Public Hypersphere and the Limits of Free Speech"

Panel discussion: Dealing with Online Vitriol in Theory and Practice
Moderator: Greta Olson (JLU Giessen)

• Penelope Kemekenidou (Stop BILD Sexism)
• Ramón Reichert (University of Vienna)
• Andreas Schwarzkopf (Frankfurter Rundschau)

Session 2: Legal and Ethical Approaches
Chair: Jutta Hergenhan (JLU Giessen/ZMI)

• Penelope Kemekenidou (Stop BILD Sexism): "'It's Nothing Personal': Misogyny as a Hate Crime"
• Bernardo Caycedo (University of Amsterdam): "Disrupting and Deceiving: A Phenomenological Approach to Online Political Violence"
• Seda Gökçe Turan (Bahçeşehir University): "Justification of Cyber-harassment in Terms of Digital Media Literacy"

Roundtable Discussion of Case Studies and Ideas

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
50 / 2017
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

Moderator: Sara Polak (Leiden University & GCSC, JLU Giessen)

- Burcu Alkan (GCSC, JLU Giessen)
- Sonja Schillings (GCSC, JLU Giessen)
- Rahel Schmitz (GCSC, JLU Gießen)
- Ann-Marie Riesner (GCSC, JLU Giessen)
- Marie Jude Bendiola (Philipps University Marburg)

Session 3: Racism, Misogyny, Ableism Etc. Online
Chair: Birte Christ (JLU Giessen)

- Stephanie Lotzow (JLU Giessen): "Offline Vitriol: Reactions to a Social Experiment on Feminism" Monica Williams (independent journalist): "Fighting Back Against Online Harassment: A Case Study of Rescue Services to Support Female Journalists"
- Ewelina Pepiak (IPP, JLU Giessen): "#einearmlänge, taharrush, and "Nafris": The Online Expressions of Whiteness after New Year's Eve 2016 in Cologne"

Keynote lecture
Moderator: Sara Polak (Leiden University & GCSC, JLU Giessen)

- Sarah Kendzior (independent journalist): "Trump, Trolls, and the Truth: Digital Media in the Era of 'Alternative Facts'"

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