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## **Historical prefigurations of vitriol: communities, constituencies and plutocratic insurgency**

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MEDIAMATTERS



Edited by Sara Polak and Daniel Trottier

# Violence and Trolling on Social Media

History, Affect, and Effects  
of Online Vitriol

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## Violence and Trolling on Social Media

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# Violence and Trolling on Social Media

*History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol*

*Edited by  
Sara Polak  
and Daniel Trottier*

Amsterdam University Press

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## 4 Historical Prefigurations of Vitriol

Communities, Constituencies and Plutocratic Insurgency

*Frans-Willem Korsten*

### Abstract

The historical pivot of this chapter is the baroque 17th-century Dutch Republic where the rapidly developing printing press facilitated new forms of masking and of speed. Masked speaking allowed an anonymity in which communities came to intermingle with constituencies. In the current situation, the often used phrase of ‘online communities’ needs scrutiny, for there is little that makes such groups communities. They are entangled with social businesses and lack a complicated texture. Vitriolic online collectives are much like the religious constituencies in earlier times, in that they depend on iconic figures or platforms that attract and form groups and that vilify one another. Vitriol has become a form of socio-symbolic capital, partaking in neoliberal insurgencies that superimpose constituencies over communities.

**Keywords:** rhetorical maskedness, vitriol’s speed, community, constituency, neoliberal insurgency

‘Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses – but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to change property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping things unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life. [...] All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war.’  
– Walter Benjamin, Epilogue to *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanization*

**Figure 1** Pepe the Frog, 'This is what the most important memes used by extremists mean'



*De Correspondent*, 30 May 2018

This chapter looks at some pivotal historical prefigurations of vitriol, with a focus on vitriol's use of masks and need of speed – its 'going viral' – in relation to either communities or, better, constituencies. Nasty, masked speech was paradigmatically embodied first by the classical Greek god Momus, who would use masks to mislead or counter divine power and to create chaos. Not coincidentally, he also happened to father Rumor.<sup>1</sup> There are other historical prefigurations, to be sure. The Dutch online news medium *De Correspondent*, for instance, reproduced the image above in a contribution titled 'This is what the most important memes used by extremists mean'.<sup>2</sup>

In this case the infamous Pepe the frog is clothed as the god Kek, Egyptian god of chaos, who watches the world burn.<sup>3</sup> It might be an allusion to Steve Bannon, at some point the dominant voice of Alt-Right, who propagated

1 I will be using Rumor to indicate the god, rumour to indicate its everyday manifestation.

2 Tokmetzis, 'Dit betekenen de belangrijkste memes'.

3 Pepe the frog has real historical resonances, here. The Egyptian god Kek of Kekui was sometimes depicted with the head (not the mask) of a frog.

the total destruction of the political system so that a new one might arise.<sup>4</sup> As *De Correspondent* explains, Kek is also a term used in circles of fervent gamers, indicating fun or lol ('laugh out loud'), and it is at the basis of a virtual world: Kekistan. Still, Kek has been given a mask here, namely of Pepe. It is the both destructive and aggressively comical play with masks that is so characteristic of vitriol, and this play starts with Momus.

The functional aspect of memes, if one knows how to read the masks used, is double: they spread easily, with speed, and their message is both informative and suggestive, connoting rumour. With respect to these, I will first be looking at specific aspects of historical prefigurations of online vitriol connected to Momus, like his fathering Rumor. Its speed in classical antiquity was rather a metaphor for something else: rumour's uncontrollable spreading. Via a short detour on how medieval rumour was positively defined as talk that offered vital and valuable information to communities, I move to a qualitatively different form of masked-ness and speed in the early modern period, when vitriol's speed was technically made possible by a rapidly developing printing press. Here, people's talk came to be orchestrated in the service of powers that aimed to vectorize public debate antagonistically. In that context communities came to intermingle with constituencies and masked speaking came to facilitate an anonymity that worked to cook up political struggles. A third phase brings us to the current situation in which masks and speed have acquired an independent value in relation to forms of public talk that serve as both symbolical gratification and distraction. Here, vitriol will be considered as a form of socio-symbolic capital, partaking in neoliberal insurgencies that superimpose constituencies over communities.

### Defying sovereign power: The functions of masks and rumour's force

Between 1443 and 1450 the Italian artist Leon Battista Alberti wrote a satirical story in Latin titled *Momus*.<sup>5</sup> Existing as a manuscript first (it would be published after Alberti's death, in 1520), it was probably meant to be told or read at the court of one of Alberti's protectors: a prince. The text played with the rather popular medieval and early modern genre of the *speculum principis*, the *Fürstenspiegel* or mirror of princes, which was a genre that

4 See for instance Burton, 'Steve Bannon'.

5 Leon Batista Alberti, *Momus*.

specifically told princes or leaders how to behave.<sup>6</sup> Yet, only at the very end of the story the prince, as the symbol of political harmony and order, is addressed and given advice. Before that the text is a paradigm of what in modern times would come to be called a negative aesthetics, presenting a continuing series of nasty or dirty tricks performed by the protagonist Momus. The latter is a classical Greek god who would be taken up as an important character in the renaissance and baroque. From the eighteenth century onward he would disappear from view, but can still be traced in the English word 'mummer', a mime player, derived from French *momer*: to disguise oneself. Indeed, Momus is the god of masks. As a son of Nyx, goddess of the Night, he is a dark force. He would be the perfect patron saint for online vitriol, for he was the god of taunting, flouting and unfounded criticism.

This is how the most recent translator and editors, Sarah Knight and Victoria Brown, summarize the first part of Alberti's story in their introduction.<sup>7</sup> After Jupiter has commissioned the gods to provide the Earth with useful objects, Momus 'criticizes the efforts of other deities, and unleashes a plague of biting insects upon the world. Momus' duplicitous lover, the goddess Mischief, plots to have him exiled from Olympos, and tricks him into treacherous statements about Jupiter's regime. Jupiter discovers Momus's disloyalty and the other gods demand that he be punished.' Fleeing to earth, Momus 'poses first as a poet, then as a philosopher to spread slander against the gods and foment atheism.' So the gods send Virtue, together with her children Praise, Trophy and Triumph, to get Momus back on the right path. Yet being the god of deceit, Momus can change into anything he wants, and now he changes himself into the ugly Thersites, who then turns beautiful because of relentless prayer. Momus's tactic, here, is to make all women pray so that the gods will be overwhelmed with prayer, 'making them cantankerous,' because they now are forced to work. Then he goes to the temple of Justice, where Virtue holds sway, and rapes her daughter Praise. Out of this enforced union a child is born: Rumor. The goddess Fortune immediately realizes what a dangerous force has now come into being and 'urges Hercules, Praise's suitor and Momus's enemy, to capture Rumor'. Yet

6 For an overview, see Bejczy and Nederman. *Princely Virtues in the Middle Ages*. Peter Stacey builds forth on Quentin Skinner's analysis of Macchiavelli's *The Prince* and its indebtedness to the genre, by pointing to its classical prefigurations: Stacey, *Roman Monarchy and the Renaissance Prince*, pp. 4-5.

7 Brown and Knight, 'Introduction'.

Rumor 'flies up to heaven dragging Hercules with her' and deposits him in the house of Mars' ('Introduction', viii-ix).

Alberti's story illustrates a dominant characteristic of vitriol throughout the ages, which is not only that it prefers to appear masked, but that it can easily swap masks and positions. Moreover, Momus is not only a figure of multiple masks, but he also turns into an allegorical meta-mask, one that speaks to Alberti's time in terms of a classical other. Due to the character's mask and its allegorical doubling, Momus may invoke laughter. It is a form of laughter, however, that has little to do with humour because there is always pain involved, the pain of others and that inflicted on others. A specific case is when Momus rapes Virtue's daughter, Praise. The result is Rumor. With respect to this, one function of the masks is that without them the infliction of pain would be too real. The other function is that the masks work in a carnevalesque context, in which divine or sovereign powers are being defied and defiled, or temporarily subverted.<sup>8</sup>

Momus's carnevalesque behaviour and unreliability confuses the gods and they are not inclined to invite Momus in their tent to have him take a piss out, though as a result they run the risk of his pissing in from the outside (I am referring here to a phrase by US president Lyndon Johnson on J. Edgar Hoover, first director of the FBI, that he had rather have him piss out than piss in; quoted in *The New York Times* of 31 October 1971). This is why the gods want Momus out of the vicinity of their tent. Still, at some point he suddenly appears to have his uses. He makes people pray more than they did before. So Jupiter invites him back. Then Momus starts to plant the idea in Jupiter's head that the world, especially mankind, should be destroyed in order to make it craftily anew again, an idea that will keep the gods busy for most of the rest of the story. Here Momus loses his carnevalesque nature of playfully subverting order and turns into a demiurge or some sort of engineer; a chilling prefiguration of modern figures. The crafty, playing, both masked and masking, carnevalesque Momus comes to prefigure a political actor that we know from futurist manifestos with their *fiat ars – pereat mundus*: let art rule even if the world perishes. Or Momus manifests himself in line, here, with what Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis defined as the key marker of utopian thinking: the world that *is* has to be destroyed first before we can get to the ideal situation of a new world (also Steve Bannon's favourite

8 Probably the Netherlands' first carnevalesque society, founded in Maastricht in 1839, named itself Momus; see <http://www.mestreechtersteerke.nl/paggebmomus.htm>. Last accessed March 2018.

scenario, as we saw above).<sup>9</sup> That is to say: Momus may prefigure all those that find 'anything better' than current circumstances, or all those types that want to destroy the status quo by organizing chaos, so that the world can be built anew.

Considering Momus as a possible prefiguration of vitriol, I found the following aspects to be of interest: 1. Momus wants to destroy order or harmony. Yet would he be living in disorder he would start to promote order, just to be able to destroy it again. In this sense he is not a truly *political* actor that wants to build or make worlds but one that wants to destroy worlds. Making one anew serves only the purpose of its possible destruction. 2. Accordingly, he may act rhetorically but he lacks a proper, rhetorically convincing goal. One could, for instance, ethically defend an actor who strategically wants to unveil the hypocrisy of gods. Yet Momus does not mind hypocrisy for ethical reasons nor does he have a true strategy to counter such hypocrisy. He works mostly through tactics, 'acts of arrangement'. He is much like a stage director setting up his own theatrical scenes. 3. As senseless as it is to ask what motivates Venus to be the goddess of love or Mars the god of war, as senseless is it to ask what motivates Momus's actions. In a classical frame of mind, in the context of an honour and shame culture, his lacking understandable intentions and motivations imply that Momus will not, and cannot, be brought to justice. He only can be fought. 4. When he has fled to Earth, Momus poses as poet or philosopher. One could consider these two as the epitome of hypocrisy, in their capacity to say whatever one wants, yet Momus's impersonation also symbolizes the radically open potential in language. If literature's task and aim, in the end, is 'to say all' as Derrida wanted it, this also implies the possibility of a relentless production of filth. 5. His being a poet/philosopher, finally, leaves open the possibility that Momus embodies the radical potential in and of critique. This, at least, is why he was considered positively by humanists such as Erasmus and Giordano Bruno.

The latter, in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, used Momus to criticize the corruption and perversion of ruling elites, especially the all-powerful Catholic church.<sup>10</sup> At the same time Momus was also considered negatively, as when Martin Luther compared Erasmus to a modern Momus because of what Luther considered to be Erasmus' sacrilegious standpoints.<sup>11</sup>

9 Achterhuis, *De Utopie van de Vrije Markt*.

10 Giordano Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*.

11 Arnoud Visser states it as follows, quoting from Luther's *Tischreden* (book 1, no. 811): 'It confirmed his image of *Erasmus* as a new *Momus*, the ancient god of satire, who 'ridicules and plays with everything, the entire faith and Christ.' To this end, *Erasmus* was 'thinking up

The mask of Momus, and by implication vitriol, has a double function, then, in relation to power. The Momus mask serves those who speak against power; or helps those who run a risk. Yet Bruno's using Momus as a mask did not avoid his dying on the stake. The reason may be that the Momus mask can also serve those in power to accuse a speaker of being a Momus. Or, whereas on the one hand Momus can be used as a mask to hide from ruling powers in order to look for some form of freedom of speech, on the other hand he can be used as a mask that serves to vilify those to whom the mask is applied. As Luther's attack on Erasmus illustrates, the name of Momus worked as a meme that was functional in what would later become shaming, or a shitstorm.

Using Momus as an easily readable meme to attack others with, introduces the aspect of speed and of suggestion. Both are addressed in Alberti's text when Momus rapes Praise as a result of which a new creature comes to life: Rumor – a semi-divine creature with wings. Ovid, in the 12<sup>th</sup> book of the *Metamorphoses*, tells that Rumor has his palace at the connecting point of sky, earth and seas in a palace that is made of brass so that it can amplify and echo everything. This is an index to the kind of speed at stake. Rumor does not surprise or have power because it can move faster than a horse (it cannot, in Ovid's and Alberti's world). Rather, horses can only speed towards one goal and get tired in the course of it, while rumours swerve and swirl to all sides while gaining energy.<sup>12</sup> Rumours do not *have* speed, that is, they rather suggest speed, in their uncontrollable spreading to all sides, as a result of which they pop up at unexpected places and come to have a force that has outgrown any original source. Allegorically captured in the figure of Rumor, rumour becomes a separate subject with independent agency that has a powerful and potentially disturbing or destructive function when it can 'fly' to all sides, as it could in Rome or, by extension, in the Roman empire.

Still, rumour also had a positive value in the context of the construction and functioning of medieval communities. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Innocent III stated: 'It is not so much that the judge is himself the accuser; rather it is as if *fama* were accusing and clamor denouncing.' Here, *fama* came to indicate, positively, 'the voice of the injured community' and as such it became immensely important in the medieval honour and shame culture, to the extent that even when no explicit complaint had been brought

ambiguous and equivocal words day and night, so that his books can even be read by a Turk.' Visser, 'Erasmus, Luther, and the Margins of Biblical Misunderstanding', p. 248.

12 Kuehn, 'Fama as a Legal Status in Renaissance Florence'.



forward, city judges could use *fama* as a motivation for inquiry.<sup>13</sup> In other words: *fama* was valuable information, pronounced by 'a sort of collective voice'.<sup>14</sup> This is why in *The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail use the term 'talk', to avoid the pejorative term *gossip*. The latter acquired its bad name in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but etymologically means *godsibb* ('relative in God'), connoting the talk people had at happy or festive events. Happy talk was *community* talk, then, and *fama* was pivotal when the community was somehow injured. In this context, *fama* was informative and had a shaping force: It was the expression of an existing community or something used to restore or establish a community.

Yet when the medieval world changed into the urban mercantilist and legalized culture of early modern Europe, *fama*, as community talk, also changed in nature. At first it 'was fleeting, aspectual and notoriously protean; it was a process, rather than the fixed, unchanging memory that written records necessarily convey to us'.<sup>15</sup> Yet in the late Middle Ages, 'the capacity of talk to serve as legitimate and widely acknowledged legal, social, and moral agent' came to be taken up by professional agents, operating in the service of bureaucracies.<sup>16</sup> *Fama* became an essential component in courts of law where what people said about something or someone, as 'common knowledge', would become fact.<sup>17</sup> The performative changed into constative as a consequence: talk became fact. In the process *fama* not only came to replace the *ordeal* as a mode of proof,<sup>18</sup> it also lost its suggestion of speed because it was written down and archived. Coincidentally, it changed colour in terms of gender because knowledge was *common* on the basis of talk or gossip that was predominantly a female affair, while in courts it became a male issue.<sup>19</sup>

The move from *fama* on the floor of daily society to the legal system implied different functions in the service of cultural homogenization or cultural hegemony and growing state control. It was also intrinsic to a shift from what was an honour and shame culture to a culture that was based, in a fully Christianized Europe, on internalized and

13 Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law*, pp. 19-20.

14 Bettoni, 'Fama, Shame Punishment and Metamorphoses'.

15 Fenster and Smail (eds), *Fama. The Politics of Talk*, p. 6 (Introduction).

16 '...in medieval societies, talk did many of the things that in modern society are handled, officially, by bankers, credit bureaus, lawyers, state archives, and so on', Fenster and Smail (eds), *Fama. The Politics of Talk*, p. 9 (Introduction).

17 Kuehn, 'Fama as a Legal Status in Renaissance Florence', p. 29.

18 Hyams, 'Due Process versus the Maintenance of Order in European Law', p. 82.

19 Kuehn, 'Fama as a Legal Status in Renaissance Florence', p. 34.

provable guilt, and by implication liability. This is why 'bad talk' would become punishable, in its being maliciously disinformative. It became a prefiguration, that is of fake news. Now that valuable and trustworthy information had become the domain of experts, the question became what role was left for public, community talk. I move to a second phase in the genealogy of vitriol.

### **Fuelling antagonism: Communities intermingling with constituency**

In Dutch the genre of the *schimpdicht* has a rich history, so rich that it has two synonyms: *hekeldicht* and *scheldgedicht*. In English *satire* is the average translation; in German *Spottgedicht*, in French *satire*, *brocard*, *flèche*. Yet the Dutch verbs *beschimpn*, *hekelen*, and *schelden* are not so much satirical as vitriolic in nature. They mean: to scoff; to jeer; to denounce; to decry; to castigate; to curse; to scold; to swear; to call names. The aggressive and potentially violent type of poetry of the 'hekeldicht' is abundantly present in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Republic, in the context of a fierce and decades-long political battle between Dutch Republicans and Orangists, who longed for a quasi-royal ruler for the Dutch Republic. One such ruler was prince William III of Orange (1650-1702), who was behind a flood of vilifying pamphlets, mostly anonymous ones, or written under a pseudonym in the period leading up to a pivotal year in Dutch politics, 1672, that would definitely end the republican nature of the Republic.<sup>20</sup>

With Momus the mask was functional to subvert power, or to protect the radical speaker against supreme powers. With *fama*, considered as the collective voice of an injured community, public talk had to appear mask-less even if its original source would not be known. It concerned what one had *heard*, and one who had appeared masked could be punished for arousal and bad talk. The 17<sup>th</sup> century masks, however, were used in the context of what one could call free, public speech. Here, masks were used in the service of a power that secretly wanted to close down the public political realm while using that public realm's space of freedom. It is telling that John de Witt, the political, republican leader of the times and proponent of 'the true freedom' had recurrently asked the prince to stop his attempts to rouse the sentiments of the common folk, who for more than a century had supported the house of Orange.

20 Harms, *Pamfletten*, p. 169.

For this arousal, William of Orange made use of the astounding developments in the Dutch printing press. Pamphlets could be made almost impromptu and spit out in numbers with great speed. The speed of rumour that was formerly only metaphorical, a matter of suggestion, now made way for technically produced real speed, that effectively made public debate as a *debate* impossible. Speed served forms of arousal, which, most of the time, tapped into earlier moments of disruption (an issue central to the second chapter in this section). For instance, almost half a century before the pivotal year 1672, stadholder Maurits had organized the execution of another state pensionary, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who was, like John de Witt, the Republic's most important public official. This older figure, from 1618, could easily be fused with de Witt, as in this poem:

The ghost of Oldenbarnevelt, enemy of the land, arch-traitor  
 Come back to life in De Wit, cursed by the common folk  
 As bastard, piece of shit, and son of such progenitor  
 Born only to trample the country's prosperity  
 Is brought here next to him, comparable in virtue and deeds  
 Two enemies of the state (each in turn)  
 Betraying church and fatherland by perjuries  
 In such a way that even baby's eyes'd come to burn  
 Who have nevertheless received their deserved reward  
 One, on the court's scaffold, had his head chopped off first  
 The other was trampled, heart-ripped, hung, and torn apart  
 Because of a rightful revenge, swollen till it burst.<sup>21</sup>

The verbal violence is both performative and constative, here. In 1672, circles around William III had organized a lynching party in the course of which the bodies of John and Cornelis de Witt had not just been mutilated but had been torn apart, intestines had been eaten raw, their hearts had been ripped out and their naked bodies, or what was left of them, were

21 "t Leven en Bedrijf van Mr. Jan van Oldenbarnevelt nagevolgt van Mr. Jan de Wit.' Knuttel 10433: 'De geest van Barnevelt, 's Landsvyant, aartsverrader. / Herlevende in de Wit, vervloekt van het gemeen, / als Bastaart aterlingh, en Zoon van sulk een Vader: / Gebooren om 's Lantsheyl met voeten te vertrêen; / wort hier by hem gepaart. Gelijk in deuchde en daaden. / Twee vyanden van Staat, (maar ider op sijn beurt:) / om Kerk en Vaderlandt mejneedich te verraden, / Daar noch den Suygelingh sou hebben om getreurt; / Maar hebben (Godt sy dank) hun loon na werk ontfangen, / den een op 't hofschavot ten kosten van zijn Kop. / Den anderen vertrappt, onthart, verscheurt, gehangen, / Van rechtgetergde wraak, gesteegeen hoogh in top'.

hung, publicly, in the centre of The Hague. The poem forgets to mention that body parts were traded.

This brutal violence did not come out of the blue. On the morning of lynching day a text was hammered on the door of The New Church, in the centre of The Hague and close to the prison where de Witt's brother, Cornelis, had been tortured and was still imprisoned. It said:

Belzebub is writing from hell  
That Kees de Wit is done for, arrive he shall,  
He is waiting for him in the coming day  
But first his head should be chopped away  
And his brother is a villain too<sup>22</sup>

The one who was probably responsible for this text was preaching a day later, in a church filled to the brim, that the murder on the brothers was the revenge of God: a clear hint of how the political, the religious and the cultural coincided. The Orthodox Protestant desire for a state religion matched the Orangist's longing for the conflation of royal house with state. In contrast, the brothers de Witt belonged to the more tolerant parties, who saw religions flourish in a Republic for all. The battle between the two concerned an irreconcilable difference in the distribution of power and the organization of public space. Were regents in charge and did religion have a subservient place, or was religious rule to be fused with that of the sovereign? Was public space to be like the inner court of a ruler's house or should it be as open as a market? The models were not just different but disparate, and political agonism easily toppled over into antagonism.<sup>23</sup>

As the very term antagonism suggests, one can hardly speak of public *debate*, in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century context. Rather, radical parties were battling one another, not just Catholics, and radical Protestants or atheists, but also Anabaptists, Coornhertists, David-Jorists, Arminians, Gomarists, Socinianists, or Vorstians,<sup>24</sup> and others. They all were fighting to have

22 The minister responsible for the text was called Simon Simonides. In the original: 'Belsebub schrijft uit de Hel / Dat Kees de Wit haast komen zel / Hij wacht hem in korte dagen / Maar zijn kop moet eerst zijn afgeslagen / En zijn broer is ook een schelm' See Van Gemert, 'De Haagsche Broeder-Moord: Oranje ontmaskerd'.

23 I am referring here to a distinction made by Chantal Mouffe, with her pivotal distinction between politics and the political in *On the Political*.

24 For instance, *Vorstians* were followers of Conrad Vorstius (1569-1622) who was asked to occupy the seat in Leiden University that was left empty after the death of Arminius.


a voice, to establish a constituency, in an endeavour to establish a new world. The difference between community and constituency is pivotal in this respect. If citizens were tied to existing communities at first, they could also become part now of new entities that depended on leading, often charismatic figures who would parade, explicitly or implicitly, as a new Messiah. In this context, conceptually speaking, 'the Dutch Republic was not the solution to a political problem. It rather posed the problem of the political. Being ruled by a king first, the Low Countries had to solve the problem of how to rule themselves.'<sup>25</sup> In having to rule themselves, the Dutch had to be able to deal with radical cultural diversity in a dynamic that was driven as much by flexible constituencies as by relatively stable communities. A key problem, in this context, was not so much how to choose for one world instead of another, but how to keep the body politic together, either as one homogenized house, or as the complicated texture of peoples with different interests and cultures. As we will see in the next part of this chapter, it is this *work* to keep the body politic together that is exploited by vitriolic actors.

If vitriol is aiming at antagonizing the body politic, this is indeed the opposite of what one could call a public *debate*. Moreover, once in play, it is difficult to stop the antagonism. This is evidenced by the fact that, almost a century later, the political split that characterized the Dutch Republic re-materialized in the 'war of the de Witts' in 1757. It was a culture war of public debate in journals, newspapers and pamphlets, defending or attacking the republican brothers. One such pamphlet is shown below (Figure 2).<sup>26</sup>

The print shows men who crush pencils or cut texts with a knife, thus allegorically indicating a war of words. The first line of the poem underneath the etch reads: 'How is *fama* still roaring with her raw trumpets / about the innocent blood...'<sup>27</sup> Here, *fama* is informative in pronouncing out loud that innocent victims have fallen by the hands of tyrants. The big book in front is defined as the Bible of the Synod: an index to the Calvinist endeavour to install a monopoly by state religion. The both literal and figural violence comes, then, from the side of the so-called tolerant, republican Arminians who are fighting the texts that were used to legitimate the murder of those who, in their eyes, were innocent.

25 Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque*, p. 22.

26 'Spotprent op de strijd tussen arminianen en calvinisten over de geboeders De Witt en de prinsgezinden, ca. 1758, anonymous, 1756-1759', *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*; <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-84.500>. Accessed March 2018.

27 In Dutch: 'Hoe schatert noch de faam met haren rooue trompetten / over het onnoosel bloet [...]'.  


**Figure 2** 'Cartoon about the fight between Arminians and Calvinists about the De Witt Brothers and the royalists'



Ca. 1758, Anonymous, 1756-1759, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

In relation to the previous medieval phase, we see a reversal, here, of the use of *fama*. When historiography had come to work in the service of political powers, talk became the domain where repressed voices could be heard. Its defining marker was no longer speed but its unstoppable, time transcending potential. Speed had become the prerogative of the printing press. This, in turn, has come to change in our times, now that slow, or time transcending collective talk has acquired a technologically enhanced speed, as a result of which collective talk and writing come to be conflated, and a battle about the informative quality of public talk ensues. Whereas in the medieval context experts had come to take over trustworthy information from *fama*, claiming it as their domain, nowadays public talk has come to

target experts as untrustworthy, paradoxically claiming back an informative status while using all the qualities of fictitious rumour.

## Online communities as constituencies

One can pick a paradigmatic case every hour of the day, but let me take one of three Dutch journalists, Rosanne Hertzberger, Loes Reijmer, and columnist Heleen Mees, who addressed the coincidence of vitriol, pornification and misogyny on two online Dutch news media: *GeenStijl* and *Dumpert*. The first literally means 'Nostyle'; it is a pun that might be translated as *Badform*. *Dumpert*, connotes the English 'to dump'. Both were, in first instance, platforms of TMG Digital, part of the Telegraaf Media Group – part of an official right-wing media group, that is, with a turnover of 35 million euros. Despite its being part of a journalistically oriented media group, the subtitle on the *GeenStijl* site perverted any journalistic attitude in stating: 'insinuating, unfounded and needlessly offensive.'<sup>28</sup> Perhaps they should have called themselves Momus. Whatever the name, in 2017 the site was visited monthly by 1.9 million visitors, while *Dumpert* with 8 million visitors got 151 million video views per month.<sup>29</sup>

Especially Loes Reijmer's critical article in the national newspaper *De Volkskrant* provoked a fierce reaction. On 25 March 2017 at 10:54 a.m., *GeenStijl* posted her photograph with the text: 'Would you *do* her?' The first response came at 10:56. Within hours, 254 derogative responses followed, published online, including rape phantasies, some elaborate. There were twenty-five comments on 26 March; the two last ones came in on 27 March; the rest was from the very same day, 25 March. Considering that several texts were repulsive, one wonders what the comments said that were removed, or what the persons who were banned from the site contributed. After years of intimidation, with a growing number of journalists being victim of online threats and insults, and a growing problem of self-censorship, two Dutch national newspapers, *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant*, decided to publish a pamphlet in which companies that advertise on *GeenStijl* were asked to withdraw their money. Some of them did. In response *GeenStijl* published the

28 In Dutch: 'tendentieus, ongefundeerd en nodeloos kwetsend'; <http://www.geenstijl.nl/>. Tellingly, in June 2017, the new owner of TMG, Het Vlaamse Mediahuis, made public it wanted to buy and then sell *GeenStijl*, but then didn't.

29 <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nederland/rel-met-adverteerders-geenstijl-kan-uitgever-tmg-miljoenen-kosten>. Accessed July 2017.

list of those who had signed the pamphlet. These were insulted, threatened or put on what one voice called ‘an execution list’.

In terms of style, morality or ethics, the indecencies allowed, provoked, facilitated, or used by *GeenStijl* call to mind the comment of Joseph Welch when provoked by Joseph McCarthy during the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954: ‘Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?’ The very McCarthy period may have been one of the first examples we have in modern times of media driven vitriol, which served the purpose of eliminating communism, the political alternative to capitalist, corporative democracy. The comparison may also serve to highlight how McCarthyism, with its anchors in several cultural currents and undercurrents, was more prominently a matter of producing new forms of constituencies rather than of mobilizing existing communities.

Despite the often used phrase of online *communities* there is little that makes these groups communities in the proper sense of the term. They are entangled with social businesses and lack the complicated *texture* of culture: a texture consisting of the nuances or differences that characterize a community not bound by one homogenous culture but consisting of a network of cultures. It may be clear, here, that I am talking about a different kind of community than the one glorified under fascism and Nazism. As Susan Sontag argued in her analysis of fascist aesthetics: ‘The exaltation of community does not preclude the search for absolute leadership; on the contrary, it may inevitably lead to it.’<sup>30</sup> Such exaltation is also at work in the attempts of the extreme right to reinvigorate national identities. Yet in the current circumstances it is the combined exaltation of community with the flexibility of constituency that propels neoliberal strategies and tactics. When Pierre Bourdieu defined neoliberalism as a relentless attack on collectives, he meant collectives that are cultural in nature.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, vitriolic online collectives are much like the religious constituencies in the Dutch Republic, in that they depend on iconic figures or platforms that *attract* and form groups and that vilify one another. As bodies of constituents – people ‘who appoint or elect a representative’ – they form flexible and competitive wholes based on personal and stylistic ties. They use certain expressive forms of self-articulation or self-actualization, yet they miss pivotal elements needed for the cultural build-up of communities in the sense of their

30 Sontag, ‘Fascinating Fascism’.

31 As for communities in the context of neoliberalism, I follow the analysis of Kelly and Caputo, *Community*.



connoting 'society, fellowship, friendly intercourse; courtesy, affability.' They are not cultural at all if we specify culture with Griselda Pollock as 'the imaginative faculty that can grasp multiple life worlds, different experiences, and the nature of change and the function of creativity based on work.'<sup>32</sup>

Instead of being cultural in nature, allowing the formation, continuation or establishment of communities, vitriol is rather aesthetic in nature in the sense of an anti-aesthetics. The latter serves what Susan Buck-Morss defined as especially fascism's ability to tap in on a typically modern anaesthetized aesthetics,<sup>33</sup> using 'media which rob our senses of experiential connection and instead drug us into a blank "aesthetic" enjoyment of self-destruction.' Vitriol's speed partly fits such a form of anaesthetizing aesthetics, yet can be explained differently still.

### Speed in the age of plutocracies: The subversion of power revisited

Online vitriol is not concrete or meaningful in the sense of its having semantic use value. This would fall under the rubric of making sense by means of communication, like *talk* that holds a community together on the basis of culture. The value of online vitriol consists in how it appears on a market of exchange, much like a discursive commodity. Here, online vitriol's *real* speed gets another force. If it does not go viral, it means nothing, or has no value. Vitriol only superficially resembles early modern rumour, here, with the printing press spitting out pamphlets. Its desire and ability 'to go viral' within hours, lingering on for some days, but often not much longer, embodies something else. Speed has gained an independent value, in some sense valued higher than content. I read vitriol, here, not so much as an analogy to, but as a symptom of a neo-liberal capitalism that resonates with the first anarchic phase of capitalism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a form of anarcho-capitalism.<sup>34</sup>

I am following the analysis here of Chrystia Freeland, who before she became minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada wrote *Sale of the Century* (2000), sketching Russia's transition from communism to anarcho-capitalism, and *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone*

<sup>32</sup> Pollock, 'Saying NO!', p. 333.

<sup>33</sup> Buck Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics'.

<sup>34</sup> Fulcher, *Capitalism*, p. 38.

*Else* (2012). Moreover, I follow the analysis of Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker in *Global Criminal and Sovereign Free Economies and the Demise of the Western Economies: Dark Renaissance* (2014). Bunker and Bunker describe two insurgencies that are taking place simultaneously: one plutocratic in nature, embodied in the international elite of the ultra-wealthy; one criminal in nature, embodied in the 'deviant globalization's winners', as Nils Gilman (historian in global developments and author of *Mandarins of the Future*, 2004) defined them in his foreword:

Unlike classic twentieth-century insurgents, who sought control over the state apparatus in order to implement social reforms, criminal and plutocratic insurgents do not seek to take over the state. Nor do they wish to destroy the state, since they rely, like parasites, on the state to provide the legacy goods of social welfare [...] Rather, their aim is simpler: to carve out de facto zones of autonomy for themselves by crippling the state's ability to constrain their freedom of (economic) action.<sup>35</sup>

Online vitriol partly partakes in this double insurgency. It does not speak against real power, but serves the real powers that want to weaken the state. For instance, the multi-billionaire Koch brothers in the United States, of Koch Industries, which made its basic capital with cracking techniques in the thirties and forties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have funded multiple projects of disinformation, which have also produced vitriol.<sup>36</sup> The 'Competitive Enterprise Institute', for one, and funded in part by the Koch brothers, by mouth of Rand Simberg, targeted climate scientist Michael Mann by comparing him with a child molester.<sup>37</sup> Much vitriol, moreover, is close to being criminal in the sense that it can be brought to court; some of it is allied to criminal organizations, whether these are political or so-called entrepreneurial in nature.

Those who truly *own* power, without being responsibly *in* power, know quite well how to aestheticize politics by means of vitriol, in order to avoid the mobilization of forces that want to change property relations for real. In this context vitriol can be seen as a topsy turvy form of what Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron coined symbolic capital, with which they

35 Gilman, 'Foreword: the Twin Insurgency – Facing Plutocrats and Criminals', p. xx.

36 See [http://www.ucsusa.org/global\\_warming/solutions/fight-misinformation/global-warming-skeptic.html#.WT6hVMakLIU](http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/solutions/fight-misinformation/global-warming-skeptic.html#.WT6hVMakLIU). Accessed March 2018.

37 See [http://www.ucsusa.org/our-work/center-science-and-democracy/protecting-scientists-harassment/va-ag-timeline.html#.WT6i\\_8akLIU](http://www.ucsusa.org/our-work/center-science-and-democracy/protecting-scientists-harassment/va-ag-timeline.html#.WT6i_8akLIU). Accessed March 2018.

indicated the not straightforwardly financial or economic possessions and capabilities of the French elite but a symbolic capital that was the opposite of social capital.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the first is, indeed, elitist and can be radically anti-social or shamelessly individual, the latter is collective and indeed socio-cultural in nature. With vitriol the two become perversely entangled as socio-symbolic capital: a collective form of anti-social, symbolic capital. And analogous to non-symbolic or concrete capital, it exploits public services, like the internet, and it feeds on something else, namely communal life.

Whereas the political realm consists in and due to conflict, or *agon*, the *work* of the body politic at the same time is to keep people together, respecting differing interests and socio-cultural differences. In other words, politics has to facilitate and guarantee a texture of cultures that does not exist as one unity, what one could call the fetish of the nation state, but that defines a *political*, that is to say internally conflicting, unit. The pivotal political work to accept such conflicts while avoiding dissolution, has become precarious nowadays because neo-liberal actors have succeeded in redefining the *work* of the body politic as *labour*, something that can be bought and exploited. In this context, vitriol affectively exploits communal life, using its attention and affective resources for the creation of socio-symbolic surplus value. Since time is of the essence, here, this explains vitriol's need of speed. There is nothing in terms of content, or use value, that needs to come on the discursive market with this *speed*. The speed is needed only to make a discursive profit. As a consequence, cultural expression gets a different nature and status.

In comparison with medieval talk, vitriol is a hybrid conflation of talk and written language that constantly moves to and from between being a performative and a constative. Talk and fact alternate. And whereas in medieval courts *fama* came to replace the ordeal as a mode of proof as information, in the case of vitriol *fama* is used to fuel a public ordeal on the basis of disinformation. Considered as a form of expression *per se*, vitriol 'talk' is a form of discursive possession and as such the opposite of what Giorgio Agamben defined as 'pure language', the language of a community to come.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, online vitriol is an attack on culture, with culture defined as the complex texture that both holds together and empowers a communal entity with a living culture. In attacking this culture, vitriol is symptomatic of a neo-liberal capitalist system that has perhaps reached a

38 Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education*.

39 See, for instance, Agamben, *Language and Death*.

limit, but not the limit of growing inequality.<sup>40</sup> To avoid any serious dealing with this growing inequality, plutocrats grant peoples expression, while 'on no account granting them rights'. If capitalism celebrates the victory of the desire for possession over that of enjoyment, as Marx wanted it, vitriol should be seen in the light of possession rather than enjoyment.<sup>41</sup> When Thorstein Veblen talked about symbolic capital, in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), he indicated how the nouveau riche used displays of wealth to compete with upper classes that previously had been at untouchable social heights.<sup>42</sup> This dynamic appears now to have been reversed. Those who will never belong to the international elite, and have little money to mirror them because they belong to the parties exploited and marginalized by the processes of globalization, are granted to possess their own digito-discursive, socio-symbolic surplus value. They may feel this gives them some sort of purchasing power. In effect it gives them nothing but a hollow gratification.

In terms of historical comparison they are not part of a newly proletarianized mass, moreover, like in Walter Benjamin's times, for the current masses are split up, in a new kind of *Lumpenproletariat* and a *precariate*. Both are struggling to survive, the first by looking for the chance and the moment that they are given some sort of labour, the second by trying to stay desperately in the system. Both are inclined to form *constituencies* that are granted expression with all sorts of devices as a result of which they tend to forget that they have no real chance to change any property relations. The real financial surplus value owned by the plutocracies of this world, meanwhile, remains untouched, in its swiftly moving wherever it is safe for the time being. This is not to say that vitriol is simply the tool of an international plutocracy, the elite of the ultra-wealthy. Still, it has its *function* in arousing people's emotion on all sorts of topics, as long as the topic is not the enormous inequality of wealth and property. Any dealing with vitriol that considers it *per se*, misses the symptomatic nature of vitriol, that is to say: its mediated relation with neo-liberal insurgencies and current plutocracies. Such a dealing *per se* will mistake vitriol's anger for real whereas it is at best a veil, and more probably an entangled knot of despair and manipulated consciousness.

40 In *The Death of a Discipline* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak distinguished between the global as 'the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere' and the planetary – 'the planet is a species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan' (Spivak, *The Death*, p. 72). This was a way of defining and distinguishing a whole that is marked by respect for difference in contrast with a system that imposes the same logic everywhere.

41 Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts*.

42 See Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

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