

Despicable public personas: Dynamics of infamy in digital culture

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Abstract

This introductory essay frames the special issue *Despicable public personas: Dynamics of infamy in digital culture* by examining how platformized and polarized media environments are reshaping the relationship between public condemnation, visibility, and fame. Its first section traces a shift from “polarizing celebrities” to “celebrities of polarization”, arguing that digital culture has intensified a move from figures who are hated because they are famous, to figures who become famous because they are hated, and further toward personae whose despicability is anticipated and strategically mobilized. The second section revisits Gary Alan Fine’s account of reputational politics and extends it to contemporary platform culture, identifying five key factors in the making of despicable public personas: new reputational entrepreneurs, spectacle, architectures of visibility, spectatorial practices, and strategies of vice-signalling. The third section develops the case of Fabrizio Corona as an emblematic example of these dynamics, showing how a figure once framed as a scandalous villain can survive condemnation, reposition himself as commentator and moral entrepreneur, and turn stigma into narrative capital. The essay concludes with an overview of the articles included in the issue.

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From polarizing celebrities to celebrities of polarization

By 1956, Elvis was already much more than a rising star. He had become a key point of contact between youthful enthusiasm, adult moral panic, and new forms of commercial exploitation that capitalized on both. What made him so controversial was not only the music, but also his disruptive stage presence, described in the press of the time as “vulgar” and “animalistic” (Doss, 1999). The controversies sparked by his television performances in 1956, culminating in the national spectacle built around *The Ed Sullivan Show*,

unfolded within a context saturated with anxieties about sex, youth, and the stability of social order.

In that climate, dislike of Elvis quickly became part of the circuitry of his celebrity. A widely circulated rhyme of the time went, “Love me tender / love me quick / Elvis Presley / makes me sick” (Doss, 1999). It was in this context that Colonel Tom Parker made the astute decision to market badges bearing slogans such as “I Hate Elvis” and “Elvis is a Jerk” alongside celebratory ones. The move makes full sense only within a licensing strategy without precedent at the time, one that, in a matter of months, turned Elvis into a vehicle for clothing, cosmetics, accessories, toys, and countless other commodities, generating US\$22 million in merchandise sales by the end of 1956.

In the “I Hate Elvis” case, the conversion of outrage into attention, and of attention into economic value, was the result of a shrewd and openly opportunistic managerial intuition. In today’s platformized public sphere, the same conversion appears far less exceptional. It has become close to a default condition of creator culture. Negative affect now functions as a cross-cutting resource in the production of visibility for influencers, legacy media personalities, businesses, politicians, and entrepreneurs.

This was not a sudden shift. From the early development of the media environment that took shape in the first decade of the 2000s, figures targeted by moral condemnation and ridicule began to acquire a peculiar form of visibility and social centrality, one that marked a significant intensification of older dynamics. Across both mass media and social media, an increasing number of phenomena point to a widening overlap between fame and infamy. Reality and talent television offer an early and obvious example. A wide range of contestants achieved notoriety through derision and humiliation (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004; Montemurro and Benfield, 2015), so much so that the first decade of the century was described as witnessing a “return of the fool” to the television arena (Rojek, 2012). More broadly, the denigration of stars has become a constitutive feature of contemporary celebrity culture (Johansson, 2006; Turner, 2014). This is evident in the tabloid construction of the “trainwreck,” in the spectacle of celebrity decline, especially in relation to women (Negra and Holmes, 2011), working-class figures (Tyler and Bennett, 2010; Ricci, 2014), and those minor media personalities often described as “D-list celebrities” (Palmer, 2005).

Ridicule, disdain, and moral sanction are even more central to the celebrification of ordinary people (Williamson, 2010; Turner, 2010). As non-celebrities acquire sudden public visibility, narratives of democratized media access and promised social mobility collide with media rituals in which atypical subjects or people from subordinate classes are exposed to public denigration for their lack of talent, education, or taste.

The increasing visibility of contempt and ridicule became even more explicit in the early phases of Web 2.0, when mockery emerged as one of the main engines of online circulation. What are now “historical” viral phenomena, such as *Star Wars Kid*, *Leave Britney Alone*, or *Bed Intruder*, showed how digital propagation was often entangled with a tongue-in-cheek or sardonic attitude at best, and with outright acts of victimization at worst. Gamson proposed the term “anticelebrity” to describe this form of personal fame, especially common from the earliest diffusion of social network sites onward (Gamson, 2011). The anticelebrity, he wrote, is “a collective in-joke, in which the most unlikely candidate becomes the most celebrated, circulated star” [1]. The figure captures both a celebration of the frivolous and a way for digital audiences to celebrate their own star-making power. At another level, this tight relation between mockery, disdain, connectivity, and audience participation has been widely discussed in studies of anti-fandom (Gray, 2003; Claessens and Van den Bulck, 2014). The Internet not only provides a public arena for anti-fandom, but also affords a level of coordination that amplifies anti-fans’ productivity and collective agency. As Gray noted, “The Internet hosts many carefully designed sites dedicated to detesting a media personality or text ... and although fan campaigns to save certain shows are well documented ... antifans are often just as active an audience and just as well mobilized” [2].

The first decade of YouTube remains one of the clearest sites in which these dynamics became visible at scale. At the height of the platform’s rise, the most-viewed video of 2010 and the most-viewed video of 2011 were also the most disliked videos on the platform up to that point, and they would remain among the

most disliked for years afterward. The first was Justin Bieber's "Baby," a music video that accumulated an extremely high volume of hostile comments and, at one stage, a dislike ratio approaching 70 percent (Yau, 2011). The second was Rebecca Black's "Friday," which became famous through the far from flattering label of "the worst song ever made." Participatory media, with their promise of openness, also made visible to a mass public the extent to which fame could be constituted through aversion and ridicule. This is evident in cases in which detractors contributed through their hostility to the rise of the celebrity they opposed, as with Bieber, but also in the emergence of anti-stars whose notoriety depended above all on derision, as in Black's case.

Being "hated because famous" is not exclusive to network society. Social media and digital platforms, however, by converting user attention into visible metrics and public reach, have expanded the conditions under which one can become "famous because hated" or "famous because ridiculed."

This growing overlap between stars, laughing stocks, and targets of moral condemnation is not only the product of technological change. It has also found a favorable environment in a wider fascination with the "defective" that has long accompanied digital culture. This sensibility, condensed in labels such as "so bad it's good" (Phillips, 2013), "trash" (Sarkhosh and Menninghaus, 2016; Brilli, 2025), "epic fail" (O'Connell, 2013), "cringe" (Middleton, 2014), and "Internet ugly" (Douglas, 2014), lies at the core of dozens of sites, blogs, YouTube channels, and subreddits devoted to the discovery and circulation of eccentrically poor cultural artifacts, mocked for their shortcomings yet also valued for their naive expressiveness. This sensibility was also particularly central to the development of meme culture. As Shifman remarked, "'bad' texts make 'good' memes in contemporary participatory culture" [3], since their gaps and incongruities invite users to fill them in, mock them, and circulate them further.

Sconce (2019), writing about cinema and the viral circulation of spectacularly bad films, described the present as a "golden age of badness," one in which the aesthetic sensibility once associated with bad film has moved from subcultural circuits into popular memetic culture. Sconce also pointed to an important shift. In the current phase of platform culture, this dynamic has become more reflexive and more openly moralized. The older pleasures of the "bad" have increasingly given way to those of the "terrible," where aesthetic failure is inseparable from ethical and political judgment. Compared with the older "bad," the new "terrible" is less concerned with technical failure or lack of means than with exposing blatant market calculation, failures to meet representational standards, and the forced inclusion of moral messages experienced as heavy-handed or conservative.

Within this socio-technical environment, specific classes of figures have emerged globally whose notoriety depends, to varying degrees, on being ridiculed, bullied, or publicly despised. These are not simply isolated cases, since they have acquired the status of recognizable categories within audience folksonomies. One example is the figure of the *lolcow* in the English-speaking Internet. As Rauchberg (2025) demonstrated, the term has been used since the early 2000s to describe Internet personas whose visibility is sustained by audience practices of trolling, provocation, and constant surveillance, often directed at subjects perceived as vulnerable. A similar combination of cybermobbing and microcelebrity has taken the name of *Maskengame* in Germany (German Memes Wiki, n.d.), while in India it has been articulated through the category of the *chapri*, a term deeply marked by classist and casteist connotations (Cardozo and Waghule, 2023). In Italy, the phenomenon has become more deeply entangled with processes of celebrification and, at times, even empowerment. Since 2010, Italian social media have seen the successive emergence of a series of ridiculous microcelebrities labeled, at different moments, as "YouTube freaks," "tube monsters," "trash stars," and, more recently, "rimasti di TikTok" (Brilli, 2023). Many of these figures do not remain confined to the role of mere objects of ridicule, but partially convert audience derision into recognizability and, sometimes, economic opportunity.

The Internet and social media have, in short, fostered forms of visibility acquisition based on the aesthetic and/or moral condemnation of publics. At the same time, they have made possible processes of rehabilitation involving personalities previously targeted by tabloid condemnation, as in the case of celebrities framed through the misogynistic discourse of the *trainwreck* in the early 2000s and more

recently rehabilitated through critical readings of that frame, as happened in a particularly emblematic way with Britney Spears (Flood, 2025). Platforms have therefore facilitated both the link between the affective unanimity of the collective and the fame of the person who becomes its target, and the speed with which that same unanimity can fragment or become the object of critique.

The thesis that has guided the development of this special issue, and that became clearer through engagement with the papers collected here, is that we are witnessing a further transformation in the relationship between public condemnation and fame.

This transformation is both quantitative and qualitative. On the one hand, the instances in which condemnation becomes a visibility strategy are multiplying. On the other, the forms and meanings of this relationship are diversifying. This is especially visible in the changing power relations implied in the accusation of being *despicable* and in the polarizing effects produced by that accusation.

Public figures have always generated polarization in the opinions and sentiments of audiences. What distinguishes the present moment, however, is the emergence of a class of personalities that are functional to the intensification of already existing dynamics of polarization. We are thus moving from polarized reputation to a form of reputation that exists, first and foremost, because of the background of political, social, and economic polarizations that characterize the mediatised public sphere (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri, 2021). This shift can be better understood by distinguishing three phases, or three ideal types, in the relationship between celebrity and the unanimity of condemnation.

In classical celebrity, “hated because famous,” disapproval is a consequence of exposure to public attention. Morin (1957), in what remains one of the earliest and most important studies of celebrity, already highlighted the homologies between sacrificial processes and stars: they are elevated, but on the condition that their image can be offered up to fans and detractors alike. Their centrality in relation to the collective rests on a condition of precarity, so much so that a number of analyses have linked René Girard’s (1972) mimetic theory of the scapegoat to the institution of celebrity (Gemini, 2002; Connor, 2016; Tomelleri, 2023). On the one hand, celebrities are “safe” scapegoats, targets toward whom collective condemnation can be exercised with fewer restraints through “spectacular punitive performances” (Penfold-Mounce, 2004). On the other, they live within a kind of “moral moratorium,” what Rojek (2012) defined as *frontierism*: the expectation that they will lead lives beyond the limits of the conventions to which the majority of the population is subject. In this case, the public is polarized internally in its evaluation, but unanimous in recognizing the celebrity as such.

In the anti-celebrities of the networked age, “famous because hated,” disapproval — whether ironic or virulent, aesthetic or moral — precedes the transformation into a public persona. Because digital platforms replace *medium-based* visibility with *networked* visibility, that is, visibility grounded in audience participation (Brighenti, 2010), the clustering of attention around figures perceived as ridiculous, peculiar, excessive, or simply vulnerable can produce a self-reinforcing effect of increased visibility. In this case, fame is constituted because the public is, if only temporarily, unanimous in its evaluation, while polarization takes the form of the public against the anti-celebrity.

The third ideal type is that of the “celebrities of polarization.” For these figures, the condemnation of being *despicable* does not produce a decline in reputation, but is instead reabsorbed into their strategy of *vice-signalling*. In recent public debate (Berlatsky, 2020; Bush, 2022; Williams, 2026), this term has been used to describe the intentional display of morally reprehensible traits — cruelty, contempt for norms of civility, a taste for provocation — in order to signal authenticity, distinction, and anti-establishment credibility. This occurs within a framework shaped by the normalization of “shamelessness” (Wodak, 2021) and by *trolling culture* (Phillips and Milner, 2017), which grounds its own justification in opposition to the rival political and moral faction, identified as excessive in its *virtue signalling* (Ricci, 2020). If this behavior has become especially visible through politicians, commentators, entrepreneurs, and figures from the entertainment world — from Donald Trump to Nigel Farage, from Elon Musk to Kanye West, each reader may supply their own gallery of despicability — it also runs through less famous figures who permeate global creator

and influencer cultures.

In this sense, public figures shaped by polarization and vice-signalling can be described as post-sacrificial. Unlike classical celebrities and Web anti-celebrities, their sacrifice before the tribunal of public judgment is both *anticipated* and *incomplete*. It is *anticipated* because they present themselves from the outset as survivors of a moral trial that has already taken place, as figures who withstand the tribunal of democratic norms, common sense, and political correctness. It is *incomplete* because the judges they survive are not those of their own public, but those of the enemy public. These figures, we suggest, define yet another relation to the unanimity of condemnation. If classical celebrities are scapegoats for the public's morbid curiosity, tabloid celebrities scapegoats for moral condemnation, and Internet personas or lolcows scapegoats for memetic irony or cyberbullying, celebrities of polarization make reflexive and strategic use of the scapegoat figure itself. They present themselves to their own audiences as survivors of a "stoning" that never quite strikes them, because it always comes from the other side of the barricade of polarization.

To observe this new use of despicability more clearly, it is useful to examine the changing politics of contested reputations through the work of sociologist Gary Alan Fine.

The mediatization of reputational politics

Sociology and media studies engaged early on with the phenomena of prestige elevation and destruction, that is, with the construction of celebrity as a media elite on the one hand (Lowenthal, 1944; Morin, 1957; Alberoni, 1963) and with scandal on the other (Gluckman, 1963; Giglioli, *et al.*, 1997; Lull and Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000). Only more recently, however, have scholars begun to examine more ambiguous reputations, where the loss of prestige does not coincide with a loss of visibility and power.

An important exception is the work of Gary Alan Fine. Fine (2001) demonstrated that the process through which the reputations of public figures are constructed is only partly a matter of evaluating individual attributes. What is at stake around reputations is a "politics of memory," in which normative collective representations are created, perpetuated, stabilized, or erased. The public images of controversial historical figures are therefore social devices that organize memory, moral judgment, and public discourse, insofar as they become cautionary tales that shape how publics discuss decorum, violence, citizenship, gender, and taste.

Central to this process, for Fine, is the role of reputational entrepreneurs, actors such as journalists, biographers, activists, historians, and cultural critics who seek to promote, defend, or discredit a public figure by drawing on political, institutional, and personal interests. The effectiveness of reputational entrepreneurs depends on several factors. They must have an interest in imposing a given reading (*motivation*), be able to construct a credible and plausible account (*narrative facility*), and occupy a position from which that account can circulate and acquire authority (*institutional placement*).

In judging certain reputations as prestigious or deplorable, a key factor is therefore the extent to which a given reputation can become a narrative text consumable by an audience. Reputations, especially controversial ones, are thus objects of contention not only because they place different values and moral systems in conflict, but also because they generate competition over narration itself: some despicable people produce better stories than others, and telling those stories brings advantages.

This narrative facility also depends on the *cultural resonance* of such stories, that is, on the way they take hold within a "web of values and attitudes" [4] ready to receive them. Examining struggles over reputation is therefore an effective way to calibrate the moral and aesthetic repertoires of specific publics. Here another concept developed by Fine becomes useful, that of *subcultural reputations*. Struggles over difficult reputations may lead to different outcomes depending on the configuration of consensus. Consensus may

converge around a negative reputation; the struggle may remain open and produce reputations that continue to be contested over time; or reputations may stabilize through the fragmentation of publics, so that what is a negative reputation for the mainstream may be reproduced as a positive one within subcultural niches.

The framework offered by Fine helps us approach infamy in digital cultures because it invites attention to the different dimensions of conflict that gather around reputations: personal conflicts among reputational entrepreneurs, conflicts over public attention, conflicts among value systems, and conflicts among different portions of the public sphere, among publics and counterpublics, and between subculture and hegemony.

Fine's analysis, however, focuses on a model of reputation grounded in historical memory, and therefore on a selective principle centered on persistence over time. In contemporary media cultures, by contrast, the synchronic dimension of bad reputations tends to prevail over the diachronic one, giving priority to the question "which stories circulate" rather than "which stories survive."

This also implies that the cautionary tales inscribed in the reputations of public figures are less and less the result of scripts elaborated by a few reputational entrepreneurs and more and more the outcome of the action of diffuse publics. As Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2009) observed, Web 2.0 publics derive a "grammar of conduct" from the stories of controversial celebrities by assembling dispersed fragments of narrative and gossip into relatively coherent moral accounts. In this investment of attention and judgment, the aim is no longer only pedagogical, nor is it limited to the acquisition of personal authority. For Beer and Penfold-Mounce, what is at stake is a "new melodramatic imagination." Originally formulated by Brooks (1976) and brought into media studies by Ang (1985), melodramatic imagination names the way audiences derive pleasure by affectively investing in characters within morally polarized and intensely legible frames. For soap opera audiences, melodramatic imagination makes conflicts, injustices, desires, and family dilemmas meaningful and consumable regardless of their realism or plausibility. In digital publics, this dramatization of everyday conflict is no longer only a protocol of reading, but also a protocol of "connective writing", in which comments, online content, and interactions employ the conduct of public figures as material for defining villains, super-villains, saviors, and story arcs.

We can therefore isolate a number of factors that today help define the different meanings of despicability and the link between condemnation and reputation: the *new reputational entrepreneurs*, *spectacle*, *architectures of visibility*, *spectatorial practices*, and *personal strategies of vice-signalling*.

First, it is necessary to recognize that classical reputational entrepreneurs by no means disappear, as the analyses by Driessen and Pilati in this issue show with regard to the role of traditional media. In the digital context, however, the classical mediators of judgment, centered on the writing of memory and located within recognizable institutions, are joined by a new class of communicators who have an interest in working on the controversial reputations of others. One example is the *drama* or *tea channels* of YouTube (Lewis and Christin, 2022), a genre of content in which creators comment, often sensationalistically, on feuds and scandals involving YouTube celebrities. In these cases, what is at stake is not only a politics of memory, but also the definition of the criteria of accountability, the use of call-out, and the conditions under which the cancellation of a public personality is considered legitimate (Farries, *et al.*, 2025). Unlike traditional reputational entrepreneurs, who manage memory by virtue of their institutional position, new reputational entrepreneurs act by "becoming platform" (Brilli, *et al.*, 2024; Bozzi, 2025), that is, by using the visibility accumulated through their own platform to give space to some figures and deny it to others. In this sense, the "banter merchants" discussed by Ryder in his contribution constitute a particularly clear example.

By "spectacle," we mean those formats and scripts typical of legacy media which continue to live on in remediated form within online entertainment platforms, creating frames in which public condemnation and the performance of the villain role are legitimized for the purposes of entertainment. Daytime television talk shows, reality and talent shows (Rojek, 2012), as well as forms of "politainment" that normalize the use of political incivility as a grammar of public discourse (Bentivegna, *et al.*, 2026), are clear examples of this logic. Yet these are also spectacular forms that circulate widely online, both through the clipping and

recirculation of such programs and through the emergence of new formats and styles that privilege controversy. One need only think of the use of reuploads and edits on YouTube and TikTok, which produce waves of clips in which explicit despicability becomes a particularly effective strategy of circulation, as shown by Rieder, *et al.* (2026) in their analysis of the role these formats continue to play in the re-platforming of Andrew Tate despite platform moderation efforts. Another example is the roast analyzed by Bozzi in this issue, which moves from being a classic format of U.S. comedy to becoming a kind of ethos within certain networks of comedian podcasters.

By architectures of visibility of despicability, we mean those platform affordances and forms of regulation that foster or discourage the link between controversial behavior and public attention. This issue thus concerns both the ways in which recommendation systems and algorithmic sorting may privilege extremist content or content capable of generating outrage (Yesilada and Lewandowsky, 2022), and the role of moderation and of the reputation that a platform constructs around its own style of moderation. These aspects, too, can attract extreme publics and behaviors, as shown by platforms that tend toward forms of “fringification” (Boccia Artieri, *et al.*, forthcoming). In this issue, Galip and Maragkou address the theme particularly effectively in their contribution on Kick.

The fourth factor concerns the spectatorial practices of audiences. Forms of ironic or ambivalent fandom and anti-fandom such as hatewatching (Gray, 2019), snark fandom (Harman and Jones, 2013), *so bad it's good* (MacDowell and Zborowski, 2013), trash consumption (Brilli, 2023), or *ruzhui*, “derisive” fandom in the Chinese context (Zhao and Fu, 2026), show how audiences delimit specific ways of following texts and personalities, placing them in a zone of only-partial-seriousness or distinguishing them as a particular “province of meaning” (Schutz, 1976) of taste. These practices should not be understood only as interpretive modes or reading protocols. They are also ways of actively intervening in the construction of content around public personalities, for example through processes of memification. De Seta's contribution in this issue on Yilong Ma, the “Chinese Elon Musk,” shows with particular clarity the interplay between the ambivalence of memification and fakery, on the one hand, and the support of a controversial reputation, on the other.

Finally, there are personal strategies of vice-signalling. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the present moment lies precisely in the fact that despicability no longer passes only through condemnation exercised by publics and reputational entrepreneurs, which produces an imbalance of power and places the condemned figure in a victimized position. Increasingly, despicability becomes a potential resource for self-branding. Constructing oneself as a “villain” can be mobilized to develop personal appeal in contexts marked by strong polarization. This shift takes on particular significance as the polarity between fandom and anti-fandom becomes ever more ubiquitous, ceasing to concern entertainment alone and fully entering the ways in which people live and perform their political identities (Barnes, 2022). Being despicable for the other public is not only the basis of the self-presentation of certain “extreme celebrities” (Rogers, 2020), but also informs groups and subcultures such as those analyzed in this issue by Giolo and Rinaldi and by Boccia Artieri and colleagues.

Each of these five factors may play a more or less central role in the construction of the despicable public persona. What emerges with increasing clarity, however, is a shift from the external attribution to the self-attribution of despicability. This shift rests on the assumption that, within the current configuration of the platform cultural economy, unanimity of judgment, even around behaviors and figures that in the past might have elicited relatively homogeneous moral condemnation, is becoming an ever less sustainable and ever less expected horizon.

From villain to guru: The metamorphosis of Fabrizio Corona

To ground the conceptual discussion developed in this paper, it is useful to briefly focus on a particularly

emblematic case. We turn here to an Italian figure, Fabrizio Corona, whose public trajectory offers a compelling entry point into the dynamics explored in this special issue. Fabrizio Corona is one of the most controversial and enduring figures in Italian media culture. Emerging in the 2000s as a paparazzo and celebrity agent, he became widely known through a series of scandals, legal cases, and high-profile convictions related to blackmail and illicit dealings with celebrities which eventually led to multiple prison sentences. Over time, Corona has transformed from a tabloid anti-hero into a pervasive media personality, continuously reinventing himself across television, print, and, more recently, digital platforms. His public trajectory, marked by cycles of exposure, condemnation, punishment, and reinvention, has made him a central reference point in Italian debates around scandal, visibility, and celebrity culture.

Among the various figures that populate the landscape of contemporary despicable celebrity, Fabrizio Corona occupies a peculiar and almost paradigmatic position. Unlike many other figures associated with “bad taste” or scandal-driven notoriety, Corona has not only endured across different media regimes, but has also continuously reinvented his public persona. As already observed in earlier research, he emerged as one of the most consistently recognized and discussed “despicable celebrities” in Italy, to the point of becoming a sort of gravitational center around which public imaginaries of deviance, excess, and notoriety tend to organize.

In the early 2010s, Corona embodied what could be described as a “classical villain” of celebrity culture. His notoriety was built on scandal, legal troubles, and an overt performance of transgression. He was not simply a celebrity who occasionally deviated from normative expectations; rather, deviance itself constituted the core of his public identity. The circulation of his image was inseparable from a regime of moral judgment in which he functioned as both spectacle and warning — a figure through which audiences could articulate and reaffirm normative boundaries. In this sense, Corona fits neatly within what we might define as the first configuration of despicable celebrity: a figure “hated because famous,” whose visibility attracts condemnation as a reaction to notoriety itself.

However, as the first part of this introduction has suggested, the relationship between fame and disapproval has undergone a profound transformation. In the transition to Web 2.0 and early platform cultures, a second configuration emerged, in which individuals became “famous because hated,” as visibility itself became increasingly tied to disapproval and outrage. Corona’s trajectory intersects with this shift but does not fully coincide with it. While he initially thrived within a media ecology dominated by scandal and tabloid exposure, his persistence cannot be reduced to this phase alone. Rather, his continued relevance signals a further mutation in the logic of despicability.

In its contemporary, post-sacrificial configuration, despicability no longer functions merely as a reaction to fame or as a mechanism of visibility driven by disapproval. Instead, it becomes a broader form of public life, in which figures actively position themselves in relation to moral norms, often through practices that we might describe as *vice signalling* — the strategic display of transgression, irony, or opposition to dominant values as a way of cultivating attention and identity. It is precisely within this third configuration that Corona’s transformation becomes most intelligible.

What makes Corona particularly interesting, therefore, is not only his initial positioning as a villain, but his capacity to survive and adapt across these different regimes. While many despicable celebrities experience rapid cycles of visibility and decline, Corona has instead maintained a long-term presence by strategically reconfiguring his persona across different media environments—from tabloids and television to social media platforms. This persistence suggests that his trajectory cannot be fully understood within a linear model of scandal and redemption, but rather within a more complex economy of visibility in which notoriety itself becomes a durable and adaptable resource.

More recently, this transformation has taken a striking turn. Corona increasingly presents himself not merely as a controversial figure, but as a kind of guru, commentator, and moral entrepreneur. He positions himself as someone who exposes the hidden truths of the celebrity system, denounces hypocrisy, and offers interpretations of scandals involving other public figures. This shift entails a paradox: a figure once

stigmatized for his own excesses now claims authority in judging the excesses of others. His voice, once framed primarily through external narratives of condemnation, is now self-authored and strategically amplified across platforms.

This evolution can be productively understood through the lens of the sacrificial logic that has long been associated with celebrity culture. Classical analyses have emphasized how celebrities often function as symbolic scapegoats, oscillating between elevation and degradation, between fascination and condemnation. In this sense, they occupy a liminal position: simultaneously outside ordinary moral order and subject to its most intense scrutiny. However, as the contemporary media environment has evolved, this sacrificial logic has also been transformed. Rather than being passively subjected to cycles of condemnation, certain figures now appear as if they have already undergone the sacrifice — and survived it.

Corona exemplifies this condition. His public persona is not that of a victim awaiting judgment, but of a survivor who has already been judged, punished, and reintegrated. This gives him a peculiar form of authority: he speaks from beyond the moment of condemnation, as someone who has experienced the full force of public exposure and emerged from it. In this sense, the sacrificial moment is both anticipated and never fully completed. There is no final resolution, no unanimous condemnation that definitively excludes him from the public sphere. Instead, his visibility is sustained precisely through the ongoing repetition of this incomplete sacrifice.

This is where the concept of vice signalling becomes particularly useful. Rather than seeking redemption or normalization, Corona often embraces and rearticulates the very traits that once marked him as despicable. His persona is built on a controlled deployment of transgression, provocation, and insider knowledge, which signals not conformity but resistance to dominant moral frameworks. In doing so, he aligns himself with a broader set of public figures who cultivate notoriety not in spite of their deviance, but through it. From this perspective, visibility itself emerges as a deeply ambivalent resource. It enables recognition, influence, and continued relevance, while at the same time exposing the subject to constant scrutiny, ridicule, and potential degradation. As Navarini (2018) suggested, the condition of being publicly visible entails a structural vulnerability: the same exposure that sustains authority also renders it perpetually contestable. Corona embodies this paradox particularly well. His public persona is built on a continuous negotiation between authority and discredit, where mockery does not undermine his position but becomes part of the very dynamics that sustain his visibility.

This dynamic can also be understood through the notion of reputational politics. As Fine (2001) has shown, reputations are not simply reflections of individual attributes, but the outcome of ongoing struggles over narrative, interpretation, and memory. Public figures become sites of contestation, where different actors — journalists, audiences, institutions, and the individuals themselves — compete to define the meaning of their actions and identities. In this sense, Corona is not merely the object of reputational struggles, but an active participant in them.

Indeed, he increasingly operates as a *reputational entrepreneur*: someone who not only manages his own image, but intervenes in the reputations of others. By commenting on scandals, exposing alleged truths, and positioning himself as an insider to the mechanisms of celebrity culture, he contributes to the production and circulation of reputational narratives. His authority derives not from institutional legitimacy, but from his ability to construct compelling stories and to occupy a position from which those stories can circulate effectively.

This repositioning is made possible by the affordances of contemporary media platforms, which tend to privilege content that generates engagement, polarization, and rapid reaction. In such environments, controversy is not merely tolerated but actively amplified. The architectures of visibility that characterize platformized media—algorithmic ranking, virality, metrics of engagement—favor precisely those forms of content that blur the boundaries between approval and disapproval, information and provocation. Corona's persona is particularly well-suited to these conditions. His style of communication, his oscillation between

confession and accusation, and his strategic use of outrage align closely with the logics of platform visibility.

At the same time, his success also depends on the practices of audiences, who actively participate in the production and circulation of despicability. Practices such as hate-watching, ironic consumption, and the enjoyment of “so bad it’s good” content contribute to sustaining the visibility of figures like Corona. In this sense, despicable celebrity is not simply a property of individuals, but a relational phenomenon that emerges from the interaction between public figures, media systems, and audience practices.

From this perspective, Corona can be understood as a liminal figure, operating at the threshold between disrepute and legitimacy. His trajectory reflects not a movement from one stable position to another, but a prolonged inhabitation of an in-between space where categories such as “villain,” “expert,” and “moral authority” overlap and blur. This liminal positioning allows him to convert stigma into symbolic capital, transforming past transgressions into narrative resources that can be mobilized in the present.

Moreover, his evolution reflects a broader shift in how despicable celebrities are integrated into public discourse. As suggested by the persistence of his visibility across more than a decade, Corona is not simply a residual figure of an earlier media era, but an active agent in shaping contemporary forms of digital notoriety. His case highlights how figures once relegated to the margins of legitimacy can re-enter the center of attention by reframing their own deviance as insight, and their past scandals as a form of narrative capital.

In this sense, Corona is not just an example within the category of despicable celebrity—he is, in many ways, its most fully developed expression in the Italian context. His trajectory encapsulates a broader transformation: from a model of celebrity based on transgression and punishment to one based on reflexivity, commentary, and the strategic re-use of stigma. If earlier forms of despicable celebrity functioned primarily as objects of public condemnation, figures like Corona increasingly operate as producers of meaning within the same circuits of scandal they once inhabited.

Corona’s trajectory can also be read through the broader dimensions that structure contemporary forms of despicability. His role as both object and producer of scandal highlights the importance of reputational entrepreneurship, as he increasingly intervenes in the construction of moral judgments surrounding himself and others. At the same time, his continued presence within media circuits reflects the persistence — and transformation — of the spectacle of condemnation, in which roles of exposure and judgment are redistributed rather than abandoned. His visibility is further sustained by platform architectures that privilege controversy, polarization, and rapid engagement, as well as by audience practices ranging from ironic consumption to forms of moral outrage. Finally, Corona’s own strategy — oscillating between embracing the figure of the villain and repositioning himself as a critical insider — illustrates how despicability can be actively cultivated and reworked as a resource within contemporary media environments.

Understanding this shift is crucial for grasping the contemporary dynamics of infamy in digital culture. It suggests that the role of the “villain” has not disappeared, but has been reconfigured: from a figure to be judged, to a figure who claims the authority to judge. Corona’s metamorphosis, in this sense, does not mark the end of despicable celebrity, but its evolution into a more complex, reflexive, and structurally embedded form of cultural authority.

The many faces of despicability: An overview of the papers in this issue

This special issue grew out of the panel “Despicable public personas: Dynamics of infamy in digital culture,” presented at the 10th Ethnography and Qualitative Research International Conference (ERQ

2025), held at the University of Trento from 9 to 12 July 2025. The panel, devoted to the social and cultural dynamics of infamy in digital culture, provided the first space of discussion from which this issue took shape. It later developed into a more integrated reflection on the relation between visibility, disdain, and public recognition in contemporary media environments.

Taken together, the contributions gathered here move across multiple national contexts — Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States, and China — while also engaging digital environments and imaginaries that exceed the national scale. The papers combine heterogeneous methods, from digital ethnography to thematic analysis, walkthrough-based interface analysis, content analysis, digital methods, and case study research. They approach the phenomenon across a wide range of media and platforms: mainstream social media and alt-tech platforms, as well as Telegram, Reddit, podcasts, livestreaming and short-video platforms, Douyin, and Sina Weibo. They also examine how newspapers and television news participate in the framing and counter-framing of controversial public figures.

Despite their differences, these contributions share a common analytical tension. They show that emerging sociotechnical conditions, the discursive and performative grammars of digital culture, and the longer histories of stigma, scandal, and moral panic need to be read together. There is nothing entirely new in the fact that reputations are not necessarily undone by controversy or moral condemnation; the more relevant question concerns the conditions under which these processes may lead, in different cases, to either the celebrification or the de-celebrification of a public figure (Mortensen and Kristensen, 2020).

The first two contributions address the role of alt-tech platforms in redefining how controversy and despicability are translated into visibility and monetization. In “Chatbox sociality,” Idil Galip and Eleni Maragkou examine why livestreaming has become a particularly favorable environment for the proliferation of “extreme personae,” from manosphere creators to influencers associated with gambling, looksmaxxing, and the far right. Through a walkthrough-based interface analysis of Kick, they show how the platform’s architecture, economic model, and permissive moderation create a setting that encourages visibility and audience participation around public figures who capitalize on divisive positions and transgressive practices. Focusing in particular on looksmaxxing influencers such as Clavicular, the article traces how specific lexicons emerge and consolidate within the relational setting the authors define as “chatbox sociality,” before migrating across platforms. In this way, Galip and Maragkou highlight a crucial feature of controversial personae in the platform economy: their particular adaptability to a condition in which speculation and uncertainty function as organizing principles of both finance and sociality, intertwining in a recursive loop that is increasingly recognizable and strategically mobilized.

Craig Ryder’s paper examines the dismissal of Suella Braverman, the British Conservative politician known for her hardline positions on immigration and public order, in order to introduce the concept of “digital banter.” Ryder defines digital banter as a form of political discourse rooted in British culture that uses humor, ambivalence, and vernacular registers to veil xenophobia, misogyny, and other forms of extremism. Through a digital ethnography of BitChute and an analysis of videos and comments, he shows how Braverman becomes a perfect bad object, a totemic figure around whom anti-fandom coagulates. She is both the target of racialized and misogynistic disdain and a figure valued by these publics for the radicalism of her political positions. Political anti-fandom and the alt-tech microeconomy of visibility thus become tightly intertwined, as “banter merchants” turn hostility into engagement, community, and profit, while the boundary between political content and entertainment grows increasingly unstable.

Nicola Bozzi’s article moves in a similar direction. Like Ryder, he focuses on the role of comedy in producing new kinds of reputational entrepreneurs whose public interventions are built around controversial reputations and whose own style of positioning depends on them. In his paper on partisan podcasters, Bozzi analyzes the Rogansphere as a space in which comedy, platformization, and political commentary are becoming ever more tightly intertwined. At the center are figures such as Joe Rogan and Tony Hinchcliffe. Within this constellation, Bozzi argues, an ethos emerges that he calls “roast universalism.” Generalized offense is presented as a near-categorical principle, as proof of independence and rejection of “woke” moralism, yet in practice it is tied to very specific sensitivities toward platform policies, concrete economic

interests, and increasing proximity to segments of the U.S. right. At the same time, Bozzi shows that the world of platformed comedians is not a unified bloc. For some, “edgework” — the continual escalation of risky discourse at the limits of moderation — has a meaning that is less strictly political than artistic and algorithmic, tied to the maintenance of relevance and visibility. Alongside these figures, Bozzi identifies the so-called Rogan-Hatersphere, a set of creators and critical publics that produce antagonistic content around this constellation, archive its contradictions, track its shifts, and attempt to hold it to some form of public accountability.

Gabriele de Seta’s contribution also centers on a figure who builds visibility by working through someone else’s controversial reputation while mobilizing ambiguity and comedy. In this case, however, the figure is not a creator or podcaster, but a “synthetic impersonator.” The paper traces, over five years, the trajectory of Yilong Ma, the “Chinese Elon Musk,” who first emerged on Douyin and later circulated globally. De Seta reconstructs how this peculiar microcelebrity takes shape at the intersection of lookalike culture, synthetic media, and the geopolitics of representation. The notion of “synthetic impersonator” names a figure that is neither a simple double nor, strictly speaking, a virtual influencer. Yilong Ma thrives on ambiguity about his own authenticity, on suspicions of deepfake manipulation, and on the ironic play built around those suspicions, but above all on his proximity to a global celebrity who exemplifies the concentration of visibility and controversy. Central here is the symbiotic nature of this relation: Yilong Ma depends on Musk’s notoriety and despicability while also translating and reconfiguring some of Musk’s traits for publics and platforms that do not directly sustain him. De Seta’s case thus suggests that celebrities of polarization are nourished not only by clashes between opposed publics, distinct moral communities, or fan and anti-fan formations, but also by practices that open and sustain spaces of unresolved ambivalence.

The contributions by Simone Driessen and Federico Pilati turn to the interactions between digital and traditional media in the sanctioning of controversial figures. Driessen examines the case of rapper Ali B to show how a figure once embraced by the Dutch entertainment system can become despicable. The paper follows his trajectory from the frame of conditional inclusion associated with the “*knuffelmarokkaan*” to that of sexual predator, on the basis of a thematic analysis of 171 articles from the Dutch and Flemish press. Driessen reconstructs a “tripartite narrative” composed of the defendant’s strategy of self-defense, the victims’ narrative, and the joint role played by the judicial system and the media. In doing so, the paper analyzes the tensions between celebrity privilege and changing forms of accountability in the post-#MeToo context. The transformation of a celebrity into a despicable persona, then, does not depend on a single scandalous event, but on the progressive disarticulation of symbolic capital and the growing believability of the victims.


Pilati’s paper also addresses the role of media in the making of the despicable figure, but does so through a case fully embedded in the creator economy, where attention strategies based on provocation intersect with the stigma attached to the youth subculture of the *maranza*. Through the case of Don Ali and the TikTok challenge known as the “invasion of the South,” the article reconstructs the shift from a challenge designed to generate engagement to a full-blown episode of moral panic. Pilati shows how Don Ali, a figure in whom several tensions of contemporary Italy converge — trap culture, aggressive masculinity, virality, and second-generation identity — is transformed by media and institutions into a public order problem. The case thus becomes emblematic of what Pilati calls “stigma capitalism,” a system that converts marginality into visibility and economic opportunity while simultaneously exposing those involved to more intense forms of surveillance and criminalization. In this perspective, moral panic continues to operate as a mode of governing marginality, but now intersects with the centrality of performative exaggeration and with the sociotechnical entanglement between youth cultures and platform affordances.

The final two articles focus on spaces that cannot be unambiguously classified as “alt-tech” or “fringe,” but are especially relevant because they function as crossroads between the center and the periphery of the digital ecosystem, such as Reddit and Telegram. Guilherme Giolo and Matteo Rinaldi examine a more ordinary and diffuse form of reputational radicalization, in which visibility and moral controversy do not cluster around a single public figure but around a trend such as the “Passport Bros.” Through a thematic analysis of threads posted on r/ThePassportBros, they show how a set of misogynistic, racializing, and

reactionary ideas is organized within seemingly harmless registers such as travel advice, dating discourse, and lifestyle content. Several tensions converge here: rejection of the West accompanies the search for strongly patriarchal gender roles; praise of “traditional femininity” coexists with a deterministic and instrumental view of relationships; and the valorization of cultural difference rests repeatedly on essentialist hierarchies. The paper thus adds an important piece to the issue by showing how despicability and vice-signalling can become resources for discursive communities that naturalize resentment and misogyny through the languages of lifestyle.

The contribution by Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Valeria Donato, Elisabetta Zurovac, and Stefano Brillì examines the construction of anti-mainstream figures in the Italian Telegramsphere, asking how marginalization can be converted into symbolic capital and, at times, into opportunities for monetization. Based on an ethnographic approach combined with digital methods, the article studies a network of 413 channels that identify themselves as anti-mainstream and examines how the idea of “alternativity” is mobilized to build the reputations of the personalities inhabiting this environment. While discourse in these spaces is dominated by the rhetoric of victimization, deplatformization, and exclusion, the analysis shows that these personalities in fact tend to have a broad cross-platform presence, often privileging mainstream social platforms over more clearly fringe or niche ones. The authors also identify several rhetorical frames that articulate the relation between exclusion and inclusion: heroes, rascals, professionals, and the faceless ally. With the partial exception of the *rascals* frame, the case shows a relatively limited role for edginess and vice-signalling. What prevails instead is the reversal of the accusation of despicability from which these figures perceive themselves to suffer.

From the earliest formulation of the panel, speaking of despicable public personas did not mean positing a new class of celebrities or identifying an entirely new phenomenon. It began, rather, from an intuition that still required sharper focus: that we were facing a series of phenomena linked by the relation between reputation and public condemnation, yet not fully captured by the interpretive tools available so far. We do not claim that this special issue offers a comprehensive conceptualization of these transformations. It does seem to us, however, that the articles collected here, despite moving from very different cases and aims, converge around this intuition. They show that stigma, scandal, victimization, and villainous pride are no longer peculiar, frivolous, or marginal exceptions within systems of visibility, but dynamics fully integrated into the central figures, conflicts, and events of the contemporary digital public sphere.

For us, it is a great honor to see these reflections appear in the final issue of a journal such as *First Monday*, which helped define what it means to study digital culture not only through its contents but also through its very practice of dissemination. We thank the editor and all those who worked on this extraordinary project. The ideals of openness that have shaped the journal from the beginning now appear both rare and especially precious. We hope, in some small way, to help carry them forward. 

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Notes

1. Gamson, 2011, p. 1,066.

2. Gray, 2005, p. 842.

3. Shifman, 2014, p. 86.

4. Fine, 2001, p. 13.

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