Epistemic Envy in The Keyboard Warrior: A Bionian Analysis

Abstract

In this paper, we outline an object relations approach to the understanding of the factors underlying the behavior exhibited by a specific type of "uncivil" social media user, the keyboard warrior. Analyzing 10 key features of the keyboard warrior's behavior, we lay out the hypothesis that it is underlaid by "minus K" (Bion, 1962): namely, an envious relation to the Breast as the original provider not only of food but also of knowledge. We conclude by discussing the crisis of constructive dialogue that is ongoing at various levels in contemporary Western society and culture.

Key words: keyboard warrior, social media, online behavior, minus K, object relations

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A "Keyboard Warrior" (KW) is generally defined as a social media user who "posts angry messages or likes to get into arguments on the internet" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2021). In particular, a KW is most frequently found arguing with strangers, in the comment section below the post of a public page, on a controversial topic of public interest. Although the KW's behavior may appear harmless at first, its consequences are increasingly recognized as serious and far-reaching. Since social media platforms have become one of the main sources through which people receive and process important public information, there is growing concern that rageful commenting and other forms of so-called "uncivil" online behavior may undermine constructive public discussion, lead to group polarization, and even prelude to the acting out of violence offline (Mooijman *et al*., 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to develop an understanding of the psychological factors underlying uncivil online behavior in general and the KW's behavior more specifically.

Within a psychoanalytic perspective, previous literature has illustrated the utility of an (object) relational approach to the interpretation of online behavior (Bainbridge and Yates, 2014). The assumption behind such an approach is that the way in which people behave on social media reveals key aspects of their general pattern of relating to others: not only because social media are, by definition, all about relationships; but also because the cyberspace, with its characteristic suspension between reality and unreality, represents a facilitating environment for the outpouring of unconscious dynamics from one's inner world (see "solipsistic introjection" in Suler, 2004). Using this approach, specific forms of uncivil online behavior have been interpreted as being underlaid by specific forms of object relations. For instance, Balick (2014, p. 93) interpreted both trolling and cyberbullying as online behaviors mediated by the mechanism of projection. He adduced as evidence of this mechanism the impression reported by victims of online hate of being

so shocked "at the degree of the vitriol" that they feel that the aggressive behavior is directed not at them as persons, but as the recipients of a sort of collective transference (p. 97).

The KW's behavior, too, would appear to be underlaid by some kind of relational factor. This is illustrated, for instance, by the KW's habit of commenting below the posts of celebrities, as if celebrities themselves (and not their social media managers) would actually read and reply. But if object relations characterized by hate might underlie the behavior of trolls and cyberbullies, what type of object relation might underlie the behavior of the KW, as an uncivil social media user with distinguishing features that set it apart from generically defined "haters"? In an attempt to find an answer to this question, in this paper we analyze 10 of such features: namely, the KW's (1) commitment to the truth; (2) know-it-all attitude; (3) moral high ground; (4) intellectual antagonism; (5) eternal dissatisfaction; (6) systematic misunderstanding; (7) escalation; (8) failure to vent out; (9) black-or-white mentality; and (10) dissolution of the truth. Through the analysis of these features, we progressively develop the hypothesis that the KW's behavior can be interpreted as being underlaid by a specific object relation of the type that was conceptualized by Bion (1962b) under the name of "minus K" (–K): that is, an envious relationship to the Breast as the original provider not only of food but also of *knowledge*.

Commitment to the truth

The first key feature of the KW's behavior is that it does not appear to be driven by a generic intention to disrupt or to harm others, but by a specific *commitment to the "truth"*. This *differentia* sets the KW apart from the whole *genus* of uncivil social media users. Unlike a cyberbully, for instance, the KW does not leave a negative comment below someone's post to torment them, but to question the truthfulness of its content. Unlike an anti-fan, the KW does not criticize a public figure to harass them, but to condemn them for something they either did or said. Finally, unlike a

troll, the KW does not engage in online discussions to annoy others, but because it is "impelled" by a pointed "sense of mission" (Eberwein, 2019, p. 581). Unique among users contributing to the aggravation of online communication, the KW believes to be acting *for a higher cause*: namely, the "pursuit of the truth" (*ivi*), where the term is to be intended both in its factual sense (the reality of what is or has been) and moral sense (the reality of what ought to be).

This first feature of the KW's behavior already provides us with an important clue as to the type of object relation that might underlie it. In particular, using a distinction theorized by Bion, we propose that the difference between the KW's behavior and the behavior exhibited by generically "hateful" social media users can be conceptualized as a difference between a relation centered on *hate* and one centered on *knowledge*. Bion, in fact, posits that there are three basic object relations or "links": Love (L), Hate (H), and Knowing (K; 1962b, p. 43). The reason why he regards knowing as nothing less than a relationship is to be found in his theory of the alpha-function (Bion, 1962a). According to this theory, before being able to think, a child would evacuate its "thoughts" (i.e., states of frustration) onto the mother; the mother, in turn, would interpret the infant's needs and return them satisfied, thus transforming so-called beta- into alpha-elements. This thinking function, originally occurring through the mediation of the mother (i.e., a "sojourn in the breast"), would later be introjected as the subject's own capacity to understand itself and the world. Thus, in a psychoanalytic sense, knowing always remains for Bion a "link" to the Breast as the original provider not only of milk but also of "meaning" (1965, p. 79).

Interpreting the KW's behavior as being driven by a generic form of "online hate", as it is often done (Sorokowski *et al*., 2020), does not account for its epistemic commitment to the truth. On the basis of Bion's theory of the three links, on the other hand, the difference between the KW and generically "hateful" uncivil social media users can be interpreted as a difference in the object

relations underlying their behaviors: K and H, respectively. This implies that a KW would be less concerned with whether the Other "thrives or dies" than with the truth-value of what it says or does. Its Other is a breast-like source of meaning whose reliability the KW is committed to ascertain. *Truth* is what is exchanged between contained and container in this link. This macro-diagnosis appears to be supported by the fact that while a cyberbully, for instance, usually has some kind of "personal" relationship with its victim, the KW's target is often a stranger randomly met online: that is, an Other that interests the KW not as such, but merely as the carrier of a claim to the truth.

Know-it-all attitude

KWs are not only committed to ascertaining the truth-value of what the Other says or does, but also act as if truth was something that they themselves already possess. Whoever has ever had a KW among their friends on social media will have noticed their peculiar behavior of leaving a comment below the posts of public pages on the most varied subjects, often multiple times a day. By reading these comments, one has the impression that the KW has the answer to all the most difficult and important questions: whether the US military should pull out of Afghanistan, how the government should manage the pandemic or what is the secret to a long and happy couple life. No matter the topic of discussion: without batting an eyelid, a KW will take on the role of whatever expert the situation calls for, turning itself now into a politologist, now into a virologist or a psychologist, and starting to expound with unchanged confidence on the topic as if it had complete and definite knowledge of it. There is *nothing* that the KW does not know.

The KW's know-it-all attitude supports our hypothesis that its behavior might be underlaid by a type of K link, since Bion specifically warns about the risk of K degenerating into *omniscience*. In his theorization, this risk would derive from the temptation to evade the frustration that is inherent in the partiality of human knowledge, by indulging in fantasies of full knowledge. Bion

formalizes this by stating that a "commensal" K link is one such as "x K y", where "x is in the state of getting to know y" (1962b, p. 47). In other words, Bion regards a healthy knowing function as one in which the subject relates to its object asymptotically, in the sense of a never-ending "getting to know", as opposed to a definitive "having known". In a commensal K link, the limitations to the "human capacity to know anything" (p. 48) are accepted and the epistemic connotations are "[t]olerance of doubt and tolerance of a sense of infinity" (p. 94). However, as a link that is bound to leave at each turn an "unsaturated element" (p. 96), and therefore as a relationship characterized by the impossibility of full satisfaction, K corresponds also to a "painful" emotional experience (p. 48). That is why, especially in the presence of low tolerance to frustration, such an emotional experience "may initiate an attempt" to evade the pain through hallucinatory means (p. 48). This evasion would be undertaken through a "change of sense in x K y" (p. 49), such that "x" is not anymore "concerning himself [sic] to know the truth about y" (p. 47), but believes itself to be "possessed of a piece of knowledge called y'" (p. 49). This hallucinatory evasion of frustration (as opposed to realistic modification; see also Freud, 1911/1958) makes it so that "x K y no longer represents the painful emotional experience" that it is and K is made to "appear to be a fulfilment rather than a striving for fulfilment" (Bion, 1962b, p. 49). As a result, the subject now indulges in "a belief in a state where things are known" (1962b, p. 65).

If the KW's commitment to the truth oriented our macro-diagnosis towards K (rather than H), its omniscience orients our micro-analysis towards an un-commensal (rather than commensal) K link. Such a link, which Bion indicates as –K, represents an object relation where knowledge is experienced in *absolute* terms, out of an impossibility to accept its *relativeness* (Bisagni, 2020). If our further specified hypothesis is correct, then the KW's compulsive commenting would be driven not so much by an interest in any single topic *per se*, but by an attempt to hold back the painful

emotional experience associated with the acknowledgement that, of the myriad of pieces of news that we are bombarded with on a daily basis, we actually understand little or nothing. In this sense, the KW's comments would be like so many "fingers in a dike", desperately trying to plug anxiety-provoking and ever-multiplying holes in its understanding of the world.

Moral high ground

Not only does the KW know everything, but it never loses an opportunity to use its knowledge to affirm its moral superiority over others. This appears to be done in two steps: the first is a transformation of virtually any topic of discussion into an issue to be solved on *moral* grounds; the second is the positioning of oneself on the "good/right" side and of one's interlocutor(s) on the "bad/wrong" side. In defiance of the adage that *de gustibus non disputandum est,* a KW is able to transform even something as subjective as music taste into a moral problem (see Rolfe, 2019). Let us take, for instance, the condemnation made by a "boomer" KW of modern music as a *décadence* from the "real music" of the 70s: formulating such a moral no less than aesthetic judgement, the KW has managed at the same time to elevate itself as a real music *connoisseur* (*omniscience*), but also to position itself as morally superior to all those who listen to the "wrong" kind of music (*moral high ground*).

The KW's moralizing attitude supports the hypothesis that its behavior is underlaid by –K. The prioritization of moral over factual truth, in fact, is an indicator of an un-commensal K link. Bion expresses this feature by stating that, under –K, "a moral law and a moral system" are positioned as "superior to scientific law and a scientific system" (1962b, p. 98). The moralization of any topic allows the subject operating on –K to re-affirm their moral superiority at every turn. According to Bion, this subject would be identified with a "bizarre object" that resembles "a super-ego", except without "any of the characteristics of the super-ego as understood in psychoanalysis":

rather, it is a "'super' ego" in the sense of "an envious assertion of moral superiority" (p. 97). Moral superiority and omniscience are interconnected in the concept of –K, as Bion describes the subject operating on an un-commensal K link also as an "omniscient moralizer": that is, someone functioning according to the principle of not only "*tout savoir"* (knowing everything), but also *"tout condamner"* (condemning everything; Bion, 1962a, p. 117).

There is an important implication from the hypothesis that the KW's behavior would rest on a prioritization of moral over factual truth: namely, that providing any amount of factual information contrary to the KW's beliefs will do little or nothing to change its mind. If the belief of a KW on any given topic rests on moral and not factual grounds, then it would be impossible to change it, unless the whole underlying object relation (–K) were somehow to be addressed. In other words, if the KW's behavior is really underlaid by –K, then it would be naive to assume that, in order to counter the spreading of "fake news" by KWs, for instance, it will suffice to "fact-check" or "de-bunk" them, that is, to contrast them with additional factual information. According to our hypothesis, in fact, KWs would not believe in a conspiracy theory such as *Pizzagate* because they have been exposed to incorrect factual information, perhaps in the context of a radicalized "filter bubble" or "echo chamber" (Spohr, 2017). Rather, KWs would believe in such theories because they allow them to sit on top of an epistemic position from which they can *look down* on others (e.g., world leaders as morally disgusting pedophiles) and, at the same time, *elevate* themselves as morally superior subjects (e.g., part of the few free-thinkers living outside of the Platonic cave).

Intellectual antagonism

The KW's specialty are its destructive attacks against any opinion put forth by others. Rather than using social media simply to share *their* opinion, KWs typically confront others by replying to their posts or comments. Yet, unlike a cyberbully, who may comment negatively just

to humiliate others (e.g., by insulting someone's looks in a photo they just posted), the KW will do so to call into question the truthfulness or righteousness of the content of their post (e.g., by questioning the intellectual analysis that someone made of the results of the political elections). The KW's attacks can be just as violent, but they are targeted not so much on the other user, but on their attempt to build a proposition of any kind. Furthermore, in the KW's attacks, the *pars destruens* often surmounts by far the *pars construens*. This is illustrated by the behavior of those KWs who will sometimes leave their single-word or even monosyllabic disagreement ("no") below a post in which someone has attempted to lay out their detailed reasoning on a given phenomenon. In this way, the KW has not produced any new knowledge; it has simply "smeared" the other's attempt at sharing some. As it is also the case for those KWs who purposefully follow pages of figures they dislike (just so that they can leave a negative comment below any new update), ultimately the KW's behavior seems guided by all that it stands *against* (e.g., *no* vax, *no* TAV, *anti*-fascist, *anti*-racist).

The KW's intellectual antagonism supports our hypothesis that its behavior is underlaid by –K, since its destructive attacks are not directed at the Other *per se* (as it would be the case in H), but at their claim to the truth. In fact, for Bion (1962b) the "most important characteristic" of the object that the subject operating on –K would be identified with is:

> […] its hatred of any new development in the personality as if the new development were a rival to be destroyed. The emergence therefore of any tendency to search for the truth, to establish contact with reality and in short to be scientific in no matter how rudimentary a fashion is met by destructive attacks on the tendency and the reassertion of the 'moral' superiority (p. 98)

The "destructive activity" of the subject operating on –K "is tinged with 'moral' qualities" (*ivi*) in the sense that the attacks on the Other's attempts at "linking" (*intellectual antagonism*) are just another way, or rather the primary way, to assert its moral superiority (*moral high ground*). These attacks signal that the subject, *not* the Other, has real knowledge of the subject matter.

If a breakdown of the alpha-function leads to operatory or concretistic thinking, its "reversal" (1962b, p. 25) leads to a form of oppositional thinking and a tendency to negate whatever the Other says (see also "negativism" in Freud, 1925/1958, p. 239). In moving from K to –K, the subject becomes engaged in "destroying rather than promoting knowledge" (Bion, 1962b, p. 98). In particular, Bion theorizes that such destructive activity, shifted on the intellectual plane, would be guided by epistemic "Envy" (p. 96). If envy, in Klein's classic definition, is "the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it" (1957, p. 176), in Bion's theorization of –K that something desirable is *knowledge*. According to our hypothesis, the KW's habit of commenting negatively on any link put forth by the Other would be underlaid by the sense of having been usurped of the capacity to understand. To "smear" the Other's post is a way to take that back and set the scoreboard to zero.

Eternal dissatisfaction

Another feature of the KW's behavior is the peculiar impression that it leaves on the person whose speech or behavior are negatively commented upon. This impression can be illustrated by considering the relationship between artists and their followers online. In particular, let us take that interview format in which music artists are asked to read out loud and respond to the negative comments below their music videos. By watching these interviews, one can see how there are at least two types of negative commenters. The first type is the proper "hater". To quote from one of

such interviews with Italian rapper Ernia, this is the commenter who would write such generic insults or provocations as: “Half-a*sed failed artist bastard” (Noisey Italia, 2017, 0:04).

Yet, there is another type of negative commenters. This is the *actual fan* who, precisely because they appear to like the artist’s music so much, feels compelled to express publicly how disappointed they are with their latest release. To quote from the same interview, this is the commenter who would write such “compliments in disguise” as:

> "First song by Ernia that I dislike (which I rarely do). But this one, meh, it really sucks under every aspect. I am disappointed because I expected better, since *QT* and *No hooks* were on another level" (*ivi*, 3:30)

In Bionian terms, we may once again conceptualize the difference between the two types of negative commenters in terms of the object relations that underlie their behavior (H and L, respectively). In the latter form of negative commenting, there is a contention with the “truth” (of what the artist’s music *should* be) which is absent in the former. Unlike haters, KWs care about steering their favorite artists in the “right” direction: that is why they feel impelled to let them know how “wrong” is the one they are undertaking (e.g., “you’ve changed”, “I used to like your music”).

But the difference between H- and K-driven attacks, as revealed by this kind of interviews, reflects also in what they *do* to (or “in”) the Other. For if the artist’s usual response to the haters’ comments is simply to get angry and insult back, in the case of comments by KWs the response is different: interestingly, the artist now becomes almost apologetic and starts explaining themselves or justifying their artistic choices. “I am sorry but.. What can I do about it? If you didn't like it.. I can't force you all to love my songs, can I?” (*ivi*, 3:44). We propose that this is due to the fact that, while H-driven attacks seem to have the effect of stirring in the Other a generic “‘sense of assault’” (Balick, 2014, p. 97), K-driven attacks are intended to elicit more specifically a *sense of guilt*.

In the case of the music artist, K-driven attacks have the power to get into their head precisely because they come not from their "anti-fans", but from their self-professed "biggest fans". Especially if the artist is not too sure of their course, they can easily be drawn to feel like they have let down their hardcore fanbase and fallen short of the expectations. But therein lies the rub, for it is perhaps not possible to ever satisfy the expectations of some KWs. Indeed, these are the fans who, if the rapper experiments with new genres (for instance, by moving from old school rap to more contemporary sounds), will accuse them of having betrayed who they once were; but if the artist continues on the same line, they will accuse them of not having renewed their style over time. The impression is that, whatever the artist does, some KWs will never be happy. In the words of Bob Dylan (1963), an artist who has been criticized most harshly throughout his career precisely by some of the most devoted "Dylanologists": "it is a fierce heavy feeling, thinking something is expected of you but you don't know what exactly it is.. it brings forth a weird form of guilt".

The sense of guilt which dominates the countertransference associated with the KW's behavior further supports our hypothesis. In fact, an "attempt to retain a power to arouse guilt as an essential capacity" is yet another key feature of –K (Bion, 1962b, p. 98). While a tendency to arouse guilt is normatively at work in any contained/container relationship, since the infant needs to be able to alert the Other of its needs (e.g., by crying) and thus solicit a maternal response, in –K this tendency is said to have stopped lending itself to any "constructive activity" (*ivi*). In particular, unique to –K is this mix of eternal discontentment with the Breast *plus* eternal clinging to it as a source of nourishment. Just as the patient operating on –K finds the analyst's interpretations "without exception bad, yet he [sic] must have more and more of them"' (p. 11), so music artists should not be surprised if the same KWs who dislike every new song that they publish are the ones who keep asking them when the next album will be out.

Systematic misunderstanding

A peculiar way in which the KW is able to conduct its destructive attacks and assert its moral superiority is by *mis-understanding* every proposition that is put forth by other users online. The clearest illustration of this dynamic is perhaps provided by certain politically engaged KWs, especially those involved in the so-called "call-out culture", that is, a way of behaving on social media in which people are criticized in public "for their words or actions, or asked to explain them" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2021). The key feature of this type of KWs is that, no matter what a public figure says or does, they always seem to be able to *mis-understand* it in the worst way possible, typically as evidence of one or another form of discrimination (e.g., sexism, racism). These constant misunderstandings are what conservative KWs typically reproach to liberal KWs, as evidenced, for instance, by their use of the "so, what you're saying is" meme following the infamous Cathy Newman interview with Jordan Peterson. This meme is used mockingly by conservative KWs to implicate precisely that the "social justice" KWs will always twist what the other says as a way to accuse them of something defamatory that they did not, in fact, say; and they would do so chiefly to prove their "wokeness", that is, awareness of "social problems such as racism and inequality" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2021). However, the same dynamic of systematic misunderstanding occurs across the political spectrum, and notably also among those conservative KWs who are just as likely to repost the Channel 4 meme as they are to relish the latest video commentary about the "war on free speech" by Tucker Carlson. Underlying the defensive attitude that these right-wing KWs often have towards the Other, one can recognize the same paranoid quality whereby, for instance, freedom of speech tends to be defended even when it is not under attack by anyone. In both cases, for the politically engaged KW

to be able to declare at each turn the sacredness of certain civil rights, they have to mis-understand whatever the Other is saying as an attempt to deny them.

The KW's tendency to misunderstand supports our hypothesis that its behavior is underlaid by an un-commensal K link. In fact, in formulating the concept of–K, Bion (1962b, p. 95) resorts to the mathematical expedient of putting a negative sign before K precisely to indicate that a subject operating on this negative link is not one who does *not* understand, but one who *mis*-understands. –K is not the logical opposite of K in the sense of an absence of knowing or ignorance (due to an incapacity to symbolize or abstract); rather, it is a reversal of K in the sense of a mirror image of all that K stands for, as the function germane to learning from experience. The patient operating on –K appears "concerned to prove their superiority to the analyst by defeating his [sic] attempts at interpretation", where it can be shown that they do so by "mis-understanding the interpretations", thus demonstrating "that an ability to mis-understand is superior to an ability to understand" (*ivi*). This patient's behavior is not underlaid by a defective alpha-function, which would make them regard words as things and thus be incapable of understanding the analyst's metaphors (p. 69). Rather, the patient operating on –K can abstract, but will misunderstand.

By systematically calling out users in a way that misunderstands even their most well-intentioned (and markedly not-discriminatory) utterances, liberal KWs convey that *they*, unlike the Other, are particularly aware of what is "problematic". In the same way, by misunderstanding users as wanting to silence them on behalf of the powers that be ("you can't say anything these days"), conservative KWs convey that *they*, unlike the Other, are the ones who really care about the truth. Through such systematic misunderstandings, KWs are able to achieve several of their goals indirectly, including attacking the Other's link (*intellectual antagonism*), asserting their moral superiority (*moral high ground*), and retaining power by arousing guilt (*eternal dissatisfaction*).

The KW's prioritization of moral over factual truth consists in the fact that what counts is the resounding assertion of a moral truth (e.g., "racism is wrong", "free speech is untouchable"), more than the process of ascertaining whether the interlocutor is, in fact, a racist, or whether the right to express one's opinion is actually under threat. Without doubting the abstract value of such moral truths, or wanting to pathologize all forms of political activism online, it is worth noting how, underlying these specific forms of moralizing behavior, often there is no *search for* the truth: rather, a moral truth is simply echoed, as it is, in the public space. The KW appears uninterested in a "discrimination between true and false" along the lines indicated above; what it cares about is only "a dictatorial affirmation that one thing is morally right and the other wrong" (Bion, 1962a, p. 114). By taking on the role of a "willfully misunderstanding object" (p. 117), the KW is able to elevate "itself as a superior object asserting its superiority by finding fault with everything" (1962b, p. 98). Being outraged by everything the Other says or does and exposing their supposed mischiefs is the KW's way of safeguarding its moral superiority, at the cost of learning nothing in between.

Escalation

Online arguments in comment sections, with their characteristic chains of comments and counter-comments that seem to go on *ad infinitum,* cannot be the work of a single KW, since "it takes two to argue". In this sense, another feature of the KW's behavior is its tendency to escalate. This dynamic is especially evident whenever a KW clashes with another KW online and is given "a taste of its own medicine". To illustrate, let us consider the behavior of those public figures who give in to the temptation of answering "fire with fire" to the KWs that comment negatively below their posts, and thus end up causing even more backlash. An example is the case of the Italian virologist Roberto Burioni who, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, became nationally

known for "blasting" anti-vaxxers on Twitter, either by replying to their comments or by directly posting against them, as in a much-discussed case in which he tweeted:

> "I propose a collection to pay the anti-vaxxers their Netflix subscriptions for when they will be under house arrest locked up like rats from the 5th of August" (Burioni, 2021)

The consequence of Burioni's behavior, which in this case can to all effects be considered that of a KW, was to trigger counterblasts by anti-vaxxers online, who took issue with the tweet's sadistic tone and with their appellation as "rats". In an escalating dynamic of vengeance and mutual mistrust, the KW behavior of the virologist and that of the anti-vaxxer enter a negative symbiosis and end up reinforcing each other.

The escalating dynamic between KWs is another sign of the presence of –K underlying their behavior. In fact, in Bion's (1962b) theorization, –K is the result of a relationship in which the evacuated thought, instead of finding an understanding Breast that is able to transform it into a now tolerable element, finds a bizarre object that is felt enviously to remove "the good or valuable element" in it and force "the worthless residue" back into the subject (p. 96). Over time the subject, by re-introjecting this persecutory object, will not only project it onto others but also identify with it. Not only will the subject expect persecution from the Other, but it will become persecutory itself.

This theorization explains why the most triggering user that a KW can face is another KW. Such an encounter is one between bizarre objects somehow looking at themselves in the mirror. The "thought" evacuated by the anti-vaxxer finds in the Other not a nurturing mother, but a persecutory object who strips it of any good and forces its worthless residues back into the subject. Through re-introjection, an escalating dynamic ensues in which it is now the KW's turn to play the part of the bizarre object by attacking the virologist's attempts at linking. The virologist's behavior has done nothing but confirm the KW's expectation that the Other *is* indeed persecutory, adding

fuel to the fire of projective identification. The more the Other destroys all knowledge that is made available by the subject, the more the subject will be likely to identify with a bizarre object that not only expects more destructiveness from the Other, but acts it out itself in counter-attack. The KW ends up doing onto the Other what it fears will be done onto itself. The virologist may lull themselves into thinking that they are countering mis-understanding (–K) with understanding (K). But, with their lack of reverie, they are only perpetuating –K. What the virologist and the anti-vaxxer have in common is –K as a relation to the truth as something that a person can possess in full (for instance, by virtue of having completed a university degree or received a professional title) and that another person can be fully deprived of. The behavior of the "blasted" and that of the "blaster" are dialectically equivalent in that they both engage in destructive attacks on the Other's attempts at linking to re-affirm their moral superiority. Now, this escalating and reciprocal paranoia is poisonous enough for public discourse when it occurs between a virologist and an anti-vaxxer. But what if the two subjects involved were, say, two world leaders with access to nuclear weapons?

Failure to vent out

It is generally believed that KWs would argue online to "vent out" their negative emotions. Yet, interestingly, while a troll, a cyberbully, or a hater get a pleasurable release from their behavior, users who "rant" online often get an increase, rather than a decrease, in frustration (Martin *et al*., 2013). It is not uncommon for a KW to leave an argument angrier than before, ruminating on "who said what" over and over again, and ultimately being incapable of ridding itself of the negative emotions that it was supposed to discharge through its behavior in the first place.

The KW's failure to vent out is another important clue supporting the hypothesis that its behavior is underlaid by a malfunctioning K link. In Bion's (1962b) theorization, a subject whose

evacuation of a thought is unsupported by a general capacity for thinking would experience a "twofold failure", leading to an *intensification* (rather than an alleviation) of frustration: that is, "precisely the pass" which the subject "wished to avoid" (p. 84-85). In the absence of an alpha-function, not only thoughts are not "modified", but they become even "more painful" (1959, p. 103). Yet, notably, whatever pre-existing difficulty the KW may have in dealing with its own "thoughts", this vulnerability can only interact negatively with social media as an online environment. Social media platforms, in fact, seem designed to hinder the development of a capacity for "thinking" (in the Bionian sense of the word), as it can be seen by analyzing separately the two variables of relevance: tolerance of frustration and capacity for reverie (Bion, 1962a).

1. *Subject's tolerance of frustration*: Social media favor an evasion (as opposed to a modification) of frustration in so far as they encourage users at any given time to unload themselves of their thoughts (as in Facebook's invitation: "What's on your mind?"). While it is in the platform's interest to keep users constantly engaged, the subject in this way is never confronted with the task of tolerating the frustration that thoughts entail. But without tolerance of frustration, there can be no "learning from experience" (1962a, p. 114). Rather, "thoughts" end up being "evacuated at high speed as missiles" (p. 113), a fitting metaphor for online posting as an activity that requires the fraction of a second for a "thought" to be launched in the cyberspace.
2. *Object's capacity for reverie*: Social media do not foster a capacity for reverie either if, in an aggravated online environment, the evacuated beta-element (e.g., a tweet) is not nurtured by the Other, but enviously destroyed. If what has been impulsively evacuated by the subject gets just as impulsively counter-evacuated by the Other, then thoughts do not repose "long enough" in the Breast to "undergo modification" (1959, p. 103). If

> the object does not "respond therapeutically" to the evacuation of thoughts, then the subject is reduced to projections "carried out with increasing force and frequency" (1962a, p. 115), which is what we see happening with compulsive commenting by KWs.

The hindrance by social media platforms of the development of a capacity for thinking may explain why the KW's behavior tends to take place preferably online. The fact that these subjects become "warriors" only behind a "keyboard" tends to get explained hypothesizing that the anonymity granted by the Internet would facilitate a moral disinhibition, that is, an abeyance of the preoccupation for the consequences of one's actions. Yet, this argument might work for uncivil social media users such as trolls, who go to great lengths to hide their identity, while it appears less convincing for KWs who typically have their personal details in display, as if fear of backlash was not one of their concerns (see Rösner and Krämer, 2016). Instead, our hypothesis to account for the content-dependency of the KW's behavior is that the way in which social media are structured would directly work against the development of an already fragile capacity for "thinking".

Black-or-white mentality

Engaged as it is in defending at all times what (it thinks is) right/true and attacking all that is wrong/false, the KW seems to believe that truth, in itself, cannot contain *contradictions*. This belief underlies the whole phenomenon of group polarization online: on any topic of political discussion (e.g., abortion, transgenderism), a conservative KW will think that its take is right and that the liberal KW's is wrong, and vice versa. What appears to be unconceivable to both is that they may be right in some sense *at the same time*, especially given how their views so clearly differ. This phenomenon reminds us of the Indian parable of the blind men who were describing an elephant, without realizing that they were touching different parts of the animal, such as the tusk or the trunk. In some version of the story, the men end up coming to blows precisely because they

cannot believe that an elephant can be at the same time hard *and* soft, dry *and* wet. Since they cannot doubt the evidence of their senses, they start suspecting their interlocutors to be untruthful. Similarly, the KW's belief that truth cannot contain opposites, matched with its certainty to be right, preludes to a fight over the truth with anyone who disagrees: because if the KW is right (and, because of its "know-it-all" attitude, it is drawn to think that it is), then others must have got it wrong or even be in bad faith.

Bion ascribes black-or-white thinking to –K. He conceptualizes it as a lack of "binocular vision" (1962b, p. 86), that is, of the ability to integrate difference perspectives on the same object and thus achieve a "correlation", leading to the experience of "a sense of truth" (1962a, p. 119). The intellectual agonism of the subject operating on –K can be seen as the result of an equation whose terms are "monocular vision" (the belief that truth cannot contain contradictions) and omniscience (the belief that truth can be possessed as "a piece of knowledge called y'"). If truth is commodified into an object that can be had, and if the object ultimately is either mine or the other's, then the fight over it is just around the corner. We see this in child play, whenever an object (e.g., a doll) is given a special power, such that, for instance, only the one who holds it in their hands at any given time is entitled to speak. What typically happens in these cases is that the doll quickly becomes an object of litigation among children. The state of being right is similarly contended among KWs who believe it to exist in a unique exemplar, like a king's scepter or crown to which a claim can be made. Since the state of being right is not conceived to be sharable, then any exhibition of knowledge by the Other is perceived by the KW to be exposing its own ignorance. Any claim to the truth made by the Other is enviously seen as a territorial threat on the possibility of having one's share of it. But if truth can be owned, then it can also be stolen, and that is why the

KW feels compelled, every time the Other is "showing off" their knowledge, to snatch it from their hands and narcissistically reclaim it as its own.

The "process of synthesis" (1962b, p. 72) that would be necessary for binocular vision, instead, stems from a completely different mindset: not an epistemic "scarcity mentality", according to which truth exists in shortage and has to be contended; but an abundance mentality, according to which truth is always overflowing compared to what anyone can hold in their hands. Since human knowledge is fallible, the integration of different perspectives can only achieve a better representation of truth as a "whole" object. The KW remains entrapped in its envy for the Other's knowledge because it believes in a state where the win of one is the loss of the other, instead of appreciating that truth exceeds anything that either I or the Other will ever be able to possess in any definitive sense.

Dissolution of the truth

If truth is treated as an object to be contended, like a piece of meat would by two opposing animals, then all that will be left behind at some point are its bones, that is, its worthless remains. In other words, although the KW's behavior may originally be intended to pursue the truth, what it contributes to eventually is its disintegration. The polarization of views between KWs, in fact, has the consequence of leaving any third-party spectator unable to find out the truth. We observe this phenomenon, for instance, in the public discussion surrounding high-profile criminal cases, such as the murder of Meredith Kercher or of Kathleen Peterson. Since these cases have become known to the public (via Netflix documentaries such as *Amanda Knox* and *The Staircase*, respectively), KWs have started arguing online, or in some cases even creating their own websites, some claiming that the defendant was definitely guilty, and others that they were definitely innocent. As a result, whoever was interested in searching online for the "truth" about these cases,

would be lost. The truth has been "pulverized" into a myriad of polarized theories. Similarly, after the publication of Nicholas Wade's (2021) article about the origin of COVID-19, reactions by KWs multiplied on social media taking one of two forms: either it was one of the best pieces of scientific journalism they ever read and the lab leak theory was definitely true, or it was one of the worst pieces ever written and the lab theory was definitely false. As a result, a person who wanted to search for the "truth" on this subject, but came after the passage of these KWs, would find only its unintelligible leftovers. Anything, even historical events (e.g., the storming of the protestants in the Capitol) can be dissolved into polarized interpretations tainted by moral and political qualities, so that for the average citizen it becomes almost impossible to ascertain what did, in fact, happen.

Bion theorizes that the destructive activity involved in –K results in a "denudation" of meaning (1962b, p. 97). If, as soon as any piece of knowledge is put out, it gets "consistently and minutely" split up (1959, p. 95) and converted "into particles" (p. 96), then what is left behind are "only degenerate objects" (1962a, p. 115). But if truth is as "essential for psychic health" as food is for the body, then its pulverization leaves the psyche suffering a deprivation process "analogous to the effect of physical starvation on the physique" (1962b, p. 56), that is, a *starvation of truth*. With the bizarre object grinding anything that is within reach, all that will remain in the end is the bizarre object itself. That is why Bion describes it in terms of "without-ness": an "alimentary canal" that has no "body" around to feed anymore. Dissolving any piece of food as soon as it is introduced, the "envious stripping or denudation of all good" continues until it "degenerates to nullity" (p. 97).

Bion's theorization of a "starvation of truth" puts a name to the risk that we are running in an online culture where for every fact there are a thousand interpretations, and where even "fact-checking" is starting to get used as a weapon by one part to prove moral superiority over the other. In the era of post-truth, we understand what it means to enviously extract meaning out of events

until the point of becoming incapable of telling fake news from actual news, conspiracy theories from scientific theories. The KW starts out as the "watchdog" of the truth, but it ends up contributing to its disappearance: *mis*-understandings and *mis*-information are all that is left behind.

Conclusions

It is generally assumed that uncivil online behavior would be a problem of "online hate". But different types of uncivil social media users are likely to be driven by different types of motives (Eberwein, 2020). In this paper, we have tried to outline the hypothesis that the KW's behavior is motivated by an object relation centered not so much on hate, but on knowledge. Bion's seemingly remote concept of –K, with all of its "peculiar features" (1962b, p. 97), might be the most accomplished *ante-litteram* description of a behavior that has been almost normalized in the West: namely, that of the average rageful social media user who, as soon as a "link" is made available by an Other, will, with remarkable speed and fury, throw itself at it and destroy it; not so much to lay the basis for a further constructive dialogue, but merely to re-affirm its moral superiority, in a zero-sum game that leads to a starvation of truth. The 10 features that we analyzed can be taken as independent but convergent indicators of the presence of epistemic envy in the KW.

As a general conclusion, we would like to remind the reader that –K is not a mental disorder, but a mode of operating that is antithetic to any constructive dialogue which, as such, can be found online as well as offline, at the clinical as well as at the extra-clinical level (see also Hinshelwood, 1996). Bion (1962b) made this clear when he noted that his theorization applied to groups as well.

> In K the group increases by the introduction of new ideas or people. In –K the new idea (or person) is stripped of its value and the group in turn feels devalued by the new idea. In K the climate is conducive to mental health. In –K neither group nor idea can survive (p. 99)

To understand the KW's behavior only as a function of one or another form of severe psychopathology (e.g., psychopathy; Sorokowski *et al*., 2020) means failing to see its relation to a more general aggravation of public discourse that we are witnessing in Western society and culture. We see today a deterioration of the conditions under which debates are had not only on social media, but wherever ideas are exchanged with the purpose of producing knowledge or establishing truths. There seems to be a collective demand for omniscient affirmations of moral superiority, as evidenced by the popularity of videos with clickbait titles such as "(conservative) DESTROYS (liberal)", or vice versa (see BBC News, 2019). Whether it is Peterson *versus* Žižek or Trump *versus* Biden, millions of viewers cheer their intellectual gladiators in academic or political debates as if they were wrestlers, and enjoy vicariously their "most savage comebacks" with a bloodlust that should be out of place in any civil exchange of ideas. In the era of culture wars, destructive attacks on linking are not only normalized in our society: they are *broadcasted* for public consumption.

In light of the current crisis of the culture of dialogue in Western culture, not only social media but all forums of public discussion risk to become a swimming pool for bizarre and envious objects with "the quality of a primitive, and even murderous, superego" (Bion, 1959, p. 101), tearing apart any attempt at linking faster than piranhas would a piece of meat. But if as soon as the nipple appears so do the teeth that bite it, then –K risks to make all communication, even scientific communication, "impossible" (1962a, p. 118), as evidenced by the sorry spectacle of some acrimonious arguments on Academic Twitter. In this aggravated atmosphere where really "no idea can survive", it is imperative that we start exploring new ways to reverse the course and rediscover the knowledge process as a joint venture in which contained and container are not adversaries but allies in their search for an (integrated) truth: an enterprise in which the Other and

I "are dependent on each other for mutual benefit and without harm to either" and from which we both derive "benefit" and achieve "growth" (1962b, p. 91).

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On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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