The Earnest Internet vs. the Ambivalent Internet

Whitney Phillips, **This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture** (MIT Press paperback edition), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, 256 pp., $17.95 (paperback).

Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, **The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017, 240 pp., $16.24 (paperback), $56.68 (hardcover).

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We are now two decades into research about the Internet. The early democratic hopes of scholars in books such as Yochai Benkler's (2006) *The Wealth of Networks* have gradually given way to more measured reflections as scholars such as Andrew Chadwick (2017) have detailed complex relations of power between people, networks, institutions, organizations, and media forms. Meanwhile, a growing body of empirical research has detailed the promises and perils of our digital age, chronicling everything from the way that social media facilitates political participation (Boulianne, 2017) to the ways that women engage in unpaid aspirational labor to achieve careers in the culture industries (Duffy, 2017).
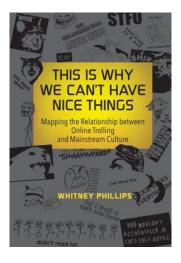
What most of these perspectives share, whether they are utopian, critical, empirically oriented, or somewhere in between, is that they have at their foundation a model of what we call an "earnest Internet." By this, we mean that communication scholarship generally posits that people act rationally and in good faith; care about facts, truth, and authenticity; pursue ends in line with their political and social values and aspirations; and, more philosophically, are fundamentally *good*. Much of the debate in communication scholarship is not about these underlying assumptions. It has revolved around the role of technologies as a causal driver in shaping human behavior, from creating conditions for virtuousness and selflessness (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006) and the flowering of human knowledge (Reagle, 2010) to the role of culture, institutions, media forms, structures, practices, and ultimately power in shaping how the Internet gets taken up in human affairs (e.g., Couldry, 2012).

And then the 2016 U.S. presidential election happened. It was not just that the election featured an explosion of ugly, racist, homophobic, and sexist opinions that were shared virtually everywhere on social media. The additional conceptual problem was that while *some* of these opinions were honestly held by actual residents of the United States, an unknown, but not insignificant, percentage of these opinions
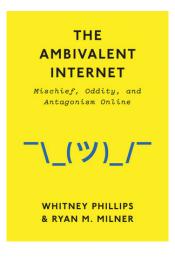
were being voiced "just for the 'lulz'"—"a particular kind of unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter" often directed at historically marginalized groups (Phillips, pp. 24–25). Candidate Hillary Clinton spent two weeks on the trail giving speeches about her general election opponent's ties to "the far, dark reaches of the Internet" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 22) while her campaign was posting explainers on its website that delved into a cartoon frog named Pepe—a racist meme that had been adopted as a symbol of white supremacy.

What was abundantly clear during the U.S. 2016 election cycle is that many once conventionally apolitical subcultures of the Internet had migrated into the realm of institutional politics. We must broaden our theoretical field of vision in response, not to mention our empirical objects of analysis. Into this context steps an important new voice, Whitney Phillips, whose work, especially a recent book with Ryan M. Milner, has done much to show us how "ambivalence," not "earnestness," is a better framework for understanding our contemporary moment. Phillips has written two important books: ***This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*** (2015) and ***The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*** (2017; authored with Milner). Together, these books show how wrong many of the reigning assumptions not only in the literature but also in public life more broadly are about human behavior online.

In *The Ambivalent Internet,* Phillips and Milner (who is also the author of the wonderful recent book titled *The World Made Meme*; Milner, 2016), reveal a world that undermines not only any sense of earnestness but also certainty. As they show through a fascinating set of detailed case studies drawn from their own "autoethnographic remix" (Phillips & Milner, p. 19) of contemporary Internet culture, we cannot be certain of anyone's intent or motivations, meaning is indeterminate, accountability is nearly impossible, and the social and antisocial are intertwined. As they put it, there is "ambivalence all the way down" (p. 201). While *The Ambivalent Internet* points to the epistemological issues that have drawn so much recent academic and public attention, Phillips and Milner reveal something far more important and, we believe, corrosive: the undermining of the basis for social trust. This goes far beyond the loss of trust in journalism or even institutions; it cuts to the heart of everyday social relations and public discourse.

Throughout her works, Phillips shows us how ambivalence, not earnestness, is increasingly a key driver of media, politics, and social life more generally. Ambivalent participation is a thorny proposition for many contemporary theories of "peer production" (Benkler, 2006), "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), "crowd-sourcing" (Brabham, 2013), and digitally networked political expression and

action (Tufekci, 2017). This is because scholars have heretofore analyzed these practices in terms of earnest people pursuing collaborative ends, producing public goods such as knowledge and political outcomes along the way.

Where most of these paradigmatic theories, and much of the field of communication more broadly, have avoided the Internet's iconic-but-odd participatory subcultures, *The Ambivalent Internet* takes them up. Drawing from the humanistic traditions of folklore and media studies, the strength of the book lies in its complex, detailed, and provocative case studies that animate our understanding of the strange world of digital content-creation that is frequently shielded from view—until, as Phillips and Milner show, it became impossible to ignore and socially consequential, as it has over the past few years. The book creates an analytical framework for understanding, and empirically documenting, some of the main drivers of Internet, and, increasingly, public culture. Centrally, Phillips and Milner argue that these participatory publics are defined not by the act of trolling, but by ambivalence, "which means 'both, on both sides,' implying tension, and often fraught tension, between opposites—despite the fact that in everyday usage, the word *ambivalent* is often used as a stand-in for 'I don't have an opinion either way'" (p. 10). As Phillips and Milner conclude, the cases explored in their book

> complicate so many of our most basic assumptions. For example, that now is not then. That you are not us. That socializing is positive. That texts and authors and meanings have borders. That fighting is the opposite of togetherness, and emotion is the opposite of argument . . . none of these assumptions is as obvious or as clear or even as helpful as we might expect or prefer them to be. (p. 210)

So many analyses of fake news, Russian fake accounts on Facebook, and bots after the 2016 election have occurred in a vacuum, often ignoring the deeper political, social, and cultural contexts from which they have emerged in focusing on the earnest production and reception of political information. In contrast, Phillips and Milner show how the speed and vehemence of 4Chan and the alt-right during the 2016 election reveal a very different cultural logic of folklore and humor. The hackers, the trolls, the meme warriors, and the "weird Internet" have long been political in the broad sense of the term. But Phillips and Milner show that the 2016 election reveals these groups to be at the heart of the realm of practical, institutional politics. This extends to the authors' deep understanding of the ways that political memes and digital cultural artifacts more generally are understood by these communities of interpretation: ambivalently. Phillips and Milner make the deeply compelling case that these communities create cultural artifacts that are supposed to be understood ambivalently, not earnestly, and through that very ambivalence lies the basis of social solidarity and social distinction. If you understand the folklore and the humor at work in this cultural play around serious topics, you are part of the group. If you do not, then you are not. In the process, however, this is often about the exercise of power, especially by white males. Cultural play is often about deploying corrosive speech, such as racist memes, "that antagonizes, silences, and marginalizes" (Phillips & Milner, p. 201)—aimed at women and people of color.

And both of the Phillips books show how the ambivalent Internet is also relationally constituted, in part through older media logics. In *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, for instance, Phillips takes trolling as a serious subject of study. Through a pioneering and rollicking example of digital participant

observation, textual analysis, and interviewing, Phillips charts the evolution of the trolling subculture spanning the years from 2003 to 2015. Phillips helps explain the jokes, the motivations, the thrills, and the failures embedded within sites like 4chan's /b online community. The latter chapters of the book are particularly insightful, assessing how popularity and growth affected the subculture, and how longtime trolls rebelled against and rejected the arrival of new, earnest efforts to turn their tactics of pranking, hacking, and raiding toward earnest political ends. Even more, Phillips shows how trolling emerged as a cultural phenomenon in response to, in part, the maudlin sentiment of legacy media spectacle and feeds off of it. Trolling, Phillips argues, draws its cultural materials from the detritus of contemporary culture, drawing on the overwhelming sentimentality but also the racism and sexism in the broader culture. Phillips points this out not to excuse the ethical implications of trolling or the very real symbolic violence it often wrecks on vulnerable people (and not-so-vulnerable people like Oprah Winfrey), as some reviewers have suggested. We believe she does this to reveal the ways that trolls "fit comfortably within the contemporary American media landscape" (Phillips & Milner, p. 134) that has given rise to the practices that are considered trolling.

The political valence of *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* and *The Ambivalent Internet* is just one aspect of these works that we believe have the potential to make contributions across communication subfields. The "ambivalent" framework, for instance, is an important analytical contribution that is applicable across the broad interdisciplinary field of media fan studies. For example, much of the fan fiction literature fails to acknowledge any sort of ambivalence in fandom given the desire to defend fans from demeaning and often pathologizing stereotypes. While this is understandable given the subfield's origins in the attempt to reclaim popular culture as an important object of study and elevate non-elite voices in scholarship, this elides the very real presence of things such as fan fiction that valorize rape and abusive relationships (Bury, 2005; Coppa, 2014; McLelland, 2016). The "dirt work" approach that Phillips and Milner outline in *The Ambivalent Internet*'s conclusion can be especially useful to help scholars unravel the more ambivalent facets of fan-related phenomena.

Borrowed from anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), the term "dirt work" emphasizes that any taboo inherently exists in contrast to norms that are characterized as "clean" or culturally sanctioned. Phillips and Milner employ this concept by comparing bewildering online content to the broader cultural logics within which they occur in order to "extract norms from that which is not normal" (p. 203). To illustrate dirt work, they apply this strategy to make sense of a video titled "The Trump Effect" and the environment in which it went viral. Posted during the recent U.S. presidential election season, the video features a chaotic amalgam of perplexing content, including praise for Trump from a fascist *Mass Effect 2* video game character, Democratic party financier George Soros lip-synced with *Star Wars* villain Sith Lord's voice, and Hillary Clinton barking like a dog, just to name a few examples. They note that Trump's decision to retweet the video was just as bizarre as the video itself, since it includes praise from a fascist villain, racist depictions of Mexican immigrants and Black Lives Matter protesters, and a Trump supporter wearing a "KKK Endorses" sweatshirt.

Phillips and Milner's dirt work, however, begins to untangle the video, revealing both its fundamental complexity and ambivalence. The video is not clearly in support of or a satire of either Democrats or Republicans; the creator's intent is highly ambiguous, which resists an easy demarcation

between an "us" and an othered "them." This renders all groups depicted in the video as potential bait for laughter—meaning even someone who is clearly laughed at in the video, like Trump, would find its derision of others humorous. Also, much of the video's shocking content becomes less surprising given the larger cultural context it occurs in. The video's populist, racist, and xenophobic content is situated within the country's long history of racist and xenophobic political figures and ideologies. Furthermore, although narrated by *Mass Effect 2*'s villain, much of the video's symbolism and narrative expressions center around age-old folkloric motifs, like the "hero-savior" (in the video, Trump) that must overcome foreboding "evil" (the barking Hillary). As Phillips and Milner conclude, dirt work reveals how messy "The Trump Effect" and other Internet phenomena are; it produces "a jumble that is, appropriately enough, both the ultimate source of and ultimate hindrance to meaningful cultural insight" (p. 211).

The different analytic lenses described in each chapter of *The Ambivalent Internet* provide important considerations for doing dirt work in fan studies or politics. In light of the first chapter's discussion of the evolution of folkloric expression, for instance, fan studies scholars could consider which elements of tabooed fan fiction are both consistent with and dynamically build upon canonical "clean" fan fiction. Regarding identity play, how might the affordances of different online platforms for fannish activity, like anonymity and publicity, affect how fans chose to perform their identities as fans, or indeed, how citizens perform their identities as citizens? In terms of fandom-related humor, how does fan fiction fetishize (in both the Marxist and sexual meanings of the word) media texts, other fan fictions, and other fandoms? At whose expense is humor built upon, and what does it cost them? The chapter on collective storytelling raises questions of what stories, urban legends, and tropes are shared between "clean" fan fiction and fan activities and the more "nonnormal" varieties. How do fan groups conceptualize "us" versus "them"? In light of fans' larger cultural marginalization, how do fandoms generate in-group solidarity and out-group disdain? How might subsets within fandoms be dually marginalized?

Using the theoretical lenses that Phillip and Milner provide in *The Ambivalent Internet*, it quickly becomes clear that fan studies, political communication, and communication research as a whole could benefit from an analytic framework of ambivalence. Their book provides a road map for tackling the complexity inherent in online social phenomena, and researchers should refer to *The Ambivalent Internet* before making conclusions or value judgments about Internet content. For example, Milner and Phillips's ambivalent framework reveals both how seemingly trivial online oddities may belittle or exclude marginalized groups and how evidently "dirty" Internet content may be a product of unquestioned cultural norms.

Whitney Phillips analyzes and documents worlds that few foresaw or even have access to. Like many scholars of contemporary digital culture and politics, and even the political practitioners we have spoken to, we were surprised by the rapid burst into mainstream politics of 4chan and the alt-right around Donald Trump's campaign. In *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things,* Phillips' deep ethnographic work was clearly prescient, providing an explanatory backdrop and necessary history for analyses such as Hawley's (2017) work on the rise and emergence of the alt-right—in essence, Phillips reveals the cultural context behind the "smirking" style of contemporary white nationalism. The key is that Phillips' work provides necessary analysis and context for understanding the ways in which ambivalence provides the backdrop for many forms of public debate and expression.

At the same time, ambivalence frustrates our ability to have clear objects of critique in view, as sexism and racism can be disavowed as simple shock tactics targeting the easily offended and provoked. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner's work joins that of other scholars who we believe are at the center of analyzing the cultural fabric of the new participatory public sphere: Jessica Beyer, Gabriella Coleman, Alice Marwick, Tressie McMillan Cottom, and Katy Pearce. These scholars, along with Phillips and Milner, have been at the forefront of showing how new online dynamics can work to exclude women and people of color from the contemporary public sphere, reinforcing structural exclusions—even as these dynamics also offer novel possibilities to challenge power.

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Above all, these two books force us to reevaluate civic and social engagement when it is rooted in ambivalence rather than earnestness. There is a central assumption shared among the research communities that study political, civic, and fan participation: We tend to assume that all participation is *earnest* and well-meaning. Phone calls to Congress are earnest. Zoning board hearings are too boring to attract anyone but the most devoted, civic-minded (and/or self-interested) attendees. The people who turn out at the local, state, or national level have some deep motivation that is leading them to take the costly action of showing up. The fans who gather to engage in things such as collaboratively writing Harry Potter fan fiction do so to join in fellowship and express their true selves. We are accustomed to thinking about civic and political participation as an unvarnished good. Rarely will you find a contemporary article that normatively questions whether increased participation or fan communities are a good thing. An engaged citizenry that bowls together is a good citizenry, and a disengaged citizenry is a symptom of an ailing body politic.

For scholars who do not come out of the traditions of folklore and media studies, there are opportunities to build on these books given what they *don't* do. Missing from both books, for instance, is an analysis of the political economy that has emerged as ambivalent Internet subcultures have picked up steam in the broader culture. The 2016 U.S. presidential election did not just feature memes and GIFs, it also featured strategic, well-funded actors who were repurposing ambivalent culture for partisan ends from outposts such as *Breitbart*. Also missing are the geopolitical forces at play. As U.S. congressional hearings have revealed, nation-states such as Russia have now intentionally invested in the business of trolling. We also never get a sense from *The Ambivalent Internet* of how citizens themselves perceived the various memes on full display during the election cycle and whether and how they might have been consequential in shaping votes, or how campaigns and institutional political actors responded to them. Nor do we know how the victims of trolling in *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* felt about being mocked and harassed for doing earnest things such as setting up digital memorials to their sons and daughters who committed suicide. Normatively, much remains to be worked out about the ethical, legal, and democratic response to the proliferation of these forms of political and social speech. And, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* should offer ripe discussions about research ethics in the context of studying marginal and abusive communities.

In short, there is far more scholarly work to be done at the intersection of media, institutional politics, fan communities, and trolling/Internet subcultural practices. These books provide a launching

point for that broader research program, and we hope scholars will bring their own disciplinary orientations to these works to frame their core problems and findings in new ways. And, we hope that those who build from these works look to them as models of compelling scholarly prose that is at once analytically rich and publicly accessible. This is refreshing. The great strength and value that these books offer to communication scholars at this particular juncture is that, in spanning the boundaries of the field, they broaden our theoretical, empirical, and normative vision. For years, many communication scholars, and especially in our own subfield of political communication, have managed to shelter themselves from broader online cultural currents, instead of investigating how new information and communication technologies and cultural practices are grafted onto traditional civic, political, and cultural spaces. Post-2016, it is time for us to confront our long-held assumptions about the earnest nature of civic and political behavior, not to mention forms of cultural expression.

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