

Book Review: The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online by Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner

In The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online, Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner explore the contradictions and paradoxes of the internet as a realm of 'vernacular creativity'. This is a thought-provoking and original study that diverges from a 'good or bad' binary to instead demonstrate the messy ambivalence of internet culture today, writes Dr Zoetanya Sujon.

***The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online.* Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner. Polity. 2017.**

Find this book: 

Whitney Phillips, winner of the [Nancy Baym book award](#) for her work on [trolling and mainstream culture](#) (2015), and Ryan M. Milner, author of the [World Made Meme](#) (2016), turn their sharp focus to the weird world of internet culture. In this highly anticipated book, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online*, the authors concentrate on the meeting points between memes and trolling through the lens of folklore and communications traditions as well as drawing rich theoretical insights from 'overlapping social sciences', especially anthropology and psychology, along with literary studies (14). The authors open up internet culture through a kind of 'auto-ethnographic approach' in order to better understand the tensions between the individual and the collective, between the private and the public and between the mainstream and subaltern (25). While this book is clearly rooted in their previous work, there is a lot of value in this conceptually rich collaboration, examining the contradictions, nuances and ambiguity of the internet, and the multiplicities of its use.



Beginning with the tale of the '[Three Wolf Moon](#)' t-shirt, a now-legendary internet object that depicted three wolves howling at the moon and inspired funny and satirical Amazon reviews attributing the shirt with magical powers, this book provides a friendly and thorough introduction to what Phillips and Milner refer to as the 'folkloric expression of vernacular creativity' (25). The book focuses on in-depth, wide-ranging and thoroughly detailed examples of individual and collective expression on the internet – what the authors refer to as 'vernacular creativity' – grouped according to theme and linked with a relevant synthesis of theories and concepts.

Further drawing on wild and weird examples of and from the internet, the book is structured as follows: the rise of Twitter hashtags like [#Cosby](#), [#AskThicke](#), [#YesAllWomen](#) (Chapter One); coordinated viral attacks on celebrities like those by racist and anti-feminist trolls on *Ghostbusters* actress Leslie Jones (Chapter Two); Tommy [Wiseau's](#) cult classic *The Room* (2003) and [ermahgerd memes](#) (Chapter Three); the remediation of urban legends on social media like '[Slenderman](#)' and the '[kidney heist](#)' (Chapter Four); and the relevance of '[Boaty McBoatface](#)' and Donald Trump's political presence on social media (Chapter Five).



Image Credit: ([Iain Heath CCO](#))

The examples provide an engaging foundation throughout the book, which Phillips and Milner use to argue that the internet is *ambivalent*. By this, Phillips and Milner aim to understand how these phenomena both build and destroy communities: how viral memes and Twitter hashtags can 'hijack identities' causing immense personal distress as well as cement collective and collaborative relationships that are both pro- and anti-social, often at the same time. In this sense, this book is a welcome departure from the 'good or bad' binary often dominating popular media coverage and a great deal of academic work on digital and social media and internet studies.

With this often paradoxical ambivalence in place, Phillips and Milner go on to make a number of observations about the nature of internet culture, and in the process provide significant contributions to internet, digital, social and media studies. Among the many rich points within the book, the three most compelling and thought-provoking arguments can be summarised through the *folkloric*, *constitutive* and *public* nature of internet culture.

First, weird internet and user culture is important as *folkloric* expression with historic and non-digital precedents. This point and its corresponding chapter are indeed one of my favourites, providing deep insights into 'the everyday expression of everyday people', which is not:

by and large, house of worship talk. It's not ivory-tower talk. It's back-alley talk, around-the-campfire talk. Furtive talk when the boss isn't listening. Hybrid, unpolished, and unfinished, folklore is where formality goes to rest (25-26).

Although there is no direct mention of [Michel de Certeau](#) or studies of media and everyday life (e.g. [Bull 2000](#), [Bird 2003](#), [Gerrard 2017](#)), Phillips and Milner look at internet culture as 'post-modern folklore', articulating a kind of twenty-first-century framework for understanding the ambivalence of everyday life on the internet. In this sense, Phillips and Milner validate the importance of what might otherwise be seen only as the playful and ridiculous, rather than also being folkloric, expressive and culturally literate.

Second, drawing from studies of humour (e.g. [Dundes 1987](#), [Oring 1992, 2003](#), [Kuipers 2015](#)), Phillips and Milner argue that humour on the internet is socially, culturally and politically *constitutive*, online and offline. All of their examples, such as the rise of 'internet ugly', 'absurdist creativity', vaguely insulting jokes about 'your dad' and '[Hulk Hogan](#)', point to the ways humour is used to create a 'cozy laughing ingroup': an 'us' which can share values and cultural references. However, true to the ambivalent nature of internet culture, every act which constitutes an 'us' also creates 'at least the potential for an outgroup': a 'them' who are unable (or lack the interest) to decode particular cultural vernaculars (96-97). Here, humour is generative of both particular identifications and 'otherings' or exclusions (106). As Phillips and Milner suggest, 'decoding humour [...] requires a set of broader cultural literacies' (112): a critical point for understanding internet phenomena and the importance of user behaviour.

Third, Phillips and Milner argue that public debate is messy, contradictory and shaped by ‘the evil twins’ of ‘conflict and unity, and affect and rationality’, as well as the *play frame* of internet culture. Focusing on ‘Boaty McBoatface’ – the most popular name chosen by the masses in a public vote for the £200m polar vessel – Phillips and Milner argue that voice on the internet is complex, ambivalent and entails ‘a process that empowers and marginalizes in equal measure’ (169). Linking Boaty’s playful dynamics to Trump’s bombastic populism, Phillips and Milner successfully outline the affective and exclusionary tensions around building an ‘us’ which can simultaneously silence and amplify others (172-73). By addressing the use of humour for political action (e.g. [Periods for Pence](#) or [#FreeChrisChristie](#)), Phillips and Milner argue that the ‘play frame’ may not be new, but is increasingly visible and increasingly potent within politics and public debate.

All of these arguments and observations build upon and illustrate the overall ambivalence of the internet, as well as providing a thought-provoking and original synthesis of a wide range of theory and examples. Students and those new to internet culture will love the freshness and accessibility of this book. Those with more experience will appreciate the authors’ significant contributions to internet and digital studies, although they may also question the absence of political economy or critical theory as part of the ‘ambivalent internet’, particularly in terms of power and hegemony (e.g. [Fuchs 2017, 2016](#), [Van Dijck 2013](#)). In addition, I found myself questioning auto-ethnography as a method. While I plan to use this book in courses on social media and digital culture, auto-ethnography will need further explanation particularly in terms of representativeness and generalisation – points which could be addressed in Phillips and Milner’s notes on method. Finally, it is worth considering how Phillips and Milner’s vision of the ambivalent internet fits within youth culture, particularly as many, if not all, of their examples are arguably youth-oriented. Given the larger global proportion of young people online ([70% of 15-24 year olds](#)) compared to [50% of the world’s entire online population](#), this is especially relevant, if also ambivalent.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.