

Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner. *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polluted Information*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020. 280 ISBN 9780262539913)

In *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polluted Information*, Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, communication scholars who specialize in digital media, argue that academics and journalists who study and report on reactionary digital media can reduce the harm that comes from repeating the messages and amplifying the voices of reactionaries. They recommend practicing “ecological literacy,” a phrase Phillips and Milner borrowed from ecologists and then significantly altered. For the authors of *You Are Here*, ecological literacy refers to two practices: describing communicative connections through which discussion of harmful media causes further harm and using metaphors that evoke nature to talk about political discourse.

The authors build on media ecology—scholarship that analyzes information technologies in the environments that support them—to address the ethics of studying their political opponents; however, they do not instruct their readers in the art of reading the world as ecologists do. *You Are Here* neither requires nor provides an education in ecology and, in fact, presents metaphors that contradict the standard ecological worldview.

The book opens with a passage that clarifies how far from ecological thinking Phillips and Milner stray. Phillips presents an interesting recollection of taking a morning run through an artificial marsh created to treat wastewater. The poetry is that, just as good municipal citizens have come together to manage their sewage, so the good citizens of digital media should do the same for digital pollution. The ecological metaphor begins here; it also ends here.

Throughout their book, Phillips and Milner refer to harmful communication in “scatological” terms while claiming that only some people make the scat. They would have it that only a certain number of people, a readily identifiable group of bad actors, are directly responsible for the mess that everyone else must clean up. The wastewater would be reactionary trolling online; the treatment would be applied ecological literacy. But their metaphor does not work. Everyone produces harmful waste. An ecological account of the problem of sewage makes all of us directly responsible for the problem. We all make the stuff.

You Are Here’s misappropriation of ecology matters because Phillips and Milner use ecological terms to provide rhetorical support for their argument that their research provides enough benefit to justify the harm it causes to vulnerable communities. Their argument is unconvincing for three reasons: 1) they do not explain why mapping the communicative path of harm reduces harm; 2) they do not explain why ecological metaphors diminish the amplification of reactionary voices; 3) they are not undertaking an ecological project, but rather a sacralizing one. They argue that they themselves should be exempt from rules prohibiting the harmful study of reactionary digital media, because they have anointed themselves worthy of such an exemption.

Their foundational ecological metaphor is the pollution of information ecologies: reactionary “disinformation,” “misinformation,” and “malinformation” pollute communication (1, 4). Their first chapter recounts the Satanic Panics of the 1980s and ‘90s, as a model of this process:

The people carrying the messages from Evangelical [information] networks to secular networks may have been oblivious

to their role in the filtration process. Still, cross-pollinating Evangelicals did a great deal to spread the panics far and wide. Loose connections across multiple networks were all it took to bring the devil to secular doorsteps. (I, 20)

Phillips and Milner think the sewage of these particular Christians' beliefs flooded through communication pipelines to contaminate even those well-equipped to resist infection. The Evangelicals polluted the media landscape by communicating their belief in a world structured by fallenness, a world that encourages devil-worshippers to befoul what should be clean. Yet the Evangelicals themselves spread the "raw sewage," by speaking of the devil: they repeated the harmful trolling of actual Satanists and amplified satanic voices (I, 22). Indeed, pranksters trolled panicking Evangelicals by adopting satanic tropes. Then, secular authorities, such as law enforcement and mental health professionals, transmitted the Evangelicals' panic, leading, the authors argue, to unjust prosecutions and invalid diagnoses.

Phillips and Milner wish to avoid those secular mistakes, but, despite their use of ecological language, the world Phillips and Milner describe in *You Are Here* does not resemble the complex systems studied by ecologists. Their world resembles the Evangelicals' world, one made to allow and even encourage evil doers to do evil. *You Are Here* is a feast of troll-bait. The authors would like to see "a Green New Deal for digital media," because these media have become toxic, especially to the most vulnerable populations, but they find the political world structured to be fallen. The weight of the system is too much for reform to lift, due to wrongs done long ago: "we don't foresee government or industry signing on to the necessary structural changes any time soon" (I, 5-6). Phillips and Milner believe that bad structure alone does not cause bad consequences; it also

takes bad people to pollute information. Pollution comes from “citizens of bad faith,” although “well-meaning citizens” (I, 5) can unwittingly pass along the poison excreted by the “bad actors” (II, 21).

Phillips and Milner talk about digital reactionaries in the same way Evangelicals talked about Satanists. They find Christians guilty of the polluting sin of creating a “subversion myth,” a story of bad things done by “an evil internal enemy” (I, 5). They frame their history of the Satanic Panics with a story of subversion they do not recognize as a myth: the accusations of Satanism brought to bear on Hillary Clinton and her allies in 2016, after the release of e-mails written by John Podesta, her Presidential campaign chair. Reactionaries seized on some odd language in these messages and spread rumors of Clinton’s partaking in satanic child abuse. Phillips and Milner interpret this trolling as similar to the Evangelicals’ Satanic subversion myth, but then they themselves characterize the event in terms just like those used by Evangelicals about suspected Satanists: “the emails were procured through a coordinated effort by a hostile foreign power to subvert American democracy” (I, 2).

They sincerely believe Clinton lost the 2016 Presidential election because of a conspiracy between foreign devils and “citizens of bad faith”. They reveal how they came to this belief in their second chapter, which aims to expose the cesspool that formed in the internet culture of the 2000s. By “internet culture” (II, 4), they do not mean everything on the internet, but rather the “subcultural trolling” they studied then and continue to study now (II, 6). For Phillips and Milner, the major event of 2003 was the founding of 4chan in October. They make no mention of the Iraq War, which began that March. Nor do they mention the 9/11 attacks, the event that was illegitimately used to justify that war. Nor the financial crisis of 2007/08. They also ignore

both the Occupy movement and the anti-war protests. Phillips and Milner focus instead on their own and others' presentations about memes at a handful of conferences throughout the aughts. Perhaps we can't expect the murder of hundreds of thousands of people or the suffering of millions to move scholars of popular culture, but *You Are Here* concerns reactionary meme culture and politics. All of these unmentioned events had a pretty big effect on both.

Now, Phillips and Milner do regret these conferences—not because they ignored the most important events of their times, but because there, the authors, who consider themselves citizens of good faith, mistakenly communicated the pollution excreted by citizens of bad faith. Philips and Milner confess to the venial sin of studying the cardinal sins of people who posted on websites such as 4chan. They note that it was common for presenters at meme conferences to show a meme featuring a racial slur, then analyze it, thereby aggravating the meme's harm. In their recounting of this mistaken approach, they repeat a racial slur in all caps and analyze its use—but now, Phillips and Milner believe, their presentation of this language in *You Are Here* no longer causes harm. Or the harm is worth it, because now their research is no longer apolitical. Thus, they claim: “Amplifying racism normalizes racist ideology” (V, 16). This claim seems absolute, but they qualify it later:

Silence isn't always advisable. The challenge is to be strategic about the messages we amplify. More than that, the challenge is to approach amplification with ecological literacy. The question isn't just “to amplify or not to amplify?” The question—to be asked anew case after case, click after click—is: What are the environmental impacts of my choices? (VI, 9)

An important cause justifies risking harm, and Phillips and Milner have arrived at a method that allows them to decide for themselves that their own scholarly work on reactionary digital media is just such a cause. In Evangelical logic, one must confess to a wrongdoing, in order to keep doing it, and *You Are Here* offers a detailed recounting of the multitude of harms done by the alt-right, before and after Trump's win, from Pizzagate to Roseanne Barr to QAnon. Apparently, this account does not amplify reactionary voices, which, Phillips and Milner claim, is something other scholars and journalists do: "Ironically, the powerful signal boosting afforded by the center-left is a primary catalyst for far-right intensification" (IV, 20).

How do Phillips and Milner distinguish themselves from those who do things the wrong way? By declaring themselves to be ecologically literate, a declaration that raises many questions, none more obvious than this: are they?

Not if their ecological metaphors have anything to say about it. As covered above, scatological metaphors are unsuitable for the project Phillips and Milner have undertaken, because such rhetoric would indict all people (which would be the proper ecological indictment on the matter of excrement). But their goal is not a society that respects ecological limits. They want a discursive crusade against those who do not practice the faith of good citizenship. The ecological conceit does not serve this goal.

Consider their likening of reactionary conspiracy theories to hurricanes: just as anthropogenic climate change has worsened these storms, so bad practices in the media climate have strengthened the storm of these theories. The authors want "to prevent these storms from forming in the first place" (III, 3). This is

another bad metaphor. There will always be hurricanes and there should be: these storms are crucial to the health of the Earth System. Phillips and Milner are naturalizing polluted information in one breath, while promising a world without it in the other.

Further, it seems judicious that one ought not to lionize “citizens of bad faith,” because reactionaries will gleefully adopt such imagery, as the authors note. But Phillips and Milner describe reactionary trolls as “the lions and tigers and bears at the top of the biomass pyramid” (VI, 7). Their “citizens of bad faith” become “apex predators.” This is ecologically confused and argumentatively confusing. Apex predators are essential to their ecosystems. Are “citizens of bad faith” essential to democracy? Beyond the confusion, this metaphor violates the authors’ own recommendations. Phillips and Milner dress up their villains as lions, hurricanes, poison fruit, and wellsprings of excrement, all while sermonizing scholars and journalists to beware the temptation of fetishizing their political enemies.

Media scholars should take care with ecological metaphors. Ecological thinking is a sub-discipline of the study of complexity or “systems thinking,” and wisdom garnered from studying the complex system we call nature is not often applicable to the complex systems we call human societies. The planetary system limits human ones, but that doesn’t mean we must manage every complex system as if it were the planet. Humanity cannot impose limits on the violence and filth of nature; humanity must limit its own violence and filth.

What is more, it is dehumanizing to compare people to storm systems and predators, not least because of what such a comparison implies about those harmed by reactionaries: Phillips and Milner

talk about alt-right provocateurs the way settlers talked about wolves—which raises questions about both who the sheep are and how the land fared when the ranchers wiped out the wolf.

Ecology is too tangled a path to support the straightforward moral campaign Phillips and Milner wish to wage. Could they have used any of the many systems thinking approaches to communication to make their case? Maybe not. Their arguments for the importance of their work undermine the possibility of doing that work. They have established reactionary digital media as so toxic that any handling of it must cause harm. Really, their logic is not that of the toxin contained by science, but that of the taboo purified by ritual. *You Are Here* rules out academic approaches and leaves only sacralizing ones.

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