

Book Review

By Johan Farkas, Malmö University

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The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017. 240 pp. \$69.95 hbk. \$24.95 pbk. \$19.99 ebk.

You open your web browser and click on some links. Before you know it, you find yourself enmeshed in strange memes or outrageous conspiracy theories, seemingly too far-fetched for anyone to believe them. Is this supposed to be a joke or is it actually "for real?" This everyday epistemological question – likely resonating with most internet users – forms the basis of Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner's timely book, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online*.

Situated at the intersection of folklore and media studies, this book provides a fascinating and personally written introduction to ambivalent practices found in multiple corners of the Web. Building on their previous two monographs — *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Phillips, 2015) and *World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Milner, 2016) — Phillips and Milner present a *tour de force* exploration of online folkloric expression and critical reflections on how to study it. Departing from the notion of "trolling," which the authors argue has become too much of a catchall term, the book explores a multitude of weird, fascinating and disturbing cases. Phillips is assistant professor of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University, and Milner is associate professor of Communication at the College of Charleston.

The book's focus ranges from relatively benign online phenomena, such as bizarre product reviews on Amazon or explicit memes about *Sesame Street* on social media, to more severe objects of analysis, such as morbid jokes about terrorism or love letters to school shooters. What holds true across all these accounts is that identifying the "real" origins or underlying intentions behind such content is not feasible. As Phillips and Milner summarize: "Online, what something 'really' is, what it 'really' means, are often the first certainties to go." This ambivalence is encapsulated by "Poe's law," stating that it is often impossible to distinguish between extremist views and parodies of extremist views online.

To most internet users – not least researchers trying to understand digital phenomena – epistemological uncertainties can easily cause frustrations and lead to either relinquishment or jump-the-gun conclusions. To Phillips and Milner, however, none of these responses will do, as ambivalence should not be disregarded or resolved but brought to the forefront. As an in-built element of vernacular expression, ambivalence often acts as a key component and driver of online communication. Accordingly, the authors argue that a viable approach "is to work with this ambivalence, not against it. Most importantly, to resist the urge to assert that something is a particular way, just because it looks like that thing."

Ambivalence, Phillips and Milner underline, has always been part of folkloric practices, yet online it takes on new forms and is amplified in unpredictable manners. This can potentially serve to promote creativity and a positive sense of community, but it can also act as a vehicle of harassment and bullying. Instead of obsessing about the "true" intentions behind such content, however, scholars and users need to focus on the content itself and its implications: "if something appears to signal bigotry, it's bigotry. Because that is, quite literally, the message being communicated."

Theoretically and methodologically, the book opts for explorative breadth, serving to highlight a plurality of cases, predominantly situated in the North American digital landscape. While stronger and more elaborate connections to theorists such as Goffman, Mouffe and Barthes (all serving minor roles in the book) would have suited the book well, its wide range of cases serve as a powerful starting point for theorising ambivalent expression. A key strength of the book lies in the authors' personal writing style, making it both an accessible and enjoyable read. The book will be of interest to both students and senior scholars examining cultural production, community building, participation and political communication online.