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But There Is No Here Any Longer Anywhere: Review of Phillips and Milner's *You Are Here*

Adam Riggio, Royal Crown College [adamriggio@gmail.com](mailto:adamriggio@gmail.com)

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*You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape*

Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner

MIT Press, 2021

279 pp.

There is arguably no issue of greater urgency than the subject matter of *You Are Here*: the epistemic breakdown of public life. This is an ongoing crisis snowballing far faster than the sluggish pace of academic publishing. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner admit as much, writing in the introduction that they were to submit their copy edits at the end of April 2020, when the chaos pestilence of COVID-19 had only just exploded. The authors saw their warnings borne out in the explosion of disinformation, extremist mobilization, popular delusion over the 11 months of the pandemic that unfolded from copy edit submission to publication.

Phillips and Milner are retroactive Cassandras: they knew to warn us, but even the warning goes unheard until history has made it a mere acknowledgement. Yet this impotence in any warning, whether slow as a university press or fast as a click on post, is itself a feature of our disinformation age. Of what good is it to tell the truth when it has become indistinguishable from lies and propaganda?

*You Are Here* doesn't ask this question, though it does beg it. At least, it begs that question from me. This book is an honest truth telling, a diagnosis of the root causes of our political epistemic crisis, whose accuracy comes, in part, from the authors' insider's view of formative internet culture. As an analysis of recent events, the book is incisive. But as theory, it remains relatively weak. It does mobilize philosophical terminology, but its core concepts advance little beyond imagery and metaphor. Their metaphors are, for the most part, perfect images to capture their concept. But the concept itself remains unsaid.

### **The Troll: A Life Without Concern for Others**

Phillips and Milner in *You Are Here* describe the pivotal cultural and institutional conditions of the disinformation age that uniquely enables fascist mobilization. They capture the moments in thought when irreverence produced a nihilism of smirking hatred for whom truth is worthless if it blocks the path of a bullet. They produce sketches of the conceptual machines at work when internet culture formed, and which still run in its most basic logic.

Understanding those concepts accurately diagnoses what has gone so very wrong in internet culture that now informs the grammar of today's high-speed disinformation campaigns that manipulate and disorient millions of people across the globe. The great virtue of *You Are Here* is that they both precisely and concisely describe the epistemology of the troll. They describe a creature whose every communication is reduced to pure surface affect. The troll is unable to understand the inner lives of the subjects of their memes and jokes, but does not

want to understand; the sympathy that comes with understanding would destroy any trollishness in someone's personality.

The only priorities for a troll are to deaden any emotions that would interfere with the pleasure he receives from laughing at others. Nothing is serious enough to interfere with the pleasure he receives from laughing at others, even if you are prank calling the parents of a suicide victim, pretending to be their dead son calling from the cemetery. Nothing has serious meaning; everything is understood as an opportunity to pleasure yourself by laughing at someone. You can send a meme making fun of suicide victims to the parents of a recent suicide victim, and consider this perfectly acceptable because it makes you laugh. If thousands of other people are harassing family members of that suicide victim, that does not matter to you because those are the actions of other people, and you are concerned ethically only with your own perspective. You send a meme mocking suicide victims to someone who just lost their child to suicide, you laugh, and you move on with your day. This is the practical ethical result of living "for the lulz."

Humour in internet culture is a comedy of juxtaposition without context or history, where the engine of laughter is insulting, dehumanizing mockery. Ordinary imagery, like an awkward photo of a stoned teenager or a shocked tween, accompanies captions that can refer to whatever the author wishes. Sometimes, a meme can provoke fascinating thoughts about complex concerns; galvanize against injustice, more often a cheap laugh; it can just as easily encourage dehumanization and hatred or spread racist lies. But no matter how complex the ideas that inform a meme, their medium significantly impacts how viewers understand them: the speedy intake of imagery and text through a browser scroll on a phone screen or desktop monitor. The medium of meme consumption severely discourages taking the time to reflect on what you've seen because the images scroll by so quickly. The format of the meme itself also discourages thoughtful reflection because its aesthetic is a simple assemblage of images and text.

Phillips and Milner describe this aesthetic as "fetishized sight," their most effective philosophical image. It is the only such image in *You Are Here* that successfully functions as a philosophical concept, laying out a framework of thinking that describes what powers the framework encourages, ignores, fertilizes, and atrophies. Fetishized sight removes all context from an image: the lives and feelings of the people involved, the social, economic, and political history and situations of a meme's target, any ethical consideration of harm to others. The only significant ethical question for a troll is whether an image makes him laugh.

### **Tangled Imagery Without an Organizing Framework**

However, apart from fetishized sight, the other images that Phillips and Milner use to describe our twisted media ecology and its social-psychological affects have no more philosophical conceptual content than metaphors and easy imagery. This can render their analyses of humanity's ongoing ethical and political crises relatively superficial. These images illuminate phenomena, making them easier for us to see, but that sight does not come with the understanding that engaging a properly complex philosophical concept would provide.

The most problematic such image is that of the dust bowl. Phillips and Milner describe the dust storms of the droughts over the 1930s that damaged North American agriculture so as to exacerbate and dramatically lengthen the Great Depression. They describe how a generation of relatively ignorant startup farmers in the American Midwest over the 1920s used such poor agricultural techniques that they ruined the soil of their fields. Expert farmers who understood crop rotation could not save their own fields after their amateurish neighbours destroyed their own soil, as the resulting dust blew over ignorant and expert alike. In Phillips and Milner's analysis, this dusty, ruined soil spread by the ignorant to destroy everyone is online white nationalism.

If you think that inference is a bit of a reach, the book's analysis is little better. In fact, relying on the metaphor of the dust bowl results in Phillips and Milner misinterpreting much of the actual strategy white nationalist organizations have used to spread their message in the internet age. They intend the image of the dust bowl to evoke how, as Trump's daily messaging and the amplification of his supporters across the United States, polluted all of media discourse with aggressive white nationalist racism.

American centrist media made few steps during most of the Trump Presidency to push that aggressive racism out of public discourse because the 'both sides' model of objectivity obligated editors and managers to present impartially all perspectives on issues. Most importantly for the radicalization of American politics, this 'both sides' model discourages journalists from calling out lies, manipulation, or opposing calls to violence. Phillips and Milner are right to critique this model of objectivity, nearly ubiquitous across American journalism, for affording a great deal of airtime to extremist messaging. However, because they stick to the dust bowl image of pollution spreading from one corrupted region over an entire ecosystem, they miss other problematic elements of this anti-judgment model of journalistic objectivity, as well as methods of organizing mass political violence that use routes other than manipulating the mainstream press.

Consider Nikole Hannah-Jones, lead researcher and writer of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project. She was denied the tenured position of Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism at the University of North Carolina: a major donor to their journalism school aggressively lobbied against her on grounds that the 1619 Project violated the 'both sides' vision of impartiality. For Walter Hussman, the newspaper magnate whose \$25-million donation secured his name on the UNC journalism school, the 1619 Project's historical and sociological research into the cultural and economic influence that slavery maintains in the United States was not journalism, but propaganda.

Hussman did not consider Hannah-Jones to have presented the history of slavery impartially because it contained no input from perspectives that considered slavery to have had little to no impact, or even a positive impact, on American culture. This is an aspect of the 'both sides' conception of objectivity that Phillips and Milner's dust bowl metaphor does not touch: beyond kicking up confusion, fidelity to absolute impartiality is an element of ideology that actively forgives and minimizes real injustices.

## How the Storm Really Builds Itself

Their reliance on metaphors to explain how violent extremists have mainstreamed their ideology in the internet age also misses an equally important channel to attract support: social media influence. While they devote a chapter to the rise of QAnon and the growth of that family of conspiracies in America's fascist movement, their analysis of what extremists are actually doing on these platforms suffers from their reliance on metaphor. They are stuck describing conspiracist organizing online using Q-related terminology like "gathering storms," imagery that does not actually describe how these extremists work or what they do.

Online recruiting methods for extremists often follow the following pipeline. Extremists look for groups and communities in mainstream social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, where people express stress and concern over contemporary events. Imagine, for example, a neighbourhood parents' group where many people post about their worries over the effects mask wearing in schools will have on their children's social development. Sometimes the platform's own audience engagement programming will recommend other groups or channels where people discuss suspicion of masks, vaccines, and other public health measures.

More reliably for the extremists, individuals will join these groups and begin posting arguments designed to make worried people actively anxious or even aggressively opposed to those public health measures. The extremists who posted those arguments will then privately message the group members who had the most emotional reactions, directing them to channels on other apps like Telegram, where content is rarely moderated and all communications are encrypted. Once in those Telegram channels, these anxious parents are then exposed to open radical extremism: posts, arguments, videos, and above all, memes and jokes. The violent beliefs and conspiracy-mongering of fascist groups are presented in sensible, reasonable, and funny appearances.<sup>1</sup>

This is how a worried parent embraces the cause of violently overthrowing their government and murdering their political enemies in death squads and lynchings. Americans saw the real results of this radicalization pipeline in the ordinary people who donned personal guns and hand-made weapons and stormed the Capitol building. They continue to see it in protests of public health measures, including regular aggression and violent attacks on hospitals, medical workers, and retail and hospitality workers on the front lines of enforcing customer mask

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<sup>1</sup> I experienced this radicalization process myself, when I was targeted for recruitment by Canadian organizers of far-right militias. In 2011, an old acquaintance from high school found me on Facebook, and began regularly contributing long comments and conversations on posts. He would often send me links to videos by Ezra Levant, who would later found Rebel Media, the far-right media platform from which Gavin McInnes later organized the Proud Boys and publicized their early demonstrations against Indigenous activists. He introduced me to members of his social circle who also offered far-right and libertarian content in post comments and private messages. He encouraged me to blame financial and career problems that began in 2013 on what he called socialist, pro-union government policy. After failing to convert me after more than two years of near-daily conversation, he severed all contact with me. I found him online again in 2019, where he was openly organizing chapters of the Boogaloo Bois militia network, and encouraging friends and acquaintances to stockpile weapons in expectation of the Canadian government declaring martial law.

mandates. While Phillips and Milner’s imagery suggest merely that there is some storm that gathers, it cannot provide any detailed insight into how that storm gathers and weaponizes each of its components against society’s marginalized and vulnerable.

### **Conspiracy’s Character Is Its Content**

The mechanics of online radicalization unfolds not like a storm or a hurricane, but with the dynamics of conspiracist reasoning and inference playing out in a community. The communication medium of online forums accelerates the exchange of speculations and suggestions to such an extreme speed as to habituate participants to a state of permanent psychological frenzy. This was the purposeful plan of 8chan/8kun administrators to generate the QAnon conspiracist community.<sup>2</sup> The Q board at 8kun became a research hub for conspiracists throughout the world. Ordinary people confused about the chaos of the Trump Presidency and the violent political movements rising around the world can easily be drawn to a community that shares a clear vision of the order underlying this world. QAnon’s battle of the swamp and the storm is a worldview where secret, malevolent, powerful forces that have long dominated society are at last under threat by a political movement that will sweep away the corrupt elite.

The form of the narrative is a messianic revolution, a common inspiration among the West, but particularly close to the hearts of many Evangelical Christians. The content that delivered this narrative was built according to the most common forms of social internet communication: acidic grotesque memes and rambling, ranting comment threads. The goal of any internet entrepreneur is to keep the members of their community engaged as intensely and deeply as possible, and social platforms’ data science has conclusively determined that enraging users is the best way to keep them on your site. In the attention-driven economy of online media, particularly social platforms, frenzy is the most efficient revenue generator.

While 8kun itself was too toxic to advertisers to make any revenue, it became a loss-leader in the Watkins family business strategy. As 8kun owner and Ron’s father Jim Watkins demonstrated by his participation in the January 6 insurrection, the QAnon social forum was a political investment in America’s authoritarian movement. The engine of this practical purpose was the development of the QAnon conspiracy and movement, in a way that Matthew Dentith describes, writing in 2016 about the communities of those who refused to believe that the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre happened.

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong about theorising that mass shooting events in the US might be part of a plot, say, by the federal government to curb gun rights. That is a perfectly interesting question. Indeed, I would argue, entertaining that notion is something someone, somewhere should engage in [...] I imagine someone in a room, dispassionately coming up with

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<sup>2</sup> As revealed in Cullen Hoback’s HBO documentary *Q: Into the Storm*, during the period of QAnon’s explosive growth, the online persona Q was the work of 8kun’s chief software administrator, Ron Watkins. Throughout the documentary, Watkins describes the dynamics, mechanisms, and potential political power of online conspiracy communities at the scale chan forums make possible.

conspiracy theories, and then getting her lackeys to see if they have any merit.<sup>3</sup>

Dentith's analysis of the logic by which we construct conspiracy theories is insightful, systematic, and correct throughout his work on the subject. The only problem is his default to presenting the process as benign. Communicating anonymously as Q and transparently as CodeMonkey, Watkins organized the QAnon forums on 8chan and 8kun just as Dentith describes. Each participant in the forum would carry out their own investigations, and Watkins would help direct them where to go. Some users were more prominent helpers than others, and more frequently engaged; some users themselves had many assistants in their own amateur sleuthing. Few, if any, were at all adept in telling disinformation from misinformation, the generally reliable from outright lies. By the time someone was doing research with the teams on the 8kun boards, it was the farthest end (so far) of a pipeline that began in media environments permeated with the lies of right wing talk radio, the open racism and explosive paranoia of online right wing media, and the violent nihilism of chan forum culture. All of this is entirely mainstream.

The general structure of conspiracy theory construction is of a piece with the fundamentals of practical individual-level epistemology: already established knowledge, methods of inference, means of investigation, and accepted standards of all three guide how we figure out what is going on in the world. The problem with conspiracy that democratic societies face today does not lie in their connective tissue, but their content and standards.

### **Holding Back for a General Audience**

Not quite philosophical concepts, but more than mere figurative expressions, it is difficult to understand what sort of idea Phillips and Milner's images are meant to be, what they can and cannot do in a mind. The troll's fetishized sight, the dust bowl of misinformation, the gathering storm; they develop these images to varying degrees of success. A main reason that a reader is left unsure what kinds of ideas these are is that *You Are Here* does not actually spend much of its text talking about them.

Instead, the book relates and retells recent historical events as the attitudes of internet culture and the incredible power of social media networks to spread propaganda enabled the ongoing global cascade of violent extremism and authoritarian governance. The chapters which begin with the philosophical images of the dust bowl and the gathering storm mostly relate the recent history of the global propaganda machine and how it manipulates the affordances of social media platforms. There follows a chapter on basic lessons for a new media literacy that understands the internet's communications ecology. After some concluding optimistic remarks, that is all *You Are Here* really does.

Why does this book that promises so much philosophically spend so much of its time walking through recent events, as if it were a mere mass-market non-fiction paperback for

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<sup>3</sup> Dentith, 2016.

progressives concerned about the new media environment? It seems that the book was published with a non-academic audience in mind, since its sticker price is US\$22.95 and MIT Press is no stranger to research-based bestseller lists.

However, I suspect this conception of the audience caused an over-compensation: presuming that philosophical complexity and profundity would alienate a mass-market audience. Its conceptual analysis stays imagistic, when the authors should push their images to become abstract diagrams of how interaction with social media platforms changes a person's psychology and ethic. Its empirical investigation shied away from mechanisms, causes, and processes to inform the shapes and details of those diagrams, and merely retold history from their particular perspective.

In sanding down their philosophical edge, Phillips and Milner have lost their unique selling proposition, and have become yet another fairly unremarkable retelling of our turbulent past decade. Yet because the energy of creative philosophical ambition still exists in those images, it is clear that *You Are Here* is striving to become more than a retelling. After all, our time is turbulent enough that any attempt to retell and interpret the events of recent history through the medium of the published manuscript book becomes inevitably obsolete before anyone reads it.

Phillips and Milner themselves acknowledge as much in their introduction, hastily added at the last minute before press so that it acknowledges something of the COVID pandemic, which had only just begun as *You Are Here* began production. Between that late addition and its publication, the Trump Presidency has ended, he led and likely organized an armed insurrection to seize the Presidency by force that barely failed. The Biden Presidency has begun while militias organize a movement of millions violently resisting the COVID vaccine in the name of freedom and their belief in deranged conspiracies. The Republican Party has mobilized their membership with such fervent belief in conspiracies about rigged elections that they have literally destroyed the public legitimacy of democratic institutions. Those are the changes in the United States I see as most relevant to what Phillips and Milner trace.

As a retelling of recent history, it is obsolete as soon as it was published. As a philosophical work, it falls short because its central concepts are never developed beyond suggestive images. *You Are Here* is an illuminating book if you are learning about internet culture and the affordances of online propaganda for the first time. You should consider yourself lucky if Phillips and Milner are your first teachers in the twisted media ecology of the internet.

But these issues are now common knowledge to most people today who use the internet. So there may not be too many people left for them to enlighten, despite their genuinely insightful ideas, because they offer a relatively basic, introductory-level enlightenment. *You Are Here* is in many ways a wonderful book, especially its chapter on troll culture, which I have already used successfully in media studies classes. But in trying so hard to appeal to a wide, popular audience, it remains so introductory that it may not have an audience.

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