

## THE THREAT OF A POLLUTED INTERNET

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*A commentary on the Book*

### ***You Are Here. A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and our Polluted Media Landscape***

Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, 2021.  
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To state the obvious, humans are a species whose culture, in size, complexity and scope, far exceeds that of any other species (Laland, 2016). This culture, with the ability to communicate and coordinate action between individuals has been the major factor in our runaway success. So when two authors argue that a major new part of this culture has been extensively polluted in a way which threatens that human success, even survival, and in ways analogous to the threats from pollution of the physical environment, then ethologists should take notice.

Phillips and Milner are both students of internet culture from University departments offering media studies. Much of this book is taken up with a recent history of the internet, focussing mainly on the experience of the USA. They frequently put forward ideas which have clear analogues/precedents in human behaviour studies: ethology, philosophy and psychotherapeutic practice, but, perhaps understandably since they are from a rather different discipline, they often do not refer to these. I shall try and bring out some of these connections as well as putting their ideas and some aspects of internet functioning in an ethological context.

## TROLLING AND “FETISHIZATION”

First trolling<sup>1</sup>, in the early years, trolling was, Phillips and Milner note, largely the province of young white middle class males who shared certain ideas about what was funny or ironic and did not think beyond that. It was regarded as a bit of fun. The least culpable of this fairly homogeneous group simply did not see that their assumptions and humour were not shared. The more culpable simply did not think of the impact which their uploaded pieces would have on the victims. Phillips and Milner coin the term “fetishization”, it means the way these people simply saw pixels on the screen and thought neither about the context or the impact on victims. It is a form alienation or dissociation from the recipient / victim. Phillips and Milner honestly admit that in the past they contributed, out of a lack of realisation, to some of the (lesser) internet behaviour they now criticise.

To an ethologist or psychologist, this trolling is similar to the behaviour of bullies in the school playground, or elsewhere, who causes distress in a situation where their victim cannot easily retaliate<sup>2</sup>. Like the trolls, bullies often justify their actions by saying they were just having fun. The bullies often gather a number of hangers on who do not initiate bullying but collude with it (Smith, 2014) analogous to those to pass on trolling messages. Seeing a victim’s distress can often moderate aggression (Blair, 2018), but the troll’s behaviour receives little or no feedback, such is the nature of internet posts, which might moderate it, and indeed some could not receive such feedback when their posts were hidden behind pseudonyms.

Although possibly thinking it, Phillips and Milner do not explicitly link this to the well known ideas about the moderating influence of feedback to perpetrators. The lack of immediate feedback from the victim has been mentioned (e.g. Blair 2018). Over a longer timespan, in small communities, the bullies, (or liars or freeloaders or ...) get known and experience consequences which constrain their anti social behaviour. Sometimes such constraints can result in stultifying conventionality and lack of originality and adaptability, not to say of humour. But if there are no constraints, then a cultural anarchy develops and the group is likely to disintegrate and its members not survive. Neither extreme promotes group survival in the long term. The internet offers few effective constraints.

Phillips and Milner do point out that the psychological processes involved in both the perpetrators and victims are not new. But what is new, they point out, is the speed and reach of the internet and the ease with which anyone can upload or edit content. They also discuss the perpetrators detachment (“fetishization”) putting them in an analogous situation as psychopathic individuals who empathise less with the distress of their victims, even in face to face settings. Should the term “fetishization” change to “psychopathization”?

What Phillips and Milner are pointing to is one of the many ways in which the internet disrupts communication and disrupts the feedback processes which have evolved to inhibit aggression.

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<sup>1</sup> A troll is Internet slang for a person who intentionally tries to instigate conflict, hostility, or arguments in an online **social** community. ... **Trolls** often use inflammatory messages to provoke emotional responses out of people, disrupting otherwise civil discussion. <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/thenow/what-is-trolling/1/>

<sup>2</sup> Cyber bullying is now a well know term

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND FAKE NEWS

Phillips and Milner devote much space to discussion of the propagation of conspiracy theories and fake news. They describe in considerable detail the nature of the manipulation of the internet by politically motivated groups (they focus on the far right in the USA). They describe the consequences that these activities have for the ideas, attitudes and values which people come to hold, and how these have real world consequences, not least the election of Trump in 2016 and his continuing appeal to some. (The book was completed just before the 2020 US presidential election result was known.)

Phillips and Milner note the contrast between on the one hand, say, American far right evangelicals pumping out for their own ends nonsense accusations of satanism, and on the other, the more altruistic use of the internet by, say, Mexican activists promoting the rights of the poor, or Chinese activists exposing the abuses of China's authoritarian government.

They discuss the role of mainstream (centre left) media in spreading the fake news and conspiracy theories. They criticise "both sides ism", which leads to the expression of lies, distortions and hate being given exposure by the centre left media alongside its debunking and rebuttal. As a result the views of the likes of Ku Klux Klan or the so called "alt-right" get widely aired and thereby become more acceptable and legitimate to some. In earlier stages of the internet (they say, pre 2016) many commentators did not see the dangers, but dismissed concerns as, "it's just on the internet" or "it is just ironic or humorous", but by discussing them they were, at the same time, spreading these ideas, thus giving these groups the oxygen of publicity.

Many far right groups had explicit policies advocating the use of humour and perhaps being outrageous in their messages, but as Phillips and Milner note, "racist jokes plant the seeds of racist beliefs". This helps the ideas to come to be seen by many as normal, shared and acceptable. This is one way they pervade/pollute the internet. Again these processes, with the use of humour, outrageousness, lies and obfuscation, are not new, nor confined to the internet as the behaviour of the current UK prime minister and his government exemplifies, but the internet amplifies and accelerates the spread.

It is difficult to think of a situation further removed than the internet from human's Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness where humans lived in small social groups and group members all knew each other well. By contrast the internet extends the trend, which started with the Neolithic agricultural revolution, of living in larger and larger groups with more and more sophisticated internal communications. With the internet, community size is billions, there is little or no investment in the welfare of the message recipients, little known about the reputation of most of the uploaders, face to face contact is absent or minimal, recipients are faced with a potential cacophony of messages and lies get passed on more often than the truth (Vasoughi et al, 2018).

The early promise of the internet: the democratising communication and the selfless spread of ideas and knowledge for the enrichment of our cultures, remains a benefit, but, inevitably, along with this have come the those who use the internet purely for their own ends such as the spreading of fake news and conspiracy theories. As with trolling, the processes which moderated communication and reduced lying seem less effective, even counterproductive, on the internet. It is another example of mismatch theory (Bailey,1996; Li et al. 2018), where long evolved behavioural systems fail to achieve the adaptive result they used to in earlier environments.

## **NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOM/LIBERTY**

Phillips and Milner discuss the concept of “negative freedom”, used by many to justify the lack of regulation of the internet in the USA, such that anything can be said or portrayed.

The meaning of negative freedom, taken from Christians et al (1993), is essentially the absence of *any* constraint, *any* regulation, you can say and upload whatever you want. This liberty is central to the American ideal and seems guaranteed by the First Amendment. Just as a free market in goods and services is supposed to yield up the best for the consumer, so the free market of ideas is supposed to result in the truth winning out in the competition with falsehoods. Essentially this is an Enlightenment approach. Phillips and Milner quote Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis arguing for “more speech, not enforced silence”.

In 1949 there was a directive from US Federal Communications Commission, called the Fairness doctrine, which mandated that broadcasters give airtime to diverse views on matters of public interest. Subsequently the new media, such as cable networks, made this less workable and it was dropped by the Reagan administration in 1987. The floodgates were thus opened for anyone to say anything unchallenged, which they did in more and more extreme, loud, mendacious and bigoted ways to get attention, usually motivated by profit and/or politics. Not only that, but, as many others have pointed out, it has become much easier to exist in “echo chambers” where a person is exposed only to a narrow range of views which accord with their preconceptions.

Phillips and Milner’s use of the concept of negative freedom is importantly different from the earlier idea of Isaiah Berlin. Published in 1958 during the Cold War, “Two Concepts of Liberty” was partly an attempt to define the difference between the liberal democracies of the West and the communist autocracies, particularly in Russia and China. To greatly simplify and emphasise the political aspect, “Positive liberty” was the freedom to do the certain activities, and to enjoy that fulfilment, but in certain states these activities were prescribed by the authorities, and other activities were forbidden. “Negative liberty” was the freedom to do whatever you wanted save for a few forbidden actions (e.g. murder, theft, breaking contracts, etc.). The concept of negative freedom used in this book leaves out the qualifier.

Most journalists in the past recognised that freedom of the press was not a licence to print anything, and controversial material had to be justified as being in the public interest. In the gutter (tabloid) and right wing newspapers in the UK, as elsewhere, that distinction became blurred, and the resultant bullying (c.f. trolling) of individuals or creation of stories of dubious provenance, was often regarded as allowable. It was often justified as a reasonable exercise of free speech, feeding on the reluctance of authorities in democratic societies to be seen as suppressing free speech. Since Phillips and Milner’ focus is on the USA, they do not mention the UK’s attempt to legislate in this area with the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003, this legislation<sup>3</sup> is more in line with Berlin’s qualifiers to the concept of negative liberty. Nor do they mention the attempts in the USA to limit internet expression, many of which have come up against the First Amendment.

## **LOUD AND QUIET COMMUNICATIONS**

Let me continue to put the ideas of Phillips and Milner in an ethological framework, this time concerning communication. Dawkins and Krebs (1978) argue that animal communication is

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst there have been a few prosecutions under these Acts, they are rarely enforced.

exploitative. Signals are sent to benefit the sender (to be precise, the sender's genes) within a necessarily competitive relationship. The signals evolve to be generally loud and low in information content. Being exploitative, they elicit "sales resistance" in the receiver. There is a communication "arms race" of increasing attention getting and deceit by the sender and increasing "sales resistance" with the ability to see through deceit by the receiver (see also: Humphrey, 1976; Whiten & Byrne, 1988, 1997).

But when the relationship is co-operative, in other words when the individuals have interests in common, different kinds of signals evolve. They are information rich, clear and "honest", and receivers develop a heightened sensitivity to them. "...the co-evolutionary interaction here is between decreased response thresholds on the one hand and increased signal clarity on the other" (Krebs, 1987). They therefore also become less costly to send. Human speech is an example of a highly efficient, low cost communication system. Chris Knight has argued that human language would not have evolved at all within a social system where all communication was exploitative (Knight, 1991, 1998; Knight et al 2000). In the parent child relationship, interests are almost (but not entirely) identical. But language is slower to develop in parent-child relationships which are more insecure and thus less cooperative - children with behaviour problems are insecure and tend to have delayed language (Stevenson and Richman, 1978, Fonagy and Allison 2014), there is a dearth of what Fonagy calls "cognitive trust". Trusting the communication/communicator is a key factor.

I shall call the competitive communications "loud" and the cooperative ones, "quiet". This is not to say that an individual may not benefit from (quietly) communicating useful honest information, their reputation may be enhanced, not least their reputation for trustworthiness and usefulness.

The promise of the internet was for great enhancement of 'quiet' (in these terms) communication. But also it hosted, in addition, large amounts of "loud" communications. Whilst not using these terms, Phillips and Milner argue, the internet has been polluted to highly damaging extent and in the process caused real damage in the real physical world. Not the least of the damage is to induce in many individuals a sense that they cannot believe anything or anyone anymore. Trust in, for instance, all politicians or *all* "experts" diminishes. A quasi Post Modernistic state of mind develops. This distrust is the antithesis of the situation where a culture, and a group, flourishes. Thus the functioning of the internet is, they implicitly argue, threatening the cohesion of the culture and group.

Phillips and Milner use the (to my mind not very apt) metaphor borrowed from biology, of a pyramid to describe the structure of this pollution. At the apex are the "predators" who set out to deceive and confuse for their own ends, Trump or the Russian disinformation factories are some of the examples given. These people's communications spread fast and wide. Then there is middle layer of people who are part of the process which helps spread the pollution but are not malevolently motivated. Then at the bottom is the rest of us, consuming, or not, the fruits of the internet, sometimes including the rotten stuff of, for example, Trump. To my mind an infectious disease or an oncology metaphor might have been more apt.

A key point that Phillips and Milner want to make is that the internet poses real threats to, in their case, the USA, and counter measures are required. Not the least of these is addressing the financial incentives which some internet platforms such as Facebook have in spreading fake news.

## LITERACY: LIBERAL<sup>4</sup> (FACT CHECKING) AND ECOLOGICAL

To stem the wave of pollution on the internet, Phillips and Milner discuss two types of literacy that should be acquired by internet users. The first is “liberal literacy”. They are particularly critical of understandable tendency to confront the polluters with the “facts” and thereby expose the ridiculousness of their claims. But a consequence of this is greatly to increase the spread of these ridiculous ideas which thereby gain traction with a section of the new audience. They note too that some people will simply disbelieve this debunking if it comes from a source they have come not to trust. Why? Because the debunkers, usually from centre left organisations are made out to be a self serving elite. Phillips and Milner do not mention Kuhn’s (1962) ideas where he described how even scientists tend to ignore findings which don’t fit their theories. In similar vein, Phillips and Milner note the power of someone’s world view, or in their jargon, their “deep mimetic frames”, such that they believe only what is consistent with set of views. And, just like Kuhn’s scientists, they continue to believe until they develop, or more likely just accept, a new world view.

Their justified criticism of those who believe that fact checking alone is sufficient to deal with the conspiracy theories, fake news, etc. is a well known idea not just within Kuhn’s paradigm shift theory but is integral to swathes of psychotherapy. Phillips and Milner proposal for decontaminating the internet is to advocate not just a “liberal literacy” (being able to discern truth from falsehood) but also what they term, “ecological literacy”. This focusses less on the sender of messages and more on the impact on receivers, and what the message means to them, and their part in the information flow. They note some difficulties here: for instance, the context of a message, any message, can change its meaning. The context of internet messages is usually impossible to know in detail. Another related difficulty is Poe’s Law, which says that it is difficult to parse sincerity and sarcasm on the internet.

It is welcome that Phillips and Milner advocate a wider focus than just fact checking. As they say, “If truth does not matter to the person speaking, then facts won’t work as a counter argument”. They had in mind those such as Trump. They note correctly that the utterances (e.g. Tweets) of Trump and those like him are “statements” not descriptions. They don’t mention the Oxford philosopher John Austin, who coined the term “performative utterances” to describe how we do things with words in addition to just describing, which was the positivists had previously maintained (Austin 1962). In fact the performative function in language in everyday life is very wide. The truth or not of Trump’s tweets are not the issue, Phillips and Milner argue, it is the impact they have and the environment in which they exist, that needs addressing.

Phillips and Milner are somewhat vague on how “ecological literacy” is actually to be practiced on the internet, but their intention is correct. The idea is very familiar to therapists and, for that matter, to advertising agencies and can be seen in everyday conversation everyday. It is axiomatic in counselling that the first important step is to develop a joint understanding of the problems and in the client’s terms. This is done through sensitive questioning. A shared understanding is negotiated. Advertising agencies and Market Research firms work hard to understand and communicate effectively with their target audiences. Phillips and Milner advocate that the internet user’s point of view should be understood, but are a bit hazy about how that is achieved with the 4.5+ billion internet users in the world.

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<sup>4</sup> A word of warning: the term “liberal” has many different meanings, especially either side of the Atlantic. The central meaning is freedom, but the differences arise when the question is asked, “freedom from *what?* “. See for instance: Liberal? Are we talking about the same thing? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-10658070>  
So a different word could have been chosen to describe this literacy.

## POLLUTION

Phillips and Milner book is valuable for the way it describes how the internet gets polluted by fake news, blatant falsehoods, conspiracy theories and how the way in which some of the platforms, such as Facebook, function mean that there are financial incentives to promote the polluting messages. They importantly point out how the understandable reactions, such as fact checking or debunking, often work to spread the lies further and give respectability to them. A very similar point has been made about the print media by Nesrine Malik (2021) who concludes, “No politician should dignify them [the lies, ridiculous theories] with comment and the rest of us should not legitimise them with debate or even with fact-checking.” Like Phillips and Milner, she points to right wing media creating false stories for their own ends (loud not quiet communication).

Phillips and Milner are of course not the first to advocate looking more widely than the message content. This is axiomatic in political campaigns and commercial advertising. Looking at the motives of the sender, the interpretations and lives of the receivers and the environment they both inhabit would be second nature to any ethologist. In fact none of their ideas is new. But their detailed exposition of internet processes is welcome given this is a powerful new medium, it is perhaps a pity they did not relate it more than they did not well known ideas and human behavioural phenomena. The late Robert Hinde (e.g. 1987) was a strong advocate of looking at synergies between the human sciences. As discussion of this book perhaps exemplifies, there can be interest and benefit in looking at these synergies.

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