Whitney Phillips, This is why we can’t have nice things: Mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015. ISBN 9780262529877: 256 pp., $17.95.

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Steering away from reductive demonizing of trolls, Whitney Phillips’ This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture treats them not as freaks but as an almost inevitable product of the mainstream. In recent times, trolling has acquired a sinister undertone, but Phillips’ book bases itself not as a treatise on their deviance but approaches trolling as a subculture, wherein her subjects of study are those who self-identify as trolls, who claim to be engaging in it primarily for laughs or “lulz” as they are better known in the trolling universe. While Phillips articulates that trolls are not a monolithic community, she identifies certain common aspects among them and defies popular thinking by stating at the very outset that their behavior is not “exceptional” (p. 10). The rest of her book sets about to prove this statement by providing historical, social, and cultural context to analogizing trolling with mainstream media behaviors. A qualitative mixed-methods study, combining rigorous ethnographic observation of online social media spaces with in-depth interviews of 25 trolls, Phillips’ work draws from fields spanning the range of digital media studies and folklore studies to critical race and feminist theories, in order to present how capitalist media systems feed off of trolling behavior.

Much of the limited corpus of work on trolling focuses on the motivations or behaviors that distinguish trolls like sadism and Machiavellianism (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), revenge and attention seeking (Shachaf and Hara, 2010), and how they succeed in their disruptive purposes (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Phillips chooses to highlight the main similarities between trolling and dominant cultural behavior. Using the examples of Facebook memorial pages and corporate spin, she astutely observes that while capitalist institutions’ investment in spectacle, drive for success, and attempt to profit is understood as self-evident, trolling’s penchant for all of the above is reviled.

In the present zeitgeist, vitriolic politically partisan exchanges on social media are framed as trolling behavior. Keeping in mind that Phillips’ book was published in 2015, there are few explicit connections drawn between trolling and participatory politics. The trolls in Phillips’ narrative deny any political intent, and the author clearly states that their “beliefs” would not withstand pressure. Quite different from McCosker’s (2014) study of trolling as an “act of citizenship,” Phillips emphasizes that irrespective of their intent, media scholars need to evaluate trolls’ impact which is politically loaded. Her examination of trolling as “détournement” (turning the existing meaning of a statement against itself) could be applied to the current right-wing appropriation of phrases such as “political correctness” and “fake news.”

Phillips’ effective employment of metaphors allows for a comprehensive understanding of certain fundamental conceptions. Incorporating the imagery of the “Trickster” (Hyde as cited in Phillips, p. 9) enables the author to connect the mythological discourses around provocateurs such as the Hindu god Krishna to the contemporary troll. Describing the process of trolling as cultural “digestion” (finding viable content, chewing the tantalizing bits, and hurling that waste on their targets), Phillips paints a vivid and layered picture. Expanding the definitions of trolling beyond the psychological characterizations (Hardaker, 2010), Phillips’ detailed mapping of trolling behavioral markers reveal the colonial nature of trolling in its disproportionate targeting of the historically disadvantaged and by identifying “trolling privilege” evident in the trolls’ performance of hegemonic White, male behaviors which define their online self-representations.

While Phillips uses examples from television media especially outlets like Fox News, there is no mention of the role that print media outlets play. This exclusion leads to questions on whether the print media are not culprits of purveying the kind of capitalist behavior that Phillips’ critiques possibly because they don’t face the exigencies that television news does to keep eyeballs. This book would have benefitted with a little insight into why print escaped becoming bait for trolls.
In this politically polarized milieu of 2017, classifying trolling as a subculture might run the risk of ignoring the ubiquitousness of trolling behavior prevalent today. But the questions that Phillips’ book brings up, concerning the mutually parasitic relationship of trolls and mainstream culture, are relevant today, more than they have ever been.

**Interview with Whitney Phillips**

Me: If you had to write this book with relevance to the current political climate, which parts would you change? What would you specifically like to add?

Whitney Phillips: I am so glad you asked this question! In fact I wish every journalist I’ve spoken to this year has asked me this. Because it’s odd—while there are, of course, aspects of the book that are immediately relevant to the present moment (cycles of amplification, for example), I am also very markedly NOT talking about the sort of White nationalist, ideologically frightening behaviors that have accompanied the ascendency of Hurricane Trump. The behaviors I describe in the book are, to put it lightly, problematic. But it’s not like anything we’re seeing now; what we’re seeing now . . . smells different, and I say that as someone who, in the early months of 2015 as the “alt-right” was just emerging, wasn’t quite sure what I was looking at.

That picture has since come into clear focus and warrants a totally different response—one that engages more directly with issues of simmering racial, political, and economic tensions. The trolls I researched 2008–2013 were coming from a place of pure privilege, yes, and that is embedded within broader cultural flows without question. But what they were doing wasn’t so clearly about (White) identity politics. So were I to approach the subject now, I would significantly minimize the trickster talk, the performance talk, and instead would focus specifically on the political issues, with a stronger discussion of media ecological shifts including—perhaps most pressingly—the rise of far right media, and the ways in which these media have set the agenda for mainstream outlets, creating a perfect breeding ground both for alt-right antagonisms and this thing we now have called President Trump. I would also not use the word “trolling” to describe any of it; I actually started phasing that word out of my vocabulary (because—among other issues—it tends to minimize the embodied impact of online antagonism) just as the book was about to be published.

In short, it’s not just that I would change the framing of the book, I would write a totally different book.

Me: Trolling appears to have become an integral part of elite political communication. How do you see this shape the reporting practices of mainstream media organizations?

Whitney Phillips: Per my above point, I am actually very reluctant to use the word “trolling” to describe anything related to or within the political realm; I talk about that more here, specifically related to Trump: http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2016/06/the_problems_with_calling_donald_trump_a_troll.html. But what is happening at those levels of communication has absolutely thrown journalists into a panic, and with good reason—it’s never clear to what extent something (particularly emerging from the White House) is meant in good faith, and what is meant . . . in some other way, for some other reason. The main issue here, then, isn’t trolling, but rather Poe’s Law, something my co-author and I discuss here: http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2016/12/poe_s_law_explains_why_2016_was_so_terrible.html. In short, the ambivalence of communication online (both from politicians and also everyday citizens) makes it extremely difficult to know what you’re even looking at, immediately scrambling what the best response to that thing might be.

Me: When mentioning certain media organization behaviors as analogous to trolling behaviors, there did not seem to be any explicit mention of the print media giants. Was that deliberate and why?

Whitney Phillips: I think you mean The New York Times/The Washington Post and the like? If so, yes that was deliberate, because they tended to be much more muted in their coverage of trolls, if they covered the behaviors at all (particularly in the early days). They simply weren’t in the business of cranking out clickbait sensationalism the way Fox News was, or even places like BuzzFeed—they didn’t NEED to follow that sort of model, and so trolls didn’t need to direct their attention to those particular mastheads. Compare this with Fox News—they’d start screaming about something first, and ask questions later (if ever). So while those more stately outlets were—obviously—part of the broader media landscape, they weren’t so tightly tethered to the emergence of subcultural trolling.
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