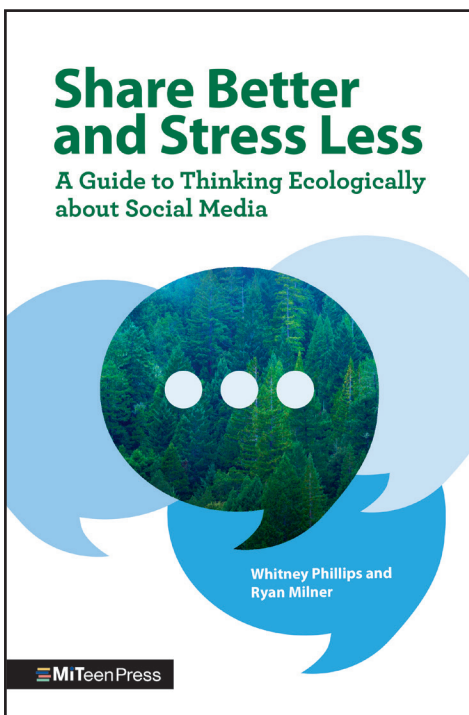# Share Better and Stress Less

A Guide to Thinking Ecologically about Social Media

Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner

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Also available as an e-book

About the Book

We know that pollution damages our physical environments—but what about the digital landscape? Touching on everything from memes gone wrong to conflict in group chats to unexpected side effects of online activism, this lively exploration draws on ecological, social justice, and storytelling frameworks to help readers understand how information pollution spreads and why—and shows how this understanding can help them make sense of the often stressful and strange online world. Featuring a hyperconnected cast of teens and their social media shenanigans, this reader-friendly text tackles the thorny topic of internet ethics while empowering young readers to cultivate a safe, secure, and inclusive digital world. Readers are invited to delve further into the subject with the help of comprehensive source notes and a bibliography.

Use this guide with *Share Better and Stress Less* in your classroom to show:

- how and why accidental harms can happen online, with tips to avoid causing them and strategies for responding thoughtfully if we unintentionally hurt someone's feelings.

- how false *and* true information can do damage online, with tips for minimizing information pollution in our social media feeds and our relationships.

- how the things we share on social media are influenced by how we're feeling, with tips for feeling better so we can share better.

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Discussion Questions

1. Online, *information pollution* can refer to false things and true things—to qualify as pollution, they just have to make a mess. When has false information made a mess in your social media feed? What about true information?

2. What experiences have you had with the book's main metaphors: redwood forests, hurricanes, and land cultivation? How do these experiences help you understand how information spreads online?

3. "Stress reactions are powered by our limbic brain, also described as the lizard brain" (page 20). When have you been saved by your lizard brain? When has your lizard brain caused you to overreact?

4. Poe's Law states that online "it can be very difficult to tell if something is said seriously or as a joke" (page 40). Have you had the experience of wondering whether something posted to social media was serious or a joke?

5. What are the four *A*s of social media? How do they impact what you encounter online? How do they impact what you don't encounter? Why are the things you *don't* encounter as important as the things you do?

6. What do you think of the comment "It's just a joke"? How do you feel when a person says this to you after your feelings are hurt? How do you feel when saying it to others after you have hurt their feelings? How do the four *A*s of social media complicate jokes?

7. What are some unexpected harms that can come from sending memes, sharing screenshots, or tagging someone in the group chat? Have you ever caused harm online without meaning to?

Classroom Activities

1. The book's ecological metaphors provide a framework to explore current events and how people talk about them on social media.
   Redwood forests help show the networks that information travels through.
   Hurricanes help show the causes of a particular information "storm."
   Land cultivation helps show how people's everyday actions shape the landscape in positive and negative ways.

   As a class, discuss a current topic students have discovered online. Use these prompts for each metaphor to guide research and class discussions.
   Redwood Forests
   - What do you know about where the issue/question/controversy came from?
   - What don't you know about its origins?
   - Which groves—audiences or platforms or communities—has the information traveled through?
   - Did something within the network result in harm to someone?

Hurricanes
- What underlying causes are fueling the issue? (Examples might include fights between friends, misunderstandings, or other problems.)
- What parts of the storm are threatening, or what groups might end up threatened?
- Who has strengthened the storm, either on purpose or by accident?

Land Cultivation
- How are people participating in the issue?
- What are their motives for doing so?
- Whatever their motives might be, what has happened as a result of their participation?

2. These metaphors can be used in personal reflections as well. To get students thinking about their own experiences, have them use these writing prompts in response to your class discussion about a current news topic. Alternatively, you can ask them to consider a recent conflict they had with a friend or an online encounter that did not go as planned.

Redwood Forests
- Where did you encounter information about this issue?
- Who else encountered the information (that you are aware of)?
- Where did you observe the information traveling?

Hurricanes
- What causes of the issue did you observe?
- Did you feel threatened at any point, and if so, how and when?
- Did you notice that others felt threatened, and if so, how and when?

Land Cultivation
- What were your motives for responding to the issue?
- How did those motives influence what you shared?
- What happened next?

3. Use the Reflection sections in each chapter to help students apply the book's ideas to their own experiences. Here are two examples to try:

REFLECTION Think of a time that you've been part of a pollution chain reaction. How did it get started? Did you fight, flee, or freeze? What did the people around you do? (page 21)

REFLECTION List some activities that relax you and make you feel content. Cross out the ones that require travel or lots of time and equipment, and focus on things you can do right away. Rewrite the list and put it somewhere you'll remember. Then when you start feeling stressed out, you'll have some good options for putting on the brakes. (page 29)

4. Ask your students to find a post that they either agree with or disagree with strongly. Have them answer the gut-check questions found on page 96 to identify the creator's beliefs and assumptions. Then have them consider how their own beliefs and assumptions influence their feelings about the post.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Whitney Phillips is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, with research interests in political communication, media history, and online ethics. She is the author of *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* and the coauthor, with Ryan Milner, of *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* and *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape*. *Share Better and Stress Less: A Guide to Thinking Ecologically about Social Media* is her first book for young adults. Whitney Phillips lives in Oregon.

Ryan Milner is an associate professor and the department chair of communication at the College of Charleston. He studies internet culture, including everything from funny GIFs to Twitter debates to large-scale propaganda campaigns. He is the author of *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* and the coauthor, with Whitney Phillips, of *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* and *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape*. *Share Better and Stress Less: A Guide to Thinking Ecologically about Social Media* is his first book for young adults. Ryan Milner lives in South Carolina.

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