



# YouTube Drama in an Atheist Public: A Case Study

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

In late March 2019, British atheist YouTuber “Rationality Rules” published a video in which he argued that trans women should be excluded from women’s sports. Accused of transphobia, he was denounced by a prominent atheist organization, which led to intense arguments in Anglophone atheist spaces on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, lasting throughout the year. This article uses the controversy, an instance “YouTube drama,” as an opportunity to investigate the ways in which an imagined “atheist community” is constructed through internal atheist conflict. Through critical discourse analysis of 157 YouTube videos, published between the end of March and the end of November, it identifies six different discursive formations, which affected the development of the drama and offer competing conceptions of the community. By utilizing Michael Warner’s theory of ‘publics’ and ‘counterpublics,’ spaces that exists only for the circulation of discourse, this study approaches the drama not as an interpersonal conflict, but as a battle over the norms of discourse within the atheist community. It suggests that a public lens is useful for understanding contemporary atheism, and that the nature of publics and counterpublics helps explain the dynamics of atheist disagreement on social issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

A concept frequently utilized in discussions about contemporary atheism is that of *the atheist community*. Distinct from atheist *communities*, referring to particular, often local, groups, this concept seems to refer to something more abstract; like “the LGBTQ+ community,” it is understood to encompass all persons and groups that identify with the label. Sometimes referred to using other nonreligious labels, for example as *the secularist community*, talk of a global community inclusive of all nonbelievers is a recent phenomenon, popularized by the ‘new atheist’ movement (Cimino & Smith 2011). The term is often used in a matter-of-fact way (e.g. Dick 2015; Bishop 2018), but some researchers have taken an interest how this *imagined* community is constructed and the purposes of its construction (e.g. Cimino & Smith 2011; Laughlin 2016). In this article, I take a similar approach, analyzing how the atheist community is constructed in the context of a recent atheist controversy.

In late March 2019, British atheist YouTuber “Rationality Rules” (RR), published a video arguing that trans women have an unfair athletic advantage over cis women (persons assigned female at birth who identify as women). In the video, originally titled “The Athletic Advantage of Transgender Women (and why it’s UNFAIR)” (Rationality Rules 2019a), RR sets out to debunk three arguments for transgender inclusion. The video received criticism for being transphobic and, after the involvement of prominent atheist organization The Atheist Community of Austin (ACA), intense arguments broke out in Anglophone atheist spaces on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, lasting throughout the year.

This article looks at the controversy as an instance of YouTube *drama* situated in the imagined atheist community. Applying critical discourse analysis to 157 YouTube videos related to the conflict, the aim is identify particular *discursive formations* utilized within it and explore how they affected the development of the drama and how they construct the atheist community. Viewing the atheist community through Michael Warner’s (2002) concept of *publics*, understood as spaces of discourse, organized by discourse, drama is elevated above mere interpersonal conflict and becomes a battleground for competing conceptions of what the community is and ought to be.

## ATHEISM AND SOCIAL POLITICS

Surveys of the political opinions of atheists consistently show that they tend to fall of the left side of the spectrum with respect to their national political context. In the United States, atheists are the religious demographic most likely to identify as “liberal” (as opposed to “conservative” or “moderate”) and report the highest level support for causes like marriage equality

and abortion rights (Pew Research Center 2015). Similar tendencies have been found in the United Kingdom, where atheists favor left-wing politics more than any other religious group (Clements & Gries 2016). This is well-known among atheists, and atheist media often report on such findings. Prominent atheist blogger Hemant Mehta (2020), reporting the results of a survey by secular activist organization Freedom From Religion Foundation (2020), declared nonreligious Americans to be an “overwhelmingly progressive” voting block that the Democratic Party ought to court. On LGBTQ issues, atheists tend to consider themselves allies and the language of ‘being in the closet’ and ‘coming out’ has been widely adopted by contemporary atheists (Anspach, Coe & Thurlow 2007; Linneman & Clendenen 2010; Laughlin 2016).

Despite this, qualitative research paints a more complex picture of atheist politics. Cimino, Smith, and Cziehso (2020) found that “atheist elites,” i.e. prominent atheist figures and organizations, tend to have more right-of-center leanings than lay atheists and that leftist economic critiques of religion are practically nonexistent in prominent atheist publications. This is an example of what Stephen LeDrew (2016) refers to as “the Atheist Right.” These right-wing tendencies are, for example, found in the writings of New Atheist ‘horsemen’ Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who are both vocal opponents of political correctness and contemporary social justice activism. Harris has also attracted criticism for his support of the War on Terror and the use of torture (LeDrew 2016: 185). Opposition to social justice activism is, however, not exclusive to atheist elites (Cimino, Smith & Cziehso 2020).

According to LeDrew (2016: 98–99), political schisms among atheists have existed since the beginning of the British and American secularist movements in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. Marxists and liberals, despite being on roughly the same page regarding religion, clashed over differing political aspirations and goals. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, atheist disagreements have largely revolved around the role of women and other minorities within the movement.

Studies of atheism and gender suggest that women make up a minority within contemporary atheism, both statistically and in terms of power and influence within the movement (Miller 2013; Mahlamäki 2012; Stinson et al 2013). The same appears to be true for racial and sexual minorities. According to Ashley Miller (2013), the white male dominance within contemporary atheism, the “non-religious patriarchy,” stems from the fact that those not otherwise marginalized are more able to bear the social cost of rejecting religion in societies where religious belonging is the norm. Consequently, the concerns of women, people of color, and LGBTQ atheists have largely been ignored within the movement, as they are of lesser interest to white men, or perceived as threats to their social privileges (Miller 2013; Stinson et al

2013). In response to these issues, blogger Jen McCreight coined the term “Atheism+” in 2012 for a socially aware alternative to the New Atheist movement. While initially popular among atheist progressives and activists, the label is rarely used today (Kettell 2013; LeDrew 2016).

Atheism has had a strong presence on YouTube since its inception, which coincided with the rise of New Atheism, with personalities such as Amazing Atheist and Thunderf00t bringing the ideas of the four horsemen to the platform (Smith & Cimino 2012). Anti-feminism has been a consistent theme in YouTube atheism. In 2011, blogger and YouTuber Rebecca Watson published a video about an atheist conference she had recently attended as a speaker. In the video, she mentioned an incident where she had felt unsafe when a man had propositioned her in an elevator late at night. Despite the incident only being a minor topic in the video, it resulted in misogynistic harassment from atheists. Dawkins weighed in on the issue via a mock letter to an imaginary Muslim woman, sarcastically comparing Watson’s experience to that of women in Muslim-majority countries, later clarifying that he considered the man’s behavior unthreatening and that she had no reason to feel unsafe. This controversy became known as “Elevorgate” (LeDrew 2016: 197–201). In 2014, atheist YouTubers Thunderf00t and Sargon of Akkad became leading voices during the anti-feminist harassment campaign known as “Gamergate” (Chess & Shaw 2015; Salter 2018). In other words, there is a history of conflict, which serves as background for the controversy examined in this study.

## YOUTUBE DRAMA AND THE ATHEIST COMMUNITY AS A PUBLIC

*Drama* is an emic term within YouTube culture for “when a flurry of angry video posts centers around an internal controversy or antagonistic debate between YouTubers” (Burgess & Green 2009: 97). In these controversies “serious disagreements can become entangled with interpersonal relationships and users position themselves in relation to others and social controversies” (Pihlaja 2014: 3). Drama also has an element of spectator sport, with some viewers bringing out the proverbial popcorn bucket to watch the carnage and other YouTubers reporting and providing commentary on the conflict. Stephen Pihlaja (2014: 4) notes that even though antagonistic social media interaction has received some scholarly interest, there is a lack of studies examining particular instances of YouTube drama. According to Pihlaja, his study of a 2009 drama between atheists and Christians is the first such study and it appears this study is the second.

Like any other form of interaction, an instance of drama is situated within a particular community. Pihlaja (2016) views YouTube communities as networks of users who interact frequently: in his study an atheist-Christian

debate community. Given that the RR drama examined here involves videos from 78 different YouTube channels without much prior interaction between most participants, no one could reasonably claim that the drama takes place within a YouTube community in this sense of the term. For this reason, it seems more fruitful to situate it within the broader imagined atheist community, viewed through Michael Warner’s concept of *publics*.

According to Warner (2002: 65–66), a public is typically understood to be a particular concrete audience whose boundaries are well-defined, for example a group of people watching a live concert. There is also the concept of *the public*, understood to include all members of society. Warner, however, offers a different use of the term, as a primarily discursive social entity which lacks definite boundaries. Publics, in this sense, are social imaginaries, more specifically:

frameworks for understanding texts against an organized body of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption. (Warner 2002: 16)

Further, publics are “space[s] of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself,” existing solely as spaces for the circulation of texts, be they books, television shows, web sites, or speeches (Warner 2002: 67). Publics only exist to the extent that they are addressed, and the act of addressing a public is not simply a recognition of its existence, but a particular construction of it (Warner 2002: 114). A public, in this sense, is a “relation among strangers,” who understand themselves to be part of this public, without recognizing its fictional nature (Warner 2002: 12).

Warner also discusses *counterpublics*. A counterpublic, or *subaltern*, is a public that understands itself as occupying a marginalized position in society. When addressing the familiar strangers of a counterpublic, one affirms their social marginalization: “ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene” (Warner 2002: 120). Furthermore, counterpublic discourse is characterized by an aspiration to transcend its marginalized status by challenging the dominant norms of discourse that exclude participants from the mainstream. Counterpublics offer marginalized groups, typically gender, sexual, and racial minorities, a degree of agency that they cannot obtain within the discourse of “the public” (Warner 2002: 118).

This study is not the first to approach contemporary atheism from the perspective of publics. Jack Laughlin (2016) analyzes blog posts from progressive atheist bloggers and “coming out” campaigns, arguing that 21<sup>st</sup> Century American atheism is primarily a discursive phenomenon, whose public nature explains its lack of real-world political agency. In order to maintain the

idea of the atheist public as inclusive of all nonbelievers (commonly referred to as ‘big tent’ atheism), atheists with progressive political goals “must concede ground in the name of ‘big tent’ atheism” (Laughlin 2016: 326). Paradoxically, constructions of atheists as a large political demographic often rely on statistics showing the growth of atheism and nonreligion (typically ignoring the diversity of beliefs among the nonreligious), and the ability to claim this growth as their own is predicated on a ‘big tent’ approach.

Evelina Lundmark (2019) applies the concept of counterpublics to the ways in which American women express their atheism on YouTube. In her study, the counterpublic status of atheist women is constructed in relation to the norms of the atheist establishment and American society more broadly. As women, they must contend with, and challenge, the male-centric dominant form of atheism and this counterpublic is “the emotive resonance chamber they are attempting to summon into being by negotiating atheist identity in their own way” (Lundmark 2019: 233). As atheists, standing in opposition to the religious norms of the country, they attempt to reassert their American-ness in relation to prejudiced attitudes declaring atheists to be unpatriotic, or otherwise challenging their full membership in American society.

Since Warner’s work mostly concerns traditional media, such as print and television, there are issues that must be considered when applying his framework to the present case. Writing prior to the advent of social media, Warner (2002: 97–98) is unsure of the implications of web discourse for publics, since web content, unlike books and magazines, is usually not indexed and can be edited or deleted after publication. His concerns revolve around the temporality and reflexivity of the circulation of public discourse. However, with regard to temporality, social media posts are automatically dated at publication and the instant access to content allows users to archive posts, which is common practice during drama. Furthermore, drama videos are reflexive by definition, since they presuppose the existence of, and respond to, previous public discourse, as well as allow for, and expect, future public discourse in response (Warner 2002: 90). For these reasons, I see no issue in approaching YouTube drama from the perspective of publics.

This approach differs from the view of drama as interpersonal conflict seen in previous research and among some participants (see the “just drama” discursive formation discussed below), highlighting other aspects of drama. By approaching drama as public dialogue, distinct from conversation in that interlocutors do not only address each other (Warner 2002: 90), the primary object of investigation is the circulation of drama discourse. The atheist community, as a public, is not only the context for drama, a space where the fighting occurs, but it is precisely this space which is fought over.

Community drama, as discursive practice, therefore reaffirms the existence and value of the community. Furthermore, when fighting over a space of discourse, organized by discourse, what is contested are the dominant norms of discourse that organize the internal circulation of texts. Consequently, this approach pays special attention to the ways the drama is discursively constructed in relation to the community.

## SUMMARY OF EVENTS

RR’s video on transgender athletes, published March 29, 2019, did not initially receive many video responses. The drama took off in May, after RR had appeared as a guest host on *The Atheist Experience*, a YouTube call-in show produced by the ACA. After receiving criticism from fans for allowing RR to appear on the show without addressing the controversy, the ACA board of directors released a statement denouncing the video and apologizing to the LGBTQ community. This was not received well by other fans, and the show’s official Facebook group was reportedly flooded with angry comments. This is also when the YouTube-part of the controversy developed into full-on drama, as the focus of video responses shifted to the RR-ACA conflict, rather than the original video. Two weeks later, the ACA retracted their statement and apologized to RR. Between the ACA’s denouncement and apology, a total of 36 video responses were published.

Throughout May and June, RR produced several videos related to the drama, including a correction video, an apology video, and a remake of the original video, which he had delisted. After the ACA had essentially removed themselves from the drama, the conflict centered on RR and his critics, particularly genderfluid atheist YouTuber “EssenceofThought” (EoT).

After briefly commenting on the drama in a Q&A video in late June, RR withdrew from the conflict, not producing any videos about it for almost three months. The drama, however, continued without his participation during this time.

The last major shift in focus occurred in early September. EoT was accused of abusive behavior on Twitter, leading to Rachel Oates, YouTuber and friend of RR’s, having a mental health crisis resulting in self-harm. 34 videos were published up until the end of November, a vast majority of which criticizing EoT, who did not publish a video response until late November. This video received no responses, and was the last one related to the drama.

## DATA, METHODS, AND METHODOLOGY

My data consists of 157 videos, from 78 different channels (one creator uploaded videos to two separate channels), related to the controversy, uploaded to YouTube from the

release of RR's original video in March 2019 to the end of the year (the last video was published on November 30). Videos were primarily located through YouTube's search function using relevant search terms (e.g. "rationality rules trans," "rationality rules ACA," "essence of thought drama"), which were modified as the controversy developed. I also collected relevant videos that showed up as "related"<sup>1</sup> as well as videos referenced in other videos.

The collection process began in May and continued throughout the year. Of the original 163 videos, six were deleted or set to "private"<sup>2</sup> before analysis. This amounted to a total of 94 hours of material. The number of videos uploaded per channel ranged between one and thirteen, with a majority of channels (64%) only uploading one video. Videos ranged from 30 seconds to almost three hours in length, with a mean length of 35 minutes. Most of the longer videos (over 60 minutes) were livestreamed discussions or podcasts where the controversy was discussed, sometimes as one of many topics.

The decision to only include YouTube videos, excluding comments and other social media posts, was largely a practical one. Given the scope of the drama, the number of comments would be in the millions, making collection and analysis impractical. Posts related to the drama in the ACA's official Facebook discussion group were frequently deleted by moderators and the group, the main forum for discussion, no longer exists at the time of writing. Since many Twitter posts were similarly short-lived, and there was no broadly used hashtag, collecting an unbiased data set would have been difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, I consider 157 videos to be sufficient for the purposes of this study.

In the analysis, I employ Norman Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis. This approach views instances of discourse simultaneously as *text*, *discursive practice* (production, distribution, and consumption of texts), and *social practice* (ideology and the constitutive aspects of discourse). These dimensions form a nested hierarchy, where all text is discursive practice, and all discursive practice is social practice. In this study, the textual dimension concerns the videos themselves as well as titles and thumbnails. At the level of discursive practice, the videos are contextualized not only as YouTube videos, but as YouTube drama videos, addressing an atheist public. In terms of social practice, the videos provide discursive constructions of the drama and the atheist community itself, and these constructions are understood to either reinforce or challenge power relations within the community, i.e. the status quo.

Since Warner does not provide any particular definition of discourse, this study utilizes Fairclough's framework, under the assumption that his view is compatible with Warner's conception of publics. For several reasons, for the purposes of this study, I believe this assumption to be warranted. Fairclough (1992: 64) states that discourses are constitutive of social reality, a prerequisite for publics

as spaces of, and organized by, discourse. He emphasizes the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structures, much like Warner's (2002: 67) notes on the circularity of public address: publics are brought into being through address, but a public must exist in some form in order to be addressed. As to whether it is meaningful to transplant Fairclough's third dimension into the setting of a public, as I have done, Warner states that there is an ideological dimension to publics; public unity is maintained by, for example, institutional power and discursive characteristics (language, medium, et cetera) which set the boundaries for a public's "potentially infinite extension" (Warner 2002: 117). For the purposes of this study, I regard this ideological dimension as sufficiently analogous to Fairclough's to speak of the discursive organization of publics in the language of broader societal ideological frameworks.

I first conducted an initial study of the 94 videos published up until the end of June, focusing on how transphobia, allyship, the atheist community, and the controversy itself were discursively constructed in each video. Noting how particular recurring discursive elements in the videos seemed to correlate with how the conflict itself was constructed, I identified six distinct *discursive formations*, which came to guide the analysis of the corpus as a whole.

Discursive formations are systems of rules that determine the possibilities "for certain statements but not others to occur at particular times, places and institutional locations." (Fairclough 1992: 40). Discursive formations can also be viewed as "discursive frame[s] of reference within which, and in relation to which, certain phenomena and states of affairs are represented, talked about, and understood" (Moberg 2017: 29). In other words, they set the parameters for discussion and action, by constructing particular phenomena in particular ways and are characterized by different approaches, styles, and vocabulary, as well as prescribe and prohibit different courses of action. Discursive formations exist in relation to other formations, and while different formations may share certain elements, such as vocabulary, the relationships between the shared elements, as well as their meaning, will be different (Fairclough 1992: 31).

Before concluding this section, there are ethical issues involved in this study that should be addressed. In their ethical guidelines, The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) cites the principle that "the greater the vulnerability of our subjects, the greater our responsibility and obligation to protect them from likely harms" (Franzke et al 2020: 17). This responsibility encompasses individual research subjects as well as vulnerable populations as a whole. While I consider it unlikely that this study would reignite the conflict, it might bring negative attention to the contributions of particular creators, which may result in a backlash against them. With this in mind, direct quotes from videos are used sparingly and with

consideration for the size of the creator’s platform and their centrality to the conflict. This approach also helps keep the focus on broader discursive features rather than interpersonal interaction. Persons involved are referred to by the names used by themselves and other participants, with a preference for channel names.

The AoIR guidelines cites LGBTQ people as a vulnerable population that requires special consideration, and since the controversy revolves around trans women’s access to a particular aspect of social and cultural life, bringing attention to the issue may be harmful in and of itself. However, unlike, for example, medical research into the topic, this study is not concerned with transgender athletic participation, and since I am not qualified to speak on the topic, arguments used by creators are neither evaluated nor presented to the reader.

## RESULTS

In this section, I present the six discursive formations identified in the data. I have named them *Academic-scientific*, *Transphobia*, *Oppression*, *Religion*, *Troublemakers*, and *Just drama*, to reflect the lenses through which the drama is viewed and constructed within them. The formations offer competing interpretations of events, contain different vocabularies, prescribe and prohibit different courses of action, and construct the atheist community in different ways. An individual video may contain elements of multiple discursive formations and such videos count towards the total number of videos in each applicable category. The prominence of each formation fluctuated throughout the drama, emerging, increasing, and declining in response to particular events. The number of videos for each formation, and when it was most prominent, are included in [Table 1](#).

The language used in this article intentionally imbues these formations and videos with agency (e.g. “these videos aim to...”), to emphasize that the creators themselves are not the objects of study. While discursive

formations, as ideological interpretive frameworks, necessarily include particular intentions, it is neither necessary nor productive to ascribe these intentions to individual creators engaging in particular discourses.

### ACADEMIC-SCIENTIFIC

This discursive formation centers the question of whether trans women have an unfair competitive advantage over cis women in sports. Videos typically feature dispassionate reviews of scientific literature and attempt to assess the scientific accuracy of RR’s original video. RR advocates for this interpretive framework in the introduction to his original video:

This debate, this video, is about women’s sport and athletics and what constitutes fair competition. It’s not about whether or not transgender people should be allowed to use certain bathrooms, or if they should be able to join gender-specific non-competitive clubs. ([Rationality Rules 2019a](#))

Here RR decontextualizes the question from other contemporary transgender rights issues, referencing so-called “bathroom bills” in the United States, by utilizing a different moral concept: “fairness.” He continues by stating that the unfairness of transgender inclusion “will kill women’s sport.” In the video, he uses medical data and sports statistics to argue for this unfair advantage, and his analysis is supplemented with clips from news and discussion programs. These clips fulfill three different functions: they establish the fairness question as a current topic of interest, provide anecdotal examples of the supposed harm caused by transgender inclusion, and provide audiovisual contrast to his on-camera appearances.

While RR uses the “academic-scientific” formation to center a particular moral dimension over others, the formation itself is often superficially amoral and allows for a particular type of defense against criticism. Many creators argue that if RR was right about the science, there are no grounds for criticism of any kind. If not, he was simply “incorrect” or “mistaken”; he was wrong, but he did not *do* anything wrong. Constructing the controversy as an intellectual disagreement, where no one can be at fault, allows creators, pressured to take a stand by their audience or other creators, to justify their reluctance to get involved. For example, in her response to EoT calling her out for not speaking out against RR, Rachel Oates ([2019](#)) states that she does have an opinion on the issue since she does not care nor know anything about sports.

One interesting feature of the academic-scientific formation is that it can be used to reject itself in favor of the “transphobia” and “oppression” formations. In their first video, EoT ([2019a](#)) begins by addressing RR’s scientific accuracy, before explaining how the video is transphobic and dangerous. While the video ultimately centers the harm the video has inflicted on the trans

DISCURSIVE FORMATION	VIDEOS	MOST PROMINENT
Academic-scientific	31	Before ACA statement and after retraction
Transphobia	30	After ACA statement retraction
Oppression	32	After RR’s withdrawal from the conflict
Religion	15	Between ACA statement and retraction
Troublemakers	48	Dominant towards the end
Just drama	16	Between ACA statement and retraction

**Table 1** Summary of discursive formations.

community, it, if only pragmatically, assumes that RR must first be shown to be scientifically incorrect before the video can be criticized on other grounds.

Ideologically, “academic-scientific” draws upon *scientism*. LeDrew (2016: 58–59) identifies scientism, in the sense that the natural sciences are the only viable path to knowledge and should therefore guide social and political life, as a core ideological feature of new atheism. In this light, the questions “Do trans women have an athletic advantage?” and “Should trans women be excluded from women’s sports?” are functionally identical, since the answer to the former (the only relevant question) directly implies the answer to the latter.

This discursive formation constructs the atheist community as a space for scientific curiosity, free inquiry, and open debate. Civil, academic disagreement within the community must be allowed, and any criticism of RR must be based on *objective facts*, not *irrational emotion*. If RR is shown to be wrong, he should issue a *correction*, rather than an *apology*.

## TRANSPHOBIA

The second discursive formation also centers a particular question: is RR and/or his video transphobic? These videos discuss what transphobia is and offer arguments in favor of particular answers to the question, which is often reflected in video titles. This approach is common in discussion videos with multiple contributors and about half of all transphobia-focused videos were published between the ACA retraction and the end of June.

All videos in this category agree that transphobia is unacceptable, but differ in whether they construct it in terms of *intent* or *content*. Intent-focused videos center RR and frame the question in terms of *ignorance* or *malice*. In a video titled “A Transgender’s Perspective on Rationality Rules’ supposed transphobia,” Sarah Michel (2019a) provides a good example of an ignorance interpretation:

Now, I’ve watched the video and I honestly don’t think [RR] himself has said anything that could be construed as transphobic. Now, he made some very poor choices for clips that he used in his video [...] but not transphobic, just a couple of blunders, that in my opinion was [sic] made out of ignorance, not out of malice. [...] I know by a lot of experience that when people talk about these issues of gender and sex and transgenderism and intersex, people are usually so used to the idea of an absolute binarism [sic] of sex and gender that they might make a few blunders.

The “ignorance rather than malice” interpretation is emphasized by the vocabulary. The potentially transphobic content is referred to in terms of “poor choices” and “blunders,” which are understandable and common, since most people do not understand transgender issues. Sarah Michel’s identity as a trans

woman, emphasized in the video title, gives her conclusion more weight. Elsewhere in the video, as in many others that come to the same conclusion, it is argued that because transphobia is such a serious accusation, ignorance should be the null hypothesis and accepted until proven otherwise.

Content-focused videos center the video itself and the potential harm caused by it. Cited examples of transphobic content include clips where trans women are misgendered, RR showing sympathy only for cisgender athletes, and RR’s advocacy for banning trans women from women’s sports. While these transphobic elements are bad in and of themselves, they are also constructed as harmful to trans people. The video is said to encourage discrimination against trans women and “provide ammo” for transphobes, by painting trans women as a threat to cis women. Very few content-focused videos conclude that the video is not transphobic.

The importance of determining whether RR is transphobic constructs the atheist community as inclusive and safe for marginalized people. All forms of bigotry are unacceptable and accusations merit investigation. Community members should be vigilant and willing to call out bigotry, but the default approach should be educational and restorative. Transphobic transgressors, whether ignorant or malicious, should have their error explained to them and make amends in the form of an apology and a promise to do better in the future.

## OPPRESSION

Treating RR’s transphobia as self-evident or previously established, “oppression” discourses focus on transphobia in the atheist community and broader society. Videos contextualize RR’s video, and the drama itself, as an example of a disturbing trend of atheists ignoring bigotry in their ranks. While the problem is understood to be larger than RR or the ACA, they nevertheless come to represent atheist transphobia more broadly and become the main targets of criticism.

This discursive formation frames the conflict in terms of a civil rights’ struggle. EoT (2019b) makes this very explicit by quoting Martin Luther King Jr. on the difference between a *negative peace*, the absence of conflict, and a *positive peace*, the presence of justice. A negative peace, a return to the status quo, is unacceptable, so the conflict becomes necessary. Consequently, a particular feature of these videos is calling for community members to participate by speaking out against RR. Nonparticipation is considered tacit acceptance of community transphobia and therefore worthy of condemnation.

The struggle against transphobia in the community is necessary and the terms of the struggle should be defined by transgender atheists. In response to “tone policing” by RR and his defenders, EoT (2019b) employs a confrontational vocabulary to justify tactics criticized for being too aggressive:

Tone policing is a common tactic used to disempower marginalized communities and strip them of their autonomy. It tells them that allyship is something that must be bought through niceties, rather than given freely on the basis as [sic] a demographic's human civil rights [...] For the person utilising tone-policing, there's typically zero cost involved.

[...] And in spite of having been explicitly told by myself and others that tone-policing is a weapon used to prolong injustice, and therefore is arguably an act of social violence, [RR] decided to begin his apology in this manner. With an attack.

The language of “attacks” is a recurring feature of “oppression” discourses. In this particular instance, it refers to tone-policing, but it is also employed in reference to RR's original video, as well as defenses of it. The vocabulary serves to justify aggressive action, like EoT's subsequent alleged Twitter abuse, as “self-defense” (e.g. *EssenceofThought* 2019c).

The connection between contemporary social politics and the drama is strengthened by assigning political labels to perceived enemies. While terms like “Nazi” or “fascist” are not used, weaker far-right labels, such as “reactionary” and “alt-right” are common. For example, EoT (2019a) interprets RR's original video as an attempt to court an “alt-lite audience.”

Not all videos focusing on transphobia in the atheist community employ an aggressive style. A couple of videos are framed as pleas to RR to stop “hurting the trans community.” Additionally, these videos express an expectation of LGBTQ allyship from atheists, constructed as a marginalized group who should know better than to participate in the oppression of other groups.

The atheist community may or may not be constructed in terms of a counterpublic, but trans people, and other marginalized groups, are viewed as counterpublics in relation to the community – minorities within a minority (Miller 2013).

The community is constructed as hypocritical, claiming allyship while refusing to address reactionary elements within it. The RR drama provides an opportunity for community members to show their true colors, and the colors reveal the extent of the problem. Accusations of the drama “dividing” the community are invalid, since the community is already divided and conflict is the only path to creating a community worth preserving. Unless the community actively combats the circulation of transphobic discourse, it is not safe for trans people.

## RELIGION

This discursive formation emerged as a response to the initial ACA statement and is almost exclusive to the time between the ACA denouncement and subsequent retraction. These videos primarily center the actions of the ACA, framing them in terms of religious oppression and

therefore inappropriate for an atheist organization. Other videos in this category use the religious framing to discuss the drama more generally. A majority of the videos present a direct critique of the ACA and most creators produced only one video, suggesting that their investment in the drama specifically revolved around the ACA, and once they had apologized to RR, their sins were forgiven.

The vocabulary is distinctly religious; the ACA is said to have “excommunicated,” “demonized,” or “crucified” RR. In a video talking about his experiences as a former Jehovah's Witness, Telltale (2019), without going into specifics about the conflict, refers to the backlash against RR as “shunning” and states that the drawing of “battle lines” is “a hallmark of the [cult] mindset.” In his video response to the denouncement, RR comments on the lack of evidence for the claims in the statement:

[A]n organisation that prides itself on freethought and substantiating their views exercised neither of these values when they denounced me. You know, it's so painful to see an atheist organisation wielding what stinks of religious dogma. Just as the religious brand me a “heretic” for not sharing their views, the ACA has branded me a “transphobe” for not sharing theirs. (*Rationality Rules* 2019b)

The thumbnail for the video (Figure 1) further emphasizes the idea of RR as a heretic, using Christiano Banti's painting “Galileo facing the Inquisition”, with RR's face superimposed onto Galileo's.

This discursive formation is based on a virtue-ethical framework: what would an atheist do? Actions, like denouncing RR, are characterized as religious and unatheistic, and therefore wrong by default. The atheist community is constructed as the antithesis of religions, and atheists should not behave like religious people; this is the defining characteristic of the atheist public. Many videos offer suggestions for how the ACA should have handled the situation, which serve as examples of what is deemed proper atheistic behavior. They should have acknowledged the controversy, expressed their disagreement with the video, and informed their



Figure 1 Screenshot, cropped (*Rationality Rules* 2019b).

audience that they had talked to RR about it and that he was working on a correction video. In other words, they should have been diplomatic and non-confrontational.

### TROUBLEMAKERS

The most popular discursive formation, “troublemakers” centers the actions and intent of RR’s critics. While videos in this category were produced throughout the drama, it dominated the conversation towards the end, with 26 out of 35 videos published in September falling within this discursive formation. This was largely a response to EoT’s alleged abusive behavior towards Rachel Oates, but many videos also focused on trans activism in general.

Like “oppression,” this formation also employs contemporary political labels. RR’s critics are typically identified as “social justice warriors” who represent the “regressive left,” situating them as part of a larger problem with “identity politics” and “political correctness” threatening free speech and open discussion. Their place in the community is often questioned; they are either “a few oversensitive individuals” and a “loud minority” within the community, or outsiders who have “infiltrated” it. In either case, they are said to want to politicize the community, making it conform to their ideology. In contrast, “oppression” discourses typically do not construct reactionaries as outsiders, but as endemic to the atheist community. These discourses set the boundaries for the atheist public and define who has the right to participate in its circulation of discourse, that is, who is allowed a voice within it.

Many videos are direct callouts aimed at EoT, encouraging others to denounce them as well. Sarah Michel, in her video “Essence of Thought must be STOPPED” (2019b), states that EoT does not represent the trans community and says of them:

They can never be wrong, they can never have a wrong opinion, they can never make a mistake. It’s just some self-righteous cuntish [sic] attitude that everyone should criticize, and if you are friends with [EoT], especially if you are friends with [EoT], you should criticize this shit.

The root of EoT’s toxic behavior is here understood to be their unwillingness to question their convictions and, by implication, the zeal with which they act upon them. This attitude is considered categorically wrong and should be called out, even if you agree with them about the issue (which a “friend” presumably does). By focusing on self-righteousness, and the behavior it inspires, the self-righteous actor is delegitimized, without evaluating the legitimacy of the cause they champion.

Not all responses to EoT’s actions are hostile in tone. Some express sympathy for EoT and other trans critics while denouncing their behavior. Sympathetic “troublemaker” discourses construct the critics as

misguided activists with good intentions, suffering under societal transphobia and lashing out at those they feel are complicit in perpetuating their suffering. They recognize the legitimacy of the greater struggle, but nevertheless discourage this particular fight, which has “gone too far.”

The atheist community is constructed as a space where toxic people and ideologies are not welcome. While sympathetic discourses emphasize reform and reconciliation, more hostile discourses, personal or political, argue for expulsion. Political discourses paint the picture of an apolitical community, under threat from progressive and leftist ideologies. Efforts to prevent the perceived politicization of the community are, however, not viewed as political in and of themselves.

### JUST DRAMA

Finally, some videos frame the conflict as “just drama”. This discursive formation reduces the drama to one or more interpersonal conflicts: typically RR and the ACA, or RR and EoT. These videos mostly come from creators with larger audiences, and is the preferred discursive formation of videos produced by the ACA. For example, commenting on the controversy on *The Atheist Experience* (2019), Matt Dillahunty states that:

What I’ve seen happening is a lot of people, well I’ve seen some people, who literally don’t know dick about what’s going on, decide to go out and create some drama on the interwebs [sic]. People who have nothing to do with the ACA, or [RR], or the trans community, have decided to go out and throw their two cents in, which is problematic.

This statement is followed by an account of what had gone on behind the scenes. Dillahunty constructs the boundaries of the conflict by designating who can legitimately comment on it. The main parties involved are the ACA and RR, and while he recognizes that trans people have skin in the game, most trans people are implicitly excluded from participation, due to their lack of direct knowledge about the situation. Note that the notion of “some people” causing drama is similar to “troublemaker” discourses, but it is attributed to ignorance rather than malice: had they been “privy to [his] private conversations,” they would have known better than to assume the worst.

The interpersonal conflict is said to have “gotten out of hand” or turned into a “shitshow.” Sometimes, it is reduced to a “kerfuffle” or just a “situation.” These discourses discourage participation, even though producing a video on the subject is an act of participation. This apparent contradiction can be resolved in various ways, for example by (generally implicitly) positioning oneself as a “peacemaker” attempting to de-escalate the conflict, or as an outsider to the drama (despite one’s community membership) by framing the video as a retrospective or

summary of it. A third, quite popular, way is to emphasize the reluctance of one's participation, by explaining why one originally did not want to take part, but eventually chose to do so anyway. Typically, one's reluctance is justified through a lack of interest in or knowledge about sports (borrowing from the academic-scientific formation), a general opposition to drama, or concern for the negative personal consequences of participation on one's mental health. The decision to speak out anyway is mainly framed as the result of pressure from other community members, as a need to respond to personal accusations, or as motivated by a moral duty to speak out against the actions of certain participants. Thus, the reluctant participant disavows their agency in their participation, and, consequently, their responsibility.

Not (explicitly) taking sides and calling for civility is central to these discourses. The neutral position of simply calling for an end to the fighting does, however, place one in opposition to those believing in the necessity of conflict. It is notable that, towards the end, calls for civility were rarely directed at those calling for the denouncement of EoT. Interdiscursively, "troublemakers" builds upon this rejection of drama and offers an interpretation of who is responsible for it.

The atheist community is constructed as invaluable, but fragile. It is frequently acknowledged that nonbelief in gods is a weak foundation for a community. Political disagreements within the community are simultaneously acknowledged and undermined; particular issues of disagreement are irrelevant considering that atheists agree on a majority of issues. Atheists are constructed as marginalized, in need of a community for support and political mobilizing around issues of church-state separation and religious freedom. In other words, the atheist community is constructed as a counterpublic.

When community members engage in open conflict instead of civil discussion around issues of disagreement, the community suffers and risks division. In other words, political disagreements are not harmful to the community in and of themselves; the threat comes from how they are expressed and dealt with in practice.

## ANALYSIS

Looking at a YouTube drama of this scope, within a community with a history of conflict around similar issues, there are three aspects I find notable. Firstly, direct references to previous atheist conflicts, like Elevatorgate, are largely absent. Instead, the drama is situated within the contemporary political discourse of social justice warriors and the alt-right. Secondly, there is a lack of interest among the "old guard" of YouTube atheists, Amazing Atheist (2019) being the only one to produce a video about on the subject. Finally, despite the intensity

of the conflict, things appeared to quickly revert back to business as usual, without any lasting consequences. ACA show hosts and volunteers, including the entire cast of their feminist-oriented podcast *The Godless Bitches*, who had left the organization in protest over the retraction of the statement, were quickly replaced and *The Godless Bitches* was rebooted in January 2020. None of the main players have lost their audience and no one seems to have made a name for themselves. While EoT might have lost some friends, they had not interacted much with other YouTube atheists previously. I did not come across any mention of the drama in 2020.

Each of the discursive formations discussed in this article contributed to the development of the drama. "Religion" discourses, as a response to the ACA's denouncement of RR, was the start of the drama proper, but "transphobia" and, in particular, "oppression" discourses made participation necessary. "Academic-scientific" and "just drama" discourses delegitimized the conflict, justifying its eventual end. The drama ended when "troublemakers" discourses came to dominate the conversation, turning the attention to EoT's actions and leaving little space for videos not addressing them, and those who viewed the conflict as a necessary fight for justice fell silent.

As an atheist public, a space of discourse organized by discourse, the different constructions of the atheist community represent different conceptions of which norms of discourse should be dominant within the community. From this perspective, in the context of community drama, one meaningful approach to the atheist communities of different discursive formations is to consider how disagreement is constructed within them. Allowing disagreement on virtually any issue may be justified as a vital part of a science-oriented community ("academic-scientific") or as an inevitable fact within a diverse community ("just drama"). Alternatively, consensus might be required on issues of critical importance ("transphobia," "oppression"). The disagreement in question is constructed as being about trans athletes in the first case, and trans rights more generally in the second.

Norms of discourse are not purely abstract notions, but are expressed in the real world, and can be approached empirically. The dominant norms of discourse of the atheist community are visible in the reactions to various attempts to enforce different sets of norms over the course of the drama. The ACA denouncing RR for his video was a form of sanction, an attempt to enforce a norm prohibiting transphobic speech, and the backlash was, in turn, a sanction for breaking the norm of "not acting like a religion." By withdrawing the statement and apologizing, the ACA accepted the latter, instantly earning forgiveness from their critics.

While the "academic-scientific," "just drama," "religion," and "troublemakers" formations emphasize

different aspects of the drama and the community, their constructions of the norms of discourse are compatible. There is no contradiction between “discuss civilly,” “do not fight,” “do not act like a religion,” and “do not politicize the community”; they all promote community cohesion and prohibit antagonism within the community (except when sanctioning those deemed antagonistic). “Oppression” discourses find these norms insufficient, as they allow for oppressive speech without offering the means to properly combat it, and consequently must go against these norms in their efforts to change them. By rejecting the dominant norms of discourse, “oppression” discourses are perceived to risk dividing the community and face a four-pronged opposition.

Discursive norms that allow disagreement and disallow conflict is consistent with a big tent approach to atheism, and is arguably an expression of it. After all, this ideological construct, the “arbitrary social closure” (Warner 2002: 117) that sets the boundaries of the atheist public, prohibits ascribing any particular beliefs or characteristics to atheists as a group, except a lack of God-belief, and requires the community to be open to all nonbelievers. In this light, the apparent lack of consequences from the drama seems almost inevitable; once the troublemakers fell silent, effectively complying with the norms of discourse, as atheists, they could not be denied reentry into the community. Conflicts can end, but never be resolved. Furthermore, this also explains the ignorance of, or unwillingness to acknowledge, the history of conflict within YouTube atheism. It is in the interest of big tent atheism to isolate conflicts from one another, since they challenge the idea of atheist unity as real or possible. Forgotten, they cannot be utilized by the troublemakers.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Atheist disagreement on social issues is not news to researchers or atheists. This article has explored how the idea of an atheist community is constructed when these disagreements are expressed through open conflict, in the context of YouTube drama. On YouTube, anyone can broadcast themselves, and the creators who participated in the drama range from unknowns offering up an opinion, to professional YouTube atheists whose prominence and influence obligated them to weigh in. Addressing a public always involves constructing it in a particular way (Warner 2002: 114), and this study has shown how drama discourse, as a particular form of public address, specifically constructs the public as a contested space, in relation to particular points of disagreement. Analyzing the discursive formations that shaped the drama, and the interactions between them, provides a deeper understanding of the inner workings of this atheist public, which is not only a space for drama, but what is at stake in drama.

The analysis of the RR drama and the discursive formations utilized within it reveals a fundamental tension between keeping the atheist community united and explicit calls to address perceived problematic aspects of it. This tension is mirrored not only in past controversies but also in the political impotence of contemporary atheism, which, as argued by Laughlin (2016), is the result of the contradiction between big tent atheism and atheist political organizing. While other researchers have convincingly argued that the hostility to feminist critiques of the atheist movement is a result of the right-wing ideology of New Atheism (LeDrew 2016), or a “non-religious patriarchy” (Miller 2013), this study suggests that there is another side to the story: passively ignoring or actively combating such critiques is a necessary part of maintaining an atheist counterpublic. Simultaneously, the establishing of counterpublics within the atheist public mandates that the dominant norms be challenged, since that is part of being a counterpublic. In other words, the tension resulting in recurring conflicts over social issues can be viewed as the consequence of two counterpublics, one nested within the other (as with Lundmark’s atheist women), where one’s struggle for recognition is understood by the other as a hindrance to theirs.

With all this in mind, it is unsurprising that another transphobia-related controversy erupted in 2021. On April 10, Richard Dawkins posted a tweet wherein he compared transgender people to Rachel Dolezal, an NAACP leader who was revealed to be white, despite presenting and identifying as African American, asking why it is okay to question transracial identities but not transgender ones. The response was mixed, with Dawkins receiving criticism as well as support from prominent atheists. Condemning the tweet, the American Humanist Association (AHA) rescinded the Humanist of the Year award that Dawkins had received in 1996 (Metha 2021). Like the ACA, the AHA became subject to a backlash for supposedly acting against their humanist values (cf. the “religion” formation). Rationality Rules (2021) produced a video commenting on the controversy, relating it to his own experiences.

The striking similarities between the two cases suggest that the six discursive formations of this study, as examples of atheist discourses, may also be useful in understanding the Dawkins controversy, as well as how other atheist socio-political conflicts develop. If abstracted into more generalized forms, I would expect them, and the ways in which they interact, to be applicable in most cases, whether the conflict concerns transphobia, sexism, racism, homophobia, or other forms of bigotry.

This study has approached ‘the atheist community’ as a public. This approach questions the reality of a unified community of nonbelievers and offers an alternative interpretation of it, centering the reflexive production, distribution, and consumption of texts that address an indefinite audience of atheists, who assign significance to the common identity they share with other nonbelievers. Unlike the abstract notion of a community, this space

of discourse is available for firmly empirically grounded investigation. As an example of such an investigation, this case study has demonstrated the usefulness of the public framework, as conceptualized by Warner, for understanding socio-political conflict within contemporary atheism.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Related” videos are suggested to the viewer by YouTube on the basis of similarities to the video the viewer is currently watching. Videos may also be suggested based on the videos the viewer has watched previously.
- <sup>2</sup> To access a private video, a user must obtain permission from its creator. Some videos, including RR’s original video, were “unlisted” over the course of the drama, meaning that they do not show up in search results or on the creator’s channel, and are only accessible through links or playlists. Unlike private videos, unlisted videos were not excluded from analysis.

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