

Pumpkins at the centre of Mars and circlejerks: do atheists find community online?

Evelina Lundmark

This volume prompts us to ask what forms of sceptical publicity atheists, sceptics and the religiously indifferent engage in, and what types of media encourage community formation or facilitate different expressions of religious scepticism in public. It thus allows us to consider the diversity of ‘sceptical publics’, which also obliges us to think about what publicness is in relation to the non-religious. Kate Nash has argued that “‘Public’ is a kind of placeholder to allow consideration of the moral dimension of democratic politics’ (Nash 2014, 1). This allows us to explore the notion of publicness beyond the idea of the *polis*, beyond definitions of the public as a social totality. Michael Warner’s (2005) work has also been influential in this respect, specifically in his attempt to define the public beyond external organisation, instead focusing on it as a space co-effected by the circulation of texts. Thus, one can argue that publicness broadly can be construed as a set of heterogeneous interlinking or opposing discourses centring on moral considerations or ideals related to issues of social organisation and ‘desirable’ identities. Similarly, a microcosm of minority discourse – such as discourse focusing on atheism – is no less heterogeneous, and thus necessitates reflection on this diversity, and on what characterises different discursive formations in this space. The aim of this chapter is thus to explore the role of conflict in atheist community formation, looking at how anti-religious sentiments should be conceived vis-à-vis atheist community

formation online, the purpose of which is to bring nuance to if and how practices of engaging with atheist content online – or of “reading with” like-minded strangers’ (Cimino and Smith 2011, 33) – should be conceived of as participation in or formation of diffused communities.

Building on ideas of atheism potentially being experienced and expressed as imagined community in online spaces, I have previously analysed discourses on /r/atheism, a subforum of [reddit.com](#) populated mainly by US users,¹ finding that atheism was conceptualised by /r/atheism users as ‘merely’ a way of thinking rationally, as opposed to being a movement or an identity (Lundmark and LeDrew 2018).² In this chapter I consider the insights from this work in relation to findings from another study focusing on atheist vloggers on YouTube, specifically the comment section of one of Ana Kasparian’s videos (the co-host and producer of *The Young Turks*, a progressive news and commentary channel on YouTube; Lundmark 2019).³ The comment section of Kasparian’s video stood out from the rest of the material in the study because of the strong focus commenters put on the lack of an atheist community and the lack of an atheist message in their critique of Kasparian’s video. As these key themes, which dominated Kasparian’s comment section, appeared to cohere with the hegemonic discursive formation of /r/atheism I had previously studied, the analysis presented here considers more deeply what appears to be a paradox observable in both data sets, a community forming around the notion that there cannot be an atheist community. Using the framework of antagonism and agonism posited by Chantal Mouffe (2013), the analysis in this chapter reflects on atheist community formation, and the role of conflict in atheist discourse, and asks if these types of online practices should be conceived as diffused or imagined communities, or as recursive echo chambers embodying atheist frustration.

Atheist community?

Atheism experienced a surge in visibility in the mid-2000s, something that has in part been attributed to the greater visibility enabled by the internet and social media technologies in general (Laughlin 2016; Smith and Cimino 2012). Research on atheist communities forming online (e.g. Starr, Waldo and Kauffman 2019), on the use of online resources by existing communities (e.g. Fader 2017), or following broader swathes of atheist discourses enacted on various platforms (e.g. Smith and Cimino 2012;

Cimino and Smith 2011; Laughlin 2016) shows that online resources form an important part in the deconversion and coming-out processes of some atheists. For example, Chelsea Starr, Kristin Waldo and Matthew Kauffman show that their respondents ‘depended on the [studied forum] to process their intellectual, emotional, and social changes’ (Starr, Waldo and Kauffman 2019, 508). In this case the online forum functioned as a type of community, providing respondents with a safe space for coming to terms with and handling the fallout of their atheist convictions. Previous research has indicated that, for atheists, being involved in atheist groups or feeling connected to other atheists is associated with higher well-being (Abbott and Mollen 2018; Brewster et al. 2020). However, it is important to note that, despite this, atheists do not tend to join organisations (Altemeyer 2010; Bullivant 2008; Manning 2010). Thus, atheists in the US have been posited to relate to a form of imagined community at the cross-section of atheist spokesmen, the reading of their texts and various social media platforms (Cimino and Smith 2011). This imagined community is thought to exist in tension with the religious majority, and to provide feelings of legitimisation, as well as exacerbating feelings of exclusion (Cimino and Smith 2011; Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006). The characteristics and diversity of this imagined community are less clear, but the heterogeneity of the group is recognised (e.g. LeDrew 2016).

Jack Laughlin (2016), opposing the idea that atheism forms a coherent community, has explored a particular type of atheist discourse he labels as ‘progressive’, which he describes as standing in opposition to ‘dictionary atheism’. Laughlin describes how such progressive atheist discourse foregrounds social responsibility, thereby disavowing the dictionary definition of atheism as being not a comprehensive system of thought but simply and exclusively referring to God’s non-existence (Laughlin 2016, 329–30). In this chapter I focus on the second type of atheism Laughlin describes, the dictionary atheist discourse which argues that atheism is simply the disavowal of a certain type of belief, and not an identity, community or worldview. As previous research has not tended to distinguish between different types of atheist discourse, some of the general characteristics attributed to atheists may refer mainly to this formation, such as a perceived tendency in atheist discourse to construct atheist identity as existing in opposition to religious others (Guenther 2014; Guenther, Mulligan and Papp 2013; J. M. Smith 2011). Atheist identity can in such cases be understood to be deployed in order to signal a set of antagonistic presuppositions about religion – as inherently fundamentalist and a threat to science – which in turn is thought to empower atheists in their disbelief (Taira 2012; Lüchau 2010). Other

characteristics include scientism, epistemic dogmatism, a reduction of religion to the status of a primitive science and a general disdain for both fundamentalist and moderate religious practitioners (Asad 1993, 2003; Gorski 1990; Kaden and Schmidt-Lux 2016; Kidd 2017; Lundmark and LeDrew 2018; Martin 2014; Olson 2008; Stenmark 1997; Zenk 2014).

Social media dynamics

The data sets analysed here came from Reddit and YouTube, which calls for some reflection on the particular affordances of both technologies. To begin with, YouTube is a subsidiary of Google and the second most visited website in the world (Wikipedia 2021), and variously functions as a tool for the dissemination or uploading of hyperlinkable video content, as a public space and as a social networking site. Reddit also functions as a tool for dissemination of hyperlinkable content but is much more centred on discussion. It is a hubforum, and subreddits like /r/atheism focus on niche topics or areas of interest, and are generally moderated by users. Both platforms rely on user interaction, and function by ranking systems – likes and interactions on YouTube, up- and downvotes on Reddit – which to a large degree affect what the average user of either site is likely to see. While YouTube relies on users producing and publishing video content, Reddit works through its users submitting a broader range of content – links to news articles, memes, stories from their lives, questions, and so on – to particular subreddits, where users can vote on it. Content that receives many upvotes appears on the front page of any given subreddit, and if popular enough on the front page of Reddit itself. Thus, Reddit is particularly dependent on user interaction, which was especially true for /r/atheism at the time of the study as it was largely unmoderated. Reddit has thus been argued to function variously as a news aggregator and as a space for virtual community, both as a public forum and as a ‘safe space’ (Darwin 2017; Jürgens and Stark 2017; Robards 2018). Both sites function with a certain amount of anonymity and allow users to access content and comments or forum discussions without registering an account. Moreover, even users with accounts are afforded relative anonymity on both sites, an important thing to note since relative anonymity has been found to foster less cordial debate online, which tends towards hostility (Halpern and Gibbs 2013, looking specifically at YouTube).

The anonymity afforded by Reddit is identified as one of the key affordances of the site in recent work by Naveena Prakasam and Louisa Huxtable-Thomas (2021). They further highlight credibility, echoing and

creating membership. The first of these refers to the way authority is created and maintained by users on Reddit via the karma system; users who receive up- and downvotes from others when they comment or post content receive 'karma', which gives credibility to their activities on the site. In addition, users are restrained by the rules established by each subreddit. Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas argue that this brings about an echo-chamber effect, as moderators are able to delete any posts or comments which they feel do not adhere to the rules. Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas also point out that in-group membership is established via particular jargon, and suggest that the 'material aspects of anonymity, upvoting, karma and the rules of each subreddit provide ways in which Users can create a "safe" space to air their views, use convincing language and narrative to recruit others and to reward those that share the same attitudes whilst excluding alternative views' (Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas 2021, 24). In stark contrast to Reddit, most YouTube content focuses on specific people: vloggers. However, as noted by Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2017), this type of content is still highly interactive, as it is centred on the relationship between vlogger and audience. Cunningham and Craig argue that key affordances of such vlogs include authenticity and community, and that the authenticity vloggers seek to establish exists in relation to the perceived artificiality of traditional media formats. Vloggers are thus able to forge authority in relation to their audiences, characterised by authenticity, connection and vulnerability (Lövheim and Lundmark 2019). While this vulnerability is often a strength for vloggers, the example of Kasparian analysed in this chapter shows that this emphasis on connection and authenticity also opens up vloggers to harsh personal attacks and critique (Lundmark 2019).

Articulating atheism

The analysis presented here builds on discourse theory, a methodology developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), which posits that as meaning cannot be ultimately fixed there exists a constant struggle between different discursive formations for the fixation of the hegemonic. This struggle takes place via articulations, the linguistic acts that seek to establish a relationship between elements (any unarticulated difference), thus fixing them as moments (fixations of meaning; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Looking at the shape of hegemonic discourse on /r/atheism, important moments include religious people, religion and atheism. User articulations of atheism suggest a different relation: 'Atheism is not and will

never have a “word” or “message” to spread ... We do the opposite of that, try to show critical thinking to people so they can reason for themselves what is and isn't real' (/r/atheism thread). Such an articulation is indicative of users' broader attempts to empty the concept of 'atheist' of meaning. Users almost never say 'atheism is ...', but rather focus on what it is *not*; in this case it is articulated as not having a message. Within this discourse the element of 'atheist' is articulated as a moment in a way that indicates that it is neutral, without value, a natural state of the mind. This way of articulating atheism was in line with the /r/atheism FAQ at the time, which defined atheism as 'nothing more and nothing less than a lack of belief in any god or gods', and further stated that a 'person can be both atheist and religious, provided that he or she believes in a religion that does not have any deities', and that the 'word “atheism” is not a proper noun (we do not worship the All Powerful Atheismo), so there is no need to capitalize it'. Moreover, the FAQ clarified the relationship between atheism and agnosticism, stating that the two are not mutually exclusive and that calling yourself an agnostic is 'completely uninformative, and does not make you “not an atheist”'. These articulations proliferated on the forum, and were also the issue around which Kasparian's video and comment section circled.

In her video, Kasparian opened by introducing the issue: she had labelled herself as agnostic when asked about her beliefs during an interview. After this she describes having received negative feedback from atheists, which had prompted her to respond to these concerns in a video addressing the 'atheist community'.⁴ To begin with, she inserts a clip of herself from the interview in which she says: 'I just feel really uncomfortable calling myself an atheist and pretending as though I know without a shadow of a doubt that there is no higher being. The truth is I don't know, and no one really knows' (Kasparian's video). She follows this by inserting a clip from a video response she received, in which another YouTuber outlines the difference between atheism and agnosticism:

The two [presumably Kasparian and the interviewer, Dave Rubin] seem to want to put agnosticism between atheism and theism but agnosticism is about knowledge: it is the idea that we can never know whether or not a God exists, while atheism and theism is about belief. So, for example, I'm an agnostic atheist – I'm both an agnostic and an atheist. Also, Christians are gnostic theists, so to say 'I'm not atheist, I'm an agnostic' doesn't make any sense. It's like saying 'I'm not a liberal, I'm a vegetarian.' They're not on the same line of ideology. But what's worse is Ana is claiming that all atheists are completely gnostic about God – they know with one hundred

per cent certainty that God does not exist and in fact I've tried to criticise atheists who act in this way. I think it's wrong and I think it's not within the ideology of atheism. I think at the centre of atheism is scepticism – the idea that we only accept claims when there's sufficient evidence for them.

(Kasparian's video)

This particular way of articulating atheism and agnosticism is most likely familiar to many. It is often accompanied by an image illustrating the differing 'lines of ideology' referred to. Variations of it exist, but it is essentially a chart that on one axis measures belief (labelled atheism versus theism), and on the other measures claims to knowledge (labelled agnosticism versus gnosticism).⁵ Thus, someone like Kasparian, who does not know but does not believe that God exists would, according to this understanding, be an agnostic atheist – which perhaps is why she receives responses like 'Atheism is NOT a claim to knowledge. Its an absence of belief in a deity. Simple,' and 'You dont believe in a god, you are unconvinced that there is one. BY DEFINITION YOU ARE AN ATHEIST also you are a pathetic coward unwilling to acknowledge reality' (Kasparian's comment section).

In this discursive formation, atheism is articulated as a statement – of knowledge of belief – that lacks substance in and of itself, which is not conceived as a 'proper noun', suggesting that it is not understood as an identity or community that one can inhabit or take part in. These types of articulations claim that 'Atheism is not an ideology' (Kasparian's comment section), and reject the notion that there is such a thing as an atheist community:

I don't like how people say 'the atheist community'. I believe that you belong to the 'catholic community' if you subscribe to that religion, same with 'muslim community' and 'anglican community'. Atheists are people who lack religious faith, they are a negative. It's like splitting hundreds of different coloured marbles into a red group and a green group, and then labelling the remaining as 'rainbow'. They lack a set group.

(Kasparian's comment section)

Instead, atheism is articulated as referring to people who – unlike religious people – simply are reasonable: 'I don't like to be labeled an Athiest, I label myself a Normal person who just doesn't believe in God, Santa Claus, The Devil, the Tooth Fairy or any other fairies!!!!' (Kasparian's comment section). This type of articulation divides the discursive field into two

opposite, antagonistic poles. As one of Kasparian's commenters puts it: 'you think agnosticism is a middleground between theism and atheism, theism and atheism are BINARY positions there IS NO MIDDLE GROUND'. This antagonistic binary explains why Kasparian, who states several times that she does not believe in God, still receives these types of comment: 'Don't be weak minded. You are smart enough to know that goofy god is a bad joke on the idiot masses' and 'I wanna bang the Jesus out of Ana ... Oh wait ... we don't know if he really exists' (Kasparian's comment section). As she does not clearly identify herself as an atheist (and thus reasonable), she is perceived by some to be irrational, or simply wrong: 'It ain't that complicated, Ana. If there is no evidence for the objective existence of God(s) – and rationalism dictates that existence is illogical and astronomically improbable, then why waffle? You're an atheist' (Kasparian's comment section). These types of antagonistic articulations should be understood as attempts to maintain the coherence of a particular discursive formation. This is achieved by repeating that articulating atheism in any other way simply does not make sense. Kasparian's comment section is thus filled with suggestions that her calling herself agnostic is absurd – 'Are you agnostic about there being a pumpkin in the centre of Mars, Ana?' – or simply wrong:

Do people ever research their beliefs before spouting out convictional ignorance??? It's really sad that we live in a digital age where knowledge is spread throughout the world instantly and yet people don't have a clue of how to properly identify and represent their beliefs!

(Kasparian's comment section)

While the hegemonic discourse apparent on /r/atheism similarly divides the discursive field into a binary, there the binary is one in which primarily religious people are othered as irrational. The religious moderate was perceived as particularly problematic for trying to combine 'actual' rationality with religion, which was apparent in comments like 'Please state your beliefs. I'll be happy to explain to you why they are either silly and/or ridiculous or, alternatively, why you shouldn't be calling yourself a Christian' (thread on /r/atheism). In contrast, in Kasparian's comment section the irrational other is the agnostic, but as should be apparent from the examples taken from the /r/atheism FAQ, claiming to be agnostic as opposed to atheist was similarly articulated as absurd on /r/atheism. Thus, the coherence of this discursive formation was maintained by arguing that anyone who disagrees is irrational, that atheism is a neutral,

natural position, and those who claim not to be atheists like Kasparian do not know their own minds: 'Agnostics are the Atheists without balls' (Kasparian's comment section).

It is not unreasonable for me to criticise the atheist community in the sense that there are gradations and I think that there are different interpretations, so there definitely are atheists without question that say 'Hey, you know what, God does not exist without a shadow of a doubt.' Now, I don't know what percentage of atheists that is, but there are some people.

(Kasparian, video)

This is said by Kasparian in response to the video she cites, explaining why she prefers the term agnostic. This claim – that different people interpret atheism differently – appears to be threatening to the coherence of the discursive formation I am focusing on here. Within this discursive formation, which attempts to empty atheism of meaning by defining it as the natural state of mind, the idea of an atheist community is rejected. Ideas of atheism being a neutral position, and atheism not being a community or a positive claim of any kind, are related: 'Atheism makes no claim about the existence or non existence of gods. It is simply the lack of belief in gods. Nothing more, nothing less. It makes no positive claim. Assigning meaning because of positive claims by some atheists is disingenuous' (Kasparian's comment section). Moreover, some commenters go further and claim that there is no such thing as an atheist who expresses absolute certainty about the non-existence of God:

I know very few atheists, in fact none, that would declare that there is absolutely no god or higher power. Instead we just have no reason to believe there is a god or higher power. The universe could have been created by the Flying Spaghetti Monster, but I have no evidence that points to that possibility so there is no reason to believe that it was created by FSM. However I am completely sure there is no Christian god because of the overwhelming evidence that in my opinion is so great that I cannot even consider the possibility

(Kasparian's comment section)

This articulation affirms that atheism is not a positive claim and is a natural state of mind by maintaining that no atheist would declare that there is no God, while simultaneously emphasising that there is no way they themselves would consider the possibility there could be (at least a Christian) one.

Kasparian's choice to label herself as agnostic comes to be contentious, as it suggests that in maintaining definite disbelief, atheism may not always be entirely rational. She thus receives many comments restating the definition of agnostic atheism she cited in her video, coupled with the wish that the internet 'was a dictionary alone rather than a forum that allows misconceptions to perpetuate themselves' (Kasparian's comment section).

This type of atheistic discourse, which was hegemonic on /r/atheism at the time, and which proliferated in Kasparian's comment section, is far from being the only form of atheist discourse. Kasparian herself is an example of this: in response to the video she cites she says that while she could consider herself an agnostic atheist under this definition, there are atheists who appear certain that there is no God and that was what she was distancing herself from in calling herself agnostic. She thus articulates agnostic in opposition to atheism, as referring to someone who does not believe in God, but recognises that 'we don't have any evidence disapproving the possibility that there could be a god' (Kasparian's video). She did also receive comments either agreeing with her definition, or defending it in various ways:

For every who wants to tell us what an atheist really is – atheism has two definitions. Both are correct. This is from [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com):

1. the doctrine or belief that there is no God.
2. disbelief in the existence of a supreme being or beings.

(Kasparian's comment section)

The comments section of her video is thus an example of clashing discourses, a struggle over different definitions of atheism: one that is highly antagonistic in its division of the discursive field into rational/irrational, where atheism is conceived as natural and neutral, and all attempts at bringing any sort of nuance to the understanding of that concept are articulated as absurd. On the other hand, we have other discursive formations that appear less clear, but do imply a more agonistic acceptance of differences in definitions, and a willingness to make concessions. Kasparian herself readily admits to being an 'agnostic atheist' under the given definition; she just does not think that this is the only definition. As a commenter puts it: 'I can't believe people have spent this much time wailing about her use of terms on whether or not she calls herself an atheist or agnostic. She clearly doesn't have a belief in theism, and that's really all that matters' (Kasparian's comment section).

Atheist discourses in the wild: community or circlejerk?

Emphasising the role of conflict in discursive formations, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) understand the limit of every objectivity as antagonism, which reveals objectivity as a partial and precarious objectification. Antagonism is thus the experience of the limit of all objectivity, a relation which shows the limit of every objectivity. It occurs when the alternative meanings a particular discourse has excluded threaten to undermine the fixity of meaning in the discourse and therefore the integrity or very existence of that discourse. Antagonism is thus not the same as conflict, but rather the undermining of fixity, the constant threat of modification or subversion (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In the analysis above I have shown the ways in which one discursive formation, which defines atheism as simple negation, attempts to defend itself against being undermined by a perceived threat that renders atheism as sometimes less than perfectly rational. Mouffe (2013) has refined the notion of antagonism in her later work as conflicts between non-negotiable values and struggles between enemies who wish to destroy each other, contrasted with agonism, which she defines as a struggle between opponents that is based on a mutual recognition that differences in perspective are important, and that leads to discussions that improve democracy. To further distinguish antagonism and agonism, Nico Carpentier (2018) has presented a typology which identifies antagonistic discourse as discourse characterised by radical othering, as a discourse which seeks to eliminate the other, attempts to establish total differentiation and distance from the other, and thus produces a homogenisation of the self. The antagonistic discourse centres on articulations of us and them, sometimes resulting in the complete dehumanisation of the other, but at the very least predicated on the establishment of a hierarchy in which the other is articulated as inferior. These types of articulations are often expressed as if they were common-sense, neutral statements. As a result, the 'us', or the self, is united against the other as its antithesis – not via articulations of positive qualities, but as the negation of the perceived qualities of the other (Carpentier 2018). This is very much in line with the analysis above, which identifies articulations of atheism that assert that it is not a positive claim, an identity or an inhabitable worldview, but a natural state of mind.

/r/atheism users themselves identify the discussion on the forum as characterised by a 'circlejerk', a metaphor for recursive discourse that does not lead anywhere. In the case of /r/atheism, the circlejerk consists of the continuous othering of religious people, mainly for comedic purposes, but

also as a way to vent frustration. The different ways users articulate the circlejerk reveal a tension in the perceived purpose of /r/atheism as being either primarily a space meant to foster rational thinking, in which atheists can hone their argumentation skills in order to deploy them against religious others, or primarily a space for atheist entertainment or venting, and thus for finding confirmation of one's minority identity (Lundmark and LeDrew 2018). /r/atheism was in either case predominantly characterised by antagonistic articulations of religious people as the prime example of an irrational other, who existed in opposition to the rational atheist. Following Carpentier's typology (2018), this discourse was marked by radical othering, seeking to eliminate the irrationality of others and to sustain a total differentiation between the two. This is apparent in articulations meant to police how other users argued for their atheism: 'You need to realize that when you argue these things you are in a sense using circular reasoning to say "our situation is different because we are right", and that is virtually the exact same rationale they use' (/r/atheism thread). 'They' in this case refers to religious people. Much as Carpentier (2018) argues, this line of reasoning appears to be predicated on a view of the radically othered – religious people – as inferior to atheists, as they are articulated as having given up their inherent rationality ('They neatly fold up their reason and skepticism and put it in a locked box. Then they chuck it in the nearest canal with a hearty cry "Well, reality's not for me after all"', /r/atheism thread). Moreover, the atheist self that is established is articulated through opposition; that is, it is explicitly articulated as not having any positive content, but simply as being a negation of the irrational, religious other. This particular way of arguing for the atheist self as neutral and objective is in line with Charles Taylor's (2007) concept of the secular self as buffered; articulations of the atheist self as neutral, factual, rational and reasonable are thus in line with those articulations of the secular self that have marked political discourse in Western states (Asad 2003; Scheer, Fadil and Schepelern Johansen 2019; see also Binder in this volume).

A very similar antagonistic discursive formation is present in Kasparian's comment section. Again, we see the explicit articulation of atheism as lacking any form of positive content. This is an attempt to articulate atheism as a moment defined as common sense, rational and inherent, again in line with Taylor's (2007) notion of the buffered self. Atheism is articulated as not referring to a community, but to people who are simply reasonable or normal. While the othering of agnostics was less common on /r/atheism, it was central to the discursive formation in Kasparian's comment section. However, these processes of radical othering appear to follow similar logics. In this process the presented

definition (via the atheist compass) is not introduced as the best or most useful definition of atheism or agnosticism; rather, it is presented as objective and as the only possible definition. This articulation divides the discursive field into two opposite, antagonistic poles. As one commenter articulates it, there can be no middle ground between these 'BINARY positions' (Kasparian's comment section). Claiming to be agnostic is articulated as absurd and irrational, and Kasparian is associated with religion and faith in God despite explicitly stating that she does not believe in God and that she is against organised religion. The type of vitriolic responses Kasparian receives can be perceived as attempts to maintain the coherence of this discursive formation: they are instances of antagonism which expose how the alternative meanings this discourse has excluded threaten to subvert its fixity of meaning, and thus undermine its integrity. Thus, users argue both that there is no such thing as a 'gnostic atheist', despite what Kasparian may claim, and that there is no way they themselves could entertain the idea of God existing. This of course functions to establish them as rational (by articulating their inability to believe in God), while solving the threat of Kasparian's statement and identification (by maintaining that no proper atheist would claim that God does not exist, for certain).

The wish to erase the radically othered is clear in the responses, apparent in the way Kasparian is told either that she does not know her own mind (reasserting the atheist compass as the only possible definition of atheism), or that her refusal to assert an atheist identity means that she is 'a pathetic coward unwilling to acknowledge reality' (Kasparian's comment section). The radical other in both discursive formations is the irrational human, the human who refuses to acknowledge the objective reality presented by the atheist; in other words, the radical other is the projected unbuffered self. The radically other is neither religious nor agnostic, but irrational; the coherence of the discursive formation is maintained by arguing that anyone who disagrees is irrational and that atheism is a neutral, natural position lacking positive content, and by repeating that articulating atheism in any other way simply does not make sense. The characteristics of the discursive formation I have outlined are thus in line with previous research that shows that atheists construct atheist identity in opposition to religious others (Guenther 2014; J. M. Smith 2011). That is, within this discursive formation atheist identity is deployed to signal a set of antagonistic presuppositions about not just the religious other (Taira 2012; Lüchau 2010), but anyone who disagrees. Thus, if atheists go online to imagine themselves as part of a community of any kind (Cimino and Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012), these

communities might be described as forming through processes of antagonistic othering and the projection of the undesirable (Ahmed 2014; Carpentier 2018; Chun 2016) – in this case irrationality – onto everyone not adhering to a narrow definition of atheism. This type of antagonistic othering has been described as an outcome of the affordances of Reddit in particular (Prakasam and Huxtable-Thomas 2021) and is one of the reasons why some argue that Reddit subverts any attempt to form a political identity or kick-start a political movement (Buyukozturk, Gaulden and Dowd-Arrow 2018).

This antagonistic othering was in both cases accompanied by articulations seeking to erase the projected other by emphasising the emptiness of atheism as a category and its naturalness as a state of mind. In this way, the atheist ‘we’ was established through negative projection of the irrational other as the only organising factor of what it means to be atheist. Communities forming through processes of antagonistic othering are fragile, as any nuanced articulation of the other threatens the coherence of the discursive formation. They can be understood as communities forged through hatred, and thus through a process whereby ‘all that is undesirable [is projected] onto another, while concealing any traces of that projection, so that the other comes to appear as a being with a life of its own’ (Ahmed 2014, 73). The central ‘us’ is thus established as the centre which implicitly needs to be protected from the threat of the other, through the hatred of the other: ‘Those who hate excessively need their objects, because they become part of a community through this attachment. This hatred organizes bodies and spaces’ (Chun 2016, 157). Agonism, by contrast, is the articulation of conflict as inhabiting a common symbolic space where interaction is based on mutual respect, and further seeks to harness pluralism for democratic purposes rather than attempting to erase it. Differences are not articulated as insurmountable or total, but as legitimate and necessary parts of a functioning social formation (Carpentier 2018; Mouffe 2013). As the above analysis shows, there are instances of agonistic discursive practices apparent in the comment section of Kasparian’s video, as well as in the video itself. It should thus be emphasised that the particular discursive formation I have focused on is not necessarily characteristic of atheist discourse in general, and nor does it necessarily represent a majority of atheists on- or offline. However, it is a discursive formation that appears to have informed the negative stereotypes some atheists fight against.⁶

One aspect should be considered, however, before the types of practices discussed in this chapter are written off as simply communities of hatred. The first is how people relate to online content,

especially /r/atheism, on which several users, responding to others calling the forum a circlejerk, declared that it was a place where atheists who are subjected to prejudices and discrimination in their everyday lives can vent frustration by laughing at caricatures of Christians. It is important to note that digital play was one of the marked characteristics of discourse on /r/atheism at the time, especially through the sharing of memes and short comments consisting of puns or pop culture references that are added to by others developing the joke. This type of collaborative digital play is a defining feature of interactions on various social networking sites (Lüder 2011), and present across a number of popular Reddit forums. On /r/atheism these instances of play functioned to foster a sense of belonging on Reddit in general, and on /r/atheism in particular, as they established a sense of interior and exterior. Thus, on /r/atheism, these antagonistic discourses were ways through which users expressed frustrations that were not necessarily meant for the eyes of the radically othered. By contrast, in the case of Kasparian this type of antagonistic atheist discourse was mobilised in an attempt to eradicate the position of the radically othered in a very explicit sense – an other that was in no way hostile to atheism. And indeed, there were examples of /r/atheism users being mobilised to harass specific people's social media profiles outside of Reddit after a story had been posted about them on /r/atheism.⁷ This type of mobilisation links to larger discussions about the effect of violent online speech on democratic inclusivity (e.g. Jane 2014); even if online harassment is intended as a 'joke' by perpetrators, it may not appear as a joke to the victim, nor to people who want to participate in online spaces but feel unable to do so because of the proliferation of such practices. So while the intention may be to vent frustration, finding resonance in shared discontent may function to mobilise frustrations in a more directed way, for example through targeted online harassment.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the role of conflict in atheist community formation, looking at how anti-religious sentiments can be conceived vis-à-vis atheist community formation online in order to bring nuance to questions of if and how practices of engaging with atheist content online – or of 'reading with' – should be conceived of as participation in or formation of diffused communities. Using a discourse

theory approach focusing on the framework of antagonism and agonism (Mouffe 2013), I have analysed the role of conflict in atheist discourse. The analysis showed what might be described as a type of antagonistic discursive formation, meaning a discursive formation that seeks to divide the discursive field into two binary poles via a process of radical othering (Mouffe 2013; Carpentier 2018). The atheist 'we' of this particular discursive formation was forged through the projection of the undesirable – in this case, irrationality – onto everyone not adhering to a narrow definition of atheism, and thus established through negative projection of the irrational other what it means to be atheist. The discursive formation was further characterised by a need to protect the implicit 'we' from the perceived threat of the other, mobilised via hatred and attempts to erase all difference, a hatred that can be seen as the primary organising principle of an antagonistic discursive formation. The characteristics of this discursive formation appear to be in line with what previous research has argued, namely that atheist identity is constructed in opposition to religious others (Guenther 2014; Guenther, Mulligan and Papp 2013; Smith 2011), and is deployed in order to signal a set of antagonistic presuppositions about religion which in turn works to empower atheists (Taira 2012; Lüchau 2010).

I would take this one step further and suggest that the 'we' of the particular antagonistic atheist discursive formation I have looked at radically others not just religion or religious people, but anyone who strays from the perceived objective, neutral definition of atheism. Thus, this discursive formation seems to correspond to the projected other of the 'progressive' atheist discursive formation that Laughlin (2016) identified as 'dictionary atheism', meaning an atheist discourse centred on atheism as nothing but the disavowal of a certain type of belief. What we see is thus something that appears paradoxical, namely a strong sense of coherence around the idea that atheism could not possibly be a community or a worldview. Recognising one's individual beliefs in the other is not necessarily about 'imagining community' but can be about reassuring oneself that although a great many people appear to be irrational, there are other rational people out there one can laugh along with. Distinguishing between communities proper – such as atheist organisations on- or offline – and this type of diffused engagement is, I think, crucial to understanding the difference between a wish to link up with like-minded people for various purposes and the impulse to use different online spaces as recursive echo chambers of atheist frustration and anger. While I show how the latter correspond to a particular discursive formation, it is less clear to me that this should be conceptualised

as a community rather than simply a type of public discourse. While atheists on Reddit, for example, do appear to ‘read with’ and engage with like-minded strangers (Lundmark and LeDrew 2018), they do not seem to imagine themselves to be part of a community. Instead, they simply imagine themselves to be right, normal and rational. Looking at this as a form of publicness organised around the concept of atheism allows us to view it instead as a type of discursive tendency in a set of heterogeneous discourses centring on moral considerations or ideals, in this case identified as a complete rejection of belief in God (while maintaining that this complete rejection is in fact not complete) as the only normal way of being, thus rendering any opposing opinion not only wrong but completely absurd, much like believing that there are pumpkins at the centre of Mars.

Notes

- 1 A majority of YouTube and /r/atheism users were from the US (Erik [hueypriest] 2012a, 2012b; Google 2021). Furthermore, these particular social media technologies were created in and for the US market and are very reliant on US cultural norms and discourses (Lange 2007).
- 2 Quotations are always transcribed directly from the YouTube comment section or from [reddit.com/r/atheism](https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism) as they were written, including spelling errors. Usernames have been omitted.
- 3 The larger study looked at videos by 60 US women, gender-nonconforming vloggers and the accompanying comment sections. These videos were collected using the search terms ‘My deconversion story’, ‘Why I’m an atheist’, ‘deconversion’, ‘deconverted’, ‘atheist’ and ‘atheism’, and focused on the experiences of atheists and of non-religious people more broadly, though a majority of vloggers did identify as atheists in their videos (Lundmark 2019).
- 4 The video, which was five minutes long and titled ‘Am I an atheist?’, was published in January 2014 and had at the time of data collection (September 2016) received 21,1449 views, 4,887 upvotes, 513 downvotes and 5,148 comments.
- 5 It should be noted that ‘gnosticism’ in this chart appears to simply refer to ‘knowledge’ or ‘absolute knowledge’, that is, it is an antonym of agnosticism, rather than referring to Gnosticism as a religious or philosophical movement.
- 6 I have considered the positive content of atheist identity formation in a previous publication, which explores other forms of atheist discourse than the type discussed in this chapter (Lundmark 2019).
- 7 These practices were not encouraged by moderators and were one of the major reasons moderators would go in and delete content. Still, users would encourage each other to engage in these types of behaviour on several occasions.

References

- Abbott, Dena M. and Debra Mollen. 2018. 'Atheism as a concealable stigmatized identity: Outness, anticipated stigma, and well-being.' *Counselling Psychologist* 46 (6): 685–707. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000018792669>.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Altemeyer, Bob. 2010. 'Atheism and secularity in North America', in *Atheism and Secularity. Volume 2: Global Expressions*, Phil Zuckerman, ed., 1–21. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brewster, Melanie Elyse, Brandon L. Velez, Elizabeth F. Geiger and Jacob S. Sawyer. 2020. 'It's like herding cats: Atheist minority stress, group involvement, and psychological outcomes.' *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 67 (1): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000392>.
- Bullivant, Stephen. 2008. 'Research note: Sociology and the study of atheism.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23 (3): 363–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900802373114>.
- Buyukozturk, Bertan, Shawn Gauden and Benjamin Dowd-Arrow. 2018. 'Contestation on Reddit, Gamergate, and movement barriers.' *Social Movement Studies* 17 (5): 592–609.
- Carpentier, Nico. 2018. 'Diversifying the Other: Antagonism, agonism and the multiplicity of articulations of self and other', in *Current Perspectives on Communication and Media Research*, Laura Peja, Nico Carpentier, Fausto Colombo, Maria Francesca Murru, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Leif Kramp, Risto Kunelius, Anthony McNicholas, Hannu Nieminen and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, eds, 145–62. Bremen: Edition Lumière.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kong. 2016. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cimino, Richard and Christopher Smith. 2011. 'The new atheism and the formation of the imagined secularist community.' *Journal of Media and Religion* 10 (1): 24–38.
- Cunningham, Stuart and David Craig. 2017. 'Being "really real" on YouTube: Authenticity, community and brand culture in social media entertainment.' *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 164 (1): 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X17709098>.
- Darwin, Helana. 2017. 'Doing gender beyond the binary: A virtual ethnography.' *Symbolic Interaction* 40 (3): 317–34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.316>.
- Edgell, Penny, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann. 2006. 'Atheists as "other": Moral boundaries and cultural membership in American society.' *American Sociological Review* 71 (2): 211–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100203>.
- Erik [hueypriest]. 2012a. '2 billion & beyond.' <http://blog.reddit.com/2012/01/2-billion-beyond.html> (accessed 15 April 2013).
- Erik [hueypriest]. 2012b. 'Top posts of the year and best of 2012 awards.' <http://blog.reddit.com/2012/12/top-posts-of-year-and-best-of-2012.html> (accessed 15 April 2013).
- Fader, Ayala. 2017. 'The counterpublic of the J(ewish) blogosphere: Gendered language and the mediation of religious doubt among ultra-Orthodox Jews in New York.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23 (4): 727–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12697>.
- Google. 2021. 'Press – YouTube.' <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/about/press/> (accessed 30 March 2021).
- Gorski, Philip S. 1990. 'Scientism, interpretation, and criticism.' *Zygon* 25 (3): 279–307. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.1990.tb00793.x>.
- Guenther, Katja M. 2014. 'Bounded by disbelief: How atheists in the United States differentiate themselves from religious believers.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (1): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2014.864795>.
- Guenther, Katja M. and Kerry Mulligan with Cameron Papp. 2013. 'From the outside in: Crossing boundaries to build collective identity in the new atheist movement.' *Social Problems* 60 (4): 457–75. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2013.60.4.457>.
- Halpern, Daniel and Jennifer Gibbs. 2013. 'Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression.' *Computers in Human Behavior* 29 (3): 1159–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.10.008>.
- Jane, Emma A. 2014. '"Your a ugly, whorish, slut": Understanding E-bile.' *Feminist Media Studies* 14 (4): 531–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.741073>.

- Jürgens, Pascal and Birgit Stark. 2017. 'The power of default on Reddit: A general model to measure the influence of information intermediaries.' *Policy & Internet* 9 (4): 395–419. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.166>.
- Kaden, Tom and Thomas Schmidt-Lux. 2016. 'Scientism and atheism then and now: The role of science in the Monist and New Atheist writings.' *Culture and Religion* 17 (1): 73–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2016.1160944>.
- Kidd, Ian James. 2017. 'Epistemic vices in public debate: The case of "New Atheism"', in *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates*, Christopher R. Cotter, Philip Andrew Quadrio and Jonathan Tuckett, eds, 51–68. Cham: Springer.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.
- Lange, Patricia G. 2007. 'Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube.' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1): 361–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00400.x>.
- Laughlin, Jack. 2016. 'Varieties of an atheist public in a digital age: The politics of recognition and the recognition of politics.' *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 5 (2): 315–38.
- LeDrew, Stephen. 2016. *The Evolution of Atheism: The politics of a modern movement*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lövheim, Mia and Evelina Lundmark. 2019. 'Gender, religion and authority in digital media.' *ESSACHESS: Journal for Communication Studies* 12 (2) (24): 23–38.
- Lüchau, Peter. 2010. 'Atheist and secularity: The Scandinavian paradox', in *Atheism and Secularity. Volume 2: Global Perspectives*, Phil Zuckerman, ed., 177–96. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Lüder, Marika. 2011. 'Why and how online sociability became part and parcel of teenage life', in *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess, eds, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 452–69.
- Lundmark, Evelina. 2019. '"This is the face of an atheist": Performing private truths in precarious publics.' PhD thesis, Uppsala University.
- Lundmark, Evelina and Stephen LeDrew. 2018. 'Unorganized atheism and the secular movement: Reddit as a site for studying "lived atheism".' *Social Compass* 66 (1): 112–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618816096>.
- Manning, Christel. 2010. 'Atheism, secularity, the family and children', in *Atheism and Secularity. Volume 1: Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, Phil Zuckerman, ed., 19–41. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Martin, David. 2014. *Religion and Power: No logos without mythos*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. New York: Verso.
- Nash, Kate. 2014. 'Introduction', in *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, Kate Nash, ed., 1–7. Cambridge: Polity.
- Olson, Richard G. 2008. *Science and Scientism in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Prakasam, Naveena and Louisa Huxtable-Thomas. 2021. 'Reddit: Affordances as an enabler for shifting loyalties.' *Information Systems Frontiers* 23: 723–51. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-020-10002-x>.
- Robards, Brady. 2018. '"Totally straight": Contested sexual identities on social media site reddit.' *Sexualities* 21 (1–2): 49–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716678563>.
- Scheer, Monique, Nadia Fadil and Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, eds, 2019. *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European configurations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Smith, Christopher and Richard Cimino. 2012. 'Atheisms unbound: The role of the new media in the formation of a secularist identity.' *Secularism and Nonreligion* 1: 17–31.
- Smith, Jesse M. 2011. 'Becoming an atheist in America: Constructing identity and meaning from the rejection of theism.' *Sociology of Religion* 72 (2): 215–37. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srq082>.
- Starr, Chelsea, Kristin Waldo and Matthew Kauffman. 2019. 'Digital irreligion: Christian deconversion in an online community.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58 (2): 494–512. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12599>.
- Stenmark, Mikael. 1997. 'What is scientism?' *Religious Studies* 33 (1): 15–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412596003666>.
- Taira, Teemu. 2012. 'More visible but limited in its popularity: Atheism (and atheists) in Finland.' *Approaching Religion* 2 (1): 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.67489>.

- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Warner, Michael. 2005. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.
- Wikipedia. 2021. 'List of most popular websites.' https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_most_popular_websites&oldid=1023620874 (accessed 15 June 2021).
- Zenk, Thomas. 2014. 'New Atheism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, eds, 245–60. New York: Oxford University Press.