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## **ATHEISM ON YOUTUBE - PERFORMING COUNTER PUBLICS?**

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### **Extended Abstract**

In this paper I will explore some of the initial findings of my PhD project. The project consists of two steps, the first being an instrumental sample of videos from YouTube, and the second being a complementary analysis of the comment fields of said videos. In this paper I will focus on the initial empirical findings from the first part of my project, namely the YouTube videos.

The purpose of my research is to examine the new visibility of atheism and non-religion in a sphere that blurs private and public. In this paper I will look at how US women performing and constructing atheist identity via personal YouTube channels are enacting and invoking a counter public(s). I look at an instrumental sample of 60 videos that have been selected using the criteria a) made on a personal YouTube channel by a woman who is from the US, b) that is about atheism, deconverting to atheism, or the question if she can identify as an atheist. The 60 videos transcribed and coded for this project are the first 60 videos found that corresponded to these criteria. In addition, a supplementary pilot study of interviews with four of these women was conducted in order to gain more insight into their process and thinking regarding their videos.

These women can be considered as performing and constructing counter publics via their videos as they openly discuss their minority statuses as atheists in the US, and how this socially precarious status intersects with issues of nationality, religion, gender and race. Research has shown the precarious nature of identifying as an atheist in the US, as it is one of the - if not the most - mistrusted minorities in the US. Edgell et al. has tied this mistrust to constructions of the good moral citizen in the US (Edgell, Gerteis & Hartmann 2006; Keysar 2009). The women in my study actualize precisely these questions when they position themselves precisely as atheists and as moral, as atheists and as US citizens, as atheists and as good people.

My study also actualizes issues of perceived religiosity not only as the national norm, but as tied specifically to issues of race and gender, as particularly black women reflect on how they break stereotypes not only in their immediate social networks but also in relation to other atheists. More broadly in my material, related issues are highlighted by

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many of these women when discussing the lack of outspoken women atheists. Many of these women thus call for greater visibility of atheists and atheist women, but some also speak of fears of being found out by friends of family, or of ostracization and abuse resulting from them coming out as atheists.

My study thus highlights issues of what it means to have privacy in a hyper mediated sphere, and how intimacy is invoked in network spaces to connote authenticity. In particular I am interested in how the apparently public space of YouTube and the intimate settings of bedrooms and living rooms in which these videos are most often filmed are woven together in a way that blurs traditional distinctions between the public and private. This builds on research by Mia Lövheim who has looked at how young women bloggers construct and enable new ways of relating to existential and ethical issues (2012). Lövheim has also looked at how intimacy is a way to affect authenticity, and can as such be viewed as a new way of constructing authority (2012b).

Issues of the blurring of the public and the private, as well as questions of how authority is negotiated, constructed and enabled in these women's videos is central to my study. The purpose is to gain a greater understanding of *lived* non-religion and *lived* atheism, not in order to categorize or make sense of the non-religious but to look at the performance of the personal and stigmatized in an ambivalent public. Instead of approaching the material as if it necessarily corresponds to a particular group formation, I want to look at how the actors themselves view their social ties. Whom are they talking to? To people on YouTube? To offline friends? To online friends on another platform? Why have they posted this video here? How do they feel about YouTube? How do they feel about atheism? Do they see atheism as a movement? If so, do they feel part of that movement? What sort of space are they stitching together pulling on different threads in disparate networks?

As my study is a qualitative instrumental study, a comparatively small material will be used to reflect on, critique and develop theory. In this case, I will mainly expand upon mediatization theory, especially as it has been used within the sociology of religion. To answer questions regarding these kind of mediated social practices – especially disorganized but tangentially connected social practices like these women's videos – I also need a solid methodological framework that can make sense of associations without assuming form. For this purpose, I will use Actor Network Theory (ANT).

ANT contributes to how we understand media as well as technology more broadly, and to how we understand group formation in relation to technology. Thus, I will look at how these YouTube videos through a series of "tags" form a sort of communal performance that occurs within – as well as reshapes and changes – social conventions. I am particularly interested in how individuals contribute to and partially change relational infrastructure by producing these videos (Miller 2012, 5). This production occurs in a field of tension between individuals and their cultural and technological contexts, and YouTube thus becomes an important platform for understanding and developing mediatization theory.

I will use ANT to tease apart the cohesion I as a researcher would like to impose on this group of videos with similar titles and similar themes (Latour 2005). I will look for traces,

look for how users themselves stitches together different social locations in their practice of making these videos. What I'm interested in is how videos that on the surface may seem similar in that they have the same title, they're published on the same platform, they bring up similar themes, draw on different associations and are positioned differently by their creators in order to accomplish different things. In this sense, these videos may be thought of as a genre which may be used for disparate aims.

Using ANT I will be looking at these performances as relational and embedded in a particular nexus of technology, associative logic, templates of behavior, as well as material affordances and objects (Latour 2005). As a complement to ANT I appropriate Lynn Schofield Clark's (2011) usage of mediatization theory, her usage is dynamic and emphasizes agency, if not necessarily intent, and contributes to a discussion on rethinking the conceptualization of public sphere and public discourse. I will use ANT to develop mediatization theory, particularly exploring if and how mediatization can be understood on a micro level.

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