

## Atheisms Unbound: The Role of the New Media in the Formation of a Secularist Identity

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*ABSTRACT: In this article we examine the Internet's role in facilitating a more visible and active secular identity. Seeking to situate this more visible and active secularist presence—which we consider a form of activism in terms of promoting the importance of secularist concerns and issues in public discourse—we conclude by looking briefly at the relationship between secularist cyber activism and secular organizations, on one hand, and the relationship between secularist activism and American politics on the other. This allows us to further underscore the importance of the Internet for contemporary secularists as it helps develop a group consciousness based around broadly similar agendas and ideas and secularists' recognition of their commonality and their expression in collective action, online as well as off.*

KEYWORDS: NEW MEDIA, ATHEISM, INTERNET, SECULARISM

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## Introduction

In recent years many websites and blogs promoting, discussing, referencing, reflecting on, and critiquing atheism have appeared. Such sites have opened up an active space for atheists to construct and share mutual concerns about their situation at a time when American public life is still largely functioning under a norm of religiosity in many contexts ([Cimino & Smith, 2011](#)). These sites—which are public spaces by virtue of being electronically reproduced and disseminated—are important components of atheist activism, especially in terms of information distribution and consciousness-raising. We argue that it is only in understanding the inherently public and connected medium of the Internet that the matrix of atheist interactions online can rightly be considered collective and conceptualized as activism.

In looking at atheist activism as a general phenomenon it is important to note that in reality we are referring to a plurality of participants and groups, which is why throughout the article we often use the terms “secular” and “secularists” to refer to atheists, agnostics, and all of those individuals and groups that are actively nonreligious while not necessarily self-identifying as atheist (e.g., Brights, Humanists, Secular Humanists, etc.), even though many of these identities presuppose atheism. Premised on a model of narrowcasting against a backdrop of broadcasting, the Internet reveals this plurality of smaller identity groupings within a larger general (and increasingly global) “secularist” collective.

In this article we examine the Internet’s role in facilitating a more visible and active secular identity. Seeking to situate this more visible and active secularist presence—which we consider a form of activism in terms of promoting the importance of secularist concerns and issues in public discourse—we conclude by looking briefly at the relationship between secularist cyberactivism and secular organizations, on the one hand, and the relationship between secularist activism and American politics on the other. This will allow us to further underscore the importance of the Internet for contemporary secularists as it helps develop a group consciousness based around broadly similar agendas and ideas and secularists’ recognition of their commonality and their expression in collective action, online as well as offline.

## Atheism Online and Off in the Contemporary U.S.

Although atheism has had a consistent, if small, presence in the U.S. since its founding, it has carried a significant amount of stigma. Part of this is due to the particular pattern of secularization in the U.S. As Jose Casanova ([2006:23](#)) has noted in America, in contrast to much of continental Europe, “the triumph of the secular came aided by religion rather than at its expense.”

*[T]here is little historical evidence of tension between American Protestantism and capitalism. There [was] no manifest tension between science and religion in America prior to the Darwinian crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, and the secularization of the American university dates only from this period. The American Enlightenment had hardly any antireligious component. Even the separation of church and state that was constitutionally codified in the dual clause of the First Amendment had as much the purpose of protecting ‘the free exercise’ of religion from state interference as that of protecting the federal state from any religious entanglement. ([Casanova, 2006:22](#))*

A survey conducted by Newsweek in 2007 found that a substantial percentage of Americans (62%) would refuse to vote for an atheist candidate ([Cline, 2010a](#)). Similarly, a Gallup poll from 1999

found that 49% of respondents wouldn't vote for an atheist for president ([Cline 2010a](#)). When such results are considered in tandem with the fact that an overwhelming majority of American adults continue to profess a belief in God when polled or surveyed, it becomes easier to understand why atheists rank first among groups that Americans "find problematic in public and private life" ([Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006:230](#)). Atheists act as a symbolic scapegoat, an "enemy" common to all religious groups that is used to draw a distinction between those who belong culturally and morally and those who do not ([Edgell et al., 2006](#); [Girard, 1972](#)).

Regardless of how "the American public" perceives atheism and atheists, the popular and highly successful "new atheist" presence in print has opened up a legitimate market for secularist thought, although it is dwarfed by the significant online presence of atheists and other non-theists. Starting with "African Americans for Humanism" and ending with "Young Freethought," the link pages on richarddawkins.net lists about 150 secularist websites. However, when the number of group-oriented blogs and forums is included the number far exceeds 150. In addition, there is the scattered array of sites, blogs, images, videos, forums, posts, podcasts, and comments coming from individual secularists formally unaffiliated with any group or organization. Of course, given that people often seek out information and those similarly-minded to confirm rather than challenge their beliefs and ideals ([Nickerson, 1998](#); [Kunda, 1999](#); [Oswald & Grosjean, 2004](#)), a phenomenon that the medium of the Internet potentially exacerbates, further research is needed to affirm whether or not this exposure or availability of information has led many, if any, towards "deconversion" from their religions. What can be confirmed is that the Internet has given atheism and secularists a more visible and personalized presence in the American public arena. Today one finds books, blogs, and media made by and for a specialized atheistic and secularist audience. In this respect, we can talk about a secular "popular" culture emerging at a time and as a consequence of the whole notion of popular being reconfigured along niche lines and niche markets. This reconfiguration along niche lines is related, at least in part, to the expansion of many-to-many communicative networks and the emerging needs and desires of secularists "coming out" online, the Internet being both a means for dissemination and mobilization.

### **The Internet Beyond Representation**

Instead of viewing the Internet as a tool solely for communicating information, we argue that it should also be seen as a domain in which knowledge of the social world and the social world itself is actively shaped. While the creative aspects involved in the critical reception and reading of media events and products has long been stressed by theorists focusing on audiences (e.g. see [Brooker & Jermyn, 2003](#)), our current media landscape of two-way and many-to-many communication shifts the focus even more towards the creative end of the spectrum, highlighting the agency involved not only in reception but also in response and creation. So while the one-way medium of the print-based press has played the role of mediator between public life and private interests since its inception, the Internet is altering this relation by encouraging new social and affective connections, blurring the border between the private and public.

Encapsulated by marketing campaigns such as Yahoo's "It's You" and Hewlett Packard's "The PC is Personal Again," today the personal is increasingly public. From posting one's photos on Flickr to tweeting one's feelings on Twitter, from donating money to a charity or a political campaign to chatting via Skype or Facebook, the Internet is not only a space for interpreting the world but actively producing it. Representation is no longer representation *of* something; rather, representation *is* something. In saying this, we are not arguing that there is no distinction to be made between lives

online and off, only that the subjects using computer technology, the world represented through computer technology, and computer technology itself are all aspects of the same reality. Conceptualizing the relationship between culture and technology in this way allows us to understand the link between the Internet and the transformation of experience, interaction, and ways of being today without falling into a technological determinism since technics and culture co-determine and condition one another. From this standpoint,

*...there simply is no such thing as technological determinism, not because technics don't determine our situation, but because they don't (and cannot) do so from a position that is outside culture; likewise, there is no such thing as cultural constructivism—understood as a rigid, blanket privileging of ideology or cultural agency—not because culture doesn't construct ideology and experience, but because it doesn't (and cannot) do so without depending on technologies that are beyond the scope of its intentionality, of the very agency of cultural ideology. (Hansen, 2006:299)*

From here we can perhaps better explain how we understand activism in this article. What happens online doesn't merely reflect reality but also creates such a reality. Blurring the private/public distinction, the Internet gives private issues and concerns a more public airing. This means that what happens online, in the private and personal domain of secularists, is potentially infused with public meaning. This, in turn, also means that the power that makes up much of formal life is never completely divorced from those smaller interactions and gestures that constitute everyday life, and that the dialogue that passes for much of public discourse is never so universal and impartial as to ever be completely disconnected from more emotional and personal concerns. Thus, as the private sphere becomes more directly constitutive of public debate, affairs, and policies, it also becomes more and more the ground for resistance, challenge, and social change. It is in this respect that we refer to secularists online as activists broadly understood.

Related to the publicly emerging needs and desires of secularists, there has been a significant growth of off-line atheist activism in the last decade, especially new organizations and umbrella groups, such as the Secular Coalition of America, to coordinate action on church-state separation and discrimination against atheists. Although research has also found that “seculars” (those not affiliated with a religion) are significantly less likely than church members to belong to other organizations, to volunteer, or to contribute to charity, thus lacking the social capital generated by the religiously affiliated, the level of political activism among the former has grown in recent years. At the same time, as of 2008, seculars were considerably more likely than “religious traditionalists” to make use of the Internet for information about the presidential campaign (Hansen, 2011). Of course, the more fundamental point for our thesis is not only that secularists are “making use” of the Internet as much as that the Internet is more and more “the place” where politics and (public) life as such takes place.

### **Studying Secularism on the Internet**

Our empirical focus is based on a textual analysis of various secularist Internet sites. The enormous volume of secularist sites online forces anyone looking to research such sites to make decisions about which ones to study. The idea of finding a representative sample or site to analyze is complicated due to the decentralized nature of the medium and the secularist “community” online. The sheer number and diversity of sites means that giving an objective account of secularist culture online is difficult.

Focusing on broad and general characteristics of cyber-secularist culture, our analysis is less concerned with external validity or being generalizable across other contexts and research. Instead, our research aims to be internally coherent and consistent with respect to the arguments presented. In other words, we are interested in showing that our conclusions, which are inevitably open-ended, are plausible and that our results are isomorphic with the reality we describe. Our intention is to look at how secular discourse(s) are shaped and (re)produced through the use of technology; we are not striving to give a representative picture of all secularists or an overview of public attitudes among secularists online.

Sites were found by performing a search on Google using the terms “atheism,” “atheist,” “new atheism,” and “secular humanism.” A further number of sites were identified by following links, quotes, and references found on secularist sites, such as richarddawkins.net (the equivalent of snowball sampling online). All together, we studied 13 sites, specifically focusing on PZ Myers’ blog and Thunderf00t’s YouTube videos since they are among the two most popular secularist hubs online. We also analyzed other sites we felt were relevant, such as vjack’s “Atheist Revolution” blog and the Rational Response Squad’s “Blasphemy Challenge” videos. The blogs, videos and sites identified and referenced all may be found via an Internet search, unless they are now inactive. All text from these blogs, social media, and web sites were collected between September 2010 and October 2011 for this particular study.

Given the hypertextual structure of the Internet ([Landow, 1992](#)), it is important to emphasize that these blogs and video accounts (or vlogs) are not only stand-alone sources for science and secularist information; they are nodes within an increasingly connected secularist network. To this end, we try to remain alert to the ways secularists understand and represent themselves online while focusing on how the material conditions of mediation shape such an understanding and representation. Examining these sites (and the content therein) in this way, as part of a greater electronic culture, allows us to better understand the complexities of contemporary cyber-secularist culture, which we argue is characterized by personalized interactivity, weak tie networks, and issue publics.

### **Mobilizing and Countermobilizing Online**

Blogs and YouTube videos have become an important part of secularist culture and activism. They promote a highly personalized mode of presentation. A no-holds barred style, such as that often found on Myers’ “Pharyngula” site, has appeal due to the uncompromising opinions and views of its author. Readers—many of whom comment on posts—are not interested in getting an objective view of an issue or news story when they visit “Pharyngula;” they are interested in reading Myers’ singular, iconoclastic take on particular issues and news. As a site for Myers to promote his particular brand of atheism (often dubbed “militant” by himself and others), the blog functions as a secularist source of information set against not only the perceived deficiencies of the mainstream press but also the perceived deficiencies of a more accommodating atheism. In a post from Aril of 2010 titled “Witless Wanker Peddles Pablum for CFI,” for example, Myers castigates the secular humanist Center for Inquiry’s Michael De Dora for his “willingness to accommodate any nonsense from religious BS artists...” ([Myers, 2010](#)). In response, Massimo Pigliucci of the blog “Rationally Speaking” wrote a post called “PZ Myers is a witless wanker who peddles pablum” ([Pigliucci, 2010](#)). In the piece, Pigliucci criticizes Myers’ post for being “the latest example of an escalation (downwards in quality) in the tone and substance of the discourse on atheism,” which he blames “broadly on the rhetoric of the new atheism (the only ‘new’ aspect of which is precisely the in-your-face approach to ‘reason’).” Pigliucci thinks Myers’ (and other new atheists’) publicized rhetoric gives atheism a bad name and

contaminates more moderate secularists. Whereas the new atheists understand that well-publicized transgressions against norms can embolden the audience, Pigliucci opts for a more restrained approach. He also sides with the modernist notion that differences between academic fields should be respected and that properly philosophical and/or religious questions should not (and cannot) be answered by way of science, whereas atheists like Myers are steeped in the notion and promote the view that there are no limits to science. Of course, the very media environment that allows atheism a more public presence also makes the boundary between science and non-science harder to maintain (outside of professional spheres and peer-reviewed publications), with experts and novices co-mingling and publishing in the same place—a situation no secularists likely see as progressive. Dissolving the public/private distinction also makes it more comfortable to just speak one's mind, going public in a less polished, professional, and civil manner, and not being overly concerned with your audience (or, in contrast, knowing your audience and only speaking to them). In terms of “getting the word out” and generating press, this is a point that favors the more outspoken approach and tactics of the new atheists given the disruptive publicity of transgressing a norm within and beyond the secular milieu.

Siding with Myers, Atheist Revolution's vjack and Austin Cline (who writes about atheism on about.com) wrote posts defending mockery ([vjack, 2011](#)) and assertiveness ([Cline, 2010b](#)) as atheist strategies. As Cline, whom vjack quotes in his post, writes:

*The sad fact is, atheists were not getting positive press and love from the general public before the so-called "new atheists" and their more assertive tactics appeared. Being less assertive and more submissive is no way to promote change and there's absolutely no reason to think that it would make the situation for atheists in America any better. ([Cline, 2010b](#))*

Such blog posts (including all of the comments and commentaries they generate) reflect a more personalized mode of presentation as well as highlight the long-standing division existing between those atheists content to attack religion and secular humanists' concern with promoting a positive system of secular ethics. In noting the links between secularist web sites we also found similar divisions, with atheist sites and blogs regularly linking to each other but not necessarily to secular humanist groups such as CFI, while other groups that disassociate themselves from the atheist label and seek to promote a new secularist identity, such as the “brights”, tend not to link to other sites at all. There are, however, exceptions even among atheist groups. For example, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, one of the oldest and largest activist atheist organizations in the U.S., provides no links to other atheist groups, while the American Atheists do provide such links. In all of this we can see acts of mobilization and countermobilization on the part of Myers and Pigliucci as well as internal boundary marking ([Gamson, 1997](#)), as secular activists and secular organizations distinguish their particular brand of secular activism or organization from others within the same milieu or movement. Such boundary marking—which is directly related to the influx of diverse participants sharing the same space—help situate and distinguish individuals and groups even as a loose group consciousness or “we-ness” unites them collectively, the aforementioned narrowcasting against a backdrop of broadcasting.

Although such inflammatory pieces as Myers' would never be published in a mainstream media outlet, online it is broadcast. The slogan for YouTube, “Broadcast Yourself,” may sound oxymoronic, since broadcasting has traditionally been associated with a privileged few, namely large media organizations. Today this is no longer the case. With the capabilities of the Internet network, atheists, as nodes in such a network, can broadcast their views and opinions even as the audience is splintered.

This ability to broadcast has increased the opportunity for geographically dispersed atheists to “come out”, often anonymously, and disseminate their ideas and views in no place in particular and to no one in particular (or to merely assertively “come out” by denying the Holy Spirit—without much further comment—as in the case of the [The Blasphemy Challenge, 2006](#)). This, in turn, allows secularists to collectively collaborate in spreading secularist views and ideas, without operating under any strong collective identity or having similar goals and priorities or even acknowledging that they are collaborating with one another. We can see this quite clearly when we look at YouTube.

The individual secularists that put up videos cannot be said to be formally collaborating with one another on YouTube; the relations among these various videos and individuals are too indirect. Instead of speaking to one another directly, the secularists posting videos more often than not are discussing and debating particular issues that are important to them personally from their particular point of view and background, not unlike Myers’ and Pigliucci’s blogs. [Thunderf00t](#) and [The Amazing Atheist's](#) videos are good examples. Thunderf00t’s popular video series “Why People Laugh at Creationists,” for example, seeks to show the foolishness of creationism and intelligent design by juxtaposing clips of creationists and other religious conservatives making controversial statements on science and creation followed by Thunderf00t’s critique in voiceover. The substance and tone of Thunderf00t’s videos are that of the professional, well-educated and articulate British academic expert exposing the irrational (often American) behavior and attitudes of the believer. TheAmazingAtheist, in contrast, plays the role of the informed and entertaining everyman. With videos that span a broad spectrum of subjects, many relating to current events and concerns that are not explicitly secularist, which, along with the comedic aspect, broadens the ability to reach beyond the deconverted, TheAmazingAtheist presents his views and arguments with a mix of humor and vitriol. In the course of debating, debunking, and critiquing other YouTubers, such as pro-creationist [VenomFangX](#) and libertarian [HowTheWorldWorks](#), Thunderf00t and TheAmazingAtheist have both taken advantage of the fair use clause in U.S. copyright law, which allows users to legally use segments of other’s videos in their own. These exchanges also highlight “one of the current pitfalls of U.S. Copyright law: the application of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) Takedown Notices. This is a clause in the DMCA under which copyright owners who believe their work is being infringed upon (beyond fair use) via the Internet can merely notify the carrier to remove the material” ([Farley, 2009](#)). Such a clause has allowed opponents, who in this case are mostly pro-creationists, to file false charges against secularists, the most infamous being the false claims issued by VenomFangX against some of Thunderf00t’s videos. To combat such abuse, individual secularists filed counterclaims and spoke out against the abuse in their individual videos. Such countermobilization culminated in a group of secularist users, including thunderf00t, forming a “multinational alliance.” This alliance set up a channel called DMCAabuse and created a video titled “Creationist DMCA abuse” ([DMCAabuse, 2008](#)). They also drafted a statement that read in part:

*“We all share an interest in science and we have respect for the advancements and benefits that science has brought us. The Internet is one example of this. We believe that the internet offers extraordinary and valuable opportunities for education, and through sites such as you tube, a forum for open discussion and exchange of views. In order for people to fully benefit from the Internet, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and a lack of censorship are essential.”* ([DMCAabuse, 2008](#))

This effort shows the potential of the Internet for outreach and collective action. As Farley

(2009), discussing YouTube and the skeptical movement, confirms:

*YouTube is an excellent avenue for skeptical outreach on the Internet. Its ease of use and lack of fees lower the barrier of entry so almost any skeptic can participate. Fair use ensures a steady stream of source material to debunk. The high traffic of the site and its explorability make the skeptical message accessible to people who may not even be aware of organized skepticism. Any skeptic with minimal audiovisual editing skills should consider YouTube an outlet for their efforts.”* ([Farley, 2009](#))

It also shows how secular compositions are capable of springing up from below, in the moment, as the need/issue arises, without representational mechanisms that would seek to determine or steer such collective action.

### **The Value of Weak Ties and ‘Soft Activism’**

We have argued that secularists online tend to value the promotion of singular views and positions over that of any collective consensus. We have also argued that such an exceptional degree of individualism cannot be understood as collective action without understanding the nature of the medium of the Internet, a medium inherently public and connected.

Today’s secularists are not content to merely be represented or “reading with” one another; they desire to present themselves to the public. This disposition towards self exhibition is intensified with secularists appearing to themselves as themselves in a place in common (cyberspace), a place that is not so much discrete images and bits of information but the source of presentation itself insofar as being public today increasingly means being online. Part of the Internet’s power and appeal for secularists is that it encourages forms of personal presentation and mobilizes them to action “in public, as themselves, unscripted and unrehearsed, as writers of their own texts and producers of their own public pronouncements and utterances...” ([Carpignano, 1999:187](#)).

In this way, the Internet allows individuals only weakly-tied through information distribution networks to inadvertently collaborate in the dissemination of ideas and advance certain issues without sacrificing their individual autonomy and identity for the greater good of an organization or movement, in contrast to the activist tradition of vanguardism that looked upon intellectuals to provide a correct analysis of the issues and historical situation in order to lead the masses. This isn’t to say that secularists don’t look to intellectuals like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens as leaders. Clearly they do. It also isn’t to deny the situationally advantageous position intellectuals like a Richard Dawkins or a P.Z. Myers occupy within the secularist milieu, one that is exceedingly “mind heavy” and intellectually-oriented in posture and content. Clearly intellectual leaders are important for secularist activism, and clearly due to their positioning and social and cultural capital such intellectual leaders are disproportionately able to influence and initiate. In highlighting the difference with the tradition of vanguardism what we do wish to highlight is the networked nature of practice online, which connects each actor to multiple intersecting networks. This “networked individualism” ([Wellman, 2001](#)), which online secularist activity reflects and perpetuates, gives the singular secularist, as a node, the ability to directly influence such networks and “go public” (without formal institutional support) in a way and on a scale that didn’t exist previously, changing both the relationship between intellectuals and institutions and leaders and “followers.”

Secularist activism online might be called a “soft” activism; for, however impassioned the de-

bate and rhetoric, no matter how uncivil and contentious the flame wars and comments, and regardless of the fact that many secularists label themselves and others as militant, at the end of the day their social antagonism with each other and the broader world online is based on the expression of subjective opinions and intellectual “debate.” Of course, having different ideas about the best way to proceed or tackle particular issues without having the ability to actually make collective decisions or reach a consensus regarding such issues while online doesn’t necessarily mean that secularists are uninterested or incapable of doing so offline. In fact, secularists have engaged in coordinated, collective action in the form of legal cases, protests, rallies, and advertising campaigns. Secular alliances and strategies have shown some success against efforts by the religious right to restrict abortion and gay marriage and introduce intelligent design into public schools. For example, the Freedom from Religion Foundation scored a major victory for secularism in 2010 when it won a lawsuit that declared the National Day of Prayer to be a violation of the First Amendment ([Hansen, 2011](#)).

Although we focus on the pluralistic nature of secularist collective action online in this article, scholars have noted definite patterns regarding secularist identity and ideology ([Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, and Navarro-Rivera, 2009](#); [Pasquale, 2010](#)), as well as the ways in which one becomes an atheist ([Smith, 2011](#)). Nevertheless, focusing on cohesion and a unified identity misses the significant identity work taking place during “latency periods” ([Melucci, 1996](#)), as well as the tensions and divisions related to identity formations within the secular milieu ([Cimino & Smith, 2007](#); [Cimino & Smith, 2011](#); [LeDrew 2011](#)) that is exacerbated, at least partially, due precisely to the fact that the collective identity they are united by valorizes remaining independent and free as an important aspect of such an identity. As such, we can talk about an “institutionalized individualism” ([Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002](#)) among organized nonbelievers. Another factor has to do with the variety of collective histories and intellectual traditions/approaches to identification with atheism (e.g. see [LeDrew, 2011](#)), as well as the fact that, in many respects, this is a first generation collective or group identity, an identity achieved rather than given ([Smith, 2011](#)). This is a point that helps explain some of the opposition to the notion of a secularist community among many secularists who do not want to give the appearance of being even slightly imitatively or residually religious, even as they arguably constitute an “a-religious” community. While we agree that tensions and problems of consensus building are to some extent inherent problems of any social group engaging in collective action, there are also tensions and issues that are specific to secularists.

Secularist identity is an identity not only achieved in interaction with fellow secularists but also in relation to outsiders, opponents, allies, and the media. Further research could continue to specify these relations and their impact on the collective identity of secularists and the various ways such an identity is relationally constituted and negotiated in different contexts. The response of secular organizations to changes in expectations and resources, and how such organizations both adapt to and influence various secular identity formulations could also be empirically clarified.

### **Secularist Media, Cultural Politics, and Social Movements**

Electronic media challenge the private/public distinction in giving personal, intimate, and issue-based concerns a more public airing. This suggests that atheist blogs and videos derive at least part of their significance in promoting the non-trivial nature and importance of secularist concerns and issues in public discourse. At a minimum, then, these media expand secularist discussion, creating new forms of virtual association and new forums for outreach based around both “political issues” concerned with inclusion and the separation of church and state, as well as “cultural issues” concerned with identities,

norms and alternative values. In fact, part of the novelty of such media is that they are stretching the boundaries of the traditionally political, making the personal more political. It is against this backdrop that we can better understand the historical shift, noted by Nabors (2009) in his study of secularist organizations, from a predominantly institutional secularist activism focused on legal proceedings, building coalitions with religious organizations, and fighting for church-state separation to a cultural secularist activism stressing the role of argument and debate and associating itself with science, actively trying to discredit religious belief outside the sphere of law and advocating for change outside the channels created for this purpose by the dominant secularist organizations. Such a distinction follows the division, found in the literature on social movements, between political and cultural movements (Eder, 1993). Defined in secularist terms, the former seeks to maintain the secular nature of government and challenge forms of domination at the level of the state; the latter is primarily interested in cultural change and attempting to construct secularist or “science-based” and “science-informed” alternatives at all levels of the existing social order. In this respect, the latter is more “radical” in the sense that it is less inclined to see present social life as legitimate and less interested in maintaining the status quo (even within the secularist milieu). Of course, in practice these two modes may not be mutually exclusive, and often secularist groups may engage in both strategies (a point to which we return below).

Some challenges for understanding secular activism include the question of how to conceptually categorize such diverse subgroups in terms of a “collective identity” or “collective interest.” Another issue is the relationship between secularist cyberactivism and secular organizations, on the one hand, and the relationship between secularist activism and politics (e.g., public-policy making), on the other. Although there is not sufficient space in this paper for a detailed examination, we would like to briefly look at these issues in order to further underscore the relevance and role of the Internet for contemporary secularism.

As one atheist author has noted,

*[A]theism is not itself an ideology; there is no such thing as an ‘atheist mindset’ or an ‘atheist movement.’ Atheism per se hasn’t inspired and doesn’t lead to anything in particular because it is an effect—not a cause—and there are countless reasons for a person to not believe in God, ranging from vicious to innocent to noble. The newborn baby lacks a belief in God, as does the Postmodern Nihilist, the Communist, and the Objectivist—but each for entirely different reasons having dramatically different implications. So lumping all of these together under the ‘atheist’ label as if that were a meaningful connection is profoundly confused. Yet this is exactly what the New Atheists do and encourage: they talk about how there are so many atheists out there, and advocate their banding together into an atheist community to seek fellowship, foster cultural change, build a political voice, and so on. (Perkins, 2008)*

Perkins’ is incorrect in stating that all the “New Atheist” authors uniformly see the need for a social movement. Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens have both stated that there is no need for one. He does, however, point out why one needs to be careful and qualify the use of the term “social movement” when looking at secularists, especially online. The electronic secularist landscape is highly pluralistic, made up of multiple groups and minor subgroups, which are made up of individuals holding diverse ideas, philosophies, and political stances, even as they share some level of consciousness. As Christopher Hitchens, referring to secularists has stated: “We’re not a unified group. But we’re of one mind on this: The only thing that counts is free inquiry, science, research, the testing of evidence, the

uses of reason, irony, humor, and literature, things of this kind” (quoted in [Cipolla, 2007](#)).

The common link among the wide spectrum of secularist groups online is minimal: a “no” to religion and irrationality and a “yes” to reason and science. Of course, such a minimal bond has its benefits, specifically with respect to the rapid spreading of information precisely due to the decentralized nature of secularists and secularist groups online—a decentralization which echoes the structure of the Internet. This spreading of information is related to secularists realizing they are not alone, and recognizing their commonality with their fellow secularists. For example, when the question “Would You Be an Atheist without the Internet?” was asked on the “Friendly Atheist” blog ([2009](#)), many respondents stated that while they would be an atheist without the Internet (many coming of age prior to the advent of the Internet) they would be less active, less informed, and less aware that they were not alone without it.

Secularists’ recognition that there are like-minded individuals out there goes hand in hand with the expansion of the communicative conditions of contemporary media. Consciousness-raising from this angle “would not be limited to a set of assumptions derived from life experiences that are used to confront, challenge, or resist, from the outside, the dominant ideology” of theism but “could also be conceived as a product of an electronically defined common place that, by virtue of being electronically reproduced, can be considered a public space” ([Carpignano et al., 1993:113-114](#)).

### **Virtual Secularism Challenging Organized Secularism**

One of the more noteworthy aspects of secular activism online is the fact that much of it is coming from the bottom up, from individual users not formally affiliated with any organization. Traditionally secularists have had their protest represented and mediated through secular organizations, including their publications. Secularist organizations were the only channel for activism. At the time, such organizations offered a smooth transition between the “private” urge to freely speak one’s mind and the “public” need for civility and building coalitions. In viewing the Internet as a form of social communication that simultaneously changes the nature of the experience secularists have with each other as well as the experience others have of secularism, we can see how the role of secular organizations has changed. Daniel Loxton in discussing the impact of digital media on skeptical organizations, which seek to debunk the paranormal and supernatural, notes that it may also apply to the case of secularists. He states:

*[The Internet] changes everything. It’s true that digital outreach may bring new grassroots support to traditional skeptical organizations, but realizing that potential requires facing up to a more fundamental shift: traditional skeptical organizations are no longer the default leaders of the popular movement. Indeed, new skeptics may not even realize the traditional skeptical groups exist. ([Loxton, 2009:24](#))*

What is crucial is not that secularists online are advocating for change; secularist organizations have been doing this all along. Rather, it is more significant that they are advocating for change outside the avenues created for this purpose by the dominant secularist organizations, even as they build and draw on the work of such organizations (many times without realizing it). This online advocacy and activism has the potential to both strengthen and undermine such organizations’ legitimacy simultaneously. On the one hand, it can strengthen such organizations by pursuing actions parallel to their activities and more directly, by “contributing money, buying magazines subscriptions, [and] sharing Web links” ([Loxton, 2009:27](#)). On the other hand, it can undermine such organizations insofar as the de-

mands and desires of the activists cannot be adequately integrated into such organizations. To the extent this happens such organizations have two options: face a crisis of legitimacy or adapt and change to meet such demands. The latter option is arguably what the CFI opted for when Paul Kurtz was voted out as the center's chairman, later resigning altogether in the face of critiques from those he labeled "angry atheists." Of course, as Massimo Pigliucci noted in a blog post responding to an earlier draft of our paper we presented at a conference: "We also have to remember that people like P.Z. [Myers] see CFI as accommodationist, and in their view not in sync with the grassroots."

### **Both Virtual and Actual Secular Activism**

A study by Diani (2000) found that computer technologies were more effective at strengthening existing bonds than fostering new ones. This should be tested in the case of secularist groups. Our study suggests it cuts both ways: computer technologies strengthen community (globally) and individuality (locally), consensus (broadly) and contention (internally). We also believe that there is the potential for technology helping foster new bonds among a younger secularist demographic due to heavy Internet use coupled with secularist organizations on college campuses all across the country.

Regardless of whether or not there has been any substantial growth due to computer technologies, there can be no question that the cyberactivism of secularists has had an impact in cultural and organizational terms, with secularist organizations that had once restricted their activity to more accepted and standard strategies adopting the methods of protest initiated by those more radical and vocal individuals and groups. Again, CFI is a good case in point, with Ronald Lindsey promoting projects that Kurtz objected to, such as International Blasphemy Day and a contest soliciting cartoons critical of religion. However, the question of whether such activity has had the same success in political terms as far as policy-making and agenda setting is a more complicated question, partly because while we can make an analytical distinction between the institutional and the cultural logic of secularist activism, empirically they are different sides of the same movement.

Although there have been secularist organizations prior to the Internet, such organizations have not positioned themselves against more grass-roots or identity-oriented initiatives and associations. It is thus inaccurate to paint the shift from instrumental to expressive or institutional to cultural, as a linear and all-or-nothing occurrence since information and influence has flowed in both directions and on both sides: organizations have adopted postures and methods of the cyberactivists and many such "independents" have supported or joined various organizations (Cimino & Smith, 2011). Thus the idea that the primary target of secularist activists has strongly shifted from the political and legal spheres to the cultural and academic spheres, insofar as their methods have moved in such a direction is, at least to some extent, misleading. While there has been a greater emphasis placed on science and reason and discrediting religion along such lines, this has not completely displaced legal concerns, such as the struggle over the separation of church and state, a form of activism supported by secularists of all types. There are also secularist lobbying groups targeting the political sphere directly, which many independents support through financial contributions. This dual strategy confirms that when speaking of opportunity for secularist mobilization, such opportunity should not be framed in terms of the movement as a whole. Opportunity may shift in favor of a particular strategy and/or a particular segment, the new atheists for example, and may influence and modify the rest of the relevant actors and organizations (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001). All of this relates more to the relationship between secularist activism and secular institutions, and does not tell us what influence, if any, secularist cyberactivism has had on politics more generally.

There has been a fair amount of commentary on the link between new information technologies and politics. To take one example, Goldfarb (2006) has looked at the role the Internet played in Howard Dean's campaign, specifically with regard to grass-roots organizing and initiatives. Of course, secularists in the U.S. have the unique problem of not having a channel to influence political parties in any direct way. No politicians can afford to align themselves explicitly with secularist issues or secularist personalities because the consequences would be too severe. And although secularists do arguably have the numbers to exert substantial influence in the political arena, they do not have an umbrella organization or powerfully connected think tanks in place to do so.<sup>2</sup> Of course, political opportunities, resources, and the support of powerful allies are not the only issues a movement has to consider. In fact, without a mass constituency willing to support secularist issues and causes no institutional or structural change will suffice for success. A mass constituency, in fact, is a prerequisite for any type of social collective to emerge. And this is precisely, in terms of developing a group consciousness based around broadly similar agendas and ideas and secularists' recognition of their commonality and their expression in collective action online and off, where the positive attributes of secular cyber activity and activism can be seen to be having the most influence.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the role of the Internet in facilitating a more visible and active secular identity. Throughout we have tried to show how the contemporary media environment influences secularist activity and institutions by creating opportunities and limits. At the same time, our research suggests that opportunities and limits should not be viewed as a structure or context that is necessarily external to such activity. In the same way that media do not merely reflect reality but also create it, individual secularists acting collectively help constitute and undermine the realities and opportunities that define and influence secular institutions and identity. In our view, an adequate understanding of the relationship between the secularist social milieu and the technological medium of the Internet should focus on the interplay and attempt to grasp the formation of secularist institutions and identity groupings *in the making*.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a movement towards umbrella-like organizing, such as the formation of an atheist political party; see: <http://www.usanap.org/>

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