1 Introduction

I met Sam and Joanna Southerland in a small conference room in the downtown branch of our city’s public library. The two had known each other most of their lives but had been married only two years at the time of our interview. Both ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses, Sam (48) left the religion voluntarily in his early 20s and Joanna (51) had been forced out four years before we spoke. The couple reconnected via Facebook after Sam learned Joanna was no longer with the church. When asked, they liked to joke that they “met online.” As we talked about their involvement with their local atheist organizations and their experience navigating their minority worldview among a generally theistic population, the role of the Internet and social media emerged as a prominent feature of their secular lives.

For Joanna, still new to her identity outside of the insular Jehovah’s Witnesses world, the community she found with the Midwest Atheist Coalition both online and in person proved to be essential to her new social life. Sam was the first to demonstrate the importance of the Internet in both their lives, explaining that the difference in their paths out of religion sometimes made it difficult for them to talk through the feelings Joanna was having, particularly early on in their relationship. The atheist communities, especially the online resources, were there for her in a way Sam could not be. He explained: “She’s done a very good job of establishing these Internet friendships in a way that she has someone to talk to. I mean, I’m not going to shut her off to talk about these things. But for me it’s a different path that we’re on.” Joanna then added her own thoughts: “And the atheist community is a whole thing online itself. They are trying to rally the troops basically because eventually people are going to wise up and see that religion is the cause of so many problems in the world.” “Catharsis, I think, is the bottom line of why we participate, support, and are drawn to the YouTube, Facebook, online [atheist] community,” said Sam, finishing the discussion.

Sam and Joanna illustrate what others (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Le-Drew 2013) have called “active atheism,” i.e., individuals who actively seek out a community of other atheists. While most atheists do not physically congregate
organized secular communities are becoming more common. Many such individuals participate only online; others may interact in real physical communities. Just as most atheists do not “congregate” (Bullivant 2008; Pasquale 2010), there are plenty of individuals who only participate online. The subjects of this research were unique in that they partook in atheist community both in person and online, indicating that the online behavior served as a piece of their larger, active atheist identity. The participation of those individuals described here reflects what research has found atheist organizations doing themselves: using an online presence to extend or supplement their physical reach (See Schutz; Smith, both in this volume). This chapter explores the specific functions of that Internet activity and finds that two patterns stand out: the Internet as a mechanism for finding and strengthening community, and social media as a tool for secular activism and outreach.

2 Literature Review

Early on in this research, it became clear that the Internet, particularly social media, was a significant site for the investigation of identity and group boundaries among my atheist respondents.

Just as technology itself has grown and changed dramatically in the last few decades, so has social science scholarship investigating the roles of these technologies and their influence on social life. Early research, as well as some contemporary work, was particularly skeptical, warning that computer mediated communication could negatively affect communication and interaction in general (Mallaby 2006; Marche 2012; Olds and Schwartz 2009; Turkle 2012), and that connections made in “virtual space” were shallow and weak compared with face-to-face interaction (Fernback 1997; Turkle 2012). Zeynep Tufekci, responding to a recent wave of popular articles that claimed social media was “eroding human connection,” reminded readers that, historically, great changes in social life always produced a strong reaction. She pointed all the way back to Cicero claiming children had stopped obeying their parents – perhaps the first ever “kids these days” rant – and Plato was concerned that writing, as an invention, could “rob people of wisdom” (Tufekci 2013, p. 13–16). Clearly, as these ancient examples demonstrate, concern over changes to social life are not unique to modern innovations in technology.

Social media and technological advances have drastically changed communication and social interaction in society (Chayko 2014). Most empirical work establishes how this new era of communication helps individuals and groups to facilitate community (Baym 2000; Baym, Zhang and Lin 2004; Kendall 2010;
Parks 2011). Members of groups who interact online tend to refer to themselves as communities (Chayko 2008; Parks 2011). As online relationships become more salient in the lives of those who take part, the definitions and parameters for concepts like “community” change. As Rainie and Wellman (2012, p.12) put it: “The new media is the new neighborhood.” For those seeking community, the community found online can be genuine and grant a significant sense of place (Chayko 2014; Polson 2013). In today’s culture, online and face-to-face social interaction are not two separate spheres. Online activities are very much a part of lived experience for most people.

Recent research on organized atheists acknowledges the Internet as an influential resource for secular individuals and secular groups in the U.S. over the past decade (Cimino and Smith 2011 and 2012; Smith 2013). Smith and Cimino’s (2012, 18) research focused on new media as an important platform for atheist concerns, particularly in the roles of “information distribution and consciousness-raising.” Increased visibility among like-minded friends, as well as the public at large, has led secular individuals and groups to reframe their goals and expectations in terms of public image and activism (Smith 2013). New media changed the individual and collective identities of those involved, which in turn changed the boundaries involved (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Shook, this volume). As Cimino and Smith (2011, 33) stated while discussing the effects of New Atheism and new media: “We can now see how secularists feeling a greater sense of acceptance and exclusion both emerge from the same dynamics.” Members of a group rely just as much on their shared commonalities with other members as they do on their differences with non-members. The Internet and social media serve as the newest field on which those boundary negotiations play out.

This chapter contributes to this growing body of work by providing empirical data on active atheists’ involvement in both virtual and on-the-ground communities.

3 Methods

As a researcher based at a large, Midwestern university, I started my search for participants with the campus club for atheist and agnostic students. From there I employed purposive sampling in order to ensure my sample included representatives from as many (adult) age groups as possible. All of the interview participants preferred the label “atheist” when asked to describe their secular identity. While literature has pointed to historical tensions between secular humanism and atheism as distinct movements that may continue to clash (Cimino and
Smith 2007), the individuals I interviewed and the groups they represented did not disclose conflict over these terms and labels. In total I completed 30 interviews for this research; most of the content for this chapter came from a subset of 13 participants who discussed their use of the Internet and social media as a significant part of their involvement in the atheist community more broadly.¹

I sought out individuals who actively participated in some sort of secular group or club. I categorized active participation as meeting with other group members, in person at least once a month. Many of my participants also interacted with other secular individuals online, but to fit my criteria they had to engage with other members of their secular community face-to-face. The findings in this piece come from a larger research project focused on identity and boundaries among active atheists in the U.S. Midwest. It is important to note that this project did not set out to make observations concerning these issues in an online context. In fact, I did not explicitly ask about online activity as a component of atheist activity. This is a subject that came up organically through the research process. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that social media and the Internet in general were a significant component of secular life for the participants of this study and, therefore, findings I could not ignore.

Interviews generally took approximately 90 minutes to complete. I conducted interviews in a variety of locations including participants’ homes, my office on campus, or a quiet public place such as a library or coffee shop. Each interviewee read and signed an informed consent document, which assured them that their names, the names of their clubs and organizations and identifying characteristics would be excluded from any publication related to the project. All audio files, transcripts, and other research documents were kept in a secure location for the duration of the project. Shortly after each interview, I typed notes describing the interview to be attached as a cover sheet to the transcripts later on. After carefully transcribing each interview I began a multistage coding process. I created the first layer of the coding structure based on categories from the interview guide; the next came from themes that materialized as the research developed. As patterns emerged through the process itself I coded the data several times from multiple perspectives. A study of this nature, with this size and scope, does not bear the weight of generalizability. Even so, the findings are a step toward better understanding the issues involved.

The interview data collected reflected a specific conversation, co-created by researcher and participant. The mere presence of a researcher affects all aspects

¹ While all of my interviewees had access to the Internet and social media, 13 of them spoke very specifically of their interactions online as an integral part of their collective secularity.
of the research process. In my position as researcher, it was essential to be present in the project without stealing focus from the participants (Frankenberg 2004). My interviewees and I shared the interview process, but it is their story I aimed to tell, not my own.

4 Findings

4.1 Cyber Interactions of Active Atheists

Individuals create boundaries, drawing lines of community in many different ways – through words, actions, participation, and/or financial support (Lamont and Fournier 1992). For members of atheist groups and organizations, the Internet has become another important site for the creation and maintenance of social boundaries (Smith and Cimino 2012; Smith 2013). Almost half of my interviewees (N=13) reported some level of online engagement with secular communities as part of their atheist activity in addition to their in person participation. Once an interviewee mentioned the online world I probed for a better understanding or clarified when it was unclear what type of participation they were describing (in person vs. virtual). With these participants the discussion always began with the participant including online activity in their description of involvement in secular communities. Two themes emerged with regard to how these participants used the Internet: (1) finding community and (2) outreach/activism.

4.2.1 Finding Community

The Internet is an efficient way to find a group of like-minded individuals. Atheists and believers alike might employ an Internet search to find local groups or a church to join. This practice proved especially true for the active atheists in this research. When asking how they originally got involved with secular groups and organizations, many interviewees started with an Internet search, a search that was, for many, within social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, Meetup.com, etc.). They typically interacted in virtual space before meeting people face-to-face. Again, researchers have noted that atheist organizations use online channels as a strategic pathway to gain attendance and participation (See Schutz; Smith, both in this volume). Meetup.com, in particular, has been a popular method for active atheists to find groups and activities (Guenther et al. 2013). For some this was the first and last foray into the online atheist community;
for others it lead to more meaningful online relationships with their like-minded associates.

One practice that spoke to how boundaries operate in an online scenario entailed people finding the initial point of contact – perhaps a Facebook page – and from there becoming linked in further and further. Martin, who discussed working toward a more secular society for the sake of his son, was a 31-year-old chef in a Midwestern metropolitan area. He explained how his atheist Internet surfing led to significant involvement with one of his city’s atheist organizations:

I first got involved with it just kind of trying to keep up with secular news. I would go onto Richard Dawkins’ website from time to time and read articles. There was an article about a new website and campaign called “We Are Atheism.” So I read a little about it and turns out it came from this group on a local campus essentially. I was like: Oh wow! This is so cool and it’s local! So I kind of reached out to them on their Facebook page, like: Look this is very important to me. It’s become a big part of who I am right now. What can I do to get involved? So the founder of “We Are Atheism” is also the director of philanthropy on the board of directors for Midwest Atheist Coalition [MAC]. So, she said I should join MAC and I had never heard of it at that point. When they said, “Check us out,” I did and it just progressed from there. They recognized that I had a passion for it and, to a degree, a talent for it, so it just went from there.

Martin served on the board of the MAC at the time of our interview. Online interaction with an atheist community often overlapped into in person interaction for participants with whom I spoke. This was the pattern by which online communities often transform into face-to-face communities in general (Chayko 2014; Rainie and Wellman 2012). Consistent with Smith’s (2013) research on Colorado- and Texas-based atheists, this was generally true for the atheists I interviewed. The simple act of being part of a Facebook group, listserv, or passive member of a national organization could easily open the door to myriad opportunities for participation and community building.

The Internet was not only useful in finding a secular community, but also functioned in a supportive, affirming, and sometimes therapeutic role. While scholars may be correct in that origins of online communities are shallow when compared with more traditional communities (Fernback 1997; Turkle 2012), in the case of a marginalized minority such as atheists, these shallow roots can make a significant difference in people’s lives. Tom (34) made the point that the online atheist communities lend emotional support for atheists regardless of whether or how face-to-face connections exist. A self-proclaimed loner, Tom used social networking sites to stay tethered to the global secular community:
I’m around millions of different people who believe what I believe thanks to Facebook, MySpace, Google Plus, whatever. I can finally connect on at least one level with somebody in Japan or Russia. We may not be a large physical group, but we are around the world. At any given point there’s somebody around the world that’s going through the exact same thing that I am.

The Internet facilitated interaction with a global network of individuals who shared ideas and experiences, fellowship that might be difficult to find in geographic proximity.

Tristan, a 21-year-old college student and community theater actor, started his participation in the Plains City Atheist (PCA) group by posting questions on the organization’s Facebook page. Before his deconversion from a conservative branch of the Lutheran church, he and a few friends had been novice “ghost hunters.” He wondered what the atheist community thought about ghosts, and whether or not he should give up his hobby. Online communication not only helped him clarify his beliefs, but also introduced him to his new secular social network. That initial interaction led Tristan to get involved with PCA and eventually organize an atheist group at his community college. This social support from afar can be vitally important for individuals in the process of leaving religion, particularly conservative religion. Guenther et al.’s (2013) work with New Atheist Meetup.com groups emphasized the permeability of boundaries when it came to the inclusion of the ex-religious. Tristan’s experience fit this pattern of permeable boundaries; the PCA community accepted his religious past and the difficulty he had leaving all things supernatural behind. As Tristan became more involved with the PCA and the satellite group he started at his community college he found he no longer had time for “ghost hunting” anyway.

4.2.2 Virtual Lines Drawn

Boundaries function not only to clarify insider status, but also outsider status (Bellah 1987; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Online interactions may build and define communities, but for my atheist participants, the Internet was also a space where individuals and groups drew lines of exclusion. Several participants discussed the social repercussions of being openly atheist online. Tristan was “un-friended” by family members on Facebook as a result of the atheist affiliations and comments he posted on his profile, a common experience for openly self-identified atheists (Guenther et al. 2013; Smith 2013). While some of Tristan’s family reacted negatively, choosing to end communication with him explicitly because he was an atheist, others reacted more positively. He recalled his sur-
prise, “A few of my younger cousins, people around my age and in high school, have ‘liked’ things I posted that were anti-religion. With Facebook and things it’s really easy to see who is on your side or not, you know?” Tristan’s status as an “out and proud” atheist in the virtual sphere consequently clarified a number of his real world relationships, particularly with extended family and acquaintances who would not otherwise have been aware of Tristan’s secular worldview.

Samantha (20), the president of her University’s atheist club, discussed dealing with arguments aimed at her secularly oriented online posts on a regular basis. She said, “I mean people hear atheist and are going to dislike it. I write a blog and I get a lot of flack online where people aren’t seeing me face-to-face, so that’s interesting. I’ve seen so many terrible things online. It’s ridiculous!” Social networking sites made these ideological divisions transparent in a way that is different from face-to-face interaction. When a person reveals ideological affiliations via social networking profiles their worldview instantly becomes visible to whoever has access to their profile or site. This may only be friends or family or this may make their opinions public on a global scale, depending on the platform and the privacy settings they choose for their profiles.

Social networking sites like Facebook also produce evidence of activities, demonstrating where a person stands within their social networks. The religious/secular divide became clear to Tom (34) when he read about what his friends were doing via Facebook without him. He remarked, “I see what they post on Facebook. I see what they do. I hear about get-togethers [that] are with certain people, certain cliques. And you obviously were not invited or thought to be mentioned. So, yeah, there’s negative consequences for being different.” Again, the autobiographical way opinions, activities, and interactions are logged and posted via online social networking sites demonstrated social standing and clarified relationships between individuals without them ever having to directly confront one another. Tom felt he and his family were being excluded from certain events because of his/their atheism. Calling back his earlier quote though, Tom also said he was around millions of people going through the same thing he was thanks to the Internet. The same boundary that demonstrated what he was missing out on locally served to bolster his sense of community and solidarity with the other atheists who might have had similar experiences in their local friendship networks (Guenther et al. 2013). Tom’s online interactions made visible his simultaneous acceptance and exclusion (Cimino and Smith 2011).

Conflict between individuals within online atheist forums came up in interviews as well. After 12 years as a police officer, Eric, 38-years-old when interviewed, switched gears and applied to law school. At the time of our interview he was just finishing his first year and loving the thoughtful, spirited academic
environment. As a busy father and student he had a hard time attending the real life gatherings of the atheist groups in his area and preferred to interact online. Unfortunately, Eric’s argumentative approach was too aggressive for the group’s facilitator. He mused,

I post a lot of stuff and make a lot of arguments. Sometimes I’m fairly funny, and sometimes I’m a bomb thrower and say just the most ridiculous thing that still fits my beliefs in the face of someone’s comments [just] so I can make a point (...) they kicked me out of the online discussion. I’m too provocative for the Provocateurs group.

He continued to post comments and engage in debates from his own Facebook account, but he was asked not to participate in the “Peacemakers and Provocateurs” group’s official online discussion. This particular group, which met in person and had a Facebook page, was meant to promote dialogue between believers and nonbelievers in Eric’s local area. Apparently Eric’s “bomb throwing” upset believers and atheists alike.

4.2.3 Secular Cyberactivism and Outreach

The other dimension of Internet-based interaction in the active atheist community that emerged from interview data was the use of online networks as a forum for debate, activism, and outreach. As narratives demonstrate, interviewees engaged in these interactions in attempts to disseminate information, to persuade others, and/or to make a public statement. Some respondents reported spending quite a bit of their online time arguing with religious believers. As Cimino and Smith point out (2012), such deliberate assertion of identity and affiliation takes place in the virtual sphere where it is uniquely public while at the same time can grant users anonymity. The ability to be anonymous in virtual interactions may allow those who are otherwise timid in face-to-face interactions the opportunity to express themselves boldly, and with little to no repercussion. This was the case for Cameron, a 31-year-old who embodied the stereotype of the shy, thoughtful individual. During our interview, he kept answers short and to the point, only adding detail and examples when requested. When asked about situations where others challenged his secular worldview, he referenced virtual interactions and declared, “I seek it out.” Cameron deliberately trolled the Internet hoping to provoke a fight, but did not engage much in the real world. Face-to-face confrontations have a potential for escalation that online encounters do not.
Cameron was not alone in his antagonistic mentality of “looking for an argument online.” Alex, a 29-year-old former conservative Christian turned atheist also engaged in online trolling. Alex’s story was striking in that he held the same type of attitude when he was a devout Christian who, for years, lurked in chat rooms looking for non-Christians with whom to argue. The catalyst for his deconversion and eventual adoption of an atheist worldview came from one such online exchange with an elderly history professor, Dr. Russell. As a junior in college Alex encountered Dr. Russell in an online Bible discussion group. The two decided to leave the group to exchange emails directly. According to Alex, Dr. Russell was at first reluctant to engage with him too assertively, but Alex insisted on a thorough debate over the existence of God and validity of the Bible. Alex felt driven to this argument by his faith, or as he put it, “I was trying to pursue God and I ended up in this situation where I couldn’t believe in him anymore!” Once comfortable in his new secular identity, Alex began the same pattern of debate and argument online, but this time from his new ideological perspective. Like Cameron, Alex preferred not to get involved in random face-to-face debates:

I don’t walk into a bar and say “Hello stranger, let’s have a debate.”(...) In terms of the Internet though, I have a YouTube channel. So this is a pretty big part of my life actually. I have people challenge my faith on a daily basis in terms of comments there. I can go look at a video and who wrote a comment today and debate them if I want.

With 30,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel, Alex has the opportunity to engage in debates with theists regularly. He described to me picking through comment threads from videos on his channel, often joining arguments already in progress. From Alex’s perspective, his goal of advocating for the right side and sharing the truth was no different; merely the origin of that truth had changed.

Both Jennifer (34) and Eleanor (69) shared stories of striving to be more vocal and forceful in their online interactions with believers. Jennifer was a pharmacist who served on the board of directors for the PCA. For several years, living in a different town, she hid her secularity. Now that atheism was publicly part of her identity, she was trying to participate actively in online discourse concerning religion. Referencing this shift Jennifer acknowledged, “But now I’m more of an asshole atheist, or I’m trying to be. So if someone puts something stupid on their Facebook page I’m trying to be like, ‘That’s not true; here’s where the proof is.’ And there are a lot of stupid people out there! On Facebook at least.” After years of self-censoring and feeling isolated because of her worldview, Jennifer has learned to embrace opportunities to stand up for what she believes. Being more vocal about her worldview has likely resulted in more conflict, which is
why she classified herself as an “asshole atheist.” The U.S. publics’ disgust for
the irreligious (Edgell, Hartmann and Gerteis 2006; Hammer et al. 2012; Zucker-
man 2009) put outspoken atheists like Jennifer on the defensive, a position she
used to shy away from but now welcomes. Like the others in this study, she at-
tempted to stand up for reason and science over the perceived divine, but it had
taken a while for her to find the strength to do so.

Eleanor, a 69-year-old grandmother of seven, had been involved in Midwest-
eran atheist organizations for just under two years at the time of our interview.
Eleanor claimed not to be an activist, unlike some of her fellow group members.
She did not attend demonstrations to hold pro-atheism signs, nor did she distrib-
ute atheist literature in the busy city district. However, her description of inter-
actions with others on Facebook told a different story.

Last year Eleanor posted a different creation myth on her Facebook page
every week, making the point that all cultures maintain some type of origin
story. She laughed and recalled, “I put things out there and get some reactions,
and some of them I wonder, like, where’s your head?” Eleanor posted these items
knowing she would get a reaction from her religious family. When they would
counter with a Biblical statement she was quick to provide links to scientific
journals or other evidence-based claims that contradicted their religious argu-
ments. Eleanor’s behavior may not be considered activism in the classic sense,
however, her consistent attempts to “plant seeds” of reason in the minds of
those with whom she cyber-communicated is a form of cyberactivism. In their
study of secularism on the Internet, Smith and Cimino (2012, 22) described sim-
ilar interactions as “secularist cultural activism,” which they then classified as
“soft activism.” Social movement scholar Bobel (2007, 149) made a distinction
in her work between “being activist” and “doing activism,” where a participant
in social movements may do activism without taking the step of self-identifying
as an activist. This distinction, said Bobel (2007, 157), represents a more “compli-
cated account of identity” in the study and analysis of social movements. Elea-
nor’s situation – stepping back from demonstrations and protests but leaning
into arguments and debates online fits into the “doing activism” side of Bobel’s
categorization.

Many of the frequent social networking users I spoke with discussed finding
a balance in how they presented themselves and their “soft activism” online.
Dominic (22), in fact, had to tone down his online rhetoric in order to maintain
friendships with individuals outside the atheist community. A recent college
graduate in the biological sciences, he explained, “My sophomore year I got
into a lot of Facebook debates where I will bring up controversial topics on
my wall or somebody else’s wall talking about things, and that led to a lot of is-
sues.” He, and those with whom he was arguing, had a hard time keeping the
conversation amicable. Dominic discovered that, “Whenever you’re talking about somebody’s religion there’s always a chance that they’re going to be offended.” Not willing to give up his virtual campaign for atheism, Dominic discovered a different tack. Rather than jeopardize friendships through Facebook flame wars, he found that conversations with strangers satisfied his desire to argue for atheism:

I’ve gone onto anonymous threads and talked to people through email where it’s like, for example, one person emailed our [atheist club] website once saying, “Do you know that there is no God? Because if you say you do you claim to know everything and if you claim to not know then you’re really not an atheist are you.” So I started emailing with them and we went back and forth.

Through trial and error Dominic found an outlet closer to that of Alex or Cameron. All three wanted to share what they knew, and what they had come to believe with other people. Internet communication has turned out to be an effective way to accomplish this. With such a wide variety of platforms available one could easily find a place to have his or her voice heard.

Both Dominic and Eric – the law student mentioned earlier who was asked to leave the online discussion forum for believers and nonbelievers who wanted dialogue with one another – found themselves in situations where their enthusiasm for the topic lead to admonishment from their online communities. Each, however, found a way to channel his zeal and continued to participate in dialogue with believers. They kept at it because it was not just about the fun of debating online; they believed they had a greater purpose. Dominic and Eric put themselves out there in an effort to raise awareness and make it easier for others to find a voice. When I asked why he engaged in online debates and Facebook flame wars Eric posited:

I think there are a lot of atheists who are in the pew [participating in church], or who are ‘in the closet,’ or otherwise silenced because they don’t feel like they can [speak up] and I feel like the more out there I am, and the more in your face I am, the more of them may feel more comfortable.

This talk of “closeted” atheism was a common way to describe atheists who do not publicly share their lack of belief. Scholarship on atheist identity formation has compared the process of going public with an atheist identity to the process of “coming out of the closet,” with non-heterosexual sexualities and trans gender identities (Smith 2011, 2013; Siner 2011). Parallels exist between the atheist community and the LGBT community in terms of issues like stigma, societal acceptance, and identity processes. The cooptation of “coming out” language,
though, is a fairly new appropriation used informally by interviewees here, and more formally by atheist organizations like Richard Dawkins’ Out Campaign, as well as academically (Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Smith 2011, 2013; Siner 2011; Zimmerman, Smith, Simonson, and Myers 2015).

Alex even put his whole story on YouTube in order to share it with others. Many of my interviewees to some extent shared the goal of raising awareness, and online interaction has proven to be a good system through which to carry out that mission. According to Smith and Cimino (2012, 19), the Internet has been “both means for dissemination and mobilization” for the secular movement. The active atheists I spoke with used Internet interaction as an outreach tool. Atheism is still highly stigmatized in many segments of mainstream society (Edgell et al. 2006; Hammer et al. 2012; Zuckerman 2009). If it is not directly discouraged, non-theism is often absent from conversations about spirituality or worldviews. My participants discovered the Internet as a space where their ideas could be heard and might even be spread to others.

5 Conclusions

The active atheists I interviewed for this research engaged with social media and other Internet based platforms to find other non-believers, to discuss their minority opinion with kindred others, to argue and assert their opinions with those who did not agree, and to reach out in the name of spreading secularity. As Chayko (2014) maintained, online communities are real communities for those who need them. My findings indicate that some active atheists in the U.S. Midwest needed online outlets as part of their atheist identity and an augmentation to their physical secular community.

Boundary work enacted online proved particularly effective for active atheists in forming and articulating an atheist identity. The virtual world was a space where participants could explore what it meant to be an atheist individual as well as how they might fit into the atheist community. From finding a community, to building solidarity, to reaching out to those not yet in the fold, online interactions supplemented connections these individuals made face-to-face and sometimes represented situations they could not, or chose not to engage with in a physical context.

The Internet, social media, and computer mediated communication of myriad kinds permeate social life and will continue to do so. Given the extent of online interaction among atheists and the communities they have built, future research should continue to examine online atheist activities. Some elements of the atheist and secular movements have materialized and evolved predominantly
online; for example 2012’s “Atheism Plus” component of the secular movement emerged online (Carrier 2013; McCreight 2012). Further investigation of boundary work would provide additional breadth and depth to the topics discussed here. Regardless of the theoretical backdrop, as is always the case with research concerning secular individuals and groups, there is more to know.

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