

J. K. Rowling and the Echo Chamber of Secrets

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Abstract This autoethnographic article attempts to capture the distress of a trans woman in Scotland at the transphobia in the legacy media's coverage of the J. K. Rowling furore in June 2020. Through the use of a frame narrative, the article analyses some of the transphobic elements of Rowling's essay published on June 10, 2020, originally titled "TERF Wars," which prompted an online backlash and a subsequent cycle of negative legacy media coverage against trans people. The article deconstructs two opinion pieces in the *Scotsman* and the *National* that depict Rowling as a victim and trans women as abusive and/or delusional, with an accompanying association of trans women with virtual spaces, set against cis women inhabiting real-world spaces. The newspapers' subsequent, respective refusal to publish counter articles criticizing the opinion pieces is then described, with reference to the legacy media's more general cancel-culture narrative, described by Sara Ahmed as a "mechanism of power." Concluding on the experience of having no personal voice or access to the kind of influence enjoyed by a transphobic legacy media, the article refers to Andrew Anastasia's conception of three modes of transgender voice to identify how only collective action can allow trans voices to be heard and effect change.

Keywords J. K. Rowling, media, furor, trans, *Guardian*

Those in the outraged online echo chambers might try their best to drown out voices who want to talk about sex, but telling people not to read the world's most famous author feels like a losing strategy. This discussion cannot be ignored.

—Shona Craven, *The National*

Preserved like frozen eddies in the whirlwind of a moral panic are the words of a national journalist, days after J. K. Rowling (2020) publishes her essay on the threat of the trans rights movement. Shona Craven's (2020) newspaper article, which associates trans identity with online echo chambers and reifies unreality and the hurling of abuse, also crystallizes the kind of "vitriolic media campaigns" in the UK identified by the Council of Europe, "in which trans women especially

are vilified and misrepresented” (Chikha 2021). The signals, noticeably outside the UK, have been there for a while: in 2018 the US office of the nominally progressive *Guardian* signs a public letter in protest of the transphobia of its UK editorial line (Levin, Chalabi, and Siddiqui 2018). Acknowledging such events in its *Annual Review*, ILGA-Europe (2021) describes how “anti-trans rhetoric continued to cause serious damage in the UK again this year,” adding in reference to the biggest trans-related story of all in 2020, “A prime example is repeated transphobic attacks by author J.K. Rowling, on Twitter and in her writing.” All these warnings reinforce what a slew of recent academic studies have also documented, namely, that the UK’s legacy media has become something of a safe haven for transphobic voices (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020: 685; McLean 2021). Specific to the reporting of the Rowling story in my locality of Scotland, two articles reflect the new moral panic: one by Craven (2020) as the columnist and community editor of the *National*, the other by the *Scotsman*’s deputy political editor Gina Davidson (2020). By comparison to their influence, I am a quiet participant in this story, a recently out trans woman and PhD researcher moved to say something at the hostility I’m witnessing. Days after the articles by Craven and Davidson that delegitimize trans identity, I write and submit counter pieces that get rejected by their respective newspapers. Neither paper runs trans-inclusive commentaries during this time, and no article appears permitted to challenge the framing of trans people as delusional and oppressive. In my distress at being voiceless, I find clarity in seeing the relationship between power and voice.

This is a personal account of the Rowling furor and the media’s transphobia, but it is also about voices. Regarding my own, I like Andrew Anastasia’s (2014) multifaceted concept of the trans voice as forming a kind of Trinity, as speech-sound, as expression of agency, and as song of collective politicized liberation. The second and third of these pertain to this essay: I want to share a rare act of agency I undertook during an important irruption of anti-trans sentiment in the UK’s legacy media, namely, the Rowling story that peaked in June 2020.

My trans voice changes over this time. I watch Rowling’s forays on Twitter from 2017 to 2020, and I shrug uncertainly at the “likes” by Rowling of transphobic tweets. I watch the likes mutate into increasingly vicious cycles of statements and reactions between Rowling and those engaged in the online backlash against her. Looking back at this period, I understand I was Rowling’s kind of trans person, isolated, quiet, and respectful of concerns. In her essay of June 10, 2020, Rowling distinguishes between the politically voiceless trans individuals who “simply want to live their lives” and whom she in turn claims to love, and the more politically empowered but unhelpfully generalized “trans rights activist” (TRA) movement, which she describes as giving “cover to predators.” She is aided by the subsequent coverage of the online backlash to her essay, including the

opinion pieces by Craven and Davidson. It is their columns I respond to, their editors who take my trans-inclusive words and bury them.

I have never met Craven, but Davidson is more familiar. She interviewed me a year before the Rowling story over a trans-centered conference I was organizing. My trans voice back then was awkward and unready—barely a speech-sound, let alone an expression of agency or a part of some greater whole. In that interview Davidson brought up a series of examples of TRAs’ silencing women whose details I was unfamiliar with. Had I been a researcher then of gender-crit Twitter, Mumsnet, and associated blogs, and been familiar with Davidson’s synchronicity with these trans-exclusionary sites, I might have expected her sources and her framing. But still we sat there, two women of not dissimilar ages, cis and trans. It wasn’t poisonous, even if I was shocked at seeing her dark reaction when I used the word *cisgender*. It was dialogue, it was “discourse”—wasn’t democracy formed from such asymmetrical meetings? Perhaps by meeting me, Davidson could see the gap between real-life trans women and whoever she imagined was typing tweets telling Rowling to “choke on Hagrid’s big dick.” True to the cute notion so key to liberal democratic principles, I believed a single, momentary dialogue in a café could overcome the daily, incessant messages shared by trans-exclusionists that Davidson seemingly absorbed before and after our meeting. Her coverage of the Rowling story one year later tells you everything you need to know about the failure of my impact.

So one year on from my café-based interview with Davidson, Rowling produces an essay that mixes dog whistles against trans women with the white-washing of transphobia. Conflating the endeavor of empowering trans people with a public threat, Rowling (2020) says, “I refuse to bow down to a movement that I believe is doing demonstrable harm in seeking to erode ‘woman’ as a political and biological class and offering cover to predators like few before it.”

Associating disempowered minorities with the moral-panic discourse of “predators” or “super predators” (Cox 2020) should signal a red-light warning to any journalist in the global North. Yet it appears that, apart from YouTubers and UK trans charities such as Mermaids (2020), with their published critiques of the essay, no one has the inclination to challenge Rowling’s incendiary language. The legacy media instead fixates on the worst parts of the Twitter-based backlash as proof of a trans threat to Rowling, in other words, of a trans threat to people like them. An alignment takes place, as the legacy media consistently allows Rowling, one of their own, to get away with removing trans women from their verifiable position as a vulnerable demographic. In Rowling’s (2020) representation, they are a mysteriously influential and politicized subgroup of misogynists, along with the terrorist-inciting Donald Trump and terrorist-associated Incels, but even worse for the access they have: “When you throw open the doors of bathrooms

and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he's a woman . . . then you open the door to any and all men who wish to come inside.”

This interchangeability by Rowling of men with trans women is a form of delegitimization that belies her claim of affection elsewhere: hers is a notion of trans at odds with most trans people, reimagining the good kind of trans person as humble, submissive, and content with their exclusion. Her claim of doors being opened, meanwhile, is an act of fear-inciting misinformation, for the doors have been open for a long time to trans women, with no pattern of damage done. Concurrently, and in contrast to the smears, Rowling (2020) whitewashes the trans-exclusionary gender-critical movement: “None of the gender critical women I’ve talked to hates trans people . . . they’re hugely sympathetic towards trans adults who simply want to live their lives.” Yet in the same essay, she expresses her admiration for Magdalen Berns, whose well-known transphobic diatribes, beloved by the gender-critical movement (Forstater 2021), include describing trans women as “fucking blackface actors. . . . You’re men who get sexual kicks from being treated like women” (Montgomerie 2020). As noted by Natalie Wynn (2021) in her deconstruction of Rowling’s social media output of this period, there is plenty of evidence of Rowling’s transphobia. All it requires is a journalist with a sufficient understanding of the responsibilities of their public position to challenge Rowling on her use of smoke and mirrors to delegitimize trans people.

Yet a day after the publishing of Rowling’s essay, Davidson (2020) produces an article in the *Scotsman* that is a study in escalation, a lesson too in why a journalism that feeds on Twitter is a danger to the public good. The article’s title ignores the transphobic content of Rowling’s essay and fixates on the online reaction, conflating it with the trans community and making it their responsibility. It is an act with overtones of backlash-based campaigns that make terrorism the responsibility of certain minority groups: “Why Abuse of JK Rowling Is a Problem for Trans Rights Activists.” Below the title, Davidson offers her unsubstantiated theory that trans women hate cis women out of jealousy because cis women are the real thing—the setting up of a violent, irreconcilable fault line in trans female identity. Davidson then uses her platform to suggest that, in response to the Twitter pile-on, the natural next step is the rescinding of trans women’s rights, regarding their current access to women-only spaces: “Hatred only results in hardening people’s minds. Why would any woman agree to share private spaces such as changing rooms or toilets with the same people abusing Rowling?”

I see Davidson’s reliance on Twitter to portray trans women as jealous, violent predators as the barely concealed campaigning against my rights. I think again about the café where we met one year before, and the middle-class respectability of it all. I remember we were both dressed in office wear and discussed the merits of the former prime minister Gordon Brown (Davidson for, me more against). I was sipping hot chocolate while conveying my enthusiasm for my

conference, she was asking me questions about people I'd never heard of; at other moments, there were intimate questions she asked sensitively, I responded, it was fine. It was a meeting of different people coming together and not totally on each other's wavelength but cordial enough. But what does such a public engagement lead to? It leads to nothing. Still we—the minority—are required to explain, justify, and appease, and by doing so provide the fig leaf of engagement for those journalists who will attack us anyway, at some point in the future. Even if we're the right kind of trans woman, we'll be the exception to their general rule. At what point do we withdraw from such unhelpful engagements, with the realization it was never about dialogue or understanding? Or maybe it was intended to be, but it could never compete with a journalist's lifetime encounters with transphobic imagery, sedimented and revitalized through the online networks they now frequent.

Davidson's (2019) article about my conference, incidentally, was fine; she even allowed me a final reading with suggested edits. Over the longer haul, our encounter simply couldn't compete with Twitter, just like nothing can compete with Twitter as a delegitimizing source of disinformation about trans people when you're a journalist of the UK's legacy media.

Perhaps my engagement with Davidson allowed me to empathize with her even as she appears to view people like me as a threat. Regardless, I think Craven's article on the Rowling furor, titled "This Is Why JK Rowling's Non-fiction Foray Caused a Twitter Storm," is more hostile to trans identity, not for the content but for the tone. Davidson struck me as being fearful, clinging to a handful of ugly stories about trans people as a sign of things to come in women-only spaces. Her fear seemed real, even if, as an experienced, award-winning senior journalist, she should know better than to fall for antiminority tropes or to think Twitter is a source of truth. Craven's article is similarly one-way traffic on behalf of Rowling but done with a level of contempt toward trans people that almost swaggers in its certainty. Juxtaposing cis people versus trans people as fact versus fiction, as science versus fantasy, and as valid versus invalid, Craven (2020) waxes, "Fortunately for her own sanity, the woman who made up muggles and quidditch and death eaters knows the difference between things that are real and things that are the product of human imagination."

The writing is caustic and smugly one-sided; it seeks only to simplify and undermine one "side" of a manufactured debate. Craven asserts of Rowling, "She knows that sex is determined by chromosomes whereas gender is a made-up set of rules about how men and women ought to be. . . . That's sex as in the real, observable, and immutable difference between men and women." There is so much here that is confident and simple in a high-school-biology manner—these are assertions that reveal no uncertainty or any interest in encountering knowledge beyond her own. The same is true in Craven's open embrace of gender-critical feminism via its surface rhetoric with her quip, "if your feminism isn't

critical of gender, you need to go back to square one.” It appears not to occur to Craven to interrogate a movement that appeared circa 2017 in direct response to a consultation on trans rights, as if feminism—with the associative descriptor of *gender-critical*—was magically invented in 2017, and that trans-inclusive feminist organizations such as Engender, in existence in Scotland since the 1990s and involved in the consultation stage for the reform of the Gender Recognition Act circa 2017, have never existed.

The manner of the misinformation, in other ways, is uncannily similar to Davidson’s. Craven makes no reference to Rowling’s predator narrative and the constant misgendering of trans women as the cause of offense for so many. Craven similarly replicates the formula of inoffensive statement versus misogynistic backlash. She asserts, “The indiscretion for which she must be punished is saying that sex is real. . . . What kind of body a person has, not what they might plan to do with it in a ‘social bubble.’” Real women, Craven insinuates, have real women’s bodies and suffer in real ways, as Rowling has done; trans women exist only in “social bubbles,” they don’t get bullied, or raped, harassed or murdered, they don’t have bodies, and they could never encounter Rowling’s experience of domestic abuse. Craven reinforces this framing by listing some of the ways Rowling has suffered, as stated by Rowling in her essay. The framing aligns with what Alison Phipps (2020: 107) calls the “claim to ownership of sexual trauma” by a middle-class-based, cisgender feminism, in which the “designation ‘survivor,’ and its claim on our empathy and outrage, is withheld from trans women.” In her article, Craven continually references Rowling as a victim of abuse. No such framing is afforded to trans women.

Regarding the impact of Craven’s words, particularly on the issue of responsibility, one wonders what the journalist—or the editor—thinks are the consequences of the position, taken to a logical conclusion. Legally, it is surely to refuse to recognize that trans people, as virtual people, exist in any legal sense. In Viktor Orbán’s authoritarian Hungary, there are laws that recognize only a version of the sex “determined by chromosomes” valued by Craven, and they have in turn legally “disappeared” the trans population. Is this what Craven’s newspaper, the *National*, with its call for an independent Scotland, wants for its vision?

Craven’s (2020) reference to the echo chamber also plays on my mind, specifically her claim that “the outraged online echo chambers might try their best to drown out voices who want to talk about sex.” I have seen it used by other journalists, by arguably the UK’s most high-profile liberal mouthpiece in the broadcast media, Piers Morgan (2020). Like Craven, he uses the term to displace trans people—whom he categorizes as “the trans lobby” (101)—along with any other uppity minority; no longer are they citizens but virtual threats. His paranoid discourse, like Davidson’s and Craven’s when covering trans people, typifies the “anger and fear” that Dag Wollebaek and colleagues (2019: 1) characterize more

generally as being “connected to distinct behaviors online.” Observe for its furious hyperbole Morgan’s (2020: 28, 7) attack on “modern-day anti-free-speech ultra-woke McCarthyism,” in which the sources of woe are the “social media echo chambers.” They dominate public life, Morgan claims, by gestating “illiberal liberals” who become “the modern-day fascists, demanding we all lead our lives in a way that conforms strictly to their narrow world view” (28, 7, 6). Morgan’s position encompasses a view of social media as both echo chamber and trench warfare (Wollebaek et al. 2019); what it is not is a concession that trans people suffer just as much on social media as anyone else, and as a disempowered minority, are likely to be particularly vulnerable to Twitter’s confrontational dynamics. As noted by Aleardo Zanghellini (2020: 10), sites such as Twitter feature “new manipulative communication practices” including “flaming and trolling,” in which bad-faith engagement of discussions acts as cover for harassment and the invalidating of people’s experiences or legitimacy—a particularly traumatic form of engagement for those historically disbelieved and delegitimized groups such as the trans community. Outside the UK’s legacy media, research reveals how “UK hate crime statistics show a sharp increase in transphobic crimes since 2015. . . . Online abuse is also rising, and many trans people fear for their safety” (Chikha 2021). But this common trans experience of suffering online harassment fails to fit the legacy media’s narrative: trans people are always the abusers, never the abused. The articles by Davidson and Craven in this sense exemplify a broader transphobic trend in the UK legacy media that minimizes or omits reference to the suffering of trans people. We are rendered hostile abstractions in a contradictory narrative: trans people are not real, only our violence is real.

The Agency of My Voice

In the days after the articles by Davidson and Craven were published, I write to both newspapers with carefully respectful counter articles that address their respective, problematic issues (Gwenffrewi 2020). Between June 18 and 27, and over a series of twelve emails, I engage with the editing team of the *National* in a bid to have my 600-word article counterbalance Craven’s 855-word one. Their refusal to accommodate, and their counter suggestion of a reduced 300-word letter in their letter pages, underscore for me both an insensitivity and a lack of awareness as to what they have done: the dehumanizing and delegitimizing of a vulnerable minority, with a condescending article connecting trans identity with abuse and delusion. Even the offer of a letter is soon withdrawn: they sign off saying that in my demand for a space of a similar word count, I have missed my chance, the deadline for the letter having passed. The responsibility for the newspaper’s absence of any counter narrative to Craven’s is presented as my fault.

I encounter a much shorter correspondence during the same period of June 22–27 with the *Scotsman* involving four emails, in which I am informed my

article has been passed on to their opinion editor, which leads to nothing. By this stage, and after my experience with the editorial team of the *National*, I silently withdraw.

I experience on a personal level the now-famous mechanism described by Sara Ahmed (2017: 226): “Whenever people keep being given a platform to say they have no platform, or whenever people speak endlessly about being silenced, you not only have a performative contradiction, you are witnessing a mechanism of power.” Trans-exclusionary feminists like Julie Bindel or Kathleen Stock, and for that matter Davidson and Craven, enjoy regular access to the national media to delegitimize trans identity, while claiming to be silenced by transgender people. Yet the “silenced” ones are elsewhere, known to no one but the gatekeepers who quietly shut them down, if the silent ones have even got that far. Arguably it begins as self-censorship, when you occupy an identity that’s disrespected and you assume there is no point in engaging with the institutions of the media, because no one will want to hear you anyway. Then tentatively, when you can no longer keep your silence in the face of constant media attacks, you intervene, only to find out you were right all along and your fragile confidence is dealt a new blow. You’re left second-guessing yourself—is it just that you’re mediocre, or did you fail to affirm the majority’s worldview? Who knows how ubiquitous these modes of silence are for particular minorities? All I know is that, when I tried to come out from the shade and the silence to speak up for trans rights, my voice disappeared, all over again.

I suffered a sense of despair after these interactions for the remainder of 2020. Here is an alternative reality to Anastasia’s concept of the transgender voice, “the agency by which an opinion is expressed.” I recognized only the illusory agency of my voice: a nameless, unpublished, dehumanized trans woman calling out into an abyss, or standing outside a giant black gate where on the other side public pronouncements were issued against my kind, and all I could do was turn and walk away. It felt as if a history of oppression, and of experience, and of my very humanity, were secrets lost in the echo chamber, and I felt helpless.

Addendum: The Kindling of the Third Element of the Transgender Voice

On August 23, 2021, I see perhaps the last of Davidson, the newspaper journalist, before her departure to work with the broadcaster LBC. In a local story in the *Edinburgh Evening News* that goes viral, the title reads, “Inquiry Launched into Row over ‘Transphobia’ in Edinburgh Pub” (Davidson 2021). The speech marks around *transphobia* underscore the article’s positioning of how transphobia is—perhaps like trans people themselves—potentially not a real thing. Of the story itself, a young trans bar manager in an Edinburgh pub is confronted by a group of trans-exclusionary activists who refuse to leave their table after their booked time expires (Maurice 2021; Stone 2021). The trans-exclusionists have left

their anti-trans flyers in the establishment's toilets, the situation for the invalidated trans staff member is traumatic, staff and customers complain of the gender-crit lit, and the trans staff member calls the police to have the trans-exclusionary crowd removed. Davidson's researching of the trans element, with worrying predictability, relies on Twitter, exploiting the trans woman's ironic Twitter handle as "AGP porn addict male"—while ignoring her Twitter handle's *they/she* pronouns—as a justification to misgender her throughout the article with male pronouns. I am one of the many people who make an official complaint about the article's transphobic tone and language and the delegitimizing of the trans staff member. Over the following days, the article undergoes an adjustment, with an editorial acknowledgment that the pronouns of the trans staff member have been corrected to reflect their self-identification.

Finally, it seems I have performed an act that impacts on the journalism of Gina Davidson, by embodying in my action and its consequence the third element of the trans voice, as part of the collective. As documented already, it is the collective voice that those in power fear, the one depicted variously as the "trans lobby" (Morgan) or the "movement" (Rowling). It is also the voice that seems to effect the greatest change.

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