

Rationally Speaking #227: Sarah Haider on “Dissent and free speech”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and my guest today is Sarah Haider. Sarah is a writer, speaker and the executive director of the Ex-Muslims of North America. Sarah, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Sarah: Really good to be here Julia. Thank you for having me.

Julia: I'm a big fan of your presence on Twitter, for what that's worth. You're one of my role models for engaging with disagreement in a careful and eloquent and intellectually honest way. So I'm having a fangirl moment right now.

Sarah: Oh wow. That's in itself such a compliment because I love your presence on Twitter as well.

Julia: So, the arc for this conversation that I was thinking made sense -- I'd really like to talk first about your work with the Ex-Muslims of North America. What you do, what you've learned from the experience, about the issues or about successful activism.

And then transition from there into some broader topics that I've seen you discuss interestingly on Twitter and some of your other interviews. Having to do with free speech and liberalism and justice and things like that. So, small talk.

Sarah: Sure. Yeah.

Julia: Why don't we start by describing what the Ex-Muslims of North America does.

Sarah: Right. So, Ex-Muslims of North America, we are now in our sixth year, so we are still a relatively young organization, but we're starting to grow up a little bit.

We were formed for the purpose originally just to provide ex-Muslims -- that is to say, people who used to believe in the religion of Islam and now have left the religion -- with community and support networks. To help them through tough times, to give them a community, especially just to mitigate some of that sense of loss that people get when they leave religion.

And we found there was a real need for ex-Muslims in particular to have these kinds of communities. What makes us unique, and what makes this

community building very challenging in our context, that I don't think exists in many other contexts, is that there is an element of security.

There is the element of the fact that many people who are ex-Muslims are “in the closet,” so to speak. We borrow a lot of gay rights language.

Julia: That makes sense, I mean it is analogous.

Sarah: Right, we find it to be very helpful. And because of these issues, these community events and gatherings and meetups have to be held in private somewhere. And they have to be somewhat covert, somewhat hidden.

So we have these cloak and dagger, kind of ...I mean, I don't say this to make fun of what's going on, but it almost feels as if we're in a movie sometimes. We have to do all these things to protect our members, our community members and the leaders and volunteers who work for us.

So because of those issues that are specific to some of those security threats that we get, and the fact that many of our members don't ever, ever want to be known as people who are ex-Muslims. Building a community is kind of challenging and requires effort that I don't think exists in other communities.

And this is why it's so helpful to have an organization that can manage a membership, and can manage screening and can manage security, on a level the way that we do.

And in addition, we've been doing some outreach and education efforts for the last couple of years. We've managed to engage in some activities that I think are unique and very positive for the dialogue we've had.

We had this campus tour, called the “Normalizing Dissent” tour, that we ended or mostly ended last year. And we ran it for about two years. We went to a lot of campuses and we had all these panels and talks and discussions that I thought were really interesting. I had a great time participating in that tour.

We've also had a video project where we asked some of our community members who were comfortable with speaking out and being public about their apostasy, to let us into their lives, and allow us to shoot them in their homes with their friends, doing their daily activities. Just to normalize the idea of being somebody who leaves a religion.

So that's some of some of what we do. And now this year especially, we're working on knowledge creation, to the extent that that is possible. So we're working on a variety of tools to help advocates and activists do their work.

Julia: Who are the main critics of your work? Or if “critics” is too genteel of a word, who are the people who yell at you?

Is it mostly Muslims who are angry because of the apostasy? Or is it non-Muslim liberals who think that you’re anti-Muslim, in like a bigoted way, and that they should fight you because you're bigots, or what?

Sarah: Right, I mean definitely both. It seems we get people yelling at us from every direction that someone yells at you from.

Which is, I feel like a way that is beneficial is that it gives us a very unique perspective on what's going on with the discourse at large. And that's partially why I'm so interested in the discussion of what is self-censorship, and how do we build a healthy and strong civil discourse?

Partially because we're sort of in this weird position, where there's quite a bit of confusion. There's the desire to protect a minority, that is the same Muslims, from unjust bigoted attacks. From usually the right wing, but it really can come from anywhere. And all of these factors kind of come together into a just a mess.

It's hard to describe it in any other way. But I think with a lot of ex-Muslims, especially public ex-Muslims, this is a line that is very difficult to walk. And it's frustrating to be forced to walk it, especially when it comes to attacks from the left. Many people I think who do attack us who come from the political left or the progressive tribe. I think they don't really understand what we're about, and don't really understand what's at stake here.

So there's quite a bit of education that I think can help matters. At the same time, to a certain degree I feel like people don't want to hear what we have to say, and people don't want to hold a more nuanced perspective on this issue.

I think we crave a simple narrative. We crave an easy solution and an easy slogan to just repeat off the cuff. When we're put in a position where we have to really formulate our thoughts.... So yeah. I mean that was a long answer to your question, but.

Julia: No, it was a complicated topic.

So to make sure I understand, is your view of the criticism -- is it more about people understanding what your goal is, and just disagreeing with you that that's a good goal? Maybe because they think your efforts to advocate for ex-Muslims are going to give fuel to the Make America Great Again crowd who want to oppress Muslims for bad reasons?

Or is it more about people thinking you're saying something different than you actually are? Whether because they're motivated to think that, or because they in good faith think you're bad? They think you're saying something like, I don't know, "Muslims are bad?"

Sarah: Right? All of the above, really. And I see both perspectives of the two you mentioned. I understand how it can come across that way, because this is an issue that it is complicated for the average person.

They don't have skin in the game. They maybe have a Muslim friend or two, but they're not growing up in Muslim societies where we are, and they're not encountering the negative aspects of religion on a day to day basis. So the things that are very clear to us are not always very clear to outsiders.

But I get frustrated with this conversation because I feel like there are standards put in place for criticisms of Islam that don't exist with criticism of Christianity, or even criticism of Judaism.

And it's very clear to me, as somebody who comes from these communities. I was actually born in Pakistan, so I do have some memories. I was quite young when I moved to the United States, but I remember it. And most of my friends and my social circles are people who are of immigrant backgrounds, mostly from Muslim majority countries.

And we know very deeply the many, many ways in which religion hinders progress or sometimes completely halts it. From the rights of women in domestic violence issues to There's some questions about Islamic finance and the fact that interest isn't really okay in the Islamic view. But in one way or another, I mean, there's so many different avenues of life in a Muslim majority country that are distorted because of the effects of religion, and because of how pervasive religion is.

I'm friends with scientists and teachers of science in Muslim majority countries, who regularly communicate with me how frustrating their jobs are. And how difficult it is for them to navigate doing what they do, and trying to really teach science and the benefits of science, and what's the state of our knowledge today, without stepping on religious toes.

And so because of the way that I intimately understand how important it is that we have this conversation about Islam, really keeping in mind the benefit of people in Muslim majority countries... I can get frustrated with the kind of very simplistic criticisms that I sometimes get from the Left, which tend to be focused on, "Well this is not a politically convenient, or it's not a politically helpful thing to say at the moment."

And it tends to be focused on very western politics, and what's good for people within the Western world. When my view it's much more global.

Julia: Have you successfully changed anyone's mind? At least in terms of understanding that you're not saying the thing they think you're saying, and that things are more nuanced than a simple black and white, "Either you're for Muslims or you're against Muslims"?

And have you learned anything about how to get through to people who maybe are hard to get through to?

Sarah: Well, I think I have. And there have been people who send me mail all the time. So it's, I don't know, I haven't tallied the degree...

Julia: What's your score?

Sarah: I think I have changed some people's minds, but it tends to be the people who really are confused. There's a genuine confusion there, or there's a genuine lack of knowledge there. They just haven't thought about it in the way that I now present it in this new way. And they change their mind.

But with a good percentage of the people who criticize me more severely, there's something deeper that is going on. Which is that I feel like there's a desire not to understand. Whether that be because of emotional ties with the view that they have at the moment, or they don't want the complicated answer, they want the simple answer.

Because it allows them to feel... I don't know how to phrase it, but I do think that action is so much easier if the picture that one paints is as simple as possible. And I think especially if we're politically active groups, it's very important that we're action-focused and that complications and nuances don't get in the way of that.

Julia: I mean, that's an interesting point to hear from you. Because as I mentioned, one of the things that I really admire about you is that you are very nuanced. And I see you frequently on Twitter responding to an argument that someone's making, and sort of carefully picking out, like, "Okay, these are the parts of the argument that I agree with, or endorsed with qualifiers; these other parts of the argument I would not agree with."

Which is really quite different from what I think most people do, which is that they sort of ... If the argument is for the thing that they support or for their side, then they just sort of are "for" that argument. And they are rarely careful to say, "I'm trying to pick out the things that I think are true," as opposed to "Are you arguing for my side or against my side?"

I really admire that and I wish there was more of that.

And at the same time, you're also an activist and a very passionate advocate. And I've wondered... I talk a lot about the importance of nuance and intellectual honesty. And one of the objections I get from people, often, is "Well, you can't be nuanced if you want to make change in the world." That there's this inescapable tension, or trade-off between nuance and passion. Or between nuance and persuasiveness.

So I'm confused about what your take actually is.

Sarah: Oh, well, just to be clear, I just meant it in the sense of that's how people assume-

Julia: Oh, you weren't sort of speaking as you, you were sort of describing what you think their view is.

Sarah: Right.

Julia: Okay. Now my worldview makes sense again.

Sarah: Well, if I was speaking as me... I'm genuinely confused about this. In the sense that -- there is my personality, the way that I am, how I prefer to engage with everyone. And how I prefer people to engage with me.

Which is as nuanced as possible. I genuinely enjoy disagreement. I enjoy being wrong. I know that that might be weird, but I enjoy the feeling of having something I hold deep, especially if it's something I deeply hold, challenged in an interesting way. And to me that practice and that act of feeling discomfort, and then being pushed at -- oh no, am I wrong about this?

And then having to look into it and having a bunch of new reading that now you have to do, that you didn't even know you had to do. I love that process and that's genuinely something that I enjoy doing.

So it's hard for me to, I guess, put myself in the shoes of somebody who might feel very differently. But the claim that "Well, too much nuance really gets in the way of activism" is really about what gets things done, not just what people like to do or don't like to do.

And it's interesting that you asked that question. I was reading it and laughing to myself because this is something I think about all the time. And I don't know if I have a really strong answer to it, other than to be able to speak from my perspective, and what I know has worked for me.

I do think my form of activism, the kind of activism that I'm pushing for -- I do want minds to change. It does matter to me that minds change, not just mobilizing people. I think that activism that is centered solely on

mobilizing people might work in a slightly different way than an activism that is more focused on actually changing minds, actually changing hearts.

And I struggle with it, because I have these dual roles that are sometimes in conflict with each other. And sometimes I think, okay, am I getting in the way by trying to insert “Oh, well, but here's another thing to consider”? Am I getting in the way of us moving to a slightly better position -- maybe not the perfect position, but a better position? I can't say I have an answer for you.

Julia: But have you observed any kind of pattern? Like, have you observed that people respond less or seem less moved by your arguments, if you include a caveat, or if you add qualifiers or whatever?

Sarah: Well...

Julia: Maybe it's just too hard to gauge how moved people are. I don't know.

Sarah: When it comes to at least the use of public platforms, they distort the way these things play out, definitely. Because the more simplistic my message is, the faster it gets spread on a platform like Twitter, for example.

And so if we add, in addition to that, the effect of the social media and the platform, then I think maybe the balance shifts away from my perspective. Because truly I'm not getting heard if I don't speak in a specific kind of way.

But at the same time I know what sticks with me. I know what arguments actually have changed my mind and what has worked for me and for the people around me, especially people from Muslim majority backgrounds, who grew up Muslim. Whose minds have changed.

And what didn't change their minds was something simplistic, right? Because especially if it's something so deeply held, it's almost insulting to think that a very simplistic black and white Twitter tweet will do the trick.

Julia: Well I think there's at least two different ways in which people think that nuance is in tension with impact.

One of them is the persuasion angle that we've just been talking about.

And the other one is -- it involves persuasion, but it's more directly about passion. That if you yourself confront the fact that there are qualifications in the policy you're advocating for -- even though you really genuinely think it's great, it has some downsides, nothing is completely perfect, nothing's black and white... And if you let that in, that that will sort of diminish your passion. And your drive to try to cause change.

Do you notice anything like that?

Sarah: Oh yeah, I do.

Julia: You do. Interesting.

Sarah: I do. But I don't know if the fact that that diminish happens is enough of ... Is a big enough downside to let go of trying to insert nuance whenever you can.

Julia: Okay. Fair.

Sarah: And I wonder, I mean it's hard to really just make blanket claims about this, because of so much of my activism is online and is dependent on the tools available to me. So Twitter being the one that everybody uses, everybody complains about. But I wonder the extent to which I can make a claim really is something that can apply to activism as a whole, or effective activism on Twitter.

Julia: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I'm sure the appropriate strategy will differ depending on the medium and the audience and everything like that.

In fact, I realized as you were speaking that I never actually asked you, whose minds are you trying to change?

Assuming you can't change everyone's mind in the world, who is most important? Maybe it's policymakers. Or maybe it's the media, who is putting forward a narrative that's kind of unfair to or marginalizing of ex-Muslims, or... what's your ideal audience?

Sarah: That's an interesting question. My ideal audience... I guess there's two.

There's people from Muslim backgrounds who I'm addressing when I talk, when I specifically make the fact and fiction claims about faith. And that I do about half the time.

And then the rest of the time I try to convince... I don't know exactly who, but I guess the general public. To think about the ways in which they speak online, and the way that they self-censor, or maybe don't self-censor. And what they choose to hold back, and why.

Because I found that to be a difficult ... I don't know if it's, it doesn't exactly stop me, but it does... There is sort of a hindering of a group of people who are potentially my allies. And really on the same page. And they'll reach out to me and they'll say,

“I'm 100% with you. I agree with you, but I don't want to retweet you. I'm not going to share it, because there's my best friend who won't speak to me again. Or maybe not that extreme, but that suddenly there's this cloud of suspicion that'll be cast over me, because I share somebody like you, or because I follow somebody like you.”

So I think about ways in which I can help these potential allies, who I know will be a great benefit to me in my work and a benefit to a free thinkers from Muslim communities, if they really were our allies. And if they really were willing to be upfront and honest about how they feel.

And it's interesting to me, the way that these things play out. Because the people who reach out to me who are really concerned about this kind of thing -- who are saying, “Sarah, I really don't know if it's the right time to speak. I really don't know if I'm helping. And I really don't want people in my circles to think a certain way of me” -- these are the people who care. Who are the most compassionate. Who care the most about not doing harm in the universe.

The kinds of people, especially who are worried about giving the wrong impression in their circles, where their circles tend to be progressive. Their circles tend to be the kinds of people who really I would want on my side.

And it's those people who are most likely, I think, to self censor. And who are most likely to say that “I'm not going to be a part of this discussion. At least not right now.” And instead we're left with really the most extreme polar ends.

So part of my work is to try and encourage those people to participate. And to give them an example I guess of maybe modeling my own behavior. Or giving them someone that they might be comfortable sharing, since I'm not so extreme in my language.

Julia: Yeah. I think that's a really good point. And something I've thought about a lot, just observing some of the debates about free speech versus social justice -- not to be too simplistic, but that's often the framing of these debates.

I think that most people don't appreciate how important it is when you're arguing for free speech and related ideas, to really live by the principles that you're advocating for. Because what I'm really worried about, and what's already sort of started to happen, is that these concepts that I hold so dear and think are so important -- like free speech and reason and nuance and fair mindedness and so on, objectivity -- that these have started to become associated in people's minds with a particular ...

People like you can criticize aspects of the social justice left for failing on free speech or other ideals. But a lot of other people criticize the social justice left for things that aren't really about lack of reason or free speech. It's like "We think you're like being too kind to trans people" or like "We think we should be able to make racist jokes," or whatever.

And so I think you just have to kind of bend over backwards, if your goal really is to criticize on the free speech grounds, to show that you're doing that. And that you're not any other group who just wants to complain about the sort of cultural or values issues of the social justice left.

And most people aren't super careful to bend over backwards and do that. And so they just sort of get conflated. And it becomes so hard to make the case you actually want to make, when people hear the other case.

Sarah: Great. I would agree with you that ... Well, I would go further. I would say it's already happened, to some degree. And it was something I was worried about years ago when people like Milo just wore the cloak of "free speech," and they were the new champions of an open and free society.

But it was very clear to me that this was something that was very conditional, and it's something that they found to be politically convenient at the moment. And they were right to find it politically convenient. It really was something that I think the left was encroaching upon, just the idea of free speech. But at the same time, these are not honest actors. Or not always honest actors, who then use these principles and claim to be fighting for them.

What you were saying, that we have to bend over backwards not to be confused with that group -- I deeply dislike being put in this position. Because I feel like there's an element of force, that now I have to go out of my way. And it's again forcing me in this position where I'm not just speaking because this is what I authentically feel, but there's an added pressure of performing, in a way.

If for nothing else but just as "I'm not one of those guys." And then you have this effect of protesting too much, that I think can maybe come back to haunt you.

Julia: So, I mean I agree, and I have the same kind of frustration. For me it's often like, "I shouldn't have to do this."

But an argument that that made me sort of more accepting of the reality of the strategic landscape, basically, was a paper from I think the 90's by Glenn Loury. Where he said, basically, he was pointing out that if you ... Let's say you're a liberal who genuinely agrees with 90% of the liberal

platform, but also thinks that, say, affirmative action, at least the way it's put in place, is not actually a good idea. Or it's harmful in some way.

And you want to say that, but you also know that people will correctly infer that if you say that... That's evidence. Like, Bayesian evidence, that you're not actually a liberal. Because there's a correlation between people disliking affirmative action, and people not actually being liberals.

And so you're like, "Well, I don't want them to infer that, because it's not actually true. So maybe I shouldn't say the thing about affirmative action."

But then what that does is that reinforces the correlation between people who criticize affirmative action, and people who are not liberals. And then that just makes it even more dis-incentivizing for people to.

And the problem... The conclusion of all of this is: even if everyone's behaving perfectly rationally, and just making inferences justified by the correlations, you're going to get this problem.

And so in a way that's depressing. But it was also kind of calming to me, because it made me... like, the fact that people are making these inferences about me feels sort of, "Well, it is Bayesian of them."

So maybe I can sort of grudgingly force myself to try to give them enough other evidence, in my manner and in the things that I say, so that they don't make that inference about me.

I don't know if that helps you.

Sarah: I guess I end up in that space anyway. I've yet to be comfortable with that position or I guess I'll think about what you said to try and get more comfortable.

Julia: Let me know if it helps.

Sarah: But I do find myself doing that quite frequently, feeling like I have to really prove my progressive creds. And reinforcing, there are certain things that I also care about.

But one thing that does make me feel better about it is that although I go into my activism thinking, okay, well here I am, I'm advocating for these one or two or three issues that I care really very deeply about, and this is where I can have a real voice...

I think if I don't share my other opinions and the context in which this is coming from me as a person, then I am actually being dishonest to some

degree. And my effect on the broader climate will be that it pulls people to whatever political pole that is more in line with where that issue is going.

So when it comes to Islam, if I don't also talk about the many ways in which I feel like the progressive left is correct, and that their approach is the better approach, then I think that I will be in some ways misrepresenting the whole picture here. Or at least for me as a person in the context from which I'm coming from.

Julia: I mean, I think that's absolutely right and I think this is a big advantage of nuance when it comes to persuasion. There are downsides, as you noted. But I think the "Bending over backwards to show that you're making your points in good faith, and not using free speech as a fig leaf for being anti-left," -- That can involve having to go out of your way to praise the left and so on, which is a little frustrating to feel like you have to do that.

But it can also just be accomplished by speaking in measured tones, too. And not endorsing arguments that you think are false, even if they're on your side. I think that stuff -- I mean, I don't know, but it sure seems to me like that signals good faith to people. And makes them more likely to infer that you're making your argument for the reasons that you say you're making it, and not for the fig leaf reasons.

Sarah: Yeah. And I think there is still a population which appreciates that.

My follower base on Twitter especially is just, they're all over the place. There are people from really every kind of background. I'm sure you have a similar --

Julia: Mine are mostly nerds in engineering jobs, I think! But no, I can tell your followers are ideologically diverse, because of the very varied reactions you get to everything.

Sarah: Right. It's like, especially if it's a political thing, if I'm touching culture war Twitter or political Twitter, then chances are -- unless it's very measured, like exceptionally measured, which is to say no one really cares about it -- unless it's that way, then I'm going to get dragged by somebody.

So there's some small group that's going to be really offended and is going to make sure that I know it.

Julia: So you always seem to handle this dragging with aplomb. It's very admirable. It's one of the things that I admire and look to as a role model for.

Is it as easy for you as it seems? Do you have any advice for how to not get angry or stressed out by people calling you a horrible person?

Sarah: It's gotten easier over time. I definitely think it's one of those things that the more you practice it... and I make a deliberate effort to behave that way. I think to some degree it may be just in line with my personality.

But then in addition, I know that I also try to have a certain kind of tone. It's easy enough to do when I think about why I'm there in the first place.

It might seem like a strange thing to say from a public figure, or "public figure," whatever that means. But I don't enjoy the attention, I guess. And I feel uncomfortable in it. So to the degree that I'm there, it's easy for me to think about why it is that I'm there. Why it is that I want this platform and what it is that I'm here saying. How can I, by virtue of my tone or my approach, how can I best serve this cause that I care so deeply about?

And when I put it in that perspective, then [things] just line up. This is my duty. It's my duty to be calm and measured. And then I find it's easier to do. It just becomes like a more honorable thing to do. It takes on this cause, that's bigger than yourself. And then it's easy to really slow down a little bit.

Julia: That resonates a lot with me. That's nice to hear you say it.

So one of the things you tweeted about the "freethought" discourse -- this was from maybe a couple of months ago -- you said "There can be no such thing as a group of freethinkers. Or at least not for long. Group dynamics spare no one."

So, okay. Fess up. Were you subtweeting the Intellectual Dark Web there?

Sarah: Yes.

Julia: Well, I thought that would be a tougher interrogation than it turned out to be.

Sarah: Well, yes and no. Not directly. But it was, that thought did occur to me after I saw some engagements back and forth. Some people really reveling in their new found-

Julia: Tribe.

Sarah: ...tribe, of the most freest, independent thinkers. And I thought it was just a funny thing that was happening.

But in the long term it can be kind of dangerous too, to have a group of people that really think that "we are immune from groupthink and tribalism." And "we are a tribe of people who are immune from tribal forces." They can be the hardest to reach.

I say this as somebody who is quite close with a lot of people who are either in the IDW or IDW-adjacent. And I think there's some wonderful people there. And then others I don't really agree with very much. But I am concerned to see this formation of a clique of "freethinkers," mainly because of the way in which it came together.

And Bari Weiss talked about this in her New York Times [article]. When she was talking about the origins of the IDW, I guess, and sort of naming it and describing it as a phenomena. She specifically mentioned the way in which these people are outcasts from the progressive left for a variety of reasons. Generally the progressive left; she phrased it as, it could be anybody, but really we're talking about people mostly who have been outcasts from the left.

And thinking about group dynamics in my own internal, like... I know that my experience as somebody who's been treated this way is that I am just, on a human level, hungry for... I don't want to say a "safe space," but a place where I can just relax a little bit and not be dragged.

And I think people who have this experience of being pushed out, sort of shunned in this way, they're in a really vulnerable place... I think they want respite from all the dragging and the smears and whatever. And you want shelter with this group of people who can kind of protect you.

And I think to some degree, people who have been dragged really badly or smeared in a really unfair way, are in a place where they might be more vulnerable to falling into a tribe and seeking the protection of a tribe.

Julia: I saw you describe yourself in one of these conversations as "tribal phobic." Or at least you said you were somewhat tribal phobic.

I am very much as well. And I had similar reactions to the sort of reifying of the body of ideas, in the form of the Intellectual Dark Web.

But at the same time, to try to be fair to it... Like, what would I actually want them to do? I mean if I'm going to say that any sort of coalescing under a banner is getting in the way of objectivity, and it's turning things into tribal disputes... Then if you take that too far, how does anyone get their message out? Is it possible, like would it be possible for these individuals to make all their arguments, but without ever calling themselves a thing? And would that actually be effective?

What do you think?

Sarah: Yeah, I actually think they still could be. And I think they were. This whole banner, it was a pretty recent phenomenon. I don't know if it was necessary at all.

But I think some of them might disagree with me. Although a lot of people who are named as foremost IDW members themselves don't really love the idea. And I know that.

I'm just concerned with the way in which it represents these two separate realms of discourse. I would really like for these group of people who have been shunned to, whatever degree that they have been shunned, to be initiated back into the broader -- I guess, I don't know what exactly to call it, but the mainstream discourse.

Julia: As in like academia, and normal mainstream papers? Like, liberal papers and stuff like that?

Sarah: Yeah. It concerns me that it's just this independent thing that's just floating out by itself. And I think that's to the detriment of the ideas in both these two camps, that they're not really speaking and engaging with each other directly. And I think that there should still be a desire to get back into ... I don't want to call it mainstream, but just the broader discourse at large.

Julia: Yeah. The mainstream, like the set of ideas that, "good liberals," in elite society consider it fine to seriously discuss, that aren't sort of outside of that mainstream discourse. Yeah. I mean, maybe there can be like an actual sort of undercover, intellectual, dark web. Now that's very cloak and dagger.

But like, no, the people who sympathize with a lot of the arguments that the IDW makes, but think that the way the movement has sort of coalesced around them and waved a banner or whatever is detrimental -- and those people don't want to actually associate with the movement itself -- maybe they can sort of make those arguments from within academia. Maybe in ways that academia would listen to... I don't know, as I'm saying this, it sounds implausible.

Sarah: I think it's a little bit ... It seems impossible but I see it happen a little bit. I am seeing what somebody threw out the term "Intellectual Lite Web."
LITE.

And I was like, I just don't want any more labels.

Julia: You're like, "I'm so tired. I'm just so tired..."

Sarah: But yeah, I think that it's, I've sort of seen the beginnings of that. Or at least people who were so exhausted by feeling like they have to perform in a certain way for, for the mainstream tribe or whatever it is. The mainstream discourse. And feel, I think, intellectually stifled.

I know that I feel that way sometimes. And I'm someone who's relatively free. Actually, I can think of very few people who are as free as I am.

I work for an organization where I have a lot of clout. I mean, I'm sure they can fire me, but it would probably, I would have to mess up quite a bit. And I have my own little bit of a public following.

So I have that freedom by the nature of what I do, that many people don't have. But I still feel strong pressure to self-censor sometimes. Or just even... I can't remember a time that I've lied ever in public for any reason. Or at least any reason that I knew. Of course everybody would say that, but-

Julia: It doesn't really count as a lie if you're saying something false without realizing it.

Sarah: That's true. Okay. That was a dumb thing to say.

But I have self-censored, and I do self-censor. And I know, even though I'm mostly letting off steam as much as I can, and I'm more free to do that.

I know that that's building up a little bit of a well --

Julia: Do you just have a little soundproof room you go in, and you scream all of the unacceptable things that you weren't able to say over the past month, for like 15 minutes?

Sarah: Well, for me it goes back to my duty as an activist. I think I heard Sam Harris say this, based on something he heard Steven Pinker say, or something like that. But it was just that "Not everything worth saying is worth saying by you."

Julia: That's a good thing to keep in mind. It's surprising how frequently that slips out of my mind.

Sarah: Yeah. Well I mean, because I think I have -- I'm sure many people do and most people do just to different degrees, but -- I have a very strong need to express myself honestly. Even if that is with, it doesn't have to be a stage, but I just don't like feeling like I have to hide something. Or that I have to put it in acceptable terms.

I don't like feeling like that. So to the extent that anything makes me feel that way, it's uncomfortable for me.

At the same time, isn't it right that not everyone can be a perfect activist for something, and not everyone can be the best voice. And if you really do care about certain issues then maybe not adding your voice might be the

best thing for that issue. Or it could be to the detriment of the main thing that you're talking about.

Like for me, for issues regarding Islam, I mean -- if I get into too much hot water too frequently, practically speaking, it might make me too toxic to touch by anybody. And so even this one issue that I really care about, if I don't touch so many toxic issues, I might be able to reach some people... So that's a concern that I do have.

Julia: I wanted to get your take on something about free speech. So, this is a thing that seems true to me, but I don't think anyone else agrees with it. So I'm just curious what you'll think.

So the thing that seems true to me is that almost all of the debates over free speech -- at least with regard to, not like literal legal free speech, but “Is it fair or in keeping with the principles of a liberal society, to deplatform speakers? Or to fire someone from a job for saying things that are technically legal but that people find offensive? Is it fair to shame them on Twitter and drag them and try to make them uncomfortable?” and things like that. Those are the kinds of like free speech debates that I'm talking about.

The thing that seems true to me is that free speech is just kind of a red herring in those debates. The debate is always framed as a disagreement over the principle of free speech. Like, on college campuses, should people be exposed to different ideas?

And the people who are arguing that so-and-so, like Charles Murray shouldn't be deplatformed, they make that argument, that the point of school is to be exposed to different ideas. It's a marketplace of ideas and so on.

And then the people who are in favor of the de-platforming and think it's fine -- They they don't really disagree with that principal. They just think this person, like Charles Murray, or this set of ideas, are so beyond the pale that... Surely you, the free speech advocate would accept that if a literal Nazi was coming and talking about how Jews are subhuman scum -- it might be legal, and not saying they should be arrested, but surely it's okay to not invite that person to speak. Or surely, shouldn't companies have the right to like fire people or shouldn't it be okay to fire people who are literally saying Jews are subhuman?

And so the disagreement is not over, like, should people be exposed to different ideas? But which ideas are beyond the pale.

Sarah: Those sort of seem like the same consideration to me, which... well actually, let me think about this a little bit, because you mentioned many different contexts.

So there's what should a private company be able to do? So maybe what should Twitter do? Or for a private company, or for de-platforming people on a college campus? That's a very different kind of a place.

So I didn't, I noticed that you told me that in your notes from before that you had a video and I wasn't able to watch it.

Julia: Oh sorry, yeah. So when I was referencing topics I wanted to talk about, I mentioned that I had a video blog – sorry, I wasn't telling you to watch it. But after Charles Murray was de-platformed, I did a video blog where basically I was arguing that that Charles Murray shouldn't have been de-platformed, but someone like Milo should be de-platformed. Or at least, I don't know that I'd call for him to be de-platformed, but I'd be fine with people doing it.

And the line that I drew separating them was the line of “Are they arguing in good faith?” You might think it's clear that Charles Murray is completely wrong. And even that his ideas are harmful to society. But if he's arguing them because he thinks they're true, as opposed to being a troll, then that sort of makes a meaningful difference.

I don't think that this, even if I'm right about this line, I don't think it gets us all the way, though. Because you can imagine someone who just sincerely believes that Jews are subhuman. So it gets rid of the Milos but it doesn't solve the whole “Where to draw the line” thing.

Sarah: That was the first thing that I was thinking about. Because I bet Richard Spencer sincerely believes the things that he's saying. And then where do we put figures like Ben Shapiro, who some people would say fall into the Milo camp and others would say fall into the Charles Murray camp?

Julia: He definitely seems to have a foot in both. I feel like he would just acknowledge that he's a troll sometimes. But I also, it seems like he has like genuine principles that he's earnestly advocating for.

Sarah: From a functional perspective... do you think, from a harm prevention perspective, do you really think that -- and this is a real question, not a gotcha question -- Do you really think that not inviting or de-platforming someone like Milo does something?

Julia: No, I think it hurts. Totally, it hurts. I was less thinking about like, “What's the best way to achieve our goals” or anything. I was just, if we're just thinking abstractly about what kinds of ideas should we treat as “Well, I

disagree, but you should feel free to say that,” as opposed to “I disagree and I’m going to try to use social pressure and means just up to, but stopping at legal means, to try to make you... to delegitimize you. Or cause people to turn against you.”

I mean, I think -- maybe you wouldn't agree with this. I would probably say if someone's literally like going out and advocating for Nazism, then I'm in favor of using social pressure in the form of shaming or whatever. And so then for me, the question becomes “Where do I draw the line, and say like, ‘I disagree with this person, I find his ideas abhorrent, but I wouldn't advocate shaming him and trying to get him de-platformed and so on’?”

But if you actually don't think that you would use social pressure to try to fight Nazism then maybe you don't have the line-drawing problem.

Sarah: I mean, I'm trying to put it back into my context... because I don't think of it so deeply when it comes to just general sort of social justice issues.

Julia: I mean, we can just take one example. Like, let's say a Holocaust denier was invited to speak by some student group at a college and then there's a protest and they shout him down or something.

Would you be like “Yeah, cool. That seems fine”? Or would you be like, “This is a violation, not of legal free speech rights, but like this is the kind of thing that's against the spirit of the liberal marketplace of ideas”?

Sarah: All right. I think I would lean towards the latter. But the practical effects have a lot to do with why I feel that way. Which is to say it does matter to me, that I think shutting them down in that way really hurts whatever cause you're trying to work against.

And I think it ultimately is better... And I'm thinking about this from the perspective of, with the ex-Muslims, just to put myself in a position where I have skin in the game. There are speakers who -- there's an Imam, or something like that, this religious leader in Australia, who every once in a while says things like “Apostates from Islam don't have the right to life. They don't have the right to exist. And I think we should, the Muslim majority countries should, be getting rid of these people.”

By that he means killing.

And then I think, how would I feel if this person were to come on campus and were to speak? What would I feel? How comfortable would I feel with shouting him down?

And even in that case, I guess I don't feel comfortable with shouting him down. Because I'm concerned that we fall into this trap of, "We haven't heard this view here," is the same thing as saying that people haven't heard this view, period.

And I'm concerned with what you can call radicalization, in the religious context, but you can apply that to a lot of other areas. You can apply it to social justice activism, where people find refuge in these online spaces, and they'll find new gurus to teach them the right way of thinking, since "All of these social justice warriors are just so awful. They're just trying to have power over you and to stop you from doing XYZ."

I think victimizing -- to the extent that it is real -- really, really works in their favor, and really helps them spread their views.

I have younger family members, some of them are in college. And I try to have conversations with them about what's going on, on campus, and how are things going. And they find so many of the young men are really, like, deep and true followers of people like Jordan Peterson.

And maybe he's not, I'm not trying to paint him as this awful guy or anything. I don't really, to be completely honest, have never gone through one whole Jordan Peterson video. I've tried to get through most of his book, and I'm almost done with it.

Julia: Doesn't sound like a strong endorsement, but go on.

Sarah: I can't listen to him, it doesn't interest me. But maybe I just have -- what they always say is that you just have to find this one video, and you'll feel differently. I listened to a few of his shorter interviews here and there, and the one with Sam Harris.

And I was really surprised by how popular he is. I mean, he's truly, he has a real influence over the minds and hearts of young men.

And now I'm thinking, well, I don't even know what he's saying. I don't even know what he's saying.

I don't even know what the -- like, maybe there is no issue to try and counteract. But maybe there is. And I don't know because they're educating themselves in this kind of a private way, outside of the wider public discourse. Because they cannot have these conversations in the wider public discourse.

This kind of thing really makes me nervous in a deep way that's hard to describe. But almost fearful. That there's this, now there's this thing that,

even if I was trying to be the best activist I can be, I'm doing everything I can -- well, I don't really know exactly what I'm fighting here.

Those practical effects to me really do matter. And I really think that you cannot try and take down, I guess, bad ideas -- or shut down these bad ideas -- if you don't even know that they're there. If you are not even able to engage with them, because they've been driven to this place that is just pure one-on-one conversations that Jordan Peterson is having with these people.

Julia: Okay. All right. Well, that's actually a good lead-in to the last question of every episode, which is: can you name a book or other resource that changed your thinking in some way?

Sarah: Yes. I was, prior to speaking early this morning, I was flipping through this book of essays by Hannah Arendt, that is called "Crises of The Republic." And it has four of her essays, "Lying in politics," "Civil disobedience on violence," and "Thoughts on politics and revolution."

And I'm deeply in love with Hannah Arendt. And I just, I read as much of her work as possible. I think she's just an incredibly original thinker, and I'm always surprised by her views. And then when you get to the end of it, and you really get to understand why she feels a certain way, and it all makes sense.

But I think that's the mark of a really interesting thinker. Especially if somebody's interested in political philosophy and in regards to issues that are really relevant today. She's somebody I would go to.

Julia: Excellent. That's one of the most satisfying reading experiences, is being led along a path and not knowing where it's taking you. And having objections, and then having them answered in interesting ways. So that sounds great. We'll link to all the Hannah Arendt works you mentioned as well as to the website of the ex-Muslims of North America. And I'm going to throw in a link to your Twitter presence as well, because I love it so much.

Sarah: Thank you.

Julia: It's been really great having you on the show. This is a really fun and interesting discussion for me.

Sarah: Yeah, this was awesome, and thank you for giving me things to talk about that I almost never get to talk about.

Julia: Good, that's what I like to hear. Well this concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.