

Analysis of Episode One "Plotted in Darkness" of the Podcast "The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling"

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Abstract

The text discusses the first episode of a podcast that defends J.K. Rowling and criticizes her pro-trans critics. The episode portrays Rowling as a victim of extreme censorship and her critics as violent extremists. We argue that the podcast follows an agenda to promote a right-wing, anti-trans ideology by distorting the critics' actual positions. Additionally we state, that the podcast appears to aim towards conflating the criticisms of pro-trans activists and the actions of Christian extremists i.a. by utilizing similar language to describe their respective actions. We note the high amount of advertisement in the podcast and suggest that monetary reasons may be a factor in the podcast's content. Overall, the text criticizes the podcast for its bias and misrepresentation of the issues at hand.

Keywords: J.K. Rowling, Megan Phelps-Roper, podcast, episode one

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1. Summary of the Podcast

We split the episode into three sections of meaning. Starting with the introduction into the podcast followed by Megan Phelps-Roper introducing herself and her ambition concerning the podcast. The latter or main part tells the story of Joanne K. Rowling writing Harry Potter and how it became a success while her abusive ex-husband was standing against her.

1.1. Introduction

The podcast's introduction is divided into two parts: an interview segment and a section that introduces Rowling and her controversial views.

1.1.1. The Interview

The introduction begins with interviews of four fans some of whom may be familiar from the podcast's trailer. The interviewees express how much Harry Potter meant for them, describing how it brought joy into dark times they have faced. Then they enthusiastically praise the "wonderful values" Harry Potter embodies, such as friendship, kindness, acceptance, love and forgiveness. Following this, they get asked about Harry Potters author "Joanne K. Rowling". They suddenly shift in tone and answer hesitantly, a bit scared to speak their mind. One person even wants the interview to be terminated to make their comment. J.K. Rowling seems to be a taboo subject.

1.1.2. About J.K. Rowling

Megan Phelps-Roper begins by talking about Rowling. She describes her as the most beloved author of the last 25 years. She says, her books teach children about the best values such as including outsiders or the celebration of difference. Then she claims that in summer of 2020 an essay about sex and gender published by Rowling was beginning to change that perception. The essay would have resulted in a twitter shit storm with friends and colleagues taking a stand against her and wanting her book to be banned, boycotted and, in some cases, burned.

Then, some recordings of critics, whose voices we couldn't recognise, say that what she promotes is frightening. They say she puts trans people at further risk and that it is disgusting and pathetic. One voice says: "Hermione would punch this woman in the face". Another says that the Harry Potter franchise is making the world unsafe for kids.

Phelps-Roper continues that many people denounce Rowling i.a. human rights organisations. Some people supporting Rowling even in small ways would have been fired from their jobs.

The introduction ends with Phelps-Roper saying that the condemnation of Rowling is becoming a symbol on rallies. The sound of a crowd is being played, one voice shouts "You are murdering <not understandable> children!" (maybe they said "You are murdering our grandchildren!").

1.2. Megan Phelps-Ropers Ambition

Phelps-Roper talks about how she spend her first 26 years in a strict fundamentalist christian community: "The beliefs of my church were the complete embodiment of my identity and my worldview". Then she tells about leaving the church ten years ago and her ambition to analysing how belief compels to act and identity and how it changes the perspective on the world.

1.2.1. Rowling's Controversy

She goes on by telling about her being surprised by Rowling's tweets and the change in the eyes of many who had loved Rowling. She explains her reaction by remembering that her old church thought Rowling was evil and her books dangerous. They also wanted to ban and burn her books.

Phelps-Roper describes Harry Potter as one of the most banned books of the 21st century and its author Rowling as a "subject of intense widespread and vocal backlashes from people whose politics could not be more at odds".

1.2.2. The Ambition

Phelps-Ropers talks about how she has spent the past year to figure out why J.K. Rowling's books "captured the ire of very different groups of people across time". Finally, she wrote a letter to Rowling which she answered.

Rowling's quote from the trailer follows: "I never set out to upset anyone. However, I was not uncomfortable with getting off my pedestal". Rowling points out that she is not worrying about her legacy concerning the surrounding controversy.

Phelps-Roper ends this section of meaning by talking about her preparations for the podcast. She claims to have spoken with historians; transgender adults, teens and advocates; doctors; lawyers and many of her critics including those who want Rowling's books banned. And she observed that all parties felt under attack and threatened, they invoked the language of witch hunts.

1.3. Main Part

The main part begins with a colorful description of Rowling's "small castle" where she lives with her husband, kinds and her dog. They record the podcast in that house. We hear them prepare for the recording and how they close the door. Rowling takes a deep breath and says "Lets do it!".

The conversations starts of with Rowling's answer to the question of why people like magic and wizards. In essence, she answers that powerless people specially kids like the thought of being powerful, having a secret super power. They continue about how Rowling got the idea of Harry Potter, the idea came in a train. Rowling points out that even if she wrote Harry Potter she was never a fan of the fantasy genre but of the human nature.

1.3.1. J.K. Rowling's Life

Rowling describes the 1990s as a decade of loss and flux. She talks about her ill mother dying and how it influenced Harry Potter, it got darker. Later she met a journalist in Portugal. She moved there and worked as an English teacher. She got pregnant and because of that, she says, he proposed to her. But she lost her baby by a miscarriage which she describes as a traumatic event. She got doubts about the marriage, but went through with it and became pregnant immediately again.

After a while, she says, her husband became abusive. She left him two time until she left for good. Rowling describes her husband as violent and controlling. Every time she came home he searched her handbag. Further, she even had no key, he was controlling the door to her home. She kept writing Harry Potter which was important for her so her husband took her manuscript hostage. Then Rowling tells about her plans to escape him and how she carefully copied the manuscript, two pages a day.

1993 she gave birth to her daughter Jessica. Some days before her plans to leave would have taken action she told her husband about them. Her husband was threatening her to hide her daughter if she leaves. They had a fight which ended with her lying in the streets. The next day she got Jessica back with the help of the police. Rowling also talks about her suicidal thoughts she had during this time. She has already worked 17 years on Harry Potter back then.

1.3.2. Advertisements

The podcast gets interrupted by three advertisements: Moinkbox ("ethical" meat), Stamps.com (mail) and Netsuite by Oracle (cloud financial system). The ads take about 3min 53sec which is about 8.1% of the whole episode.

1.3.3. The Rise of Harry Potter

Charles McGrath introduced as the former editor of the New York Times book review from 1995 to 2004 and Cat Rosenfield introduced as a culture writer and author of five books leave some positive words regarding Rowling.

Rowling tells about getting rejected by many publishers and how she finally got her work published with only 500 copies printed. The publisher just wanted to print her initials and added the "K." in J.K. Rowling. Rowling explains the publisher was worried about boys not reading a book written by a woman. Getting her book published was one of the best moments in her life.

After some time her books got popular just by the word of mouth. Then we hear kids being interviewed, they rave about Harry Potter. They think of Harry Potter as the best book, a book that stands out. She goes on and tells that after a while the book got famous and so did she. She expresses the gratefulness she had about her book being loved. The downside of her fame, she says, was the high amount of journalists in front of her house. And after her ex-husband broke in to her house they moved. She tried to hide from him while she got more famous.

We hear more audios of people raving about how great the book is. According to Rowling, since 2000, the Harry Potter franchise has grown to such an enormous size that it has

become overwhelming. She tells about a bomb threat from a far right christian extremist. Phelps-Roper notes at the conclusion of the podcast that it has become increasingly evident since then that a significant backlash against Harry Potter has been mounting. She points out that in the 21st century, the culture is facing challenges and there are growing calls to halt the publication of Harry Potter books. We hear christian voices out-raging "Heather has too mothers!", "witchcraft", "Aborting of children", "no god", ...

1.3.4. "The Free Press"

The last 45 seconds are about an advertisement for the publisher "The Free Press". They explain their agenda: "The Free Press is a new kind of media company trying to help restore trust in journalism at a time when that trust is at a historic all time low. And we are doing that by printing stories, hosting debates and publishing a wide range of opinion pieces, all in an effort to break out of echo chambers and fight against confirmation bias and see the world as the complicated and sometimes wonderful mess that it really is." Then they want you to subscribe to their service. That 45 seconds make up about 1.6% of the episode.

2. Context

The following section aims to provide some essential information for interpreting the podcast.

As Phelps-Roper herself admits, she spent her first 26 years in a strict fundamentalist christian community. But she misses out some detail about her life in the church and its beliefs. To be exact she was a member of the Westboro Baptist Church [1]. At the age of five years she was demonstrating with her church against homosexuality [2]. She was holding a sign "Gays are worthy of death" [2]. Further, Phelps-Roper was engaged in activism against Jews: "I said Jewish customs are dead rote rituals that will take them all to hell" [3].

The Topeka Church itself was founded by Phelps-Ropers grandfather Fred Phelps in 1955 and is know as one of the most hateful groups in America also known to be anti-LGBTQIA+ (specially anti homosexual and trans people) [4]. To name one example: 2021 they staged a "God hates f***" protest outside a high school of a bisexual 14-year-old student who took his own life [5].

Megan Phelps-Roper describes Rowling as "a kind of saint", "JK Rowling is arguably the most successful author in the history of publishing, with the possible exception of God" [4]. Phelps-Roper criticized by pro-trans groups for i.a. her association with "gender critical" pundits [4], states regarding Rowling that she knows how it feels "to be an object of intense hatred" [4]. We assume the reader is aware of Rowling's previous anti-trans activities, but we may provide more information about this topic in the future.

3. Conclusions

The agenda of the podcast regarding Phelps-Roper and Rowling seems to fit in their already known course of action. Both

individuals are recognised for their opposition to the transgender community, making their anti-trans views a recurring theme in their public discourse. Although Phelps-Roper may have reconsidered her aversion towards homosexuality, her opposition to the transgender community remains steadfast. This becomes more clear analysing the podcast.

The podcast takes a firm stance in support of Rowling, standing up for her against all critics, or as she may perceive them, "attackers". The music provokes clear emphatic emotions regarding Rowling. The way she and her stories are described are supporting that assumption. She gets pictured as just a woman with a horrible past who is trying to achieve the best for all people and her family. She lives with her husband, kids and dog in a romantic little castle on the land. Everybody loves her, specially the kids. For the kids who grew up by now they read out cozy passages of the Harry Potter book and remind them of the positives effects it had on their lives. For instance the interview part in the beginning, the interviewees talk about that Harry Potter brought them joy in times of darkness.

On the other hand, the critics are being portrayed as extremists who desire nothing less than to silence Rowling, ban her books, and even burn them. This caricature of pro-trans critics as advocates of censorship and violence towards Rowling is a gross misrepresentation of their actual positions which are articulated by reputable human rights organisations like Amnesty International. Moreover, the motivations of the critics are given short shrift, as if their "extreme" reactions are solely based on a single essay and a few generic tweets. This distorted portrayal of the critics serves to support the right-wing agenda of promoting a "cancel culture" without just cause.

In the whole podcast Phelps-Roper treats christian extremists and supporters of trans rights (critics of Rowling) as equivalents. She explains that she recognizes the "radical practices" of the pro-trans critics from her old extremist church. Once she even puts them at same line of course: After the christian bomb threat she suggests it became clear that Harry Potter would mount significant backlash. As if the christian terrorists and the pro-trans critics had a common motivation of some kind.

Throughout the episode she gives herself as benevolent and neutral. She points out how surprised she was about the "attack" on Rowling. She states that her self-imposed task is to find out why people feel threatened and attacked by Rowling. She implies that the reason behind the outrage is not obvious. Thus, from her perspective, the stated reason of her critics - namely, concern for the well-being and human rights of the transgender community, and the negative impact that Rowling's actions may have on them - cannot be considered a legitimate justification. Concerning Phelps-Ropers associations with "gender-critical" pundits[4], this conclusion seems to be reasonable.

Another impotent observation is the high amount of advertisement. If we add the 3 minutes and 53 seconds of clear advertisement and the 45 seconds of promotion by the publisher at the end of the episode we get 4 minutes and 38 seconds which is a bit less than 10% of the whole episode. Monetary reasons may be impotent to upcoming interpretations.

While the tragic events in Rowling's early life may lead to speculations about how and why she became a TERF, these details are irrelevant for our current purpose. The podcast is promoted as a "witch trial," with Rowling being confronted by her critics' arguments. Therefore, it appears that her personal story is being used primarily as a stylistic device. Although her experiences are compelling and her struggles are certainly regrettable, they do not appear to align with the podcast's official agenda as communicated thus far.

In a nutshell, this episode appears to support the theory that the podcast's main aim is to defend Rowling's anti-trans agenda and actions, while simultaneously discrediting activists who advocate for trans rights and the trans community.

References

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