

Dynamics of Transphobic Content and Disinformation: Introduction to the Special Issue

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During the 2020s, prejudice, hostility, and violence towards LGBTQIA+ people has rapidly become re-normalized across most of the industrialized world, threatening the unprecedented expansions of civil rights that had been achieved during the 2010s (US: Alfonseca 2024; Brenan 2024; Lavietes 2024; Paterson and Gingerich 2022; PRRI 2024, 2025; UK: Home Office 2024; Kuhr 2021; National Centre for Social Research 2023; Germany: Anarte 2021; Nicholson 2025; Europe and Central Asia: Datta 2021; Di Sario 2025; ILGA–Europe 2025; Strand and Svenson 2021; China: Liang 2023).

Where hate crimes are recorded, they are at record highs, with transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) people have borne the brunt of these attacks across multiple countries (UK: Home Office 2023, 2024; US: Alfonseca 2024; Meyer and Flores 2025; Uniform Crime Reporting Program 2025; Germany: Anarte 2021; European Union: de Groot and Immenkamp 2025). Policymakers and adjudicators have introduced and affirmed stances that heavily restrict or outright criminalize the public presence and legitimacy of TGE people, ranging from bans on gender-affirming healthcare (e.g., US youth care bans; Dawson and Kates 2025) to legal declarations that TGE identities are fictitious and illegitimate (e.g., UK Supreme Court Ruling; Dawson and Sobel 2025) to outright declaring that presenting TGE identities are forms of fraud or public indecency (e.g., proposed Texas legislation H.B. 3817). Broadly, news media and public policy have become more hostile towards TGE people during this time (Alstott et al. 2024; Billard 2023, 2024).

The transnational political movements driving these shifts are heterogeneous, but rely upon shared core beliefs, tactics, and strategic tools. Broadly speaking, the

anti-transgender movement and its successes can be understood through the critical framework of *cultural hegemony* and through practical models of *alternative influence networks*, *disinformation*, and *conspiracy theories*. Anti-transgender politics represent what Gramsci termed cultural hegemony in the sense that they reproduce longstanding dominant cultural narratives and beliefs (“transgender people are mentally ill”; “genitals present at birth define gender”) while delegitimizing and countering movements that challenge this dominant framework (“transgender identities are non-pathological variations in human identity”; see Adamson 1980). As a hegemonic product, the anti-transgender movement positions “gender ideology” as a threat to the natural, “common-sense” order of reality and therefore an assault on the rights of people who believe in said order.

This special issue of the *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies* solicited a diverse range of articles that each, despite varied foci and methodologies, aim to explore the dynamics of how anti-transgender politics have succeeded worldwide. Some contributions explicitly focus on the role of manufactured doubt in politics and litigation (Corby 2025, this issue; Gwenffrewi 2025, this issue) or the role of credulous news media and institutional support in the movement (e.g., Gwenffrewi 2025, this issue; Smith et al. 2025, this issue). Others highlight how social media-based communities radicalize and reinforce beliefs about TGE people among laypersons (e.g., Berge and Schmalzer 2025, this issue; Brewer 2025, this issue; Knott-Fayle 2025, this issue; Ma and Wang 2025, this issue), or how technologically mediated communication and networking promotes the flow of anti-transgender content (e.g., Channon and Mathieson 2025, this issue). Yet, each contribution interrogates some aspect of how this anti-transgender movement functions. Here, we review the context surrounding the politically heterogeneous, transnational anti-transgender movement, and elaborate upon how the current issue’s contents contribute to our collective knowledge.

CORE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES OF ANTI-TRANSGENDER MOVEMENTS

Nobody’s calling to exterminate anybody because the other problem with that statement is that transgender people is not a real ontological category. It’s not a legitimate category of being. There are people who think that they’re the wrong sex, but they’re mistaken. They’re laboring under a delusion. And so we need to correct that delusion.

–Michael Knowles, Conservative Political Action Conference

(March 4, 2023)

We affirm that:

For the purposes of state/federal law, a person’s “sex” is defined as his or her biological sex (either male or female) at birth;

For the purposes of state/federal law, a “female” is an individual whose biological reproductive system is developed to produce ova; a “male” is an individual whose biological reproductive system is developed to fertilize the ova of a female.

–Women’s Bill of Rights, Women’s Liberation Front (March 31, 2022)

Across the country, ideologues who deny the biological reality of sex have increasingly used legal and other socially coercive means to permit men to self-identify as women and gain access to intimate single-sex spaces and activities designed for women, from women's domestic abuse shelters to women's workplace showers. This is wrong. Efforts to eradicate the biological reality of sex fundamentally attack women by depriving them of their dignity, safety, and well-being.

—Donald Trump, Executive Order 14168 (January 20, 2025)

The fundamental organizing principle of anti-transgender political movements is the belief that transgender identities are illegitimate and that “biological sex,” conceptualized as reproductive anatomy and karyotype, inherently determines the “correct” sex and gender a person should possess. Within this framework, sex and gender are both determined by what gametes and reproductive role a person “should” develop, with intersex variations and fertility challenges represented as “disorders” of “normal” functioning rather than legitimate identities. Gender identities other than “male” and “female” are dismissed entirely as fabrications or delusions. This belief is shared across anti-transgender political movements transnationally, including groups from the United States, Canada, Australia, the UK, Europe, Russia, Latin America, China, and Japan (Agius et al. 2023; Billard, 2023; Biroli and Rousseau 2025; Caiani and Tranić 2024; Corredor 2019; Edenberg 2023; Kawasaki 2023; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Zarembek et al. 2021).

This shared axiom allows for cooperation and collaboration between groups that are nominally antagonistic. The re-normalization of homophobia and opposition to gay rights is driven primarily by right-wing partisans and religious conservatives, particularly—but not exclusively—in the United States (Brenan 2025; Guillot and Coi 2025; ILGA–Europe 2025; PRRI 2024), and can be interpreted as part of a broader process of right-wing populist democratic backsliding that has occurred across many countries over the past decade (see Carrier and Carothers 2025; Riedl et al. 2025; Waldner and Lusk 2018). These platforms consistently include “anti-gender” politics, including opposition to “gender ideology,” which conceptually encompasses anti-feminism, anti-LGBTQIA+ politics, anti-egalitarianism, anti-abortion, and biologically deterministic positions (Datta 2021; Di Sario 2025; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Hajek and Domrowski 2022; ILGA–Europe 2025; Paternotte and Kuhar 2016; Strand and Svenson 2021). While the transnational anti-gender movement began as a project of the Catholic Church that characterized deviations from cisgender, heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear families as antagonistic to God’s design (Zengarini 2024), the movement itself has secularized over time as normative populist right-wing politics (for a review, see Graff and Korolczuk 2022).

By emphasizing anti-transgender politics, a “big tent” movement opposing the normalization of TGE people in civil society can be constructed that allows religious conservatives and secular anti-gender activists to cooperate with anti-transgender liberals, so-called “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (TERFs), “gender critical” feminists, and atheist “skeptical” communities. Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) was able to work closely with Family Policy Alliance, Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), and the Heritage Foundation despite their goals with regard to women’s rights (in par-

ticular, abortion access) and gay marriage being completely incompatible. That these groups were directly responsible for overturning *Roe v. Wade* and heavily restricting abortion access in the United States was no object to continued collaboration (see Alliance Defending Freedom 2025). Cooperation between the radical feminist WoLF and well-known right-wing religious think tanks has been regular and recurrent for years (e.g., Norris 2021). This cooperation has included financial support from ADF to WoLF dating back to 2015.

Why someone believes that transgender people are delusional and illegitimate is irrelevant; the shared belief itself is sufficient for collaboration and movement advancement. Whereas religious perspectives argue that sex and gender are divinely ordained by God (Zengarini 2024), TERF groups present their opposition to “gender ideology” as radical left-wing “gender abolitionism” that will enable women as a sex-based “caste” to obtain and retain the “means of production” (uteri) within their framework (see Deep Green Resistance 2020). Under TERF frameworks, normalizing transgender identities represent a threat to women’s control of the means of production, and therefore it is sexist and dangerous to normalize mutability between sex castes. Other “skeptical” or “gender critical” perspectives instead represent current normalization of TGE identities as the products of adolescent fads or psychiatric malpractice through the use of conspiracy narratives and/or pseudoscience.

The importance of preventing TGE identities from becoming normalized was more important than all other concerns:

What’s at stake here is the end of women’s and girls’ existence as a legal class. Gender identity policies in public accommodations not only forbid lawmakers and the courts from seeing sex as an immutable characteristic, they redefine any separate legal recognition for women and girls as discriminatory. With so much on the line, it’s urgent to build bridges across disagreement and take action to protect our rights.

–Natasha Chart, WoLF

Fundamentally, it is the refusal to acknowledge transgender women as women and transgender men as men that the anti-transgender movement values above any other concerns. Research has even found that among people who consciously describe their support for anti-transgender policies as being about “safety” for women or “fairness” for athletes, transphobia explains their policy support more than any other stated concern (Morgenroth et al. 2024). That this shared perspective allows cooperation between actors who are openly antagonistic on matters of gay rights is a key reason why right-wing policy groups have adopted it, as Meg Kilgannon explicitly articulated at Family Research Council’s *Value Voters Summit* in 2017:

For all of its recent success, the LGBT alliance is actually fragile, and the trans activists need the gay rights movement to help legitimize them.

Gender identity on its own is just a bridge too far. If you separate the T from the alphabet soup, we’ll have more success. (Montgomery 2017)

That American poll data suggest that cisgender queer people see more similarity between themselves and cisgender heterosexual people than they do with TGE people, and that relatively large minority proportions support anti-transgender positions, suggests that this strategy has been particularly effective (Minkin et al. 2025), despite

most cisgender LGB adults polled expecting Republican policies to make life worse for them (Minkin et al. 2025).

However, this belief system is necessary, but insufficient, for engagement with anti-transgender politics. Poll data indicates that while support for anti-transgender positions is increasing across all points along the left–right political spectrum in multiple countries, the majority of cisgender people polled report little interest in and place little importance on issues related to gender and gender identity (Parker et al. 2022). These patterns suggest that while central principles of transphobia have become more socially normative over time, this process has not necessarily happened through laypersons placing importance on these principles.

Thus, while these positions are endorsable across the political spectrum, what factors shape how and why someone endorses and values these positions to the point of participating in radical transphobia remains an understudied question. Several contributions in this special issue explore these questions through the lenses of online radicalization and community narratives. Three contributions (Berge and Schmalzer 2025, this issue; Knott-Fayle 2025, this issue; Ma and Wang 2025, this issue) conduct qualitative analyses of discussions in anti-transgender social media circuits in the Anglosphere (e.g., Ovarit and Twitter/X) and the Sinosphere (e.g., *Douban*) to explore the content and discussions that contribute to community radicalization and narrative formation. Brewer (2025, this issue) experimentally explores the impact of edited visual misinformation used by “transvestigators” (conspiracy theorists that attempt to “uncover” and “expose” people they believe to be transgender) on attitudes towards TGE people and how these processes that exist in online spaces facilitate radicalization in people who consume them. These contributions explore how the interconnected processes of discussion and consumption online facilitate acceptance of transphobic (mis)information and increase support for radical anti-transgender politics. From another angle, Channon and Mathieson (2025, this issue) model detection of anti-transgender content on YouTube, potentially developing tools to monitor its spread.

NORMALIZING PROCESSES OF ANTI-TRANSGENDER POSITIONS

Other contributions in this special issue instead focus more on the processes that help normalize anti-transgender politics and beliefs within the Overton window of acceptable politics. These contributions examine how anti-transgender narratives are mainstreamed in local and national news outlets (Smith et al. 2025, this issue); how disinformation strategies developed in other political arenas are leveraged in ongoing litigation surrounding restrictive, anti-transgender policies (Corby 2025, this issue); and the central role pressure groups play in normalizing anti-transgender positions within legacy media (Gwenffrewi 2025, this issue).

Smith and colleagues (2025, this issue) and Gwenffrewi (2025, this issue), in particular, explore the politically paradoxical nature of anti-transgender politics: while the movement itself is politically heterogeneous, substantial political resources and influence associated with the movement comes from the American and British far-right (Datta 2021; IGLA–Europe 2025; see also Ma and Wang 2025, this issue, noting the influence of translated Anglosphere narratives in Chinese TERF circles). While Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) helped originate the model legislation for sex definition

bills in the United States, it owes its influence to funding from the Alliance Defending Freedom (Gabbat 2023; Pope 2024). While liberal political parties (e.g., US Democrats, UK Labour) have embraced slogans and positions consistent with anti-transgender politics in recent years (Lavietes 2024; Thompson and Doherty 2025), they have done so following right-wing success at implementing and normalizing said positions, rationalizing that failing to do so alienates normative majorities (Holzman 2024; McKiernan and Zeffman 2025).

Thus, Gwenffrewi's (2025, this issue) study of LGB Alliance, a prominent UK-based pressure group who were influential in securing a Supreme Court ruling declaring that transgender people could not use gender congruent public facilities in the UK, and how it exercises hegemonic influence as a registered charity yields, provides key insights about how such processes function in media landscapes. In a similar vein, Smith and colleagues (2025, this issue) examine how anti-transgender coverage flows through local and national news ecosystems, expanding an existing body of research and public criticism which suggests that prestigious, traditional news media outlets (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The BBC*) have played central roles in normalizing anti-transgender beliefs and politics (see Billard 2023, 2024). Both prestigious legacy media (e.g., *The BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*) and right-wing partisan outlets (e.g., *The Telegraph*, *Fox News*, *The Federalist*) alike have circulated exponentially increasing amounts of hostile coverage (e.g., Billard 2023, 2024). However, while right-wing outlets typically distribute overtly hostile, conspiratorial stories (e.g., grooming conspiracies, allegations of children "identifying as cats"), prestigious legacy media like *The New York Time* instead position their coverage as neutral perspectives on "complex" debates, presenting anti-transgender politics as an equally legitimate opposing opinion to that of the scientific community and TGE people (Ashley 2020; Elster 2022; NYT Contributors' Letter 2023). Such tendencies reflect a broader pattern; comparisons can be made to coverage of evolution versus creationism (Allgaier and Holliman 2006; Rosenhouse and Branch 2006), climate change denial (Imundo and Rapp 2022; Painter and Ashe 2012), AIDS denialism (Grimes 2019; Slothouber 2020), and pseudoscience linking vaccines to autism (Dixon and Clarke 2012; Holton et al. 2012; Stroud and Jamieson 2017). In this issue, Smith and colleagues (2025) examine the bidirectional relationships between agenda-setting national news outlets (i.e., *The New York Times*) and local news on these subjects.

This pseudo-neutrality is enabled in part through widespread misinformation narratives surrounding the safety, etiology, and outcomes of gender-affirming care (Billard 2024). Examples of such narratives include the concept of "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" (i.e., that gender dysphoria is instantiated through peer influence and social media; see Restar 2020 for discussion and elaboration), misrepresentations of what "low quality" evidence means in medical practice, insinuations that TGE youth will "grow out of it" if left to their own devices, and conspiracy theories implicating the pharmaceutical industry in intentionally pushing transition onto youth (see Billard 2023, 2024; McLamore and Leveille 2023; McNamara et al. 2024; Wuest and Last 2024). While some of these narratives originated from antiquated scientific models that have since been challenged (e.g., the claim surrounding desistance; see Ashley 2019; Karrington 2022), others originated entirely from within radicalized online spaces before

being granted an air of legitimacy through scientific publications and editorials (e.g., ROGD; see Kessler 2022; Restar 2020; Serano 2020).

All of these discussions are commonplace in news coverage surrounding TGE youth and, as Corby (2025, this issue) explores, in litigation surrounding care for TGE youth. Much of the United States now outright bans or criminalizes providing gender-affirming care (Redfield 2025; Trans Legislation Tracker 2025), and during the second Trump presidency, the Supreme Court has upheld these bans. Unprecedented action from the Department of Justice has *de facto* banned gender-affirming care for minors on the basis of these misinformation narratives, even in states with shield laws, through intimidating professionals out of providing it (Simmons-Duffin and Bolton 2025). As such, Corby's (2025, this issue) analysis of a specific court case models how these narratives manufacture doubt, similar to previous studies of widespread misinformation in other contexts. Nevertheless, while anti-transgender politics may be separate from the broader anti-gender movement conceptually, anti-transgender animus is an integral and inseparable component of the anti-gender politics that are fully integrated within transnational far-right populism (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Marchlewska et al. 2019; see Datta 2021; Di Sario 2025; Hajek and Dombrowski 2022; ILGA–Europe 2025; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Strand and Svenson 2021).

ANTI-TRANSGENDER MOVEMENTS IN BROADER CONTEXT

Transphobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and most other systemic prejudices continue because they are either explicitly or implicitly encouraged and reproduced within societal systems and norms. While landmark changes such as widespread legalization of gay marriage, acknowledging anti-trans and anti-queer hate crimes as hate crimes, expanded gender recognition procedures, elimination of sterilization mandates for said recognition, and depathologization of transgender identities all constituted systemic changes that expanded the rights and dignities of queer and TGE people, these changes signaled social norms without necessarily changing them. For example, research suggests that *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in the United States, did not change American's personal attitudes towards gay marriage, only what they thought was the normative majority position within the country (Tankard and Paluck 2016). While polls suggested rising majority support for gay marriage in the years since, even among Republicans (Borelli 2022), these patterns sharply reversed when homophobia was re-normalized through the widespread "groomer" conspiracy (Brenan 2025) and, as of 2025, longtime opponents of gay marriage have initiated a process that could overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Dwyer 2025).

Meanwhile, institutional actions favoring anti-transgender beliefs normalize anti-trans beliefs. While advocates in the UK have long decried close associations between the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and anti-trans pressure groups, these associations specifically normalize and legitimize transphobic positions and narratives within the country despite these objections (Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention & Human Security 2025; Siddique 2023). Despite being small, non-expert organizations, groups like Sex Matters UK and LGB Alliance have been successful litigants in court and adept at signaling to both liberal and conservative cisgender people that transphobia is normative. The pseudoscientific narratives discussed in some

papers have been adopted as official policy in both the UK and the US following both the Cass Review and the Trump Administration's declared positions on TGE People. Such processes are likely to be imitated in other countries.

These trends mean that the renormalization and re-pathologization of transphobia will likely continue for the foreseeable future across the industrialized world, particularly if liberal political parties do not reject these processes. As far as the contents of this special issue are concerned, the collection overall provides both retrospective insights about how anti-transgender narratives and communities coalesced prior to transphobia's re-mainstreaming and some of the mechanisms through which that re-mainstreaming happened. While the strategies that they collectively suggest for preventing these processes from intensifying are seldom able to be implemented by researchers and lay readers, as they often are contingent on community moderation and action by platform holders, understanding their underlying mechanics can still be helpful for preventing new fronts from opening in an increasingly trans-antagonistic world.

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