How anti-trans media undermines everybody's rights
A timeline

New research shows anti-trans media stories serve as a political tool to attack equality and human rights frameworks

Introduction

The anti-trans moral panic that is currently raging in the UK has been aided and abetted by the UK media and amplified by social media. While it started ramping up in 2017, the political hostility towards trans people goes back much further. And trans people aren't the only target. Media stories opposing trans people's rights overlap with opposition to other groups' rights and to equalities laws and human rights frameworks in general.

Why does this matter?

In a healthy democracy, the media informs citizens on political issues, enabling debate and political participation. The concept of the Fourth Estate means that the press acts as a watchdog, holding our political representatives to account. In exchange, it has faced limited oversight and regulation. But instead of representing everybody, it is abusing its privileges. Over time, minority groups won rights, while media ownership became concentrated in a few corporations. Findings show the press built an anti-rights agenda that serves the interests of billionaire proprietors and reactionary political actors. Failing to take media transphobia seriously endangers everybody's civil rights.

Where next?

Parts of the right-wing press want to repeal our equality and human rights frameworks. This will affect women, queer folk, Black and Brown people, people seeking asylum, and workers. It is part of a global movement seeking to undermine civil rights. Findings suggest the anti-trans moral panic may read as a strategy of billionaire media owners. But the contemporary media economy intensifies it. News media are increasingly reliant on creating outrage online. With Big Tech leaders seeking to influence democratic processes around the world, media-driven attacks on civil rights will only intensify. We need a stronger intersectional coalition that recognises anti-trans media as part of a bigger reactionary agenda. And it needs coordinated efforts to better regulate an increasingly hostile media system.

This timeline traces developments in the media landscape, legal rights, and examples of press responses.

1970s

Late 1960s-70s. UK joins the EEC. While feminist and gay rights activism existed in the postwar period, the more radical Women's Liberation Movement and Gay Liberation Front emerge. First UK anti-discrimination laws on sex and race.

1980s

Media ownership deregulated. Rupert Murdoch expands media empire in UK. Defeats print unions at Wapping in 1986.

Some progress, some steps backwards. European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rules homosexuality must be decriminalised in Northern Ireland. Cases about legal gender recognition went to the ECtHR but were lost. Section 28 banning 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools introduced.

> *'A transsexual who claimed that the Government's refusal to change his birth certificate violated his human rights lost his case in the European Court of Human Rights yesterday' (Telegraph, 1986)*

1990s

Newspapers launch first online versions. Development of more sensationalist and simplistic news. Statutory press regulation rejected.

Important milestones reached. European Court of Justice (ECJ) rules trans people protected under EU sex discrimination law. Age of consent for gay and bi men equalised. ECtHR rules against UK ban on LGBT soldiers. Human Rights Act incorporates European Convention into UK law.

> *'the House of Lords is poring over the third reading of Lady Turner's absurdly named Sexual Orientation Discrimination Bill, and the European Court has ruled that a council was wrong to sack a college manager who underwent a sex change' (Telegraph, 1996)*

> *'No sex change, we're British'. 'Once we have abolished our own currency, and replaced it with an artificial new one, then we shall have performed the full sex-change operation' (Telegraph, 1996)*

2000s

Print newspaper sales fall. Decline in professional standards due to economic pressures. Smartphones and social media give new avenues for news dissemination.

Major steps forward. EU Equal Treatment Directive introduces protection from sexual orientation discrimination. Section 28 repealed. Gender Recognition Act passed. LGBTQ couples gain adoption rights, can form civil partnerships, and be granted family unification in context of migration.

> *'The ideal soldier is physically tough and mentally balanced, so a serviceman who needs lipo-suction or a sex change is in the wrong job. And, dare I ask how a female soldier, who is so distressed by remarks about her appearance that she has to resort to implants, would cope under fire?' (Daily Mail, 2001)*

> *'any law to give transsexuals freedom to marry would be likely to pave the way for legalised homosexual marriage' (Daily Mail, 2001)*

> *'DRUG addicts, prisoners, transvestites, travellers and terrorists … Here we list 20 examples of how the Human Rights Act, working with the European Convention on Human Rights and Strasbourg judges, has wreaked havoc against common sense' (Daily Mail, 2008)*

2010s

Leveson Report recommends new system of press regulation, which establishes IMPRESS. Major newspapers refuse to sign up and instead set up IPSO. Death of Lucy Meadows follows intrusive press coverage of her transition.

Further progress, but anti-equality movement intensifies. Equality Act deepens protection from discrimination across nine protected characteristics. Marriage equality laws for same-sex couples passed in England, Wales and Scotland. EU referendum sees Leave campaigns conflating the EU and ECtHR.

> *'If even the feminist Germaine Greer can get herself banned from a campus for having suggested that many women think male to female transgender people "do not look like, sound like or behave like women", what does that tell us about the warped priorities of this generation… If every child leaves school believing that Britain's imperial history is evil, that open-ended human rights must be extended to everyone, including the wicked and the criminal, and that the world is getting catastrophically hotter, then eventually everyone in Britain will hold those views, and, crucially, anyone who dares to challenge them will be a social outcast' (Daily Mail, 2015)*

> *'Says [in The Guardian] that since the Conservatives got in six years ago, there's been a 1,000 per cent rise in people being treated on the NHS for gender disswossname. Makes you proud to be British but only if we stay in the EU. I'm going down the pub, or I would be if it hadn't been turned into a safe space for bi-curious Afghan asylum-seekers' (Daily Mail, 2016)*

> *Tories 'have endorsed transgenderism, swallowed the idea that Britain is a hate-filled country in need of more social workers, and refused to defend low taxes…Britain needs a new opposition to liberal Toryism' (Telegraph, 2017)*

> *'Make the mistake of drunkenly tweeting that a female politician you don't like is a "bitch" or write a Facebook post questioning whether trans women are "real" women and you could be judged unfriendly and have your collar felt by the cops. It's terrifying' (The Sun, 2017)*

2020s

Social media platforms continue changing the news. Newspapers need individual stories to perform well with platform algorithms. This often involves staging outrage that generates clicks and advertising revenue. Professor Jason Arday's death prompts calls for IPSO investigation.

Rollback of equality and human rights protections in Britain. Brexit removes UK requirement to comply with EU equality law and Charter on Fundamental Rights. Windsor Framework guarantees 'non-diminution' of rights in Northern Ireland. Supreme Court rules 'sex' under Equality Act refers to 'biological sex'.

> *'Then there's the Jamaican drug dealer […] who managed to avoid deportation to his native island by claiming his daughter was transgender and could speak about it only to him […] One day, perhaps sooner than many think for we live in febrile times, we could leave the ECHR, forcing Parliament to lay down a more sensible and restricted framework of basic rights' (Daily Mail, 2025)*

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