



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

News Media Representations

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News media serve as key sources of political information for the public. Historically, they have served as the predominant source of political information, although in the digital age, alternative sources, such as blogs and social media, have emerged to rival news media's monopoly. Nonetheless, news media remain significant sources of political information and serve as central players within the networked flow of facts, opinions, and perspectives that shape the contours of public debate on social and political issues. Importantly, news media have served, alongside entertainment media, as a primary means through which the cisgender public has received information about trans issues and identities. As such, they have been key determinants of the cis public's understanding of trans identity, as well as of their attitudes and opinions toward trans people and their civil rights.

This entry summarizes the historical development and current state of trans people's representations in news media. First, it addresses early news media representations of trans people in the United States and Europe, beginning in the first half of the 20th century and continuing through the midcentury period. Next, the entry characterizes the state of trans representation in the traditional news media of newspapers and broadcast television from the 1990s through the mid-2010s, discussing the role of these representations in the (de)legitimation of trans issues and identities. Third, it describes representations of trans people in digital news media since the mid-2010s, attending to the ways digital news representations compare and contrast with the representations of the legacy press as both the driving technologies of news media and social norms and values have evolved. Finally, this entry addresses the global press, describing news media's contentious role in the exportation of "trans" as an identity category central to modern society into countries across the world.

Early News Media Representations of Trans People

The earliest deliberate representations of individuals we would today classify as "trans" in news media emerged in the early 1900s, albeit without the terminology of "trans" identity. (Although news media had previously reported on instances of crossdressing and cross-gender behavior, these instances were rarely presented as indicative of an internal sense of gender identity.) By the 1930s, popular press outlets in the United States and Europe were publishing occasional accounts of medical innovations in sexual transformation, largely pioneered by German physician Magnus Hirschfeld and his associates at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in Berlin. In Europe, the most notable of these stories were published in Germany and Denmark, and they reported on the series of surgeries performed under Hirschfeld's supervision on Danish painter Lili Elbe. In the United States, these medical marvels were reported and debated in popular magazines and sexological journals, where they gave exemplars of possibility to other would-be transsexual women and men. Importantly, because of the medicalized nature of their coverage, these news reports provided only the exemplar of transsexuality—that is, of the transformation of one's anatomy via endocrinological and surgical intervention to match that of the gender "opposite" to that which one was assigned at birth. The notion of a trans identity that was not transsexual would not emerge in news media until much later.

One such individual who saw models of possibility in the news reports of the popular press was Christine Jorgensen. Jorgensen, who had been born and raised in New York City, traveled to Denmark, where she received hormone replacement therapy until she was eventually granted governmental permission to undergo genital reconstruction surgery in the fall of 1951. By that time, the term transsexual had been popularized as a category of self-identification by German American endocrinologist Harry Benjamin, and it ultimately became a household term following the media circus surrounding Jorgensen's operations in 1952. For most people in the United States, the unprecedented media coverage made them aware of transsexuality as a phenomenon for the first time and informed their first impressions of who trans people were.

Importantly, the news coverage that brought trans identity into public consciousness presented a very particular form of trans identity. Transness was, per the news media of the era, the desire to be a "normal" person of the "opposite" gender, driven by an innate sense of the "wrongness" of one's body (i.e., the sex one was assigned at birth), which could only be overcome via the wonders of modern medicine. For trans women, who were largely the only trans people represented in news media, part of this desire was the dream

of fulfilling the normative role of the middle-class, heterosexual housewife—a dream that was both explicitly and implicitly racialized as white. That is, to be trans meant to be respectable in the eyes of the mainstream U.S. society of the era. The focus on Jorgensen (and other trans people like her) was a deliberate one. Other trans people existed, including trans women of color and working-class trans people, but they did not fit within this vision of respectability, and so they received little attention from the mass news media.

Following the midcentury period and up until the 1990s, this vision of trans identity predominated. When trans people were represented in news media, they were usually trans women, they never identified outside or across the binary of “male” and “female,” they were usually straight, and they were usually white. When trans people diverged from these expectations, they were depicted as aberrations and as degenerates. For example, trans people who did not pursue genital reconstruction surgery were frequently represented as “hermaphrodite” freaks who defied the very laws of nature and were, accordingly, portrayed as dangerous to society. Yet even when trans people met these rigid ideas of respectability, they were rarely afforded respect within news media. They were, rather, often portrayed as mentally ill, as unnatural deceivers, or as sexual predators. For example, trans women were often portrayed as gay men who underwent surgical transformation for the primary purpose of seducing heterosexual men. And these prejudicial constructions of trans identity reverberated in news media representations for a half century and only fell out of favor (but still did not disappear) in the late 2010s.

Trans People in Traditional News Media

The traditional mainstream news media of newspapers and broadcast television—what is often referred to as the “legacy press”—serve a key legitimating role in U.S. politics and society. It is through news media asserting the legitimacy of any given group’s social and political claims that the public come to view their issues (and, for minority groups, often their very identities) as worthy of dignified attention. For trans people, representations in traditional news media were, for decades, mostly delegitimizing.

By the mid-1990s, thanks both to activist Holly Boswell’s 1991 article “The Transgender Alternative,” published in the transgender community journal *Chrysalis Quarterly*, and to author Leslie Feinberg, who published the pivotal 1992 pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, transgender had emerged as the term of choice for people whose gender identities differed from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender terminology largely came to supplant the term transsexual, as transgender afforded a broader conception of trans identity than transsexual, which carried with it associations of rigid binarity and normativity. Changes in the terminology used by news media, however, lagged significantly, with transgender becoming the dominant term only in the 2010s.

Indeed, the language and discourses used to discuss trans issues and individuals in the legacy press remained regressive throughout the 1990s and into the mid-2000s. Alongside the more obvious means of delegitimation, such as the use of slurs and name-calling and the defamation of trans persons’ characters, the legacy press enacted four main categories of delegitimation of trans people. First, traditional news media outlets frequently misnamed and misgendered trans people. Often this could take the form of presenting someone’s birth name in lieu of their chosen name or else placing their chosen name in quotation marks, as though it were a nickname. Additionally, trans people would be misgendered through the use of pronouns, with news outlets using the pronouns of the gender a trans person was assigned at birth, rather than those of their current gender identity. Even when trans people were not misnamed, they were often still misgendered via pronouns.

Second, legacy press outlets often misrepresented or mischaracterized trans identity, conflating trans identity with other identities, referring to trans identity as a mental illness or the result of trauma, and describing trans women as “men in dresses.” Additionally, these outlets would often deploy what is referred to as “wrong-body discourse,” or the definition of trans identity as having been “born in the wrong body.” While this discourse accurately describes some trans people’s experience of gender, it restricts the various identities that fall under the term transgender to a singular conception of (postoperative) transsexuality.

Third, traditional news media often characterized trans people as “tricksters” who live out their gender identities for the primary purpose of seducing cisgender heterosexuals. While this narrative was most often

applied to trans women, usually as justification for violence against them, it was also applied to trans men. Most notably, this narrative was widely used by news outlets reporting on the death of Brandon Teena, a trans man murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska, in 1993.

Finally, the legacy press often sexualized the trans body. Most often this was done through a focus on trans people's sexual organs as the source of gender identity such that trans women were only considered women if they had undergone vaginoplasty and trans men were only considered men if they had undergone phalloplasty. To the extent that nonbinary people were reported on—which they very rarely were—their sexual organs were presumed to hold the “truth” of their “real” gender. Yet even beyond a focus on sexual organs, traditional news media outlets maintained a prejudicial focus on the normativity of trans people's gender presentations, measuring the authenticity of trans people's gender identities against their attainment of a normative cisgender appearance.

Over the course of the 2000s and 2010s, these forms of delegitimation decreased significantly, such that by the mid-2010s, the presence of delegitimizing coverage in a news outlet was typically evidence of its overt conservative bias. Of course, this is not to say that coverage was not still limited in several important ways. In fact, many of these delegitimizing discourses remained but in more subtle ways. For instance, trans people are frequently discussed in aesthetic terms, with an undue focus on their appearance (even when described complimentarily) as justification for their gender identity. Nonetheless, by the mid-2010s, trans issues and identities were widely held as legitimate within mainstream news media and, consequently, became subjects of legitimate political discussion for the general public.

Trans People in the Digital News Environment

The introduction and proliferation of digital technologies radically transformed the news media environment. The institutions of the legacy press moved online, and new, digital-native news outlets emerged—many of which rivaled, if not surpassed, the audience sizes of their competitor legacy press outlets. Beyond distributing exclusively online, digital-native outlets differ from legacy press outlets in a number of key ways. Perhaps the most important difference is that their issue agendas are more closely linked to those of social media, and they tend to be more transparently attentive to progressive social issues. Considering both the rapid growth of the modern trans rights movement in the 2000s and 2010s and the way social media have afforded trans people platforms for mass self-communication, the rise of digital-native news outlets has considerably affected trans people's representation in news media.

Most notably, trans representations are more frequent in digital-native news outlets than in legacy press outlets, and these representations also tend to be more explicitly sympathetic in their perspective. Digital-native news outlets also present more frequent representations of trans people of color, trans children and teenagers, and trans men than legacy press outlets. Although neither digital-native nor legacy press outlets offer representations proportional in their frequency to the size of the trans population, they have offered a significantly improved vision of trans people's diversity since the early 2000s.

That said, compared to the predigital era, the representations in legacy press outlets, in their own right, have become far more frequent and more explicitly pro-trans. Both legacy press and digital-native outlets offer increased (albeit still infrequent) representations of nonbinary people. And both types of news outlets offer a more robust set of topics that they cover, as trans issues and identities are regarded as legitimate subjects of social and political discussion. For instance, issues of discrimination, anti-trans violence, health care access, military service, and access to public accommodations form a large plurality of the news coverage of trans topics, and each is represented as an important concern for social equality. Moreover, digital-native and legacy press attention to these issues does not, in the aggregate, differ. That is, the proportion of coverage that digital-native outlets dedicate to any given issue is approximately equal to the proportion of coverage legacy press outlets dedicate to that same issue.

In significant part, improvements in legacy press coverage since the early 2000s can be traced to the influence of digital-native outlets (as well as to the tireless work of trans activists and social movement organizations). Because legacy press outlets must now compete with digital-native outlets for a share of the information market, they must ensure that they are not missing coverage of topics or events being offered by

their economic competitors, which would result in a loss of audience. Legacy press outlets, therefore, monitor the content of digital-native outlets and adjust their own coverage accordingly. Moreover, in seeing coverage of a topic or event by their competitors, legacy press outlets come to see that topic or event as legitimate news. Since digital-native outlets began dedicating significant attention to trans issues and identities in their reporting, so too did legacy press outlets. And since digital-native outlets regarded trans issues and identities as legitimate, so too did legacy press outlets. This kind of intermedia agenda-setting effect afforded trans issues and identities a pathway to representation in the wider news environment and to more legitimating representations.

Trans People in the Global Press

Nonnormative gender identities exist and have existed across cultures but often in terms that European and U.S. society do not recognize. In these cultures, understandings of gender variance have produced native identity categories, such as hijra in the Indian subcontinent; muxe in Oaxaca, Mexico; and waria in Indonesia. Within news media, however, these identities are often recast as “trans” identities, collapsing cultural differences into one universalized identity category of Euro-American origin. The source of this recasting is, most often, transnational media companies usually based in Europe or North America, which report on the gender-variant people of these societies as members of a global trans community. However, transnational media companies alone are not to blame. National media in these societies also participate in this conflation of “trans” identities, making the recasting of native gender categories a collaborative project. For example, the hijra of India are described in both international and Indian news media as being locked in battles for “trans rights.” And similar dynamics are apparent elsewhere.

In other cultures, no native identity categories cover gender variance, and so “trans” is a useful cultural import. In Namibia, for example, the label of “trans” has given gender-variant people both an organizing category of identity and a collective global identity through which to build cross-national solidarity and, in doing so, leverage international news media attention as a means of effecting local change. In still other cultures, news media present simultaneous representations of “trans” identity and other gender-variant identity categories, and these representations often find themselves in tension with one another. For example, in Brazil, both trans and travesti are represented in news media, with trans identity being presented as the more “respectable” identity to hold.

Importantly, the label of “trans” is regarded as a superior mode of identification by global news media precisely because of its Euro-American origins. For example, in Taiwan in the 1950s, intersex soldier Xie Jianshun was styled the “Chinese Christine” by news media and held up as a symbol of Taiwan’s technological and cultural sophistication, which they presented as rivaling the United States. In these contexts, as in others, European and North American culture are presumed to represent a universal default. That is, “trans,” as a European and North American concept, is held up as a self-evident category that we should expect to find universally in modern society, and in advancing this idea, global news media essentialize European social categories as the natural state of social existence. However, while the remaking of native gender identities across the globe in a Euro-American model involves familiar dynamics of cultural imperialism, it simultaneously makes nonnormative gender identities legible in a global context and enables a transnational movement for recognition and acceptance. As such, there is an ambivalent tension whereby the global press serves as a vector of cultural power that maintains Euro-American supremacy and, at the same time, advances the equality of trans people and those whose identities can be recast as “trans” throughout the world.

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See also [Communication](#); [Public Opinion of/Climate for](#); [Reality TV](#); [Representations in Popular Culture](#); [Scripted TV](#); [Social Media](#); [Social Media Influencers](#); [YouTube](#)

Further Readings

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