



“Gender-Critical” Discourse as Disinformation: Unpacking TERF Strategies of Political Communication

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I was conducting fieldwork for my forthcoming book at the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in Washington, DC, when the infamous rapid-onset gender dysphoria (ROGD) article was published in *PLOS One* by Brown University public health scholar Lisa Littman in August 2018 (Billard, 2024). The gist of the article was that transgender identity is a “social contagion” spread among emotionally vulnerable youth who declare trans identities in order to be special or (conversely) to be trendy, or as a cry for help, but who are not actually trans. The article was quickly and near-universally declared illegitimate by members of the scholarly community on both theoretical and methodological grounds (see, e.g., Ashley, 2020; Bauer, Lawson, & Metzger, 2022; Coalition for the Advancement and Application of Psychological Science, 2021; Restar, 2020).¹ But much like the 1998 Andrew Wakefield et al. study that set off a misinformed panic about the connection between measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccines and autism—which persists still today—the widespread discrediting of the research’s claims did nothing to prevent the study from being taken up by zealots as “proof” that “transgender ideology” (Faye, 2022) is a dangerous force that must be stopped. Within days of the study’s initial publication, it was being shared in disparate corners of the anti-trans Internet on both sides of the Atlantic—from neofascist YouTubers in the United States to British women’s networks in the ostensible parent support community Mumsnet (Kesslen, 2022; Lewis, 2019). From there, the “debate” over ROGD spread to the mass media and to state and national political parties, where it continues to inform how opponents of transgender rights justify everything from outlawing the provision of transgender health care to opposing the United Kingdom’s Gender Recognition Act (Billard, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020b).

The weaponization of recognized misinformation to oppose transgender rights that we see in the case of ROGD is not unique. In fact, it is typical. During the two years I was at NCTE, I observed situation after situation in which misinformation about transgender issues was mobilized for the sole purpose of justifying opposition to the rights—and often the very existence—of trans people. In the intervening years, I have witnessed it countless times. Misinformation—or, more specifically, *disinformation*—about trans topics has become the defining feature of public discourse on transgender rights.² What the ROGD case illustrates particularly well, however, is the complex dynamics

surrounding the use of disinformation by the transatlantic movement against transgender rights made up of people variously identified as “gender-critical feminists” (in their own formulation) or “trans-exclusive radical feminists” (abbreviated TERFs, in the formulation of pro-trans advocates). What marks TERF attacks on the trans community apart for many observers is the seemingly unlikely alignment between Anglo-American “feminists” and the U.S. Christian Right in both ideology and strategy (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Faye, 2022; Hines, 2020; Libby, 2022).

Generally speaking, scholarly and popular debates over “gender-critical” discourse focus on questions of TERF ideology and feminist infighting over transgender inclusion. As transfeminist philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher (2017) summarizes, “[I]t’s often been thought important to answer the question ‘What is a woman?’ in order to delimit the purview of inquiry. Since feminism is concerned with the oppression of women, goes the thought, it should be able to determine whose oppression is at stake” (p. 2). And, indeed, the question “What is a woman?” has been a constant refrain among “gender criticals,” even becoming the title of a documentary by alt-right media figure Matt Walsh, released by American far-right media company *The Daily Wire* and celebrated by prominent TERFs in the British media. In these contexts, the “TERF wars” are constructed as ideological contests over whether people are born women or men, whether womanhood is defined by reproductive capacity, and whether certain answers to those questions are incompatible with a truly feminist politics (Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020a).³

I argue, however, that a focus on questions of gender ideology and feminist identity elides the true machinations of gender-critical discourse. It is my contention that such “discourse” is better understood as disinformation. And this argument has several important corollaries that relate to (1) the purpose and objectives of gender-critical talking points, (2) the broader ideological orientations of gender-critical political action, and (3) how we conceive of disinformation’s origins and influence in contemporary Western democracies.

Gender-critical discourse is disinformation

To support my argument, it is first necessary to evidence the claim that gender-critical discourse constitutes a coordinated disinformation campaign that is part of a broader political strategy to oppose transgender rights. As I have written elsewhere (Billard, 2022), there are various types of anti-transgender misinformation: (1) definitional misinformation, which is misinformation about what transition-related health care actually is and what it does; (2) misinformation about the accessibility of trans care; (3) misinformation about the safety of trans care; (4) misinformation about the cost of trans care; (5) misinformation about “desistance,” or the frequency with which people “cease to be trans” or “detransition”; and (6) misinformation about the etiology or “cause” of trans identity; among several others (see also Lepore, Alstott, & McNamara, 2022).⁴ The spread of this misinformation is often intentional and invested in long-standing systems of media power. By that I mean to say that anti-trans misinformation is spread not only through link sharing on Mumsnet and the ill-advised retweets of transphobic trolls but also through award-winning popular press books, journalistic features in the pages of *The New York Times* in the United States and *The Times* in the United Kingdom, on the cover

of *The Atlantic*, in prime-time segments on news programs like *60 Minutes*, in conversations on some of the world's most popular podcasts, and via Twitter posts by some of the world's billionaires (Billard, 2022; Faye, 2022; Gwenffrewi, 2022; Kesslen, 2022).⁵ As with other domains of misinformation, it is these larger media sources—invested with various forms of social, cultural, political, and economic power—that reach, engage, and influence larger audiences (Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020).

This is to say nothing of the various forms of “computational propaganda” (Woolley, 2023) employed by TERFs and their allies to supplement their mass media campaigns. For example, using the Meta Ad Library, which publicly catalogs the sponsored posts about social issues, elections, and politics on Facebook and Instagram, we can see the central role disinformation has played in opposition to transgender rights in both the United States and United Kingdom. Various anti-trans actors—including TERF organizations LGB Alliance and Fair Play for Women in the United Kingdom and conservative political advocacy organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom and Concerned Women for America in the United States—paid money to Meta to ensure the wider spread of disinformation on their platforms with the clear and express intention of justifying anti-transgender policies (Billard, 2022). And these disinformation campaigns have real political effects that go beyond rhetorical claims of harm; they have succeeded in shaping policy in ways that curtail the rights and damage the life chances of trans people at various levels of governance (Billard, 2022; Hughes, Kidd, Gamarel, Operario, & Dowshen, 2021; Johnson, 2022; Lepore et al., 2022; Park, Das, & Drolet, 2021).

At a broader level, we can understand this particular approach to disinformation as fitting within a model of what Madhavi Reddi, Rachel Kuo, and Daniel Kreiss (2021) described as “identity propaganda,” or “narratives that strategically target and exploit identity-based differences in accord with pre-existing power structures to maintain hegemonic social orders” (p. 1). While Reddi and colleagues focused on disinformation campaigns targeting racial groups in the United States, we see similar dynamics play out in the disinformation campaigns targeting trans people in both the United States and the United Kingdom: The disinformation I have described contains *othering narratives* that alienate trans people, *essentializing narratives* that craft negative generalizing tropes about trans populations, and *authenticating narratives* that undermine (in particular) trans women's claims to womanhood (see also Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Bettcher, 2017; Koyama, 2020; Pape, 2022). Disinformation not only relies on epistemologically suspect claims but also entails “strategic attempts to undermine and weaponize people's social identities and group membership for political gains ... in accord with racial and other structures that underlie social differentiation” (Reddi et al., 2021, p. 13). Within the frameworks of gender-critical politics, the meaningful categories of gender that sort various kinds of political claims and organize political identity are challenged by trans identities, and so disinformation becomes a tool to maintain those meaningful categories and, in doing so, reify the hierarchies that privilege cisgender TERFs.

Unpacking TERF ideology through a disinformation lens

As I have already begun to indicate, understanding gender-critical discourse as disinformation illuminates how TERF ideology works to support particular kinds of political

action that are premised on raced and gendered hierarchies of domination. More specifically, TERF ideology aligns with broader white nationalist and imperial projects, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, that employ disinformation as a strategy to shore up their eroding sociopolitical power (e.g., Camargo & Simon, 2022; Kuo & Marwick, 2021). In addition, TERF ideology depends on a particular form of white feminism that employs victimhood as a tool for political power, and that victimhood is often premised on disinformational claims pertaining to racial and gender minorities (Armstrong, 2021; Libby, 2022; Phipps, 2021).

It has already been well established in Black feminist and trans of color critique that debates over transgender inclusion in mainstream feminism are rooted in “unspoken racism” (Koyama, 2020). At a base level, efforts to gatekeep inclusion within womanhood are highly racialized to the extent that they follow a long history of denying Black women recognition *as women* (often through “ungendering”) under white supremacy (Spillers, 1987; see also Bailey, 2021; Bey, 2017; Snorton, 2017).⁶ Within white supremacist frameworks, Black women are considered more masculine—often monstrously so—than white women and thus are regarded as threats to them (and, at a broader level, to the social order) in much the same way that “men” (which include trans women, according to TERFs) are. This includes panics over the gendered bodies of athletes like Black intersex woman Caster Semenya and biracial trans woman Fallon Fox, who are constructed as “threats” to both the “fairness” and the physical safety of women’s sports, as well as broader panics over access to gender-segregated spaces in everyday life (Bailey, 2016; Fischer & McClearn, 2020; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). In these contexts, white women’s politics of vulnerability demonizes Black cis women and (both Black and non-Black) trans women alike (Bailey, 2016, 2021; Koyama, 2020).

While we see racially charged debates over transgender inclusion in both the United States and the United Kingdom, they occur in different political spheres. Whereas in the United States such debates are largely the purview of the far right—where racism and misogyny are deeply entwined within a shared project of white patriarchal domination—in the United Kingdom they find a comfortable home within mainstream feminism. As British transfeminist Sophie Lewis (2019) describes, “[M]iddle- and upper-class white feminists have not received the pummeling from Black and Indigenous feminists that their American counterparts have, and thus, their perspectives retain a credibility and a level of influence in Britain.” In addition, Britain’s imperial history of enforcing both heterosexuality and the divinely ordained gender binary in the societies they colonized, “while simultaneously constructing the racial ‘other’ as not only fundamentally different, but freighted with sexual menace,” has more deeply entrenched racist ideologies of (trans)gender exclusion in the mainstream of British feminism (Lewis, 2019).

Despite their divergences, though, we see parallel concerns over the “erasure” of cisgender women by trans women in TERF disinformation in the United Kingdom (e.g., Stock, 2018) and paranoid fantasies of “white replacement” by racial and ethnic minorities in far-right disinformation in the United States (Ekman, 2022). These disinformational replacement narratives share across them a certain genocidal logic that draws on racist ideologies to support the “defense” of white women via the elimination (whether through murder or medicine) of the threatening group. As trans philosopher Rachel McKinnon (2018) analyzed, drawing on Jason Stanley’s ideas from *How Propaganda*

Works, dominant groups in society adopt flawed ideologies that justify their own continued dominance and work to replicate those ideologies through disinformation. For TERFs, this entails crafting flawed ideologies about gender identity that exclude and demonize trans people and attempting to spread that ideology through disinformation.

At their core, the racist and imperial ideologies that align with gender-critical attempts to police the boundaries of womanhood with disinformation are rooted in widespread anxieties over how changes in the categorization of gender might shift (white) women's place within the social hierarchy. If white women currently enjoy a privileged place above people of color and gender minorities, in which their subordination to white men grants them access to a politics of vulnerability that can simultaneously be used to further the subordination of those below them in the hierarchy, then an opening up of the category of womanhood threatens their social place. As such, TERFs find themselves ideologically aligned with the very social conservatives they ostensibly oppose as feminists because both are invested in maintaining the current hierarchy of gender domination lest the posttransgender order strip them of power (Libby, 2022; Wuest, 2021). And, of course, this fear of losing power and privilege in a society where demographic boundaries are being redrawn links the rise of gender-critical politics to the wider rise of neofascist ideology globally (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Pearce et al., 2020b).

Understanding disinformation through the case of gender-critical politics

Beyond illuminating the ideological underpinnings of TERF politics, understanding gender-critical discourse as disinformation invites us to think about disinformation in a different way. Specifically, the case of gender-critical politics pushes us to take a more critical perspective on what counts as disinformation (and the category of information more generally), as well as both how and why disinformation has effects. Within the mainstream of mis-/disinformation studies, the spread and adoption of false information has been regarded as a disorder of an otherwise healthy communication system, and it is often studied as a phenomenon in which false media messages cause irrational political behavior in large numbers of individually affected media users (for critiques see, e.g., Anderson, 2021; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Reddi et al., 2021). These studies further tend to focus on issues like election disinformation and anti-vaccination misinformation and to do so in ways that see mis-/disinformation as indicative of new, technologically determined problems. However, an emergent "critical disinformation studies" (Kuo & Marwick, 2021) perspective breaks this mold, asking us to think about the historical continuities of disinformation, how disinformation reifies hierarchies of power, and how, specifically, disinformation becomes a tool for dominant groups in society to maintain power via the creation and management of social panics. It is this critical perspective that understanding gender critical discourse as disinformation contributes to.

If we accept that gender-critical discourse is disinformation, we must also accept several corollaries. First, we must accept that, beyond the strategic use of scientifically invalid or factually incorrect ideas for political purposes, disinformation entails structured worldviews that affect social cognitions and public opinion in ways that have consequences and reverberations across society. Disinformation is often invested in systems

of communicative power—and not just the digital fringes—as a means to (re)build a social reality that benefits the interests of dominant groups and to enforce that reality with the coercive power of institutions.

Second, understanding gender-critical discourse as disinformation draws our attention to a long, often-overlooked history of dominant groups using media power to spread false narratives as a tool for reactionary political ends meant to exacerbate or sustain inequality. We can see past our tendency toward presentism, for example, in how current transphobic disinformation parallels the state-sanctioned disinformation surrounding the early HIV/AIDS crisis and how disinformation was used to further marginalize gay men (in particular) to promote opposition to gay and lesbian rights (e.g., Jaiswal, LoSchiavo, & Perlman, 2020). We can further see how racist disinformation has been used throughout the long histories of enslavement and empire in the United States and the United Kingdom, and how those histories follow us up to a present in which they have been renewed to sustain white supremacy and adapted to justify the oppression of trans people (Mejia, Beckermann, & Sullivan, 2018).

Finally, acknowledging gender-critical discourse as disinformation reveals the important role that disinformation plays in (re)orienting the anxieties of dominant groups who feel their dominance may be coming to an end. Many people—including many women who would think of themselves as feminists—have experienced profound disorientation as the otherwise stable categorizations of biologically determined and socially sanctioned gender have been (to some extent or another) challenged by the increasing acceptance of trans identities. These people find themselves turning to the media for the resources needed to reaffirm their understanding of the social order regarding gender and to justify their anxieties over the emergence of transgender as a “threat” to existing understandings of gender. Disinformation offers an easy escape from a potential future of powerlessness, as disinformation can be used to restore the dominant order and shore up existing hierarchies.

Notes

1. Among the many criticisms of the study and its findings was the fact that study surveyed only the parents of trans youth, not the youth themselves, and parents sampled were found exclusively through websites specifically focused on helping parents “fix” their trans children (Restar, 2020).
2. In keeping with other scholars of political communication, I understand *disinformation* as referring specifically to “false or misleading information intentionally spread for profit, to create harm, or to advance political or ideological goals” (Kuo & Marwick, 2021, p. 1). In contrast, *misinformation* refers to generally incorrect information that is spread without malicious intent.
3. In this article, I maintain a focus on debates over trans girls and women, who are the central objects of TERF political attacks. Such a focus also allows a degree of analytic clarity in such a short piece, in which I cannot disentangle the web of complex social relations implicated in TERF politics. However, it is important to note that trans boys and men are often targeted by gender-critical discourses that position them as ruined girls and wounded women who are deluded by a patriarchal society into thinking the solution to oppression lies in becoming male. Nonbinary people take less predetermined roles in TERF ideology, as their identities are categorically dismissed as fictive.
4. It is crucial to note that most of this misinformation is specifically health misinformation, and much of it focuses on transgender youth specifically, continuing a long legacy of

“insidious concern” (Elster, 2022) that packages transphobia as interest in the welfare of children.

5. The most prominent examples include technology investor Elon Musk and author J. K. Rowling.
6. Spillers (1987) further highlights a paradox in which Black women are denied womanhood while, simultaneously, Black bodies are used by white oppressors as “a living laboratory” (p. 68) in which to construct and reaffirm gendered categories. Much the same might be said of trans women in the ways they are simultaneously disavowed by (white) cisgender people *and* central figures to the categorization of “woman” (see also Bey, 2017).

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