

A Year of Hate: Understanding Threats and Harassment Targeting Drag Shows and the LGBTQ+ Community

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Executive Summary

Internationally, rising hate and extremism pose an existential threat to human rights and democratic freedoms. LGBTQ+ communities are often the first group to come under attack, and understanding the contours of these assaults matters both for the protection of these communities and to be better able to safeguard human rights and democracy more broadly. In new research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, including four country profiles, we examine the trends in anti-LGBTQ+ hate and extremism with a particular focus on harassment targeting all-ages drag shows.

Drag events by no means represent the entirety of LGBTQ+ communities, and opposition towards them does not encompass all attacks on LGBTQ+ people, nor does opposition to drag necessarily entail that an individual actor is attacking LGBTQ+ more broadly. However, due to the public association of drag with queer communities, analysing anti-drag mobilization does provide useful insight into the key actors engaged in anti-LGBTQ+ activism as well as the key narratives and tactics used to attack these communities. Given the increasingly hostile environment LGBTQ+ communities face, and the increase in violence targeting them, it is crucial to better understand the roots, causes, tactics and dynamics of anti-LGBTQ+ activism.

In recent years anti-LGBTQ+ hate and extremism has increased in many places. Statistics document increases in recorded hate crimes targeting the LGBTQ+ community in countries including the USA,¹ UK,² France,³ Germany⁴ and Canada.⁵ Violence targeting the LGBTQ+ community is also increasing. The European International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) found that violence against the LGBTQ+ community reached its highest point in a decade in 2022 in Europe and Central Asia.⁶

This violence can manifest in mass casualty attacks, such as that in Club Q, Colorado Springs, in 2022, which left five dead and 26 injured;⁷ or in Bratislava in 2022, which left two dead.⁸ This uptick in violence takes place against a steady 'background noise' of surging online hate, harassment and polarisation.

Hate targeting LGBTQ+ is often influenced by deeply-rooted prejudices. As with activity targeting other minority communities, it also follows global patterns which are shaped by inter-referential, transnational confluences of mobilisation from a range of actors. This can be seen, for example, in anti-migrant activism, where international networks have mobilised to oppose migration, and a base prejudice is exacerbated by opportunistic alliances and information manipulation tactics.⁹ Activity targeting drag events in a range of different countries - mostly those tailored for child audiences, such as Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) events - demonstrates how this mobilisation works, and the attendant risks to those hosting, performing in or attending LGBTQ+ events in public.

Explanation of key trends in anti-LGBTQ+ mobilisation is key to enabling policy makers and law enforcement to identify and mitigate targeted hate, harassment and violence against LGBTQ+ people in more effective way. It is a key part of the broader research ISD carries out on hate, extremism and disinformation perpetrated by many different actors against a whole range of communities, all of which risk damaging democracy and infringing human rights. Understanding the interaction between on and offline hate targeting drag shows is a useful way of exploring the hate movements and actors targeting the LGBTQ+ community more broadly.

In this report, ISD analyses the narratives, themes, actors and tactics involved in anti-drag activism in the US, UK, Australia and France. It examines the footprint of 274 anti-drag mobilisations: 11 in Australia, 3 in France, 57 in the UK and 203 in the USA. Anti-drag activity was also found in Ireland, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland as well as other European countries during the reporting period, usually in isolated cases. Due to finite resources these instances were not analysed in depth, but would merit further research.

This research draws on ethnographic monitoring of over 150 Telegram channels, Twitter profiles and Facebook groups, as well as external resources such as news reports, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) and Crowd Counting¹⁰ and previous reports on anti-drag¹¹ by GLAAD and the Southern Poverty Law Center.¹²

Key Findings

This research has found substantial consistency globally in anti-LGBTQ+ activism, especially in relation to the tactics employed by actors, but also some key differences between geographies:

- **Across all contexts analysed, mobilisation against drag events has resulted in loose coalitions of extremists, conspiracy theorists, local activists and fringe political actors to form.** Far-right groups, conspiracy theorists who rose to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, fundamentalist religious activists, and anti-LGBTQ+ influencers from the right of the political spectrum are driving much of this activism. Political figures in France, Australia and the US have supported anti-drag action, but only in the US are a substantial number of elected representatives of a mainstream party engaging in anti-drag rhetoric and action.
 - **These loose communities of anti-LGBTQ+ actors draw on a common narrative framework to denigrate LGBTQ+ people and justify their activity when mobilizing against drag events.** This framework draws on and relates to broader “save the children” narratives which have come to the fore in conspiracy theorist communities since the emergence of QAnon in 2017. This includes justifying sometimes extreme action by claiming it is necessary to prevent harm to children.
 - **The US has seen the largest number of protests against drag events, as well as the highest number of violent incidents associated with anti-drag activism.** It has also set trends for the narratives and tactics subsequently used elsewhere.
 - **Anti-LGBTQ+ actors globally have converged on a shared set of tactics.** These include doxxing; threats of violence; coordinated harassment campaigns against venues and performers; and stickering and flyering campaigns. However, despite regular threats against drag performances, only a minority of performances have been cancelled. In the largest dataset analysed for this study - the US - this amounted to 6.4% of all performances targeted online and offline.
 - **Offline mobilisation against drag performances, in the form of protests and vandalism, tends to be highly localised.** Typically, actions are organised in response to planned events, and offline mobilization is always accompanied by online discussion and coordination, such as direction from high-profile influencers to attend and protest an event.
 - **The greatest momentum of anti-drag protests is in the US.** It is the only country reviewed in which legislation has successfully been introduced to prevent drag performances. It is the only country in this data set in which there have been violent attacks against drag events, including the Club Q shooting and an attempted arson.¹³ There also appears to be a greater degree of private organising amongst US groups, with protest organisers posting their final plans in public spaces to attract additional attendees but first building their plans in private or less public spaces. US protests often bring together disparate actors from across the ideological spectrum in a form of coalition-building that has become common to causes favoured by right-wing groups in recent years.
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Glossary

Anti-drag

Activity undertaken to oppose the hosting of drag shows. These are shows in which, typically, performers caricature or challenge gender stereotypes, often by dressing in clothing that is stereotypical of another gender, using exaggeratedly gendered mannerisms, or combining elements of stereotypically male and female dress.¹ Anti-drag activists normally oppose drag performances or performers appearing in front of minors at events such as all-ages drag shows and Drag Queen Story Hours.

Anti-lockdown

The term “anti-lockdown” has come to stand in for a range of positions held by individuals who broadly oppose the implementation of restrictions on individual freedoms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-lockdown individuals or groups may advocate for alternative approaches, such as emphasizing individual responsibility or the prioritization of other societal needs alongside public health considerations.

Anti-vaccine

The terms “vaccine sceptic” and “anti-vaxxer” cover a wide range of attitudes that are characterised by distrust of a specific vaccine or vaccines in general. Vaccine sceptics are not categorically opposed to vaccines, but have reservations of varying degrees about them. Certain vaccine sceptics accept some vaccines but reject others, sometimes including the COVID-19 vaccines. By way of contrast, anti-vaxxers are fundamentally opposed to vaccines. Their reasons range from suppositions derived from conspiracy theories to the deeply held belief that all vaccines represent a harmful intervention into the body’s biochemical processes.

Christian nationalist

Christian nationalism has multiple definitions, but for ISD’s purposes it is understood to be an ideology that “idealises and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American [or Australian, or British] civic life” (Whitehead and Perry 2020:10). Christianity in this form is typically racialised (as white) and exclusionary (implying that other religions cannot or should not be part of the nation).

Doxxing

Searching for and publishing the private data of individuals or organisations on the internet, usually with malicious intent.

Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH)

An event in which a drag performer (typically, though not always, a drag queen – usually a man dressed in female gendered clothes) reads books or tells stories, normally to children.

Extremism

Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based ‘in-group’ over all ‘out-groups.’ It propagates a dehumanising ‘othering’ mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights.

Far-right

ISD’s definition of far-right is in line with far-right expert Cas Mudde who conceptualises “far-right” as an umbrella term that includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. Mudde states that both radical and extreme right-wing actors believe that “inequalities between people are natural and positive,” but have differing attitudes towards democracy. Radical right-wing actors are not against democracy in principle, while extreme right-wing actors reject democracy as a form of government.

Parents’ rights

In the context of this report, “parents’ rights” groups are organisations or collections of individuals who advocate for the rights of parents to direct the upbringing, education and care of their children.

Save The Children

In this context, Save The Children (often stylised #SaveTheChildren) is a conspiracy theory offshoot of QAnon, claiming that there is a wide-reaching conspiracy by powerful individuals who are trafficking children for the purposes of paedophilia and ritualistic abuse.¹⁴

Sovereign Citizens

The Sovereign Citizens movement comprises a highly heterogenous anti-government ideology that originated in the United States. Adherents are united in their belief that the U.S. government illegitimately rules over them. They live under the assumption that by declaring themselves sovereign, they are not obliged to abide with government legislation.

While it is an ideology that has manifested in many different forms, contemporary interpretations are frequently linked to conspiratorial and extremist beliefs. U.S. law enforcement agencies have labelled the movement a domestic terrorist threat. In recent years, anti-government sentiments in relation to imposed COVID-19 measures triggered a surge in popularity of Sovereign Citizens-related ideas in many national contexts.

White nationalism

White nationalism is advocacy for a separate white society or white nation, also sometimes referred to as a white ethnostate. The Anti-Defamation League describes white nationalism as a euphemism for white supremacy; the term is now used to “refer to a form of white supremacy that emphasizes defining a country or region by white racial identity and which seeks to promote the interests of whites exclusively, typically at the expense of people of other backgrounds”.

White supremacism

White supremacy is a system of belief that posits the superiority of whites over non-whites, and advocates that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people. This can extend to a belief in the need for violence against, or even the genocide of, non-white people.

Key Actors, Tactics and Narratives

Outlined below are overviews of the key actors, tactics and narratives identified through ISD analysis of protests against drag events for all-ages audiences in Australia, France, the UK and US.

Key Actors

Across all geographies, similar sets of actors are consistently providing the impetus for anti-drag action. This coalition building sees established extremist actors join forces with local activists, conspiracy theorists, partisan media, religious groups and more mainstream actors. Importantly, this follows patterns seen elsewhere, such as during mobilisation against COVID-19 restrictions¹⁵ or against migration in Europe.¹⁶ This demonstrates an opportunism that is now characteristic of extremist groups - beyond only those targeting LGBTQ+ communities - and is important as it highlights a potential vector whereby established extremist movements can influence broader swathes of the population.

Here it is important to flag that by no means all individuals or groups involved in anti-drag activity are extremists.¹⁷ Some "parents' rights" groups such as Protect Texas Kids express intolerant attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people but do not meet ISD's threshold for extremism. However, convergences and coalition building are still important phenomena; these groups and the events they organise and attend represent vectors through which extremists can influence broader social movements.

Far-right groups and actors

Characteristically, far-right groups and actors have sought to both seed a mainstream moral panic about drag performances, and to exploit existing protests to gain publicity and support for their broader aims.

Typical of far-right and white supremacist messaging is the claim that the acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities is indicative of "degeneracy" and a west in decline. While the manipulation of public opinion against drag performances can be opportunistic, members of these groups harbour genuine hatred for LGBTQ+ people of all identities.

In terms of the numbers attending, neo-Nazis and white supremacists are often the smallest groups present at drag protests, but they attract outsized media attention.

Attracting this media attention is often intentional, as these groups display symbols and make statements that deliberately court controversy. However, media coverage of anti-drag protests also tends to centre on these groups due to the extreme nature of their beliefs. This "oxygen of amplification" is actively sought by white supremacist groups.¹⁸

Right-wing media and influencers

Some influencers from the right of the political spectrum, along with associated right-leaning media organisations, have sought to stoke anti-drag action. The most prominent of these actors are located in the US, including Chaya Raichik ('Lids of TikTok') and 'Gays Against Groomers'. Their content is exported to other geographies in the dataset, with the scale and extremity of anti-drag action in the US providing encouragement to movements elsewhere.

These individuals and organisations are typically producing content that appeals to their audiences, and may or may not genuinely believe the messages they are producing. With few exceptions (e.g. Turning Point UK, who have become active in organising and attending protests in the UK in 2023), these influencers tend to push anti-drag narratives online and may encourage or facilitate protest action, but do not turn up in person at events.

Conspiracy theorists, including COVID-19 sceptics

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ecosystems of conspiracy theorists grew to hold sway over substantial audiences, with accompanying infrastructures on alternative tech platforms such as Telegram. While many of the actors involved in these groups have continued to share anti-vaxx and other COVID-related narratives, anti-LGBTQ+ activism has become a significant plank of the platform for some. The kinds of narratives these actors embrace are often overtly conspiratorial, seeking to portray LGBTQ+ people interacting with children as insidious indoctrination, possibly aided and abetted by the state.

Radical right and conservative parties/politicians

In multiple geographies, both radical right and broader conservative parties and politicians have been active in pushing anti-drag rhetoric. In France, there was a political party, Union for the Family,¹⁹ set up initially to protest equal marriage legislation whose

attention has now turned to drag performances. In Australia, Senator Ralph Babet of the United Australia Party, elected with the support of COVID-sceptic movements, is a vocal supporter of anti-drag action. The UK has thus far seen minimal involvement from elected politicians. In contrast, the US has seen a substantial number of anti-drag laws being introduced into State legislatures, and politicians such as Ron Desantis (Governor of Florida) have been active in advocating not only anti-drag laws, but also restrictions on gender affirmation and the teaching of LGBTQ+ identities and issues in schools.

Religious groups

Historically, attempts to prevent the acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities have often been led by conservative religious groups. Religious groups and narratives are not at the forefront of anti-drag activism, but they are still represented in the ecosystem. In Australia, the conspiracy movement that grew during the pandemic has shifted towards religiosity since 2022, and those in the movement who have committed to anti-drag activism often use explicitly religious terminology, labelling LGBTQ+ people as “demonic” or “Satanic”. In the US, fundamentalist Christian rhetoric is represented both in the QAnon movement and in Christian groups such as the New Columbia Movement, who have appeared at anti-drag protests with banners protesting equal marriage. In line with its increasingly secular character, the UK has seen minimal involvement from religious groups in anti-drag activism.

“Parents’ rights” movement

Across all geographies, groups purporting to be composed of parents concerned about children being exposed to “gender ideology” or drag performers have become major players in the anti-drag ecosystem. These groups typically use the “protecting children” narrative, as well as claiming that their rights as parents to control the information and identities which children are exposed to are being eroded.

There is significant overlap between these groups and other actors, particularly far-right activists seeking to legitimise themselves by framing their concerns as being from the perspective of parents who want to “protect children”.

Parents’ rights groups grew during the pandemic with opposition to vaccine mandates and schools’ COVID-19 measures, before renewing efforts to campaign on issues such as race and sexuality in school instruction, advocating for measures such as the banning of books about LGBTQ+ issues. Opposition to drag performances sits alongside this set of issues, wrapped into a single package of concerned parents protecting their children from insidious influences.

Key Tactics

Our analysis of anti-drag activity has identified a range of tactics used to target drag events, ranging from strategies commonly used in political activism to potentially violent activity designed to silence drag events.

Threats, Protests, Harassment and Violence

Anti-drag activists have deployed a range of tactics to attempt to have drag shows cancelled, make it harder to host them in future, and demonise those who are hosting or performing at them. These include:

- **Protesting at locations where drag events are being held**

Protests range from small gatherings of no more than a handful of people with signs, to much larger gatherings of multiple groups.

In some cases, these protests can escalate to disruption, intimidation and violence. Drag queen Sab Samuel, who ran a series of DQSH events in the UK in summer 2022, was cornered and blocked from driving away in his car by COVID-19 conspiracy theorist protestors who called him a “paedophile” and asked “Why are you grooming children?” As a result of this confrontation and aggressive protests, two subsequent DQSH events were cancelled.²⁰ Other UK events have been disrupted by protestors infiltrating the audience and proceeding to shout abuse at performers.

Protests have also been held at locations where events have been cancelled. When a restaurant in Sacramento, California, cancelled a drag show due to safety concerns after a local Proud Boys chapter circulated the event details, a group of Proud Boys still showed up to protest and attempted to force their way into the restaurant.²¹

- **Doxxing and harassing drag performers and hosts**

Some activists have sought to exert pressure on drag performers and venues by publishing their contact details (or urging their followers to do so) and requesting that their followers complain about upcoming events.

A UK drag performer told a court that a former councillor who protested an event and subsequently breached an injunction (restraining order) against him had portrayed him as a “groomer” online, which led to him losing work, receiving death threats and being targeted by paedophile hunters.²²

Elsewhere in the UK, adherents to the Sovereign Citizen ideology²³ have attempted to make “citizen’s arrests” of drag performers, or explained to their followers how to do so.

- **Sending threatening messages to those performing at or hosting drag events, including death and bomb threats**

In some instances, these threats can lead to disruption or cancellation. One such instance saw an Illinois library cancel their drag bingo event celebrating National Coming Out Day due to mail and online threats.²⁴ In another example, a bomb threat was called in during a DQSH performance, resulting in a performance being delayed while the threat was dealt with.²⁵ A significant risk is that threats, alongside other tactics, create security risks that require substantial financial outlay to mitigate, making it difficult for all but the most secure or affluent venues to host drag events.

- **Vandalising locations hosting drag events**

Vandalism can function as a form of intimidation, making performers and hosts feel unsafe and in some cases forcing the cancellation of events. In the US, a bakery in suburban Chicago had its windows smashed and homophobic graffiti daubed on its walls.²⁶ Alongside other tactics such as threats, spurious complaints to law enforcement, and continuous picketing of the building, the bakery was forced to close and move to a different area.

- **Testifying at school meetings and legislative sessions**

A tactic that appears to have been adopted primarily in the US and Australia, some activists have taken to testifying at or disrupting public meetings. The aim for this action appears to be a mix of exerting pressure to cancel drag events and seeking to gain publicity. In one instance, around 190 protestors - including several high-profile influencers and livestreamers - attended a Monash City Council meeting and disrupted the proceedings, calling councillors “paedophiles” and calling for them to be sacked and arrested for promoting “sex in front of our children”.²⁷

- **Encouraging email, call and mail campaigns to try to have events cancelled**

Some activists have sought to overwhelm libraries and other venues hosting drag events with communications asking to have events cancelled. These can both intimidate staff and make it difficult to function normally as a business or public service. One UK-based activist typifies this tactic, sharing the numbers of libraries on her Telegram channel and posting recordings of her phone calls with library staff, in which she would question them over their knowledge of DQSH events and sometimes become aggressive and confrontational.

In France, petitions appear to be a common mechanism for attempting to have events cancelled. La Furie Francaise, an identitarian group,²⁸ created a petition to protest a drag show in Toulouse; the link to this petition became the most-shared link in ISD's dataset tied to the event. Ideological fellow travellers such as representatives of Eric Zemmour's Reconquete party and former Generation Identity members were among the amplifiers.

- **Flooding websites with bad reviews, often accompanied with accusations of paedophilia and grooming**

The practice of "review bombing" is a low cost effort that requires only online mobilisation and can make the lives of business owners and public officials difficult. In Australia, activist Monica Smit encouraged her followers to target the Monash Library Service; they subsequently flooded its Facebook page with negative reviews, accusing the library of being paedophiles and groomers.²⁹

- **Organising stickering and flyering campaigns**

Stickers and flyers can function as a form of intimidation, indicating to those in the area that there is active local support for (or opposition to) a cause. British white nationalist group Patriotic Alternative has encouraged its members to distribute leaflets to local areas to garner support for their protests. Likewise, in Perth, Australia, flyers were distributed prior to a long-running drag event, calling the event "grooming" and including photos of the scheduled performer dressed to perform in a nightclub, attempting to indicate the event would be unsuitable for children.

Notably, many of these tactics are used in conjunction with others, creating multiple threat vectors for would-be drag event hosts and performers.

Legislation

Localising this dataset to the United States, anti-drag legislation has been advanced in a number of states. At time of writing, 43 bills have been introduced, 5 of which have been defeated, 3 passed into law, and 35 advancing to further stages of legislative scrutiny.³⁰ In another example, proposed legislation in Texas would defund public libraries that allow drag show story times for children.³¹ This legislative approach echoes the narrative that drag shows are an inappropriate use of public resources, and threatens to undermine libraries that do substantially more than host drag story hours.

The language in these bills is often vague, meaning they can be interpreted to target trans people. For example, a Tennessee bill restricting "adult cabaret performances" in public or in the presence of children,³² and banning them from occurring within 1,000 feet of schools, public parks, or places of worship, refers to drag performers as "male or female impersonators".³³ Given that separate legislation was passed in Tennessee (as well as states including Louisiana, Tennessee, Montana, Nebraska, Florida and Idaho) restricting gender-affirming care from being provided to minors, there are justified fears from the trans community that they may also be treated as "male or female impersonators" simply through their public appearance in a State which has institutionalised transphobia.

Key Narratives

Based on a narrative analysis of online content associated with 274 anti-drag protests, we have identified a set of shared narratives deployed by anti-LGBTQ+ actors. Better understanding these narratives is essential. It not only allows us to understand the ways in which anti-LGBTQ+ actors are mobilized towards a range of harmful activities, but also provides a baseline for activities pushing back against anti-LGBTQ+ activity, including communications campaigns and preventative programming.

ISD's analysis of anti-drag mobilization has identified seven central narratives:

- “Protecting children”
- Framing drag as misogyny
- Conflation of drag performers and trans individuals
- Importing of US narratives and actors
- Wasting public resources
- LGBTQ+ identities as “ideology”
- Linking LGBTQ+ identities to Satanism

“Protecting children”

The most extreme forms of protest appear to be justified using the “protecting children” narrative, with actors arguing that they are obligated to prevent children from being “groomed” by drag performers.

Anti-drag activists have sought to frame their actions in terms of “protecting children” from performances that they claim are inherently sexual and therefore inappropriate. This claim often involves references to the names of drag performers, which may be double entendre or veiled sexual references. Likewise, activists will link to adult performances by the same artists who are reading to children, claiming (incorrectly) that they will dress or behave in the same way around minors.

Drag performers are framed as ideological indoctrinators, seeking to “groom” children into LGBTQ+ identities, particularly trans identities. They are also framed as predatory, with some anti-drag actors such as Turning Point UK activist Calvin Robinson asking the rhetorical question, “Why [are] drag queens so keen to spend time with your children?”. More extreme

versions of this claim will argue that drag literally promotes “sex in front of children”.³⁴

This narrative also seeks to engage parents in anti-drag activism by claiming that the acceptability of public drag performances – or the “trans agenda”, which is often conflated with drag (see below) - is an attempt to erode parental rights. This is sometimes framed in religious terms, with activists saying, “Don’t come near my children, don’t come near my faith,” implying that drag is anti-Christian and its acceptability is antithetical to Christian parents’ beliefs.

The anti-drag activist group Gays Against Groomers provide a useful summary of this narrative in a letter to a US location hosting a drag show. They write, “We firmly believe that public child drag unnecessarily exposes children to potential predators and strangers who will view a maturely dressed child as desirable prey.”

Framing drag as misogyny

A narrative that is present primarily in the UK and Australia, with minimal notable representation in the US, portrays drag artists as misogynists due to the exaggerated caricatures of femininity they often portray. It is worth noting that drag’s relationship to gender and feminism is contested, and the question of whether drag may have misogynistic elements is a live debate.³⁵

The gender critical group Women’s Rights Network attended an anti-drag protest in Glastonbury. This group promotes transphobic tropes and views DQSH as misogynistic and homophobic.³⁶

In Australia, anti-drag Senator Ralph Babet, who was elected off the back of anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine movements, argued “It’s time for us to actively campaign against men playing ‘woman face’.”

Conflation of drag performers and trans individuals

A notable theme across geographies was the consistent conflation of drag performers and transgender or gender non-conforming individuals. Drag events were often framed as indoctrination into “transgender ideology”, or attempts to groom children into becoming transgender.

In one instance, an organisation called the Family Education Trust created a letter template for people emailing libraries seeking to cancel drag

events. The template claims that DQSH events are “highly sexualised” and that their true purpose is “indoctrination in the transgender agenda.”

In a telling slip, an Australian anti-LGBTQ+ activist described a speech from One Nation politician Mark Latham as “a speech on homo- um, on transgenders [sic] and what they want to introduce into the schools.”³⁷ The claim this activist is making is that either gay or trans people want to introduce inappropriate ideological or sexual content in schools, but the notable part of the sentence is the slippage between the two groups he is apparently concerned about.

In France, drag performers are commonly referred to as transgender, often using transphobic slurs and hate speech, including at an event in which l’Oriflamme, a group described by news articles as “ultra-right”,³⁸ physically protested a DQSH event. In the French-language post below, a Telegram channel talks about the “reading of transgender stories by drag queens in front of children.”

Importing of US narratives and actors

The United States is the site of the largest number of anti-drag actions, and the largest number of violent altercations and arrests resulting from these actions. Right-wing extremist movements and hate campaigns are typically internationalised, and anti-drag action is no exception. US actors’ rhetoric and content has been observed in multiple other countries.

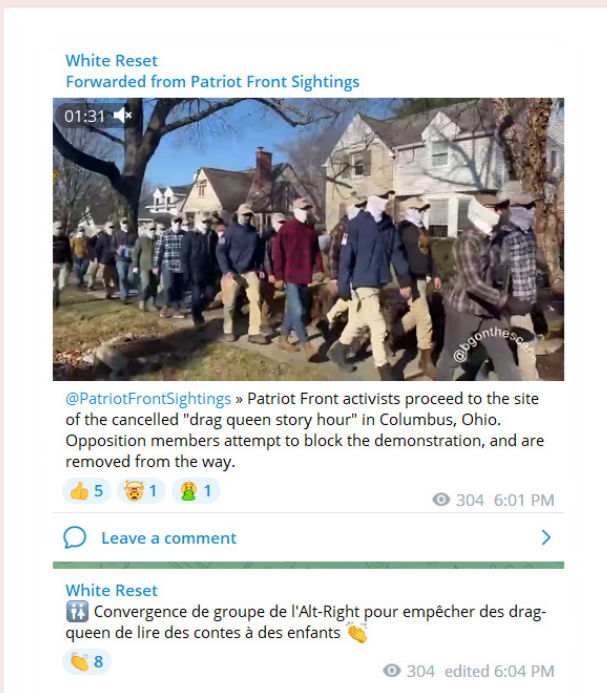
The recent popularisation of the “groomer” slur originates in the US,³⁹ however drag events in the US have been targeted by far-right groups since 2017,⁴⁰ and early articles condemning DQSH appeared in media outlets Breitbart News and the Daily Wire which are known to share right-leaning content. While anti-drag legislation thus far appears to remain a preserve of US State Legislatures, anti-drag rhetoric has become a key export, alongside major US players in the space.

French anti-drag activists have approvingly reposted content from Gays Against Groomers and Patriot Front, as seen in the figures below. Gays Against Groomers’ content has likewise been seen in the Telegram channels of UK anti-drag actors such as Danny ‘Truth Pills’.

Figure 1 Example of a post conflating drag queens and transgender people. The translation of the following post: “Macron and LGBT propaganda at school. Emanuelle Macron is promoting LGBT propaganda in front of children. This extract is a reminder that the reading of transgender stories by drag queens in front of children and sex education at school promoting LGBT propaganda and gender theory are a direct reflection of the ideas of president Macron...”



Figures 2 and 3 French anti-drag activists repost content from US anti-drag action



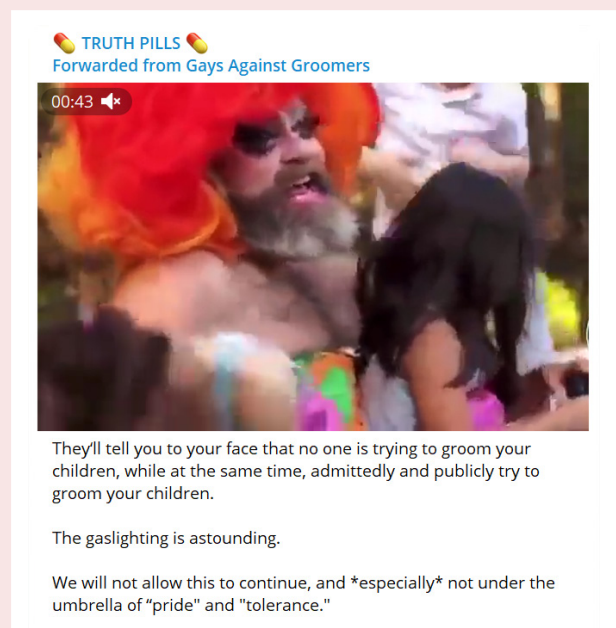
Perhaps the most influential anti-drag (and indeed anti-LGBTQ+) activist of the moment is Chaya Raichik, aka Libs of TikTok, whose tactics include highlighting events taking place across the US, resulting in her followers embarking on harassment, abuse and protest. Her content appears elsewhere, including a clip being posted by Australian senator Ralph Babet.

Wasting public resources

Many DQSH events are run in public spaces such as libraries and are sometimes funded by local councils as cultural enrichment activities. This has become a topic for anti-drag action, which claims that, for example, councils should be worried about "rates, roads and rubbish," rather than "spending your money to indoctrinate and groom children," to quote Australian senator Ralph Babet.

This narrative is present across multiple countries, with UK anti-drag activists complaining that DQSH events are "funded by public money," along with criticising the closure of libraries to the public during the events. Likewise in France, anti-drag actors often highlight the fact that events are taking place in public libraries, or

Figure 4 Gays Against Groomers appears in the Telegram channel of Danny 'Truth Pills'



that the organisations or festivals hosting the events are receiving public funding. In the US, even drag events that are not funded by public money are sometimes framed as if they are by actors seeking to have them cancelled.

The “wasting public resources” narrative has become a vector for activists to attempt to have events cancelled, with activists writing to libraries and councils with template complaints, as well as sending abuse and threats.

LGBTQ+ identities as “ideology”

In the 1990s, the phrase “gay agenda” was used to frame the fight for equal rights and cultural acceptance of homosexuality as a form of political ideology which would inherently require a trade-off between the rights of LGB individuals and others (particularly people with strong religious convictions). The “agenda” itself is an empty signifier, adaptable to whatever form of cultural or legal acceptance might be in play. The term “gender ideology” has taken on a similar function, encompassing a range of demands such as the right to abortion, sexual orientation and gender identity, diverse families, education in gender and sexuality, HIV prevention and sex work.⁴¹

In anti-drag activism, framing LGBTQ+ identities as “ideology” allows some actors to separate gay individuals from many other people who fall in the queer spectrum. For example, one Australian activist claimed they were not against homosexuality, rather, “There’s a lot of people who are hiding behind the LGBT [sic] who are making the gays look bad.” These kinds of framing weave neatly into other narratives, particularly the conflation of trans people with drag, and the claim to be “protecting children” - i.e. from LGBTQ+/gender ideology.

Linking LGBTQ+ identities to Satanism

Echoing the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and ‘90s,⁴² along with more recent conspiracy theories emanating from QAnon and its offshoot Save The Children, some anti-drag activists have sought to link drag to Satanism. Primarily found in Australia, with some narrative elements present amongst US groups, this narrative is meant in both metaphorical and literal terms. Key examples include claims such as:

- “That is a demon not a man pretending to be a woman”
- “It even looks like a demon”
- “That person looks like its [sic] representing the Baphomet”

Conclusion

The year from May 2022 – May 2023 has been marked by escalating action against drag performances across the UK, US, France and Australia.

Taken in their totality, these anti-drag actions spanning three continents paint a bleak picture for the freedoms of LGBTQ+ people to participate in public life. This picture becomes more concerning when paired with continuing attacks on the rights of transgender and LGBTQ+ people, both through legislation and broader attempts to slur them as “groomers” - paedophiles – and roll back progress on queer acceptance.

The “groomer” slur is the latest narrative emerging from fringe and extreme groups to become a mainstream part of politics. A 2019 ISD report charted the violent consequences of the mainstreaming of the ‘Great Replacement’ narrative,⁴³ which laundered the explicitly white supremacist ‘White Genocide’ conspiracy theory into the mainstream.⁴⁴ The Great Replacement inspired the 2019 Christchurch terror attack, which killed 51 people, and the bulk of right-wing terrorist attacks in the years since. Since that time, the ‘Great Replacement’ has been renamed ‘replacement theory’ and repeated on mainstream news.⁴⁵

This research suggest that the anti-drag actions documented in this report show no signs of ceasing in the near future, and it is unlikely that they will de-escalate as the narratives used by anti-drag activism becomes more mainstreamed. However, it is important to acknowledge that where anti-drag protests have materialised in person, they have often been met by substantially larger counter-protests. While extremist activists may travel from afar to exploit tensions at public libraries, counter-protestors are typically drawn from local communities who are broadly tolerant and supportive of LGBTQ+ rights and identities. While anti-drag protests may be increasing in number and severity, they do not represent more than the view of a vocal and active intolerant minority.

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