

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION CONSULTATION: CURRENT AND EMERGING THREATS TO TGD HUMAN RIGHTS

ISD Submission – 11 April 2024

In recent years, and especially over the past eighteen months, ISD has observed a significant rise in hate, vilification and disinformation targeting trans and gender diverse people in multiple countries around the world. This is occurring against the backdrop of a [broader wave of anti-LGBTQ+ hate](#) which is manifesting in various forms of violence in both online and offline spaces.

Our analysts have noted this rising trend in anti-trans hate across [multiple geographic regions and across a range of the groups which we monitor](#), including far right and populist right political movements; white nationalist groups; conspiracy and anti-vax groups; some fringe left cohorts; Islamist groups; and state propaganda and covert influence campaigns from both Russia and China.

In Australia, much of the anti-trans hate and mobilisation appears to be heavily influenced by developments in the US, and to a lesser extent the UK. Australia's information ecosystem sits downwind of America. American culture wars are often imported to Australia through media organisations like Sky News, through local politicians seeking to emulate the populist rhetoric they see working in the States, and through social media, among other sources. This is what we are seeing happen with anti-trans rhetoric and narratives, with mixed effects.

During 2020-22, the enormous spike in conspiracy theories associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions also led to the creation of a complex web of Facebook groups, Telegram channels and other communities on social media which have served to funnel predominately US conspiracy theories into Australian society. These networks are continuing to shovel American content and narratives in front of their Australian audiences, but have now largely shifted their focus away from Covid-19 to other topics and other kinds of conspiracy theories, including the targeting of LGBTQ+ people.

ISD has not yet undertaken any quantitative research specifically into anti-trans hate trends on social media. However, we have undertaken [a broad study](#) into mobilisation against Drag Queen Story Hour events in the US, the UK, France and Australia during 2023-24.

Drag performers and trans and gender diverse people are, of course, distinct groups of people. However, the rhetoric and narratives targeting drag performers makes it very clear that trans people and drag performers are being conflated in the minds of those who subscribe to these narratives, meaning that threats against one group should be recognised as also being threats against the other. Drag performers may be the immediate victims, but in many ways trans people are the true target of that animosity.

In general, we found that across [all geographies included in the study](#), similar groups of people are acting in a loose coalition to create the impetus for anti-drag mobilisation. The picture emerging is one of multiple actors coalescing around stoking hatred of trans people and drag performers as an engine

to mobilise audiences for their own purposes. These actors often amplify and support one another's transphobic narratives out of mutual opportunism rather than because they are necessarily working together directly or even have the same goals.

The key groups identified in this report include far right and extremist organisations; 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.

The specific narratives and nature of the hate speech targeted at drag performers and trans people differs from incident to incident and region to region, but there are a number of common features. ISD [identified](#) seven central narratives (p.12).

Of these, by far the most central and most prevalent in the Australian context is the idea that children needed to be protected against drag performers as either a physical, often sexualised threat (e.g. accusing drag performers of being paedophiles) and/or as a moral and spiritual threat (e.g. accusing drag performers of wanting to corrupt or pervert children to make them queer, or to 'bring them over to the side of the devil').

This narrative is directly linked to the ['groomer' conspiracy theories and rhetoric](#), which is anti-LGBTQ+ in general and [transphobic in particular](#). It is also linked to QAnon and its successor movement Save the Children which hinge on the idea that society is run by cabals of Satanic paedophiles targeting children. These movements are particularly notable because, particularly in the post-January 6th Capitol riot era, they have often resulted in [harassment and violence directed at ordinary people](#), as opposed to targeting politicians or high-profile figures.

Our research series found that anti-drag activists across the geographies appear to have consolidated around a common set of tactics. Most prominently, this includes protesting outside venues where all-ages drag events are being held or planned to be held. Other tactics include doxxing; threats of violence; coordinated harassment campaigns against venues, organisers and performers; and stickering and flyering or letterboxing campaigns.

Based on ISD's limited research to date, a major concern which emerges in the Australian context is the capacity of small but persistent groups of anti-trans and anti-drag activists to intimidate local authorities, or to increase the cost and difficulty of holding LGBTQ+ events to the point where local councils and organisers decide it is no longer viable. Some of this activity is happening alongside other mobilisation by groups like the [My Place movement](#), who are engaging in conspiracy theory-fuelled activism against local councils on a variety of topics.

It seems clear that many local councils are not currently trained, prepared or financially resourced to stand up to this kind of sustained harassment both online and offline. This has serious implications for the LGBTQ+ community, for the councils and their staff, and for the viability of local democratic institutions.

Another clear concern is the risk of escalation to physical violence. The past several years have seen [multiple fatal shootings](#) targeting LGBTQ+ people and venues around the world from attackers motivated by a combination of conspiracy theories and anti-LGBTQ+ hatred. In Australia in December 2022, the [deadly Wieambilla shootings](#) were fuelled by a mix of conspiracy theories and

fundamentalist Christian beliefs. The potential for an individual or a small group motivated by extreme anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs to execute a violent attack is real and must be taken seriously.

To better understand and address this growing threat, ISD recommends:

- Addressing the significant knowledge gaps through further research. To date research on this topic in Australia (as in most countries around the world) has been limited, in part due to a lack of available funding. Without this research it is difficult to fully understand the scale and nature of the problem, and therefore to ensure that any policy responses are effectively targeted and proportionate.
- Increased support and protections for trans and gender diverse communities.
- Increased support, training and awareness for local councils and police, and other groups likely to be targeted by anti-LGBTQ+ hate and harassment (e.g. event organisers or venues).
- Increased engagement with online platforms from political actors, state bodies and civil society to ensure they both understand the growing threat, and ensure their policies protect trans people and are effectively and consistently enforced.