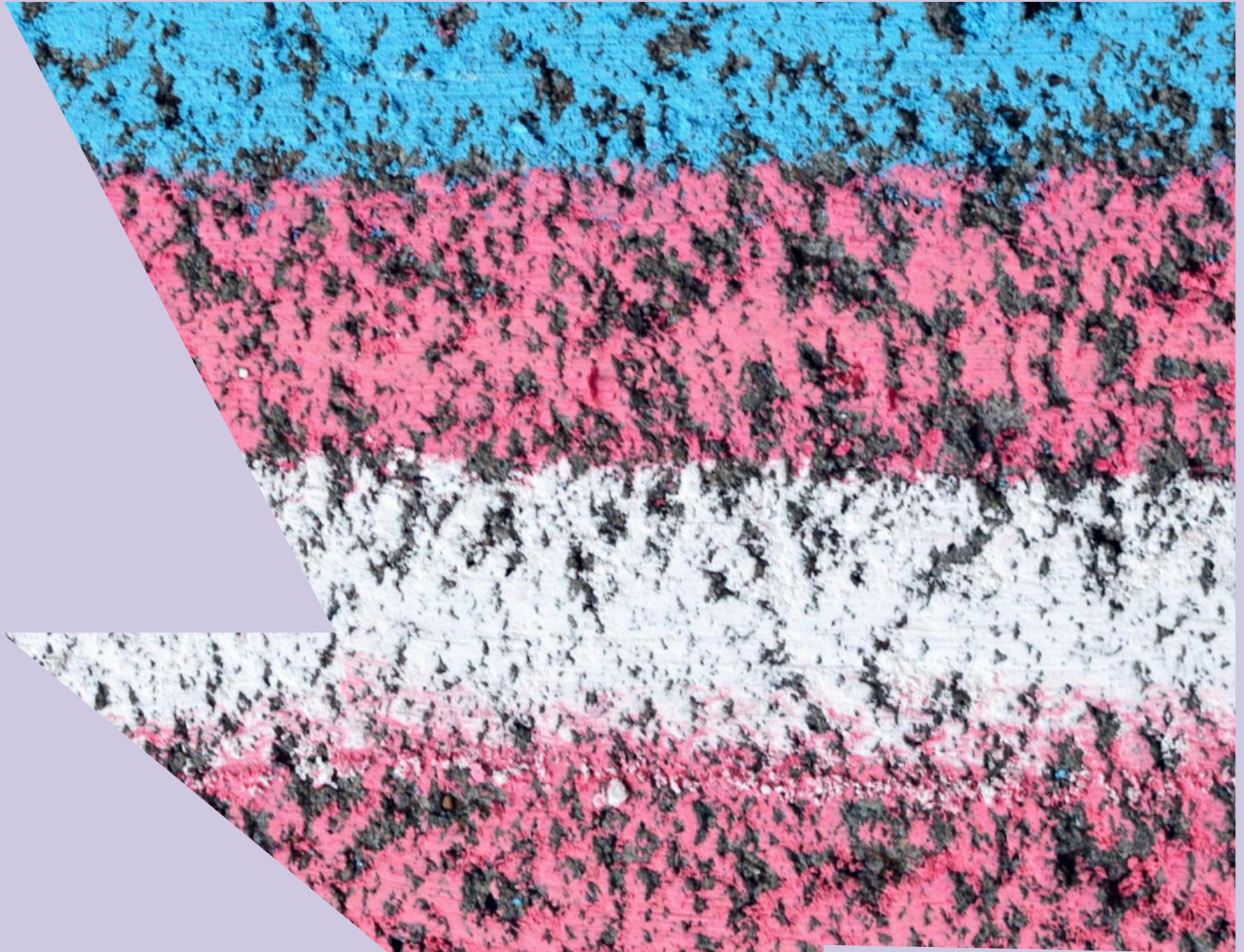





DANGEROUS
SPEECH PROJECT



Anti-Trans Dangerous Speech During the 2024 U.S. Election

By Niko Shahbazian and Cathy Buerger



As the 2024 United States election approaches, speech that can move people toward accepting violence, called “dangerous speech” (DS), is flourishing, and with it, there is a growing possibility of intergroup violence. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people have become a primary target of such speech. Influential politicians, media figures, and religious leaders are falsely portraying transgender people as threats to children, cisgender women, families, traditional values, and public safety. Since 2023 the Dangerous Speech Project has been collecting and analyzing examples of this dangerous speech. In this report, we describe the primary rhetorical trends that have emerged from this analysis.

CONTEXT:

Transgender people are frequent targets of attacks, both online and offline, and there have an extraordinary, and rising, number of anti-trans [violent extremism incidents](#) including murder, arson, and harassment. At least 33 trans people were killed between November of 2022 and November 2023, according to a report by the [Human Rights Campaign](#). Harassment campaigns led by influential social media accounts like Libs of TikTok have led to bomb threats against [hospitals](#) and other [trans-inclusive community spaces](#).

Online, anti-trans dangerous speech takes on many facets, and is often circulated as political talking points by far-right politicians, commentators, advocates, and influencers, as well as by anonymous social media users. This rhetoric includes speech that:


- Denies trans people’s identities or dehumanizes them,
- Contains baseless claims that children are being harmed by pro-trans activists, therapists, and doctors,
- Maliciously over-dramatizes the amount of power wielded by trans people against others, and
- Frames trans issues as one part of a larger “battle between good and evil.”
- Targeted harassment, including intentional misgendering and deadnaming, has also become a common practice online.

Many of these rhetorical trends reflect common hallmarks of dangerous speech. Dangerous speech is any form of expression (e.g. speech, text, or images) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group, and a “hallmark” is a common rhetorical device found in such speech, such as dehumanization. A defining feature of dangerous speech is that it often promotes fear, as much as it expresses or promotes hatred. For example, one can assert that another group is planning to attack one’s own group without expressing hatred, yet that message might easily convince people to condone or commit violence, ostensibly to fend off the attack. Violence would seem defensive, and therefore justified.

In March of 2024, [GLAAD released a report](#) documenting how Meta allowed violent, dehumanizing, and fear-mongering rhetoric to remain on its platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Threads) despite the fact that it violates its own policies. The report includes dozens of examples of anti-trans posts, reported to Meta by GLAAD, that were not removed.

Anti-trans speech and policies have similarly permeated the legal environment, with each year since 2018 [surpassing the previous one](#) in the number of proposed bills restricting transgender people’s civil rights. In 2023, there were 600 bills considered (national and state-





level combined), up from 143 just two years prior - **87 of them passed**. In just the first three months of 2024, 526 anti-trans bills have already been introduced across the country. Many of the bills have been introduced with the intention of limiting trans people's access to public or social spaces and basic necessities, such as health care, bathrooms that align with their gender, and school activities.

The targeting of trans people through legislation is not new, of course. Many of the earlier bills were focused on bathroom access. In 2016, for example, 15 states debated "bathroom bills" resembling the restrictive HB 2 that was passed in North Carolina that same year, which required all people to use the bathroom that corresponded with their sex as assigned on their birth certificate. As the years have passed, **legislators** have increasingly sought to restrict **gender-affirming health care access** as well as the right to legal recognition and ability to participate in school activities such as sports.

THE FINDINGS:

Our research has shown that dangerous speech aimed at trans people often falsely claims that they pose a threat to children or frames them as being a danger to the moral character of the nation (claims that are often cast in religious language). Specifically, we have identified the following prominent narratives targeting the trans community in contemporary political discourse.

1) Speech that denies trans people's identity or dehumanizes them


By describing other groups of people as something other than human, or less than human, speakers can persuade their audiences to **deny other people some of the moral consideration** they give to those who are "fully" human. Dehumanizing targets prepares audiences to condone or commit violence, by making their targets' death and suffering seem less significant, or even by making it seem useful or necessary.

Some anti-trans dehumanization implies that transgender people are evil or demonic. These examples are laden with Christian references, describing trans people as a threat to Christians and Christianity. For example, Florida Representative Webster Barnaby stated in a 2023 public hearing on anti-trans legislation:

"I'm looking at society today and it's like I'm watching an X-men movie... it's like we have mutants living among us on planet Earth. That's right- I called you demons and imps who come and parade before us and pretend that you are part of this world."

In another example, during the hearing over **Ohio House Bill 68**, which bans gender-affirming care for minors, local minister Stuart Long said about those opposing the bill, "The only thing that makes sense is demons are influencing people, allowing their bodies to be possessed to run satanic agendas." These harmful notions received more support from a recent **declaration issued by the Vatican** called the "Dignitas Infinita" (Infinite Dignity), in which the Pope declared what he calls "gender theory" to be a "grave threat" to human dignity. Dehumanization that references Christian notions of evil - especially when expressed by religious leaders - can be extremely dangerous, as it can silence dissent within groups of believers. Questioning the dehumanization becomes akin to questioning God.





Anti-trans dangerous speech also often denies trans people's identities by, for example, referring to trans people as "biological males" or "biological females" instead of as trans women, men, and people. This type of DS includes references to "[transgenderism](#)," "the transgender cult," or "transgender ideology." As [GLAAD notes](#), the term "gender ideology" falsely asserts that LGBTQ — notably trans — people are an ideological movement rather than an intrinsic identity."

One of the more egregious examples of this kind of speech was Michael Knowles' statements during the 2023 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC): "For the good of society ... transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely — the whole preposterous ideology, at every level," he said. Earlier on "The Michael Knowles Show," he had stated that "there can't be a genocide" of trans people because "it's not a legitimate category of being... they're laboring under a delusion. And so we need to correct that delusion." This speech asserts that the very existence of transgender people is not real in order to excuse, and even justify, acts of violence targeting the trans community.

This language has been echoed by politicians. In January 2024, Republican Senator Kristina Roegner stated at a House hearing on restricting trans medical care: "Despite what the liberals say, gender is not assigned at birth, but rather from the moment of conception, you are either male or you are female. There is no such thing as gender-affirming care. You can't affirm something that doesn't exist."

Suggesting that being transgender is not a legitimate identity, but instead a belief, is dangerous. This language incites violence towards transgender individuals by framing the harm as a necessary part of a larger battle against a dangerous ideology. On social media, it also allows people to subvert content moderation policies that prohibit attacks against people based on protected characteristics, but allow speech challenging ideologies.

2) Groundless claims that trans people are a threat to women and children.

Whether they know it or not, contemporary political figures often use versions of dangerous speech that go back centuries, and none is more pervasive or powerful than telling people that someone is threatening their children. This hallmark is very common in dangerous speech around the world and throughout history, likely because it is difficult to ignore a warning of violence against members of a group who are vulnerable and in need of protection. For most societies, this includes women and children; almost universally, men are expected, and often instructed, to protect women and children at all costs, up to and including killing a supposed attacker.

The specter of trans people as threatening to children draws upon decades of homophobic messaging. This hallmark is historically rooted in the false malicious assertion that gay men are pedophiles who take advantage of young boys. Now, this false trope is also directed at trans people. In anti-trans DS, this shows up in common refrains that all trans people are pedophiles and "groomers" a term that refers to people who try to brainwash kids to make them vulnerable to sexual abuse.

In addition to the persistence of rhetorical patterns like these that [we have identified in the past](#), we have also seen an increase in speech that falsely claims that all children are under threat from an amorphous "transgender industry" trying to brainwash them with the goal of "mutilating" their bodies to make a profit. For example, a [campaign text message](#) sent to voters in Kentucky by a conservative political action committee supporting Kentucky Republican



gubernatorial nominee Daniel Cameron asked: "When you were five, what did you want to be when you grew up? A doctor, an astronaut? How about the opposite gender? Kentucky tried to protect kids from a billion dollar transgender industry, but Andy Beshear vetoed legislation against this, Andy Beshear sided with the transgender industry, he doesn't care about our kids. Vote against the liberal corporations he fights for."

At CPAC 2024, Terry Schilling, president of the conservative political action committee the American Principles Project, claimed that the "transgender industry" is waging a "war on families." This narrative builds off the baseless and dehumanizing notion that being trans is not a valid intrinsic identity, but rather a "trend" or an ideology that can be pushed on children. In this construction, trans allies, especially healthcare providers who offer trans-affirming care, are reframed as individuals who are taking advantage of vulnerable children in order to make money.

In an [interview on Fox News Digital](#), Jeff Meyers, President of the evangelical church Summit Ministries, which is focused on defending "Christian worldviews," said "When a lot of people think about the transgender issue, they imagine drag shows or confused children. But behind all of that is an industry that intends to make a great deal of profit off gender-insecure children — and an ideology that intends to gain a great deal of power *from* them."

Politicians have frequently used speech like this to lobby for anti-trans legislation and as a general political rallying cry: "Let there be no doubt that we will protect women's sports from biological males, and we will protect our kids from transgender surgeries," said Kentucky Republican gubernatorial nominee Daniel Cameron. It should be noted that gender-affirming care is [approved and recommended](#) by every major medical association. As with other hate-driven disinformation tropes, especially medical misinformation, attacks on such care attempt to erode confidence in trusted institutions by repeating inflammatory falsehoods.

There is a real danger of messages like these inciting attacks. Throughout history, accusations of threats to children have been used repeatedly against minority groups, many times leading to violence.

3) Framing trans issues as part of a larger battle over "American" morality and/or culture

Online anti-trans commentary is rife with comments about the amount of power that trans people have over American culture and discourse. Some of this speech makes connections between trans issues and other common "culture war" topics, such as diversity and inclusion programs. "I get past the technical and then the HR interview sinks me because they realize that 'other' on my application meant white. I've considered larping as a troon [an extreme anti-trans





slur]²for the DEI points... Troons have more DEI points than any race and move ahead to first place," one internet user posted on 4chan.

A user on Kiwi Farms, a social media site known for facilitating the harassment of people from a variety of marginalized groups, also echoed the notion that trans people "get free clout and oppression points": "Oh your a white guy and now your the oppressor? Nope! Now your a non-binary trans person who gets to pretend they are an oppressed minority and make zero effort to try and become the other sex. Some of them may actually make an attempt to exhibit classic transgender behavior such as wearing clothing of the opposite sex but this is only done to "fit in" with the modern liberal agenda which allows anyone to self-identify as an oppressed minority and gain power over others."


Speech like this uses hyperbole to overstate the power and influence that trans people have. It can lead to doxxing, threats, and violence for the individuals singled out and creates a dangerous precedent for blocking trans folks from serving in any positions of power on the basis of being trans. It also suggests trans people wield too much power and representation, and thus pose a threat to the rest of society, when in reality cis people hold much more power over the lives of those in trans communities.

There is also a significant amount of speech that frames trans issues as part of a constellation of "woke" culture that undermines "true" or "moral" American culture. For example, one 4chan user wrote: "When I think about Trump voters I think: american flags, guns, big mac and fries, rodeo, founding fathers, declaration of independence, eagles, mullets and pickup trucks, country music. Ok not necessarily the greatest. But it is American through and through. An actual organic culture. I think about Biden voters I think: lgbt flags, funko pops, bug burgers and quinoa, superhero movies, apple products, colored hair and piercings, transgenderism, black lives matter, rap music. Completely merchandized fake plastic culture. Disgusting."

In another example, a Gab user outlines this "war of good versus evil," in promotion of his podcast "Understanding the Bible,": "If you see the evil in the world and want to fight against it, you need to get on the right side. The only reason evil fights to destroy goodness is because goodness is real and is the opposite of evil. Abortion, transgenderism, riots, unjust laws and imprisonment, stolen elections, evil lies told everyday in the media, twisted and evil school teachers warping children's minds; all of these things are proof of the acceleration of evil in this world. It's coming out of the woodworks into the light of day and laughing in our faces as they destroy our society...This podcast starts with the assumption that you understand that there is literally a war of good versus evil going on right now. It is quite literally Demonic influence against any sort of goodness that dares to rise up. This spiritual war requires that you choose a side. Don't sit on the sidelines."

In a similar vein, another social media user wrote: "Everything the LEFT stands for, is an illusion. It's all fake. There is nothing that they believe in that is truthful, honest or genuine. It's all lies, make-believe, fake and dishonest. Globalism, open borders, war, climate change, wokeness, going green, transgenderism, LGBTQ++, The Lincoln Project, DEI...all of it is 100% bullshit. It's all an illusion to demoralize, to break traditions, break the family unit, turn men into sissy's, confuse children, mis-program minds, to gain power, to steal wealth and make people their serfs. Don't fall for it. Reject it, Mock it. Laugh at those who believe in it. Laugh and laugh. It's all lies. #MAGA Make the World Great Again."





In these examples, it is people on “the left” , framed as “demonic,” “evil,” and lacking morals, that are described as the real threat due to their support for causes like gender-affirming health care, abortion, and immigration. The positioning of one group vs. another while invoking notions of good vs. evil is a frequent marker in DS that incites a call to action. This framing creates a feeling of existential threat and seeks to galvanize others to think in terms of polarized, and urgent, moral conundrums, right vs. wrong. This is dangerous as it creates an imperative, an active call to action, to fight for whatever is deemed "good" by whatever means necessary, which excuses and even goads violence for the sake of the "good."

COUNTERING ANTI-TRANS SPEECH:

In response to the growing amount of dangerous and hateful anti-trans speech online, in a context where [platforms are failing to moderate such speech](#) - even when it violates their own policies, users have turned to counterspeech and counternarrative campaigns as a way to push back. At the Dangerous Speech Project, we define [counterspeech](#) as any direct response to hateful or harmful speech that seeks to undermine it. Counternarrative is a broader strategy that involves challenging dominant narratives or ideologies that perpetuate injustice, discrimination, or inequality. These narratives generally include an alternative interpretation, analysis, or understanding of historical events, social issues, cultural norms, or political ideologies.

Some trans people choose to reply directly to those who send them hateful messages. [Lauren Sundstrom](#), a trans woman content creator started using the “outfit of the day” trend on Tiktok (often abbreviated OOTD, where users post a photo or video of their outfit, describing the different pieces) as an avenue to counter those who sent her harassing messages online. [One such video](#) shows Lauren addressing the audience with a small image of a comment saying “you are not a girl” in the corner. “I get comments like this on a very regular basis, and they just make me laugh because my sense of self is so grounded, so rooted, so unshakable. I started transitioning when I was 16 years old. I am now 34. This is nothing. This cannot hurt me,” she says. She continues “So you might be wondering, Lauren, if you have such an unshakable sense of self, why are you replying to this comment at all? And that, my friend, is to show you my outfit because I love using these as fodder for my outfits of the day.”

Other responses focus on changing larger narratives around trans issues. In 2016, after North Carolina passed a law banning trans people from using bathrooms corresponding to their gender, actor and writer Dylan Marron created a web series called [“Sitting in Bathrooms with Trans People.”](#) “Hateful legislation depended on fear, and fear grew from the unknown. I wanted to reverse that” Marron later wrote in his book, [Conversations with People Who Hate Me](#). So he set up a studio in a toilet, interviewing his guests about their trans identity, and also “the mundane” like their favorite snacks and boring pastimes. The series went viral. It also prompted many to send Marron hateful messages, often homophobic ones. Those messages, and Marron’s responses to them, later became the focus of a podcast he created called “Conversations with People Who Hate Me,” in which he conducted extended one-on-one conversations with the writers of the messages. Marron later wrote a book by the same title.

There are more orchestrated counternarrative efforts as well. In 2024, a group of trans activists came together to form the [Trans Safe Action Fund](#) and began buying television ad space on right-wing Fox News and Newsmax, stations that frequently air content targeting trans people.





Their **30-second ad** contains images of trans people at work and at home, accompanied by a narrator saying: “This is us laughing. It’s 2023. Here’s the food we like, and the seconds we didn’t need. This is our home, and here is us at work. And this is what freedom feels like, what beauty looks like, what love is. This is just us.” The ad ends with words that read “We are Trans. We are human.” In 2022, GLAAD released a similarly humanizing ad, showcasing a family with a trans son. **In the ad**, the mother talks about her family while the viewer sees images of everyday life. “Trans kids don’t have a political agenda,” the mother says. “They are just kids.” Counternarrative campaigns like these challenge dangerous speech that claims trans people are a frightening threat.

These are just a few examples of the voices challenging the increasing anti-trans rhetoric permeating the media. Civil society and user-based responses like these are an essential component of mitigating the very real harm posed by anti-trans dangerous speech. Counterspeech can have strong favorable effects on the audience and on discourse norms, according to our research. It can encourage other, more timid social media users with similar views to share them. When people see other people counterspeaking, they often feel it’s safe to chime in. It can also potentially change the views of those in the “movable middle,” those who may not have made up their mind yet about the topic being discussed, and therefore could be potentially swayed in different directions. Also, for those who are denigrated and attacked online, counterspeech from allies can deliver much needed support and convey a sense of solidarity.

As Human Rights First points out in their “**Extremism Fact Sheet**,” “targeting LGBTQ+ rights in society is a marker of democratic backsliding and a dire warning for democracies.” In this moment of **democratic precarity**, addressing such speech is of the utmost importance. Combatting anti-trans rhetoric requires a multifaceted approach, including education, advocacy, and policy changes aimed at promoting inclusivity and equality. Understanding the rhetorical patterns used to advance dangerous narratives about trans people is one step toward designing better interventions to counter such speech.





Report Contributors:
Niko Shahbazian
Cathy Buerger

The **Dangerous Speech Project** is a team of experts on how speech leads to violence. We use our research to advise internet companies, governments, and civil society on how to anticipate, minimize, and respond to harmful discourse in ways that prevent violence while also protecting freedom of expression.

¹LARP stands for live action role-playing

²**The Online Hate Research and Education Project** defines this term as “a slur used by transphobes to refer to and dehumanize transgender women. The term is a portmanteau of the words “trans” and “goon”, and carries the connotation that those accused of being “troons” are using gender identity to hide sinister and potentially violent ends.”

