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Author

Johnson, Jin

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“My Pronouns are USA”: The Impact of Right Wing Online Influencers on the LGBTQ+ Community

Jin Johnson

Abstract

Hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community has grown throughout the United States as public figures such as Chaya Raichik (also known as Libs of TikTok) and Matt Walsh of the Daily Wire have gained influence online. Right-wing activists and influencers disseminate hateful content to their radicalized audiences in an attempt to otherize those in the LGBTQ+ community. Previous research has shown a connection between online communities and homophobia/transphobia, however this research primarily focuses broadly on social media platforms and communities. As our lives become more intertwined with our social media presence, it becomes difficult to escape online hatred as an LGBTQ+ individual – especially for those who are people of color. There are two sides to online bigotry: the perpetrators of the hatred and those receiving said hatred. Using ethnographic and oral history methods, this project shows how online hostility increasingly affects individual LGBTQ+ community members in their everyday lives.

Background

Conservative internet personalities Matt Walsh and Chaya Raichik (also known online as Libs of TikTok) are some of the most popular right-wing political voices in addition to being leading instigators of anti-LGBTQ+ hatred. Walsh is part of conservative media organization *The Daily Wire*, which is co-owned by Ben Shapiro. In addition to co-owning *The Daily Wire*, Ben Shapiro is himself a right-wing online influencer with around 7.22 million subscribers on YouTube. Although Walsh is less popular in comparison to Shapiro, he is still incredibly influential with over 10.57 million followers across YouTube, X.com (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram. He is most known for his film *What is a Woman?* whose title question is used to brand the modern LGBTQ+ movement as ignorant and unable to define what a woman is, decontextualizing left-wing advocacy for transgender individuals.

In addition to blatant transphobic and homophobic tropes, much of conservative online harassment consists of branding LGBTQ+ individuals as ‘communists’ or ‘perverts’, which is similar to the past tactics used in 1960s Florida by Senator Charley Johns. The label of ‘communism’ in relation to the LGBTQ+ community has been analyzed by Stacy Braukman in *Communists and Perverts under the Palms: The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956-1965*. Braukman discusses how homosexuality was likened to secularism due to fears surrounding the Cold War, stoking the fears that parents would ‘lose’ their children to a liberal lifestyle. This is similar to the fears that Walsh and Raichik spread on their social media platforms. Raichik in particular is popular amongst conservative social media personalities for her targeted attacks against LGBTQ+ people. Her methods of harassment are defined by doxxing (the practice of maliciously spreading personal information about an individual and disseminating it), and witch hunts. This mass hysteria is reminiscent of past (and current) fear mongering of ‘communist perverts’ that Braukman describes. You hear this in Raichik’s interviews, even stating in a conversation with Tucker Carlson that, “...we’ve gotten about a dozen teachers fired – we’re talking about bad teachers who are grooming kids,” and that the LGBTQ+ community is, “Evil. They’re just evil people, and they want to groom kids (Blistein, 2022).”

Today’s anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is not new, and it continues to be defined by the nationalism, bigotry, and absurdity that was made prevalent in the 1970s. In the 1970s, Anita Bryant popularized the methods that Walsh and Raichik use which combine public shaming with misinformation. Bryant was a singer who later became an anti-LGBTQ+ activist and founder of the ‘Save Our Children’ political coalition. She once said that, “Homosexuals are made by training rather than born” which is incredibly similar to Walsh and Raichik’s idea that LGBTQ+ adults recruit children to be a part of the “gender ideology cult” (Johnson, 2018; Dickson and Ramirez, 2023). During her time as an anti-LGBTQ+ activist Bryant was hyper focused on gay teachers whom she believed to inherently be ‘child molesters’ that ‘recruited’ children to be gay. Bryant’s talking points, which have been laid out in “God, Country, and Anita Bryant: Women’s Leadership and the Politics of the New Christian Right” by Emily Suzanne Johnson, is the biggest motivation for this project as we can see much of the old homophobia that was popularized by Bryant in Walsh and Raichik’s rhetoric.

Research and Methodologies

As we become interconnected through online methods of communication and media

publishing, it is important to seek out the voices of those within marginalized groups to gauge their self-perceptions of safety and perspective. This project is a social justice oral history. In other words, the goal is not just to get the perspectives of those who are affected by online homophobia or transphobia, but also to encourage the viewer to reexamine their media consumption of marginalized people through the internet.

By telling personal stories through the lens of ethnographic and oral history methods, this project will show the necessity to speak with LGBTQ+ individuals — especially those who come from racialized backgrounds – in order to see what can be done to combat anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. In today's social climate where transgender individuals' existence is politicized, it is all the more important to focus on this group in order to further society's understanding of the struggles that marginalized people face.

Introduction

At the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2019, American political commentator Michelle Malkin announced, “My pronouns are U-S-A!”. This exclamation was met with uproarious applause and statements like Malkin's have become a staple in the conservative repertoire of insults against the LGBTQ+ community. This quote was chosen as the title for this project because it encapsulates the nationalism and prejudice that defines the anti-LGBTQ+ movement of today.

Today's anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is not new, and it continues to be defined by the nationalism, bigotry, and absurdity that was made prevalent in the 1970s. The statement, “My pronouns are U-S-A!” exudes nationalism as it demonstrates that the conservative movement is on the side of patriotism, while LGBTQ+ Americans are automatically seen as part of an anti-American movement. Additionally, the phrase insults the common practice of sharing pronouns (which is intended to normalize and increase acceptance for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals) by reducing its importance to a frivolous joke.

Beyond jokes, conservative internet personalities Matt Walsh and Chaya Raichik (also known online as Libs of TikTok) are some of the most popular right-wing political voices in addition to being leading instigators of LGBTQ+ hatred. In 2022 Raichik alleged that Boston Children's Hospital was performing gender affirming surgeries on minors. This led the hospital to receive, “harassing emails including threats of violence towards [their] clinicians and staff” (Bond, 2022). It is important to note that Boston Children's Hospital was not performing the gender affirming hysterectomies that the right-wing attacks were alleging, but the attacks continued despite the inaccuracy of the allegations.

Much like Chaya Raichik, Matt Walsh is also known to target hospitals for their real or perceived support of transgender identities. In 2022, Walsh attacked the Trans Buddy program at Vanderbilt University Medical Center claiming that they, “castrate, sterilize, and mutilate minors as well as adults...” (Sprayregen, 2022). Both Matt Walsh and Chaya Raichik mask their transphobia by framing it as a concern for the wellbeing of children. However, when contextualizing this rhetoric within Anita Bryant's framework and the title of her political coalition ‘Save Our Children’, it is apparent that the real motivation is not to protect children. Rather, the goal is to eliminate transgender individuals from public life, or as a senator from

Anita Bryant's home state of Florida, once said, "We are tired of you and wish that you would go back in the closet" (Braukman, 2012).

Motivations

In order to understand the motivation behind this research project, it is important to gauge the extent of damage by conservative personalities like Raichik and Walsh. A recent example that gained popularity in mainstream media was the international "transvestigation" of the Olympic boxer Imane Khelif. Khelif is an Algerian boxer who was falsely accused of being a transgender woman. Due to the public's misinformed opinion that Khelif is 'secretly a man', she was subjected to a 'transvestigation' – the term used to describe the incredibly invasive questioning that forces individuals to prove their gender under intense scrutiny.



Figure 1 (betterplanwithchan, 2024)

Khelif is a cisgender woman, yet many were convinced that she was actually a transgender woman (which in the eyes of transphobes is the same as being a man). Many online influencers participated in this misinformation campaign with Matt Walsh saying of the situation, "Women support trans ideology more than men and feminism laid the groundwork for the theories of gender that the trans myth is grounded in" (Walsh, 2024). Raichik also added to the misinformation by stating on her Libs of TikTok account, "This dude," in reference to Khelif, "just beat up a woman and punched her in the face on live TV in front of millions of people" (Raichik, 2024). This lie reached as far as the Boston Globe who published a headline, "Transgender boxer advances." Even though Khelif is a cisgender woman, the harassment of her demonstrates that homophobia and transphobia affects not just the LGBTQ+ community, it also threatens all those who do not fit into the conservative ideal of a man or woman.



Duffy, 2019



Walsh, 2024



(*"Libs of TikTok" : The Reveal*, 2022)

Interviews

My three interviewees were individuals that I knew personally and who are heavily involved in LGBTQ+ activism within their communities. Esmée Silverman is from Portland, Oregon, and is currently a student at Reed College. They are a prolific advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and are the co-founder and co-president of the non-profit Queer Youth Assemble. Amanda Trinh is a health equity specialist from Riverside, California. She has done volunteer work with LGBTQ+ youth and currently works for the county of Riverside to improve the lives of all marginalized groups. My last interviewee is Alia Cusolito who comes from Rochester, Massachusetts. They are an incoming first year college student who has been featured prominently in their local news for their LGBTQ+ youth advocacy. Each interview was sixty minutes to ninety minutes and took place during the week of July 28th.

When discussing the topic of online homophobia and transphobia, each interviewee stated that they had faced intense adversity and/or a loved one who is LGBTQ+ had been directly harmed as a result of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. Esmée and Alia both elaborated on their personal experiences with homophobia and transphobia, in addition to the excess difficulties they have had because of their activism. Esmée told a story about how she had lost four friends to suicide due to the current political climate:

I've lost four friends to suicide, and I'm confident that I'll lose another one if things keep going the way they are. I hate saying that I'm going to lose somebody else to suicide, but it's true...This stuff affects you – not only directly, but through other people. It's impossible to ignore.

Alia later told me how at a national protest they were organizing that an individual drove over seventeen hours from Minneapolis to Washington DC because he wanted to harm the LGBTQ+ activists campaigning for queer youth autonomy:

Queer Youth Assemble – we had threats from people when we were organizing our national marches – we had threats to various people. The [QYA march] in Nashville had to cancel because of concerns of gun violence. A few different ones had news that Proud Boys were going to be showing up...The DC march had a threat from someone who – we later confirmed – actually drove 17 hours from Minneapolis, and some folks we were in contact with reported him to the FBI.

Both Esmée and Alia told me that online homophobia and transphobia played large roles in these outcomes. Esmée told me that four of her friends had, “See[n] too much and hear[d] too much” and Alia told me that the driver from Minneapolis was rampantly posting virulent transphobia online before being arrested. The previous quote from Esmée encapsulates the urgency with which we must address those spreading online hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community. Although addressing the violence towards these vulnerable individuals is not enough, it starts to place appropriate blame on who should be held accountable for the damage being inflicted on LGBTQ+ people. Both of these examples are horrific and should be cautionary tales of how right wing misinformation of LGBTQ+ individuals leads to terrible consequences for all involved.

There are many ways that online conservative anti-LGBTQ+ activism hurts the queer community – especially for those who also identify as people of color. In my interview with Riverside health equity specialist Amanda Trinh, she told me that in her experience:

A common pipeline that Catholic Vietnamese – older folks like Gen X – would fall into is being introduced to a lot of right wing ideology. Especially through platforms like Facebook. And that kind of repeated information that they're exposed to had parents coming up to me and expressing... very covert transphobic and homophobic ideals that they had learned...

Amanda explained to me how this radicalization led the LGBTQ+ youth in her community to feel unsafe at home and were forced to hide their sexuality or gender identity from their family. By creating an unsafe environment that intimidates LGBTQ+ individuals so they hide an essential part of their identity from those in their same household, it creates an uninhabitable space filled with shame, loneliness, and anxiety. This example demonstrates how passive viewing of right-wing content normalizes homophobic and transphobic views which creates isolation between communities. Adding onto this, Amanda later told me how this radicalization through right-wing accounts affects her work in health equity, stating:

I believe that the health and wellness of LGBTQ+ [people] – and especially transgender youth – is a large concern, and one of the most important things that we should be addressing.

The final question for each interview was, “What does an LGBTQ+ friendly internet look like to you?” Something I found interesting was that on questions I asked pertaining to violence and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, each person was prepared to give a response. Though all participants had readily addressed online discrimination, the image of a queer-friendly online environment resulted in reflective silence. Alia Cusolito told me in their response:

It's so hard – I've never even been able to think about that as a concept... In theory, it's more about people just being more conscious of their actions so that they're not just blindly following things that other people say, and instead take time on their own to look into it before they share that post, or add onto it, or make their own post.

When the same question was asked to Amanda Trinh, who works with the county of Riverside in part to combat online racism and discrimination, she expressed this to me in our interview:

Right now, I'm trying to subscribe to this idea of freedom thinking. Ideas that are so hard to imagine happening in this world – imagine it anyways. Because once you have that clear picture in your head, you can start making your way there...In order to make the internet a truly safe place for LGBTQ+ people, it would have to be a systemic shift, a cultural shift, a societal shift in how LGBT people are viewed and how LGBT centric activities are viewed.

These answers are a glaring reflection of our society. It demonstrates how easy it is to list a number of examples when thinking about violence done to marginalized groups, however it is difficult to even imagine the opposite occurring.

Conclusion

This social justice oral history demonstrates the necessity to speak with LGBTQ+ individuals – especially those who come from racialized backgrounds – in order to see what can be done to combat anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. Areas of further study should focus on the impact that doxxing and harassment has done to LGBTQ+ individuals in the public eye (such as teachers or gender affirming healthcare providers) and how they rebuild their lives after the attacks. Our current political climate is filled with transphobia and is seeing record numbers of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation being introduced in the United States. Because of this, we must stay vigilant, and remember that all people have a responsibility to ensure the safety of the most marginalized in our communities.

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