



# The stoning of Stonewall during the new trans panic

How the UK's most popular progressive newspaper, the Guardian, aligned with the right-wing legacy media's attempts to delegitimise the LGBT+ charity Stonewall for its advocacy of trans rights

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# Summary

The explosion in the number of stories about trans issues since the late 2010s, published by a UK legacy media largely devoid of trans voices and related specialist knowledge, has seen coverage deemed “aggressive and damaging” against transgender people (IPSO, 2020: 12). Such trans testimonies, registering their distress at the negativity of the coverage by the UK legacy media, are supported by the findings of a number of international bodies such as the Council of Europe (2021) and ILGA-Europe (2021) which claim the UK’s legacy media has been contributing to the demonization of the country’s transgender community. One surprising participant in this media campaign has been the UK’s most popular progressive news outlet the Guardian. While the reasons behind the apparent anti-trans tendency remain a point of conjecture, the evidence of transphobic framing is discernible and measurable. This article provides a frame analysis for some of the recurring patterns of delegitimization from the period of 2020–2022, specifically its coverage of the largest LGBT+ charity and trans-advocacy organization in the UK and Europe, Stonewall. As has been recognized (Trans Legal Project, 2021; Paton, 2021), Stonewall has increasingly become a collateral target of the U.K legacy media for its refusal to abandon its advocacy of trans rights. This study analyses how the Guardian’s coverage has contributed to this attempted delegitimization of Stonewall, specifically in terms of its selection of key words and omission of key information in its coverage of the charity.

## Frame analysis: background

At a general level, this research is indebted to the frame analysis conducted by Catherine Luther and Mark Miller concerning the national news media in the U.S. They define framing as the “selection, emphasis, or omission of particular attributes of an issue, event, or actor” (2005: 83). They highlight the impact of the curation of information on a national audience, when “journalists simplify, highlight, and make more salient certain aspects of reality, while obscuring others” (79). Importantly, they identify the role of power and ideology in this process of framing. A key finding, supported by other research (McLeod and Hertog, 1992; Hallin, 1986), is that “the news media, as part of the broad economic and social system, often confer legitimate status only to those movements which do not pose a threat to the established societal consensus.” Conversely, the legacy media’s journalistic framing of the news includes “cues of deviance or disruption” which “then leads to delegitimization” of the actors/groups seen as subverting the status quo. In this research, such cues include key words tied to a broader moral panic across the media conveying a ‘free speech crisis,’ and the ‘toxicity’ of ‘identity politics,’ with the paradoxical association of ‘institutional capture’ by marginalized minorities and their advocates. Overall, the delegitimizing of trans communities and advocates by the UK legacy media can be said to involve this combination of an omission of affirming narratives with a discourse of delegitimizing cues. Conversely, the UK legacy media can be said to represent individuals or groups with a history of transphobia with a discourse of affirmation, counterbalanced with the omission of delegitimizing cues, including reference to any record of transphobia.

# Protectors of the status quo: the UK's legacy media

From the data available on the legacy media's composition, it can be argued that the construction of an alignment of delegitimizing cues and the omission of affirmation of a marginalised actor or group is arguably less the result of a calculated conspiracy spanning the entire media than the pre-existing ignorance and accompanying gap-filling prejudices that exist across it. Concerning the UK's legacy media, it is useful to begin by acknowledging the findings of the Social Mobility Commission by the Sutton Trust (2019) which summarizes that in the UK, "The media, alongside politics and the civil service, form a triumvirate of sectors at the top of the socially exclusive list" (2019: 6). In terms of educational background, the Commission finds that a select demographic of people dominates the UK legacy media, with 44% of newspaper columnists in the national media having attended either Oxford or Cambridge University, despite less than 1% of the population attending these universities (2019). Meanwhile, only 19% of columnists have attended a state comprehensive [U.S.: public] school, while approximately 93% of British children are state-school educated (2019: 12). The result of these trends, for journalist Nesrine Malik in her study of the conservatism of the UK media, is that, "Politically, the opinion-making class is overwhelmingly centre, right of centre or right-wing. Demographically, it is overwhelmingly white, male and upper or middle class ... [with] a world view that is ideologically establishmentarian" (2020: 210).

Within this relatively elitist industry, the impact on trans voices can be measured by the latter's journalistic absence and the resulting gap in specialised knowledge on trans issues. This is particularly significant since the late 2010s when the quantity of UK news coverage of trans issues grew exponentially. According to IPSO, "During the second half of [the 2010s] ... the number of stories reached an average of 176 per month, a rise of 414% and an indication of the dramatic emergence of transgender-related stories in our press" (2020: 37). Combining dangerously with this increase in attention is the shift away from a lifestyle framing of individuals typical of the early 2010s, to issues requiring specialized knowledge such as policy and law, as typified by the reform of the Gender Recognition Act circa 2016-2022 (IPSO, 54-55). During this latter period, in which a more sophisticated understanding of trans issues and policy-making was required, the concept at the heart of the GRA reform, namely 'self-identification,' appears to have become a Rorschach test among anti-trans communities and ideologically aligned journalists in which the worst possible consequences for women and children could be imagined. Notably, when UK journalism and its commentariat needed specialists in trans policy-making to break down the minutiae for public comprehension, the UK legacy media included almost no regular trans opinion-piece writers and no editor during this period (Fae, 2018, 204; Faye, 2021: 9). One consequence of this asynchronicity between analysis and knowledge has been the emergence of a narrative of trans rights vs. women's rights, and trans people vs. feminists (Phipps, 2020). This has led in turn to a sparser, more confrontational period for trans journalists and media commentators who have been positioned by the media on the other, 'deviant' side of the constructed 'debate,' as testified by those such as Shon Faye (2022: 8), Juliet Jacques (2020), and Juno Dawson (2020). Each has noted an intensification in the tone of hostility in the framing of trans people by the UK legacy media in this period. In turn, they have

articulated their own reluctance to participate in the few, delegitimizing opportunities made available to them on TV, namely debates with anti-trans representatives, where trans identity and rights are effectively put on trial as a form of entertainment (Faye, 8; Lester, 2017: 17-19).

By contrast to the 'debate' format and overall coverage of trans issues of the Guardian and the establishmentarian legacy media, a new wave of online news and current affairs platforms has arisen, arguably exposing the legacy media's commitment to an establishmentarian, largely anti-trans status quo, with the latter's paranoid narrative about trans people and their rights. These online channels align with the position of international bodies such as the Council of Europe and ILGA-Europe in recognizing a pattern of institutional transphobia across the UK's legacy media. Typifying this position is Novara Media, whose journalist Ash Sarkar summarizes the UK legacy media's current delegitimization of trans people via the 'trans vs. women' narrative:

*"There is a media interest in utilising feminism and discourses that develop through feminism about sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and wielding them to demonize transgender people. That is a thing that is not just happening at the BBC, it's also happening at the Guardian, it's happening in all of these discussions around self-identification and access to same-sex spaces, and it is a way of using the language of liberation for intensely reactionary purposes ... So you have a deliberate media gate-keeping to exclude trans-sympathetic stories from their platforms ... This is an editorial perspective that runs rife through British media, and I think it is shameful, I think it is dangerous, I think it is inciteful towards the minority who already face heightened rates of violence, abuse, and harassment. But it is also atrocious journalistic practice, and it is robbing the audience of the ability to make an informed decision about what they think about this issue" (2021: 56.50).*

Sarkar's analysis replicates the scholarship of Alison Phipps on how the legacy media constructs discourses of moral panic against particular minorities such as the trans community. These include the recycling of different forms of threat to the UK's implicitly white and middle class women and children that can be merged onto the template for trans coverage:

*"This concern with white 'women's safety' is not new ... Sometimes, sexual violence is a 'cultural problem' (but only when this culture is non-white). Sometimes, it is a product of male anatomy (but only when this anatomy is assigned to a trans woman or a man of colour) ... representatives of patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism weaponise the idea of 'women's safety' against marginalised and hyper-exploited groups" (2020: 30-31).*

A second, more contemporary discourse used to pejoratively frame minorities concerns the myth of a "free speech crisis" (Malik, 2020: 97), in which those occupying the platforms of power of the legacy media portray themselves as marginalized, and the marginalized as all-powerful. As Malik says, "Claiming to be silenced plays an important part in both sexing up views that have become dulled by mainstreaming, while at the same time conferring a sort of underdog legitimacy on to plain old bigotry" (114). Headlines at the Guardian that typify this analysis in relation to trans rights include those from a string of articles by its then-columnist Suzanne Moore as the moral panic against trans activism peaked circa June 2020: 'Women must have the right to organise. We will not be silenced' (2 March 2020), and 'Cancellation might feel good, but it's not activism' (3 July 2020). Overall, this range of moral-panic

discourses is evident in the attacks on both trans issues and Stonewall, with the latter evidently viewed in the anti-trans climate as the protector and enabler of the former.

## The legacy media's attacks on the LGBT+ charity Stonewall

The legacy media's coverage of Stonewall represents a form of collateral delegitimization of trans rights. Similar to the attacks on the validity of trans people, the attacks on Europe's largest LGBT+ charity come from several directions, including both social media and the legacy media. Concerning the former, Gaby Hinsliff highlights an apparent online campaign "coordinated via feminist blogs or threads on the parenting site Mumsnet under the hashtag #DontSubmitToStonewall ... [in which] in the first quarter of 2021 around 900 FOI requests were made to organisations [Stonewall] works with" (2021). The result of this apparent campaign, involving a potentially overwhelming number of requests for freedom of information, has been to demoralize the charity and its staff while distracting it from functioning effectively in its advocacy of LGBT+ rights. As Stonewall's CEO Nancy Kelley says, it "pulls resource and energy away from the work we're here to do and that is really distressing for staff" (Hinsliff, 2021). The reference in Hinsliff's article to the website Mumsnet as a source of at least some of this anti-Stonewall campaigning online is also instructive. As noted by Katie Baker, Mumsnet has become a major location of online radicalization against trans people, with one of the UK's most high-profile anti-trans-rights campaigners, Maya Forstater, tweeting, "Mumsnet is the think-tank, campaign hub and archive of thinking about why #sexmatters." Of equal concern for supporters of Stonewall or trans rights is the finding by Baker that "Leading British journalists have admitted that their views on this topic are directly influenced by the forum" (Baker, 2021).

From the legacy media, the most intense delegitimizing coverage comes from the right-wing press, typified by the Rupert-Murdoch-owned Times / Sunday Times. As noted by Douglas Kellner, the impact of Murdoch's media empire on the UK generally, including via the Times / Sunday Times, has profoundly shaped media coverage over several decades in the UK, having

*"contributed massively to the tabloidisation of news and information in newspapers and journalism ... all framed from a right-wing conservative position ... Thus, not only was Murdoch the major purveyor of an aggressively right-wing political slant on the news, but he also degraded journalism and helped create the tabloidisation of both news and information" (2012: 2).*

Such tabloidisation is typified by the Murdoch empire's involvement in the News International phone-hacking scandal of 2011 (Fae, 2018), after which a major Murdoch-owned paper the News of the World was closed by Murdoch following the public backlash (BBC, 2011). Yet another example of 'degraded journalism' is the Sun's apparent whitewashing of police complicity in the deaths of 97 Liverpool football fans at the Hillsborough tragedy, a media campaign deemed so offensive that the Sun continues to be boycotted in the city of Liverpool several decades later (BBC, 2022). As noted by Christine Cooper and Irvine Lapsley, the Murdoch-owned Sun newspaper "stated that Liverpool fans were to blame for the disaster ... In effect, the culpability for the deaths of Liverpool fans was placed on other Liverpool fans" (2021: 8). After campaigning by the victims' families, "a jury found that the

victims of the disaster were unlawfully killed.” As David Conn notes, however, the Sun’s front-page story on the Hillsborough tragedy “remains a notorious low point of British journalism” (Conn, 2016).

Historically, there is little evidence of the Murdoch media empire and its anti-union and anti-leftist position being an ally of progressive movements or causes, including in relation to LGBT+ rights. The LGBT+ rights campaigner Peter Tatchell for example highlights the improvements in news coverage of the gay community when compared to the past: “Nowadays you rarely see anything as vicious as The Sun’s 1986 feature: ‘Perverts To Blame For The Killer Plague’, which denounced gay people with AIDS as ‘terrorists holding the decent members of society to ransom’” (1998). Yet even in regard to improved news coverage about the gay community, research by Michael Lovelock highlights the enduring homophobia of the Murdoch press in the same era as the moral panic against the trans community:

*“At numerous points in 2016 and 2017 the Sun ... brought into being a spectral, undesirable mode of gay life that was pitted against the ‘normal,’ responsible, respectable, and, by default, heterosexual subject of neoliberal austerity. This negatively coded vision of gay life, formed of a cluster of representations spanning numerous different news events, makes legible a conflation between gay identities (or, perhaps more specifically, certain kinds of sex between men), wastefulness, irresponsibility, danger, threat, self-destruction, and death” (2018: 227).*

It is notable that Lovelock’s analysis of legacy-media homophobia conforms to the overarching analysis by Luther and Miller, in which the legacy media “often confer legitimate status only to those movements which do not pose a threat to the established societal consensus ... [while utilising] cues of deviance or disruption” to actors/groups seen as challenging the status quo. Queerphobia, on this evidence, is never far from the surface of legacy media coverage.

It is consistent with the Murdoch brand of “aggressively right-wing” sensationalism, therefore, that the Murdoch media empire’s broadsheet Times / Sunday Times between 2020-2022 produced approximately 178 stories in which Stonewall was featured, with 47 of those being centred on how Stonewall’s actions – indeed, its existence – are damaging to UK society.

**Table 1: stories in the legacy media covering Stonewall (2020-2022)**

	Stonewall featured	Stonewall-centred	Stonewall as a beneficial force	Stonewall as a negative force
The I	24	2	0	2
Independent	94	6	1	5
Guardian Observer	72	8	6	2
The Times/Sunday Times	178	48	47	1

With further examination of the coverage of the Times / Sunday Times, what also becomes noticeable is the diverse but familiar range of tropes used to undermine Stonewall. As table 2 shows, the most popular recurring theme is to depict Stonewall as haemorrhaging clients and

support in its Diversity scheme, in spite of Stonewall’s claim of an increase in UK organisations joining its scheme (Hinsliff, 2021). This discrepancy supports an analysis by Stephen Paton that there appears to be a campaign “to bring down Stonewall” by falsely insinuating it is in the process of collapse.

**Table 2: Top 20 recurring negative themes in stories associated with Stonewall by the Times/ Sunday Times in 2020-2022**

Themes	Frequency of them
1 Withdrawal by organisations from Stonewall workplace programme	33
2 Stonewall undermines free speech (eg HE, workplace)	26
3 Stonewall represents institutional capture / lobbying	24
4 Stonewall is a waste of money / drain on public money / a funding racket	18
5 Stonewall is dominated by dogma / gender ideology / propaganda	16
6 Stonewall infringes on children’s rights / welfare	16
7 Stonewall is guilty of misinterpreting the law	15
8 Stonewall introduces oppressively gendered language	13
9 Stonewall policies are an attack on women’s rights	13
10 Stonewall is guilty of individual attacks on GC academics	8
11 Stonewall victimises gender-critical individuals (Allison Bailey)	6
12 Stonewall has been exposed by the Nolan Investigation (BBC)	5
13 Stonewall undermines information gathering on the census	5
14 Stonewall contributes to a politically toxic / divisive debate on trans issues	4
15 Stonewall operates through cancel culture	3
16 Stonewall seeks to undermine women’s sport	2
17 Stonewall is associated with online abuse	2
18 Stonewall is implicated in the issue of conversion therapy	2
19 Stonewall is going in the wrong direction with its intersectional approach	2
20 Stonewall is undermining women’s spaces	2

Other notable themes that appear in this table are those identified in Malik’s critique of right-wing news agendas, namely a confected crisis over free speech (2-3, 8, 15), as well as the exploitation of concern for women’s rights (9, 16, 20), as noted separately by Phipps and Sarkar.

# The Guardian

Between 2020 and 2022, and in contrast to the rest of the progressive legacy media, the Guardian has with increasing consistency begun to emulate the frame used by the Times / Sunday Times to portray the UK's largest LGBT+ charity as a negative force in society. Without replicating the frequency of negative stories, it does maintain the negative framing and key themes of delegitimisation.

**Table 3: Top 5 recurring negative themes in stories associated with Stonewall by the Guardian in 2020–2022**

Themes	Frequency of themes
Withdrawal by organisations from Stonewall workplace programme	6
Stonewall contributes to a politically toxic / divisive debate on trans issues	3
Stonewall is guilty of misinterpreting the law	2
Stonewall undermines free speech (eg HE, workplace)	2
Stonewall is dominated by dogma / gender ideology / propaganda	1

## Study of a trans-delegitimising article in the Guardian

Presenting an analysis of the moral panic surrounding Stonewall, an article on 5 June 2021 by the Guardian, 'Stonewall is at centre of toxic debate on trans rights and gender identity,' conforms to the 'moral-panic' coverage of the Times / Sunday Times. Consistent with this frame, the association between trans rights and toxicity is presented as a *fait accompli*, with Stonewall tainted by association. A significant feature of this story is that it encompasses the language of controversy and moral panic, but is not an opinion piece; rather, it is a news piece by a legal correspondent. Its neutrality and validity as a piece of objective information is therefore assumed, even as its framing replicates characteristics of online 'cancel culture,' with its emphasis not on detail but on (1) presumption of guilt, (2) abstraction, and (3) essentialising (Wynn, 2021: 5.38, 7.23, 9.39).

In terms of key words of delegitimisation, the Guardian article has the effect of smearing Stonewall with negative abstractions. Key words include: toxic (4 times), extremist (3), aggressive (2), controversy (2) as well as the synonyms fraught (1), polarised (1), and storm (1). In terms of a narrative frame, the story is also consistent with the criticism made by Malik of the UK news media in general, with the manufacturing of a 'free speech crisis' and a related 'cancel culture crisis' produced by minorities against a liberal majority. The article for example claims of Stonewall:

*"Each controversy has been linked – directly or indirectly – to its position on trans rights, which critics believe is over-aggressive and seeks to shut down debate but which the charity and its defenders believe is putting it on the right side of history."*



The condemnatory key word of ‘over-aggressive’ is notable by its contrast to the representation of trans-exclusionists referenced in the article, whose history of crude and delegitimising condemnations of trans identity goes unmentioned. In one instructive instance, the article references famously anti-trans feminists Julie Bindel and Germaine Greer with the economical assertion, “both raised concerns about predatory men gaining access to women’s spaces” (2021). Leaving aside the unsubstantiated and damaging trope of trans rights enabling predatory behaviour, it is worth focusing on this economical framing and what it omits. Greer’s track record for crude, anti-trans statements can be tracked back to at least the 1980s, when in an article in the Independent in 1989, she describes her encounter with a trans woman attempting to express gratitude for her book:

*“I should have said, ‘You’re a man. The Female Eunuch has done less than nothing for you. Piss off.’ The transvestite [sic] held me in a rapist’s grip ... Knee-jerk etiquette demanded that I humour this gross parody of my sex by accepting him as female, even to the point of allowing him to come to the lavatory with me” (Fae, 2018: 198).*

Greer’s output on trans identity since then has remained consistently of the same tone and language, typified by another infamous statement: “Just because you lop your dick off and then wear a dress doesn’t make you a fucking woman” (Frankland, 2019: 155). The Guardian article’s whitewashing of visceral anti-trans language is extended to Bindel, whose position on trans people has similarly involved decades of a recurring set of associations against trans women involving mutilation, false consciousness, and a predatory-like misogyny. In her 2004 article, ‘Gender benders, beware,’ Bindel for example concludes, ‘I don’t have a problem with men disposing of their genitals, but it does not make them women, in the same way that shoving a bit of vacuum down your 501s does not make you a man’ (2004). Other stated positions by Bindel on trans identity, also published in the Guardian, includes advocating the cessation of medical treatment for trans people (2006), with implications for the erasure of trans identity.

By the inversion of representations, this Guardian article attributes aggressiveness to the marginalized minority and its advocates, against the depiction of calm and responsible good intentions for experienced and derogatory exponents of anti-trans activism. In this example we see a distillation of the analysis by Luther and Miller (2004) of how “the news media, as part of the broad economic and social system, often confer legitimate status only to those movements which do not pose a threat to the established societal consensus,” while using “cues of deviance or disruption” which “then leads to delegitimation” of those viewed as unsettling the status quo.

This curating of cues of deviance and omission of key information is compounded by the apparent lack of evidence in the article to justify delegitimizing Stonewall. Two particular examples appear designed to insinuate the charity’s culpability for its predicament as the subject of media attacks and organisational withdrawals, as they connect directly to the main sources of attack against Stonewall in the media, namely the depiction of an ‘exodus’ of clients leaving Stonewall, and the citing of Stonewall providing incorrect legal advice:

*“[1] a report accused it of giving incorrect advice on equality law and [2] a cabinet minister was reported to be pushing for all government departments to withdraw from its Diversity Champions programme, which the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) quit last month”*

To begin with the second example, Stonewall's culpability is here implicated in the actions of a Conservative cabinet minister pursuing a policy of having all government departments withdraw from Stonewall's pro-LGBT+ workplace programme. Yet the minister responsible for this approach, Liz Truss, has herself been the object of significant criticism for her overall lack of commitment to LGBT+ rights prior to her actions against Stonewall. In March 2021, only a few months before the Guardian's Stonewall article and Truss's move against Stonewall, three government advisors on LGBT+ rights resigned in protest at Truss for being "ignorant on key issues" and "creating a hostile environment for LGBT people" (Allegretti, 2021). Two of the advisors, Ellen Murray and Jayne Ozanne, stated openly their belief that the Conservative government appear to be pursuing a "culture war" against the LGBT+ minorities. Ozanne for example says:

*"There are many who fear that we are going back to the days of Thatcher, the days of Section 28 ... The language that I hear from them is of us being woke, or of being loud lobby groups, and what they don't seem to understand is the reason we have to shout is because we are hurting, because there are people who are vulnerable who are going unheard and unnoticed."*

This first-hand evidence of the government's prior and enduring hostility to LGBT+ rights provides a plausible explanation for the policy to end the workplace relationship with Stonewall. Namely that the government is hostile to LGBT+ rights, and is therefore hostile to Stonewall and its advocacy of LGBT+ rights. This does suggest a national scandal – a government that is intent on undermining LGBT+ rights – but it is one that exonerates, rather than implicates, Stonewall.

The second and more complex source of criticism against Stonewall referred to in the article is related to the charge of Stonewall "giving incorrect advice on equality law." As highlighted in Table 2, this allegation – relating to incidents at the University of Essex – was used as key evidence by the legacy media in challenging Stonewall's legitimacy. Specifically, and as noted by Trans Legal Project, "the allegation that Stonewall has given bad legal advice to the University of Essex caused a media storm" (2021: 3). The Guardian article reveals that the University of Essex incidents occurred in 2019 and 2020 when two anti-trans-rights speakers were disinvited from particular events. A subsequent review by an employment and discrimination lawyer, Akua Reindorf, recommended that the university abandon its affiliation with Stonewall as a result of the disinvitations, primarily because Stonewall was alleged to have provided the "incorrect summary of the law" that the Guardian article quotes.

As Trans Legal Project's study of the case highlights (2021), however, the Reindorf review does not provide evidence of Stonewall influencing the disinvitations, making "no allegation that Stonewall was directly involved in the decision to exclude the two academics" (9). More importantly, given the Guardian's focus on "giving incorrect advice on equality law," the Reindorf review appears to provide the misleading interpretation on equality law. This is in relation to the protected characteristic of "gender reassignment" as identified in the Reindorf review, which the University of Essex policy for 'Supporting Trans and Non-Binary Staff' correctly claims is inclusive of 'gender identity' and 'trans status,' including non-binary identity, as confirmed by the legal precedent of Taylor vs. Jaguar Land Rover (2020). The Reindorf review challenges this interpretation by the university, evidently failing to recognize the legal precedent already established and which has expanded the protected characteristic of "gender reassignment." This error on the part of the Reindorf review may be, as highlighted by Trans Legal Project, because Reindorf, while being a barrister specialising in employment

and discrimination law, appears to have no background in the “specialised subfield of discrimination law,” namely “gender reassignment discrimination ... Indeed, Ms Reindorf appears to acknowledge her limitations in this area as she writes in the Report that ‘The [STNBS Policy] should be reviewed by a specialist lawyer and if necessary amended to ensure that it offers adequate protection and is lawful’” (4). This gap in Reindorf’s specialised knowledge appears to be replicated in turn by the Guardian’s legal affairs correspondent, whose article does not question the allegation by the Reindorf review but merely replicates it:

*“The report, by Akua Reindorf ... [said that] Stonewall appeared not to have picked up on the university’s ‘incorrect summary of the law’ ... Reindorf said the mistake was that the policy said ‘gender identity or trans status’ are protected under the law, whereas it is only gender reassignment that is protected, and concluded that the university should consider its relationship with the campaign group.”*

In this passage in the Guardian’s story, we see again the limits of the non-specialist journalist covering specialist trans stories, with a need for consultation with specialists in “gender reassignment” discrimination in order to separate allegation from fact. Had such consultation been involved, it is possible that the incorrect allegations made against Stonewall would not have been replicated in the Guardian. Regardless, the lack of rigour and interest in checking Stonewall’s position is underscored by the lack of consequences following the publication of the Reindorf review. Contrary to the delegitimising allegations in the legacy-media framing, the University of Essex made only slight changes to its policy for ‘Supporting Trans and Non-Binary Staff.’ As highlighted by Trans Legal Project, “The only change that appears to have been made to the policy is changing gender identity or trans status to gender reassignment and the provision of an explanation of what gender reassignment means” (9). In this provision, the policy re-asserts its original and correct legal position in which “gender reassignment” is inclusive of gender identity, including non-binary identity. As Trans Legal Project says, “the operational effect of the STNBS Policy is unchanged” (9). The Reindorf review therefore led to no significant changes at the University of Essex, which maintains its affiliation with Stonewall and its Diversity scheme. In spite of this apparent exoneration of Stonewall, the allegations in the review were used by the legacy media, including the Guardian, to delegitimise Stonewall as part of a broader message that Stonewall is providing incorrect legal advice to organisations.

The Guardian’s article on Stonewall: at odds with its own progressive mission, and lacking expertise in LGBT-centred law

The Guardian’s article on Stonewall provides a subtler but nevertheless identifiable form of anti-trans reporting than that evident in the Murdoch press. It frequently uses cues of deviance to delegitimise Stonewall, while omitting incriminating information about trans-exclusionary activists that amounts to whitewashing. The article accepts that Stonewall was not directly involved in the disinvitations of anti-trans-rights speakers, but it appears to lack the knowledge and analysis to challenge Reindorf further on her inconsistent and misleading interpretation of the protected characteristic of Gender Reassignment. Ultimately, this is an article that would benefit from the support and guidance of an experienced trans or queer legal scholar with a specialism in gender reassignment discrimination. By doing so, it would help understand the flexibility of the Gender Reassignment characteristic in relation to gender identity and recognize the problems with the interpretation provided by the Reindorf review.

# Conclusion

This article began by highlighting the institutional elitism of the UK legacy media and its lack of expertise in tackling trans issues that in particular veer towards policy and law – a noticeable trend since the furore surrounding the potential reform of the Gender Recognition Act from the late 2010s. The consequences have seen the waging of a culture war by the legacy media against trans people and their rights, through a combination in news coverage of cues of deviance and the omission of trans-affirming facts or incriminating facts about anti-trans activism. This is most apparent across the right-wing press, but it is also evident in the coverage of the nominally progressive Guardian. Primarily, this can be blamed on the elitist composition of the UK legacy media, and its ideological commitment to protecting the status quo. Through an absence of diversity and specialised knowledge, particularly in relation to the reporting on marginalised identities, the result is that those who shape the narrative about trans people are not trans themselves, but instead those who through their ignorance contribute to their marginalisation. While the rise of new forms of online news media provides reasons for optimism for reporting on marginalised identities, there is sufficient evidence that the climate fostered by the UK legacy media against trans people at the moment is one that misleads the public while causing distress and anxiety for the trans community and its allies and advocates (IPSO, 2020).

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