



RESIST

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

The RESIST project: UK Case Study Findings



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UK Case Study Findings

The research design for these case studies constructed clusters of key issues concerning gender, sexuality and feminism that are key sites, across multiple contexts, of anti-gender discourse in politics and public culture. This expansiveness notwithstanding, this research reveals a somewhat narrow pattern: a distinct – and distinctly hostile – preoccupation in the UK with the existence, identities and rights of trans people. This focus in media and politics is singular, but it is not exclusive, i.e., it should not be understood as dominating to the exclusion of other modalities of anti-gender politics. Rather, anti-trans politics is prosecuted as both a coherent ideological goal and as a productive nexus for connecting a more disparate range of political preoccupations, and actors.

This oppressive relationality is present in the range of international bodies that have recently criticised both the overt forms of hatred and delegitimation aimed at trans people, and the demonstrable backsliding on LGBTIQ+ rights in the UK. A joint statement in 2020 from Liberty, Amnesty International UK and Human Rights Watch¹³ stated that:

“Human rights are universal and belong to everyone. Yet too often in the UK trans people are spoken about and treated as though their rights don’t matter. The toxic media coverage about trans people has recently spiked. At times of crisis and political change, marginalised groups are often singled out for abuse and hate. History has shown us time and time again the dangers of setting the rights of one marginalised group up for debate.”

In ILGA-Europe’s widely cited ‘Rainbow Index’ of LGBTIQ+ rights, the UK dropped from 1st place in 2015 to 14th by 2022.¹⁴ As well as documenting hate crimes and legislative stagnation or regression, these reports consistently draw attention to the significance of hostile media and political discourse.

Our findings empirically demonstrate the expansion and intensification of this anti-trans politics, and further the analysis of its production, constitution and circulation by exposing and analysing key discursive strategies derived from a significant corpus of parliamentary, media and civil society sources. They demonstrate how these strategies overlap and diverge across sites of activity, illuminating a surge that is shaped by right-wing, reactionary political instrumentalisation and media opportunism, but also by more disparate affective aversions and unlikely affinities.

UK Parliament Findings

As Craig McLean (2021) has recently noted, there has been a significant growth in the ‘anti-transgender movement’ in the UK, resulting in what they term a “silent radicalization of the British electorate”. In McLean’s analysis, this process profoundly intensified in the aftermath of a parliamentary Transgender Equality Enquiry (TEE) which sat in 2015-16, reported in 2016, and led to the establishment in 2018 of a process of public consultation on reform of The Gender Recognition Act (GRA, 2004). This process of consultation prompted the formation of a “whole host of (gender critical) lobby groups” intent on using the process to oppose trans people self-identifying as their adopted gender without having to secure a gender recognition certificate (2021: 474-5).

While this analysis emphasises *a presumed and projected radicalization of the electorate* when spoken for and represented in anti-trans rhetoric by politicians, commentators and ‘gender critical’ activists, McClean also points to a rapid and stark process of political re-orientation. To contextualise this report’s findings from a corpus of debates spanning 2018-23, but primarily gathered from debates between 2021-23, the prevalence of debates on transgender issues in the House of Commons was examined using CLARIN, which revealed an extraordinary spike in parliamentary mentions of “transgender” during December 2016, when the TEE reported.

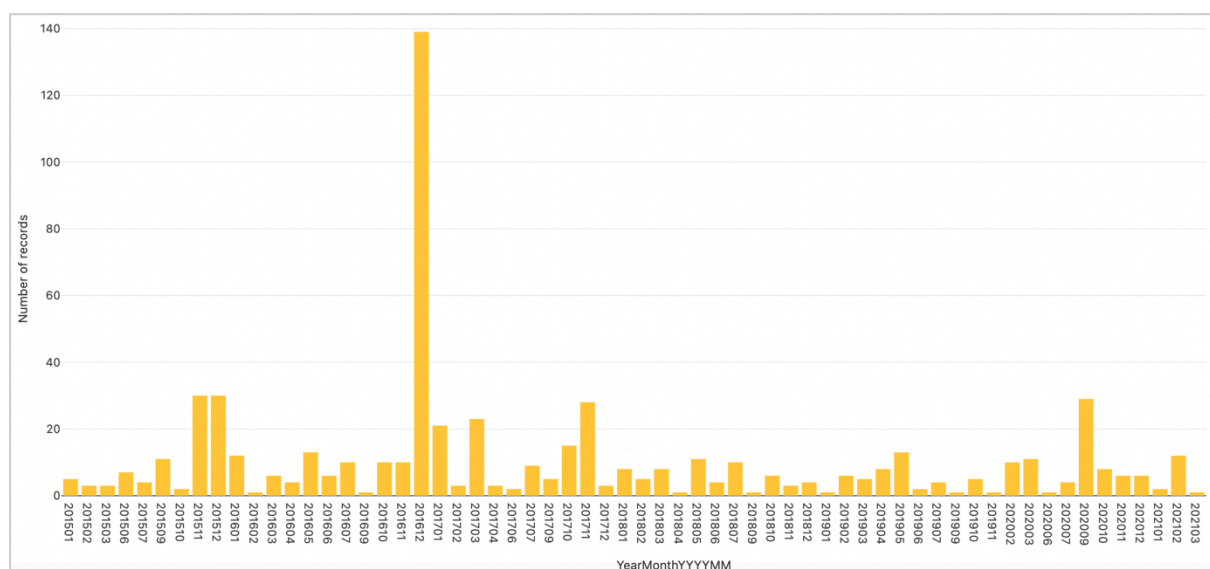


Table UK53: Prevalence of debates on transgender issues in the House of Commons, 2018-2023

The longest debate from this month - Transgender Equality, 01.12.2016 – was selected for coding, using the codes derived from the 2018-23 corpus. Strikingly, no anti-gender material was coded, indicating a complete absence of the talking points and tropes that proliferated in the later debates. Similarly, there was a complete absence of reference to campaign

groups that self-describe as “gender critical”, again in notable contrast to the main corpus (which informed our decision to track them, in the following stages of research, through media sourcing, and network mapping). On the contrary, politicians that subsequently became actively involved in promulgating anti-trans politics can be seen, in the run-up to this debate, advocating, for example, for care for transgender prisoners:

Sue-Ellen Cassiana Braverman, CONS (08.12.2015): “On 27 November, a transgender prisoner killed herself while serving in a male jail. What are the Government planning to do to address the concern about another tragic death in this vulnerable group of people?”

The expressions of concern in relation to prison are particularly striking, given the subsequent importance of prisoner placement to the discursive coding presented below. In the debate on 01.12.2016, the Conservative MP Ben Howlett openly criticises the placement of a transgender woman in an all-male prison:

“In November 2016, however, the Ministry of Justice published the results of a data collection exercise conducted in March and April of this year. It was reported that 70 transgender prisoners were held in 33 prisons in England and Wales at that time. The Committee argued that there was ‘clear risk or harm’ when trans prisoners are not located in a prison ‘appropriate to their acquired gender.’ The report also said that holding trans prisoners in solitary confinement was not fair or appropriate, and I am sure that the whole House agrees. Last year, there was the example of Tara Hudson, a transgender prisoner from Bath, who was born male but had lived her entire adult life as a woman. Tara was sent to an all-male prison.”

Bearing this temporal and political context in mind, the main findings from the parliamentary data analysis (corpus spanning 2016-2023) are the following:

- Demonstrating the political intensification described, debates related to gender recognition and trans rights are generally the most extensive, involved, and productive of content codes and data. Sharp differences of position and ideology are also expressed, if to a far lesser extent, in debates on abortion and LGBTIQ+ rights. However most debates in the clusters beyond ‘debating trans lives’ are quite short, technical and procedural, involving questions of clarification on progress with various reports and legislative proposals to responsible ministers.
- The material coded and presented as ‘rhetorical tactics’ and ‘discursive tactics’ is overwhelmingly drawn from contributions from Conservative Party MPs. This dominance is partly explained by the party’s role in government, and by the fact that, in the debates in question, the party was predominantly

mobilised to oppose changes to legislation on gender self-identification. The almost total absence of the British Labour party from this data can be taken as evidence of them not publicly engaging in anti-trans politics during this period. Nonetheless this is also, to an extent, a result of the sample parameters; between the completion of data gathering and the time of writing, the Labour party have reneged on an electoral manifesto commitment to support 'self-ID' reforms to the GRA.¹⁵

- Further, this coded material is predominantly drawn from contributions by male Conservative MPs. Their prominence in particular categories – 'silencing', 'what if', 'trans as lifestyle trend' – that allow for greater declamatory licence is predicated on a discursive pattern of speaking "in defence of women", sometimes in ways that subject opposition MPs who are female to aggressive forms of rhetorical questioning (David Davies (CONS): "I hear what the hon. Lady is saying. May I bluntly ask her whether she would be happy sharing a changing room with somebody who was born male and had a male body?"). To an extent, this reflects a wider pattern where women's rights and safety are invoked to posit an inherent conflict with trans rights, despite polling evidence in the UK clearly indicating that women are more likely to reject transphobia and support trans rights than men in Britain.¹⁶
- Nevertheless, UK parliamentary discourse bears little resemblance to the overt and often spectacular anti-gender discourse expressed in debates in the European Parliament (where, as our study of the EP documents, a large far-right bloc is explicitly mobilised in and through opposition to 'gender ideology', and where this provides a central tenet of their cross-party cooperation). The relative absence of references to 'gender ideology', despite the prominence and naturalisation of this term in UK media discourse, is the most striking indicator of this.
- While inflammatory rhetoric is largely absent from parliamentary debate, the prevalence of the code 'sex as biological fact' indicates the extent to which transgender rights are held up as inherently in conflict with women's rights, that is, transgender rights put women's rights – or 'sex-based rights' – at risk. As will be seen below, this prevalence is reproduced in a significant degree of media coverage and comment on the controversy generated by the UK government's decision to block the passage of the Scottish GRR. In this data this fact is often stated as a form of common sense, or through the articulation of gender/sex and identity/biology dichotomies, which are

justified almost exclusively with reference to ‘science and material reality’, as opposed to religious rationales.

- The most overt delegitimation of transgender lives occurs in the categories ‘transgender identity as ideology or lifestyle trend’ and ‘what if’. What unites these coding categories is the discursive production of imagined scenarios and anxious speculation. They licence a recourse to stereotypes and, by constantly positing transness as a opportunistic way of accessing “women’s spaces”, insistently reproduce the association of transgender men with predatory sexual behaviour and abuse. Similarly, the *imaginative search for explanations for transgender identity that exclude the explanations of trans people themselves* reproduce established twentieth century moral panic images of young people as vulnerable and susceptible to media and ideological indoctrination. It is notable that this projection of vulnerable subjectivity is not reproduced by Conservative MPs in debates on prohibiting forms of “gay conversion therapy” in the corpus. In arguing for conscience-based exemptions to these prohibitions, party MPs contend that, as a party of liberty, everyone must be treated as a rational agent that can make the autonomous decision to subject themselves to such therapies as a ‘free choice’. This underlines the extent to which transgender identity, particularly among young people, is framed as a consequence of factors other than their own agency: social media influences, trends in popular culture, and dangerously zealous activism, particularly in schools.
- The category of ‘trans as erasure’ reinforces the dominant emphasis on sex/gender and biology/identity dichotomies, but it is characterised by speaking positions that do not as readily appear when these arguments are circulated in media discourse. In contra-distinction to articulations that position transgender identity as a problem for forms of commonsense, MPs that speak against trans rights as ‘a feminist’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay man’ posit it as a threat to historically achieved and hard-won political and sexual freedoms.
- Given the extent to which the idea of “transgender identity as ideology or lifestyle trend” depends on projecting indoctrination or undue influence, there is little overt reference to the ‘problem’ of what is held to be ‘excessive activism’ in the debate corpus (a finding also at odds with the centrality of this trope to media discourse). As with ‘gender ideology’, this restraint is confined to this selection of parliamentary discourse, as this reference point is actively reproduced by Conservative politicians in other settings (see section conclusion).

- The trope of what is projected as ‘excessive activism’ must be read against the fact of a growing number of highly mobilised anti-transgender organisations which are frequently mentioned in the House of Commons, and often described as “women’s rights groups”. Several of the most frequent contributors of coded material are involved in Conservative Party or party-related initiatives that explicitly campaign on gender recognition and relationships and sex education in schools, such as Policy Exchange’s ‘Biology Matters Project’ and The New Social Covenant. The fact that both groups openly oppose something called ‘gender identity ideology’, and yet this trope scarcely features in parliamentary discourse, underlines how anti-gender discourse does not walk in straight lines from one context to another. Nevertheless, the fact that significant contributors to the data are involved in cognate ideological campaigns is relevant to explaining the presence of anti-gender discourse in Commons proceedings. Subsequent to the data collection period (May 2023), one of the top contributors of coded material, the MP Miriam Cates, co-founded The New Conservatives, a lobby group that aims to influence the formation of The Conservative Party’s 2024 election manifesto, including seeking a manifesto pledge to ‘ban gender ideology in schools’.¹⁸

In conclusion, these findings empirically demonstrate the intense ways in which the political landscape in the UK is reconstituted through anti-trans politics. While much of the coded material attests to ideological and political conviction on the issue of sex vs. gender, and while the discursive expression of these ideas is less characterised by the overt stereotypes and targeting language encountered in other political contests, anti-transgender politics has become an important and renewable currency that is instrumentalised for multiple political rationales.

These findings point to an increased political import of anti-trans political rhetoric amongst the UK's ruling party over their term in government. In February 2023 the Conservative Party’s Deputy Chairman, Lee Anderson, used his first interview in the role to declare that the party should campaign in the next election on a “...mix of culture wars and trans debate”.¹⁹ It is precisely this mobilising ‘mix’ that accounts for the abrupt incorporation of ‘gender ideology’ and anti-transgender rhetoric into the Conservative Party Conference speeches of the Home Secretary and Prime Minister in October 2023. In her highly publicised speech, the then-Home Secretary Suella Braverman described ‘gender ideology’ as a ‘poison’ beloved of a ‘luxury beliefs brigade’ that her party must determinedly challenge on behalf of the ‘common sense majority’.¹⁷ The British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, made a clear reference to the ‘problem of activism’ in his keynote speech to the same party conference in October 2023: “It shouldn’t be controversial for parents to know what their children are being taught in school about relationships. Patients should know when hospitals

are talking about men or women. We shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't. A man is a man and a woman is a woman, that's just common sense".

The idea of 'being bullied' is illegible in this construction without the vision of a powerful and aggressive 'trans lobby' that has been assiduously cultivated in media and public discourse. This declaration of strategic choice has been made in a context where whilst sexual orientation hate crimes are down by 6%, transgender identity hate crimes rose by 11% (from 4,262 to 4,732) from April 2022 to March 2023, the highest number since the time series began in the year ending March 2012. The Home Office said, "Transgender issues have been heavily discussed by politicians, the media and on social media over the last year, which may have led to an increase in these offences, or more awareness in the police in the identification and recording of these crimes."

Our findings demonstrate the emergence, in the House of Commons, of a concerted focus on transgender-related issues that significantly departs from the broadly inclusive political focus evident in the period when the reform of the Gender Recognition Act was first proposed and debated. This departure is characterised by the consistent reproduction of discourse that positions trans people, particularly trans women, as threats to 'women's rights'. In the next section, the report considers the influential role of media coverage and campaigning in furthering this discourse of threat and risk.

UK Media Findings

The nature of British media coverage of transgender-related issues has been a focus of criticism and concern for some time. The negative representation of transgender people was discussed at the Leveson Inquiry (2011-12) into "the culture, practices and ethics of the press" and directly criticised by the chair of the public inquiry, Lord Leveson.²⁰ A 2020 IPSO report "examining trends in editorial standards in coverage of transgender issues" notes a 'particularly marked growth' in 'transgender-related stories during the last five years', as

"All publication types are publishing more transgender-related stories but most notable has been the proportion of transgender-related stories published by the tabloid press. At the start of the decade, most of the stories were published in the broadsheets but over half of the stories published now are in tabloids."²¹

A study by the transgender media researcher 'MinnyMum' provides statistics on the stark increase in stories about people who, while comprising approximately 0.1% of the population, are the subject of an average of 154 articles per month in mainstream titles between 2015-2022, with a pattern of significant intensification over time. In May 2022 16 articles a day were published on 'trans issues', with *The Daily Mail* alone publishing on average five a day during this month.²² The extent of this hypervisibility is important; as

Sivamohan Valluvan has pointed out, a feature of contemporary reactionary politics is to render “...the excluded Other the overdetermined and outsized object of political discourse” (2019: 35-6). This outsizing, unsurprisingly, is achieved through predominantly negative coverage. A similar study by Elli Folan notes that “Of the 115 Daily Mail articles in trans issues in January 2023, 100 of them (87%) could reasonably be categorised as negative, in comparison to zero negative articles in January 2013.”²³

While the extent and velocity of this negative coverage is well-established, there is far less research on the discursive aspects of the negativity, and little consideration of systemic dimensions, that is, how and why this hostile coverage has intensified now, within a transformed and febrile media system. Bearing this political and systemic context in mind, the main findings from the media data analysis are the following.

- The comparative analysis between three broadsheet newspapers empirically demonstrates the extent to which transgender coverage has become a key pillar of right-wing media’s creation of a ‘culture war’ strategy in the UK. This involves a concerted and hostile focus on the lives of transgender people themselves, and the positioning of the ‘trans debate’ as part of a wider and more fluid targeting of gender and sexuality issues that can be encompassed by and collapsed into the idea of ‘wokeness’.
- The treatment of the transnationally distributed and controversial term ‘gender ideology’ provided an initial way into this comparison between newspapers. While *The Guardian* endured internal upheaval in 2020, prompted by staff protest at ‘anti-trans bias’ in comment and opinion pieces,²⁴ in our data it clearly treats the term ‘gender ideology’ as ideologically loaded, and as exclusive property of the transnational far-right. *The Telegraph*, meanwhile, systematically naturalises the term through its reporting, in both news coverage and opinion pieces. This naturalised treatment of what is well-established as an anti-gender campaigning concept, in a context where editorial guidelines and style guides routinely offer advice for the journalistic treatment of controversial ideas and claims, is significant in pointing at ideological intervention through media activity.
- In contradistinction to other news sources, *The Telegraph* exclusively reserves its usage of ‘gender ideology’ for UK domestic reporting, linking it in almost every articulation in the corpus to transgender issues, particularly the ‘problem of activism’. This positions ‘gender ideology’ as an established political problem in education, social services and public spaces and institutions, and is key to the development of the ‘problem of activism’ in the UK context. This data points to this coverage as a form of campaigning

journalism which focuses concerted on trans-inclusive services and associations.

- The campaigning valence of the Telegraph is reiterated by the network of actors and organisations that consistently provide the source or focus of its coverage. It is striking that half of the actors mentioned in stories that feature the term ‘gender ideology’ are self-described ‘gender critical’ actors who, in many cases, are actively involved in campaigns and organisations mobilised against transgender rights. Similarly, in the data on organisations mentioned, 56% are ‘gender critical’. All of these mentions are as story sources, as opposed to story subjects or respondents, a finding well-illustrated by comparing the two most cited organisations in the sample. For Women Scotland was founded in 2018, and in this short space of time has been included as a regular source of stories and framing quotations for *The Telegraph* and cognate media (a significant achievement for such a young organisation, albeit one bolstered by the publicity accorded the Scottish GRR reform process). Mermaids, a charity and advocacy organisation for transgender youth, is mentioned as frequently as For Women Scotland in the coverage, but it is predominantly mentioned as a subject embroiled in controversies that they must respond to.
- Within media regulatory systems, journalism can legitimately be politically and ideologically partial. Within these arrangements, civil society groups can strive to position themselves as trusted sources on issues of concern. However, what these sourcing routines demonstrate is a pattern of differentiated access which poses important questions of media ethics. In political communications research, the differential access of ‘interest groups’ to media coverage, and particularly to being the source of news coverage and issue framing, is regarded as a key indicator of the democratic functioning of the news media (Binderkrantz, Bonafont and Halpin, 2016). While ‘interest group diversity’ can be measured across a spectrum of media outlets, our findings indicate that it is significant when one set of interests, namely ‘gender critical’ or anti-transgender campaigning groups, have been successful in being granted disproportionate access to news coverage and news framing.
- *The Telegraph’s* concerted and hostile focus on transgender issues in the UK can be found in other newspapers on the political right – as the quoted studies of *The Daily Mail* show – and must be further understood, as our findings suggest, as folded into an emerging cross-platform right-wing media ecosystem where key actors continually amplify and cross-reference each

other's stories. The cross-platform creation of an issue around transgender and 'woke' stories can be seen in the daily output of GB News and The Free Speech Union. It is well-established that forms of content saturation increase the credibility and persuasiveness of stories for sectors of the audience (Lecheler et al 2015). These cross-media dynamics promote not just content confirmation but also competition for attention and status within the right-wing media sector, a competition that is expressed through increased search for sensational, attention-grabbing content, and increasingly extreme 'takes' that seek to provoke more interaction, comment and publicity. This underlines that there is media-systemic as well as ideological integration of this cross-media network.

- As the case of GB News demonstrates, this integration also has a clear commercial rationale, as it allows newer market entrants access to sensational and seemingly popular stories without sinking costs into news gathering and journalism (Petley and Barnett 2023). Consequently, this report contends that anti-trans content is not just a product of campaigning journalism, it is also a valuable commodity with exchange value in a media sector aiming at carving out audiences in a fragmented media public and divided electorate. This systemic dimension is critical to understanding the accelerated and expanded production of these stories, suggesting that this content surge is a result not only of ideological animus, but also commercial considerations and datafied calculation. Our data shows that there is a commercial rationale for anti-trans content.
- Significant amounts of anti-transgender content is carried by both GB News and Free Speech Union as a key dimension of how they position themselves as champions of free speech. Coverage of a handful of controversies over 'gender critical' speakers on university campuses has animated a media frame of 'excessive' transgender activism as a threat to freedom of expression. More substantively, the ceaseless positioning of 'gender ideology' as a repressive hegemony serves as a legitimating framework for breaking 'taboos' and 'silences' and thus positioning anti-transgender sensationalism as a form of democratic journalism. The systemic dimension is also important here, as this positioning is a dimension of GB News' market positioning as 'necessary pluralism' to the putatively liberal hegemony of the BBC, a manoeuvre which is necessary to justify maximal levels of opinion and comment – which are much cheaper than news-making – within the regulatory framework.

UK Controversy Mapping Findings

- In the sample of 50 opinion pieces from 22 news sources commenting on the GRR, only two were written by writers who identify as transgender. This is indicative of how trans issues get written about, and who speaks on transgender issues. It is also the inverse of the repressive hypervisibility noted in the media findings: even where there is broadly sympathetic coverage, transgender people are significantly more likely to be spoken about than to be platformed in a 'debate' about their lives and rights.
- While anti-gender politics are not exclusive to the political right and far-right, the sectoral analysis of opinion and comment demonstrates key dimensions of its significance on the political right, and the nature of its presence in other sectors. The 'centre-left' and 'centre-right' media sampled in this study largely eschew sensationalist and 'culture war' discourse, while the binary of sex and gender remains prevalent as a 'commonsense' explanatory framework. Left-wing and progressive media have a clear political motivation to criticise the current UK government, however the extent and character of their critique of how transgender people are being exploited for political gain is not just a consequence of political opposition, it is a clear normative commitment. In the right-wing sector, the dominance of 'presumed public disquiet' indicates the importance of 'populist' modes of communication vested in the conceit of 'speaking up' for the 'silenced majority.'
- The dynamics of the so-called 'trans debate' clearly prefer highly sensationalist coverage of issues that can be presented as indicating the nature and extent of the 'problem'. In a large corpus of articles in *The Daily Telegraph*, the GRR and the case of Isla Bryson are the subject in the headline or main paragraph mentions – of almost identical levels of coverage: 20% in both instances. The case of Isla Bryson – a transwoman convicted of rape and sexual assault and initially committed to a women's prison – became a huge political issue in mid-January that impacted on the SNP's support for a challenge to Westminster's legislative block. Both issues received the same amount of coverage in the sample period, despite the Bryson case occurring more than 1/3 through the timeline of the controversy.
- The importance of media coverage to political tactics in this controversy is underlined by the popularity of a key tactic of anti-gender organisations; to prepopulate complaint letters against media outlets, with a particular focus on the BBC given its status as the public service broadcaster.

- In terms of network building, the data showed a significant proliferation of “women’s rights” groups mobilised to oppose the Scottish legislation on gender recognition. The data demonstrated that they appear far more frequently in media coverage in direct comparison with trans inclusive bodies and all other relevant agents and institutions. For example, in terms of groups used for published quotes in the Bryson case coverage, 80% self-identify as ‘gender critical’ or post ‘anti-gender ideology’ on their websites. In the GRA coverage, it is 70%, with one of these groups, For Women Scotland, quoted 500% more than any other campaigning group in discussion of the legislation.