OP-ED: ***Fake News and the Villainization of LGBTQ+ Minorities in the United States***

The term "fake news" has been a prevalently used buzz term by all political affiliations since the rise of the Internet. The direct line of communication that social media and the Internet have created has fostered a culture that enables disinformation to spread like wildfire. The need for people to participate in Internet discourse has skewed the news industry as they now feed into the attention economy. Having a business model that depends on the attention of daily Internet users quickly erases the importance of well-intentioned journalism, prioritizes controversy, and fosters a home for problematic ideologies. This inevitably results in an easier way to dehumanize and defame minority groups.

The LGBTQ+ community has become the unfortunate victim of fake news. The political right has created a disinformed narrative surrounding members of the community that eventually bled into legislature. 2021 and 2022 had been record-breaking years for anti-trans legislation with 2023 doubling the number of anti-trans bills being considered across the country from last year.

Right-wing politicians have figured out a strategy to bring in support for anti-LGBTQ+ bills. They have been pushing to censor discussions about sexuality and gender in schools. In doing this, they fearmonger parents by believing that discussions about sexuality and gender are the political left's way to "groom" their kids into the community. They market it in such a way that the discussions take away parental rights to shield their children from these topics that could contaminate the innocence of their children. These "parental rights" campaigns initially took the form of the infamous Floridian "Don't Say Gay" bill first presented in 2022. The "Parental Rights in Education" bill states that "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through [third grade]" or "in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards" in other grades. The bill does not go on to define what would be considered "age-appropriate" or "developmentally appropriate". With how easily these false narratives can spread through social media, it is not a surprise that right-wing conservative parents support such a bill to be passed.

Legislature has gotten progressively worse with anti-trans rhetoric plaguing social media. Since the "Don't Say Gay" bill, there has been an onslaught of bills that have attempted to restrict the rights of trans kids, drag performers, and gender-affirming healthcare. All of this can be traced back to harmful disinformation campaigns from right-wing conservatives. When asked about gender-affirming care for trans youth, right-wing conservatives often follow the same script, spewing that such care is child abuse, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence that states otherwise. These disinformation campaigns are the foundations of the anti-trans movement currently happening in the United States. Harmful trans rhetoric is heavily based on gender essentialism and biased reporting without much opposition from the left. The algorithm eats this up. It knows that these polarizing topics about trans issues are an easy way to garner clicks,

comments, and discourse on social media. The exploitation of trans discrimination has become a booming business model and there's plenty of blame to throw around on why that could be.

Trans topics have had disproportionate coverage by right-wing outlets and in turn, are amplified by the algorithms on all platforms. The numbers show that right-wing media has been dominating social media as they have used the attention economy to their advantage. These politicians understand that the best way for their voices to be heard and for voters to vote is to feed into fear and controversy. The algorithm loves animosity and unfortunately, this has become a weapon to vilify all minorities, and in this case the LGBTQ+ community. According to a study by Media Matters, right-leaning news stories about trans folks have attained 82% of the interactions of all trans content on Facebook in comparison to positive, or left-leaning content on the platform. This bias can also be seen on other platforms like Twitter. It's easy to frame this as simply right-wing media becoming overtly popular post-Trump administration but it is important to note that the left lean has not done much to help prevent these voices from being amplified. Right-wing politicians are more likely to state divisive takes about minorities and human rights and social media companies are aware of this. The algorithm thrives on any form of attention, whether good or bad. This means that any participation, including an overwhelming distaste from the other end of the spectrum, feeds into the spread of these disinformed narratives.

Social media is a no man's land no matter how much these companies try to implement regulations that could protect these targetted groups. While it seems like grooming and child abuse allegations sound farfetched, these are age-old accusations that have been historically used against the LGBTQ+ community. The only difference is that these harmful takes can now exist outside a bubble and reach uneducated communities that do not know better. Even if you are not personally affected by this, understand that these politicians will not stop spreading anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and will eventually affect other minorities in the United States. It is important to rally democratic, left-leaning politicians to outwardly and loudly stand by the LGBTQ+ community. Do your part in educating people and debunking anti-LGBTQ+ narratives amongst your family and friends.