



# Transgender Representation in Media

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This document will look to survey and address issues concerning transgender representation in media. The contents of this document will be divided into two sections. The first section will go over different forms of media and how transgender people are represented in each. The second section will offer further suggestions to improve transgender representation in media.

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# Section I: Transgender Representation in Media

This section will discuss how transgender people are represented in different forms of media. The forms of media to be looked at are news, film and television, music, and video games.

## News

Transgender representation in the news widely varies. This variance can be explained by a combination of these facts:

- Transgender issues are also politically divisive issues, as evidenced by a [2017 Pew Research Center article](#).
- Different news outlets will attract more people who identify with a certain political view than others.

There are various ways to categorize political views. For simplicity's sake, this document will look at the political variance through two of the United States' common political views: right-leaning and left-leaning. These political views are often tied to the United States' two-party political system: respectively, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. As such, this document will use right-leaning/Republican interchangeably, and left-leaning/Democrat interchangeably. This document will use these two political views since much of the empirical data focuses on these opposing views.

## ***Right-Leaning News***

The first political view under consideration is right-leaning. According to a [2020 article by Pew Research Center](#), **65% of Republicans trust Fox News for political and election news**. This is significant because, as [a blog piece by GLAAD notes](#), **Fox News has a history of portraying transgender people in a negative light**.

In more recent times, [a research article published by Media Matters writes](#), "As part of its campaign **to vilify transgender athletes in order to malign the trans community as a whole**, Fox News has obsessively covered University of Pennsylvania [transgender] swimmer Lia Thomas. From December 3 through January 12, the network aired 32 segments on Thomas' swim career. Throughout Fox's coverage of the story, hosts and guests **spewed dehumanizing rhetoric** about Thomas and went so far as to assert that "this is

like everyone has taken a crazy pill and no one wants to admit that this is wrong.” These segments also included **deadnaming and misgendering** Thomas, as well as **fear mongering** that “woke ideologues are silencing women like these University of Pennsylvania athletes for saying no to men in their sports.”

A [July 2020 study by Media Matters](#) found that **65.7% of the traffic to transgender news from Facebook originated from right-leaning sources**, while only 3.9% of the traffic originated from left-leaning sources. *Media Matters* analyzed that **most Americans are getting “biased, bigoted, and misinformative news” about transgender people** on Facebook, and that **“this content directly harms public discourse and policy surrounding trans folks.”** This discourse has also led to **“the online harassment and abuse of trans people.”** This is significant because, as [Pew Research Center found in 2019](#), **52% of all U.S. adults get news from Facebook, making it the dominant social media news source.**

Ultimately, anti-trans rhetoric is more prevalent for those who identify on the right side of the political spectrum. The negative portrayal of transgender people from right-leaning news outlets plays a major role in transgender discrimination in broader society. According to [a February 2022 study by Pew Research Center](#), **54% of Republicans and Republican leaners say that the greater acceptance for transgender people is *bad* for society.**

### ***Left-Leaning News***

The second political view under consideration is left-leaning. Those who identify more to the left of the political spectrum are likely to watch news outlets such as *CNN* and *NBC News*, [according to a 2020 Pew Research Center article](#).

Pieces by *CNN* portray transgender people in an unproblematic way, such as [highlighting notable trans people](#), [accurately reporting the violence that trans people face](#), and [bringing awareness to International Transgender Day of Visibility](#).

*NBC News* has also unproblematically reported on trans people. In fact, GLAAD nominated [NBC News’ documentary \*TransAmerica\*](#) for Outstanding TV Journalism - Long Form in its [33rd Annual GLAAD Media Awards](#). Another piece

by NBC News - [“As Anti-Trans Violence Surges, Advocates Demand Policy Reform”](#) - was also nominated for Outstanding Online Journalism Article.

A search on other news outlets watched by democratic-leaning people such as ABC News, CBS News, and MSNBC News did not reveal any misinformation or negative portrayal of transgender people. This search, in addition to the fact that pro-trans organizations such as *GLAAD* and *Media Matters* haven't noted any problems with these news outlets negatively portraying transgender people, is sufficient to show that these news outlets are not representing transgender people in a problematic way.

## **Film and Television**

According to the [2021 GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index](#), there were **zero transgender or non-binary characters present in films released by major studios<sup>1</sup> in 2020**. This has been a trend going as far back as 2017 - four years in a row without a transgender or non-binary character present in a major studio film. [GLAAD found](#) that the last time a transgender or non-binary character was present in a major studio film was in Paramount Pictures' 2016 film *Zoolander 2*. Still, it is worth noting that this was the only film to include a transgender character out of the 125 films released by the major studios that year. [2015 also saw](#) only one film to include a transgender character (Warner Brothers' *Hot Pursuit*) out of the 126 films released by major studios that year.

According to a [2017 research article in the Cinesthesia journal](#), Nikki Reitz found that **“Film and television often casts trans women as villains”** and portrays them as **“deranged individuals who are violent and dangerous.”** Using data from *GLAAD*, it is found that since out of 102 television episodes featuring transgender characters, **“21% of them featured a trans woman as a villain.”** Reitz also lists films that portray trans women as villains such as *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

Not only was it found that trans women are portrayed as villains, but that out of the 102 television episodes featuring transgender characters, **40% of them**

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<sup>1</sup> Major studios include Lionsgate, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures, STX Films, United Artists Releasing, Universal Pictures, Walt Disney Studios, and Warner Bros.

**showed trans women being victims of extreme violence.** Reitz writes, “Shows such as *Law & Order* (1990-2010), *CSI* (2000-2015), *NCIS* (2003-), and *The Closer* (2005-2012) often **depict trans women as being sexually assaulted or murdered.**” Reitz also notes that in such shows, **police will misgender, deadname, and harass trans women.** Finally, the article claims that “**Hollywood reinforces the idea that trans women are not really women by casting cisgender men in the roles of trans women.**”

On the positive side of things, there are prominent transgender actors who have appeared on television in more recent years. For instance, Mj Rodriguez is a trans woman who is known for her role as Blanca Evangelista on *Pose*, and became **the first transgender person to win a Golden Globe Award** for that role. Laverne Cox is also another notable transgender actress, playing Sophia Burset in *Orange is the New Black* and being “[the first openly transgender person to be nominated for an Emmy Award in any acting category.](#)”

Furthermore, according to [GLAAD's Where We Are on TV - 2021-2022](#) report, **there are 42 transgender regular and recurring characters across all of broadcast, cable, and streaming - an increase in the number of transgender characters compared to previous reports.**

## **Music**

Music media contains very few mainstream artists who identify as non-binary. The most famous mainstream artists include people such as [Sam Smith who came out as non-binary in 2019](#) and [Demi Lovato who came out as non-binary in 2021.](#)

Outside of the mainstream, however, there are many transgender artists in the music scene. [An article by The Globe and Mail states](#) that in 2006, Lucas Silveira became the **first out-trans man to sign a major record deal.** Shea Diamond is a transgender singer and song writer who [headlined the 2019 Capital Pride Concert.](#) SOPHIE is a trans musician whose album *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides* was [nominated for the Grammy Award for Best Dance/Electronic Album in 2018.](#)

## Video Games

Video games have a long history going far back as the mid-1900s. While transgender characters have been rarely featured in the long history of video games, and only with minor roles, the last decade saw some transgender characters being prominently involved in video games.

According to a [2020 article by CNN](#), the video game *Tell Me Why*, released on August 27, 2020, is the first AAA<sup>2</sup> game to feature a transgender character in its main cast. The character, Tyler Ronan, is also [voiced by transgender actor August Black](#). The development of the game [also involved GLAAD](#) to make sure that “Tyler is a compelling, multi-dimensional character” and that “his story avoids the harmful transgender stereotypes and tropes of the past.”

Arguably, it might be the case that Bloodhound from Respawn Entertainment’s *Apex Legends* is actually the first transgender main character from an AAA game. Released on February 4, 2019, *Apex Legends* is one of the most popular Battle Royale games today, [announced to have reached 100 million players on April 14, 2021](#) and, according to [an article by GamesBeat on August 4, 2021](#), “averages 13 million weekly active players.” [Respawn Community Manager Jay Frechette told Rock Paper Shotgun](#) that “Bloodhound is non-binary, or at least non-specified, in terms of gender” and, [according to lead writer Manny Hagopian who helped develop Bloodhound](#), uses they/them/theirs pronouns.

Going back to the 1980s, we have Birdetta from Nintendo’s *Super Mario Bros. 2* who, according to a [2017 article by Out](#) and a [2018 article by Advocate](#), is the **first transgender character in video games**. [The instruction booklet for the game](#) (pg. 28) describes Birdetta as such, “He thinks he is a girl and he spits eggs from his mouth. He’d rather be called ‘birdetta.’”

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<sup>2</sup> AAA video games are taken to be those that are published by major publishers and have higher marketing budgets relative to other games.

## Section II: Suggestions to Improve Transgender Representation in Media

Given the above data, most of the negative portrayals of transgender people in media occurs on the news and in film and television. Such negative portrayals consist of:

- ***Misgendering and Deadnaming***
- ***Misinformation and Fear Mongering***
- ***Bigotry and Dehumanization being justified***

As such, suggestions to improve transgender representation in media should focus on rectifying these issues.

### Education

Issues such as misgendering and deadnaming could be resolved by learning the importance of calling someone by their preferred gender and name, as well as understanding the harms that occur due to misgendering and deadnaming. For example, it should be known that **“misgendering negatively affects the mental and physical health of trans individuals and may impact their future engagement with the health care system,”** according to a [2020 report by the Medical Journal of Australia](#).

By teaching people the importance of sharing one’s gender identity and preferred name, as well as practicing calling someone by their used pronouns and name, this will likely reduce the instances in which transgender people are misgendered or deadnamed. The *Human Rights Campaign Foundation* also recognizes the importance of education. In their document [Dismantling a Culture of Violence](#), they state **“Dispute harmful rhetoric that seeks to dehumanize transgender people, and educate those who are not informed of the many barriers transgender people experience.”**



## **Combating Anti-Trans Rhetoric**

As mentioned in *Section I* of this document, much of the anti-trans rhetoric that appears in the media comes from right-leaning sources such as particular news outlets and social media sites.

One suggestion to combat anti-trans rhetoric from right-leaning sources such as *Fox News* is to gather information from other sources that demonstrate why such information is misinformative and problematic. For instance, *Media Matters* is a research organization that “[systematically monitor\[s\] a cross section of print, broadcast, cable, radio, and Internet media outlets for conservative misinformation.](#)” *Media Matters* has a team dedicated to monitoring media coverage of LGBTQ issues and narratives, and this includes pointing out misinformation by right-leaning sources (e.g. see *Section I*). Also cited in *Section I* were articles by *GLAAD* that pointed out the misinformation put forth by right-leaning sources such as *Fox News*.

Another suggestion is for social media sites to ban anti-trans rhetoric. Consider [Twitter’s response to misinformation regarding COVID-19](#): “Content that is demonstrably false or misleading and may lead to significant risk of harm... may not be shared on Twitter.” Insofar as anti-trans rhetoric involves making demonstrably false or misleading claims about trans people which results in a significant risk of harm to them, then social media sites should not allow such information to be shared on their platform.

Something worth considering is the positive correlation between the progress made in LGB Rights and the percentage of people who know someone who is gay or lesbian. According to a [2013 report by Pew Research Center](#), “87% of Americans say they know someone who is gay or lesbian. Twenty years ago, far fewer (61%) say they had a gay or lesbian acquaintance.” While this isn’t to say that knowing more gay or lesbian people is a causal factor in the progress made in LGB Rights, it is safe to say that the overwhelming amount of Americans who know a gay or lesbian individual is an indicator that progress is indeed being made. One likely explanation for this is that as progress is being made more gay and lesbian people are willing to come out to acquaintances due to feeling more accepted than ever.



According to a [2021 article by Pew Research Center](#), 42% of Americans personally know someone who is transgender. Given the above data and explanations, it is safe to say that there may be a positive correlation between progress made in transgender rights and the amount of people who know someone who is transgender. A future that involves a large percentage of people who personally know a transgender individual will likely be a future where we have made tremendous progress in transgender rights and representation.

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