



montana
HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

MHRN Guide to Reporting on Extremist Activity Targeting the LGBTQ+ Community

In 2021, MHRN created and distributed a [media guide](#) for reporters who were trying to take on the challenge of accurately covering extremist groups' activity without accidentally amplifying their propaganda. Since that guide was released, we have seen another group of extremists — national anti-LGBTQ+ organizations — roll out dehumanizing and coordinated misinformation campaigns attacking LGBTQ+ community members and their supporters. Throughout Montana, we're seeing local community members adopting and repeating some of these talking points. For example, statements made by ImagineIF Library [trustees](#), [community members](#) in Kalispell, and protesters at [drag shows](#) used language taken directly from national groups.

Most of the attacks specifically target transgender youth, resulting in a flood of slurs, harmful stereotypes, and verifiably false information about transgender people. When left unchecked, these messaging campaigns contribute to feelings of isolation and despair and can compound with other [factors](#) leading to an increased [risk](#) of death by suicide. Additionally, this national anti-LGBTQ+ campaign has led some people within extremist movements to make threats against [hospitals](#), [drag story hours](#), [Pride events](#), LGBTQ+ [dance clubs](#), [libraries](#), and [public schools](#). Here in Montana, [local businesses](#) and [organizations](#) have been attacked, and operatives are asserting that books with LGBTQ+ [authors](#) or books with LGBTQ+ stories, characters, or information should not be allowed in public libraries. Montana legislators are preparing several anti-LGBTQ+ bills for the 2023 Legislative Session (see the end of this report for examples).

Why “Both Sides” Fails While Covering LGBTQ+ Issues

As you're covering these difficult topics, it's good to remember advice from the [Association of LGBTQ Journalists Stylebook](#):

“When covering a controversial or sensitive issues, it's standard journalism practice to seek out opposing views to provide 'balance' to a story. However, there are times when 'balance' doesn't further understanding of the issues or the story.”

Reporters covering activities involving White nationalists, neo-Nazis, and other extremist groups often make the mistake of repeating extremist operatives' talking points verbatim. They justify this by claiming that readers understand that racism is bad and will immediately recognize the harmful ideas that racists say. This assumption is dangerous and false. White supremacists are thrilled when their dangerous ideology is normalized and

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featured in legitimate media outlets.

On LGBTQ+ issues, direct quotes from anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-transgender operatives is harmful for similar reasons. For example, phrases like “groomers” or “[trans strippers](#)” to describe drag performers are intentionally designed to dehumanize and criminalize the existence of transgender and LGBTQ+ people, which leads others to justify violence and threats towards them. Additionally, when people don’t know transgender people personally, they are far more likely to be influenced by the misinformation and disinformation campaigns launched by anti-transgender groups like the Alliance Defending Freedom, Montana Family Foundation, Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family.

We urge you to remember that there is no “both sides” justification for dehumanizing people who already face discrimination or normalizing attacks on their basic human rights. Every week, we are seeing more coverage of in-person protests and threats across the country that cause real harm to the LGBTQ+ community.

How to Cover LGBTQ+ Issues Fairly and Accurately

Here are a few tips for covering these situations without becoming megaphones for transphobic and/or homophobic rhetoric.

Avoid Repeating Inflammatory Rhetoric and Slurs

Don’t normalize misleading and ugly narratives and talking points. We have seen articles where reporters have simply repeated cruel, false statements like “[groomers](#)” and “[pedophiles](#)” when referring to teachers, librarians, LGBTQ+ allies, or people speaking up for the First Amendment right to access information. Similarly, many books have been mischaracterized as “obscene” or “pornographic” even though they do not fit definitions established by [law](#).

Repeating the language and terms used by anti-LGBTQ+ groups results in more people assuming these terms are acceptable and legitimate. This leads to more online bullying and physical violence against LGBTQ+ people, who already face discrimination. Instead of printing misleading and harmful insults, whether unintentionally or via direct quotes, you can generalize or [qualify](#) their statements. Some examples:

- “Protesters held signs opposing drag queens and drag events....”
- “Commenters made unsubstantiated [or various] claims against the content of the material....”
- “John Doe stated that the book included pornographic material, but the content does not match the definition currently upheld by federal law.”
- “Supporters of the book ban made claims that books contain objectionable material.”

Do Not Give Extremists an Open Mic

The current anti-LGBTQ+ and pro-censorship movements are counting on media outlets to spread their message. These operatives view earned media as a free pass to disseminate misinformation and discrimination.

To prevent this, you can refer to statements they have made in public comments or on social media to provide needed context about their perspective.

As detailed in our [media guide on extremism](#), extremists will use live or exclusive coverage to offer polished versions of their dangerous ideology to make themselves seem reasonable. People who begin following these individuals for their reasonable statements are later introduced to more extreme concepts and rhetoric, leading to the spread of xenophobia, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and White nationalism. Appearing reasonable should not be treated as genuine reasonability when additional evidence of extremism is readily available.

As an example, many of these operatives say they are challenging books in order to “protect children” and assert their “parental rights.” This narrative ignores the reality that the children they claim to be “protecting” have parents or guardians who have the right to review and choose the books their children read. Likewise, claiming someone is a “pedophile” is a very serious accusation. Publishing unsubstantiated claims of criminal activity could open your outlet up to legal challenges. The consequences of unsubstantiated accusations being repeated in news outlets are serious and have led to LGBTQ+ community members being forced to flee their homes due to violent threats.

Context, Context, Context

Anti-LGBTQ+ operatives and organizations are hoping to exploit “both sides” journalism by getting reporters to directly quote their misinformation. Please consult LGBTQ+ individuals and their advocacy organizations, as well as professional medical associations, when covering these issues. For example, it is very important to include the perspectives of transgender people and drag performers, because they are being targeted. Misinformation is rampant, and there is no reason to legitimize it when local experts can provide accurate information. MHRN can help connect you with professionals who know these topics inside and out.

In one example of a thoroughly researched and contextualized [article](#), reporter Micah Drew took the time to discover where the campaign to remove two books from the ImagineIF Libraries in Flathead County began. A FOIA request revealed that one of the newer library trustees had seen a video of people in other states clamoring to ban books with LGBTQ+ themes, and he shared it with the other trustees. Before that video was shared amongst the trustees, there were no complaints or attempts to ban those books, even though they had been on the library shelves for a few years.

If people show up with a list of one book or [400 books](#) they want to ban, please ask a few questions to determine what organization or person created the list. If people tell you that drag story hours are harmful for children, find out where that talking point originated. In Idaho, an [investigation](#) revealed that individuals submitted a doctored video so they could falsely claim that a drag performer had exposed themselves during a performance.

We understand that deadlines are tight, but if you can, research the people who are making public statements, especially if they make frequent appearances. For example, John Lamb has been referred to only as a “former

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Libertarian candidate,” but he has also been a very public supporter of violent extremist Ammon Bundy. Simple online searches [reveal](#) that Lamb did live broadcasts from the federal courthouse where Bundy was on trial for conspiracy after his followers’ armed takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in 2016. Connecting individuals to the broader ideologies that mobilize anti-LGBTQ+ politics and policies provides important context. Governor Greg Gianforte, who signed anti-LGBTQ+ bills into law in 2021, has made more than [\\$1 million](#) in donations to anti-LGBTQ+ groups for over a decade. The Montana Human Rights Network can often help you find and understand these connections.

Crucial Work in Difficult Times

Covering the news during these contentious times is a difficult business. We acknowledge that reporters have many pressures on them as they work to deliver accurate information to readers. Thank you for covering the meetings and events that hold our communities and democracy together.

If you have any questions about covering extremism or need information on current movements or leaders, please reach out to Travis McAdam at research@mhrn.org or Shawn Reagor at shawn@mhrn.org.

Further Reading & Resources

- GLAAD [Media Guide](#)
- Trans Journalists Association [Style Guide](#)
- Eight Tips for [Investigating LGBTQ+ Stories](#)
- LGBTQ+ media guides from the [Global Investigative Journalism Network](#)

Anti-LGBTQ Bill Drafts – 2023 Montana Legislature

We have listed bills that specifically threaten the rights of LGBTQ+ people. There could be more, but we cannot determine content based on titles like “generally revise healthcare laws.” More information will be available as the session progresses.

- [LC0892](#) Sponsored by Bob Phalen (R) HD 36 - Revises dissemination of obscene material to minors laws
- [LC1360](#) Sponsored by John Fuller (R) SD 4 - Provide for a youth health protection act
- [LC1471](#) Sponsored by Braxton Mitchell (R) HD 3 - Prohibit minors from attending drag shows
- [LC2033](#) Sponsored by Caleb Hinkle (R) HD 68 - Codify definitions of male and female
- [LC2034](#) Sponsored by Caleb Hinkle (R) HD 68 - Constitutional amendment defining gender

