Evidence Bite - Debating Transness: A Critical Investigation into Trans Topics in Opinion Pieces

This article by Emma Verhoeven and CCINDLE partner Rylan Verlooy discusses how transgender issues are discussed in opinion pieces, and who talks about them in the opinion pages. News media increasingly report on trans issues, which has been analysed before, but the opinion pages of a newspaper have very different editorial standards and expectations to traditional news reporting. The article examines how trans topics are framed in Flemish op-ed pieces, highlighting who participates in these debates and how arguments about trans rights and lives are constructed. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

The **key observations** of the article include that:

1. Trans voices are largely absent in opinion pieces

The study finds that non-trans authors dominate discussions of trans issues in op-eds. When trans people get a voice to write about trans issues, it is often in reaction to trans-exclusionary opinion pieces. Moreover, trans authors mostly write about their personal experiences or about transphobic violence. Meanwhile, non-trans authors have a much broader repertoire of trans issues that they discuss.

2. Anti-trans arguments dominate the opinion pages

A substantial proportion of opinion content includes trans-exclusionary perspectives. These authors commonly question the legitimacy of trans identities, and argue to diminish the rights of trans people. These arguments are mostly put forward by columnists who have a weekly platform without much editorial supervision.

3. Opinion pieces actually debate what 'transness' means

Although many trans topics were covered in the op-eds (including sports, healthcare, and violence), the pieces actually discuss the meaning of 'transness'. Authors contribute to narratives around who is recognised as trans, how 'gender' and 'sex' relate to each other, and who is 'trans enough' to be eligible for trans rights.

The **key takeaway messages** of the article include that:

- **It matters who gets a voice:** Who speaks and who is excluded is critical to how trans issues are understood and addressed. Non-trans columnists fuel exclusionary discourses.
- **Anti-trans arguments get legitimacy through the op-ed pages:** Opinion journalism can legitimise exclusionary perspectives or challenge them, with impacts for lived experiences.
- **Debates are about power as well as ideas:** Public contests over transness reflect broader struggles over authority, knowledge, and rights.

The study shows that debates about transgender issues in the media are not neutral, but key arenas where social norms, identities, and

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rights are negotiated. When trans voices are marginalised and exclusionary narratives dominate, public understanding becomes skewed, potentially influencing policy and reinforcing inequalities. You can read the article in full here.

For more information on the CCINDLE project, as well as publications, evidence bites, podcasts, videos and more, please visit our website: https://ccindle.org

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