

Brianna Ghey and Framing of Transgender People in *The Times* Newspaper: A Queer Study of Political Communication in Right-Wing British Broadsheets

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Author Bio

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Abstract

This article explores how politically right-leaning British broadsheets, specifically *The Times*, frame transgender identities through the case of teenager Brianna Ghey's murder. Applying a queer constructivist lens and Barad's intra-action theory, the study analyses how media discourse, state power, and public knowledge entangle to perpetuate dominant narratives that marginalise trans bodies. Using a thematic framing analysis of *The Times* articles from February 2023 to February 2024, that mention Ghey, the research reveals three dominant frames—Spectacle, De-legitimate, and Political Left—which collectively contribute to the de-legitimisation and politicisation of trans identities. This work argues that these frames shape societal attitudes toward transgender people, reinforcing conservative cultural boundaries. Ultimately, the paper calls for alternative sites of resistance, such as digital platforms, where trans voices can reshape discourse and challenge harmful representations.

Keywords

Framing, British media, representation, political communication, queer theory, transgender studies

Introduction

Since the late 2010s, there has been an explosive increase in the number of stories about transgender people in British broadsheet and tabloid newspapers.¹ The British Press published approximately three and a half times more articles on transgender people in 2019 compared to 2012.² In response to the recent surge in LGBTQ+ visibility, states are passing anti-trans, anti-queer legislation – for example, the 2023 Texas bill SB14 in the United States, which prohibits trans individuals under 18 from accessing hormone therapies and puberty blockers.³ In the UK, trans people remain at the epicentre of contemporary political and media debates, which the Home Office has stated could have caused the 11 percent rise in trans hate crimes leading up to March 2023.⁴ This statistic suggests that much of the violence trans people experience may stem from political communication and the media’s mediation of knowledge and understanding.

While scholars have conducted research concerning the representation and sociolinguistics of transness in various media worldwide, studies delineating the role of British broadsheets in shaping public opinion on trans people are limited. Most recently, Camila Soledad Montiel-McCann has compared the *Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Telegraph*’s use of discourse in reproducing anti-trans discrimination through their championing of hegemonic femininity.⁵ She says that due to “the perception of broadsheet newspapers in Britain as somehow inherently respectable (with a higher price-tag and a focus on political and economic news, as well as investigative journalism)”, analysing them is useful because, as she puts it, they “reproduce[e] hegemonic discourse by appearing to be most rooted in epistemological truth

¹ Gina Gwenffrewi, *The Stoning of Stonewall during the New Trans Panic* (London: University and College Union, 2021), 2, https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13245/The-stoning-of-Stonewall-during-the-new-trans-panic/pdf/The_stoning_of_Stonewall_Nov22.pdf.

² Mermaids, “Exclusive: Mermaids’ Research into Newspaper Coverage on Trans Issues,” *Mermaids*, November 18, 2019, <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/news/exclusive-mermaids-research-into-newspaper-coverage-on-trans-issues>.

³ Minami Funakoshi and Disha Raychaudhuri, “The Rise of Anti-Trans Bills in the U.S.,” *Reuters*, August 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/USA-HEALTHCARE/TRANS-BILLS/zgvorreyapd/>.

⁴ Michael Goodier, “Hate Crimes against Transgender People Hit Record High in England and Wales,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2023, Society section, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/oct/05/record-rise-hate-crimes-transgender-people-reported-england-and-wales>.

⁵ Camila Soledad Montiel-McCann, “‘It’s like We Are Not Human’: Discourses of Humanisation and Otherness in the Representation of Trans Identity in British Broadsheet Newspapers,” *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 6 (July 14, 2022): 2963, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2097727>.

and, hence, offering a “reflection” of society devoid of the bias shown in the tabloids”.⁶ By centring a cross-section of queerness, the trans identity, framing and political communication, this article uses Montiel-McCann’s study as a point of departure to explore how the frames used by right-leaning broadsheets are complicit and active producers of trans violence – a gap in the research which remains overlooked.

Through a queer, constructivist lens, this qualitative study presents a thematic framing analysis of *The Times* online newspaper articles between February 2023 – February 2024 on the murder of teenager Brianna Ghey as a way of examining how and why politically right-leaning media mediate the British public’s understanding of transgender people within contemporary society. While *The Telegraph* is also a right-leaning broadsheet that consistently publishes media on transgender people, it has been more consistent in presenting a sceptical stance toward trans rights, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. In contrast, *The Times* often blends its editorial stance with investigative features and opinion pieces, offering the opportunity to explore varying frames and nuances within the same publication. With 42 articles published in *The Times* featuring Brianna Ghey’s name within the year after her murder, the topic of her death was one of the most salient and politicised stories of 2023. Her death and its discourse in newspapers sit at the intersection of issues surrounding the visibility of the trans identity, marginalisation of trans bodies and impact on public opinion and policy. The combined methodology of case study and framing analysis offers an opportunity to observe what conservative media wants society to tell itself about itself.

The article argues that due to the depth of historical anti-trans rhetoric in right-wing media, the journalists reporting on Ghey’s death further perpetuate dominant frames on the gender debate as a means to enforce moral judgment and protect a heteronormative binary.⁷ The use of a queer, constructivist perspective, argues that the journalists, trans marginalisation, perpetual discourse, and power exist in relevance to one another, emerging through situated knowledge and entanglements – all of which, “provide legitimation for a politics of inequality”.⁸ Underlying this article is Karen Barad’s theory of ‘intra-action’: the idea that unlike ‘interaction’ which presupposes the existence of independent entities that come

⁶ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2963.

⁷ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2970.

⁸ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2963.

together to affect each other, ‘intra-action’ suggests that entities do not pre-exist their relationships.⁹ Instead, they emerge through their intra-actions – their specific entanglements. By accepting that all knowledge is shaped by the specific contexts of its creation, this article draws on Barad's theory to challenge traditional views of identity, agency, and media, arguing that British media discourse not only reflects but actively shapes societal attitudes, framing trans identities in ways that align with state power and public policy.¹⁰ This article first unpacks the theoretical framework, drawing on existing literature in framing queer, and transgender studies. Following the introduction of the case study, each subsequent section dissects the different frames used by journalists—the Spectacle, De-legitimate, and Political Left—through thematic analysis and a queer constructivist lens, culminating in a discussion on the need for alternative, resistant narratives that empower trans voices.

Framing the Queer/Trans Body

Framing Theory

Framing is commonly understood as the journalistic process of selecting features of a perceived reality and making them “more salient in a communicating text”.¹¹ According to Erving Goffman, “framing began as a way of analysing how humans organise experience in the social construction of reality”.¹² Goffman explains that dominant frames build upon one another, repeating to form collective notions that can cause audiences to develop a monolithic understanding of a person, groups of people and events.

Robert M. Entman understands that frames encourage specific interpretations of issues and events by emphasising problem definitions, causal attributes, and moral judgment.¹³ The purpose of framing, whether intentional or not, is to subtly or overtly persuade an audience

⁹ Malou Juelskjær and Nete Schwennesen, “Intra-Active Entanglements – an Interview with Karen Barad,” *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 1–2 (March 15, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i1-2.28068>.

¹⁰ Karen Barad and Daniela Gandorfer, “Political Desirings: Yearnings for Mattering (,) Differently,” *Theory & Event* 24, no. 1 (2021): 14–66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2021.0002>.

¹¹ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

¹² Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974), quoted in Bowe and Makki, “Muslim Neighbors or Islamic Threat,” 542.

¹³ Entman, “Framing,” 51.

on how to think about a particular topic and its surrounding discourse.¹⁴ Scholars from Murray Edelman to Shanto Iyengar collectively agree that framing affects the beliefs and behaviours of audiences in their daily lives.¹⁵

Frames are formed of thematic word choices. Entman emphasises the ‘salience’ and repetition of information¹⁶, while William A. Gamson and Baldwin Van Gorp explore the how linguistic elements can more subtly lead audiences to make judgments e.g. the use of metaphors or visual descriptors.¹⁷

Within media discourse, Iyengar presents the concept of two types of frames: episodic and thematic.¹⁸ Episodic frames spotlight singular events or instances drawing on personal narratives and specific examples to isolate complex issues from larger patterns or systemic injustices. Thematic frames, on the other hand, contextualise events within larger social, political, or historical contexts. Thematic framing emphasises the systemic factors, structural inequalities, or overarching themes that shape individual events or cultural phenomena.¹⁹ These two modes of presentation can produce two different ways audiences understand an issue.²⁰

Building on these general frameworks, theorists such as Paul Bell and Entman analyse media representation and its role in shaping public understanding. Bell and Entman argue that the media bear partial responsibility for the audience’s monolithic understandings, stating that, “the media are not passive conduits, but rather active participants in shaping the dominant

¹⁴ Dror Walter and Yotam Ophir, “Strategy Framing in News Coverage and Electoral Success: An Analysis of Topic Model Networks Approach,” *Political Communication* 38, no. 6 (December 29, 2020): 709, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1858379>.

¹⁵ Walter and Ophir, “Strategy Framing,” 709.

¹⁶ Entman, “Framing,” 51.

¹⁷ Baldwin Van Gorp, “The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In,” *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00329.x>.

¹⁸ Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), quoted in Brian J. Bowe and Taj W. Makki, “Muslim Neighbors or an Islamic Threat? A Constructionist Framing Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of Mosque Controversies,” *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 4 (December 30, 2015): 540–58, 542, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715613639>.

¹⁹ Bowe and Makki, “Muslim Neighbors or Islamic Threat”, 550.

²⁰ Bowe and Makki, “Muslim Neighbors or Islamic Threat”, 542.

frame for a given issue”.²¹ Although media can direct culture, Bell and Entman fail to recognise that the journalists producing such frames are “embedded in the same cultural system as their audiences” and, therefore, are partially passive in their writing choices.²² Van Gorp and Goffman understand that frames are fundamental in establishing aspects of culture - their dominance can become institutionalised.²³ The repertoire of previous frames that make up cultural phenomena, enable and limit the journalist's cognitive understanding of social reality, thus somewhat scripting what they can write. This constructivist perspective is supported by scholars Rens Vliegthart and Liesbet Van Zoonen, who attach the continuation of a dominant frame to the institutionalisation of routine processes and unequal resources.²⁴

Queer and Transgender Studies

Like Vliegthart and Van Zoonen, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler further explore the institutionalisation of dominant frames but with a focus on gender and sexuality power structures. Considering the gendered body as a site of persistent frames, queer theorists like Foucault and Butler understand that the body is not naturally 'sexed'; instead, it is given shape and categorised by cultural processes and language that use sexuality and gender to perpetuate specific power structures.²⁵

Butler argues that gender identity arises from the repeated performance of behaviours expected of one's sex.²⁶ To Butler, gender is not a fixed aspect of identity; rather, it must be continuously expressed and reaffirmed through discourse. Journalists, who are also constrained by the subconscious social expectation to create a discourse that converses with

²¹ Christine V. Bell and Robert M. Entman, “The Media’s Role in America’s Exceptional Politics of Inequality: Framing the Bush Tax Cuts of 2001 and 2003,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16, no. 4 (2011): 548–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161211417334>, quoted in Bowe and Makki, “Muslim Neighbors or an Islamic Threat,” 542.

²² Bowe and Makki, ‘Muslim Neighbors or Islamic Threat’, 543.

²³ Van Gorp, ‘The Constructionist Approach to Framing’, 64.

²⁴ Rens Vliegthart and Liesbet van Zoonen, “Power to the Frame: Bringing Sociology Back to Frame Analysis,” *European Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (2011): 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323111404838>, quoted in Bowe and Makki, “Muslim Neighbors or an Islamic Threat,” 542.

²⁵ Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (Totum Books, 1999), 56.

²⁶ Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy, “Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice,” *Affilia* 25, no. 4 (October 15, 2010): 434, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910384068>.

their sex, produce positive and negative frames to reinforce the gender binary and adherence to essentialist norms.²⁷ However, as put by Dimitris Akrivos, queer theory offers a lens to view gender identity as, “how messages communicated through the media—and their shaping by the regulators’ codes of conduct—serve as a means to govern gender relations by producing ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ gender subjects”.²⁸

Still, while the normative gender binary is produced and enforced through discourse and performance, discourse and performance are also shaped by, and in conversation with, material and bodily realities. Transgender studies scholars recognise the gender binary is neither entirely essentialist nor wholly conceptual. For instance, Viviane K. Namaste and Jay Prosser critique queer theory for overlooking the material realities and struggles faced by some trans people such as gender dysphoria and gender-related surgery.²⁹ They argue that the material body itself, rather than just its performance, is central to trans subjectivity and that the trans experience complicates the idea that gender is purely discursively constructed.³⁰

Andre Cavalcante suggests that the discourse does not just warp our perceptions, it has material repercussions for trans people. It can change trans bodies by influencing the passing of policies that prevent trans access to healthcare, and online spaces that provide avenues for identity exploration.³¹ It is within this intra-action between material and abstract, as delineated by transgender studies scholars, that the notion that discourse shapes the world while matter is passive, is dismantled - one finds that the two are active and inseparable. Barad’s concept of entanglements, intra-action and material discursivity is fully realised. While this article takes a queer, constructivist approach by acknowledging that knowledge is situated and shaped by discursive perspectives, it also identifies specific forms of violence trans bodies endure and centres these embodied experiences.

²⁷ Nagoshi and Brzuzy, “Transgender Theory”, 433.

²⁸ Dimitris Akrivos, “Transgender Reporting in the British Press: Editorial Standards and Discursive Harms in the Post-Leveson Era,” *Journal of Media Law* 14, no. 2 (December 5, 2022): 410,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/17577632.2022.2153216?needAccess=true>.

²⁹ Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Internet Archive, 2023), <https://archive.org/details/invisibleliveser000nama>.

³⁰ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 64.

³¹ Andre Cavalcante, “‘I Did It All Online:’ Transgender Identity and the Management of Everyday Life,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (January 2016): 109–122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129065>.

What queer and transgender studies scholars can agree on – returning to Butler - is that “neither power nor discourse are rendered anew at every moment: they are not as weightless as the utopics of radical resignification might imply”.³² What Butler is suggesting here is that both power dynamics and discourse are not constantly reinvented or transformed. They carry the historical weight of existing power structures, not easily changed. Connecting this to Vliegthart and Van Zoonen’s constructivist account of the dominant frame, Butler highlights that for those marginalised, or ‘othered’, the dominant frames are harder to shift.³³ Transgender studies scholars Brian D. Zambodi and Dallas Denny relate this to the trans-embodied experience. As the transgender identity engages and re-evaluates the social construction of gender and sexuality, trans individuals are in constant conflict with core cultural boundaries and bear the brunt of negative dominant frames that intend to de-legitimise their existence.³⁴

Sadly, it is really in trans-death that the brutality of these frames comes to light. British news reporting on the deaths of transgender people, for instance, their persistent misgendering of the subject, exposes how little right-wing journalists respect trans lives. According to Sara Ahmed, heterosexual culture, having abandoned its capacity to mourn its own lost queerness, cannot mourn queer lives; nor recognise them as lives worth grieving.³⁵ Akrivos contextualises Ahmed’s point by referencing the British media’s misgendering of transgender victim, Naomi Hersi’s murder in 2018.³⁶ For Ahmed, Akrivos and Jasbir Puar, such misgendering of trans lives in death is an act of violence and removal of dignity, to protect the “pre-existing palette of identities” that the state deems acceptable.³⁷ The media scapegoats transgender deaths as a warning to its presumed cisgender audience: do not deter from the essentialist gender binary, or else, this is how you will be remembered - even in death, defined through the cis gaze.

³² Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies That Matter* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1993), 4.

³³ Butler, “Critically Queer”, 4.

³⁴ Kristen Norwood, “Meaning Matters: Framing Trans Identity in the Context of Family Relationships,” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 9, no. 2 (March 2013): 155–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428x.2013.765262>.

³⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Queer Feelings,” *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, no. 2 (2014): 156, <https://doi.org/10.3366/j.ctt1g09x4q.12>.

³⁶ Akrivos, “Transgender Reporting in the British Press”, 406.

³⁷ Sarah Singer, ““How Much of a Lesbian Are You?”: Experiences of LGBT Asylum Seekers in Immigration Detention in the UK,” in *Queer Migration and Asylum in Europe*, ed. Richard C. M. Mole (London: UCL Press, 2021), 240, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv17ppc7d.18>.

Case study: The Murder of Brianna Ghey

In February 2023, transgender 16-year-old Brianna Ghey was murdered in a park in Cheshire by two other teenagers, a boy and a girl.³⁸ Across the United Kingdom (UK), vigils were held to honour her life and to commemorate the loss for the transgender community.³⁹ The event, the trial, its mention in a Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, and Ghey's mother's campaign for adolescent mental health were reported by all major news channels, both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, and were prevalent in discussions on social media. *The Times* is typically regarded as a politically centre-right-wing newspaper, further evidenced by its 2019 endorsement of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and editorial stances, which often emphasise traditional values, fiscal conservatism, and a cautious approach to social change.⁴⁰ Its opinion pieces frequently align with the Conservative Party policies and candidates, usually advocating for free-market principles, strong national defence, and maintenance of social order while producing a sceptical view of progressive social policies. According to an interview with *Attitude* magazine by transgender activist Shon Faye's, the Rupert-Murdoch-owned broadsheet published over 300 articles in 2020, averaging nearly one per day, all of which conveyed a negative stance on transgender issues.⁴¹

The Times has released 42 articles referencing the name Brianna Ghey between February 2023 and 2024. Using articles that mention Ghey's name rather than only those about her and her death allows for space to explore what Ghey's name means and symbolises when inserted into other contexts or topics. Given the article's focus on depth rather than breadth of communication, the analysis will explore thematic frames used by different journalists in 14 of these articles chosen through random selection, approximately a third of those published,

³⁸ Bronwyn Jones and Rachael Lazaro, "Brianna Ghey: Boy and Girl in Court Charged with Murder," *BBC News*, February 15, 2023, sec. Manchester, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-64625001>.

³⁹ "Brianna Ghey: Candle-Lit Vigils Planned across UK for Schoolgirl," *BBC News*, February 14, 2023, sec. Manchester, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-64627680>.

⁴⁰ The Sunday Times, "General Election 2019: Keep Mr Corbyn out at All Costs. So Vote Conservative," *The Times*, December 8, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/keep-jeremy-corbyn-out-at-all-costs-so-vote-conservative-k37srdpbg>.

⁴¹ Tara John, "Analysis: Anti-Trans Rhetoric Is Rife in the British Media. Little Is Being Done to Extinguish the Flames," *CNN*, October 9, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/09/uk/uk-trans-rights-gender-critical-media-intl-gbr-cmd/index.html>.

to detect their techniques of mediation and political intentions.⁴² The analysis for each frame will draw from the most salient examples of linguistic elements, phrasing, and thematic lexicon within articles that most encapsulate the frame and can be analysed through queer and trans theory.

Framing Analysis

The framing analysis unearthed three prominent frames on the transgender issue related to the Brianna Ghey case: the Spectacle frame (most salient in 3 articles out of the 14 analysed), the De-legitimate frame (5 articles), and the Political Left frame (6 articles).

Spectacle Frame

The Spectacle frame is characterised by undertones of othering, watched/watcher rhetoric and based on what Rhea Ashley Hoskin calls, ‘the cis gaze.’⁴³ Hoskin argues that trans representation in the media can be viewed through the critical lens of the ‘cis gaze’. Based on Laura Mulvey’s 1975 ‘male gaze’, the cis gaze analyses how trans and gender non-conforming individuals in media have been “reduced to objects of fascination”; documented as something ‘other’ and external to the dominant cisgendered norm.⁴⁴ Hoskin uses Mulvey’s framework to explain that those in power control the gaze, depicting the marginalised through their perspective. This dynamic produces the objectification and dehumanisation of the marginalised, thereby strengthening the dominance of those in power.⁴⁵

The ‘cis gaze’ appears in the journalists’ choice to depict Ghey as an unashamedly dynamic individual – using expressions like “unapologetically themselves”, a “larger-than-life character” and “one of a kind”.⁴⁶ This frame positions Ghey as positively abnormal, suggesting she is special compared to the average person. This is a common frame used for

⁴² These will be referenced individually in due course.

⁴³ Rhea Ashley Hoskin, “Trans Representation in Popular Culture,” Research Gate (University of Waterloo, 2021), 3-4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350194084_Trans_Representation_in_Popular_Culture; Hesmondhalgh, “Media and Society, 6th Edition,” 4-5.

⁴⁴ Hoskin, “Trans Representation”, 3.

⁴⁵ Hoskin, “Trans Representation”, 42.

⁴⁶ Fariha Karim, “Brianna Ghey: Trans Girl’s Murder Was Brutal, Court Told,” *The Times*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brianna-ghey-transgender-murder-boy-girl-charged-jx5nbf5fn>.; Debbie White and Keiran Gair, “Brianna Ghey: Trans Girl Was First of Two 16-Year-Olds Killed in 48 Hours,” *The Times*, February 13, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brianna-ghey-transgender-girl-was-first-of-two-16-year-olds-stabbed-to-death-in-48-hours-mt0rpzqkm>.

depictions of queer and trans individuals more broadly in British media. One article by journalist Will Hodgkinson reviews a concert by trans non-binary singer Sam Smith, describing them as a “cheerful and unthreatening figure”.⁴⁷ Though Hodgkinson is not explicitly transphobic, by using the word ‘unthreatening’, he insinuates that the audience may be surprised by Smith’s warm demeanour. In the same article, Hodgkinson references Smith wearing a “halo spelling the name of Brianna Ghey” and he states that “the debate around gender identity [is] spilling into violence” – signalling to Ghey’s death.⁴⁸ The glorifying tone underscores this frame and highlights that the journalists, along with the Times audience, are observers objectifying both Smith and Ghey’s transness. This frame exoticises or sensationalises the lives of transgender individuals through the cis gaze. As Hoskin puts it, “trans people become spectacle”, inherently captivating simply because they are perceived as ‘different’ from the media outlet’s typical cisgender audience.⁴⁹

This framing reinforces societal divisions and fosters voyeuristic fascination with the ‘foreign,’ positioning transgender experiences as ‘other’ and ‘strange,’ even in cases where the journalist intends to foster empathy.⁵⁰ However, trans individuals are often denied empathy and understanding in their portrayal, as they are defined through the lens of privileged perspectives. The discourse about trans people in the articles revolves around their differences from the cis-gendered audience rather than their shared humanity. Regardless of whether the article is intended to be accepting of gender non-conforming bodies, by using this frame, journalists make a distinction that trans people are somewhat removed from normality. The Spectacle frame in Ghey’s case thus serves to maintain the status quo by subtly reinforcing the boundaries of uniformity and deviance.⁵¹

De-legitimate Frame

The De-legitimate frame is characterised by subtle narratives that align thematically with the attributes of transphobia as delineated by Bettcher, such as moral indignation, discrimination,

⁴⁷ Will Hodgkinson, “Sam Smith Review — a Cheerful Balladeer in a G-String,” *The Times*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sam-smith-review-a-cheerful-balladeer-in-a-g-string-bs577vj5c>.

⁴⁸ Hodgkinson, “Sam Smith Review”

⁴⁹ Hoskin, “Trans Representation”, 4-5.

⁵⁰ Hoskin, “Trans Representation”, 4-5.

⁵¹ Hoskin, “Trans Representation”, 4-5.

judgment, and dehumanisation of trans people.⁵² Through lexicon choices, metaphors, and anecdotes, *The Times* journalists intend to delegitimise Ghey's transness.

Scholars of transgender and queer media studies unearth how media representation of transgender people often employs discourses of "deception" and being born in the "wrong body". Talia Mae Bettcher, supported by McKinnon and Victoria Fisher, understands that the deceiver and 'wrong body' frames, for instance, depict trans women who 'successfully pass' as women without revealing their trans status as deceptive or inauthentic. This trope fixates on one's "real" sex and often culminates in a dramatic "reveal" of one's trans identity - delegitimising their gender - frequently portrayed through invasive and sensationalised means.⁵³ Bettcher explores the public fascination with trans people's gendered appearance versus 'sexual reality'⁵⁴, noting that right-wing media particularly relishes in the "possible deception, revelation, and disclosure"; using expressions such as "a man who lives as a woman" to highlight the gender paradox.⁵⁵ In Will Humphries and George Sandeman's article, they write that "Brianna had been living as a girl for several months", implying that this is a choice of gender expression as opposed to an authentic and very real gender identity.⁵⁶ This wording denies Brianna's legitimacy as a girl. It supports analysis on existing frames by Bettcher, along with McKinnon and Fisher, who argue that transgender people are presented in the 'wrong body', 'passing' and 'hiding' their trans identity.⁵⁷

The De-legitimate frame was marked by anecdotes that were thematically consistent with a misogynistic and transphobic obsession with Ghey's appearance. Many articles patronise her femininity; one is solely written around the murderer's "fascination" with Ghey's beauty, wanting to "kill her because she was prettier".⁵⁸ The frame is epitomised in a completely

⁵² Talia Mae Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4640081>.

⁵³ Rachel McKinnon, "Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women," *Hypatia* 29, no. 4 (2014): 858, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24542107>.

⁵⁴ Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers", 50.

⁵⁵ Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers", 50.

⁵⁶ Will Humphries and George Sandeman, "Transgender Girl Brianna Ghey, 16, Stabbed to Death in 'Targeted Attack,'" *The Times*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brianna-ghey-16-fatally-stabbed-in-warrington-park-fqn6p6tp5>.

⁵⁷ Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers", 50.

⁵⁸ Mario Ledwith and Andy Russel, "Brianna Ghey Murder Trial: Accused 'Wanted to Kill Her Because She Was Prettier,'" *The Times*, November 29, 2023,

unnecessary anecdote from Ghey's optician, none of which would have been mentioned had Ghey been cisgendered: "Brianna looked gorgeous with her hair down and her make-up. Her little face lit up when I told her how beautiful she looked".⁵⁹ By emphasising her appearance at length, Humphries and Sandeman congratulate Ghey for 'passing' as a pretty girl. The praise and recognition around her 'girl-ness' is made entirely hollow when it is noted the Times changed multiple articles on Ghey to include her deadname⁶⁰ before changing them back after backlash on social media.⁶¹ This reiterates the general message that *The Times* wishes to promote and that is embedded in their anti-trans ideology: trans women are illegitimate.⁶²

Additionally, the language around Ghey's murder in this frame is particularly explicit given the sensitivity of the case – the act itself is described as "extremely brutal and punishing".⁶³ All articles written by Mario Ledwith and Andy Russell graphically describe her body through de-humanising comparisons that should not have been included, especially considering Ghey was a child. For example, they mention that Ghey's body "resembled a dummy" three times in the text; as well as including that the witness who found her thought she was a "caramel coloured cockapoo dog" – both of which frame Ghey as not human.⁶⁴ Both are ugly depictions of her death to promote shock and horror from audiences at the expense of Ghey's dignity.

Political Left Frame

The Political Left frame situates Ghey as a symbol of the gender debate, embedded in discourse over political disputes between the right and left. This frame is characterised by a

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brianna-ghey-murder-trial-latest-warrington-killers-vgnhwqwjz>.

⁵⁹ Humphries and Sandeman, "Transgender Girl Brianna Ghey."

⁶⁰ (v. and n.) meaning the birth name given to a transgender person which they have disposed of and changed as part of their gender transition.

⁶¹ Steve Topple, "Brianna Ghey's Murder Has Exposed Sick Corporate Media Opportunism after It Peddled Years of Anti-Trans Hate," Canary, February 17, 2023, <https://www.thecanary.co/uk/analysis/2023/02/17/brianna-gheys-murder-has-exposed-sick-corporate-media-opportunism-after-it-peddled-years-of-anti-trans-hate/>.

⁶² Montiel-McCann, "It's like We Are Not Human", 2972.

⁶³ Karim, "Brianna Ghey"

⁶⁴ Mario Ledwith and Andy Russell, "Brianna Ghey Murder Trial: Dog Walker Saw Two Suspects Fleeing," *The Times*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brianna-ghey-murder-trial-dog-walker-saw-two-suspects-fleeing-w6h39f0hv>.

language of ‘freedom of speech’, a point noted by Montiel-McCann in previous news articles on trans people, using Ghey’s case as a means to dismantle the political left argument. It is based on Montiel-McCann’s argument that trans lives are used as political tools in modern debates which leads to the objectification and dehumanisation of trans people.⁶⁵ The politicisation of trans lives has emerged in the last decade with the recent phenomena of the ‘trans debate’ in the media. As Montiel-McCann argues, this political frame portrays trans individuals as threats to free speech and emblems of left-wing politics, turning the discourse around trans rights into a contentious political issue. This approach not only marginalises trans people further but also undermines the genuine efforts to promote equality and prevent discrimination.⁶⁶

Despite the proliferation of public debates including the topic of transgender people, trans voices are seldom included in mainstream media debates about rights, as seen in articles from *The Times*, further denaturalising their identities for political purposes.⁶⁷ Ghey’s association with transness meant that she could be used by journalists as a point of political reference. Even articles with no direct connection to Ghey’s case used her name to emphasise their points of view on the gender debate – sometimes insinuating that existing as a trans person brands you a symbol of the political left. For example, Janice Turner’s article titled “I’ll use whatever pronouns I think courteous” and Ben Ellery’s article interviewing an ex-teacher at Eton who “does not agree with the term transgender” both concentrate on portraying trans identity as a fragment of leftist ideology, leveraging their own ‘freedom of speech’ argument.⁶⁸ This argument, often weaponised by far-right figures, portrays politically correct language intended to shield marginalised communities from harm as encroachments on the fundamental human right to freedom of expression.⁶⁹

By embedding Ghey within broader political debates, the journalist’s use of the Political Left frame traps trans people within an unruly web of public discourse, presenting them without depth or agency.

⁶⁵ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2975.

⁶⁶ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2970.

⁶⁷ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2975.

⁶⁸ Ben Ellery, “Schools to Blame for Boys Idolising Andrew Tate, Says Sacked Teacher,” *The Times*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/schools-to-blame-for-boys-idolising-andrew-tate-says-sacked-teacher-3d9ctgznb>; Janice Turner, “I’ll Use Whatever Pronouns I Think Courteous,” *The Times*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ill-use-whatever-pronouns-i-think-courteous-hqhzmwj55>.

⁶⁹ Montiel-McCann, “It’s like We Are Not Human”, 2970.

Discussion

The three frames—the Spectacle, De-legitimate, and Political Left—emerge as recurring tools in *The Times*' reporting on trans issues, each framing transgender identities within a context of moral judgment and reinforcing an essentialist understanding of gender. This discussion will explore how these frames function within theories on power and performativity, alongside Barad's concept of intra-action, to show how discursive and material forces collectively shape public perception of trans bodies.

Through a queer, Butlerian lens, these frames operate not as mere reflections of society's views but as active performances that regulate gender identity, reinforcing trans bodies as 'other' and trans identities as morally ambiguous. Applying intra-action, where entities are mutually constitutive, the media's framing of trans identity does not simply present an 'objective' perspective; instead, it continuously enacts and reaffirms cis-normative standards that shape how trans lives are recognised and understood. Interestingly, none of the journalists reporting on Ghey are transgender themselves; therefore, much of their writing is routinely conceived from their perceived understanding of transness – constructed by preexisting cultural frames and phenomena. In Nesrine Malik's study of conservatism in British media, she found that the majority of the "opinion-making class" have "a world view that is ideologically establishmentarian".⁷⁰ Rather than attributing intent to individual journalists, these frames can be seen as manifestations of a hegemonic discourse embedded within the social reality of media institutions—largely cisgendered, white, and male—that positions trans lives as subjects to be managed or policed.

For instance, the symbolism and repeated association of Ghey's identity with leftist politics exposes how the Political Left frame intra-actively binds trans identity to a contested cultural space, making trans bodies inherently political. Meanwhile, the Spectacle and De-legitimate frames, reflect a moral discourse that positions trans identities as deviant, legitimising a hierarchical view of gender upheld by media representations. This intra-action between media discourse and cultural power structures produces a material-discursive boundary around acceptable identities, making trans visibility both hyper-visible and marginalised. As Butler

⁷⁰ Gwenffrewi, "The Stoning of Stonewall", 3.

suggests, such frames do not arise from neutral ground; rather, they draw from entrenched power dynamics that maintain the gender binary.

Yet, the violence cannot be prevented by the inclusion of more trans journalists writing for *The Times*. Trans journalists hired by *The Times* could still produce media that perpetuates essentialist and traditional ideologies that are damaging to the diverse trans community as a whole. Cis-gendered and trans journalists may produce frames within the realm of their right-leaning social realities. Regardless of one's cis or trans identity, continuing to produce frames that crystallise the essentialist gender binary, renders one complicit in trans violence.

Therefore, trans people and allies must seek alternative sites of resistance beyond mainstream media outlets like *The Times*. Trans individuals might find greater agency and autonomy in online, digital media spaces, where they can more freely navigate and express their identities. As Cavalcante argues, digital spaces provide opportunities for trans people to manage their lives, build communities, and resist harmful narratives.⁷¹ These alternative spaces offer critical avenues for trans individuals to produce and circulate frames authentically reflecting the diversity of the trans community. Barad's theory of intra-action highlights that agency emerges from within entanglements rather than outside of them. Thus, alternative sites of resistance such as digital platforms offer trans individuals more opportunity to reshape the discursive-material conditions of their identities. These spaces allow for new *intra-actions* that challenge the rigid boundaries perpetuated by mainstream media and cultural power.

Concluding Remarks

By producing articles with consistent moral frames that distort transness as abnormal, *The Times* reinforces the cultural margins of gender as this aligns with its conservative values and ability to exploit trans identity. The subtle phrasing, similes, presence or absence of information used throughout all 14 articles collectively produced a negatively biased, heavily polarising, and lifeless image and stereotype of what it means to be transgender. The Spectacle, De-legitimate, and Political Left frames create a trilogy of anti-trans rhetoric alienating challenges to the heteronormative binary and politicising the trans body.

The topic of Brianna Ghey's death between February 2023 – 2024 snowballed into a tool for media power and a one-sided political debate by British right-wing broadsheets. While

⁷¹ Cavalcante, "I Did It All Online", 120.

Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen inform us that journalists are mutually embedded within the same cultural systems as their audiences and are themselves reacting to preexisting dominant discourse, Barad's theory of intra-action which underscores this article, suggests that media does not merely reflect societal norms; rather, it co-creates them through continuous material-discursive interactions. Frames in the Times are part of an ongoing process that reflects and shapes public knowledge and understanding of trans identities. As explained by Gwenffrewi, trans people are often the subjects of the articles, as opposed to the writers, and monolithic and damaging frames, are far harder to dismantle. Through Barad's theory, we can understand these frames as more than representations of static identities; they are sites where power, discourse, and trans bodies are continuously reconstituted through specific intra-actions. The cis-gendered frames that permeate the Times' discourse are devoid of empathy and understanding, not to mention grief for the life lost of a young Brianna Ghey. In the words of Ahmed: "[trans] lives have to be recognised as lives in order to be grieved".⁷²

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⁷² Ahmed, "Queer Feelings", 156.

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