

Contemporary Propaganda and Intimidation Silencing Marginalized Voices in the US

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In the post-2010 era, marginalized groups in the United States, including LGBTQ+ people, BIPOC communities, immigrants, and women, continue to face both formal and informal tactics of propaganda and intimidation that effectively silence or suppress their voices. These techniques occur online (especially on social media platforms) as well as in real-world settings (through institutions, laws, media narratives, and even vigilante threats). This report synthesizes peer-reviewed research, credible reports, and analyses to detail how these methods operate today.

Social Media Platforms and Online Harassment

Targeted Online Harassment: On social platforms, members of marginalized groups experience disproportionate levels of abuse intended to intimidate them into silence. For example, an Anti-Defamation League survey found 66% of LGBTQ+ individuals have endured online harassment, compared to 38% of non-LGBTQ respondents. Women – especially women of color – are also relentlessly targeted. Amnesty International’s “Toxic Twitter” study revealed that Black women were 84% more likely than white women to be mentioned in abusive tweets (with women of color overall 34% more likely than white women). Such abuse includes slurs, violent threats, sexual harassment, and doxxing (publishing someone’s personal information with malicious intent). The cumulative effect is a chilling environment where marginalized voices are drowned out by fear and vitriol.

“Digital Closet” and Algorithmic Bias: Beyond direct harassment, social media platforms themselves sometimes silence marginalized voices through biased content moderation and algorithms. LGBTQ+ users, for instance, report that their posts and even innocuous queer content often get taken down or hidden – a phenomenon researcher Alexander Monea terms “the digital closet,” referring to the over-policing and suppression of LGBTQ+ expression online. In a 2021 study, GLAAD found “inadequate content moderation, polarizing algorithms and discriminatory AI” on major platforms, disproportionately impacting LGBTQ users and other marginalized communities. These covert forms of censorship (often the unintended result of ad-driven algorithms or overbroad moderation rules) mean that marginalized creators are demonetized, their content shadow-banned or removed, and their ability to connect with audiences curtailed. The net result is an informal yet pervasive silencing – marginalized people are pushed off platforms or forced to self-censor to avoid abuse and punitive moderation.

COORDINATED TROLLING AND CYBER “MOBS”: Another intimidation technique is the coordination of online hate mobs to swarm and silence outspoken individuals from marginalized groups. Research shows that misogynist and racist disinformation campaigns are often deliberate: many online propaganda efforts are designed with racist and sexist content as a feature, in order to promote white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies. For example, women

in politics and journalism are frequent targets of gendered disinformation campaigns that portray them as unfit for leadership, spreading false claims about their qualifications or intelligence and often weaponizing sexualized tropes. These campaigns aim to undermine female and minority voices in public discourse by making the personal cost of speaking up – in terms of reputation, emotional strain, and safety – unbearably high. As one CDT research report noted, such disinformation exploits existing prejudices and can discourage women (especially women of color) from participating freely in political dialogue .

Media Narratives and Disinformation Campaigns

Demonizing Propaganda in Media: Traditional media and political messaging also play a powerful role in silencing marginalized voices via propaganda. In recent years, right-wing media figures and politicians have pushed false narratives that cast marginalized groups as threats, which both stokes public hostility and intimidates the targeted groups. For instance, conservative outlets and politicians have increasingly branded LGBTQ+ people (especially trans individuals and drag performers) as “groomers” or child predators – a baseless but inflammatory claim. After Florida passed its so-called “Don’t Say Gay” law in 2022 (banning discussion of LGBTQ topics in early education), online use of words like “groomer” and “pedophile” in tweets about LGBTQ+ people spiked by 406%, fueled by extremist politicians and influencers . A joint report by the Human Rights Campaign and Center for Countering Digital Hate traced much of this surge to a coordinated campaign by a handful of high-profile figures – including political officials – whose posts reached tens of millions of people . Social media companies largely failed to enforce hate-speech policies (Twitter ignored 99% of flagged “grooming” slur posts) , allowing this propaganda to proliferate. The real-world consequences have been deadly: “Violent rhetoric leads to stigma, radicalization, and ultimately violence,” the HRC president cautioned, noting nearly 1 in 5 hate crimes now stems from anti- LGBTQ bias, and the past two years were the deadliest on record for transgender people, particularly Black trans women . By painting LGBTQ+ communities as deviant or dangerous, such propaganda not only incites harassment and violence but also discourages LGBTQ+ people from visibility and advocacy (for fear of being labeled and attacked).

“Anti-CRT” and Censorship of Racial Justice: Likewise, a wave of propaganda against Critical Race Theory (CRT) and diversity education has arisen, amounting to a campaign to censor discussions of racism and Black history. Pundits and politicians have demonized “CRT” – often a catch-all for any teaching on systemic racism – as a menace, and dozens of states since 2020 have introduced bans on “divisive concepts” in classrooms. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund observes that this “war on truth” is really an effort to halt racial justice progress by suppressing honest history and silencing Black perspectives. Indeed, one analysis noted that the ultimate goal of the anti-CRT furor and related book-banning is “to censor, silence, and suppress Americans’ ability to be fully informed about their own country and the lived experiences of its people” (Robinson).^{[[1]]} After the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, school boards and legislatures across the country moved swiftly to remove materials on racial inequality and to gag teachers – a coordinated backlash that tells BIPOC students, educators, and activists that their truth is unwelcome. The proliferation of book bans is one striking aspect: hundreds of books by

Black authors or LGBTQ authors have been pulled from school libraries in the past few years. This resurgence of content censorship echoes historical patterns (e.g. Jim Crow-era bans on anti-slavery books) and serves the same end – erasing marginalized voices from public narratives. By controlling the narrative in media and education, these propaganda tactics intend to invalidate marginalized experiences and frighten people away from speaking about injustice.

Anti-Immigrant Narratives: Immigrant communities have similarly been targeted by fear-mongering propaganda that silences them. In political discourse and media, immigrants (especially from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa) are often scapegoated as criminals, terrorists, or economic threats. Repeated rhetoric about “illegal aliens” invading the country or false claims linking immigrants to disease and crime create a toxic climate. This propaganda of dehumanization not only sways public opinion toward harsher immigration policies but also intimidates immigrants themselves. For example, during the 2016 U.S. election, Russian-backed disinformation campaigns specifically sought to suppress Black and immigrant voter turnout by spreading misleading information. The vast echo chamber of anti-immigrant talk (on cable news, talk radio, and social media) contributes to immigrants feeling unwelcome and unsafe to voice their concerns. Misinformation has even deterred immigrants from using public services or reporting crimes, out of fear it could lead to deportation or public smear. In sum, media propaganda that vilifies marginalized groups serves as informal social control – it reinforces stigma and fear, making the targeted populations less inclined to stand up, be visible, or express their views.

Legal and Policy Measures as Tools of Silencing

Anti-Protest Legislation: In the wake of mass movements like Black Lives Matter, some government officials have employed legal intimidation to deter dissent. Dozens of state legislatures (predominantly Republican-led) have proposed or passed new laws that criminalize aspects of protesting. These so-called “anti-protest” bills often impose harsh penalties for actions like blocking traffic, defacing monuments, or even camping out at capitols – actions commonly associated with racial justice protests. Civil rights experts warn that such laws are deliberately broad and will be used disproportionately against BIPOC protesters, given racial biases in policing. In Florida, for instance, a 2021 law increased offenses for “rioting” and even created a new crime of “mob intimidation” (defined so vaguely it could encompass peaceful protest). Local organizers say the intent is clear: “For me, it’s like they’re silencing protesters – specifically Black and brown people,” said Jawanza Tinsley, a young Black activist, about the Florida bill. In Tennessee, another activist noted that after a law there made certain protest tactics felonies, “That law had the effect of intimidating a lot of people from coming out... it just made people more fearful to participate”. This chilling effect on assembly illustrates how legal tools can suppress marginalized voices en masse: when protest itself is painted as criminal, people are afraid to exercise their First Amendment rights.

“Divisive Concepts” Bans and Gag Orders: Legislators have also enacted laws censoring how educators, public employees, and even private companies can discuss topics like race, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues. These laws (often billed as anti-“CRT” or, in some states, “Don’t

Say Gay” bills) impose gag orders on marginalized narratives. For example, by 2022 at least 17 states had passed restrictions on teaching critical race theory or systemic racism in schools. In Florida and Alabama, laws now ban classroom acknowledgment of LGBTQ families at certain grade levels. Such policies send an intimidating message to teachers and students from those communities: that their histories and identities are taboo. Beyond education, some states have even prohibited diversity training or anti-bias training in government agencies, threatening fines or lawsuits if “prohibited concepts” are taught. The NAACP LDF argues that this wave of censorship is “part of a broader attempt to suppress and deny the voices, power, and lived experiences of Black and Brown Americans” (Swarns). By wielding legal authority to restrict speech, those in power can force marginalized topics out of the public sphere, effectively silencing the people who would speak on them. Even if some of these laws face court challenges, in the meantime they create confusion and fear that lead to self-censorship among educators and employees – which is precisely the intent.

Anti-LGBTQ+ Laws and Policies: Another contemporary trend is the introduction of hundreds of anti- LGBTQ+ bills across various states, many specifically targeting transgender youth and the LGBTQ community’s expressive events. In 2022 alone, over 300 anti-LGBTQ bills were proposed (ranging from banning trans students in sports to restricting drag performances). By the end of that year, a GLAAD report had documented eight different bills introduced to ban or limit drag shows (framed as “protecting children”). These legal moves, even when not passed, act as intimidation through policy: they signal that public existence of LGBTQ+ identities is unwelcome. The legislative assaults often accompany or encourage spikes in harassment – for example, several hospitals providing gender-affirming care received bomb threats after political figures accused them of “mutilating” children on social media. The intended effect is to make LGBTQ+ individuals and allies afraid to organize events, speak openly, or support certain causes, lest they face legal consequences or violent backlash. In short, when lawmakers leverage their power to stigmatize and constrain marginalized groups, it legitimizes broader mistreatment and silencing of those groups in society.

SLAPP Suits (Legal Harassment): Not all silencing via law comes from statutes; sometimes its abusive lawsuits designed to bankrupt and bully activists. So-called Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) have become a recognized method to intimidate journalists, whistleblowers, advocates, or minority community leaders who speak out. A SLAPP filer (often a corporation or powerful individual) doesn’t necessarily expect to win in court – the goal is the process itself. As one free-speech advocate explains, “Getting sued is expensive, time-consuming, embarrassing and stressful... being sued – or just threatened with a suit – is enough to cause people to back down and keep their mouths shut.” For example, an oil company might sue environmental justice organizers (disproportionately Indigenous or people of color) for defamation after a protest, or a real estate developer might sue community activists for opposing a project, knowing the legal fees will drain them. These meritless lawsuits exploit the legal system as a weapon of fear. Many states have passed anti-SLAPP statutes to protect against such abuse, but not all – as of 2022, 18 U.S. states still lacked effective anti-SLAPP laws, leaving activists vulnerable. The prevalence of SLAPPs in recent years means marginalized voices – who

often critique the powerful – must weigh the risk of crippling litigation before speaking up. Even the threat of a lawsuit can render someone silent, illustrating how formal legal mechanisms are co-opted to quash dissent.

Institutional and Law Enforcement Intimidation

Surveillance and Infiltration of Activist Movements: U.S. law enforcement agencies have a long history of surveilling and undermining Black, Brown, and other dissident movements – a practice that persists in new forms post-2010. After the rise of Black Lives Matter, for instance, the FBI engaged in extensive monitoring of BLM organizers, treating them as potential threats. Leaked documents showed that by 2017 the FBI even invented the label “Black Identity Extremists” as a domestic terror category – alleging (with scant evidence) that Black activists motivated by racial injustice would target police. Under this pretext, the Bureau launched “Operation Iron Fist” to conduct nationwide “assessments” (investigations with no criminal predicate) of Black organizers. Agents visited activists at their homes to warn them against attending protests, an intimidation tactic reported by multiple BLM organizers. Such actions echo the FBI’s notorious COINTELPRO era: in the 1960s, the Bureau ran disinformation and harassment campaigns to “neutralize” civil rights leaders, even aiming to “inspire fear” among activists by making them think every move was watched. The fact that similar surveillance has been deployed against today’s racial justice advocates sends a clear message – that being too vocal, especially while Black, might put you on a government watchlist. This climate of surveillance forces activists to wonder if their phones are tapped or informants are in their meetings, a fear that can discourage organizing and free expression.

Immigration Enforcement as Retaliation: Immigrant rights activists and outspoken undocumented people have experienced direct intimidation from federal agencies like ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). In recent years, there have been numerous cases of immigrant activists suddenly arrested or deported after speaking out, suggesting retaliatory motive. A 2020 law review study documented over 1,000 instances of federal retaliation against immigrant rights advocates, including surveillance of protests, targeting of prominent organizers for deportation, and even prosecution of humanitarian aid volunteers. One high-profile example involved two New York City immigrant leaders, Jean Montrevil and Ravi Ragbir, who had been living under ICE supervision for years – both were suddenly detained in 2018 after gaining attention as activists. A federal appellate court found a “plausible inference” that Ragbir’s outspoken criticism of ICE triggered the attempt to deport him in retaliation. As Professor Alina Das writes, this pattern shows how immigration law is wielded to “silence dissent – using surveillance, stops, fines, arrests, detention, and deportation to silence [immigrants’] dissent”. The chilling effect on immigrant communities is severe: when vocal community members or protesters are picked up by ICE, others receive the message to stay quiet. Even those with legal status may fear guilt by association. Essentially, immigration authorities have been able to act with impunity in targeting critics (since deportation is technically a civil matter with fewer First Amendment protections), which sends a broader warning to immigrants that engaging in activism could make them a target for removal.

Policing and “Chilling Effect” on Protest: On the local level, aggressive police responses to protests and over-policing of minority communities also serve to intimidate and silence. During the 2020 racial justice uprisings, heavily militarized police forces frequently met peaceful protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets, mass arrests, and intimidation tactics. In many cities, Black protesters noticed a stark double-standard: authorities used far more force against BLM protests than they did against right-wing gatherings. This disproportionate crackdown is not only a violation of rights in the moment but also deterrence by example: seeing fellow protesters beaten or jailed makes others fearful to protest the next time. Studies of protest movements have long noted that state violence and surveillance instill fear that “can have a chilling effect on protest”, people stay home rather than risk brutality. Additionally, routine over-policing in marginalized neighborhoods (through tactics like stop-and-frisk, heavy surveillance, gang databases, etc.) creates a baseline climate of intimidation that dissuades residents from civic participation. If simply existing in public while Black or trans or undocumented invites police scrutiny, standing up in public to demand change becomes even riskier. In these ways, institutional power – whether federal or local – is often exerted in a manner that marginalizes and mutes minority voices.

Extremist and Vigilante Intimidation

Militia and White Supremacist Threats: Outside of official channels, vigilante actors and hate groups have taken it upon themselves to threaten marginalized communities into silence. A notable phenomenon in recent years is the appearance of armed far-right militias at racial justice protests. In the summer of 2020, as Black Lives Matter demonstrations spread even to small towns, militia groups (sometimes with tacit police support) showed up in combat gear, carrying AR-15s and positioning themselves as if ready to shoot protesters. In one incident in Omak, Washington, dozens of armed white men encircled a BLM march and stationed snipers on rooftops; the organizer, a 19-year-old Latina, said, “Honestly, it was terrifying... it felt more like preparation to kill”. Across many rural areas, BLM rallies were met with similar shows of force, or with caravans of counter-protesters brandishing Confederate flags and weapons. Local activists report that this intimidation has concrete effects: in some towns, turnout at subsequent protests dwindled or events were canceled because people feared violence. “If protesters are fewer or more timid... the militias can have a chilling effect,” explained one racial equity advocate of the dynamic. The presence of armed vigilantes conveys an implicit (and sometimes explicit) threat that exercising one’s rights could be met with lethal force. This dynamic harks back to the Jim Crow era when lynch mobs and the KKK would terrorize Black communities to prevent them from asserting their rights. Today’s militias, often coordinated via Facebook and fueled by conspiracies (like false “antifa” rumors), serve a similar function: silencing through menace.

Attacks on LGBTQ+ Events: LGBTQ+ people have also seen a sharp rise in extralegal intimidation, especially at public events. Organized extremist groups, from the Proud Boys to neo-Nazis, have targeted LGBTQ gatherings like drag queen story hours, pride marches, and queer-friendly library events. GLAAD tracked at least 124 protests or significant threats against

drag events in 47 states in 2022 alone – a staggering number that suggests a coordinated campaign of fear. Often these incidents involve armed demonstrators or bomb threats. For example, in Columbus, Ohio, a holiday Drag Storytime was canceled in December 2022 after about 50 members of Proud Boys and a white nationalist group gathered with guns and shouted hate slogans, causing organizers to fear for children’s safety. Across the country, similar scenes have played out: protesters carrying assault rifles stand outside queer venues, or gangs of masked men invade drag events yelling slurs. The aim is to make LGBTQ communities afraid to hold public events or express themselves openly. “The world is getting more and more unsafe for the LGBTQ community. The attacks are constant and getting worse,” one event organizer lamented after her drag story hour was derailed by threats. These vigilante actions are often egged on by online propaganda – the surge in “groomer” rhetoric mentioned earlier directly correlates with real-world harassment. As Sarah Kate Ellis of GLAAD put it, “social media lies spread like wildfire... stir people up and create an environment that is very deadly”. The tragic shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs (November 2022), where a gunman killed five people at an LGBTQ club, underscored that stochastic terrorism born of hateful propaganda is an ever-present danger. In response, some LGBTQ groups have begun organizing their own armed self-defense, but that does little to erase the underlying message sent by these attacks: be silent, hide who you are, or you could be the next target.

Hate Crimes and Everyday Acts of Intimidation: Beyond organized extremist campaigns, many marginalized individuals face “lone wolf” intimidation in daily life, which is often inspired by the broader culture of hate. This ranges from Muslims being harassed on public transit by strangers yelling Islamophobic slurs, to Asian Americans (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic) being randomly assaulted due to anti-Asian conspiracy theories. Women journalists and academics who write about feminism or racism regularly receive rape threats or death threats in their email simply for speaking publicly. Such incidents might appear isolated, but they tie into an ambient atmosphere of intimidation that discourages marginalized people from raising their voices. When the cost of visibility is constant abuse or fear for one’s safety, many understandably retreat from public dialogue. As one commentator noted, the “silencing is the point”, the barrage of micro-aggressions and open threats aims to drive certain voices out of the conversation (Kajikawa). In effect, these real-world hate incidents operate as the enforcement arm of the propaganda: after propaganda paints a target on a group, hate crimes and harassment then punish members of that group who dare to be seen or heard.

Conclusion

In today’s United States, the methods of silencing marginalized voices are multifaceted and often mutually reinforcing. Online harassment mobs amplify disinformation, which then justifies hostile laws and policies, which in turn embolden vigilantes and abusive officials, all creating a feedback loop of intimidation. Whether it’s a Black activist worrying that FBI surveillance or new protest laws will derail their movement, a transgender teenager seeing vicious lies trending on Twitter and fearing for their safety, or a Latina immigrant hesitating to report a crime after watching ICE detain a vocal community leader – the message they receive is that speaking up for themselves or their community is perilous.

Yet, awareness of these tactics is a first step toward countering them. Lawmakers, tech companies, and civil society are increasingly recognizing propaganda and intimidation as threats to democracy and free expression. For instance, some states are strengthening anti-SLAPP statutes, and the White House in 2022 convened a task force on online harassment of women and LGBTQ+ people. Social media platforms have been pressured (with mixed success) to improve content moderation and protect users from hate and doxxing. And importantly, marginalized communities themselves continue to resist silencing – from developing digital self-defense strategies to bringing legal challenges against censorship laws. The struggle is ongoing, but by understanding the contemporary techniques of silencing, we can better safeguard the vital voices that have too often been pushed to the margins.

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