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Media discourse in Canada on trans youth and parent advocacy

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ABSTRACT

News reporting on transgender youth between 2011 and 2019 in Canada is increasingly affirming of transgender identities, experiences, and needs. These news stories are also increasingly initiated by parent/caregiver advocates of trans youth. We trace the recent history of news coverage of transgender youth to provide for the first time a history of parent advocacy as a social movement in Canada. This movement began in urban centres by cis, white, professional women, but is increasingly representative of rural, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC), and diverse caregiver advocates of transgender youth.

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Introduction

Both offline and online media are primary sources of public knowledge about transgender issues (Lauren McInroy and Shelley Craig 2015, 606; Colette Chiland 2003, 68; Trans Media Watch 2010), where people come to understand gender diversity, find representations of trans or gender-diverse identities, and learn about trans resources (M. Heinz 2015; Jamie Colette Capuzza 2016). News media have the “power to construct and challenge social ideologies” about gender identity (Capuzza 2016, 83). We know that increasing US news coverage of trans issues moved from presentations of trans people as deviant towards “accommodating and containing” (Bernadette Barker-Plummer 2013, 711) that representation, although usually in “wrong body discourse” (Capuzza 2016) that prioritizes cis-heteronormative, binary gender models that erase the complexities of transgender identities. We situate the rise in public awareness, media response, and parental advocacy of Canadian transgender and gender-diverse youth in terms of a social movement of advocacy led specifically by parents and caregivers, and most overtly by mothers. Parent advocacy is found to be strongly gendered work (Katherine A. Kuvalanka, Leigh A. Leslie,

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A. Leigh and Rachel Radina 2014; E. P. Rahilly 2015) during an era of “intensive mothering” (Sharon Hays 1996, 6–9) where mothers overwhelmingly perform the labour that maintains especially their transgender children’s safety.

In this way, this discourse analysis of major Canadian print and online media coverage of transgender and gender-diverse youth and families identifies: (1) a rise in trans-affirming reporting and (2) evidence-based reporting, amidst ongoing but nevertheless (3) more minimal “moral panic” waves of backlash, and importantly (4) a historical moment of the social movement of parent advocacy for trans children in Canada based on the work of mothers. Our analysis is grounded in Andrea O’Reilly’s (2011) description of contemporary motherhood as “an autonomous social movement” where mothers become “activists out of necessity,” following Sara Ruddick’s (2011) argument that maternal practices create unique ways to re-imagine peace and justice. The coverage of trans issues in Canada since 2010 has trended trans affirming, increasing since 2015 and coinciding with key news moments such as changes to school sexual education and the 2017 addition of gender identity and gender expression to the Canadian Human Rights. We found that articles which included interviews with gender-diverse youth and their families were the most affirming. More provocatively, our analysis found a clear overlap between the discourses introduced into the news by parent and specifically mother advocates—in news stories about or by parents of trans youth—which changed the news discourse from mere explanations of transgender issues to the discourses of human rights challenge, social policy change, and the validity of childhood autonomy in knowing one’s own gender, discourses that align with current research.

Our discourse analysis explores four key dimensions of Canadian media reporting on trans youth and their families. Specifically, we examine: (1) the ways an article represents trans and gender-diverse youth identities and experiences; (2) the message (about childhood gender diversity); (3) the evidence supporting that message; and (4) which model of discourse (such as an Op Ed, Health, or regional story) represents trans youth and their families. Mary Gray’s (2009) ethnographic study confirmed that LGBTQ+ children and youth are now a category distinct from their adult counterparts, demanding different press treatment. While some trans youth independently engage in media work, mostly rely upon the support of at least one parent to raise awareness about trans issues.¹ The purpose of our discourse analysis is to clarify and situate parent advocacy in a context of public representation in order to better understand epistemological and thematic challenges to supporting trans children socially. Our media analysis opens a description of this social movement represented in Canadian news media. We hold that parent advocacy of trans and gender-diverse youth developed and changed the discourse itself in news stories. It did so by contributing human rights discourse, educational and health policy discourse, and discourse of childhood autonomy about gender identity. However, this social movement of parent advocacy also maintained a focus on white and urban parent advocates whose privilege gets attention from news media.

Literature review: social activism, media analysis, trans theories

Recent content, discourse, and thematic media analyses of trans children and their families agree on certain key points, the foremost being that since 2002 media representations of trans youth have increased (K. Manning 2017). This increase is matched in North

America by an increase in affirming representations of trans identities, from film and television (Gilad Padva 2007), to empirical and medical literature (Bonnie Moradi, Elliot A. Tebbe, Melanie E. Brewster, Stephanie L. Budge, Alex Lenzen, Engin Ege, Elena Schuch et al. 2016), general news (Capuzza 2016), and the recent “critical discourse moment in genderqueer media politics” defining the ways news media frame and report on non-conforming gender identities and expressions (Barker-Plummer 2013, 711).

Context of Canada’s trans youth “critical discourse moment”

Transgender children are only recently socially visible (Manning 2017), having suffered systematic processes of “erasure” (V. Namaste 2000) similar to trans adults in mainstream media, due partly to their pathologization (K. Bryant 2006). Professionals encouraged parents to correct childhood non-conforming gender behaviour, leading to its “non-apparent” (M. Hellen 2009) and “culturally unintelligible” status (Rahilly 2015, 342). Until the past decade, professionals advised parents to reinforce heteronormative, binary gender expression, repressing signs of gender diversity (e.g.: R. Green 1987; Zucker 2008). Parents were viewed in terms of parental psychopathology (Jake Pyne 2014, citing Owen-Anderson, Bradley and Zucker 2010; Zucker and Bradley 1995), and specifically “mother blame” (Paula Caplan 2000), which makes women vulnerable to the “secondary stigma of mothering a transgender child” (Susan L. Johnson and Kristen E. Bensen 2014, 124; Manning 2017). Media coverage of transgender children, youth, and their parents has played an important role in a shift from stigmatization to support. At the same time, this shift reflects a “save the child” agenda, in which cis allyship and solidarity for trans people has only materialized at a moment in which (white, privileged) trans children appear to be imperilled (see Viviane Namaste and Dalia Tourki 2020). Kivalanka’s et al.’s (2014) study found that mothers of transgender girls quickly develop from unawareness into strongly informed advocates. Fathers are clearly supportive of their trans children, but unquestionably it is mothers who go public, are blamed, who educate and intervene with schools and doctors, attend workshops, bring trans advocacy into their careers and volunteer activities, and lead or join outreach groups.

The media’s role in public understanding of childhood gender diversity

Our discourse analysis traces the shift towards supporting trans children and their families through the content and frameworks of news stories. Barker-Plummer (2013) explains that popular understanding of diverse gender identities and expressions is shaped by descriptions from (cisgender) journalists through “wrong body discourse” or WBD, an essentialist but no longer pathologizing framework (711). Cisheteronormative descriptions of gender and sexuality are normative ideals maintained by presenting difference from either binary gender identity or heterosexuality as problems that can be “fixed,” as with “desistence” models of therapeutic interventions (Julia Temple Newhook et al. 2018). Gender diversity is acceptable only as an aberration from cismasculine or cisfeminine norms, solved by realigning identity and expression to hegemonic forms. When gender diversity is presented in this WBD framework, representations of happiness, struggles, and diversity amongst gender identities and expressions is unrecognized, or corralled back into the binary. Capuzza 2016 explains that multi-dimensional representations of trans people are

limited by a twofold journalistic framework of soft news and deviancy: stories about gender-diverse lives are found in lifestyle and entertainment rather than politics or world events sections, and they require a verification of the assigned-at-birth sex and gender of the story's subjects. Similarly, Moradi et al. 2016 analysis of psychology publications found that stigmatization remains the dominant representation of gender diversity. Researchers and clinicians ignore the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH) guidelines, rejecting the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) replacement of gender identity disorder with the de-stigmatized dysphoria, thus maintaining transgender pathologization by categorizing it as illness. Furthermore, Moradi et al. reveal that few academic journals discuss trans youth and their families, suggesting they receive less clinical or research focus than transgender adults. Both Moradi et al. and Capuzza show that news media and academic journals misrepresent trans people as white, middle class, educated, urban young adults proximal to social deviance (Moradi et al. 2016; Capuzza 2016).

Aida E. Manduley, Andrea Mertens, Iradele Plante and Anjum Sultana (2018) support these media findings, but argue that gender-diverse people of colour (POC) are marginalized to the point of total erasure. Media reports in which gender-diverse white audiences find themselves represented, positively or negatively, are "colorized. They adjusted their materials to include images of POC without adding any information about the values or family dynamics that inform their decisions around sex and relationships" (J. V. Ward and J. M. Taylor 1992 cited in Manduley et al. 2018, 156). Manduley et al. argue that LGBTQIA+ POC or queer or trans POC (QTPOC) communities turn to social media websites instead that inform, support, share histories, and provide training. Given their claim that "48% of youth of color do not know any teachers or school staff who are supportive of LGBTQIA+ issues [with t]hirty-eight percent of Indigenous students, and 31% of white youth feel the same," the turn to social media is important.

Representations of trans people indicate three problems within the media. First, journalists (re)produce a "WBD." Second, journalists may cite published research yet do not independently confirm the facts (R. A. Hackett 1984; T. Koch 1990), which can produce a "two sides of the story" approach (maintaining that positive and negative accounts are equally relevant), even when research confirms the harmful effects of reparative therapies, and the positive health benefits of affirmed gender expression (Skovsgaard et al., 2013). Third, North American media coverage of trans and gender-diverse topics is coloured white, skewing public understanding of who is—and what it means to be—trans or non-binary. We show that all three dimensions have shifted in news coverage, a trend that parallels the increasing visibility of transgender journalists themselves; the number of out transgender journalists remains small, but their influence is on the rise.²

Method

Because media representations affect the challenges faced by families, our discourse analysis considers accuracy, frequency, content, and fairness (McInroy and Craig 2015). Accuracy concerns the portrayal of factual information correctly, while fairness is how individuals and situations are treated, and how gender diversity is explained. This study began with four pan-Canadian, English-language sources about transgender issues from 2011 to 2019, coinciding with increasing media reports about trans issues and Canada's parent advocacy movement. These sources include English-language online *CBC* news,

the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail*, and *Maclean's* magazine, focussing online because: (1) they have searchable histories; (2) they are accessible anywhere (noting some regions do not receive paper editions); and (3) online editions carry near-identical content to the paper editions. Our keywords used in searching these sources included variations of “transgender youth,” including: trans youth, transgender youth, transgender children, trans children, trans parenting, transgender students, chosen because “gender” provided too many sources, and “gender diverse” too few.³

Our primary mode of analysis is a discourse analysis focussing on textual elements, which enabled us to capture what was discussed and how, such as whether journalists deployed negative or positive tones, transphobic or affirmative messages, in what context, and using what frameworks, such as WBD, cisnormativity, sex–gender conflation, or a diversity model. Critically analysing the text revealed an increase in affirmative, positive-toned articles about trans children and their families, and identified gaps in reporting about BIPOC communities and intersections between specific identities. Our discourse analysis considered word choice and storyline by connecting words, descriptors, and frameworks to contexts of social and political power to discover what the news stories do politically, and how they (mis)represent trans and gender-diverse identities and experiences. With this, we categorized stories as “trans affirming,” “neutral,” or “negative” based on how the stories supported and affirmed, merely explained, or actively pathologized or disapproved of trans identities, recognizing that although some early stories used contentious terms prior to the watershed in trans recognition and support in 2015, the tone was affirming. Positive or affirming stories were those that did not take a “two sides of the story” approach, neither pathologized trans youth nor criminalized their families; moreover, trans-affirming stories did not hold trans happiness to a cisheteronormative standard but instead recognized the diversity of trans joy on its own terms, beyond cisheteronormative representations. Normative representations prioritize characteristics of queer identities that conform to hegemonic expectations, presenting queer identities “positively” when these identities hold to the same goals and ideals of dominant cisheteronormative society (J. Halberstam 2018; M. McDermott 2021). The trans-affirming stories we identified instead affirmed gender-diverse children and youth by, for example, recognizing their own forms of joy, reporting support for and by their families, promoting medical and legal trans awareness, promoting science-based understandings of trans health and identities, challenging human rights limitations, and reporting why parents fight to accommodate trans youth in schools and sports. We describe neutral stories as the “two sides of the story” approach that neither supports nor decries trans issues, but considers gender-affirming and gender-critical positions equally, a position that paradoxically embraces the bias it purports to deny. Negative stories were those that criticized families for supporting trans and gender-diverse youth, pathologized trans children and youth, criticized modes of care for trans identities, and/or refused to recognize the flourishing of trans youth outside cisheteronormative modes of happiness (Ahmed 2010).

Social action history

The post-2010 “critical discourse moment” of gender media politics that Barker-Plummer notes is also critical to the social movement history that emerged out of our media analysis. Our concern is to better understand the role media encourages

parents to take, given that parents are as influenced by media coverage of trans issues as the general public (Trans Media Watch, 2010; Suriati Ghazali and Azilah Mohamad 2011; Jamie Colette Capuzza 2014), the journalists who write about them (Anna Kirkland 2003; Barker-Plummer 2013; Joelle R. Ryan 2009), and the people such as medical professionals who directly affect their lives (C. Davis 2009; McInroy and Craig 2015). Our analysis showed us how news media represent trans issues that pertain to youth and their parent advocates, and in doing so provided a concomitant recognition of the social movement history of parent advocacy. This latter claim led us to newly consider parent advocacy of trans youth as an emergent form of social activism particular to Canada (though not unrelated to US activism). Thus, we analysed the articles twice: first thematically focussing on keywords and their frameworks of meanings, then on the history of parent advocacy offered. We were not disappointed. The tone, message, and framework of the articles differed, while streaming towards affirming, diversity-modelled accounts, but the overarching theme of parent advocates supporting trans children and shaping the language, the scientific supports, the background medical and legal contexts, and the contexts of power in educational, medical, legal and political, and social care contexts was clear. Increasingly, parents were reported to be or reported themselves as advocates who spoke for and/or with their transgender children to support their rights to live their identities. Parents represented were generally white, cisgender, and straight women, working class or middle class, but usually professional; future research could explain the vocal power of this privileged community and their given media attention. The model of support reported by parent advocates is affirmative parenting that respects childhood autonomy to decide gender, resists WBD, and therefore follows the child's lead about gender identification. Our media analysis revealed a slowly diversifying Canadian movement of parents supporting trans children and providing news media with the positive frames (described above) in which to report.

This emergent movement of parental advocacy impacting news stories about trans issues appeared as a form of coalitional identity that is ongoing and differentiated (Anna Carastathis 2016). As Mari Matsuda (1991, cited in Carastathis) argues, people join coalitions out of necessity, but “[w]orking in coalitions forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone.” (1190). People recognize their strengths and differences as a collective; coalitions bring power in numbers, and recognition of non-identity and interconnections of subordination, even if they maintain hegemony for some within the coalition (1189–1190). Families of trans children do not share “the same undifferentiated experiences [or] have equal representational capital to define group-wide agendas and to be heard in making demands” (Carastathis 2016, 191), which is why we found that a coalitional model accounted for productive differences from the earliest reported sets of white, professional women to move towards diverse forms of social capital, gender, economic position, kinship structures, education, and BIPOC subjectivities. In these media reports, parents are increasingly apparent, with mother activists in particular promoting the growth and social acceptance of trans youth. Parents are productive of changed perspectives and they contribute to social and political change; as a coalition, parent advocates in news media represent unevenly but converge in their focus on “preservative

love” (Sara Ruddick 1989) in their common resistance to hegemonic negative framings of trans children.

Further, as media theorists such as S. Hall (1981), W. Gamson and A. Modigliani (1989), and Helga Kristín Hallgrímsdóttir, Rachel Phillips, Cecilia Benoit and Kevin Walby (2008) variously argue, news media reproduce hegemonic frameworks of meaning and belief. Hall explains that journalists presume audience assumptions about what makes a story: “what is already known is not a neutral set of facts. It is a set of common-sense constructions ... of the world” (1981, 236); events are encoded as stories when presented as news, and are more acceptable to audiences when encoded in prevailing belief systems. This is resonant framing (Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2008): we use familiar metaphors and narratives to understand unfamiliar ones. Gamson and Modigliani explain that media discourse dovetails popular understanding because media “both reflect[ts] it *and* contribut[es] to its creation” (1989, 3). Our articles prior to 2016, affirming or negative, primarily use the resonant framing of WBD discourse, an ideology made popular by films (*Boys Don’t Cry*, 1999; *The Danish Girl*, 2015), and trans media events such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009). As Mark C. J. Stoddart and Paula Graham explain, “compartmentalizing” events in familiarity is common when reporting social movements by framing their stories in a familiar way, rather than ways that account for variety and difference (2016). In our sample, we found that resonant framing constructed stories until 2015 in terms of WBD to explain trans identities, and of “mother blame” to explain the apparent surge in childhood gender diversity, where both frames rely upon the pathologization of trans youth. After 2015, the resonant framing became gender affirming, as a matter of childhood safety, of human rights, of equivalent access to health and wellness, and of parents working together. The unified reported actions amongst unconnected parents in 2015 for affirmative parenting, gender-affirming care, and demands for de-pathologization established a clear narrative in news media of the emerging national social movement that causally connected parental support of trans children with the trend to affirming news stories.

Review of media stories

We surveyed 148 media stories using our keywords within our 4 selected sources; covering all Canadian stories would be too vast. We removed 11 articles because they reported outside Canada’s context. We do not analyse their reach—how often they are read or shared; our discourse-based focus is solely on coverage and presentation. We found little difference in coverage of trans children or trans teens, and, as the focus was on stories of youth, we did not explore any other trans identities in the families, when families were discussed. Considering the role of parents, our analyses determined which stories were “parent led,” namely motivated by parent advocates or written by parents. The number of stories breaks down according to year:

Year	Number of articles	Tone		Article type
2011	4	1 Affirming/1Negative/2Neutral	2 parent led	3 News/1 OpEd
2012	6	1 Affirming/1 Negative/4 neutral	4 parent led	5 News/5 OpEd
2013	8	6 Affirming/2 Neutral	5 parent led	8 News/0 OpEd
2014	13	7 Affirming/2 Negative/3Neutral	7 parent led	10 News/3 OpEd
2015	29	19 Affirming/2 Negative/7 Neutral	18 parent led	25 News/4 OpEd
2016	16	9 Affirming/6 Negative/1 Neutral	6 parent led	15 News/1 OpEd
2017	26	20 Affirming/5 Negative/1Neutral	13 parent led	21 News/5 OpEd
2018	23	18 Affirming/3 Negative/2Neutral	11 parent led	21 News/2 OpEd
2019	29	26 Affirming/2 Negative/1Neutral	4 parent led	27 News/2 OpEd

Media discussions of transgender or gender-diverse youth issues increase from 2011, spiking in 2015. Historical moments coincide with the 2015 increase in media coverage, including celebrities coming out as trans, the introduction of Ontario's Bill 77, and the lead up to the passage of Bill C-16 (adding gender expression and identity to the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, 2017). The push to pass Bill 77 and Bill C-16 was led by trans advocates, many of whom spent decades struggling to secure the passage of these laws. The one anomaly in the increasing trend of media coverage is 2016; we speculate there was more coverage in other media outlets, such as local news and online sources, used increasingly for information about transgender support.

These articles were examined and collaboratively interpreted through the following codes: title, date, outlet, author, medium, tone or purpose and how the topic is discussed, notable details, source section, and subheading. We relied upon consensual agreement in our critical analysis to determine which stories would be considered trans affirming, neutral, or critical (ultimately, an anti-trans position); we reduced the stories to these three categories primarily to discover and present an overview of the narrative direction of the news stories which parents (and the general public) would be turning to for information about trans and gender-diverse youth (further, deeper engagement with the categories is beyond the scope of this article) (J. M. Taylor, C. Gilligan and A. M. Sullivan 1996). The most interesting data derived from dates that generated a history, authors who revealed increasing parent involvement, tone or purpose that shaped our three categories, and to some extent the source section (such as Lifestyle or headline news) which contributed to the tone or purpose. Our coding "notable details" was informative because its vagueness captured details such as the story's form, the source, the addressee, and the role of parents in promoting or writing it.

Summary of news media coverage

Overall, the reporting on trans and gender-diverse youth in Canada has trended "neutral" and "affirming." This is because the majority of stories are educational or informational, either explaining terminologies and policies, or more affirmatively sharing the lessons of experts who advise that supporting trans children enhances their well-being, develops equality of human rights, and illuminates trans histories. The majority of the negative news articles are op-eds written by conservative columnists from the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. The majority of clearly gender-affirming stories are initiated by parent advocates, such as parents who take a school, sports team, or medical complaint to the

press, or who offer “personal narratives” outlining needs and experiences of caring for gender-diverse or trans children with which others then connect.

Gender-diverse youth lacking support from any family member are at higher risk of psychological distress than those who are supported, or who are cisgender (Russell B. Toomey, Amy K. Syvertsen and Maura Shramko 2018; H. Virupaksha, Daliboyina Muralidhar and Jayashree Ramakrishna 2016; K. Scanlon, R. Travers, T. Coleman, G. Bauer and M. Boyce 2010). There is little news media evidence of parents publicly supporting their gender-diverse children prior to the 2011 push for socio-cultural, policy, or human rights changes. But by 2014, parents and children began going public with their stories and joining with other parents nationally to challenge policies that deter acceptance of their children in education, health care, and society (Manning, Meyer and Pullen-Sansfaçon 2014). In 2015, parent advocacy for trans and gender-diverse children stepped up its game geographically and politically, shifting the discourse to a rights-based advocacy with a focus on children’s autonomy to know their own identities; the role of parents in advocating for their trans children is matched in the news stories. By 2017, media reports revealed that parents were assuming positions of community leadership pushing for policy, social, and legal change. Parents also began to shape broadcast media representation, successfully convincing the *CBC* to pull a documentary with clear bias against trans children. In 2018, many articles discussed, for the first time and led by parent motivation or writing of the news stories, the need for trans and gender-diverse youth to see affirmative representations of themselves in culture.

In the stories by or about parents, mothers are most visible, a finding consistent with research showing fathers less actively supportive of gender-diverse children (E. W. Kane 2006; D. B. Hill and E. Menvielle 2009; E. A. Riley, G. Sitharthan, L. Clemson and M. Diamond 2011, 2013). Of all parents represented, only two were non-affirming: fathers unsupportive of their child’s transition. Ultimately, however, we noted a rising trajectory of affirming representation between 2011 and 2019. Coverage shifted from earlier explanations of what transgender means, to later coverage written by or focussing on parental support that asserts the reality of gender diversity with references to medical, legal, and educational sources.

This shift is not insignificant. It shows a persistent recognition of the reality of young trans life, despite both the few editorials criticizing the affirmation of transgender children, and the intensification of transphobia among US legislators. The differences in Canadian and American political culture remain outside this paper’s scope, but we note the stark contrast between Canada’s limited backlash (during the period covered) and the US proliferation of anti-transgender “gender critical” media stories, especially in right-wing media outlets⁴ where articulations of “moral panic” (Amy L. Stone 2018) or what Fleras (2011, 26) defines as a “belief in a dissolving moral order” have intensified.⁵

The articles in our sample fall into 7 news sections—Parenting, Health, National News events, Op-eds, Regional news, Life, and, after 2016, Politics, where primarily the op-ed articles are gender critical or oppressive. After 2015, stories are increasingly initiated by human rights complaints led by parents and sometimes the children themselves, shifting from explorations of a trans child’s gender journey to stories upholding the need for affirming representations of gender diversity in cultural, legal, and policy documents. Stories shift from documenting trans marginalization to normalizing the reality of childhood and adolescent trans and diverse gender identities in Canada with the supportive

intervention of the advocacy of parents of trans children; after 2015, these stories also increasingly reference trans-affirming scholarly sources.

An outstanding feature of the Canadian news articles over the eight-year sample is the involvement and impact of parental support.⁶ Basic to parent-initiated articles or articles about parent-led initiatives given space in news media is the role of parents or caregivers in prompting public discussion of their trans or gender-diverse children. The percentage of news stories initiated by or based on parental advocacy breaks down as follows: 2011—50%, 2012—66%, 2013—63%, 2014—54%, 2015—62%, 2016—36%, 2017—50%, 2018—43%, 2019—14%. Amongst these articles, we included: (1) articles that publicize calls from parents and caregivers to institutions and agencies for support of their children; and (2) articles about children's legal or school-based campaigns for recognition, rights, or needs (such as pronouns or toilet access), because these all require the support of parents or caregivers for the campaigns to go forward. More than half of news articles until 2016 involve parent advocacy of gender-diverse children, a substantial percentage given that these include topics from law, education, policy, medicine, social structures and events, to entertainment, cultural representation, language, and labour. Clearly, parents and caregivers are represented in Canadian news media as a driving force behind the changes to the lives of trans youth; this further illustrates that the stories simultaneously offer a social movement history of how parents support trans children. For if trans and gender-diverse children are increasingly represented in the Canadian news since 2011, and if parents are the primary group presented as initializing that representation, then we are not simply tracing the recognition of trans children. We offer at the same time a history of parent advocacy that leads to positive recognition of trans youth in the news media.

Summary of news media coverage of parent advocacy as a social movement

The representation of white parent advocacy

First, the parent/caregiver advocacy traced through news coverage since 2011 is represented in our sample in full-comment or national news and in every region except Nunavut. This lack of reporting about Nunavut can be explained by the lack of diversity amongst the parents represented and the lack of reporting about Nunavut, and Indigenous people in Canada (Sarah E. Nelson, Annette J. Browne and Josée G. Lavoie 2016). The parents and children represented in the 58 gender-affirming articles are primarily white or white-passing, rarely Black or Indigenous. Only one person is Two-spirit, three are Indigenous, and one is Chinese-Canadian, although one *Globe and Mail* article contains interviews with gender-diverse youth from a range of Black, Indigenous, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Nelson, Browne, and Lavoie (2016) argue that “[R]esearch has continually demonstrated that mass media, and in particular news media, play an important role in shaping public perceptions” (also Dan Irving and Rupert Raj 2014; Shanto Iyengar, Mark Peters and Donald Kinder 1982; Russell Neuman and Lauren Guggenheim 2011). Canadian news media represent childhood and adolescent gender diversity mainly as middle class and white, and caregiver advocates as adoptive or biological parents, not usually extended family or community members. The scarce

mentions of children racialized as not white suggests to audiences that the white experience can be universalized to POC, and that gender diversity is not—or need not be—a concern for BIPOC Canadian communities, a phenomenon we hold demands further critical race analysis. The absence of Nunavut in the news coverage relates to the overall lack of news coverage about Canada’s Indigenous children especially (see Nelson, Browne, and Lavoie 2016).

Representations of parent advocacy: an issue of urban motherhood

Second, the lack of racial diversity in news media representations opens onto another demographic characterization of Canadian trans children and their families, namely their access to urban-based legal representation, gender-affirming health care, and affirming education systems. Only 11 articles of our original 137 focus on gender diversity and its challenges in rural, outport, or isolated regions; only 5 families do not share the professional, highly educated, or middle-class backgrounds of the urban contexts. The middle-class background represented intersects with profession and/or education, such that working-class families are represented in terms of their higher education attainments (four articles), indicating that a certain privilege is leveraged when parents publicly seek legal, medical, or policy-change support. Families represented in and as the trans community in Canada—where the individuals represented in the news articles are synecdochal with the community as a whole—are white, educated, and/or professional and/or middle class. Finally, all but six of the parents are mothers. While the parent advocacy represented is not exclusively gendered, overwhelmingly it is done by mothers.

Our findings bear up Rahilly’s (2015) argument that parents of gender non-conforming children tend to benefit from white privilege, elevated socioeconomic status, and, we add, the privilege of cisgender identity, enabling them to add advocacy work to the “regular” work of parenthood (see also Ann Travers 2018). Not surprisingly, then, these are also the primary points of reported advocacy, including the affirmation of childhood gender autonomy, demand for gender-affirming medical care and the inclusion of gender diversity within the human rights code, leadership in community-building, and gender-affirming changes to school policy. In our sample, these reported points of trans advocacy do not intersect with other forms of activism, such as race, region, or sexuality, but they do mark the changes from purportedly neutral to trans-affirming new stories, indicating the real influence of parents on news discourse about trans children.

These primary points engage with the historical, hegemonic norm of “motherhood” as white, middle-class, straight, and cisgendered, defined by child-rearing, family care, emotional labour, and community-based leadership initiatives (although many of our stories document leadership of human rights challenges). White, heterosexual, middle-class women are granted “warrior mother” status more than poor, Black, Indigenous, or queer women, especially when faced with child apprehension by protective services (Pullen Sansfaçon and Manning 2015; Manning et al. 2014). This normative motherhood at the basis of news depictions opens new questions about the resources and support that differently positioned parents require to thrive as advocates. What additional or alternative forms of advocacy are required to achieve fully inclusive mobilization?

Parent advocacy represented as the new normal

Third, advocacy work is multi-faceted and laborious, but mundane, an ongoing “new normal” for parents and caregivers of gender-diverse children. Half of our sample are recurring, affirming stories of families who publicly challenge human rights and school policies. The other half represents gender-affirmative parenting that challenges policies in a child’s immediate environment, such as schools, medical clinics, or sports teams. In these stories, advocacy involves enabling children to determine their own identities and needs, and learning to meet those needs when the children cannot. It became clear that most parents cited, photographed, or interviewed for these articles had taken on advocacy activities on behalf of their child, “outing” themselves and their families in news media as trans allies when they had not heard of transgender children before becoming a parent to one.

A history of parent advocacy as a social movement in Canada’s news media

Diversifying the normalization of parent advocacy

Our analysis reveals an emergent history of the growth into a social movement of parental and caregiver support for trans children. From the 2011 rise in coverage, acceptance motivates the social movement; parent-led and affirming stories focussed on wellness over cisnormativity, and on childhood autonomy to know one’s own gender identity, key themes of parent advocacy. From here, parent support reported in news media moves into advocacy for legal recognition and trans-affirming medical care, support of children who want to self-advocate, and the normalization of gender diversity in schools, sports, health care, and also clothing stores, hair salons, and gyms. This social movement has its own nodes of activism at regional, urban and rural, and national concentrations.

In 2015, media representation begins to include families in rural, Indigenous, outport, and northern communities alongside major white, urban centres. Revealing the centrality of urban whiteness evinced in this media narrative prompted a process of self-reflection. As Manning (2017) and Kimberley Ens Manning and Akiko Asano (2017) argue, white mothers’ advocacy can erase the identities of parents and caregivers racialized as not white by prioritizing marginalization over and above, say, settler colonialism or anti-Black racism. Indeed, and as Dan Irving and Rupert Raj (2014) argue, trans activism must take on a de-colonial approach specifically because “the binary sex/gender system and the subsequent subjugation of sex-and gender-variant subjects is the legacy of settler colonialism” (10; see also Scott Lauria Morgensen 2011). Our analysis suggests that parents and children going public in the media can bring a coalitional recognition of shared experiences and an increasing diversity of realities, needs, and goals for supporting trans children. Still, the analysis also shows that only parents with class- and race-based privilege are encouraged by news media to come forward, marking the role of social privilege in how advocates find a voice in news media.

The resonant framing of parent advocacy and its developing diversification

The impact of media representations of parent advocates is tied to the verisimilitude it provokes in the reader. It is well documented that the lack of representation in news stories of peoples and issues makes under-represented lives “non-apparent” (Manning

2017; Hellen 2009). Prior to 2015, representations of these parent advocates as a homogenous, hegemonic group erase the diverse stories of those outside that norm. Stories in our sample represented affluent urban motherhood, opening slightly in 2015 to rural, northern, and Indigenous mothers. This maintains a focus on the validity of childhood gender diversity and on the ethics of affirmative mothering, contiguous to op-ed attacks on this form of motherhood and on childhood gender autonomy, but leaving uninterrogated who is overlooked and what other issues emerge in gender identity when race, class, or ability intersects. The overarching problem with representations of parent activists in news media is their neglect of the experiences and needs of specifically unrepresented communities who remain invested in advocating for their gender-diverse children; news coverage of rural, Black, Indigenous, and gender-diverse youth develop throughout our sample only marginally.

Conclusion: towards coalitional models of support

Our media analysis revealed key trends in the advocacy of trans children and a tangible connection between parental support and news media representations of childhood gender diversity. We found unconnected parent initiatives to raise public awareness about the reality and needs of trans and gender-diverse youth to develop in tandem. Reports about parent advocacy that began with socially privileged white, middle-class, professional mothers developed into reports about a recognition of the diverse needs, experiences, and forms of advocacy required for all gender-diverse youth. While all trans and gender-diverse young people require affirming support, what that support looks like and where it comes from will differ according to the different intersections of identity amongst these communities.

Parent advocates are involved in mobilizing the productive force of difference in both advocacy work and its representation in news media to open who is invested, how they are invested, and what they need to support gender-diverse children from different backgrounds.⁷ By the end of 2019, the coverage we analysed now focussed on the specific kinds of support and policy changes required by Black communities and those advocating for Two-Spirit youth, changes led by parent advocates in rural or Indigenous communities. The stories reported about trans and gender-diverse youth focussed on normalizing affirmative support, and on the culturally specific ways that parents and community members can support their gender-diverse youth. Parent advocacy impacted news media reporting in Canada by focussing the stories on affirming events, such as trans modes of joy and community building, human rights challenges, access to school bathrooms and sports teams, and trans-affirming medical care, and parent advocacy emphasized the need for scholarly sources as the basis of reporting on trans issues. Still, our analysis made clear that both the scholarly sources and mainstream news articles required an intersectional approach that accounted for differences in race, social position, ethnicity, geographical location, and ability, for example. Overall, we found that during the period covered, as one of primary sources for parents newly learning about trans children and youth, the Canadian news media increasingly offered trans-affirming representations and information from which parents of transgender and gender-diverse children and youth could begin their understanding.

Notes

1. We define trans children as children under the age of 14 who affirm themselves to be a gender not originally assigned to them at birth. We define trans youth as young people between 14 and 25 who affirm themselves to be a gender not assigned to them at birth.
2. <https://transjournalists.org/>
3. Please note that two of this paper's authors have published opinion editorials about the subject matter in the time period under review, although not in the selected publications of this study. Two of the authors appear as parent advocates or "experts" in six articles during this time period.
4. See, for example: <https://video.foxnews.com/v/5524002302001#sp=show-clips>
5. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/25/trump-administration-doubles-down-trans-discrimination>
6. The exception in this data set is the final year, 2019, where stories are neutral, educational, and not parent-led. We note that throughout 2019, parent-led stories appeared in other Canadian news outlets, such as *Chatelaine*, French-language news media, and regional newspapers.
7. The federal (SSHRC) funding that supported this research also supports a parallel national study of parent social action group work. Our primarily parent-led team of white and white-passing academics work with parents whose needs and priorities were not centred in the first wave of media coverage and research: rural and/or Black and/or Indigenous parents.

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