Decoding LGBTQ Scapegoating: Communications Guidance

To complement Over Zero's Decoding LGBTQ Scapegoating report, we offer this communications guidance. The report explores the connection between two escalating crises: The systematic targeting of LGBTQ communities and democratic backsliding worldwide. It examines how the attacks targeting the LGBTQ community are, in addition to a critical rights issue, a central tactic in the authoritarian playbook, cloaking themselves as culture war “politics as usual.”

LGBTQ scapegoating is not random. It is not a natural consequence of polarization or an expected backlash to rights advancements, but rather a strategy to deepen divisions and erode democracy.

As communicators, we play a critical role in framing this issue and undermining the narratives that fuel or facilitate it. Below you will find suggestions, based on Over Zero’s research, for covering LGBTQ scapegoating as the democracy threat that it represents.

Preparation

BEFORE RESPONDING:

• **Define your goal:** Do you intend to prevent scapegoating, expose scapegoating as an authoritarian threat, de-escalate ongoing targeting, or generate public support for a response to harm done? Defining your goal, especially according to who you aim to reach, leads to clearer, more effective communication.

• **Mitigate the risks:** To the extent possible, ensure your communications cannot be used to justify further scapegoating or harm. Also ensure that they do not play into the goals of scapegoating efforts and further divide. Planning ahead helps ensure responsive communications defuse, rather than fuel, conflict. Consider the soundbites, abbreviated headlines or ways in which your content might be manipulated prior to publication.

• **Ask yourself:** What’s the intent of the harm or violence that is targeting a community? Refer to the report’s Identifying Scapegoating Worksheet (slide 26) to identify the tactics at play and distinguish scapegoating from “politics as usual.”

• **Check in:** If a specific community has been targeted with violence, threats, or intimidation, always check with that community to ensure responses are respectful and address their priorities and needs.

• **Verify:** Always verify information before sharing it. Avoid exacerbating confusion and amplifying mis-and disinformation. If you don’t have all of the details yet,
Communicate to your audience that you are investigating and will keep them informed.

- **Consider messengers:** Identify credible individuals to deliver different messages to different audiences. A perfectly crafted message will often fail to resonate if delivered by a messenger that lacks credibility and influence among the target audience.

### Communications Guidance

#### SUGGESTION #1: HIGHLIGHT THE POLITICAL GOAL

Highlight the political goals behind LGBTQ scapegoating. By naming what actors targeting LGBTQ communities stand and hope to gain from doing so, we create an opening for our audiences to think more critically about the nature of these attacks and to distinguish them from ideological or policy disagreements. Our research identified six interconnected and overlapping political goals of LGBTQ scapegoating:

- **Stigmatize:** Censoring discussion or depiction of a marginalized group further stigmatizes them, cementing their status as a scapegoat.
- **Mobilize a base:** Turning a scapegoated group into a common enemy to energize and organize a base.
- **Win elections:** Exploiting fears of the scapegoat to gain electoral support and secure victories in political contests.
- **Polarize:** Manufacturing a controversy to polarize society along fault lines that unify an authoritarian movement and/or spark divisions within a political opposition.
- **Distract:** Shifting public focus away from critical issues, government failures, or unpopular goals by inflaming fear, disgust, and anger at a scapegoat.
- **Normalize political violence:** Targeting a scapegoat for intimidation, violence, and militia activity desensitizes the public to violence against the group specifically and society more broadly.

**Example of highlighting the political goal:**

“Today, the effort to restrict transgender rights has supplanted same-sex marriage as an animating issue for social conservatives at a pace that has stunned political leaders across the spectrum. It has reinvigorated a network of conservative groups, increased fundraising and set the agenda in school boards and state legislatures. The campaign has been both organic and deliberate, and has even gained speed since Donald J. Trump, an ideological ally, left the White House. Since then, at least 20 states, all controlled by Republicans, have enacted laws that reach well beyond the initial debates over access to bathrooms and into medical treatments, participation in sports and policies on discussing gender in schools.”

*New York Times, April 16, 2023*
SUGGESTION #2: CONNECT INCIDENTS OF LGBTQ TARGETING TO GLOBAL AUTHORITARIAN TRENDS AND TACTICS
LGBTQ scapegoating is a key political strategy to undermine democracy worldwide. As Protect Democracy outlines, scapegoating vulnerable communities is one of the main tactics authoritarian actors use to chip away at the institutional, legal, and political constraints that defend our civil rights and freedoms. Connecting incidents of LGBTQ targeting to global trends helps demonstrate that these attacks are neither random nor an expected backlash to rights advancements or ideological differences, but instead are part of a coordinated strategy to deepen divisions and erode democracy.

Example of connecting to global trends and tactics:

“Populist governments in Poland, Hungary and other countries are now exploiting this underlying problem, stoking fears and painting the LGBTQ community as the enemy. [An expert] said that while Hungary and Poland are passing anti-LGBTQ legislation, signs of similar moves are popping up across Europe and the world–Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia are just three countries [being watched] closely.

These trends are noticeable even in countries that are perceived as more liberal, such as the Czech Republic...For those willing to stoke and exploit these sentiments, the potential political capital is clear.”

CNN, July 1, 2021

SUGGESTION #3: UNDERSCORE THE TRUE SOURCE OF PROBLEMS FOR WHICH LGBTQ COMMUNITIES ARE BEING BLAMED
Scapegoating is a tactic that names a societal problem, real or imagined, and blames a group for that problem. However, beyond a single malicious accusation, the “problem” blamed on a scapegoat is often every problem in the society, or even modernity itself. Indeed, authoritarians have effectively weaponized feelings of anxiety, of being destabilized by rapid cultural change–focusing all the discomfort people feel about a quickly changing society onto a single enemy.

As communicators, we can complicate this narrative by highlighting the real source of grievances–for example, cultural change and nostalgia, questions of belonging, the rising cost of living or government corruption–undermining the scapegoating tactic of laying a problem at the feet of a specific group.
Example of underscoring the true problem:

“Autocrats and aspiring autocrats need an effective way of communicating a very simple idea, which is I can take you back to an imaginary past. And in this particular case, they’re saying, I can take you back to an imaginary past where women were women, and men were men, and families were families, and life was predictable. And you felt comfortable, and you didn’t have to accept things that made you uncomfortable and that made the future seem unpredictable.”


Suggestion #4: Avoid and Counter Scapegoating Linguistics

Scapegoating strategies seek to construct a virtuous “us” in need of protection and a threatening “them” that needs to be stopped or contained. Additional linguistic devices build on this “us vs. them” framing:

• **Labeling:** Making a “super label” of the group’s name (LGBTQ) through repetitive association (e.g., “Groomers”, “Pedophiles”) trains listeners to think of a handful of malicious and hostile personality traits and behaviors when they hear the group’s name.

• **Metaphors:** Powerful rhetorical devices which support the threatening labels (e.g., “LGBTQ invasion”) and dispossess the group of its humanity (e.g., “Rainbow Plague”) in ways that attempt to suggest that violence against its members may be justified.

• **Reversals:** Attackers always claim to be the victim; this is important psychologically and very effective (e.g., “Groomers” is a label that communicates a reversal that “they are attacking our kids”).

In addressing scapegoating, our own communications strategies should not play into or reinforce these linguistic devices. For instance, restating harmful labels can cause readers or listeners to form associations between the targeted group and what they are being labeled as, even if we are communicating that the labels are inaccurate. Instead, we can describe the tactics being employed to dehumanize LGBTQ communities and expose the damage they intend to cause. Relatedly, we can avoid simplistic representations of those being targeted, instead using language that acknowledges their full complexity, individuality, and humanity. This can also be accomplished by providing additional information about the people in question beyond their group membership.
» **Examples of avoiding scapegoating linguistics:**

**Avoiding harmful metaphors:** “These groups attempt to associate transgender women with different forms of sexual misconduct to mobilize their base and win elections.”

→ As opposed to saying: “These groups refer to transgender women as ‘groomers.’”

**Avoiding simplistic representations:** “A local business owner who is active in the LGBTQ rights movement.”

→ As opposed to saying “LGBTQ activist”

**SUGGESTION #5: ACTIVATE SHARED VALUES OF FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

We can help generate broad support for ending attacks on LGBTQ communities by demonstrating how they contribute to eroding democracy and everyone’s rights. This can also help make the case that we all have a role to play in opposing LGBTQ scapegoating, regardless of whether our work directly addresses LGBTQ rights or if this is our primary issue area. Targeting LGBTQ communities normalizes and sets a precedent for future rights reductions of LGBTQ communities, other marginalized groups, and the general public. Freedom of speech, expression, and assembly are in particular jeopardy. We can also raise awareness of how these threats diminish the influence of independent institutions, such as the judiciary, by justifying efforts to limit their powers after associating those institutions with scapegoated groups.

» **Examples of activating shared values:**

“LGBTI people are being used as political pawns… and in turn, the human rights and freedom of everyone are being undermined.”

“Targeting LGBTI people for political gain is a costly strategy which harms the lives and well-being of those affected and undermines social cohesion in general. When public officials and elected politicians employ intolerant rhetoric, this signals to others that they too can engage in hateful actions with impunity.”

“Human rights are universal and indivisible: ensuring that everyone in society can enjoy them is the key to cohesive, peaceful societies where everyone can strive. Pitting groups of people against each other breeds tensions, hate and violence — only serving the narrow interests of some unscrupulous politicians.”

*ILGA Europe, August 2021*
SUGGESTION #6: MAKE EFFECTIVE RESPONSES THE STORY
Our communications must avoid normalizing scapegoating or making it appear more ubiquitous than it is. This can create a permissive environment for further scapegoating, while also reducing people’s sense of agency or empowerment to respond.

Instead, we can identify and amplify effective responses to scapegoating. Groups that have successfully pushed back on scapegoating, whether through challenging authoritarians’ narratives, building effective coalitions across lines of difference, or leveraging public attention on the issue to instead generate public support for targeted communities. Highlighting these responses— and the strategies, contextual dynamics, and people that contributed to their success—helps strengthen individuals’ agency to get involved.

» Example of making effective responses the story:

“When Moms for Liberty has faced organized opposition, including from groups such as Grandparents for Truth, their activities have backfired. Grandparents for Truth, a group of grandparents and their allies...whose state goal is to fight for the next generation’s freedom to learn, formed in 2023 to fight censorship, book bans, and attacks on education. When Moms for Liberty convened in Philadelphia last year for their annual convention, Grandparents for Truth rallied hundreds of grandparents, local activists, and elected officials outside the convention hall, reframing the activities of Moms for Liberty as the antithesis of liberty.”

Just Security, June 5, 2024