



USER ERROR: LGBTQ+

**A REPORT BY
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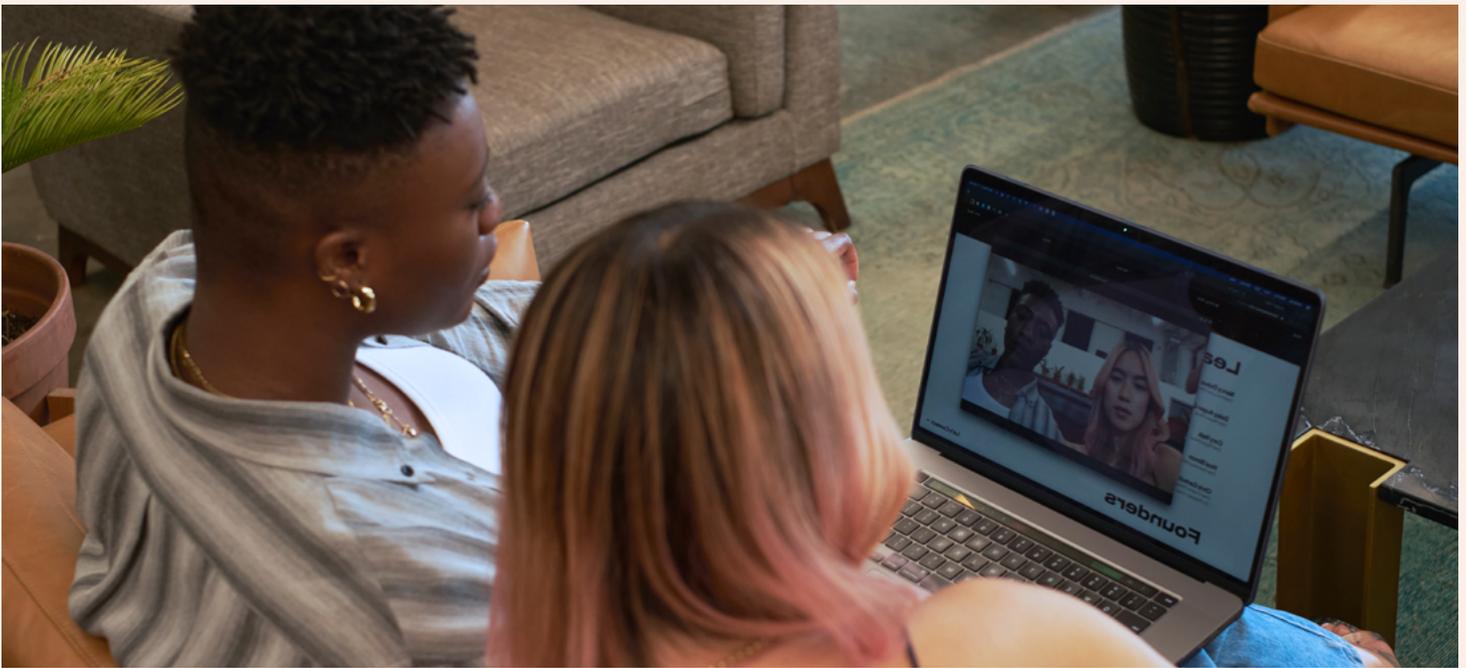
Queer and trans people have always made community in environments that seemed impossible. From the Stonewall uprising to Ballroom houses, and the formation of LGBTQ+ specific organizations: when queer people face violence and hostility they find, and often fight, their way to belonging.

Queer and trans people have been innovators in creating safety when the mainstream world was not concerned about them. Much of what we know about transformative justice is built from queer folks' understanding that "we keep us safe" in the face of state violence and antagonism, and citizen-level violence where the state has turned a blind eye.

This is also true online. Queer people have been essential to how the early internet came together and have taken tools that have not always been designed for them and transformed those tools into resources without compromising the values that keep people safe.

The people who run internet platforms make decisions that make queer communities less safe and less able to connect. Privacy, content moderation, and protecting LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized communities has also never been a concern for Big Tech companies. And their business models facilitate extreme hate speech and massive amounts of data collection that are used against queer and trans people.

In this report we will explore the history and the current issues facing the LGBTQ+ community online and what an internet that values queerness and queer people can look like.



QUEER PEOPLE ONLINE

In 1996, the [LA Times](#) reported that gay men and women were "among the most avid and plentiful commercial users of the Internet." On any given day one-third of all AOL chat rooms were dedicated to LGBTQ+ topics.

The internet is an important place for LGBTQ+ people living in areas with few resources and/or without a supportive family or community; access to digital communities can be life-saving.

One AOL chat room, Gay and Lesbian Community Forum, had around 1.8 million hits a month. The ability to be fully yourself and feel safe drew LGBTQ+ people online, but these spaces would not have existed without a fight. In that same *LA Times* piece, it's noted that "a loyal group of gay men and lesbian users had been begging for an official gay space [on CompuServe] for 10 years" and finally were able to get it.

As the years rolled on in the early aughts, queer communities continued to spread online on sites like LiveJournal and Tumblr. Picture this: you're a newly out trans person wanting a place to talk about your life and your journey. You join Tumblr

and just start writing, using the hashtag system to reach other people like you. Someone halfway across the world finds your blog and follows you. Maybe they message you because they also are trans, but haven't come out yet because they are scared offline, but not online. You talk and become friends. They repost your content and vice versa, reaching even more people around the world. Now you have thousands of followers, a new best friend, and a sizable digital community that understands and loves you for you. Some of them you know, most of them you don't. But what ties you together is that you all came to this online space, looking for a place to be whole and find others doing the same.

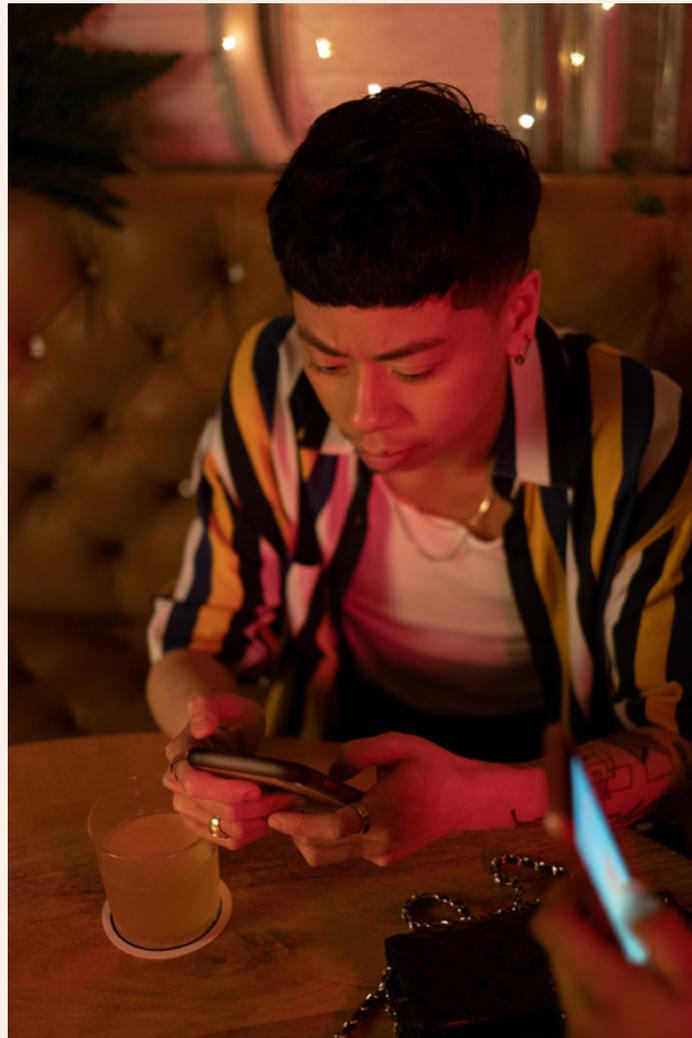
Despite the way in which queer people's participation online has made platforms successful, LGBTQ+ communities have not been able to control the digital spaces they live in. Instead, queer people are left vulnerable to online violence.

Tumblr is actually a great example. In 2021, the company tweeted it was the "[queerest place on the internet.](#)" There was a time when many users would have agreed. However, in 2018 Tumblr haphazardly implemented an algorithm that would rid the site of "adult" content and address a growing concern about child pornography on the platform. The algorithm, as you might expect, did not work and made hilariously wrong decisions like flagging a picture of [Garfield as explicit.](#)

On the not-so-funny end, thousands of queer and trans users cited their content being flagged as explicit when it was not. Which, [shocking to no one](#), didn't keep anyone safe. Queer content is, by algorithm or not, often viewed as "adult" or "explicit" no matter the content or context. So Tumblr users who were documenting their gender transitions or finding relationships online got kicked off the site.

This led to a mass exodus of LGBTQ+ users from Tumblr. The company [issued a too-late apology](#) saying, "we agree there were better ways of handling 2018's adult content ban, and we take full ownership of our role in it and the impact it caused our LGBTQIA+ community. We know people would agree that Tumblr's main intention was to create a safer platform. We would never want to hurt anyone who loves this platform as much as we do. But we did and for that we deeply apologize."

But years later, the company is *still* trying to win its queer users back. Tumblr did not simply mess up. The company became yet another place contributing to the isolation of LGBTQ people. No more space to document coming out or transition experiences in hopes of helping someone else. No more people to ask scary questions about identity or validate your experiences. No more community



discussions on how to fight for rights. This type of social isolation is a [determinant of overall health](#), affecting a person's physical, emotional, and mental wellness. Social isolation is also a strategy of anti-LGBTQ+ lawmakers and groups. While tech companies tend to not be outrightly homophobic, they are complicit in the harm that the queer community faces.

Let's dive a bit deeper into who the players are when it comes to the current landscape of LGBTQ+ people online.

THE PLAYERS



USERS

There's a secret queer history of the internet. Not only are LGBTQ+ a huge percentage of internet users—giving platforms more users and therefore, business and reasons to keep their sites running—but queer people are integral to what the internet is today.

Here's an excellent example. Before Facebook, Twitter/X, Tumblr, MySpace, there was GeoCities. The company, created by David Bohnett in 1994, gave anyone who wanted to create their own website a little slice of the web for free. When asked about why he created GeoCities, Bohnett [responded](#), "I think a lot of that comes from my own experiences as a gay man and coming out and meeting other lesbian and gay people and understanding the power of meeting others of your own identity."

GeoCities went on to be one of the fastest-growing online platforms. Overall, [38 million web pages](#) were built and at one point it was the [third most visited URL on the internet](#). GeoCities started what we know as the internet today, where user-generated content is the majority of what exists online and what companies rely on to stay afloat.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

The fact that Bohnett was a gay man, modeling and creating a digital space from the experiences he had of belonging in queer community, is not a side fact that should be overlooked. His queerness has everything to do with creating a platform that cemented the internet as a place where people can gather and create with other people. GeoCities is just one example of how LGBTQ+ users shaped the internet and how protecting queer users makes a stronger internet for all.

ANTI-LGBTQ+ FACTION

Anti-LGBTQ+ groups have been using a playbook of tactics that make them feel bigger than they really are. Most recently this has included harassing queer people online and targeting corporations that display pro-LGBTQ+ sentiment. Right-wing commentator Matt Walsh even [tweeted](#): "We don't need to [boycott every woke company]. Pick a few strategic targets. Make them pay dearly. That's enough to make wokeness a lot less appealing to the corporate world. Stop trying to bring down the whole line of dominos at once. Start with one, and then the next."

For context, Matt Walsh currently has 2.7 million Twitter followers. He appears in the Southern Poverty Law Center's [Extremist Files](#) as a self-described "theocratic fascist" and is one of the loudest and most prominent anti-trans voices in the U.S. Not only is he platformed on traditional American media, but he has several hugely followed social media accounts where he regularly says things like he would rather be dead than have a child who is transgender. Walsh's "work" has sparked the introduction of policy in the state of Alabama. In April 2023, Alabama State Representative Susan DuBose filed the "What Is a Woman Act," which is named after one of Walsh's anti-trans projects. The act aims to define the terms *man*, *woman*, *boy*, *girl*, *father*, *mother*, *male*, *female*, and *sex* in the Code of Alabama, effectively erasing trans and non-binary people in the state.

On the other side of things there is Dylan Mulvaney, a trans influencer who gained popularity on TikTok while documenting her physical transition. Dylan has 10.2 million followers on TikTok. From sharing her experiences online, Dylan has attracted a lot of anti-trans hate, usually in the form of violent comments, but when [Bud Light](#) made Dylan an ad partner, conservatives started a boycott of the brand that included a violent online campaign featuring some users shooting Bud Light cans and harassing Dylan offline.

"For months now I've been scared to leave my house. I have been ridiculed in public. I've been followed. And I have felt a loneliness that I wouldn't wish on anyone," Mulvaney said in an [article](#) reporting on the situation. This is the same summer that [Target took out its Pride collection](#) in stores after facing pressure and threats from anti-LGBTQ groups.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Anti-LGBTQ groups and individuals' strategy is to silence anyone who appears to be pro-LGBTQ. Whether through online acts or offline threats, they encourage each other to go up against people and corporations in order to further their broader narrative that queer and trans people, as well as allies, don't and should not belong.

ANTI-LGBTQ+ LAWMAKERS

In 2023 [500+ pieces of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation](#) were introduced in statehouses across the U.S: three times as many as the year before; 84 were signed into law in 23 states. These bills go hand in hand with an online strategy by anti-LGBTQ groups to spread as much disinformation and hate online as possible. In the month following the passage of Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law, [Human Rights Campaigns and Center for Countering Digital Hate](#) [reported](#) that "the volume of content on Twitter that accused LGBTQ+ people of 'grooming' children increased dramatically—to an average of more than 6,000 tweets per day compared to more than 1,000 the month before." And the top 500 tweets were viewed more than 72 million times. Much of this online campaign is [led by a handful of elected officials](#), among them Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) and Governor Ron DeSantis (R-Florida).

Bills like the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) hide behind the idea of keeping children "safe" on the internet by removing "age inappropriate" content. This will more likely than not mean the erasure of

LGBTQ+ content. This is not a theoretical concern. Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) [stated](#) that KOSA should be a top priority for conservative lawmakers because it would protect "minor children from the transgender in this culture."

This all has a real impact on queer people, especially LGBTQ+ youth. According to the [Trevor Project's 2023 survey](#), 2 out of 3 LGBTQ young people said that "don't say gay" bills made their mental health worse and 41% have seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with this rate even higher among trans people and people of color.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

A small group of vicious politicians are responsible for spreading a huge part of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric online. That rhetoric, combined with the speed and lawlessness of the internet, only makes it easier and faster for them to stoke unfounded fears in their bases and make sure that anti-LGBTQ laws get passed.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

On June 1, when Pride rolls around, you can find platforms like [YouTube](#), Facebook, and Instagram "celebrating" the LGBTQ+ community. Outside of June—after some digging—you might even find a [policy or two about LGBTQ+ "safety"](#) that states something along the lines of not allowing hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community.

However, behind the scenes, these same companies allow all sorts of trash content to retain users' attention. From violence-inciting tweets to lies-filled Instagram posts to homophobic Facebook ads, they've got it all.

Kairos, along with partners at UltraViolet, Women's March, and GLAAD, [published a report](#) in 2022 that found 57% of people have seen social posts calling for physical violence based on a person's race, gender, or sexuality and 60% of respondents said that even witnessing these violent posts resulted in feeling personally unsafe online and offline.

Social media companies also allow and profit from anti-LGBTQ ads on their sites. Take Meta. In 2023,

Media Matters found Meta (Facebook's parent company) has [profited from over 200 ads](#) using the anti-LGBTQ "groomer" slur even though the platform claimed they prohibit the term. It was only after this reporting that Meta removed the ads. And they still earned thousands before taking any action.

On top of making profit anti-LGBTQ+ content, social media companies have blocked or removed LGBTQ+ content under the guise of filtering "offensive content." For example, when [YouTube implemented filters](#) that blocked queer content creators from uploading videos, not only was this move harmful, but it sent the message that being queer is offensive.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Social media companies' role in spreading violent homophobia and transphobia is undeniable. On the surface, Big Tech may pretend to care about LGBTQ people but behind the scenes they will do anything to make a dollar, which includes allowing anti-LGBTQ content online for profit and unfairly taking down LGBTQ+ content.

DATING APP COMPANIES

Queer people often have to work harder to not only find each other but find each other in welcoming environments. According to [Pew Research](#), queer Americans are way more likely than straight people to use a dating site and app (51% vs. 28%) to connect with friends and future partners.

Much like social media companies, dating apps like Grindr, Her, Lex, and many others gather personal information and allow third parties to access it, including to advertisers and data brokers. Both entities are in the business of buying and selling information to literally whoever pays. A few years ago, [Grindr got caught selling location data](#)

to advertisers unbeknownst to users. And just last year, *The Washington Post* broke the news about an anti-LGBTQ Catholic group that spent 4 million dollars purchasing Grindr data from a data broker in order to track down members of the clergy and get them removed from the church and their jobs.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

The data-sucking, profit-driven business model of dating sites and apps poses a unique threat to the LGBTQ community. Without intervention, companies will continue to financially benefit from privacy violations, and anti-LGBTQ groups can continue to use this data as a tool to harm people.

VISION FOR A PRO-QUEER FUTURE



The LGBTQ+ community is full of brilliant creators, who have contributed the building blocks of what we know of as the internet today—which everyone online benefits from. Queer people continue to generate content that defines culture. Despite the hardships laid out in this report, queer and trans people will continue to fight and survive online and offline. Standing in the way of a fully thriving LGBTQ+ community online are, as discussed, anti-LGBTQ+ groups, anti-LGBTQ+ politicians, and tech companies that decide against safety and for homophobic and transphobic violence that translates to offline harm.

For a world where tech is pro-queer, the corporations that govern our digital platforms, must:

- Create and/or enforce existing policies that ban violent speech, including the use of slurs.
- Ban and remove disinformation about the LGBTQ+ community.
- Give users control over their data and how it's used.

We must fight for a pro-queer future. This future is not just an internet that simply allows or tolerates LGBTQ+ people. It is one where everyone can exist without being targeted. It's a world in which online platforms can't be used by anti-LGBTQ+ groups or politicians to further a destructive agenda. It's a future where tech works for and humanizes queer and trans people.