

The hateful rhetoric of our toxic culture wars can have deadly consequences

[MARSHA LEDERMAN](#) – Globe and Mail

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It would be irresponsible, with what we know as I write this, to draw a direct line between [the shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs last weekend](#) and the proliferation of hate speech targeting LGBTQ communities online, on certain media platforms, and in once-respectable political circles.

It would also be irresponsible to pretend there is no connection between the hate speech that has become so ubiquitous – and somehow acceptable in some polite company – and the mass shootings that target specific communities.

The sticks and stones mantra does not apply. Names can hurt – or worse.

For years, there has been a persistent campaign against gay, trans and gender-non-binary people – some of it perpetuated by public figures who have co-opted the hatred for political gain, clicks or ratings. Right-wing politicians and commentators have spoken out against, of all things, drag queens reading to children at schools and libraries – delightful events, as anyone who has attended one knows. Somehow these family-friendly, pro-literacy gatherings have become a flashpoint in the ugly U.S. culture wars; bad actors going on about the so-called “grooming” of children – inaccurately, offensively and dangerously – have tried to link these readings with pedophilia.

When people put out that kind of hateful ideology in a society where guns are so readily available, the consequences can be deadly.

The attack at Club Q killed five people – including the boyfriend of the daughter of the heroic, quick-thinking military veteran who stopped the shooter (with assistance from a clubgoer’s high heels). There was a drag performance advertised for that night and an all-ages drag brunch the next day, coinciding with the Transgender Day of Remembrance – an annual commemoration of the people who have died as a result of anti-trans violence and discrimination.

Now, we must remember to be good allies and call out hateful rhetoric and toxic behaviour when we see it.

When I see keyboard bullies offhandedly ridiculing the use of pronouns, the fight for safe access to public washrooms for people who are trans, even the Trans Day of Remembrance, I usually just roll my eyes. What is the point, I think – what good is this doing?

That’s not enough. We should be asking ourselves what bad these acts might be doing – what kind of damage – especially when they’re paired with the much more vile examples of anti-trans and homophobic rhetoric out there, coming even from the hallowed halls of governance in the United States. Anti-trans legislation has been [passed](#) in several states; Florida has passed a “Don’t Say Gay” law, which forbids teachers to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity in classrooms from kindergarten through Grade 3. This is legalized discrimination, entrenched by governments.

We’ve seen what such demonizing rhetoric can do to radicalize – and even encourage – troubled minds. [The mass shooting](#) at a Tops Friendly Market in a predominantly Black neighbourhood of Buffalo in May was [fuelled](#) by the Great Replacement Theory, a far-right, anti-immigrant and antisemitic

conspiracy theory. The shooter in the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue attack in Pittsburgh was radicalized by right-wing radio and social media, where he too posted antisemitic conspiracy theories. The perpetrator of the 2017 mass shooting at a Quebec City mosque had spent time searching out far-right views online. In 2011, the horrific killing of 77 people in Norway – many of them youth attending a summer camp – was carried out by a far-right anti-Muslim extremist who had been influenced by a [blogger](#) once described by the Dagsavisen newspaper as “one of Europe’s most influential Islamophobe ideologists.”

More than a decade later, the hate, the tragic deaths and the vile encouragement continue. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be a different matter altogether, but it’s clear that rhetoric urges on further violence there: after the twin blasts in Jerusalem this week that killed Canadian-Israeli teenager Aryeh Shechoppek, I felt ill when I [read reports](#) that the Islamic militant group Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, “praised the perpetrators of the attacks, calling it a heroic operation.”

What other angry young men might seek to earn the praise of their heroes, and hope to be called one themselves?

Allyship can feel performative, but it is necessary. Hatred and discrimination must be challenged. At the very least, this lets persecuted groups know that they are not alone.

Of course, when most people write cruel things on Twitter, they are not intentionally trying to provoke a gay nightclub shooting, or an attack on a mosque or a synagogue, or any other hate crime. The political leaders who engage in this kind of hate speech, on the other hand, know that vile rhetoric can have consequences – and they continue to traffic in it.

Whether it’s intentional or not, we all have a responsibility to challenge it. When we witness this kind of demonization – in politics, on social media, at the dinner table – we need to stand up against it.