

The Litter Box Hoax: How Disinformation Can Lead to Catastrophe

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Since the establishment of the internet, information has been more accessible than ever before. With all the knowledge, opinions and arguments in the world just one click away, the line between fact and fiction has grown more and more blurred. When politicians, celebrities and influencers began referencing school bathrooms containing litter boxes for cat-identifying students, the media exploded with claims, personal accounts and opinions on the matter. Over the course of two years, the story has grown and contorted to portray transgender students, and individuals overall, as deluded, disturbed, bizarre and animalistic. The effects of this disinformation were catastrophic on the lives of transgender youth across the globe. The glaring issue with this incredulous story was that it was all a ruse. The school litter box canard has devastating effects on the peace and safety of society. The following three key factors will be discussed: the untrue nature of the claims, the toxic conversation surrounding the hoax and the perpetuation of pernicious ideologies.

5 key-words were chosen to summarize the whole composition of this essay-based work:

- stigma
- cataclysm
- discrimination
- dogmatism
- change

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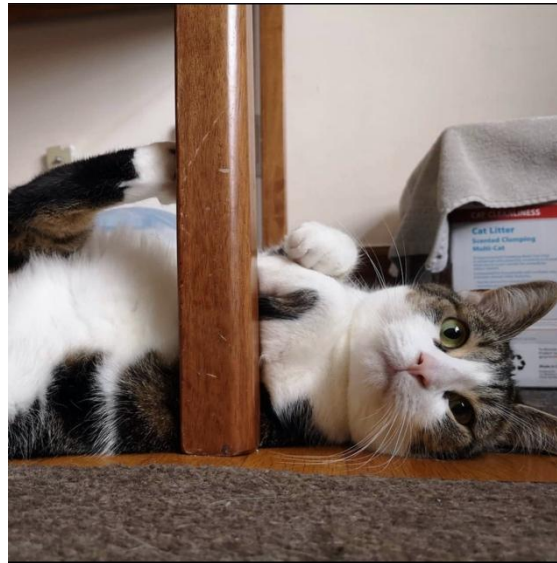


Figure 1: Cat Litter Box¹

2. Introduction

Originating in Prince Edward Island, rumours of cat litter boxes being placed in school bathrooms to accommodate students who identify as cats have been circulating the internet since October 2021. Soon after it was initially mentioned, an increase in the hoax's popularity led a representative of the Prince Edward Island School Board to debunk the claims.² However, once Twitter and Facebook users got a hold of the rumour, it began to spread to all corners of the internet regardless of the fact that the claim was baseless. The untrue phenomenon of students who identified as cats being provided with litter in school restrooms made its way to the United States, where Republican influencers, politicians, and senators fed into the claims with their own fabricated accounts.³ As the hoax gained widespread attention, more personal stories of litter boxes in bathrooms came out all across the continent. Today, this falsehood has made its way into the repertoire of right wing

¹ Author's Photo.

² Homepage of NBC News. Page Rumours about students identifying as cats is rooted in hate, says P.E.I Public Schools Branch. URL:<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-psb-statement-cats-students-1.6218628>. [23-2-23].

³ Homepage of NBC News. Page How an urban myth about litter boxes in schools became a GOP talking point URL:<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/urban-myth-litter-boxes-schools-became-gop-talking-point-rcna51439>. [23-2-23].

anti-transgender talking points across the globe. The spread of these false claims has negatively impacted the lives of transgender individuals, particularly in schools. The litter box hoax has threatened peace in schools across the world because of its untrue nature, the hateful way it is discussed and its perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and ideas.

3. Littered With Lies



Figure 2: False rumors about litter boxes in classrooms have gained momentum in recent months⁴

What started as a seemingly harmless rumour was able to grow and spread rapidly due to its internet popularity. In October 2021, the school litter box hoax started circulating in Prince Edward Island, Canada. Shortly after its sudden burst in relevancy, the claims were debunked.⁵ In spite of this, by October of the next year, the hoax hit a peak in popularity as at least 20 Republican candidates used the rumour as a platform during elections. In one week alone, the lie that school districts were putting litter in their bathrooms was mentioned more than 25,000 times.⁶ The pattern continued to repeat itself, as it traveled across the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Homepage of NBC News. Page Rumours about students identifying as cats is rooted in hate, says P.E.I. Public Schools Branch. URL:<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-psb-statement-cats-students-1.6218628>. [23-2-23]

⁶ Homepage of Politifact. Page Debunking, rebuttals didn't stop claim about litter boxes in schools from spreading before midterms URL:<https://www.politifact.com/article/2022/dec/15/debunking-rebuttals-didnt-stop-claim-about-litter/>. [23-2-23].

United States from school board to school board. A claim was made of cat litter being in schools, which was then refuted by the school boards themselves. Sadly, their efforts to end the spread of these falsehoods were futile, as the hoax gained widespread popularity. These false accusations have real world consequences, because as the hoax traveled from the online world to the real world, the bullying did too.

3.1 The Cat's Out of the Bag

Firstly, the 'litter boxes in bathrooms' rumours are harmful as they are unfounded. The rumours have continued to spread despite being debunked time and time again, often by the schools they are rumoured to be originating from. The Public Schools Branch of Prince Edward Island released a Facebook post on October 19, 2021, referencing the recent influx of concerned calls and emails from parents they had been receiving regarding litter boxes in school bathrooms. In the post, the PEI director of schools Norbert Carpenter said, "*this claim as well as many others are simply false and are causing unnecessary stress to students and staff*", thus officially debunking the original claim.⁷ This did not end the rumours, as they spread to other places, particularly the United States. Those who were perpetuating the hoax were given further reason to believe the lies when a school in the Jefferson County District admitted to having been stocking classrooms with litter since 2017. This, however, was not to accommodate cat-identifying students, but rather as a precautionary measure in the case of an active shooter in the school, which is in the same district as Columbine High School.⁸ John McDonald, Jeffery County Schools' former director of campus safety says this rumour has spread so far because "*This thing has gotten out of control with politicians just wanting to have a talking point.*"⁹ The hoax has been repurposed as an opportunity for several Republican politicians' to promote anti-trans rhetoric. This decision has made it easier for the spread of disinformation to continue.

⁷ Homepage of NBC News. Page How an urban myth about litter boxes in schools became a GOP talking point
URL:<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/urban-myth-litter-boxes-schools-became-gop-talking-point-rcna51439>. [23-2-23].

⁸ Homepage of NBC News. Page How an urban myth about litter boxes in schools became a GOP talking point
URL:<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/urban-myth-litter-boxes-schools-became-gop-talking-point-rcna51439>. [23-2-23].

⁹ Ibid.

3.2 Cataclysmic Discourse

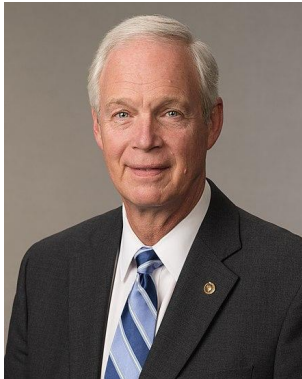


Figure 3: Senator Ron Johnson¹⁰



Figure 4: Julie Ross M.A.¹¹

Secondly, the hoax surrounding cat litter in school bathrooms was dangerous because of the hateful and often offensive way in which the situation was discussed. As the rumour spread online, bullying and transphobia made their way into elections in the United States as more and more Republican senators, politicians and candidates spoke on the topic. One such example was Senator Ron Johnson, who claimed that teachers influence youth by forcing “*transgenderism*” onto students, as well as stating that schools should not “*accommodate the phase,*” when discussing the litter box canard. This was harmful because the language and manner in which Johnson addressed this was abrasive and factually incorrect. When individuals with influence like Ron Johnson willingly spread disinformation, they can greatly shape the perspective and opinions of those who support them, and thus they are voluntarily contributing to discrimination. Johnson used the hoax’s widespread popularity to push his own anti-transgender rhetoric. He said, “*I mean, this is sick what’s happening. But yeah, I’m aware of the fact that we’ve got some teachers that are pushing this stuff on kids. I mean, kids are kids. They think weird things, you know? They go through phases. Every parent knows that.*”¹² Johnson expressed a sense of discomfort surrounding transgender identities, and claimed that they were simply a phase. However, according to Julie Ross M.A., gender identity is personal, and treating someone’s identity as a phase is

¹⁰ Homepage of Wikipedia. Page Ron Johnson. URL:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Johnson. [23-2-23].

¹¹ Homepage of Parenting Horizons. Page Our Staff. URL:<https://www.parentinghorizons.com/staff>. [23-2-23].

¹² Homepage of Heartland Signal. Page Ron Johnson goes on transphobic rant, says trans teens ‘think weird things’ and are going through ‘phases’. URL:<https://heartlandsignal.com/2022/10/26/ron-johnson-goes-on-transphobic-rant-says-trans-teens-think-weird-things-and-are-going-through-phases/>. [23-2-23].

harmful, especially for young people. According to Ross, “*When we think about our children, and our children’s friends, it is important to be willing to expand our world view so that we can approach people of different genders with radical acceptance and love*”.¹³ The disinformation being spread and the manner in which it is discussed has the potential to discourage trans people from coming out in the future. Providing transgender youth with support and kindness, rather than rejection and hate, can help provide everyone in society with more peace and comfort.

3.3 Catastrophic Stereotypes

Thirdly, the perpetuation of the false narrative that cat litter is being used in school restrooms is disrupting peace as it pushes detrimental stereotypes and ideals. Since its initial popularity, the concern surrounding the litter box canard was never from a place of genuine worry for the state of school washrooms. The ruse intentionally targets transgender individuals and people who are in the furry subculture by portraying them as bizarre or even dangerous.¹⁴ The ruse often blurs the line between those who identify as transgender and those who identify as an animal, which is harmful to trans people as “*The wave of misinformation reflects discontent among many conservatives around how the concepts and politics of gender identity are rapidly shifting*.”¹⁵ The hoax additionally perpetuates the idea that gender identity is a choice; however, according to Gender Spectrum, an organization that focuses on the health and well being of gender-expansive youth, “*...while gender may begin with the assignment of our sex, it doesn’t end there. A person’s gender is the complex interrelationship between three dimensions: body, identity, and social gender*.”¹⁶ These ideas are harmful as they misportray transgender people and their identities. Although the number of trans people has been increasing in recent years, they are still a small minority,

¹³ Homepage of Parenting Horizons. Page Trans Is Not A Phase.

URL:https://www.parentinghorizons.com/trans_is_not_a_phase, [23-2-23].

¹⁴ Homepage of NBC News. Page How an urban myth about litter boxes in schools became a GOP talking point

URL:<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/urban-myth-litter-boxes-schools-became-gop-talking-point-rcna51439>. [23-2-23].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Homepage of Parenting Horizons. Page Trans Is Not A Phase.

URL:https://www.parentinghorizons.com/trans_is_not_a_phase, [23-2-23].

with only 1.6 million transgender individuals in the U.S.¹⁷ The disinformation surrounding this hoax negatively affects these individuals, who are often unable to destigmatize themselves to those passing laws and regulations that affect them because of it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, disinformation can have a devastating effect on how our society progresses, and how we as individuals see each other. The disinformation surrounding the litter box hoax has disrupted peace in schools, online and in society through its intentional fallacious nature, the deleterious way in which it is discussed and the malevolent stereotypes it perpetuates. As of 2023, more than 50% of transgender youth experience bullying because of their identities.¹⁸ Disinformation such as this is a key contributing factor to the stigma surrounding gender that lead to bullying, which then directly contributes to the 82% of trans individuals who consider taking their own lives.¹⁹ Understanding others and listening to their truths will be integral parts of lowering these statistics in the future.

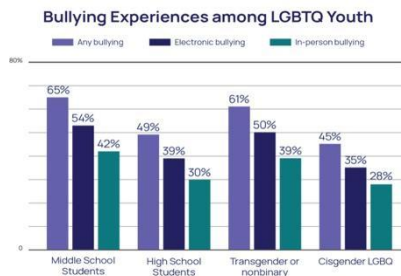


Figure 5: Bullying among LGBTQ Youth²⁰

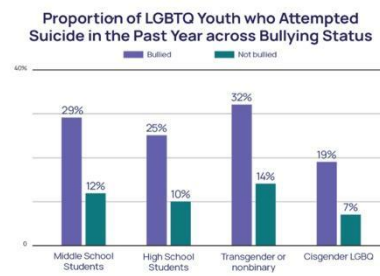


Figure 6: Suicide Attempts among LGBTQ Youth²¹

¹⁷ Homepage of UCLA School Of Law Williams Institute. Page How Many Adults and Youth Identify as Transgender in the United States?. URL: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states/>. [23-2-23].

¹⁸ Homepage of Beyond Bullying. Page Transphobic Bullying. URL: <https://www.beyondbullying.com/transphobic-bullying>

¹⁹ Homepage of National Library of Medicine. Page Suicidality Among Transgender Youth: Elucidating the Role of Interpersonal Risk Factors. URL: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32345113/>. [23-2-23].

²⁰ Homepage of The Trevor Project. Page Bullying and Suicide Risk among LGBTQ Youth. URL: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/bullying-and-suicide-risk-among-lgbtq-youth/>. [23-2-23].

²¹ Ibid.

5. Annexes

5.1 List of Abbreviations

- Trans - Transgender
- Ibid.- ibidem, the same place

5.2 List of Figures

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5.3 List of Literature

Journal

- [Suicidality Among Transgender Youth: Elucidating the Role of Interpersonal Risk Factors \(ncbi.nlm.nih.gov\)](#) [02-19-23]

Websites

- [Debunking, rebuttals didn't stop claim about litter boxes in schools from spreading before midterms \(politifact.com\)](#) [02-19-23]
- [How an urban myth about litter boxes in schools became a GOP talking point \(nbcnews.com\)](#) [02-19-23]
- [How Many Adults and Youth Identify as Transgender in the United States? \(williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu\)](#) [02-19-23]
- [Ron Johnson goes on transphobic rant, says trans teens 'think weird things' and are going through 'phases' \(heartlandsignal.com\)](#) [02-19-23]
- [Rumours about students identifying as cats are rooted in hate, says P.E.I. Public Schools Branch \(cbc.ca\)](#) [02-19-23]
- [Transphobic Bullying \(beyondbullying.com\)](#) [02-19-23]
- [Trans Is Not A Phase \(parentinghorizons.com\)](#) [02-19-23]

6. Affidavit

I declare that I have written this essay independently without aid. I have clearly cited any ideas not my own with documented sources. The essay does not contain content previously submitted or graded.

I am conscious of the fact that failure to do so is plagiarism. To plagiarize is to present another's work or ideas as your own, without proper citation or paraphrasing.

I am conscious of the consequences associated with plagiarism. Repercussions include exclusion from the PSP For High School Student Writing Competition. I also acknowledge that these consequences work retroactively, thus if plagiarism is discovered after the essay is submitted and marked they still apply. I understand the extent of these penalties.

Yaël Brennan-Touaty

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Yaël Brennan-Touaty
Montreal, Canada in February 2023

Validated by Giulia Bartolone—Teacher at Villa Maria High School

Giulia Bartolone
VILLA  MARIA