

Response from Natalie Feliks, Writer:

1. What do you think of this opinion piece and what are the reasons you think The Age might have been reluctant to publish it?

https://open.substack.com/pub/szegounplugged/p/a-question-of-transition?r=lqlet2&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web

The first thing I need to say in answer to this question is that it's impossible for me to go over every single aspect of this article, particularly with how lengthy it is. I will say, however, that I think it's very entitled of Julie to attack a publication for refusing to print an article, especially in the way that she did. I'm a freelance writer, just like her, who routinely writes about transgender rights from an informed, lived experience and, to be quite honest, I am much more equipped to handle this issue than she is. In saying that, I do not have the platform that she does simply because I am a member of a minority that she is not. I have had my pieces routinely rejected from publication in spite of the hard work and love that I put into them, and that is simply the harsh reality of the job. The Age has every right to refuse to publish an article, and every right to be outraged and disgusted by the insults she publicly threw at them afterwards. Even if you agree with her general sentiments, it's unquestionable that this is very unprofessional behaviour that any publisher has the right to take offence at.

On the subject of the article itself, I dislike it intensely. It's filled with numerous inaccuracies, inflammatory language, and has the usual tropes that I expect from an uninformed cisgender writer writing not just on a subject that are totally ill-equipped to deal with, but clearly have a political agenda on as well (as we saw in her conduct after this piece was rejected). I wish I had the time to write about everything I disliked about this piece, but I will go over some basics.

For starters, in the case of the two examples provided at the start, Szego only gives the perspectives of the parents. The children involved are never heard of at all. This is a common trope when cisgender people report on our healthcare and rights, we only hear from the cisgender people around us, of *their* opinions on our lives, and never about *our* perspectives on ourselves. This, you'd think, would be basic, but it's astonishing how much this still happens, and speaks to a very high degree of cisgender entitlement and infantilisation of us. The irony of this is that both experiences ended with the transitioned person being totally happy with the results of their healthcare. The only anxiety comes from Yvette, Mia's mum, who repeatedly demonstrates a desire to control Mia's healthcare and bodily autonomy, when this simply isn't her right. One of the most common arguments in the fight against conversion therapy was that "parents deserve to control their children", which is a horrible, horrible thing to imply in the media. I don't know why it has to keep being said. Children are not the property of their parents. They deserve to seek whatever

information around their own health they can, and the responsibility of a parent is to inform, not control.

Another aspect of this piece that I took offence to was the constant notion that trans rights activists and detransitioners are ideologically opposed. This, again, couldn't be further from the truth. It is a complete myth that detransitioners disconnect themselves from the trans community. Most stay closely linked with the community for the obvious reason that they are likely to build close friendships and, sometimes, relationships with transgender people. One of my partners, for instance, owes her access to healthcare in large part thanks to a detransitioner partner she had at the time. There are a small group of detransitioners who are campaigning against transgender healthcare, and these people are often paid large amounts of money from the far-right to do so. This money trail is easy to see if you look for it, and it's the job of journalists to do this kind of investigating before shamelessly reporting this misinformation.

And finally, the report addresses the hysteria over the "large amounts of children accessing transgender healthcare", which is another common trope used against a minority that is seemingly "going out of control". The fact remains that this is an indictment on the success of the queer rights movement across the world, and is something you can see in every instance of a community undergoing destigmatisation. Every subsequent generation is more likely to identify as queer than the next thanks to our efforts, and there's a popular meme about the same trend occurring with left-handedness once that trait was destigmatised as well. You need to remember that the word "sinister" actually has its roots referring to left-handed people. To suggest that our movement has been "too successful" is again pandering to a far-right idea. There is a genocide occurring against transgender people at the moment in parts of the United States, and yet Szego tries to "both-sides" this fact by merely "comparing" Texas, a place that is attempting to legislate transgender genocide, to Victoria, where the torture practice of conversion therapy against transgender people was recently outlawed, as though these are simply two sides of a debate. The outlawing of conversion therapy also didn't completely stop it from happening. Szego likewise also tries to legitimise the "groomer" rhetoric against transgender people, which has been used to imply trans people are paedophiles, a harmful idea that has its roots in trying to outlaw our existence.

I can't understand why it would be right or even "feminist" to deny people their right to bodily autonomy. The problem is that there is a large amount of misinformation about these procedures, primarily spread by the far-right, and people who are advocating for transgender rights are working tirelessly to allow people access to it. Why would you fight against that? More knowledge about this is a good thing, it will prevent people undergoing procedures that they will later regret, especially to more

vulnerable, younger people. It is the anti-trans lobby who wants this information removed, not us. You can't dispute that bodily autonomy is a good thing or that increased access to healthcare doesn't save lives.

This isn't even touching on the fact that this article is also peppered with a snide, nasty tone and uses outdated language that is considered pejorative by my community now. Szego puts the word "supportive" into quote marks to imply the suggestion that is questionable to use someone's correct pronouns at one point. She clearly had an agenda writing this article. It's impossible to say whether or not The Age saw through this and that's part of what motivated their decision not to run it, but either way, she was clearly upset that it wasn't published, and her conduct afterwards was immature and pathetic. I sympathise with the way The Age handled it.

2. The Age says it effectively sacked Julie because of disparaging remarks she made about the publication. Some appear to have suggested she was sacked for writing the column that's now been published on Substack. If that's the case- do you think columnists like Julie who write pieces like that should be sacked or do you welcome the airing of their views?

Jackie Turner wrote a great article for Junkee recently about the recent spread of misinformation about transgender rights and how to spot the truth from the lies. I agree with the idea that people should have the right to air their views, but the question remains, what views are productive for our society, what views should be platformed, and are all lived experiences platformed equally?

The answers to these are simple. Lies and misinformation are not productive to a healthy society. Szego was not airing her opinion, she was airing a deeply misinformed perspective clouded by propaganda and lies. This is not helpful. She is trying to report on an issue that she has no lived experienced with and is totally out of her depth with addressing. She should never have been expected to deal with this issue. The people who are the best served to address this issue, and the people who should be platformed, are people with the lived experienced. Transgender people, people who have gone through the rigorous and often traumatising process of attempting to access their healthcare. There are countless stories out there that Szego either refused to report or simply didn't know about, of transgender people being forced to undergo conversion therapy, in spite of it being outlawed, before receiving their healthcare, or being refused by doctors altogether. I myself was nearly sexually assaulted by the doctor who prescribed my first course of hormonal treatment. These are probably the stories that would be better served getting airtime, not stories of parents trying to control the decisions of their children and the information they might receive about their own bodies.

3. I understand trans people have publicly criticised Julie and The Age because some of her trans-related opinion pieces were seen as transphobic or offensive etc. Are you able to sum up any patterns or themes you've observed in this regard and why you and others in the community may be concerned?

I think I've summed up the pattern and theme I've observed and why I'm concerned. There is a rise of Terfism happening in Australia lately, and I wrote an article for Zee Feed outlining why this is a troubling sign of the general rise of Nazism in Australia too. Tolerating this ideology, legitimising it and platforming it will only incentivise more inflammatory articles and language in the discourse, as we saw with One Nation's recent attacks on trans kids too. It's not a feminist ideology, it's a far-right Nazi-aligned ideology and needs to be treated as such.

But, as I said, the main problem here is the fact that people like Szego, cisgender and totally out-of-step with this issue, are the people who are being platformed to write upon it. It's accepted that discourses which pertain to and directly affect minorities should be controlled by the people from that minority, yes? I can't fathom why this isn't the case with transgender issues, and it's deeply frustrating as a transgender journalist who needs to fight for her voice to be heard, who relies on the kindness and allyship of cisgender people in getting her pieces platformed, is getting shifted aside for someone like Szego. Such unprofessional conduct from her would simply be laughed off in any other context, except this particular one. I don't get why we need to talk about it.

4. What would your response be to people who might say people like Julie are entitled to their views and there's nothing wrong with them or what she wrote?

I would say that they need to understand the realities of this situation. Szego's piece was full of misinformation which should never have a legitimate platform. Why are we in a state of political discourse where lies and mistruths are considered to be of equal weight as facts? Why is a cisgender person's perspective on my lived experience considered to be as, or more, important than my own? Why are transgender journalists not the first people we turn to when articles about transgender issues are getting published? Why are their voices not highlighted in these articles? There is nothing wrong with having an opinion, but it is an informed opinion that should be platformed, and be affecting the discourse, not an uninformed one. It's like doing a piece about lifeguarding and safe swimming, and instead of asking a lifeguard with a decades' experience in their job, you ask some dude from Central Australia who has never been to the ocean in their life, or you ask the dad of the lifeguard what *they* think about their son's job. You're not going to get a satisfying piece that actually informs the audience. I can't stress this enough. It sucks for all of us, but particularly those who have to live with the consequences of a

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misinformed public, and a growing threat of far-right organisations that want to attack us.