

The remoaner queen under attack: the trolling of Gina Miller

What happens when a private individual takes on a very public cause? Amy Binns and John Mair examine how the case of Gina Miller demonstrates how fast social media can whip up a storm of abuse

Gina Miller shot to fame after taking the British government to court for attempting to force through Article 50, the mechanism, which started the Brexit process. It was a case that, like the 2016 Referendum itself, polarised Britain. While Leavers were outraged that their vote to exit the EU was not the final word, Remainers watched with bated breath in hope that their disaster could turn to triumph.

In the middle was the previously unknown financier Gina Miller. Articulate, photogenic and unafraid to comment on a controversial issue, she might have been made for the media. Widespread coverage led to her becoming a hate figure online, with two men arrested for making threats to kill her.

In her own words, in her book *Rise* (Miller, 2018), she outlines the hate her campaign had generated:

“Over the past two years I’ve been the target of extreme bullying and racist abuse. Ever since I took the UK government to court for attempting to force through Article 50, the mechanism for starting Brexit which would have led to the nation leaving the European union without Parliamentary consent, I live in fear of attacks.

“I receive anonymous death threats almost every day. Strangers have informed me graphically that they want to gang rape me and slit the throats of my children, how the colour of my skin means I am nothing more than an ape, a whore, a piece of shit that deserves to be trodden into the gutter.”

This study analyses 18,036 tweets, which include the username @thatginamiller, from October 1, 2016 to February 27, 2017, from just before the opening of her High Court case to beyond the Supreme Court ruling on January 26 . It uses the same methods and sentiment analysis software described in the chapter ‘What makes a target?’, (P xx) built by Dr Martin Bateman at the University of Central Lancashire.¹

The beginning

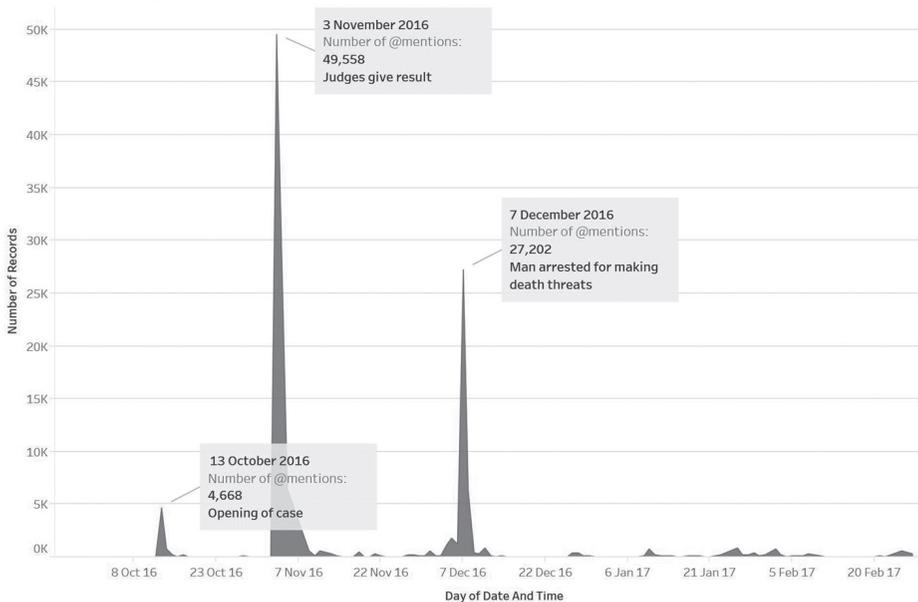
The first few days of October 2016 show the @thatginamiller account functioning as any active, private account. It received as few as four mentions a day, rising to 45 when Ms Miller promoted a charity concert. Very few mentioned the upcoming court case.

The initial spike in tweets came on October 13, the date of the opening of her High Court case. This was largely news driven. As the lead litigant, several news sites ran profiles of Gina Miller. The Guardian described her as having a ‘long history of taking on powerful establishments’ (Topping, 2016). It referenced an interview in the Financial Times, in which she mentioned her nickname of ‘black widow spider’, due to her lobbying for more transparency in the City of London. (Racism and Fees Fire up Gina Miller, 2016). This is a term that came back to bite her.

These are heavily retweeted: 4,668 tweets mention @thatginamiller on the opening day. But although this is a huge increase of activity for a private account, there was relatively little hostility at slightly less than three per cent of all mentions.

Though newspapers ran stories on the four-day case, it did not capture public interest, at least in Cyberspace. There was very little further traffic directed at Ms Miller’s account until the High Court judges gave their decision on November 3, Traffic then continued through the Court of Appeal case and finally to the Supreme Court itself, which pronounced on January 26, 2017.

Tweets including @thatginamiller



The plot of sum of Number of Records for Date And Time Day.

The Trigger

On November 3, the High Court judges ruled that the Government was obliged to go to Parliament with any Brexit deal. It was the end of Leavers' and Theresa May's hopes for a swift, hassle-free Brexit. Cameras were not permitted in this hearing, so although the judges received much hostility in the press, it was Gina Miller, speaking on the steps of the court, who became the face of the result. It was at this point that Ms Miller became a hate figure for a section of Brexit supporters.

Spikes in hostility online are often driven by broadcast appearances (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017). The spike in traffic was enormous, mostly driven by retweets from news organisations across Europe but also comments from individuals. Over November 3 and 4 79,040 tweets mentioned her account. This is a volume of traffic far greater than any individual can deal with. It included 9,908 hostile tweets, a jump in hostility to 13 per cent, compared to the three per cent at the opening of the case.

These include tweets such as:

I despise interfering busybodies like @thatginamiller. Wonder who picked up the legal costs?

Jew Alan Miller and his pet monkey try to torpedo Brexit via lawsuit. Jew judges sided with jew racial comrade.

Examples of scum I want out of my country. They are baying for if you were wondering.

cin her face after made me vomit profusely Seems no end 2 wot the wealthy elite can do. Enuf is enuf.

#Eurogirl @thatginamiller is the new Guy Fawkes and needs to be thrown on the nearest bonfire.

@thatginamiller is a disgrace she wears a poppy to remember those died fighting for our freedom at the same time she attempts to take it away!

#ginamiller who the fuck is this slag V 17.4 million voters. Fuck the judges. YOU WILL LOSE.

However, this outpouring of anger was not entirely directed at Ms Miller. She had become a lightning rod for the Brexit issue. People on both sides were fighting across her, flooding her Twitter feed with hostility. For example:

@thatginamiller seems to be labelled both a traitor and a foreigner. She can't be both. Make your minds up Nazis.

Obviously white men in the UK have found a convenient vehicle for their pent-up sexism and racism in @thatginamiller. Disgraceful.

Many others were straightforwardly positive. Across the whole dataset, 388 tweets used the phrase “thank you”, and 168 said “well done”. Other examples include:

@thatginamiller da god! Give this woman a throne. a dragon. whatever she wants.

@thatginamiller Should get a medal.!

As an antidote to the hate. I love you xxx @thatginamiller

Stoking the fire

Leaver news sites went to town on Gina Miller, turning her into a target for their readers. A Daily Mail profile on November 4 (Sunderland, 2016) painted her as an ageing trollop, resurrected the ‘black widow spider’ insult, described her as cougarish, implied she lies about her charity work and finished:

“Today the balding, bespectacled financier [Alan Miller] is worth nearer £30m. Some have wondered why a livewire like Mrs Miller is married to him. Cynics may say she has about thirty million good reasons.”

The Sun’s front page on November 4TH emphasised Ms Miller’s origins, asking: ‘Who do EU think you are? Loaded foreign elite defy will of Brit voters’. All these served to generate more traffic to her account.

Another major spike occurs on December 7, when there was Europe-wide coverage of the arrest of a man for making death threats against her. He was later released without charge. The day of the first arrest resulted in 1,719 hostile tweets in a total of 27,202 which mention her @username.

Over the following weeks, there were further smaller spikes as the legal process continues. On December 11 a Labour amendment in parliament called on the government to publish its timetable before triggering Article 50. Ms Miller said the motion was irrelevant, and this story triggered another spike of 818 tweets, of which 147 were hostile.

Further spikes occurred on January 10, when she appeared on radio station LBC; and on January 26 when the Supreme Court gave its verdict in her favour and a second man was arrested. This was Viscount Philipps, who was later jailed for 12 weeks.

Ms Miller remembered (Miller, Rise, 2018):

“Four days after I won my Brexit challenge Viscount Philipps offered a bounty on Facebook of £5000 for the ‘first person to ‘accidentally’ run over this troublesome first generation immigrant’. Describing me a ‘boat jumper he added ‘if this is what we should expect from immigrants send them back to their stinking jungle.’”

Another spike occurred on February 2, the day after MPs voted in favour of triggering Article 50 by a huge majority. After this victory for Leavers, commentator Katie Hopkins called her a snake-in-the-grass in the Daily Mail:

“Gina darling, I wouldn’t ask for your help if I had just wet myself after a nasty sneezing episode (stranger things have happened). We don’t need your help with anything. We never did. You are a walking irrelevance. Run along and play with someone equally impotent – Nicola Sturgeon perhaps?”

“Despite your powerful connections and your cash, we won – with the power of a little pencil on a piece of string and a tick in a box.”

Katie Hopkins lost her LBC contract after calling for a ‘final solution’ in relation to the Manchester Arena bombings. She has since left the Daily Mail and MailOnline too and is writing for alt-right sites in the US.

What drives the haters?

Perhaps surprisingly, there is little overt racism around her colour: words such as nigger and coon never appear in the entire dataset of 18,036 tweets. The word black in reference to her is used only 50 times. Some are hostile:

Who is @thatginamiller? Another Anti White Black Bitch That should be deported. Like Abbott The Black Labour MP

but most use the word positively or to reply to racism:

@thatginamiller is a black woman from Guyana who brought the case against Brexit. I just love irony. Also she’s my new hero.

However, there is significant debate and hostility around her perceived status as an immigrant. The word foreign/foreigner appears 115 times, Guyana appears 98 times, migrant/immigrant 53 times, deport 36 times. Again, some of these comments are from her supporters, but many are hostile.

Gotta love how a foreigner like is trying to stop #Brexit if you dont like it fuck off back to guyana. The people have spoken!!!

@thatginamiller U need to go bk to where ever it is u came from stop shagging rich folks u sket . #deporther

In fact, Ms Miller was born in the then British Guiana (now called Guyana after independence in 1966) and came to Britain as a child to boarding school. Her father, a lawyer, worried about his children’s safety in British Guiana. The money ran out and the government banned export of foreign currency. She then had to do menial jobs in the morning to keep her and her brother at school. She has never returned to Guyana to live.

Some tweeters made these points positively in tweets such as:

Guyana was a British colony when was born there in 1965 – she qualifies for British citizenship.

Others called out media critics:

The Sun owned by a loaded foreigner lambasts @thatginamiller for being 'a loaded foreigner.

Apart from her origins, there are two more major focal points of hostility: her wealth and her perceived treachery. The words traitor/traitorous/treachery appear 117 times. Many tweets refer to this, including death threats such as:

treasonous fool. she should be dragged on hurdles to the tower and given a traitors death.

November already has Guy Fawkes' Night. In history what date will be remembered as #GinaMiller night. @thatginamiller

In terms of her status, *wealth/wealthy* appear 51 times, *rich* 87 times (not including partial words such as *richard*), *millionaire* 82 times. These tweets are almost entirely negative. Her status is also seen as making her out of touch with ordinary people, and lacking any right to represent them. The words *arrogant/arrogance* appear 69 times, and *smug* 17 times. Examples include:

@thatginamiller Father an attorney-general. Rodean girl. Married to multi-millionaire financier. The voice of authentic Britain apparently.

Obviously then as a millionaire is far more intelligent and her views are more important than that of us plebs Arrogant bitch

@skynews Don't be so naïve – rich bitch was just protecting her financial interests Guyanese just used her husband's millions to attempt to overrule a democratic vote by the majority of the British people

@thatginamiller needs to spend some of her capitalist millions on neck surgery what a wrinkly mess it is #TheAgenda

Another kick in the crack for you and the millionaire whore

*I've never wanted to slap a woman as much as I want to slap that smug b*tch*

Conclusion

Although Ms Miller was certainly aware that the case would generate enormous publicity, she was taken by surprise by the level and virulence of the online comments. She said in her book:

“Social media, email and other platforms create breeding grounds for hate that are terrifying. I've watched as perpetrators have discovered a new boldness... they no longer linger alone in their rooms or at the end of some bar in a pub; social media has amplified their destructive voices and created echo chambers that echo their views.”

Gina Miller is a case study in the echo chamber of anonymous hate that exists in not-so-dark corners of social media. The 140-character comments are aimed at hurting and destroying her. Few would be made face to face. Many governments, including the UK and the US, are losing patience with social media companies' inability to control the users on their platforms. This case adds weight to the arguments of those calling for stronger regulation.

Notes

¹ The data in *What Makes a Target?* was captured in real time, but this dataset was collected in 2018. This means that some seriously abusive tweets may be missing, having been deleted by the users or by Twitter in the interim. This dataset may therefore slightly under-represent hostility.

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Note on the contributors

Dr Amy Binns spent ten years as a newspaper reporter before entering academia. She teaches print and digital journalism at the University of Central Lancashire. Her research is largely around finding practical solutions for difficult behaviour online, which involves working with a wide range of people including media industry professionals. She still loves a good story, and is currently working on a biography of science fiction author John Wyndham.

The sentiment analysis software used in this research was developed by Dr Martin Bateman, senior lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. His research interests are, networks and distributed systems, network based computer forensics, protocol analysis, video identification and cloud systems.

John Mair is the lead editor on this book as he has been on the previous 24 *Abramis 'Hackademic'* volumes. He is a former BBC television producer and university lecturer. To declare an interest, he too was born in British Guiana, knew Gina's father Doodnauth Singh SC, and has put Gina speaking on three platforms in the UK.