What makes a target: politicians and abuse on social media

Politicians are known to be targets for some of the worst abuse on social media, including rape and death threats. But exactly how bad is it? Who gets it worst? And where is this onslaught of negativity taking us, asks Dr Amy Binns

Although often at odds, journalists and politicians share many of the same problems on social media. Both are obliged to maintain a public profile, and to remain cheerful and polite no matter how gross the provocation. Both struggle with the competing demands of professionalism and likeability – often a zero-sum game. Both seek trust and respect on platforms notorious for dishonesty and no-holds-barred disdain.

And both may be seen as authority figures, part of the Establishment, and thus fair game for cutting down to size (Binns, 2017).

Pugnacious criticism of politicians has always been a part of the system. Lord Bew chaired a Government report on intimidation of MPs, partly in response to the increase of abuse on social media, but said at its launch: "Politics is a rough old game, and it should be a rough game."

Nobody's policies should get a free pass, and MPs' postbags have always contained anger and abuse; but social media has allowed this to reach a level of personal hostility that has shocked and disturbed politicians and commentators.

It has also removed the traditional filters that protected politicians. Secretaries used to discard the most vicious letters from the 'green-ink brigade', so called because the unhinged seemed to favour that colour, but now every insult pops up on their phones.

The hatred and even threats aimed at politicians, particularly on Twitter, had been an issue for some time but the death of Jo Cox MP threw it into sharp focus. She had been subject to abuse on Twitter in relation to her Remainer stance. Although her killer had not sent threats himself, he researched right wing groups online and repeatedly shouted "Britain First" as he stabbed her.

The links were summed up by a tweet by Beth Murray, a social media activist: "Female MPs get daily death and rape threats: 'It's just online, why can't you ignore it?'. Female MP is murdered: 'An unexpected tragedy.'"

How can we measure hostility?

We have stored millions of tweets sent to MPs from the end of 2016 in a database. We are still capturing data, but the results below relate to tweets sent between 18 March 2017 and 11 June, three days after the general election.[1]

We then categorised the tweets using sentiment analysis software. In order to focus on tweets seen by the MPs themselves, we have only categorised tweets sent as mentions using the MP's @username. These are tweets that will appear in the MP's stream (unless the sender has already been blocked). This excludes messages which may use the MP's name but will not necessarily be seen by the person such as "Dress himself?! Have you seen Boris Johnson? He's a complete tramp."

We only categorised tweets which mentioned a single MP. This removes confusing tweets sent to multiple accounts, such as: "@theresa_may you are a disgrace, vote @jeremycorbyn #labour #hero". It also removes tweets in which the MP may not be the target of the emotion, but has been copied in, such as: "@southernrail you are ruining my life @theresa_may @jeremycorbyn".

These @messages were then categorised as positive, neutral, disagree, hostile or threat using bespoke machine learning software, trained using this dataset, to measure the emotion behind the messages people send to politicians. This is a far more reliable method than simply searching for keywords, such as profanities. We defined hostility as insults aimed at the person rather than the action or policy.

Who is hated the most?

The results were surprising. Firstly, although Twitter is seen as an unremittingly hostile place, threats were a very small part of the overall dataset. We initially intended to create a separate category of threats but found these were too rare to train the software (we require a dataset of at least 500 examples).

Based on the numbers we found during manual categorising, we estimate threatening tweets at roughly 0.1% of all tweets sent to MPs. This is not to downplay their significance. This may still be a significant number for higher-profile MPs receiving hundreds of messages a day. Also, although rare, they are likely to make a much greater impact on the MP than the hundreds of other tweets received.

Secondly, although hostile behaviour directed at women receives most press coverage, our data shows little difference between the sexes after removing Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May from the database (due to the disproportionate number of tweets they receive).

Jewish and white male MPs receive marginally more negativity than their female counterparts, by percentage of total messages received. Asian men receive significantly more abuse than Asian women MPs, while black women receive more than black men. However, there is a relatively small number of non-white MPs, and these figures may be disproportionately affected by high profile MPs, particularly Chuka Umunna and Diane Abbott.

Differences by race and gender

	White		Asian		Black		Jewish	
Classification	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male
Hostile	13%	16%	13%	22%	19%	14%	13%	14%
Disagree	23%	25%	23%	24%	20%	21%	20%	24%
Others	64%	59%	64%	53%	61%	64%	66%	62%

Differences by party:

	Party			
Classification	Con	Labour	Lib Dem	SNP
Hostile	15%	13%	18%	13%
Disagree	26%	21%	28%	21%
Others	59%	66%	53%	66%

Although this may seem counter-intuitive given the much greater publicity regarding abuse of female MPs, it's actually in line with other smaller studies (Phillips, 2017); while some studies have only focussed on women, so cannot offer comparisons (Amnesty International, 2017).

The major drivers of hostility become clearer when we look at the people who receive the greatest percentage of hate as a proportion of their feed: high profile jobs and criticising Corbyn resulted in long term hostility. Incautious public appearances or tweets resulted in major spikes.

Scottish politics also proved more aggressive, with both of the sole elected representatives of Labour and the Conservatives acting as lightning conductors for online hatred. Greater numbers of non-SNP representatives could have dissipated some of this hatred.

We ranked the top 100 most messaged MPs [2]. The ten receiving the greatest *percentage* of hostility were:

Chris Leslie (32%), Labour MP and Corbyn critic, enormous spike after a radio interview.

Boris Johnson (29%), Conservative minister and Brexit campaigner.

Jeremy Hunt (27%), Conservative minister.

Simon Danczuk (24.5%), Labour MP, Corbyn critic, columnist for right-wing newspapers.

David Mundell (24.5%), Scotland's sole Conservative MP at that time.

George Osborne (24%), Conservative MP and newspaper editor.

Neil Coyle (24%), Labour MP and Corbyn critic.
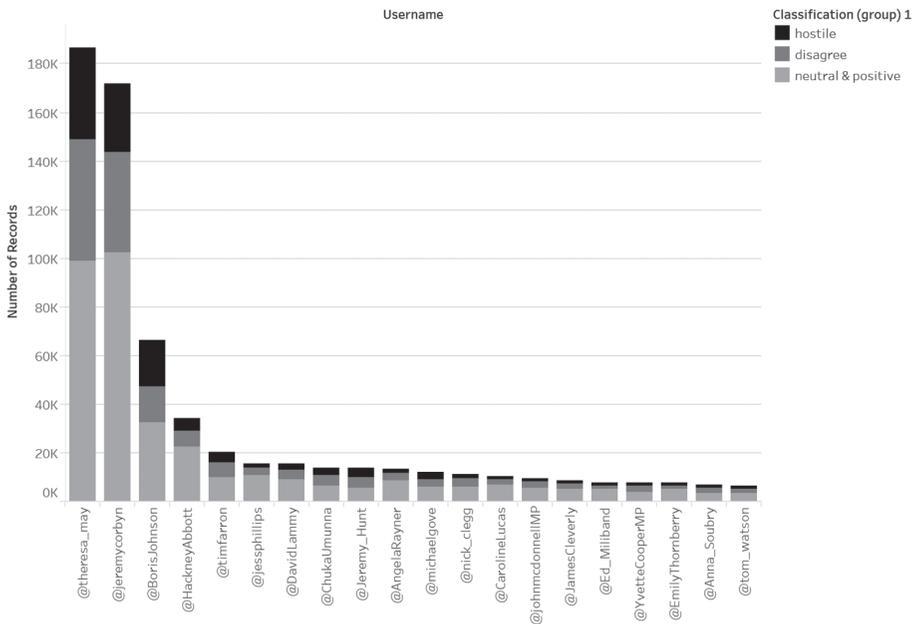
Sajid Javid (23.5%), Conservative minister.

Ian Murray (23.5), Scotland's sole Labour MP at that time.

Corri Wilson (23%) SNP MP, faced allegations of wrongly using funds to support her campaigns.

Michael Gove (22%), Conservative minister and Brexit campaigner.

A different picture emerged when looking at high numbers of hostile tweets. These were usually part of a very busy feed. Diane Abbott and Jess Phillips, who are known to receive a lot of hostility, appear high on the graph below, but mid-table when ranked by percentage. This is because, in addition to receiving a lot of hostile tweets, they also receive a lot of positive and neutral tweets and are generally high profile. Ms Phillips is also a heavy Twitter user and has a lot of long conversations with supporters. Boris Johnson, however, scored highly for both percentage and total numbers of hostile tweets.

Top 20 most messaged MPs
By single @messages

Sum of Number of Records for each Username. Color shows details about Classification (group) 1. The view is filtered on Username, which has multiple members selected.

These figures should not necessarily be read as disproving links between hostility, gender and race; as high public profiles clearly have an overwhelming effect on traffic, and front bench jobs at this time were predominantly held by white males. In order to provide a definitive analysis, we would need a set of MPs from each of these groups who were neither frontbench or high profile, neither strongly pro- or anti-Corbyn, active on Twitter without courting publicity and who had not made an embarrassing television appearance or an incautious tweet. There are not sufficient MPs in each group to do this.

However, we can say that hostility on Twitter crosses demographic and party groups; and is not a problem for only one party, sex or race. It is fed by publicity on and off Twitter, so increases for people with higher profiles. It is also notably an issue for Labour MPs who criticise Jeremy Corbyn.

Subject or target? Our two minutes' hate
Through this research, we have examined tweets with single @usernames which will show in the MP's feed. We assume the senders are seeking to directly insult the MP; but some people use @usernames without any expectation of the MP actually seeing the thread.

In many hostile cases, the sender is discussing a major public event and tags in some of his/her own friends, along with the MP. They may then have a conversation about the MP's faults – a conversation which will appear in the MP's timeline. But the sender may have no expectation of them seeing the tweet amidst thousands of others. The sender may just be thoughtlessly using the @username as a hashtag, rather than intending a direct insult.

Such threads are essentially conversations between like-minded people. The MP is the subject of their conversation, but not the target. The real point of these conversations is not necessarily to distress the MP, but to build trust and community feeling between the other participants in the conversation. Bizarrely, abuse is being used as a form of virtue signalling.

As predicted by Orwell, hatred is used to create a sense of belonging and community-building. By including an MP of an opposing viewpoint in their abusive tweets, they prove their orthodoxy and credentials for belonging to the group. This is the 21st century's Two Minutes' Hate. This is how we prove we are goodthinkful.

The gates close
One result of the unremitting hostility online has been the quiet return of the gatekeepers. Social media was originally seen as a way for public figures to directly reach their audiences without the intermediaries of the press or broadcasters. It was also an opportunity for campaigners and constituents to circumvent the gatekeepers of secretaries and staff.

These sidedoors to power have been closing as MPs grow weary of abuse. Many MPs, such as Britain's sole Chinese origin MP Alan Mak, now state on their profile that they do not respond to enquiries via Twitter. For them, Twitter has become another one-way tool for pushing out media releases. Others are taking their conversations to the peaceful uplands of Instagram (Le Conte, 2017).

One prominent female politician told me she no longer looks at Twitter for 48 hours after a television appearance: she leaves it to her staff to monitor her feed. Others use Twitter's own tools to block hate-filled messages. Jess Phillips has said she filters her tweets for anything likely to include abuse, describing her system

as "peak block, peak mute" (Elliott, 2017) and has discussed leaving the platform altogether (Press Association, 2016). Whilst these are reasonable responses to a distressing situation, this means one of the key benefits of social media has already been partially lost.

Where now?

Could an online climate of hostility result in more sensitive people being reluctant to enter public life? If so, this would leave our most important institutions to the more thick-skinned or even arrogant who are least likely to care about criticism.

This was one of the major concerns of Lord Bew's report on intimidation, which stated: "The overwhelming view of Parliamentary candidates who provided evidence… was that intimidation is already discouraging individuals from standing for public offices… If we want a diverse and experienced set of candidates for public offices, we need to address intimidation in the political arena." (Committee for Standards in Public Life, 2017)

This report recommended creating an electoral offence of intimidating Parliamentary candidates. Theresa May has endorsed this (Dearden, 2018).

It also recommended legislation to make social media companies liable for illegal content online, in the same way as newspapers are held responsible for everything they publish, even if written by readers and appearing on a letters page. Former Culture Secretary Matt Hancock made clear he was in favour of legislation (Tobitt, 2018), possibly creating a hybrid legal classification between platform and publisher.

UK politicians are not the only ones losing patience. Mark Zuckerberg's contrition tour has continued this year with appearances in front of US and EU bodies (Smith, 2018) (Rankin, 2018). Facebook and other social media companies are hurriedly hiring extra moderators and building sentiment analysis tools to try and cut back on the most offensive or criminal content.

But if politicians continue to see the worst of unregulated free speech every time they pick up their phones, we could see regulation that permanently curtails abuse.

Notes

[1] There is a natural break of a few days at this point as the set of accounts changed due to MPs winning or losing seats.

[2] We focussed on the most messaged 100 in order to discount the many MPs who are barely active on Twitter, but who may receive a small spike in hostility from half a dozen constituents angry about a local matter. This could have the result of a backbencher topping the charts due to a missed bin collection.

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Note on the contributor

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.