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Islamophobia, Jo Cox MP and Cyber Hate Speech

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The following evidence offers a critical review and focus on issues related to the impact of Islamophobia and the cyber hate speech following the murder of Jo Cox MP and Brexit.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research has shown that Muslims, particularly those with a ‘visible’ Muslim identity, are more vulnerable to anti-Muslim hostility, intimidation, abuse and threats of violence. Indeed, for repeat victims, it is difficult to isolate the online threats from the intimidation, violence and abuse that they suffer offline.\(^1\) Rather, there is a continuity of anti-Muslim hostility in both the virtual and the physical globalised world.

1.2 Following the tragic death of Jo Cox MP and the EU referendum vote in June 2016, the UK witnessed a sudden surge in hate crimes. This led to an increase by 42% in England and Wales since the Brexit result was announced and 289 hate crime incidents were reported alone on the 25\(^{th}\) June, the day after the result was announced. According to official police figures, a total of 3,076 incidents were recorded across the UK between the 16\(^{th}\) and 30\(^{th}\) June, which is a dramatic increase on the 915 reported incidents recorded over the same period in 2015.\(^2\)

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2. Causes and Drivers of Anti-Muslim Hatred

2.1 Hate crime is the umbrella concept used in its broadest sense to describe incidents motivated by hate, hostility or prejudice towards an individual’s identity (Chakraborti and Garland, 2009). Specifically, the College of Policing (2014) earmarks hate crime as offences that are motivated by hostility or prejudice on particular grounds – race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status and disability.

2.2 The prevalence and severity of anti-Muslim hate crimes are influenced by ‘trigger’ events of local, national and international significance. Hate crimes are communicative acts, which are often provoked by antecedent events that incite a desire for retribution in the targeted group, towards the group that share similar characteristics to the perpetrators. From this perspective, hate crimes increase following ‘trigger’ events as they operate to galvanise tensions and sentiments against the suspected perpetrators and groups associated with them.

2.3. Evidence has shown that anti-Muslim hate crimes have increased significantly following ‘trigger’ attacks including terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who choose to identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam (Hanes and Machin, 2014). Spikes in anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents following ‘trigger’ events are not confined to offline settings; rather, the offline pattern is replicated online (Awan, 2014).

2.4 Crime can incur a number of different ‘costs’ following a victimisation experience that involve emotional, psychological, physical and financial liabilities. Smith et al. (2012) via their analysis of the British Crime Survey (2009/10 and 2010/11) found

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8 Awan, I. (2014) ‘Islamophobia on Twitter: A Typology of Online Hate Against Muslims on Social Media’ Policy & Internet 6 (2): 133-150.
that, compared to non-hate crime victims, victims of hate crime were statistically significantly more likely to say that they were emotionally affected by the incident (86% compared to 92%), and more likely to be ‘very much’ affected (17% compared to 38%). In particular, 67% experience anger; 50% annoyance; 40% shock; 39% fear; 35% loss of confidence/vulnerability; 23% anxiety; 20% depression; and 17% record difficulty sleeping.

2.5 In the context of anti-Muslim hate crime, both online and offline attacks upon Muslims ‘hurt’ more than ‘normal’ crimes as they are seen as an attack upon the victims’ Muslim identity. From this perspective, the impact of anti-Muslim hate crime may exceed that of ‘normal’ crime because of victims’ perceived and actual vulnerability due to their affiliation to Islam.

2.6 Research has shown that participants suffer from a range of psychological and emotional responses to anti-Muslim hate, from lowered self-confidence and insecurity to depression, isolation and anxiety. Given that Muslims are targeted because of the ‘visibility’ of their Muslim identity – which is easily identifiable because of their Muslim name and/or Muslim appearance either in the virtual world or in the physical sphere – victims are unable to take comfort in the belief that what happened to them was simply random and ‘could have happened to anyone’. Rather, they are forced to view this abuse as an attack on their Muslim identity and this has severe implications for their levels of confidence and self-esteem as well as their feelings of belonging and safety in the UK. As might be expected, experiences of anti-Muslim hate crime increases feelings of vulnerability, fear and insecurity.

2.7 According to Hanes and Machin (2014), if attitudes towards Muslims are influenced by ‘trigger’ attacks and by media coverage of these attacks, then this finding fits with the proposition of ‘attitudinal shocks,’ where a driver of hate crimes is the level of hatred or bigotry for a particular group in society, which may be influenced by media framing and coverage of attacks. Furthermore, it is important to

recognise that the visibility of Islam is key to revealing the individual’s Muslim identity and thus triggering anti-Muslim attacks.

2.8 Indeed, it is well established in the literature that there is a significant relationship between being visible as a Muslim and experiencing anti-Muslim hate crime (see Allen et al., 2013). In this context, if the markers of Islam (for example, a Muslim dress or a Muslim name) are absent, ‘passing’ as a non-Muslim is possible for those without conspicuous Muslim names or dress, and those who do not ‘look like’ a Muslim. Correspondingly, victims are convinced that it is their distinctive Muslim appearance that made them a target of anti-Muslim hate.

2.9 In addition to the significance of ‘trigger’ events and the visibility of the Muslim identity, the literature highlights that both race and religion are interlinked in anti-Muslim hate crime. Within this framework, the Muslim identity has been subject to a process of racialisation whereby this identity is defined on the basis of the individual’s race rather than exclusively on the basis of their religion. Indeed, anti-Muslim hate crime and racism were inextricably intertwined. From this perspective anti-Muslim hate crime is understood as a ‘new’ form of racism, which can be attributed to anti-Muslim attitudes as well as to racist sentiments. In this regard, anti-Muslim hate crime and racism become mutually reinforcing phenomena.

3. Jo Cox MP, Hate Crimes and Brexit

3.1 In 2016, we produced a report in joint collaboration between the authors, Dr Imran Awan and Dr Irene Zempi, and HOPE not hate. The aim of this report was to examine cyber hate speech on social media (specifically Twitter) in relation to the murder of Jo Cox MP and the EU Referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) in June 2016.

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3.2 Evidence shows that hate crime surged in the UK in the following weeks after the EU Referendum vote, and still remains at significantly higher levels than a year ago. Reports of hate crimes have risen 58% in the aftermath of this vote, according to the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC, 2016). Police suggested that some people had taken the ‘leave’ vote as a ‘licence’ to behave in a racist or discriminatory way.

3.3 Against this background, the authors conducted the first qualitative study of cyber hate speech on Twitter, focusing on:
● cyber hate speech as a result of the murder of British MP Jo Cox by Thomas Mair.
● cyber hate speech as a result of the Brexit vote in the EU Referendum in the UK.

The report concludes with recommendations in terms of preventing and responding to cyber hate speech on Twitter.

3.4 This study examined over 53,000 tweets between June 2016 and July 2016, following the murder of British MP Jo Cox and the EU Referendum vote.

3.5 A key theme that emerged on Twitter was the depiction of Thomas Mair as a ‘hero’ for murdering Cox. Individuals had tagged pictures in their tweets praising Mair for killing Jo Cox, using the hashtag #HeroMair.

3.6 Thomas Mair was also referred to as a ‘patriot’. Using the hashtags #VoteLeave and #JoCox, Mair’s killing of Jo Cox was referred to as a ‘sacrifice’ that should not go in vain and to this end people were encouraged to vote Leave in the Referendum.

3.7 A key theme that emerged on Twitter was the notion that Jo Cox ‘deserved to die’ because ‘she supported rape gangs’, with references to the child sexual exploitation scandal in Rotherham, South Yorkshire.

3.8 Jo Cox had campaigned for the rights of Syrian refugees in her first year as an MP. In light of this, she was labelled as a ‘traitor’ and ‘she got what she deserved’ among Tweets observed. She was also labelled a supporter of Islamist terrorism.

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3.9 In the Tweets analysed Muslims were often described as ‘rapists’. Since the majority of Syrians were Muslims, the inference was that Syrian refugees were ‘all rapists’.

3.10 Hate crimes are message crimes. Cyber hate speech can lead to message crimes which, in the case of Jo Cox, means that her murder can be used to send a message that anyone (including politicians) are at risk if they are seen to be sympathetic towards the victim group.

3.11 Cyber hate speech on Twitter also acts as an echo chamber, where hateful comments are reinforced and can impact upon wider community cohesion.

3.12 There is a link between online and offline cyber hate speech. Experiences of xenophobic hostility lead to communities feeling a sense of fear, insecurity and vulnerability. It also leads to an increase in offline incidents where both these ‘trigger’ events (reactions to Jo Cox’s murder and the EU Referendum process) led to a rise in xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia.

3.13 Trigger events in the case of Brexit has continued to spike despite most trigger events losing momentum within the first few weeks.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Social Media Training and Workshop for Schools
The authors argue that for a long-term sustainable change of attitudes, social media training should be provided for teachers and children in schools which can help equip young people from an early age in tackling cyber bullying, cyber harassment and cyber incitement.

4.2 Counter-Messaging Protocol
The authors feel that in some cases a significant amount of work in relation to counter-messaging can help create a positive space on social media platforms such as Twitter.

4.3 A duty of care for social media platforms
The authors believe that since users must sign up to a code of conduct, social media companies must also sign up to a specific duty of care and conduct.

4.4 Social media companies improving their response to online hate
The authors feel that social media companies must be more proactive in responding to online hate crime. This includes working alongside the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and prosecuting those who are responsible for posting, sharing and endorsing harmful content.

4.5 Debating what is Hate Speech and striking the balance with free speech
The authors believe that there should be a national debate on how we balance free speech with actual accounts of cyber hate speech.

4.6 Online archive of hate incidents
The authors argue that an online tool that can help report things directly to the police through social media networks is important.

4.7 Improving the lives of victims of online hate crime
The authors feel that much of the discourse about online hate ignores the role of victims and much more can be done by relevant stakeholders when considering online hate impacts.

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