And they thought papers were rude

Amy Binns and Martin Bateman

Politicians thought social media would allow them to speak to voters without journalists skewing the message. Then the trolls moved in

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.

Both may also be seen as authority figures, part of the establishment, and thus fair game for cutting down to size. Pugnacious criticism of politicians has always been a part of the system. When Lord Bew chaired a government report on intimidation of MPs, partly in response to the increase of abuse on social media, he said at its launch: "Politics is a rough old game, and it should be a rough game."

MPs' postbags have always contained abuse; but social media has allowed a level of personal hostility that has disturbed politicians and commentators. It has also removed traditional filters that protected politicians. Secretaries used to bin the most vicious letters from the "green-ink brigade" a colour the unhinged seem to favour – but now every insult comes on phones.

While the hatred and threats aimed at politicians, particularly on Twitter, had been an issue for some time, the death of MP Jo Cox in 2016 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.

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The links were summed up in 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.'"

As a means of measuring hostility, we stored millions of tweets sent to MPs from the end of 2016. We are still capturing data, but the results below relate to tweets sent between March 18 and June 11, 2017, three days after the general election.

We categorise the tweets using sentiment analysis software. To focus on tweets seen by the MPs themselves, we categorise only 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 categorise only tweets which mention 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 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.

The results have been surprising. First, although Twitter is seen as an unremittingly hostile place, threats are 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 per cent 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 show little difference between the sexes after removing Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May from the database (owing 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	
	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:

	Conservatives	**Labour**	**Liberal Democrats**	**SNP**
Hostile	15%	13%	18%	13%
Disagree	26%	21%	28%	21%
Others	59%	66%	53%	66%

Although this may seem counterintuitive, given the much greater publicity regarding abuse of female MPs, it's actually in line with smaller studies. The major drivers of hostility become clearer when we look at the people who receive the greatest percentage of hatred as a proportion of their feed: high-profile jobs and criticising Jeremy Corbyn resulted in long-term hostility. Incautious public appearances or tweets resulted in major spikes.

Scottish politics also proved more aggressive, with 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.

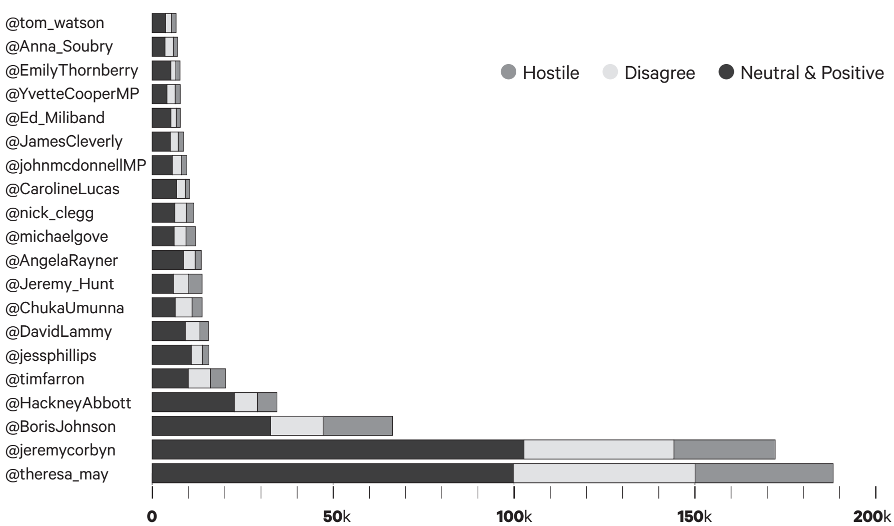
We ranked the top 100 most-messaged MPs (to discount the many MPs who are barely active on Twitter, but who may receive a small spike in hostility from half a dozen constituents angry about a local matter. This could have the result of a backbencher topping the charts owing to a missed bin collection). Not all are still MPs.

THE 11 RECEIVING THE GREATEST PERCENTAGE OF HOSTILITY WERE:

32%	**Chris Leslie**	Labour MP and Corbyn critic, enormous spike after a radio interview
29%	**Boris Johnson**	Conservative minister and Brexit campaigner
27%	**Jeremy Hunt**	Conservative minister
24.5%	**Simon Danczuk**	Labour MP, Corbyn critic, columnist for right-wing newspapers
24.5%	**David Mundell**	Scotland's sole Conservative MP at that time
24%	**George Osborne**	Conservative MP, newspaper editor
24%	**Neil Coyle**	Labour MP and Corbyn critic
23.5%	**Sajid Javid**	Conservative minister
23.5%	**Ian Murray**	Scotland's sole Labour MP at that time
23%	**Corri Wilson**	SNP MP, faced allegations of wrongly using funds to support her campaigns
22%	**Michael Gove**	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 are 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 @MESSAGE MARCH 18-JUNE 12 2017



These figures should not be read as disproving links between hostility, gender and race, as high public profiles have an effect on traffic, and front bench jobs at this time were predominantly held by white males. To provide a definitive analysis, we would need MPs from each of these groups who were neither front bench nor high profile, neither strongly pro- nor anti-Corbyn, active on Twitter without courting publicity and who had not made an embarrassing television appearance or an incautious tweet. There are not enough 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, gender 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. But are the MPs truly targets, or just the subjects of hostility? This research examined tweets with single @usernames which show in the MP's feed. We assume senders are seeking to 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 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".

One result of the hostility online has been the return of gatekeepers. Social media was seen as a way for public figures to reach audiences without press or broadcasters. It was also an opportunity for campaigners and constituents to circumvent the gatekeepers of secretaries and staff. These side-doors to power have been closing as MPs grow weary of abuse. Many, such as Britain's sole Chinese origin MP Alan Mak, now do not respond to inquiries via Twitter. For them, Twitter has become another tool for pushing out media releases. Others are taking conversations to the peaceful uplands of Instagram.

One prominent female politician told us 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". Whilst these are reasonable responses to a distressing situation, this means one of the key benefits of social media has already been partially lost.

Could online hostility make more sensitive people reluctant to enter public life? Would this leave our most important institutions to the thick-skinned or arrogant who are least likely to care about criticism?

This was one of the major concerns of Lord Bew's report on intimidation, which recommended an electoral offence of intimidating parliamentary candidates. Theresa May has endorsed this. It also recommended legislation to make social media companies liable for illegal content online, in the same way that newspapers are held responsible for everything they publish.

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. Facebook and other social media companies are hiring extra moderators and building sentiment analysis tools to try to 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.

Dr Amy Binns spent 10 years as a newspaper reporter before entering academia. She teaches print and digital journalism at the University of Central Lancashire. The sentiment analysis software used in this research was developed by Dr Martin Bateman, senior lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire.

This is an edited extract from Anti-Social Media? The Impact on Journalism and Society, *available £19.95 from Richard@abramis.co.uk or at Amazon.*