

## Social Media

### Online vitriol and death threats – a way of life for MPs

Social media has made political partisanship increasingly hostile and dangerous

## Helen Lewis

YESTERDAY by: Helen Lewis

Many members of parliament now regard death threats the way the rest of us think about long commutes or boring meetings: a grim but unavoidable part of the job.

In the past year, I have twice found myself talking to a female MP just after she had received a threat. One woman was in the Labour party, the other a Conservative, but their responses were similar: call the police, stop advertising your movements for a while, and try to get on with your work. What prompted these threats, you might ask? Brexit in one case, and the vote to approve air strikes on Syria.

### **Keyboard warriors delight in neologisms used to lump their political opponents into a dehumanised mass**

inquiry.

All politicians agree that the level of abuse and threats they face has dramatically increased. At a Westminster Hall debate on July 12, the Conservative MP Simon Hart said his whips' office received "at least three credible threats to colleagues every week" and Labour's Paula Sherriff added that "the last election was the most brutal I can certainly imagine". The prime minister has now ordered an

Unfortunately, because there are politicians involved, the issue has become politicised. The Conservatives claim that Jeremy Corbyn's rise has emboldened the hard left, whose anti-imperialist rhetoric sometimes strays into [anti-Semitism](#). Labour cries foul over the way the Tories made Diane Abbott — a rare black woman at the top of politics — into the prime punchbag of their general election campaign. Both these accusations have merit. But both sides, and their supporters, are also guilty of holding opponents to standards that they do not meet themselves.

The rising tide of vitriol feels like an inevitable consequence of our hyper-partisan age. In the US,

“very unfavourable” views of Democrats by Republicans (and vice versa) more than doubled between 1992 and 2014, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). Most of those who held such views felt the other side’s policies were “so misguided that they threaten the nation’s wellbeing”.

By 2010, this polarisation had created an atmosphere of such bitterness that comedian Jon Stewart organised a [Rally To Restore Sanity](#) in Washington DC. One of the suggested slogans captured the mood: “I disagree with you, but I’m pretty sure you’re not Hitler.”

As Ms Abbott herself noted in the Westminster Hall debate, the internet, and particularly [social media](#), must take much of the blame. (“When I first became an MP, if you wanted to attack an MP you had to write a letter,” she said.) A 2015 [study](#) by Yphtach Lelkes, Gaurav Sood and Shanto Iyengar tracked political views in the US alongside the rollout of faster internet services and found that “access to broadband internet increases partisan hostility”. We are less exposed to contradictory opinions online, and those we do encounter don’t come attached to a person we might respect. Anonymity breeds disinhibition, and there is little stigma attached to endless hectoring, unlike at a real-world political meeting.

Perhaps it is also the case that political beliefs have replaced other identity markers as the most acceptable form of tribalism. In liberal democracies, we frown on creating a hated “other” out of those of a different race or religion. But humans still have an innate desire to form groups, and so keyboard warriors delight in neologisms used to lump their political opponents into a dehumanised mass. (If you want to stare into the abyss, look up words such as cuck, [melt](#), terf and zio.) As [Professor Iyengar](#) found: “Partisans discriminate against opposing partisans . . . to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race.”

Unsurprisingly, then, both ends of the political spectrum downplay abuse when it suits them. The preferred rightwing response is a dismissive appeal to irony — lighten up, people are just sounding off! — which ignores both the intimidating power of words and how inflammatory rhetoric can stoke offline violence.

The leftwing defence is different: the abuse might be ugly, but some people bring it on themselves because of their repellent — or even just questionable — beliefs. This is a lousy way to adjudicate, because whose anger is “understandable” entirely depends on your starting position. A fundamentalist who bombs an abortion clinic might feel his anger over what he sees as the murder of innocent babies is “understandable”.

For rigorous but civilised debate to flourish, we should reject all partisan attempts to excuse bad behaviour. Social norms should not be subject to passing a righteousness test — and yes, online vitriol has real, damaging consequences. Otherwise, it won't be long before I next bump into MP who has just received a death threat.

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