INCREASE IN ANTI-MINORITY HATE CRIMES: Evidence of the link to social media – and President Trump's tweets

Can social media promote hostility against minorities? A new study by **Karsten Müller** and **Carlo Schwarz**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019, examines the link between Twitter's most prominent user – Donald Trump – and the recent rise in anti-Muslim sentiments in the United States.

Their research finds that Trump's tweets about Muslims tend to be followed by increased reporting about Muslims by cable news stations, Fox News in particular, and a spike in hate crimes targeting Muslims. To get closer to potential causal effects, the researchers leverage President Trump's well-documented passion for golf.

As it turns out, Trump's golf habit does not prevent him from tweeting, but golfing shifts the content of his messages: on golf days, he tweets less about daily politics and more about minorities, especially Muslims. Using this source of variation, the study shows that his anti-Muslim tweets are still highly predictive of anti-Muslim sentiments on the following days.

More…

In recent weeks, the 45th President of the United States has once again been criticised for his inflammatory tweets about minorities. Critics claim that Trump's rhetoric has real-life consequences. Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar, for example, linked tweets by Trump targeting her Muslim faith to 'an increase in direct threats on my life'.

Indeed, the incidence of anti-Muslim hate crimes – one metric of Islamophobic sentiments – has increased in the United States since 2015, starting around the beginning of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. This rise in hate crimes has also been concentrated in areas where many people use Twitter. While interesting, these facts alone tell us little about a potential role of social media. After all, places with high Twitter usage are also different in many other ways.

From correlation to causality

To get closer to causal effects, this study makes use of a 'tipping point' in Twitter's popularity: the platform's presence at South by South West (SXSW) Conference and Festivals in March 2007. During the event, Twitter activity increased to 60,000 tweets per day from 20,000 the week before. The social connections of these early Twitter adopters at SXSW – which drew more than 200,000 visitors in 2019 – were key to the platform's success story.

In the home counties of Twitter's early users, the volume of tweets shot up considerably in the months following SXSW 2007. Indeed, these counties still have around 12% more Twitter users today. This is still true after accounting for the locations of SXSW followers who signed up to Twitter *before* the event. Although these earlier followers were also interested in SXSW and Twitter, they were not instrumental for Twitter's spread across the United States.

This study confirms the patterns on anti-Muslim hate crime using this source of quasi-random variation. Further, around the start of Trump's presidential campaign, the home counties of Twitter's early adopters at SXSW also saw an upward shift in anti-Muslim hate crimes and hashtags such as *#stopislam* or *#banislam*.

Could Trump's tweets be one trigger for anti-Muslim sentiment?

To make sense of these patterns, the researchers go to one potential driver of anti-Muslim sentiments: Donald Trump's Twitter feed. They find a clear pattern in the data. Trump's tweets about Muslims tend to be followed by increased reporting about Muslims by cable news stations, Fox News in particular, and a spike in hate crimes targeting Muslims. To get closer to potential causal effects, the researchers leverage President Trump's well-documented passion for golf.

As it turns out, Trump's golf habit does not prevent him from tweeting, but golfing shifts the content of his messages: on golf days, he tweets less about daily politics and more about minorities, especially Muslims. Using this source of variation, the study shows that his anti-Muslim tweets are still highly predictive of anti-Muslim sentiments on the following days.

This study provides some evidence that social media, especially when used by powerful individuals, can enable changes in what people think is socially acceptable. This could also mean that a few potential perpetrators of hate crimes believe that their actions are less heinous than they really are.

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A working paper is available on SSRN at:
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3149103.

Note: This research project is a considerably revised version of an older working paper entitled 'Making America Hate Again? Twitter and Hate Crime under Trump'.

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