

The impact of Brexit on far-right groups in the UK: Research Briefing

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Summary

Over the past two weeks, British police, NGOs and researchers have been exploring the impact of the Brexit campaign and election result on the rise of racist and xenophobic incidents. The police reported a fivefold increase in reports of hate crime in the five days following the announcement of the Brexit vote.¹ In addition to the shocking and tragic murder of MP Jo Cox, examples of racist and xenophobic incidents have included threatening phone calls to an African Caribbean care group, numerous Islamophobic attacks, as well as Polish families receiving flyers through their letterboxes reading 'Leave the EU, no more Polish vermin'.²

Despite the focus on measuring increased xenophobia and racism, there has been little to no research published on whether the Brexit campaign and vote resulted in a measurable increase in support or membership of far-right groups in the UK.

To do this, ISD utilised the social listening tool Crimson Hexagon to investigate the following research questions:

1. *How did the Brexit campaign and the murder of Jo Cox impact on far right political parties and street movements?*
2. *Did the use of derogatory xenophobic terms on Twitter increase throughout the final two months of the campaign?*

Our research suggests that:

- UK far-right groups gained a significant number of followers from the murder of Jo Cox MP and the Brexit campaign. Britain First's Twitter followership increased by over 700 in the 5 days following Jo Cox's murder.
- Britain's four most prominent far-right groups all amplified their online reach during the Brexit campaign, with British Unity increasing its visibility on Twitter by almost 12,000% last month.
- The English Defence League, the British National Party and Britain First were all talked about in a more positive way online following both the murder of Jo Cox and the EU referendum result.
- The election of Sadiq Khan as Mayor of London and the terror attack in Orlando had far greater impact on the use of anti-immigrant language online than the EU referendum result.
- While levels of support online are extremely important to understand the current state of far right groups, the extent to which increased online support and visibility for far right groups translates into actual support offline remains unknown at this point.

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/police-report-fivefold-increase-race-hate-crimes-since-brexit-result>

2 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/brexit-eu-referendum-racism-racial-abuse-hate-crime-polish-latest-leave-immigration-a7105746.html#gallery>

Background & methodology

The potential consequences of a Brexit vote for the future of far-right movements in the UK were written about at length in the months leading up to the EU referendum. However, very few of these articles were grounded in analysis of how the activity and popularity of these groups had already begun to change as a result of the campaign.

It is claimed that the significance of a majority Brexit vote for community cohesion lies in the legitimization of xenophobic sentiment that has loomed in the background of the Leave campaign's immigration rhetoric. These narratives resonated and gained traction with communities who felt they had lost control, or simply lost out, because of national immigration policy. Regardless of the Leave campaign actively trying to distance itself from UK far-right movements, inevitable parallels were drawn between the narratives of the two.

These incidents may be localised and unaffiliated with any group but they demonstrate an adherence to the narratives propagated by far-right groups during the lead-up to the referendum, and the potential support for such movements going forward.

ISD has been monitoring the impact of the past month's political incidents, including the murder of Jo Cox MP and the results of the EU referendum, on a range of UK-based far-right groups. Our newly acquired tool, Crimson Hexagon, allowed us to retrospectively analyse a selection of influential far-right groups on Twitter to determine how these events (among others) may have affected their activities and how the wider Twitter community subsequently engaged with them. While the tool is capable of in-depth analysis of social media accounts, it does not lend itself to a broad overview of how the UK far-right has been affected by recent events. For example, one of our original research questions sought to determine to what extent those who voted to leave the EU in the referendum were motivated by immigration policy. This proved too difficult methodologically and therefore a more specific focus on the Twitter accounts of UK-based far-right groups was selected.

The accounts were chosen on the basis of their legacy and influence in the discourse of UK far-right politics; we selected the official Twitter pages of the British National Party (BNP), the English Defence League (EDL), Aryan Revolution UK, Britain First and British Unity (Nick Griffin's newest BNP spin-off). It is worth considering that the groups themselves and therefore their official Twitter presences vary hugely in terms of output, popularity and political tone. Despite these differences there are some uniform trends that can be identified across the given time period (28th May – 28th June 2016).

Exposure & visibility

Three of these five groups have shown a significant increase in total potential impressions. This measure is calculated by the amount of times that a particular post could have been seen; specifically by adding the account's followers to the number of followers of all users who have re-Tweeted the post. British Unity saw the biggest jump in visibility, with an 11,943%³ increase, followed by Britain First with 291% and the BNP with 127%. However, the English Defence League's score increased by only 7%, and Aryan Revolution UK actually saw a 58% decrease in their potential total impressions. This could be due to a lack of response to key events, or simply that the political tone of the group, which is explicitly rooted in white supremacy and neo-Nazism, no longer chimes with a far-right support audience that may

3 Calculated on the period 28/05-28/06 inclusive.

instead be seeking anti-immigrant or Islamophobic posts.

Followership

The bar chart below outlines trends in followership among these five groups over the month period. Britain First's Twitter account saw the largest increase in followership with 15%, followed by Aryan Revolution UK and the EDL with 13% and 5% respectively.

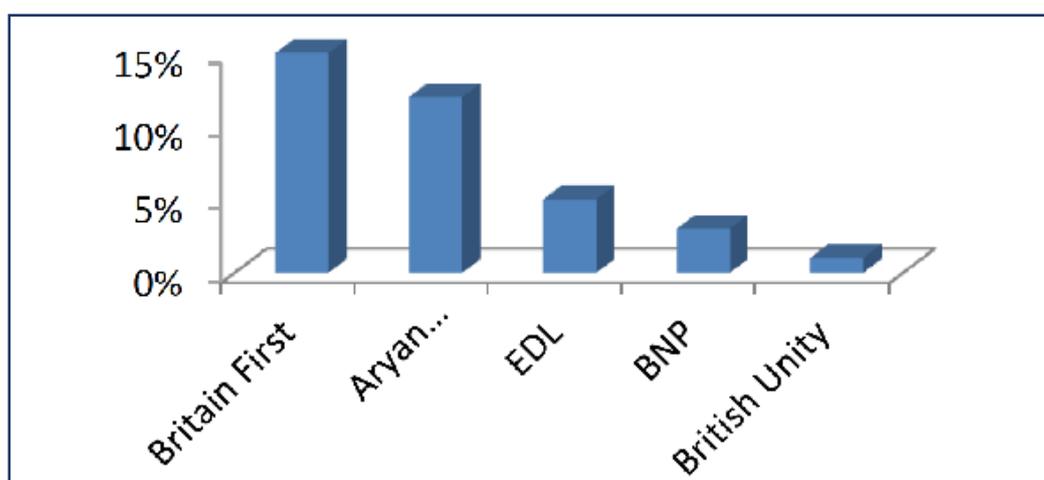


Figure 1: Followership increases between 28th May and 28th June

Britain First, which describes itself as 'a patriotic political party and street defence organisation'⁴ had roughly 10,900 followers and had posted exactly 8,938 times at close of data collection. This represents approximately 1.22 followers per tweet, the second highest among the group.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these increases are often based around specific events – it is worth analysing these surges in greater depth. The vast majority of the upturn in followers of the Britain First account occurred in the days after the murder of Jo Cox, with another more gradual increase following the EU Referendum result. This initial arc is illustrated by the orange square in the graph below, which can be seen in greater detail in the micro-graph.

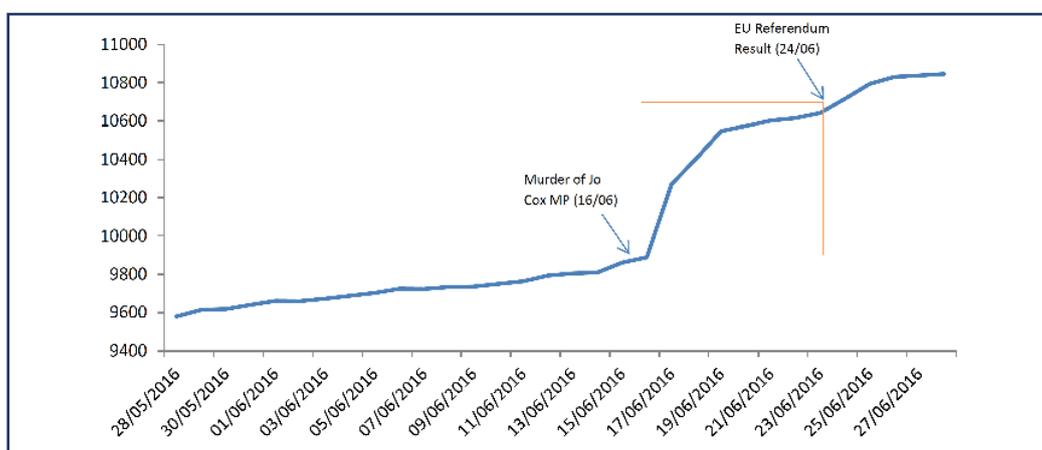


Figure 2: Britain First's Twitter followership between 28th May and 28th June

4 <https://twitter.com/BritainFirst> (bio)

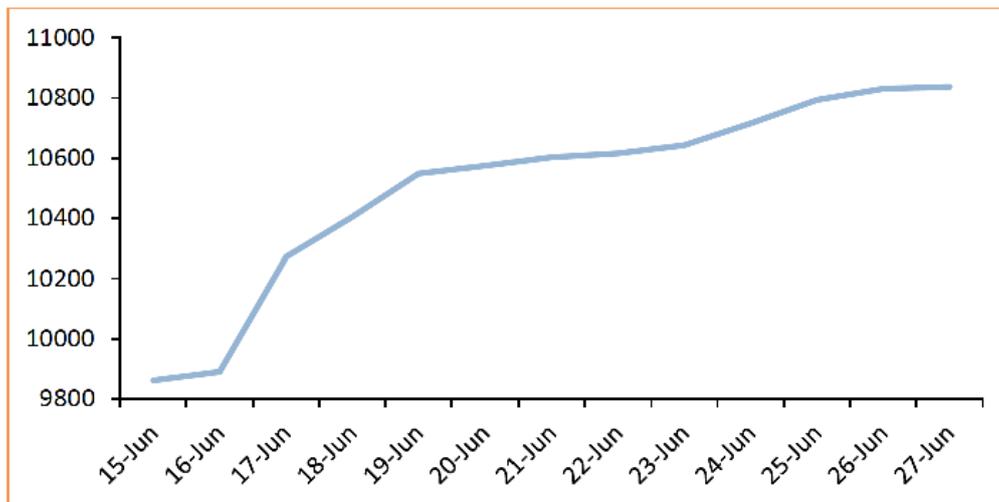


Figure 2: Britain First's Twitter followership between 15th June and 27th June

Britain First's direct connection with the murder of Jo Cox MP, in that witnesses claim they heard the alleged perpetrator shout 'Britain First' as he killed her, coupled with a swell of defensive Twitter activity around this event appears to explain this sharp increase. However, it is also possible that due to this direct connection, visibility and followership

have both increased merely by the general public responding to the news reporting around the event with curiosity about the group itself, thus generating conversation. As is often said in the Twittersphere, a 'follow' does not always equal an endorsement.

Accordingly, the wider Twitter discourse around Britain First over the past month appears to be a fairly even mixture of support and condemnation. For example, within the top ten most prolific users (the most active authors in a conversation over a particular time period, regardless of their influence or 'klout' score), five appear vehemently in support of Britain First as a group whilst the other five discuss the group in overwhelmingly negative terms. Engagement sentiment analysis (by no means a conclusive indicator of conversational tone) indicates a surge of negative references to Britain First immediately after the killing of Jo Cox, bringing the negative post tally to 57% of all posts. However, positive sentiment in conversation around Britain First has simultaneously grown by 7% within this time frame, signifying a polarisation of debate surrounding the group.

Engagement demographics & geographies

Crimson Hexagon allows further analysis of the discourse surrounding these five groups by providing statistics on the demographic composition of those talking about them (where available); these include gender, age and location. This information is never available for all authors but can give a broad sense of demographic variation. Across all of the five accounts, demographic analysis shows that the vast majority of contributors to the conversation surrounding these movements are middle-aged males. Aryan Revolution UK displayed the most

homogenous group of authors with 78% of them deemed to be male and 89% aged 35 and over.

Geographically, analysis showed that 82.34% of the conversation about British Unity is generated in the UK, with the North West, Yorkshire & the Humber and Greater London residents dominating the discourse. This is exemplified by the map below.

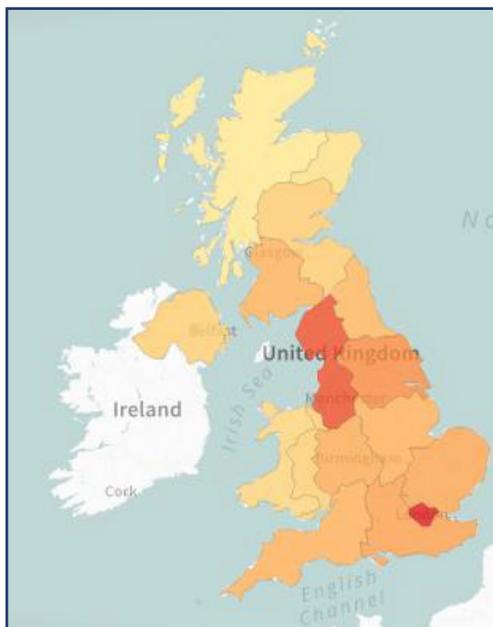


Figure 4: Geographic distribution of conversation about British Unity in the UK

Meanwhile the EDL held different geographic strongholds of conversation; namely in the West Midlands, from which 33.5% of all related posts were generated whereas Aryan Revolution UK appeared to be referenced and supported more commonly by a US national audience. This US audience, who represented over 40% of the conversation, were deemed to be located predominantly in California and Texas.

'Share of Voice'

Share of voice is calculated by comparing each monitor's share (percentage) of total engagement by day between different social accounts, in this case the five far-right Twitter accounts in question. Total engagement is the sum of all Retweets, @replies and handle mentions for each monitor which essentially indicates how prominent each account was the daily discourse across a period of time. As you can see from the graph below, the 'share of voice' between this group of five changes drastically over the period 28th May-28th June. Key events, such as the murder of Jo Cox and the announcement of the Brexit vote on the 24th can be clearly identified as pivotal turning points that dictate the dominance of each account in the national conversation. For example, Britain First gain a disproportionate share of voice in the days following Jo Cox's murder as their name was referenced an exceptional amount of times in both news media and Twitter. However, British Unity's activity the following week (22nd-24th), which largely consists of references to topics like #Leave and #IndependenceDay, effectively drowns out the other four groups.

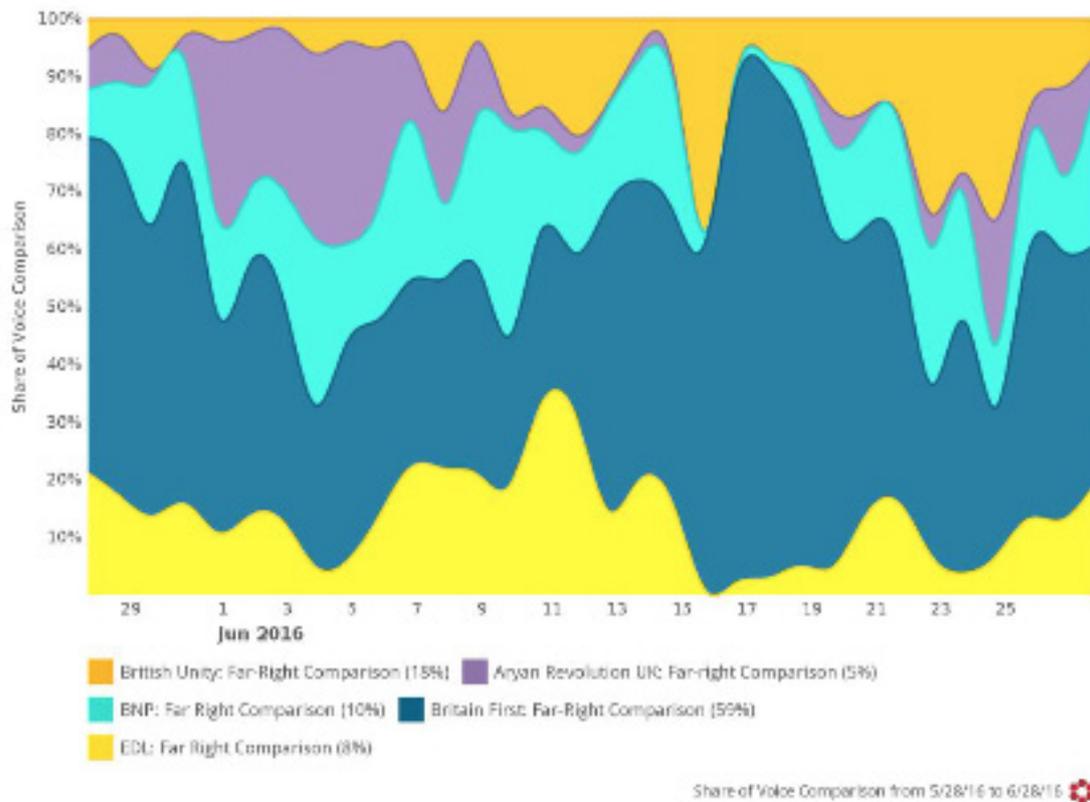


Figure 5: Share of Voice Comparison between five far-right social accounts

Usage of xenophobic terms

ISD has also been monitoring the use of derogatory xenophobic terms in the Twittersphere through Crimson Hexagon. As mentioned, there have been numerous reports stating a palpable increase in hate crimes being committed across the UK⁵, however it remains to be determined whether actual rates are rising rather than there simply being a higher rate of reports. Research undertaken into Islamophobic crime over the course of several years does indicate rapidly escalating levels of verbal and physical abuse, including a 300% increase in 'offline' incidents in 2015⁶. However, the examples given in recent reports, as well as through hashtags like #PostRefRacism and #PostBrexitRacism, would indicate a surge in hate crime toward communities of ethnically Polish, Romanian and Greek UK residents. When viewed chronologically, there are marked increases in the usage of these terms around May 6th-7th which coincides with the election of Sadiq Khan as Mayor of London, and a larger spike around the 12th of June, the exact date of the terrorist attack in Orlando.

5 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/26/spate-of-racist-attacks-blamed-on-brexit-vote/>; http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/post-brexit-racist-attacks-soar-hate-crimes-reported-to-police-increase-57_uk_57714594e4b08d2c5639adcb; http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/eu-referendum-racism_uk_576fe161e4b08d2c56396075

6 <http://tellmamauk.org/geography-anti-muslim-hatred-2015-tell-mama-annual-report/>

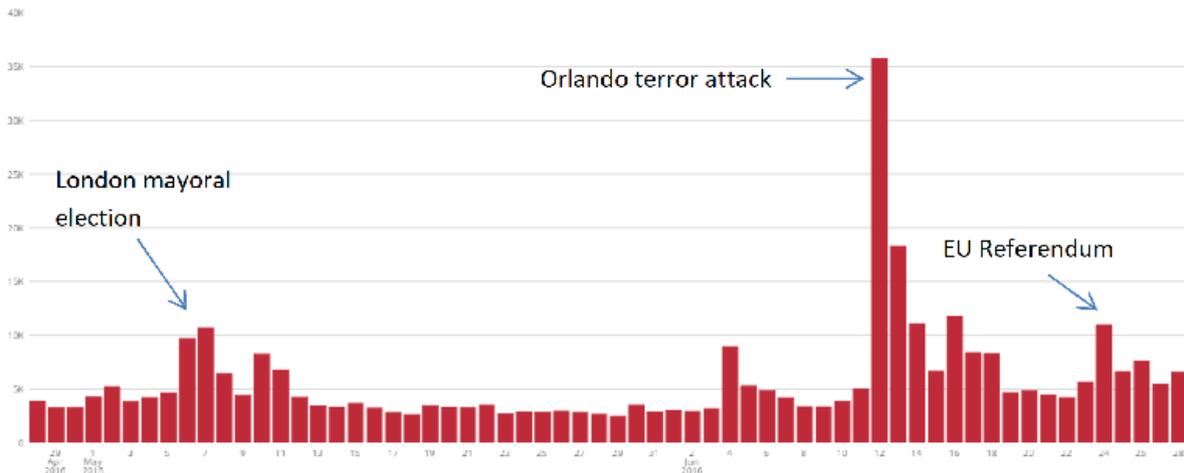


Figure 6: Figure 6: Usages of derogatory xenophobic terms online from 28th April to 28th June 2016

In online terms, the use of derogatory xenophobic terms over the past two months (28th April – 28th June) shows a continued focus on anti-Muslim or Islamophobic sentiment, however terms such as ‘gypsy’, ‘poles’ and ‘paki’ appear to be become more prominent towards the end of the data collection period, perhaps indicating a surge inspired by Brexit. Below is a word cloud which represents the terms most commonly coupled with xenophobic terms (based on a sample of 613,085 posts).

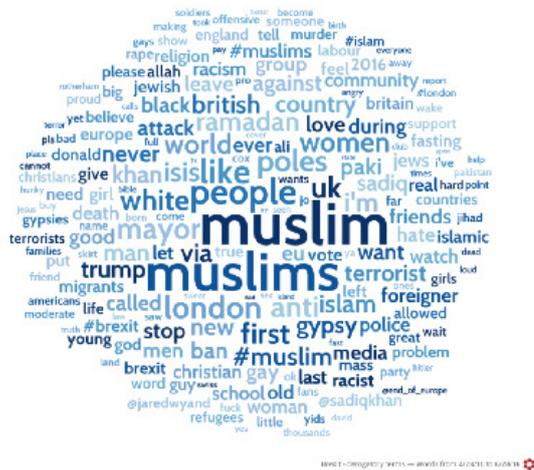


Figure 7: Association of xenophobic terms based on 613,085 posts from the 28th of April to the 28th of June

In terms of geographic distribution, the locations that used these terms most commonly were: Greater London (42.66%), followed by the North West (9.37%) and the South East (9.26%). This mirrors the geographic distribution of those using the hashtags #PostRefRacism and #PostBrexitRacism, signifying a positive correlation between the use of derogatory xenophobic terms, and the incidence of Brexit-related hate crime.

Conclusion

While the long-term effects of the vote to leave the EU on the activities of UK far-right groups and the far-right scene writ large still remains to be seen, it is clear that key events between the 28th of May and the 28th of June have already garnered support for the online presences of these movements. This increase in followership and total potential impressions signifies a growth in visibility for groups like Britain First, British Unity and the BNP, thus enacting a positive feedback loop where exposure can lead to popular support. Meanwhile the alleged escalation of hate crime targeting communities of European migrants, as well as the increase in the online usage of derogatory terms targeting this social group, must be monitored closely in the coming months.

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