

“I HOPE THE RIVER FLOODS”: ONLINE HATE SPEECH TOWARDS GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities experience hate and discrimination in a range of public and private arenas. Online spaces are a relatively new outlet for hate against GRT groups and fuel offline responses. This article outlines UK cases of online hate speech reported to Report Racism GRT, a third-party reporting website for incidents perpetrated against GRT communities, from its inception in October 2016 to February 2018. Our analysis found that online hate is primarily manifested through abuse on social media and is often incited by the mainstream media. A key trigger for online hate is the arrival of new camps, and a shortage of legitimate sites fuels the tensions. We consider the need to ease tensions over site provision; the need for a more serious response to online hate speech; and the need to ensure that policy-makers and practitioners are aware of how they may be affected by problematic and racist assumptions about GRT communities.

Keywords

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT); hate speech; exclusion; discourse; racism; online

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Introduction

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT) are stigmatised in a range of public and private services and systems, including housing and planning, education, health, social care, crime and policing, and the media (Drakakis-Smith, 2007; Bhopal, 2011; Allen, 2012; Smith and Ruston, 2013; Ivatts with Day, 2014). There is an inadequate social policy response to address this exclusion. The internet, particularly social media, is a relatively new outlet for hate and discrimination against GRT (as well as other) groups (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012), and this fuels offline responses in communities and services. Similarly, offline tensions fuel online activity (the arrival of new camps, in particular). Tensions are exacerbated by insufficient authorised sites to meet the level of need. Media and policy discourses feed into each other to exacerbate the stigmatising of GRT groups.

We begin this paper by exploring how structural racism and anti-GRT discourse legitimise online hate speech against GRT communities. We consider the social policy implications of pervasive anti-GRT discourse, particularly in relation to site provision. We then outline the findings of our analysis of the online hate speech aimed at GRT people. Online hate speech takes the form of slurs and insults about GRT people, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about them, and the inference or incitement of violence towards them. It is often triggered by the arrival of, or media reporting on, new camps. We analysed data collated by Gypsy and Traveller Empowerment Hertfordshire (GATE Herts) through their national third-party website for reporting hate and discrimination against GRT people, Report Racism GRT. We consider the implications of our findings, which include: the need to ease tensions over site provision; the need for a more serious response to online hate speech and media incitement of such; and the need to ensure that policy-makers and practitioners are aware of how they may be affected by the problematic assumptions cultivated by racist anti-GRT discourse.

What do we mean by GRT?

In the UK, the umbrella term GRT is used to refer to several different groups, including Romany English Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Welsh Gypsies, Scottish Gypsies, New Travellers (post-1960s), and Roma migrants from Europe, in addition to other, smaller travelling groups, such as Showmen (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a). GRT people are not one homogenous group but several different communities, with their own diverse histories and cultures (Lally, 2015). The term GRT has faced some contestation among the communities (Acton et al., 2014), but it is accepted and used by many members and activists, including those we worked with for this research. In the UK, most GRT groups have a protected ethnic status under the 2010 Equality Act (Lally, 2015). Whilst our analysis focuses on England, it is worth noting that Roma are the largest minority ethnic group in Europe (Rostas and Ryder, 2012). Our argument, therefore, can be applied to wider Europe, where GRT groups also face persistent exclusion (Tremlett, 2013; Lauritzen and Nodeland, 2018).

Hate crime and hate speech

In UK law, a hate crime is a crime committed against someone because of their race, religion, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation. In a recent analysis of hate crime statistics in England and Wales, Allen and Zayed (2019) look at figures from police-recorded hate crime and the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) (acknowledging some

unreliability in both measures for establishing levels of hate crime). They show an increase in police-recorded hate crime every year from 2012/13 to 2018/19, acknowledging that this is at least partially due to better methods for reporting and recording, with 103,379 cases recorded in 2018/19 (Allen and Zayed, 2019). The CSEW data, however, shows a 40% decline in hate crime between 2009/10 and 2017/18. Allen and Zayed (2019) use the data-sets to explore the recent hate crime context in England and Wales. They find the vast majority of hate crime offences are race-related and that spikes in religion- and race-related hate crime occurred after the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2017 terror attacks in London and Manchester. The most common form of reported hate crime is public order offences at 54% (compared with 8% for reported crime more generally), followed by violence against the person at 36% (compared with 28% for reported crime more generally). When broken down by race, the CSEW data shows that Asian people face the highest level of hate crime, with 1.1% of this ethnic group having experienced hate crime. However, in this analysis, GRT groups fall into the 'other' category. In another briefing paper specifically on 'Gypsies and Travellers', Cromarty (2019) draws on data from a survey completed by the Traveller Movement that found that four out of five GRT people said they had experienced hate speech or hate crime and that only one out of five had reported this to police. This suggests that experiences of hate crime for GRT groups are widespread but vastly under-reported.

Hate speech incorporates slurs, stereotypes and the incitement of violence towards particular people because of their social attributes (Curtis, 2010). For hate speech to constitute a crime, it relies on the *intention* to harass, intimidate or incite hatred being proven. This makes policing and responding to hate speech particularly difficult, despite the law allowing for fines and even imprisonment for convictions. For example, Richardson and O'Neill (2012) outline an example where GRT activists reported *The Sun* newspaper to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) in 2005 for a series of inflammatory articles entitled 'Stamp on the Camps'. The case was referred to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), who chose not to proceed after concluding there was no direct link between the reports and the commenting that followed. Subsequently, the PCC also concluded that *The Sun* had not breached its code of practice because the reports were not targeted at a particular named individual, rather the entire GRT population (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012).

There can be blurred lines between what constitutes hate crime and what is discrimination, and whether these should be responded to as civil or criminal cases. For example, Report Racism GRT refers all cases that it categorises as crime to True Vision (the police-funded initiative for collating online reports of hate crime), but many of these are returned as non-criminal. Whilst GATE Herts offers support to named victims for exploring civil cases, there is often little follow-up of these cases.

Data gathered from police forces found that 2% of hate crime took place online in 2017/18 (Allen and Zayed, 2019, with a note of caution around data reliability). This is interesting given that the majority of reports made to Report Racism GRT are for cases of online hate. Debates around responses to online hate speech are tied up in tensions between calls for action and calls for the allowance of free speech (for example, see Shriver, 2019). Beyond this, online hate is difficult to respond to in tangible ways because of the ease of opening,

closing, deleting and moving between groups and accounts on social media, in addition to jurisdictional difficulties relating to abuse perpetuated in an online space.

Structural racism, anti-GRT discourse and social policy implications

Online hate speech is part of wider negative discourse about GRT communities and reflects the structural racism they face. The issue of negative stereotyping is not unique to GRT groups, but having received ethnic status only relatively recently (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a) and being a small and 'white' minority group, they can be overlooked in both academic and popular discussions around racism (Traveller Movement, 2017). James (1996) identifies three levels of racism at the individual, institutional and societal level. He defines structural racism as where society is structured in such a way that some ethnic groups are marginalised and excluded. It is clear that GRT groups are subject to structural racism at the societal level, because they are expected to assimilate with services and systems that are incompatible with their culture and lifestyle (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a). Similarly, in research with immigrants, Viruell-Fuentes et al. (2012) outline how a focus on the need for acculturation obscures structural factors in health disparities. Whilst GRT groups have a centuries-long history in the UK, there is clear resonance here in how structural racism is obscured in their exclusion through a focus on cultural dissonance.

In her conception of 'revolting subjects', Tyler (2013) recognises GRT experiences of exclusion and prejudice. Drawing on the high-profile Dale Farm eviction in Essex in 2010, where 500 people were forcefully evicted from land they owned after retrospective planning permission was successively denied, she demonstrates how GRT groups are marginalised to the status of 'human waste' and thus action against them is legitimised, mandated and even celebrated, including by those in power. Tyler's use of the term 'revolting' has a dual meaning. It refers to the adjective *revolting*, which justifies the social abjection of certain groups. However, she outlines that it also refers to the verb *to revolt*, recognising that these groups are engaged in resistance to and protest about their treatment. She recognises that for GRT and other 'revolting subject' groups, resistance is not a choice but a fight for survival (Tyler, 2013). However, it is arguable that being engaged in resistance also reinforces perceptions of these groups as antagonistic. As such, the 'social abjection' of GRT groups as 'revolting subjects' (Tyler, 2013) arguably allows for anti-GRT discourse to be maintained.

Through the lens of discourse

Negative discourses about GRT communities affect how they are perceived by others and how they are framed in policy and practice, in addition to impacting on their health, identities and sense of marginalisation. In defining discourse, Mills (2004) explains the impact of discourses on thought, behaviour and identity formation:

Discourses are sets of sanctioned statements which... have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think... [F]or example, the discourse of middle-class femininity in the nineteenth century... constituted the parameters within which middle-class women could work out their own sense of identity. (Mills, 2004:56)

This draws on Foucault's (1970) conception of discourses as collections of narratives that represent a particular way of viewing or thinking about something. These discourses are powerful institutionalised messages that define how individuals frame their own narratives about the world. Foucault argued that people are largely unaware of these powerful discourses and the impact that they have on their thinking and behaviour. Social structures and inequalities are represented and perpetuated within dominant discourses that control people and cement inequality and power (Foucault, 1970; Mills, 2004). Whilst Foucault (1970) suggested that discourses were controlled by the powerful and were impossible to change from below, narrative researchers more recently have suggested that exposing the counter-narratives of marginalised groups can challenge misleading generalisations (Maynes et al., 2008). Feminist research has achieved this, for example, by hearing the voices of women in male-dominated institutions (Maynes et al., 2008).

Through the media (and increasingly online), negative discourses about GRT communities are created, maintained and strengthened (Tremlett, 2013). Thus, we see pervasive negative discourses about GRT groups being sanctioned and accepted as truth online and in other forums for communication. This impacts on how GRT groups are perceived and treated in society, including in policy and practice, and frames them as 'revolting subjects' and antagonists (Tyler, 2013). GRT individuals also define their identities in the context of these powerful discourses that 'other' them, further reinforcing their outsider status (Drakakis-Smith, 2007; Bhopal, 2011; Tremlett, 2013).

Discourses created and reinforced by the media and policy often become accepted as truth, as seen in the problematic stereotypes about GRT groups. It is accepted that the travelling lifestyle, in which people move from area to area with no fixed abode, is problematic. This is reinforced by policy, where not enough transit sites are made available and being an active citizen with the same rights and entitlements as others is limited for those without a fixed address (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a). It is reinforced by the media, in which reports about people who live a travelling lifestyle are overwhelmingly negative (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012). Online, there are increasing instances of 'confirmation bias' that strengthen this discourse, as many of those posting derogatory comments actually believe what they are saying and seek to reinforce their own and each other's views (Mothes, 2017). Our research has found this happens especially where people are discussing newly arrived camps in an area. The responses reinforce negative stereotypes (around mess, for example) and often lead to more serious hate speech, including inferences of violence. Everyday discrimination against GRT groups has increased as the internet has become more pervasive (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012).

In discussing the role that the media plays in reinforcing negative discourse, Richardson and O'Neill (2012:169,185) describe the 'cycle of news and views' and the 'circular nature of anti-gypsy discourse', where the media confirms negative attitudes, which feed into policy discourses and then further fuel media discussions. Scholars discussing negative discourse about GRT groups have referred to Cohen's (1972) 'moral panics' to describe this ever-escalating pattern of media and policy discourses feeding into each other and reinforcing people's prejudices more widely (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012; Richardson and Ryder, 2012a; Ansell with Torkington, 2014; Ryder and Cemlyn, 2016). This links clearly with Tyler's

(2013) concept of 'revolting subjects'. Prejudice against GRT groups stemming from these moral panics has been described as a form of 'acceptable racism' (Traveller Movement, 2017).

GRT groups are under-researched and under-represented at all levels (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a; Acton et al., 2014), including online (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012). Their voices are often excluded from shaping and delivering the policies and practices that are designed to engage them (Allen, 2012; Ivatts with Day, 2014). There is work to be done to ensure that policy formulation includes GRT voices and challenges rather than cements negative discourse.

Social policy discourses

Richardson and O'Neill (2012) outline how media and political discourses about GRT groups fuel each other. As such, clear social policy implications stem from media (including online and social media) discourses about these communities. Richardson and Ryder (2012a:12) explain how political discourses often exacerbate the exclusion of GRT groups in society; 'exclusion that the state has actively contributed to through assimilationist and hegemonic discourse and policy'. They give the example of the move from an agenda of 'multi-culturalism' to one of integration and conformity to British values after the New Labour era, meaning that those who do not conform to what are seen as central British cultural values and practices are considered to be deviant. As such, anti-GRT discourse is, to an extent, driven by policy. Richardson and O'Neill (2012:185) explain that the 'cycle of marginalisation' created by such discourse leads to growing hostility towards GRT groups and a lack of public willingness to develop more inclusive policies and practices, particularly around tolerating camps.

Housing and planning are most pertinent when it comes to policies that impact on travelling communities. It is not a popular political move to advocate for GRT groups, and politicians often reinforce rather than challenge the problem. This is seen in public and media commentary from politicians and in policy decisions. For example, the post-2010 coalition government, as part of their austerity-localism agenda, halted New Labour policy developments around transit sites and removed central funding for such (Ryder, 2016; Ryder and Cemlyn, 2016). Under New Labour, although sites were developed, eviction powers were increased through the 2003 Anti-Social Behaviour Act (Kabachnik and Ryder, 2013). Funding for developing authorised sites was reinvested by the coalition in 2012, under a new policy paper to tackle inequalities faced by GRT groups (DCLG, 2012), although this is not nearly enough to deal with demand. Overall, there is a history of policy decisions that have made it difficult for GRT groups to set up camps and easy for authorities to evict them (Ansell with Torkington, 2014). A lack of sufficient policy and funding for developing sites receives no noticeable public outcry, particularly when compared with public outcry against the development of new sites (Kabachnik and Ryder, 2013).

Yet, there are simply not enough 'authorised' sites available for the GRT population (Richardson, 2017). Greenfields (2008) worked out that, in 2005 (under New Labour's more progressive policies) a GRT person on an unauthorised site had an average of 27 years to wait for a place on an authorised site at the level of supply. Richardson and Ryder (2012a)

outline from biannual government data from 2010 that of the UK's 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers, two-thirds lived in settled housing. Of the remaining 100,000, one-quarter lived on unauthorised sites, including land they owned themselves (but without permission to reside). They argue that 'it would be difficult to find any other minority ethnic group with such large numbers that are effectively homeless' (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a:4). Here is the power of discourse; GRT groups are not viewed as *homeless* in policy or media discourses but as *trespassers* or *invaders*. They are seen as antagonists rather than people with needs and inequalities that are to be addressed. There is a lack of sites available, yet the media and political responses are dominantly punitive rather than addressing the problem (Kabachnik and Ryder, 2013). Richardson and Smith-Bendell (2012) argue that a lack of site provision is compounded by prejudiced assessments of GRT groups' planning applications and by racism from local communities and stakeholders. This reflects structural racism in the planning policies and everyday racism from local communities. A lack of sufficient accommodation and pervasive anti-GRT discourse has led to other issues for GRT groups; for example, in relation to health (Drakakis-Smith, 2007; Smith and Ruston, 2013), education (Bhopal, 2011; Foster and Cemlyn, 2012; Ivatts with Day, 2014) and social care (Allen, 2012). We explore these other contexts in another paper that explores the offline exclusion of GRT groups from our research (Woodger and Thompson, forthcoming).

Anti-GRT discourse causes GRT groups to be treated with suspicion and viewed as problematic and criminal (Meek, 2007; Ansell with Torkington, 2014). This makes it problematic for GRT groups seeking a response to online hate and abuse. Richardson and Ryder (2012b) describe GRT groups as under 'surveillant control' by society, and particularly by the police. They explore the lack of trust between GRT groups and the police, which is cultivated by this culture of suspicious surveillance and by GRT experiences of police involvement in site evictions. They identify that a large proportion of GRT individuals do not believe that the police will act in their favour when responding to incidents; thus, they are unwilling to report them.

Racist anti-GRT discourse has a profound impact on policies and services. Internet and media discourses support their status as antagonists, trespassers and invaders rather than homeless or vulnerable. Policy and media discourses largely ignore the structural racism that GRT groups face, and even legitimise this. Anti-GRT discourse feeds into and is reinforced by policy, creating an ever-escalating moral panic about GRT groups who are seen as society's 'folk devils' or 'revolting subjects' (Cohen, 1972; Tyler, 2013). This impacts on their experiences and outsider status in a range of services, where they are viewed as problematic whilst their voices and needs are disregarded. There is a need to reshape GRT discourse. Whilst there is a clear media responsibility for this, there is also a need for the policy-makers and public professionals who shape and deliver services to advocate for GRT groups and begin to redress their pervasively negative experiences.

The UK's coalition government in 2010 did set up a working group to tackle inequalities faced by Gypsies and Travellers; this was followed by a progress paper in 2012 that made several commitments to improve a range of services for GRT groups (including accommodation, education and health) and to tackle hate crime (DCLG, 2012). This was the only specific government paper on Gypsy and Traveller inclusion in the UK until a new report

was published by the Women and Equalities Committee in April 2019 (House of Commons, 2019), despite a raft of papers on 'unauthorised encampments' throughout the decade. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government is engaging with some GRT stakeholders, including GATE Herts, to raise awareness of hate crime and discrimination and inform responses. Such positive steps receive much less media attention than discussions and decisions over 'unauthorised encampments'. The investment in such positive measures is substantially lower than the spend on evictions, with the 2011 Dale Farm eviction alone estimated to cost £18 million (Tyler, 2013).

Rostas and Ryder (2012) outline that across Europe there is problematic policy-making relating to GRT groups. In recent years, for example, there have been blanket deportations in France and mass fingerprinting in Italy. They recognise that the growth of far-right populism has exacerbated anti-GRT discourse. The European Union (EU) and European Commission have developed wider policies on poverty and social exclusion that include GRT groups, in addition to developing the more specific EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (Ryder and Cemlyn, 2016). However, Rostas and Ryder (2012) argue that overall, there has been a 'political inertia' at the EU level, with the EU Roma Framework not holding nation-states accountable enough and not enough funding being invested in ensuring its implementation. Nation-states are supposed to develop their own specific Roma integration policies, but there is little monitoring or intervention where this does not happen (Acton et al., 2014).

Methodology

Foucault (1970) believed that we are constrained by the dominant discourses that control us and are powerless to change them. However, Maynes et al. (2008:1,6) argue that research can expose 'marginalised voices' that challenge misleading generalisations. Through the Report Racism GRT website, GATE Herts is gathering such counter-narratives that demonstrate the level of hatred faced by GRT groups and individuals.

This research was done in partnership with GATE Herts, a GRT-led organisation that set up Report Racism GRT, with our analysis of *their* data feeding into their awareness-raising activities. This fits with ethical principles of researching "'with" and "for" Gypsies and Travellers rather than carrying out research "on" members of these communities' (Greenfields and Ryder, 2012:151). Another ethical issue to consider was around the privacy of those posting on social media sites. We concurred with Baker's (2013) analysis that anything posted publicly on social media is in the public domain. However, despite there being no legal issue with including names on public social media posts (this being confirmed by our institutional data protection assessment), we decided to remove identifying names whilst retaining pseudonyms used by commenters on public media websites.

We analysed the incidents of hate and discrimination that had been reported to the Report Racism GRT website since its inception in July 2016. The analysis took place in early February 2018 and considered all cases reported to the website from the UK, removing spam, duplicates and non-UK reports. In total, 115 cases were subject to a quantitative analysis of the nature of the reporting and abuse, and a qualitative analysis identifying key themes and

illustrative case studies. Where more detail was needed, follow-up interviews took place with three reporters to the website who had given permission to be contacted.

This paper focuses on the reports of online hate and discrimination in particular. In some cases, we were able to follow links provided by reporters to gather screenshots of online posts and comments. In others, the links did not work, we did not have permission to access certain pages or groups, or the posts had been removed. We contacted some reporters who indicated that they had screenshots (Report Racism GRT did not have the facility to upload these at the time of reporting). Overall, we collated several thousand negative comments about GRT groups which evidence the themes in this paper.

Quantitative findings

Of the 115 cases, 113 were from England, and these were spread across the country. One case was reported from Wales, one from Scotland and none from Northern Ireland. As such, the data primarily reflects the experiences of GRT groups in England, although online cases are accessible across national borders and have a large reach beyond the individual making the report. There were international reports from several countries. These were excluded from our analysis.

Types of incidents reported

People reporting incidents to the Report Racism GRT website are asked what type of incident they are reporting by choosing from a number of different categories. They are able to choose more than one of these categories (therefore, the percentages discussed below total more than 100). Figure 1 reflects the categories chosen by those included in our analysis.

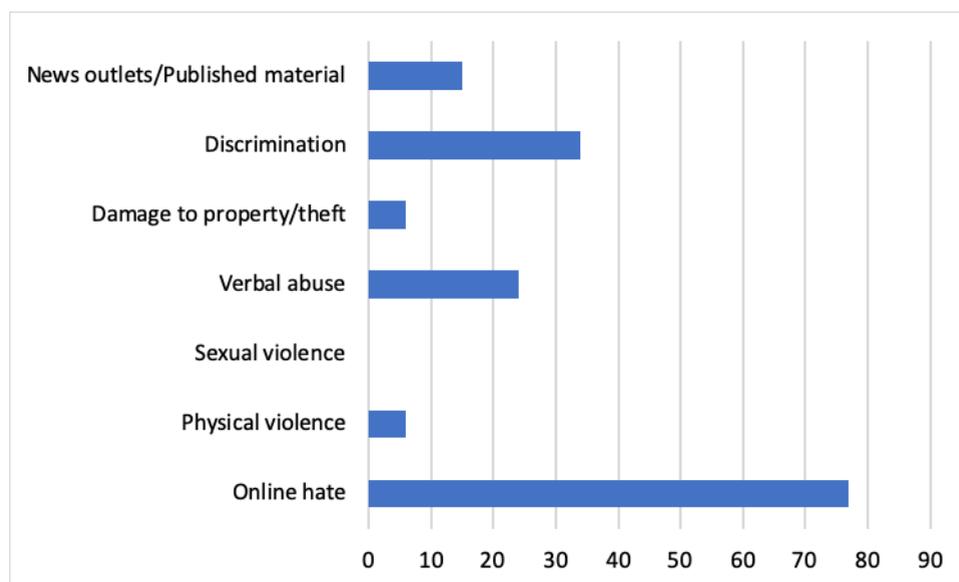


Figure 1: Types of incident reported: July 2016 – February 2018

Online hate was the most common type of incident, with 77 (67%) of the 115 cases reported identified as this category. The quantity of online incidents demonstrates the prevalence and reach of online abuse. For example, some abuse that took place online was reported independently by multiple people, demonstrating a level of impact that was not experienced in offline incidents. The prevalence of this type of report may reflect, to an extent, that the method of reporting to Report Racism GRT is online and is a preferred mode of reporting for individuals who are active online. Victims may also be particularly unsure about whether it is appropriate to report an online incident to the local police. Facebook was the most common platform for reported abuse (this may reflect the age demographic of those reporting). The extent of the online cases justifies this paper's focus on the online incidents in particular.

Reporting

Of the 115 cases, 77% were reported by people from GRT groups and 23% by third parties. Of the incidents reported to Report Racism GRT, 20% were also reported to the police. Eighteen per cent of the incidents reported to the website by people from GRT groups were reported to the police, compared with 27% of incidents reported by third parties reported to the police. The most common reason for not reporting to the police was a lack of confidence that the police would act: 57% of people who did not report to the police gave this reason.

In cases where online incidents had been reported to police, there were indications of their resistance to follow-up in the narratives of those reporting to Report Racism GRT. Some online incidents were also stated to have been reported to social media platforms (Facebook in particular) or to the administrators of the groups in which they occurred. In most cases, the reporters indicated that this was not acted upon. When following up some of these online posts it appeared that some comments, posts or groups had been removed. However, a significant amount of online hate and discrimination remained online on news and social media sites several months after it had been posted, reflecting a general tolerance of anti-GRT hate speech.

Qualitative findings

The 115 incidents were subject to qualitative analysis to identify themes that cut across the different categories of incidents reported to the Report Racism GRT website. The key themes that emerged from this analysis were:

- Social media abuse
- Media incitement
- Intimidation, harassment and violence
- Exclusion and discrimination from and within services
- Bullying at school and at work

This article focuses on the first two. The other themes are explored in another article which focuses on offline incidents (Woodger and Thompson, forthcoming). The themes explored in this paper overlap, with media incitement often leading to abuse on social media. The theme of intimidation and harassment, not explored as a separate theme in this article, also overlaps with the themes of online abuse and media incitement.

Social media abuse

Abuse on social media took various forms. One of these was the targeting of an individual's own profile to perpetuate hate. For example, one person reported that someone had observed from a badge on their Facebook profile picture that they were of Gypsy heritage and left the extremely offensive comment, 'p*key c*nt' (our starring) on the photo. In other cases, perpetrators had shared the personal accounts of GRT individuals on other pages or websites with derogatory comments. For example, one victim's YouTube videos were shared on Facebook in this way. These invasions of people's personal profiles are a particularly intimidating form of online harassment for victims, as illustrated by the case study at the end of this section.

Another common form of perpetuating hatred on Facebook was through groups specific to local areas, and even on the official pages of some publicly funded authorities. These groups were usually general community forums used by local residents to discuss the area. There were also local pages and groups set up by residents specifically to monitor the arrival or presence of GRT groups in the area. The existence of such pages appears to be tolerated by Facebook, although there is some evidence of particular posts being removed from these and other groups. The following example reflects a common theme; the direct association between 'Travellers' and the description of them as 'scammers'.

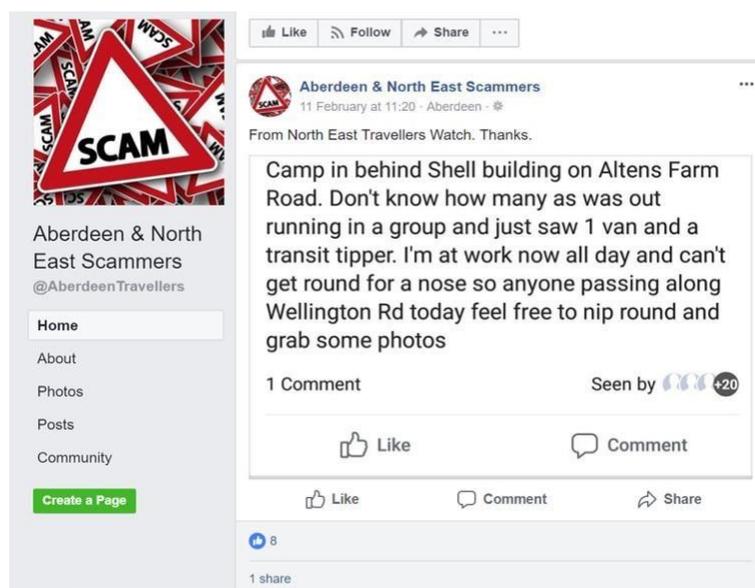


Figure 2: 'Aberdeen and North East Scammers' Facebook page

This reflects the 'surveillant control' that Richardson and Ryder (2012b) argue GRT groups are subjected to by society.

A significant aspect of incidents on social media was how extreme the nature of the abuse could be. Extreme hate speech towards GRT communities was prevalent and it appeared, in many cases, to be tolerated. Terms such as 'gas', 'cull', 'bomb', 'drone', 'drown' and other threats of violence were common. The comment below referring to Gypsies as a 'cancer' appeared on a Facebook group relating to a particular area where residents were commenting on the arrival of Travellers.

I'll never respect a tumour growing within my body, and I'll therefore never respect gypsies in my civilisation. They contribute nothing, and they seek only to cause misery for those around them, proud of the fact they do so. They are a cancer to society, and I will not consider them to have the same rights as human beings. You can teach a gorilla sign language, teach it to care for other animals, but you cannot teach a gypsy how to do anything but steal and destroy and fight.

This post was reported to the police, but the reporter stated that the police were resistant to act and that she was told the CPS would be unlikely to prosecute. Overall, social media was an easy forum to perpetuate abuse in a variety of forms, including threats of serious violence. There is further evidence of this in the case study that follows and the section on media incitement.

Case study: takeover of the 'Travellers Buy and Sell' group on Facebook

In February 2017, there were 24 independent reports to Report Racism GRT about abuse happening on a 'buy and sell' group on Facebook set up by and for Travellers. This page was targeted by a number of 'trolls' using fake accounts. As well as general insults towards GRT people, the trolls moved on to take the pictures of children and deceased relatives from the personal Facebook accounts of the group members and post them to the group with abuse and threats towards these individuals. People who responded to the original, more general threats were targets for this type of abuse. The comments reported, many alongside personal photos from group members' profiles, included:

"Go and commit suicide"

"I wish this was all Travellers" (alongside a picture of a burning caravan)

"Go hang yourselves"

"You need to wash"

"Learn to read"

"Half dead travelling baby for sale"

"Retards"

This case study exemplifies the reach and impact of online abuse, in this case leading to many reports. It also highlights how perpetrators can protect their own anonymity online (through the use of fake accounts) and yet access personal information about those they target. The level of personal invasion and intimidation was significant in this case.

Media incitement

This theme overlaps with social media abuse, as much incitement took place on social media platforms. It is a theme in its own right because of the prevalence of the pattern where a media outlet published an article or social media post about GRT groups in a way that incited negative commentary and hate speech. This took place both in direct comments in reply to the media articles on the media outlets' own websites and where the articles or posts were shared on social media. Extreme comments perpetuating hatred and violence remained on the websites and social media pages several months after they had been made, demonstrating that outlets are not doing enough to moderate the comments that their publishing incites.

The pattern of incitement typically involved one of three types of incident being reported by the media:

- The arrival of a new camp
- Negative comments about GRT groups by someone in public life, usually a politician (for example, an MP, a local councillor or a mayor)
- An incident of anti-social behaviour or crime purportedly involving GRT groups

The regional press in local areas were most commonly reported. A small number of reports were from the national press. The following example demonstrates one such article, about a woman being knocked to the ground when she attempted to stop the arrival of a GRT group at a nature reserve. This led to comments inciting hate on the website, two of which are included with the example.

OAP 'had false teeth KNOCKED OUT as she tried to stop travellers entering nature reserve'

A PENSIONER claims her false teeth were knocked out when she was thrown to the floor by travellers as she battled to stop them entering a popular nature reserve.

By MARK REYNOLDS

PUBLISHED: 14:58, Mon, Jun 12, 2017 | UPDATED: 18:10, Mon, Jun 12, 2017



Peterboroughboy

256 days ago

There is another name for these so called "travellers" just thieving thugs.....

Reply · Share Report This Comment

+2



Dave01

256 days ago

If they try any of this nonsense in Ireland they get their teeth knocked out - false or otherwise. And their police don't negotiate with them; if they stray off of their fully functional 'reservations' their caravans are just hooked up to tractors and dragged back. And no one over there gets them to tarmacadam their drives. We're just too soft.

Reply · Share · 1 reply Report This Comment

+5

Figure 3: Media report with comments from the *Express*

Reports about politicians' comments produce similar hatred and legitimise such prejudice, as in the example on the following page from the *Express & Star*, which published a story about an MP's comments about Traveller sites. The comments it incited remained on their website several months later:

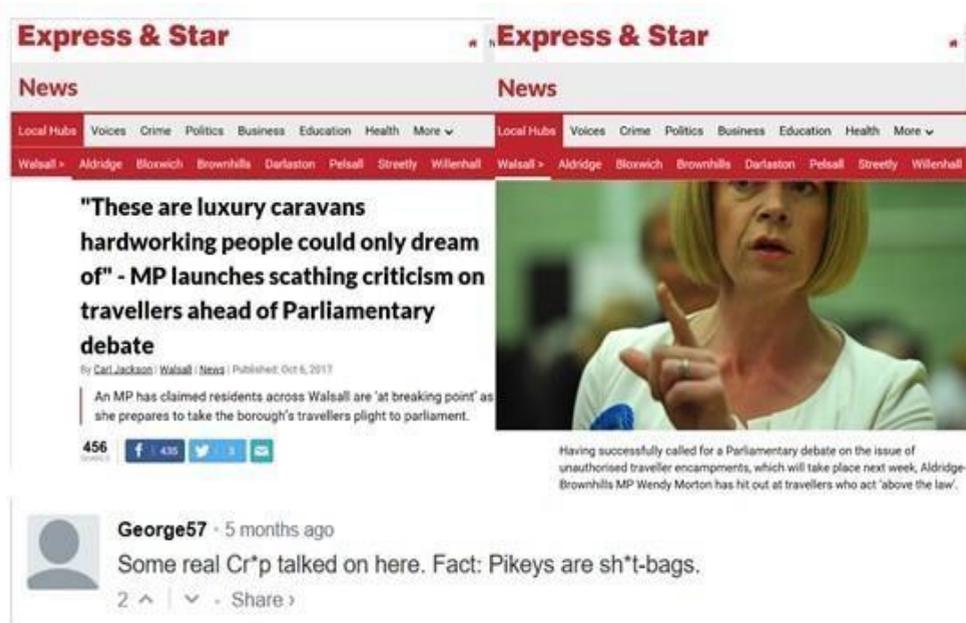


Figure 4: Media report with comment from the *Express & Star*

It is significant that the commenter ‘starred out’ letters in the words ‘cr*p’ and ‘sh*t’ but not the racist term. This indicates that the commenter viewed the ‘starred out’ words as more offensive or that they thought only those words would prevent the comment from making it through a filter on the newspaper’s website. That the publisher found it acceptable to have the comment on their website for several months indicates the lack of response to racism against GRT groups. There was also a prevalence of comments suggesting that GRT groups are given freedoms and allowances others are not, due to political correctness and human rights legislation. The fact that such hatred is allowed to remain on these sites suggests the direct opposite.

Case study: incitement by the Yorkshire Evening Post

This case study demonstrates how media incitement overlaps with social media abuse, intimidation and violence, and discrimination against GRT groups. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* was reported twice to Report Racism GRT for inciting hatred through its Facebook page. On both occasions, it posted an image with a comment about Travellers arriving in the area. One such example is shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Facebook post by the *Yorkshire Evening Post*

These posts incited vast numbers of negative comments. Many of the comments appeared to have been posted by people who accept as truth the racist discourse communicated by this type of journalism: that Travellers are a problem to be feared. For example, one response reacted to the camp being near a school, stating: 'Just as the kids go back to school ☹️'.

Other comments reinforced negative stereotypes about GRT communities. These ranged from stereotypes about GRT communities avoiding taxes and committing crime to accusations of animal cruelty. A stereotype reinforced about GRT communities leaving mess also often evolved into derogatory accusations about their toilet habits. The comments about human faeces served to belittle GRT people's status as civilised human beings and reflects society's view of them as 'revolting subjects' (Tyler, 2013). Such discussions led to GRT groups being referred to as 'scrotes', 'scum', 'dirty', 'filthy' and 'savages'. Some examples of the comments that reinforced stereotypes are as follows:

"They should pay taxes and council tax water rates then no one would object like everyone else"

"That'll be all the lead gone from the roof overnight"

"Now watch them turn the place into a Dump and Thousands of £'s have to be paid to Clear up their trash, sewage waste etc etc etc"

"travellers don't exactly make themselves welcome when threatening local residents and allowing their kids to s**t on the grass like animals!"

There were also significant numbers of extremely hateful comments, including those inciting violence.

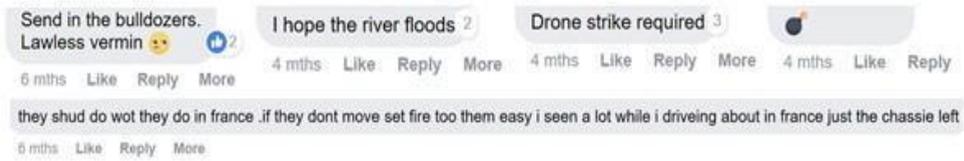


Figure 6: examples of violent comments left in *Yorkshire Evening Post* Facebook group

There was evidence that some extreme comments had been removed, as one commenter stated to another: 'I notice your picture of the gas used to kill millions in concentration camps was quickly removed. That is evil.' When people defended GRT communities against the abuse, the response they received was either further hatred targeted at GRT people or insults directed at themselves.

A cycle of discourse

The cases outlined in this paper form a cycle of discourse. Online hate aimed at GRT groups usually begins with the report of a new camp or an incident involving GRT people. This is followed by negative stereotypes being perpetuated; some reported as observations, others merely speculative. This escalates into serious hate speech inferring violence.

Whilst this abuse took place online, offline responses were linked with residents encouraging each other to respond through, for example, calling the RSPCA or the local police, and even planning to harass the local camps. These groups served as a clear form of 'confirmation bias', where like-minded residents gathered to reinforce stereotypes about GRT groups. This speculation and strengthening of stereotypes evolved into more serious abuse.

Media incitement also spurs the stereotypes and abuse, as seen in the examples explored in this paper. Media reporting is biased against GRT groups, as shown in Figure 3, where the reporting frames GRT people as antagonists whilst downplaying the fact that the 'OAP', presented as vulnerable, was the one to confront them. Comments by politicians in the media about GRT groups legitimise online hate speech. This cycle of discourse – from incitement to responses that include stereotypes, hate speech and harassment – increases the marginalisation of GRT communities, and reflects their status as 'folk devils' and 'revolting subjects' (Cohen, 1972; Tyler, 2013).

Implications and conclusions

The most common trigger for inciting online hate speech was the arrival of a new camp being reported by an individual or the media. This has implications for a response both by local authorities (to ease local tensions over camps) and national policy (to address the massive shortfall in the number of authorised sites available) (Greenfields, 2008; Ryder,

2016; Ryder and Cemlyn, 2016; Richardson, 2017). A larger amount of central funding is needed for the development of both permanent and transit sites. Local authorities need to implement measures such as 'negotiated stopping', which is currently used in Leeds to allow GRT groups to negotiate temporary sites without fuelling tensions about them 'trespassing' on land.

Local authorities need to work with the police to respond appropriately to harassment towards GRT communities in their areas, as the lack of authorised sites fuels tensions both online and offline. Clearer laws are needed about what constitutes hate speech and how it can be responded to, as well as specific strategies for developing trust of the police among GRT communities. A clearer police strategy is needed for responding to online hate towards GRT groups. Whilst jurisdictional issues make it difficult to identify who is responsible, there appears to be a general reluctance to react when online hate is reported to the police, as exemplified by one woman in our analysis who said she had been told by police that the CPS would be unlikely to prosecute.

GATE Herts has been tackling this issue through both advocacy work with victims and training for police and other practitioners. A vast amount of time is spent on case work to encourage a police response, yet even where the police have responded, action is not always possible. For example, in October 2018, a news website published an article about a series of anti-Gypsy posters in Sussex. In the comments section of the article, a reader claimed to have previously set fire to a GRT person's house and car, then gave 'step-by-step instructions on how to set Gypsies' caravans alight while they sleep and not get caught by police'. GATE Herts reported the incident to police and were later advised that the police had not been able to identify the perpetrator and would be closing the case. When asked for more details about the investigation, it emerged that no action had been taken. When pressed, the investigation was reopened and the police force traced the IP address to the USA. As such, no further action was taken.

One offline criminal case referred to Report Racism GRT in which a GRT person was racially harassed by a shop-owner has reached prosecution. In May 2019, the defendant pleaded guilty to the following offences: 'racially/religiously aggravated intentional harassment/alarm/distress-words/writing'. He was fined £200 plus £85 court costs. The GRT community member reporting this harassment was illiterate and would not have reported this case without the support of the hate crime officers. This case was passed to True Vision and from there to the local police force. The hate crime officers had to pursue the case persistently with the police for several months before the case and the evidence were sent to the CPS.

Progress has been made with the police and other practitioners through community-led training delivered by GATE Herts. A direct outcome of all front-line police officers in a region attending training with GATE Herts is that there have been some specific examples of the police cooperating with GATE Herts and engaging positively with the GRT community. In one case, shortly after receiving training from GATE Herts, a chief inspector called them in relation to concerns over the welfare of a GRT individual who was suspected to be missing. Project officers at GATE Herts managed to track the person down and persuaded him to

present at the police station. In October 2018, an 18-year-old Gypsy girl and a man were tragically killed when a horse and cart toppled over on the road after an incident involving a car. The next morning, a local police officer, who had been on training with GATE Herts two weeks before, phoned their office to enquire how they could support the community. These examples demonstrate the importance of expanding such police training.

Media and policy discourses about GRT groups feed into each other, as observed by other scholars (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012; Tremlett, 2013; Ansell with Torkington, 2014; Ryder and Cemlyn, 2016). In our analysis of media incitement, reporting negative comments from politicians about GRT groups legitimises online hatred. There is a need for a more serious response to hate speech against GRT communities by media outlets, social media platforms, and the public authorities that are responsible for responding to hate and discrimination. This should be the responsibility of authorities such as the PCC in addition to the police. A reluctance to report reflects a lack of belief that these authorities will act, as had been demonstrated when people had reported incidents to media or police authorities. This also mirrors Richardson and O'Neill's (2012) finding that negative reporting is allowed to continue without regulation.

Policy relating to GRT groups is dominantly punitive and too often focused on eviction powers, rather than dealing with a population that is effectively homeless (Richardson and Ryder, 2012a). Racist discourse prejudices local and national responses to GRT groups in relation to accommodation and planning, crime and policing, and other services. Overall, there is clear need for social policy interventions to break the 'cycle of news and views' (Richardson and O'Neill, 2012:169). Policy and practice with GRT groups needs to challenge rather than cement anti-GRT discourse, and to tackle the hostility around them attempting to live within their cultural traditions, rather than focusing on assimilation. This will go some way towards combating the 'othering' of GRT groups and fostering their engagement with systems and services. Further research is needed with GRT groups, institutions and practitioners as to how to respond to online hate. There is a need to involve GRT communities in defining responses to anti-GRT discourse, as they have routinely been denied a voice in defining the policies and practices that affect them (Allen, 2012; Foster and Cemlyn, 2012; Ivatts with Day, 2014). There is potential to work with GRT activists, such as those at the GRT-led organisation GATE Herts.

The internet can be a force for change rather than just fuelling the problem, as seen in the pioneering work of GATE Herts through Report Racism GRT. Since our analysis took place, there has been a significant growth in use of the site. However, there is a need for more institutional support to fund and sustain the work of GRT activists and organisations. GATE Herts currently receives support from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. This needs to be maintained, promoted and enhanced in order to sustain and grow their work on recording and responding to hate incidents faced by GRT groups. Rostas and Ryder (2012) identify that more investment is needed in the GRT third sector. They outline that in the UK only 20 registered GRT charities existed at their time of writing, despite a GRT population of 300,000. They argue that across Europe, there is a lack of voice and representation of Roma populations and that policies are bound to fail unless policy-makers engage with grassroots Roma communities. They recognise the work of some NGOs

in doing this, including in the UK, and call for policy-makers to work closely with these organisations. The EU Framework for Roma Integration offers some imperative for European countries to respond, but more specific inclusion commitments need to be implemented and monitored, with states held accountable (Rostas and Ryder, 2012). A post-Brexit Britain will likely be free from even this loose requirement to tackle the exclusion of GRT groups.

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