

# Security, terrorism and social media

The recent terror attack in Tunisia highlights the ongoing risk of terrorism both abroad and in the UK, where the threat level of terrorism is ranked as 'severe'. Social media has increased the community impact of terror attacks, and ESRC research shows the need for post-event strategy measures to deal with this impact.

Social media is changing the speed of how the public learns about terrorist attacks, and the way they react. The first information to the public about incidents is now likely to come through social media channels such as Twitter rather than through traditional news outlets.

The ubiquity of smartphones means that information can be spread to a wide audience in real-time, providing details about the attack and police response, and updates on further developments. This new reality means that policymakers, security services and police forces need to consider the impact of social media in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, in terms of response planning for terrorist incidents, rapid dissemination of information and criminal investigation procedures.

The research project 'After Woolwich' is analysing social reactions to the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich on 22 May 2013 using social media data collected from Twitter, blogs and other sources. The data has enabled researchers to track how public perceptions and sentiments evolved in real-time as key events occurred, from the crime scene

through to the conclusion of the court case, to understand how public opinion is shaped and evolves throughout the events.

## Key findings

- Social media is becoming a key information source for the public when violent terror acts occur. There were in excess of 800 tweets a minute about the Lee Rigby murder at its peak.
- Social media is increasingly important in influencing the public's understanding of such attacks and what happens in the aftermath.
- The use of social media has implications for the first response by police to such attacks, with witnesses tweeting directly from the scene.
- There are important lessons for the police and authorities in terms of taking the heat out of a tense situation and reducing the opportunities for 'secondary crimes'. In the days and weeks after the murder there was a spike in hate crimes and public order incidents in different towns and cities across the country.
- Over the past few years the beliefs of young Muslim people that police will treat them fairly has been declining. This has important implications for the Government's Prevent Strategy and how counter-terrorism resources are used following future incidents.

## Policy relevance and implications

- The UK counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST currently focuses on the four strands of 'Prepare, Protect, Prevent and Pursue', but should also include a fifth 'P' for 'Post-incident consequence management' - including measures to more effectively manage secondary attacks, community tensions, hate crimes and public reassurance.
- There is a need to improve strategic communications capacity and capability in the initial response phase to inform the public about what is actually happening, in order to counteract rumours and conspiracy theories.
- Social media means that the community impacts of terrorist attacks are more widespread and longer-lasting. Longer-term community impact management strategies should be developed, encompassing different agencies.
- Traditional 'big data' science statistical methods can be misleading in terms of how and why events are unfolding after major terrorist incidents, due to the complex conflict and information dynamics. Theory-driven methods of data analysis need to be urgently developed to realise the potential of social media analytics.

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### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The ESRC-funded research project 'After Woolwich' is using social media data to track public reactions to the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich on 22 May 2013, in order to analyse how public opinion evolve in the aftermath of violent events.

Web: [www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/80667-learning-from-the-community-impacts-of-the-lee-rigby-murder](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/80667-learning-from-the-community-impacts-of-the-lee-rigby-murder)

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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