

Rise in vehicle ramming attacks a 'social virus' spread through media networks

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Researchers at the University of Kent and Copenhagen University sought to understand why vehicle attacks, such as in Nice in July 2016, Finsbury Park in 2017 or Charlottesville also in 2017, have become so prominent in the last few years, having previously been a rarity. In their analysis, Dr. Vincent Miller from the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent and Professor Keith Hayward from the University of Copenhagen document the emerging popularity and spread of VRAs in two waves: the first in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2015, and a second in Western Europe, North America and Australia.

While mainstream media has suggested terrorists are promoting this means of attack due to its simplicity, the timeline suggest that most propaganda promoting these kinds of [attacks](#) appears only after high-profile incidents. The researchers also challenge the idea that terrorists have been forced into more low-tech methods due to improved security measures around more traditional high-profile targets, as such measures have been in place for decades, but VRAs only began to rise notably since 2015.

As such, Dr. Miller and Professor Hayward examined a third explanation for the spike in VRAs: that they have spread as a form of 'social virus' irrespective of ideology. This does not mean that Dr. Miller and Professor Hayward are suggesting that ideology, propaganda or psychological issues play no role in these crimes. However, they do suggest the need to recognise the viral or mimetic quality of some forms

of violence and that exposure to these actions through, for example, news media and social media can create a momentum that leads to people with different beliefs and motives to repeat the act. For example, they argue that similar to the outbreak of plane hijackings that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, the coverage of VRAs in the media and in online discussion forums on websites has encouraged others, often with wholly different political and religious motives, to engage in VRAs.

As such, the sudden 'wave' of vehicle ramming incidents over the last few years is akin to a virus spread by social contagion, whereby a single action leads to a wave of others, which would otherwise not take place—often more akin to a 'crime of passion' than a well-planned terrorist act.

For example, they depict how the 2017 Finsbury Park Mosque ramming attack was conducted by a man who had been motivated to act by the ISIS-inspired London Bridge ramming attack 16 days earlier. Subsequently, within six days of the Finsbury Park attack, two other similar ramming attacks against Muslims had occurred: one in North London and another in front of a Mosque in France. This spate of very similar attacks in such a short time frame, from disparate individuals with vastly different political and religious beliefs and backgrounds, underlines the imitative appeal of the VRA and the impact that the coverage across the media can have in spreading these events, particularly in the highly-saturated mass-media landscape that now exists.

The researchers note that, like most viruses, the current spate of VRAs will likely become less prominent in time. Sadly, though, they will be likely be replaced by another form of horrific attack that will also spread through digital networks and spawn similar attacks.

However, by understanding how the potential for the appeal of certain

types of attack to spread beyond ideological and even psychological categories to influence wider populations, security services could be bettered prepared and foil further loss of life.

The research has been published in the *British Journal of Criminology*, titled "'I did my bit': Terrorism, Tarde and the Vehicle-Ramming Attack as an Imitative Event."

More information: Vincent Miller et al. 'I did my bit': Terrorism, Tarde and the Vehicle Ramming Attack as an Imitative Event, *The British Journal of Criminology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azy017](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy017)

Provided by University of Kent

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