

Incivility, threats doubled against 'The Squad' after Trump tweet

March 23 2022, by Sara Zaske



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Many believe that former President Donald Trump's derogatory remarks toward four congresswomen of color, known as 'The Squad', carried a lot of influence. Now a group of researchers has quantified it.

They found that uncivil [tweet](#) replies to the congresswomen containing

stereotypes and threats to [individual rights](#) doubled after Trump's initial tweet in 2019 saying that the women, who are all U.S. citizens, should "go back" to their countries.

The replies included threats of physical violence and sexual assault. Many echoed Trump's comments saying the women had no right to hold office and should leave the United States.

"It's not surprising that the former President's rhetoric is mimicked in the tweet replies," said Porismita Borah, a professor in WSU's Murrow College of Communications, and lead author on the study published in *Internet Research*. "We cannot ignore the implications of this study because incivility online doesn't just stay online. It has many consequences in the [real world](#)."

In general, women of color are more likely to experience abuse and incivility compared to their white colleagues, Borah also pointed out.

"Examining incivility against these congresswomen provides a window into the incivility faced by marginalized populations in the U.S.," she said.

For the study, Borah and her colleagues analyzed a 20,500 sample of the 102,000 replies to tweets from the four congresswomen: representatives Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Talib of Michigan and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts. Ocasio-Cortez, Talib and Pressley were all born in the United States. Omar was born in Somalia but became a naturalized U.S. citizen at 17. In the analyzed sample, the majority of those replies, 62.9%, contained uncivil language, including name-calling and vulgarity as well as stereotypes and threats to their rights.

All tweet replies to the four [women leaders](#) jumped in the three months

following Trump's initial tweet, up to 72% in some cases.

The researchers noted the chilling effect such incivility can have on women of color who might decline to speak out, much less run for office, for fear of these kinds of attacks. The authors also note that incivility online can spillover into real actions such as the thwarted kidnapping plot on the Governor of Michigan in October 2020, and the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. It was only after the latter event that Twitter banned Trump from that platform.

"I think January 6 shook people—to the extent that [tech companies](#) finally took some steps," said Borah. "Twitter banned accounts that were spreading disinformation including Donald Trump's account."

While the study helps quantify the dangers of uncivil online speech, the researchers acknowledge that potential solutions are not as clear as it can be hard to define the moment when free speech crosses over into dangerous hate speech.

"The problems of both disinformation and incivility online are complex," said Borah. "Individuals, companies, and the government have to come together to determine where we draw the line on hate speech like these congresswomen endured. Yes, it's complex, and solutions are not easy, but I think it's possible."

More information: Porismita Borah et al, "You are a disgrace and traitor to our country": incivility against "The Squad" on Twitter, *Internet Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1108/INTR-06-2021-0363](https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-06-2021-0363)

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